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I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Meredith McCarroll entitled "Transforming Whiteness: Seeing (and) Shifting Representations of Whiteness in Twentieth Century American Literature and Film." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in English.

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Transforming Whiteness:

Seeing (and) Shifting Representations of Whiteness in

Twentieth-Century American Literature and Film

A Dissertation Presented for the Doctor of Philosophy Degree

University of Tennessee, Knoxville

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May 2009

Acknowledgements

As anyone working on a project like this knows, the process is collective and its completion feels surreal. I am filled with gratitude for more people than I can name as I reach this closure. First, I thank my extended family for all of their support which took various forms— from empty cabins to child-free weekends. I especially thank my mother, Phyllis Braswell, for first encouraging me to ask questions, and my brother, Matt McCarroll, for showing me to always doubt easy answers. I owe any success I ever find to the support of my partner, Jeff, whose generosity and love astound me each new day. I thank him for giving and giving, and for knowing when to stop. To my son, Jasper, born in the midst of this journey, I am grateful for his patience as I was gone and his occasional insistence that I stay. Together, we helped the dogwoods bloom.

I owe much gratitude to the mentors that I have had over the years. To Michael Lodico for being the first teacher to make me feel that I had something worth saying. To Jay Wentworth for his joyful and enthusiastic refusal to take less than he deserved. To Lynn Sanders for showing me that there is more to life than literature *and* that literature can give more to life. To Chip Arnold for calling me out and daring me to "aspire" further. To Loretta Williams for showing me my own whiteness and expecting me to deal with knowledge responsibly. Finally, to La Vinia Jennings for seeing this project when I could not, for talking me off many a ledge, and for keeping me laughing in spite of myself. My gracious committee, Mary Papke, Chuck Maland, and Chris Holmlund, stepped far beyond the reaches of any job description to help bring this project to fruition. I would not have reached a conclusion without their steady and patient presence. Finally, I thank Keely Byars-Nichols for being my editor, co-author, co-parent, partner, mentor, and friend.

Abstract

Transforming Whiteness: Seeing (and) Shifting Representations of Whiteness in Twentieth-Century American Literature and Film both explores the ways that whiteness has remained unseen in American socio-political realms and in American cultural texts and points to ways of seeing beyond the white/non-white dichotomy in order to revision race. The word "transforming" functions as an adjective, signaling the ways that whiteness has changed shape, and also as an active verb, looking at ways that we may shift whiteness out of its position of dominance. As critical race and whiteness scholars have demonstrated, as long as whiteness maintains its invisibility, it maintains its privilege. Adding to and opening up this criticism, *Transforming Whiteness* focuses on figures, moments, and texts that have not been interrogated for their privileging of whiteness and maintenance of a racist and oppressive hierarchy. Integral to the dissertation project is the dismantling of the dichotomy in the very method of the study; rather than focus on whiteness as a stagnant identity, a sort of racial "other" from a different vantage point, the focus follows white privilege as it is written onto black and multiracial bodies of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Concluding optimistically, in order to deconstruct whiteness, I argue that those who create and interpret cultural texts must tackle the white/non-white dichotomy that has remained dominant in America through social and political movements that attempted to shift racial roles without fully acknowledging the constructed but powerful role of whiteness. Paul Haggis and Christian Lander exemplify a deconstruction of the dichotomy to allow a multidimensional and mutable racial perspective as they decenter whiteness by positioning it alongside multiple racial identities and by addressing the conflation of markers of identity such as class, geography, gender, and religion, respectively.

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Introduction

"No one was white before he or she came to America."
James Baldwin, "On Being White… and Other Lies" (1984)[1]

"The discovery of personal whiteness among the world's peoples is a very modern thing"
W.E.B Du Bois, "The Souls of White Folk" (1920)[2]

In the nearly two decades since the establishment of Critical Whiteness Studies in academia, the United States has recently elected a biracial President who is considered black, and popular media describe the new millennium as a multicultural era—evoking simultaneous fear and celebration. Norman Mailer's conceptual "White Negro" who imitates black culture has become so mainstream that he is invisible (1957).[3] Yet despite theoretical, political, and cultural revisionings of race in America, whiteness and white privilege are firmly intact. In resisting the active attempts to deconstruct race or at least to create a racially equitable social structure, whiteness has shrouded itself in a cloak of invisibility and has remained relatively unchallenged, seemingly normative, and decidedly ideal. As America's racial structure has changed, American whiteness has transformed to maintain a position of dominance atop a racial hierarchy. Only through a broad reading of whiteness across the twentieth century can these microscopic transformations become visible. From the white liberalism of the 1930s through the civil rights activism of the 1960s, antiracist whites were invested, to varying degrees, in the elevation of the racial other. Based on social position and civil participation, respectively, white allies worked to

[1] 90.
[2] 453.
[3] In *Dissent* in 1957, cultural critic and commentator Norman Mailer wrote an essay entitled "The White Negro" in which he asserts that the popularity of both jazz music and the associative hipster lifestyle, linked to blackness, created a "white negro" who desired access to black spaces with the knowledge that one's whiteness always remains intact.

offer assistance to the racially oppressed American Negros who, at the time, depended upon white support. Importantly, after the Civil Rights Movement, the racial structure and the language America used to discuss race shifted. This transition was complex, but to put it simply, the performance of race in America shifted from physical to cultural enactments. Passing as white once depended primarily on phenotype—the observable traits associated with race—and secondarily on an ability to act white. Today, passing has shifted from acting to accessing. While conversations on race have changed dramatically over the past century and access to whiteness has increased, whiteness itself remains a constructed yet functional ideal. The performance of race shifted from the somatic to the social, but the judgment of race remains based on phenotype. Biracial Barack Obama, whos mother is "white" and whose father is Kenyan, can embody whiteness well enough to gain access to the most elite white spaces, but he is still read as monoracially black by an American society that relies on phenotype to determine race and insists that race shapes character in important ways. During the first half of the twentieth century, the performance of whiteness was based upon an ability to pass as visually white. With the socio-political transformations of the twentieth century, marked most clearly by the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, the performance of whiteness has shifted to an ability to enact what has been deemed culturally white. Despite this shift in performance from body to culture, judgment of racial belonging remains purely phenotypic.

An emerging critical school in the 1990s began to evaluate literary representations of whiteness, particularly white representations of whiteness which had remained invisible and normative in American literature. In *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992), Toni Morrison writes that "in matters of race, silence and evasion have historically ruled literary discourse" (9) and calls for readers and scholars to acknowledge the

pervasiveness of literary whiteness in order to see the ways that it has become "'universal' or race-free" (xii). Morrison is interested in "the impact of racism on those who perpetuate it" and thus turns her attention to white-authored texts in order to deconstruct their portrayals of white characters who are represented as "race-free." Morrison writes about the representations of whiteness, as well as the presence of Africanist characters and ideologies that are woven into white culture in works ranging from authors Willa Cather and Edgar Allan Poe to Mark Twain and Flannery O'Connor—all white authors. Following her lead, a literary scholar like Valerie Babb, who rereads *Moby Dick*[4]with an attention to its whiteness, participates in an investigation of the ways that white authors "imagine" as an act of "becoming" (Morrison 4). In other words, white authors write whiteness as a means of perpetuating the myth of whiteness, often unconsciously. Black representations of whiteness remain relatively ignored. Similarly, in film scholarship, following film scholar Richard Dyer's call to "make whiteness strange" (6), scholars have examined whiteness in films ranging from Science Fiction (Gwendolyn Audrey Foster) to Film Noir (Eric Lott), but black representations of whiteness in film have been avoided.[5] In her preface to *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison acknowledges that her own racial position determines the ways that she will write about blackness, and asks the question: "What happens to the writerly imagination of a black author who is at some level *always* conscious of representing one's own race to, or in spite of, a race of readers that understands itself to be 'universal' or race-free?" (xii). The scholarly attention to white representations of whiteness, well-intentioned as

[4] Valerie Babb's *Whiteness Visible: The Meaning of Whiteness in American Literature and Culture* (1998) focuses on white authored texts, ranging from colonial maps to *Moby Dick*. Even in her subtitle, Americanness is conflated with whiteness, as she only studies white literature but calls it American literature.

[5] There are a few exceptions, including Keith Harris' "Boyz, Boyz, Boyz: New Black Cinema and Black Masculinity," included in Daniel Bernardi's *The Persistence of Whiteness: Race and Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, 2008, which is otherwise entirely devoted to films by white directors.

scholars generally are, when combined with the paucity of attention given to black representations of whiteness function to validate white representations and ignore black representations, which were also actively shaping the conception of whiteness through literary and cinematic representation.

The careful literary analysis that has taken place in the past decade which has used critical whiteness studies in order to read white depictions of whiteness has not taken place in black-authored texts. This absence of scholarship has diminished the role that black authors have in creating, challenging, or perpetuating myths of whiteness. With a few notable exceptions, black representations of whiteness have gone uncritiqued. David Roediger, in *Black on White*, collects anecdotes about whiteness which range from W.E.B. Du Bois to bell hooks, acknowledging that in a white-dominated world where whiteness has been equated with success and access, blacks have always known how to act white or have at least been aware of what it means to be white, by virtue of not being white *and* because they worked for whites. Roediger calls scholars to recognize "the fact that from folktales onward, African Americans have been among the nation's keenest students of white consciousness and white behavior" (4). The critical intervention of my project is the application of whiteness studies to African-American texts and multiracial bodies in order to complicate the ways that whiteness remains normative and invisible, and the roles that black authors have played in that process.

Whiteness Studies, despite its roots in the radicalism of the Civil Rights and Anti-war Movements by way of Critical Legal Studies (CLS), has come under scrutiny as being either a celebration of white power or as being a dangerous challenge to white power. Rosa Hernández Sheets posits that "multicultural integrationist assumptions… add to the perception of people of color as inherently inferior by promoting White liberal literature that often uses a subjective

construction of knowledge… to promote the psychological well-being of Whites" (15) while *National Post* journalist Barbara Kay erroneously explains that the "goal of [whiteness studies] is to entrench permanent race consciousness in everyone – eternal victimhood for nonwhites, eternal guilt for whites," and Paul Craig Roberts asserts that Noel Ignatiev, Critical Whiteness Studies scholar, "has an idea like Hitler. A race is guilty and must go." In its inception, active interrogation of race and power was a primary objective of Whiteness Studies, neither celebrating nor calling for the elimination of whiteness itself. Whiteness Studies grew out of a debate over the "indeterminacy theory," which split legal scholars as they argued the mutability of law and the span of influence of the individuals making the law. Legal scholar Derrick Bell challenged dominant positions on civil rights law and argued in *The Constitutional Contradiction* that whites will only implement civil rights laws when they also benefit whites or when their privileges are not jeopardized. Similarly, Critical Race theorist Richard Delgado asserts that non-whites have a separate narrative, informed by their experience(s) of racism in America. Born of Critical Race Theory, Critical Whiteness Studies developed in order to examine the construction and implications of whiteness, particularly in the United Kingdom and the United States.[6]

As Whiteness Studies has developed, the goals of particular schools and scholars diverged.[7] Three key concepts drive my work on literary and cinematic representations of

[6] 1997 is often seen as the birth of Whiteness Studies, perhaps in answer to Toni Morrison's call to scholars in her 1992 *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. In 1997, scholars offered responses with the publication of Richard Dyer's *White*, Jean Stefancic and Richard Delgado's *Critical White Studies*, Michelle Fine et al, *Off White: Readings on Race, Power, and Society*, and Mike Hill's *Whiteness: A Critical Reader*.

[7] In *The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness* (2001), editors Rasmussen, Klinenberg, Nexica, and Wray outline the following definitions of whiteness that shape their collection: "Whiteness is Invisible and Unmarked," "Whiteness is 'Empty' and White Identity is Established Through Appropriation,"

whiteness: the constructedness of whiteness, the mythology of whiteness, and the perpetuation of whiteness. The invisibility of whiteness is central to each of these phases in the cycle that maintains white privilege and sustains a racialized hierarchy. Beyond an acknowledgment that race is constructed and that mythologized whiteness functions as a race through the silent perpetuation of its presumed normativity, the goal of my work is to address the mutability of whiteness in order to push for a deconstruction of whiteness by placing it in active conversation with other equally constructed and simultaneously functional races. Studying the historical transformations of whiteness enables a way of imagining its further transformation.

Building on the well-established perspective that race is constructed in its particular geographical and political moment, sociologists and race scholars Michael Omi and Howard Winant analyze the processes through which the meanings of race are established, which they call "racialization." In regard to whiteness, they write, "*Whites and whiteness can no longer be exempted* from the comprehensive racialization process that is the hallmark of US history and social structure" (Winant in Fine 49; emphasis original). For too long, whiteness has maintained its normative appearance precisely because it has not been analyzed *as* a race. Black feminist scholar Hazel Carby argues that "everyone in this social order has been constructed in our political imagination as a racialised subject" and thus must identify whiteness as a position that is constructed in order to begin to remove it from its normalized space in the center (qtd in Dyer 3). Whites have too often seen themselves as raceless; as long as one is "just" human, one can speak for humanity, but "raced" people can only speak for their race. Richard Dyer asserts that "The point of seeing the racing of whites is to dislodge them/us from the position of power, with all

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"Whiteness is Structural Privilege," "Whiteness is Violence and Terror," and "Critical Whiteness Studies is an Antiracist Practice" (10-13).

the inequities, oppression, privileges and sufferings in its train, dislodging them/us by undercutting the authority with which they/we speak and act in and on the world" (2). Following Dyer's lead, Michelle Fine introduces her volume *Off White: Readings on Race, Power, and Society* (1997) by explaining that it is "focusing squarely on this prismic site of constructed dominance. […] Our task is to provide colorful conversation about whiteness, prying it open and wedging it off of its unexamined center" (Fine viii). A failure to process whiteness in the ways that we process the racial other enables the invisibility and subsequent empowerment of whiteness. As Ruth Frankenberg explains it, "Naming whiteness displaces it from the unmarked, unnamed status that is itself an effect of dominance" (qtd in Fine viii).

The myth of whiteness and the connotations of what it means to be white have continued to shift microscopically for as long as the concept of whiteness has existed. Like Jacques Derrida's empty signifier, the concept of whiteness has become so full that it is emptied of meaning. Despite this fullness/emptiness, whiteness maintains its functionality in a culture in which race is central. Michelle Fine argues, "whiteness has come to be more than itself; it embodies objectivity, normality, truth, knowledge, merit, motivation, achievement, and trustworthiness; it accumulates invisible supports that contribute unacknowledged to the already accumulated and bolstered capital of whiteness" (Fine viii). Whiteness has been continually associated with privilege—in socio-economic class, educational status, and cultural access. In his 1997 book, *White*, Richard Dyer explains, "White power none the less reproduces itself regardless of the intention, power differences, and goodwill, and overwhelmingly because it is not seen as whiteness, but as normal. White people need to learn to see themselves as white, to see their particularity. In other words, whiteness needs to be made strange" (Dyer 10).

The ways that whiteness "reproduces itself" are necessarily subtle, relying on invisibility for the perception of normativity. As Dyer points out, the reproduction of the myth of white normativity is generally unconscious. Whether conscious or not, one of the primary reasons that whiteness maintains its dominant position is due to what George Lipsitz calls the "possessive investment in whiteness." Lipsitz calls for whites to acknowledge that they are a part of the problem "not because of our race, but because of our possessive investment in it" (384). The investment in whiteness is due to ways that whites, overtly or covertly, have been encouraged to invest in the belief that whiteness is superior and that whites are somehow deserving of their elevated social status. White people, through careful narratives and the perpetuation of myths, claim "family values, fatherhood and foresight" rather than "favoritism," creating the sense that whites have earned their privileges (380).

The invisible privileges associated with whiteness emerge once whiteness is identified as a conceptual but functional racial marker. Because of an unconscious communal perception that whiteness is normative and has claimed its position atop the racial hierarchy by some natural superiority, it becomes essential to acknowledge and name the privileges associated with whiteness. Feminist critic Peggy McIntosh defines white privilege[8] as "an invisible package of unearned assets that [one] can count on cashing in each day, but about which [one] was 'meant' to remain oblivious" (10). Part of the power of white privilege is that it is invisible. Once it is acknowledged, according to McIntosh, one is less likely to cash in on all of its benefits unquestioningly. She offers a list of "unearned advantage and conferred dominance" granted

[8] Drawing from her experience in women's studies and some recognitions about male privilege, McIntosh expresses the idea that, often, men do not want to acknowledge the privilege that they are granted, which maintains a hierarchy and denies the privilege to others. Similarly, whites are given privilege which they are taught to deny.

because of whiteness, which she calls the "daily effects of white privilege" (qtd in Dyer 9). Like McIntosh and Dyer, Lipsitz points to the role of invisibility in maintaining white privilege, explaining that "[a]s the unmarked category against which difference is constructed, whiteness never has to speak its name, never has to acknowledge its role as an organizing principle in social and cultural relations" (369). Invisibility is central to every stage of this cycle which perpetuates white privilege.

The centrality of whiteness results from and contributes to a dichotomous conception of race. Often unconsciously, whites assume their centrality and resulting privilege as natural and perform a privileged role which perpetuates the cycle. To deconstruct the racial binary depends upon the deconstruction of white normativity, and the deconstruction of white normativity depends upon the acknowledgement that whiteness is constructed, is continually reconstructed, and is essential to the oppression of non-whites. As a concept that can shift in subtle ways, whiteness attains a dominant position as central and ideal, despite the fact that it is actively reconstructed and perpetually performed.

Resisting the privilege of whiteness on a personal level depends upon an awareness of the emptiness of the marker of identity. David Roediger, in *The Wages of Whiteness* (1999), argues that "It is not merely that whiteness is oppressive and false; it is that whiteness is *nothing but* oppressive and false. … It is the empty and terrifying attempt to build an identity based on what one isn't and on whom one can hold back" (13). Other branches of whiteness studies offer solutions which conflict with one another. On one extreme are the New Abolitionists, led by Noel Ignatiev and influenced by his theory of race traitors, which suggests that "Treason to

whiteness is loyalty to humanity."[9] In response to Ignatiev, Howard Winant acknowledges that despite good intentions and the need to acknowledge the social construction of race or the racial formation of whiteness, "rather than trying to repudiate it, we shall have to rearticulate it" (48). Instead, Winant proposes new attempts from neoliberals and New Abolitionists to erase boundaries between whites and nonwhites in order to form transracial coalitions and political alliances (50).

With a too myopic lens on history, looking only at key moments, the fluidity of identity becomes masked by the appearance of constancy. The end of movements that worked to restructure race are key to an understanding of the ways that whiteness has shifted in subtle ways; the moments that are generally ignored with averted gazes or retrospective musings on the period just past provide an important gauge of the ways that invisible normativity functions. Acknowledging the tendency or desire to see one's own moment as transitional, optimism about the potential deconstruction of whiteness remains *if* a racial binary is deconstructed. Only by taking advantage of the disruption in consciousness around race might a revisioning of race and a deconstruction of white normativity be possible. Howard Winant describes an opening up at the close of the twentieth century because of new ways of thinking about whiteness: "On the one hand, whites inherit the legacy of white supremacy, from which they continue to benefit. But on the other hand, they are subject to the moral and political challenges posed to that inheritance by the partial but real successes of the black movement (and affiliated movements)" (Winant 41). Taking this deconstructionist momentum and a tendency that Winant optimistically reads as

[9]Ignatiev argues that whiteness and white privilege are given to people in exchange for support for or silence about domination/oppression. According to Ignatiev, "counterfeit whites" can resist racism and capitalism and splinter the oppressive system and the silence that allows and depends upon the system.

whites being "confused and anxiety-ridden, to an unprecedented extent," the moment is nigh for a positioning of whiteness *as* a race beside other races in order to see what race is and what race is not (41). Inspired by the political activism that motivates Critical Whiteness Studies and the deconstructionist tendency that Toni Morrison and Richard Dyer call for in literary and cinematic studies, I work to assess the ways that whiteness has maintained its normative position through subtle and invisible reworkings and repositionings in order to see whiteness finally as a race—no more and no less—by placing it alongside other races.

I situate my argument throughout the project not only in biographical and historical texts but in visual and literary texts for several reasons. First, as Wright learned from H.L. Mencken, literature is a powerful tool for not only expressing a belief, but for advocating for change, and establishing an ideological perspective. Grounded in naturalism, Richard Wright took seriously the responsibility to write as a form of political action rather than as a means of escape. Second, the history of white privilege is best understood as continuously shifting. Too often, scholars read history in closed chapters with neatly designated eras and periods, forgetting the extension of concepts and beliefs across periods. Readers of a literary text are more likely to enter into the text with a slight awareness of its setting but a more present absorption into the characters and the plot. For example, the ideas that Wright expressed in 1940 are vivid and active each time one reads *Native Son*. His arguments about race, and his representations of not only white characters but also of conceptual whiteness as a powerful and invisible force for Bigger Thomas, are accessible with each reading. In the study of the transformation of whiteness, literature offers a way into a particular moment that is kept alive with each reading. Just as the literary present is used to discuss a text, Wright's perceptions of white characters and ideological

whiteness are experienced in the present tense and thus retain their ability to shape readers' perspectives.

My historical analysis of whiteness begins in the 1930s, investigating the ways that blacks experienced and then represented an alternative political and social identity for whites. Ostensibly, the American Communist Party (ACP) offered a viable revisioning of race as it emphasized the role of the worker and shifted focus from race to class. Based on Marxist theories and with a critical eye toward capitalism, which initiated the enslavement of the first African Americans, Communism held the potential to deconstruct a system that was then three centuries old and had woven itself into the fabric of the post-bellum culture. This early moment of potential disruption of white privilege reveals, through the biography and literature of Richard Wright, the limitations to an upheaval which necessitates an acknowledgment of such privilege. Looking closely at both the experiences of Wright, as he joined, questioned, and eventually left the ACP, and his representations of white communists in his nonfiction and fiction offers a way of understanding the subtle mutability of white privilege which keeps it intact. A global political shift of the decade of the 1930s, facilitated by events ranging from the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt and the rise of the Popular Front to the signing of the Stalin/Hitler Pact and the rise of anti-communism, impacted not only the experiences and expressions of Wright's involvement with the ACP but also limited the potential for a dismantling of white normative power. In order to understand the ways that a powerful concept like whiteness can shift and become invisible, an examination of its moment of mutation is revealing. As white communists went underground, the ideology that posed "The Race Question" and advocated for racial equality became equated with dangerous activities abroad.

The active and mainstream position of the American Communist Party was firmly quashed by the 1940s as America entered World War II and fought in opposition to the fascism that became associated with communism by 1939 via the Stalin/Hitler Pact. As America recovered from the war and enjoyed a period of economic growth combined with a reining in of ideas during the period of McCarthyism and the age of homogenization as exemplified by the spread of McDonalds and Holiday Inns across the country, the general mood of the 1950s was one of conservativism and inward focus. Even within this period of relative stability, a new period of dissatisfaction and activism against racism was beginning.[10]

The most obvious period in American history during which there was an organized effort to deconstruct a racial hierarchy built upon white privilege is the Civil Rights Movement, whose beginning dates are an issue of debate and range from 1954 to 1961, but whose closing date scholars generally agree was 1966. The clarity regarding the close of the movement is based on a precise moment during which one era marked by integration and interracial coalition was replaced by a monoracial demand for "Black Power." While Chapter One focuses on a black perspective of white activism, Chapter Two offers two contrasting white perspectives on black activism in order to demonstrate the general uncertainty surrounding the close of the Civil Rights Movement and the displacement of white activists within the movement. Two films of 1967, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (Dir. Stanley Kramer) and *In the Heat of the Night* (Dir. Norman Jewison), present the romanticism of integration and the uncertainty at the transition of the period, respectively. Films, even more than novels, reach a wide audience and therefore have a vast capacity not only to reflect but also to shape culture. Weaving together cinematic texts with

[10] In *The Fifties*, David Halberstam writes of this homogenization as the catalyst for emergent underground movements epitomized by Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, Neal Cassidy and the Beat Movement.

biographical and historical texts in an attempt to capture the period of 1966 and 1967, I work to explore the various white responses during a tumultuous racial era in American history. Alternately giving voice to those inside the Civil Rights Movement and those representing race through film, I offer a complex look at whiteness as it shifted again, maintaining a normative position despite a cultural shift toward racial equality. By stepping outside of the movement, as the movement was headed up by blacks, whites failed to deconstruct or even acknowledge the role of white complacency in the history of violent oppression against which many activists fought. Turning attention to the elevation of the racial other, the racially dominant walked away from the scene unscathed and intact.

At this moment in the twentieth century, there are important transitions that I work to encompass and reflect within my work. Although desegregation was slow-moving in the South, and depended upon the work of those involved in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s to enforce the 1954 *Brown v Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* ruling, a cultural shift took place during and following the 1960s. Vastly ranging questions from those of national purpose in regard to the conflict in Vietnam to those of sexual freedom and gender roles created a less binaric system of thinking. While it is crucial to avoid gross generalizations, and I attempt within this work to complicate a progressive vision of history, since an important transition took place in regard to race after the Civil Rights Movement. Racial definition shifted from phenotype to performance, while color came to matter less than culture. Significantly, despite the romance of an evolving perspective on race moving ever closer to unity, whiteness—now associated more with cultural than physical traits—remained the ideal. Conflating class privilege with whiteness, and thus associating education and access with whiteness, American culture maintained an unconscious and disguised support of white privilege and normativity. The

difference is that now those whose skin color, facial features, and hair type might have negated their access to whiteness during segregation could claim cultural whiteness. Norman Mailer talks importantly about the reverse trend in *The White Negro* (1957),arguing that it became hip for whites to turn away from mainstream white identity by trying on blackness. To be black, according to Mailer, is to be carefree and live outside of the constraints of middle-class white suburbia. I argue that although there has always been a performance of whiteness that accompanied racial passing or access to certain "Blue Vein"[11] societies, the acknowledgment that it was a performance faded with the passing decades until the 1980s when the concept of whiteness—constructed and performed by those of any racial descent—had become so normalized that it was perhaps more invisible than ever before. With such invisibility comes great power.

The second half of my project is situated in post-Civil Rights and post-segregation America of the last two decades of the twentieth century. Trey Ellis's 1989 manifesto, "The New Black Aesthetic," offers a way of understanding the hope of the post-Civil Rights generation, capturing the idea of the "cultural mulatto" who is phenotypically black but culturally white. Ellis reads this new generation born out of their parents' activism in the 1960s as a way out of race, a step beyond race. Two representations of Ellis's cultural mulatto, Pierre Delacroix of Spike Lee's *Bamboozled* (2000) and Monk Ellison of Percival Everett's *Erasure* (2001), demonstrate the limitations of Ellis's imagining of racial transgression. Instead of undoing race, Lee and Everett assert that the cultural mulatto alternately passes as black and passes as white, significantly without a revision or deconstruction of either black or white.

[11] "Blue Vein" societies, popular in the early twentieth century, were open to light-skinned blacks whose veins showed through their skin, which associated them with white privilege.

Scholars like Steven Belluscio (*To Be Suddenly White: Literary Realism and Racial Passing,* 2006) and Gayle Wald (*Crossing the Line: Racial Passing in Twentieth Century U.S. Literature and Culture,* 2000) have argued that racial passing serves to stabilize the concept of race rather than blurring the lines between races. The cultural passing of the post-segregation era acts in the same way, validating and solidifying what might have become a conceptual definition of race. As with the end of the 1930s American Communist Party and the end of the Civil Rights Movement, whiteness remains idealized through its invisibility and apparent normativity. The difference is that whiteness, as a cultural marker that is highly constructed to be dominant, is enacted by those deemed non-white and thus upheld as ideal.

At the close of the century, population shifts combined with political activism around mixed race identity and educational movements advocating for multiculturalism began to shift thinking about race toward a less dichotomous system that allowed for multiple racial identities, potentially destabilizing white centrality and normativity. My fourth chapter reads the conversations, both scholarly and popular, around multiculturalism and multiraciality as the 2000 U.S. Census was revised. The conversations and definitions established by activists and scholars as they debated the ways to make the Census more inclusive of mixed-race Americans reveals the tendency toward dichotomous understandings of race. As the U.S. Census Bureau met a compromise to allow citizens to select multiple markers of identity, the popular media voiced a fear of the loss of whiteness. The increase of multiracial identity and of a multicultural society corresponds with a tightening of definitions of race and access to whiteness. Mainstream readings of cultural figures offer support for the assertion that claiming multiracial identity acts as a new racial passing, solidifying whiteness in opposition to non-whiteness, and relying on phenotype, while multiracial voices begin to rise up from liminal positions despite their

misreading, and a biracial U.S. President offers promise that multiraciality might bridge gaps even if it doesn't erase boundaries.

A sweeping historical reading of racial passing, as it has shifted from bodily to cultural performance, offers a way of seeing the mutability of whiteness and the unconscious perpetuation of the myth of white normativity, which maintains the invisibility of whiteness and the concept of racelessness. With a belief that there is hope in the deconstruction of whiteness—a further transformation—I conclude the dissertation with brief readings of Christian Lander's blog and book *Stuff White People Like* 2008) and Paul Haggis's film *Crash* (2004), which acknowledge the construction, perpetuation, and social functions of whiteness. *Stuff White People Like* points to the constructedness of whiteness through ironic cataloging of stereotypes about a particular type of white person. What becomes evident through an analysis of Lander's posts is the white person's desire to accessorize in multiculturalism by participating in cultural colonialism while simultaneously grounding oneself in and dismissing financial stability. Lander's white person is versed in a surface knowledge of multiple races and ethnicities but holds fast to his/her white privilege. Similarly, this white person is firmly middle-class to the extent that he or she can criticize the trappings of the middle-class without actually shunning it. *Crash* offers a way of transforming whiteness further, glimpsing the intersections of various races in a tense and dysfunctional multiracial setting. Each of the several white characters in *Crash* has damning and redeeming character traits, most of which can be traced to particular racial and social positions. Each white character is problematized, but neither more nor less than the Hispanic-, Asian-, Indian-, and African-American characters depicted in the film. By treating America as a country that frequently generates puerile and racially unconscious whites,

Haggis begins to unsettle the myth of normalcy that has long allowed whiteness to rise on the racial hierarchy and left others looking to a false construction as an ideal.

Chapter One

Depression-era Communism and the "Negro Question": Whiteness and Communism in Richard Wright's *Native Son*

"Hear me, White Brothers,/ Black Brothers, hear me"

Robert Hayden, "Speech" (1940)[12]

Across the American twentieth century a series of political and/or artistic movements arose to destabilize normative white power, seeking an equitable racial hierarchy. The political work of the American Communist Party in the 1930s offers the inaugural site for this investigation, providing the historical context for Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940). The novel engages the potential within and challenges to the communist party, particularly in regard to the debate about race and self-determinism which came to be known as the "Negro Question." The Depression era[13] offered opportunities for communists to challenge the white-dominated American racial structure, even as the white organizational control within the shifting internal structure of the communist party and the shifts in global politics leading up to World War II disabled an effective dismantling of white wealth and privilege in the United States. Despite his allegiance to the pacifist and Marxist ideology which initially drew him to the party, Richard Wright grew dissatisfied with the party's weakening stance against racial bigotry due to political factors such as the threat of fascism, the election of a progressive U.S. President, and domestic economic growth, as well as organizational factors, primarily the shift from the pacifist anti-racism of the Extreme Left Period[14] to the broadened and weakened Popular Front.[15] Situated in

[12] "Speech" David R. Roediger, ed. *Black on White*, 122.
[13] Generally understood as 1929-1940, following the stock market crash in October of 1929.
[14] 1929-1932.
[15] 1934-1939.

a period and climate with tremendous potential to revise American racial hierarchies, *Native Son* captures Wright's ambivalence about the limited radicalism of the party at the close of an era.

The focus on Wright's representations of whiteness, communism, and, more specifically, white communism contextualized within the 1930s with particular attention to American Communists' line on the "Negro Problem" enables a rereading of Wright's novel, adds to and at times challenges the scholarship on Wright and communism. It also contributes to the conversation about the communist party in the 1930s—a conversation voices from the post-WWII era of anti-communism have dominated. The representations of whiteness in *Native Son* range from the negative culture of whiteness that protagonist Bigger Thomas understands as status quo to the more positive white communists who work to represent, enlighten, and protect him. In *Native Son*, Wright reveals, first, the need for a revised racial hierarchy, second, the promise of the communist party to undertake this transformation, and, finally, the ultimate ineffectiveness of the communist party to achieve this transformation.

"Blasted into revolutionary awareness": White Communism in *Native Son*[16]

When Bigger Thomas, the protagonist of *Native Son*, meets Mary Dalton and Jan Erlone, both of whom identify with the communist party, Wright establishes an immobilizing power differential within the trio based upon Bigger's (mis)perceptions of communism, Jan's and Mary's inaccurate presumptions about Bigger's life on the South Side of Chicago, and the race and class differences among them. On the first day of his new job as a driver for the wealthy

[16] Addison Gayle writes, "Their daughter Mary looked upon him as a social experiment, one of the downtrodden masses, everywhere her equal, who had to be blasted into revolutionary awareness" (116).

Daltons, Bigger meets Mary. He sees Mary as "this rich girl [who] walked over everything, put herself in the way and, what was strange beyond understanding, talked and acted so simply and directly that she confounded him" (56). Her friendly attention to Bigger destabilizes him. That is, as he tries to relate to her, he realizes that he has no context in which to place Mary:

> Never in his life had he met anyone like her. She puzzled him. She was rich, but she didn't act like she was rich. She acted like…Well, he didn't know exactly what she did act like. In all of the white women he had met, mostly on jobs and at relief stations, there was always a certain coldness and reserve; they stood their distance and spoke to him from afar. But this girl waded right in and hit him between the eyes with her words and ways. (60)

Bigger responds similarly to Jan, Mary's boyfriend, whom she introduces to Bigger as "a friend of yours" (65). Jan awkwardly attempts to break down the racial barriers between them: "'First of all,' Jan continued, putting his foot upon the running-board, 'don't say *sir* to me. I'll call you Bigger and you'll call me Jan. That's the way it'll be between us. How's that?'" (67). While naïvely inattentive to Bigger's discomfort, Mary and Jan attempt to befriend Bigger without recognizing that Bigger reads Jan's radical attempts to transgress racial boundaries as condescendingly controlling. Although theories of equity motivate Jan, he creates confusion for Bigger by suddenly stepping outside of the social norms established over centuries. Bigger, not surprisingly, reflects his dismay: "How on earth could he learn not to say *yessuh* and *yessum* to white people in one night when he had been saying it all his life long?" (73). Mary and Jan are privileged with the ability to construct, at least theoretically, more equitable relationships across

race; they believed, as critic Addison Gayle notes, "that they were able to look beyond race and color," though they actually "succeeded not in regarding all as equal but in regarding blacks as fantasized images called from the imagination" (*Richard Wright* 117). A history of racism limits Bigger's imagination; he cannot distance himself from the cultural history of abuse and judgment based upon race. Rather than feeling equal to and respected by Mary and Jan, Bigger becomes anxious and insecure, and Wright explains why Bigger "felt naked, transparent; he felt that this white man, having helped to put him down, having helped to deform him, held him up now to look at him and be amused" (68).[17]

The inability of Mary, Jan, and Bigger to communicate openly reflects, of course, their inability to see one another outside of racial type. Relying on presumptions to read one another, they are then unable to move beyond their misreadings to enact a balanced relationship or to begin an open conversation. Most notable is the misperception that Jan and Mary have about Bigger and life across the "line." Acting like socio-economic tourists who have hijacked their tour guide, Jan and Mary insist that Bigger drive them to a "real" place to eat on the South Side (69). By essentializing Bigger based on race and class assumptions, Jan and Mary expect an embodiment of their romantic Marxist imaginings of the underclass.[18] As they drive through the

[17] Addison Gayle contends that Wright's description of Jan and Mary reflects Wright's own feelings of "nakedness" and "transparency" when he, in 1935, arrived in New York for the American Writer's Conference and found that his race surprised the white communist organizers who scrambled to find a place for him to stay. Wright recalls "I burned with shame" (*LW* 330). Gayle writes, "These communists were blind toward him, just as Jan and the Dalton family were blind toward Bigger" (117).

[18] As will be discussed further, the American Communist Party valorized the working class and imagined poor blacks as the key to an economic and political revolution, especially in the early 1930s. Often, as with Jan and Mary, Communists read poor blacks as saviors and disregarded an individual's lack of interest in or knowledge of the Party. Mary fits a stereotype of a wealthy student whose interest in Communism is linked to her adolescent defiance of family more than a demonstrated devotion to or understanding of communist ideology.

predominantly Black and low-income section of Chicago, Mary "wistfully" explains her naïve longings for otherness from inside the chauffeured car:

> "You know, Bigger, I've long wanted to go into those houses," she said, pointing to the tall, dark apartment buildings looming to either side of them, "and just *see* how your people live. You know what I mean? I've been to England, France and Mexico, but I don't know how people live ten blocks from me. We know so *little* about each other. I just want to *see*. I want to *know* these people. Never in my life have I been inside of a Negro home. Yet they *must* live like we live. They're *human*…. There are twelve million of them….They live in our country….In the same city with us." (70)

Mary's economic privilege enables her to see the world but disables her from seeing Bigger, even as he sits beside her. Not only does her imagining of *his* people establish their essential difference, her soliloquy in the place of conversation contributes to the unequal power dynamic as well as Bigger's discomfort. Mary shifts from "your people" in second person to "these people" in third person, making clear the distinction as she explains that "They"—the outsiders—"live in our"—the insider's—"country," unable to recognize the subject position of the man to whom and about whom she speaks. That Mary and Jan cannot see Bigger yet insist upon speaking for him as a representative "Negro" causes Bigger to feel "toward Mary and Jan a dumb, cold, and inarticulate hate" (68).

Bigger's preconceptions about communism contribute to the group's inability to communicate effectively. Jan and Mary assume that Bigger trusts them because of their links to

the communist party, an organization committed to racial equality. Bigger, however, associates communists with "cartoons… in newspapers [with] flaming torches, [and] …beards [who] were trying to commit murder or set things on fire." From these images, he deduces, "People who acted that way were crazy. All he could recall having heard about Communists was associated in his mind with darkness, old houses, people speaking in whispers and trade unions on strike" (66). Indeed, since Bigger has only negative perceptions concerning communism, he keeps the communist pamphlets that Jan gives him only because he believes that they might be of use to him later for blackmail. Knowing that white America fears communists almost as much as it hates Negroes, Bigger eventually frames Jan for the murder of Mary Dalton, trusting in the societal view that "the reds'd do anything. Didn't the papers say so?" (87, 88).

Wright proceeds to expose the power of (mis)perception in Bigger's response to the pamphlets that Jan gives him. Initially, the literature intrigues Bigger who, noting the titles of the pamphlets, reflects, "*Race Prejudice on Trial. The Negro Question in the United States. Black and White Unite and Fight*. But that did not seem so dangerous" (94). The content of the pamphlets appeals to Bigger, but the context, which the anti-communist media established, frightens him: "He looked at the bottom of a pamphlet and saw a black and white picture of a hammer and a curving knife. Below it he read a line that said: *Issued by the Communist Party of the United States.* Now, *that* did seem dangerous" (94). The pamphlet itself, which envisions a revision of American race relations, is far more "dangerous" in the early 1930s than a black and white symbol could be. Nevertheless, the connotation of the symbol eclipses the content of the pamphlet as Bigger has bought into the same social ideology that "make[s him] live in one corner of the city" (23) to determine how to read the communist party. Despite the logical

reasons that Bigger should be drawn to the Party, the mainstream portrayal of communists as dangerous animals prevails.

Bigger is, then, unable to categorize Jan and Mary, which could potentially provide an opening for and a revision of their scripted racial roles. Instead, the power dynamic remains stagnant—Bigger is the employee, and Mary and her family are the employers. Bigger is not in a position to speak against Jan and Mary, nor can he truly join them as a peer. The transcendence of racial roles which Jan and Mary attempt to enact is not grounded in trust and serves only to make Bigger keenly self-conscious of his performance of an unscripted subservient role. With Mr. Dalton, Bigger understood the part that he was meant to play, but Jan and Mary have disrupted the normative behavior—to a degree.[19] Rather than empowering Bigger by interpellating him as an individual with agency, Jan and Mary presume for Bigger, enacting the role of missionary to a disinterested or otherwise invested "native." Without consulting Bigger, Jan and Mary forcibly "befriend" him as a means of liberation. The performance of liberation is without context or mutual understanding and, even in that light, has limits. Bigger does not experience enlightenment or inclusion but only confusion, concluding about Jan and Mary, "…he did not understand them; he distrusted them, really hated them" (71).[20] Wright's portrayal of these white communists at the end of the 1930s is clarified by an

[19] Reflecting on Bigger's conversation with Mr. Dalton, Wright writes, "He stood with his knees slightly bent, his lips partly open, his shoulders stooped; and his eyes held a look that went only to the surface of things. There was an organic conviction in him that this was the way white folks wanted him to be when in their presence; none had ever told him that in so many words, but their manner had made him feel that they did" (50).

[20] Wright's portrayal of Jan and Mary in *Native Son* garnered immediate attention from scholars and the press. Reviewers in popular, mainstream *Time* magazine call the "Jan-Mary-Bigger relationship… one of the most devastating accounts yet printed of that tragicomic, Negrophilous bohemianism which passes among Communists as a solution of the Negro problem" (Kinnamon 3). In a 1940 review of *Native Son,* Henry Seidel Canby praises what he saw as Wright's criticism of whites in the novel: "The characters, too, are fully realized. There is a deadly satire in the portraits of the young radicals. Mary who is killed,

understanding of his contentious relationship with the American Communist Party predating *Native Son*.

Richard Wright, Communist

"As anyone with common sense could easily guess, I was a Communist because I was a Negro."
Richard Wright, 1955[21]

For Richard Wright, who first encountered communism as a young man recently transplanted in Chicago from his native Mississippi via Memphis, the American Communist Party was formative in his development as a writer and intellectual. His introduction to the party was gradual and consensual in contrast to Bigger's fictional confrontation with party members whose political investment becomes increasingly questionable with each new drink. In 1933, after repeated invitations from post office coworker Abraham Aaron, Richard Wright attended a meeting of the newly established literary John Reed Club in Chicago, beginning his long relationship with the communist party—a relationship that would shape his writing, his politics, his friendships, and would eventually help drive him from the United States.[22] In *Black Boy*

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and Jan, the Communist, who chooses Bigger to work on, not realizing that this kind of political pity is more offensive to a Negro than color prejudice" (Butler 23). In response to Canby, Samuel Sillen writes in the communist publication, *New Masses*: "This is the most blatant stuff I have ever read. It angles the novel away from itself to the very stereotype which the novel demolishes. For the plain fact is that the radicals, Mr. Max and Jan Erlone, are the only ones who make Bigger aware of his dignity as a human being" (Butler 32).

[21] Quoted in Fabre, Michel. *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright*, 1993: 230.

[22] After 1929, when the Comintern established the need to address American Negroes, there was a massive push to recruit blacks into the party. Nathan Glazer writes of the early 1930s, "The Communist Party devoted more resources, more attention, more effort, to the recruitment of Negro members than it expended on any other social group, except perhaps for industrial workers and trade-unionists" (169).

(American Hunger) (1944, 1977),[23] Wright recalls the skepticism with which he entered the meeting:

> I felt that Communists could not possibly have a sincere interest in Negroes. I was cynical and I would have rather have heard a white man say that he hated Negroes, which I could have readily believed, than to have heard him say that he respected Negroes, which would have made me doubt him. I did not think that there existed many whites who, through intellectual effort, could lift themselves out of the traditions of their time and see the Negro objectively. (300)

Influenced by his youth in the Jim Crow South, Wright, like Bigger, doubted the legitimate intentions of the communist party, especially during a period which placed what Nathan Glazer calls an "almost hysterical emphasis on Negroes" (178). Nevertheless, Wright eventually found a home within the party, which, according to biographer Michel Fabre, offered "the only bridge between his cultural ghetto and the American intellectual world" (Fabre 103). By the end of this inaugural meeting, Wright describes being "full of reflection," most pointedly "probing the sincerity of the strange white people I had met, wondering how they *really* regarded Negroes" (*LW* 302). While Wright may have initially distrusted white communists, Wright joined the

[23] Wright wrote his autobiography, originally entitled *American Hunger*, in 1943 and 1944. The Book-of-the-Month Club selected the book for publication if Wright was willing to cut the second half, which begins with Wright's arrival in Chicago and treats his involvement with the Communist Party. Wright agreed, changing the titled to *Black Boy*, a title he deemed "not very original" but "honest. Straight" (*LW* 869). The second half of the autobiography was serialized; most memorably, Wright published "I Tried to Be a Communist" in *Atlantic Monthly* in August-September 1944. The entire text was published posthumously by Harper and Row in 1977 and appears in *Later Works* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1991), with the title *American Hunger*.

party within a year and began publishing his poetry in party publications.[24] Fabre contextualizes Wright's political awakening: "he came to see in Marxism an organized search for truth about the life of oppressed peoples, and this convinced him that the communists were sincere. […] H]e concretely realized that the oppressed classes of all colors were united by a common suffering, and that as a writer, he could play a particular role within the group" (97). Similarly, Addison Gayle suggests that at the time, the communist party was "the only organization that appealed to blacks across the board, the militant and the moderate, the poor and the petit bourgeois" (*Richard Wright* 68).[25] Wright himself came to believe at the time that certainly there must be a place for a burgeoning writer drawn to the communist party not only out of economic despair or a desire to publish his writing but also by the "possibility of uniting scattered but kindred people into a whole" (*Black Boy* 284). As Wright was introduced to communism, the American Communist Party was on the brink of a major transformation resulting from national, international, and structural shifts. Wright's representation in *Native Son* of white communists and of the potential for racial transgression within the party hinges on a close reading of key moments in the history of communism in the 1930s. In 1933, the year of Wright's introduction to communism, the party's radical potential which drew a young Richard Wright into its ranks as well as the weaknesses that led to its eventual decline are all evident.

Depression-era Communism: The Extreme Left Period (1929-1932)

[24] Wright published "A Red Slogan" in *International Literature* and "Red Leaves of Red Bodies" in *New Masses* in 1934.
[25] Although Gayle is characterizing the party in 1933, his description is more fitting of the Popular Front period two to three years later.

"There is […] on the part of the overwhelming majority of people in the world, a feeling that the Anglo-Saxon type of cultural organization has failed and that new cultural patterns should be tried, and that for the trial of these new cultural patterns there is demand for cultural democracy and intercultural tolerance. That without this, civilization in its present form is doomed."

W.E.B. Du Bois, "Race Relations in the United States, 1917-1947" (1948)[26]

Arguably, America's economic decline resulting from the 1929 Stock Market Crash created a welcoming environment in which communism could take root and grow, especially in urban America. The previous decade, characterized by cultural excess and prosperity for many, was less open to the party's deconstruction of capitalism, and the global politics of later Cold War decades would create an environment of fear which called for patriotic adherence to the status quo and distrust of the communist party. But, for a brief period in the 1930s, American communism blossomed and offered an appealing alternative to many Americans experiencing a crisis that was not only financial but existential. Nathan Glazer, in *The Social Basis of American Communism*, explains that "[t]o be a Communist meant to shed the limitations of one's social reality, and to join in a fraternity that transcended the divisions of the world" (168). In 1932, the communist party offered the promise of revolution, which found a rapt audience in the unemployed and impoverished. Although the communist party was not overtly devoted to the Negro cause until 1929, by the early 1930s the Communist Party United States of America [27] was "attempting to transform a predominantly white, immigrant organization into an interracial

[26] 32.

[27] Communist International, or Comintern, was a Soviet-based Communist organization founded in 1919 whose mission was world-wide organization for a communist revolution. Communist Party United States of America and American Communist Party are used interchangeably in scholarship, though CPUSA was most often used by the Comintern during the 1930s.

party that could lead black Americans in the fight against discrimination" (Ottanelli 37). In 1929, the communist party launched an aggressive campaign to recruit, promote, and feature American Negroes whom they imagined as key to their revolution. This is the communist party that welcomed and nurtured Richard Wright for a time in the early 1930s. The party that Wright joined, first through his entrance to the John Reed Club in Chicago, was justifiably inspiring as it had become "the strongest, most influential radical movement in American history" (Starobin 3).

In his monumental six hundred page study, *American Communist Party*, Irving Howe traces the "political, social, and cultural history of the American Communist Party from its inception in 1919 to its virtual demise in 1957" (ix). Howe describes the 1930s for the communist party as a period of "hopeless contradiction," torn between becoming a "rooted part of American life" while calling for revolutionary transformation (217). This contradiction is evident in a series of changes, both internal and external, between 1928 and 1939; in particular, the Stalin/Hitler Pact of 1939, though its impact was not immediate, would determine the future of the party as it went underground and was eventually dissolved. Although historians have categorized the periods differently, most scholars describe the early 1930s as the anti-intellectual extreme left period of the party that opened up into a second period, shifting away from anti-capitalism and focusing on anti-fascism.[28]

During the Extreme Left Period, the communist party recruited through public demonstrations against immediate concerns like unemployment and unfair housing and was distrustful of intelligentsia—regardless of their socio-economic backgrounds. The Scottsboro Case in 1931, in which nine black youths were indicted for the alleged rape of two white women,

[28] Fraser Ottanelli denotes three periods: 1929-34, 1934-39, and 1941-45; Irving Howe calls 1930-35 the period of "Extreme Left," followed by 1935-39 as the "Popular Front"—a term that Nathan Glazer also uses.

offered an opportunity for the communist party and their International Labor Defense (ILD) to demonstrate that they were a "defender of minority rights" (Howe 211). One black paper cited by Fraser Ottanelli reported that "the Communist party was the first white organization, since the abolitionist movement, to advocate openly 'the economic, political, and social equality of black folks'" (41). That the ILD won the right to represent the "boys" over the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) grounded the communist party in its work for and among "the people."

In 1932, the year that Franklin Delano Roosevelt was elected President, the John Reed Clubs grew to the status of an organization—denoting that an emphasis on increased membership may have begun to outweigh the stance that has been retrospectively called "anti-intellectual." Within the John Reed Clubs and in the party in general, the politics remained radical, devoted to a proletarian revolution of the current capitalist system. The party did not support Roosevelt but rather viewed him and incumbent Herbert Hoover as capitalists with few fundamental differences. At the same time the John Reed Clubs emphasized the party line in members' writing, encouraging social realism. Although Ottanelli writes that "the heavy ideological limitations imposed… did not sit well with many intellectuals," membership increased, and the John Reed Clubs remained a viable recruiting tool (63-64). Even with these limitations, Irving Howe argues that the John Reed Clubs, even if not ostensibly theoretical and auspiciously proletarian, offered an environment that was rich and warm for many writers:

> …it can safely be suggested that among the young and obscure writers, who found in the Communist movement both an audience and a brotherhood, it was relatively easy to win

> recruits, while the more accomplished writers, who had sunk roots in other areas of life, were inclined to guard their independence. (282)

Some of these "more accomplished writers" would be the sweethearts of the communist party in a few years when the party line, influenced by the growing power of fascism in Germany and Italy, shifted.

"The Negro Question in the United States": The Party Line

The early decades of the Communist Party U.S.A. largely ignored the "Negro," despite Stalin's acknowledgement of the Negro's critical position in social and economic reform. Until the 1928 Resolution in which the Comintern was "very frank in accusing the American communists of complete failure in their work among Negroes," the party had no line on the American Negro (Nolan 40). Ottanelli confirms, "During its early years the Communist movement, in the tradition of the Socialist party, showed no special concern for the problems of black Americans, an attitude shared by the International up to 1928" (36). Following the 1928 Resolution was an internal struggle in the Comintern around the issue, resulting in a lack of clarity on how the communist party would finally address the role of the American Negro. The cacophony engendered by the introduction of the "Negro Question" led the Comintern to clarify its position in the 1930 "Resolution on the Negro Question," often referred to later as the Black Belt Theory, a theory arguing for the right for Negroes to form a separate state in an area of high population concentration along the southeast band of the United States.[29]

[29] In 1964, in the midst of the Cold War and the aftershock of McCarthyism, Leslie H. Fishel, Jr. wrote of the Communists, "Before 1935, their ideology committed their followers to support a separate state for

The roots of this theory are difficult to trace. In 1928, *New Masses* wrote in favor of "an independent Negro republic not only for South Africa but also for the Solid South of the United States of America as well" (48). In order to contextualize this idea of an independent Negro republic, one must understand, generally, Stalin's definition of "nation," applied a decade later to the Southern United States and the Negro. In 1913, Stalin defined a nation as "a historically evolved, stable community of language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a community of culture" that "has the right to secede" based upon its "right of self-determination" (qtd. in Nolan 41).[30] A study that later became *The Negro Question in the United States* revealed that "in certain Southern counties Negroes constituted a majority of the population, lived in contiguous territory, worked for the most part on the land, spoke a common language, had common physical characteristics, and enjoyed in common certain forms of entertainment and recreation," designating them a nation with the right to self determination (Nolan 45). The 1930 "Resolution on the Negro Question" clarified that "Negro self-determination was thus seen as being possible before the establishment of socialism" (Starobin 131) and made clear that "the slogan of the right to self-determination is a real slogan of national rebellion" (Comintern qtd. in Nolan 49).

The Comintern in 1928-1934, after years of neglecting the issue, spoke out on behalf of the American Negros in order to give them the right of self-determination. William Maxwell characterizes the period as follows: "The Depression-era party thus not only declared that African Americans possessed a 'community of culture' whose locus was the rural South but

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negroes, the so-called Black Republic, and insisted that they work independent of all other groups toward this end," reading the Black Belt Theory negatively, as a means of disempowering the Negro (15).

[30] Stalin wrote in the context of Russia, but two years later commented on "the striking similarity between the economic position of American Negroes and that of the 'former landlord's peasants' of the central agricultural regions of Russia" (qtd. in Nolan 44).

formally accepted the possibility that this culture's stewards might choose statehood on the (fancied) model of Soviet socialist republics" (Maxwell 162). The party line, from the top down, viewed American Negros as members of a separate nation; according to Howe, Negros were treated "not as ordinary human beings" but "as a special group requiring special 'handling'" (209). The American Negro became a project of the communist party, an object whose agency and voice were questionable on a large scale. The theory was to establish a "governmental separation" and to "stand… for the establishment of a Negro republic in the Black Belt" (quoted from the Comintern statement in Howe 206). The missing link seems to be a conversation between the "white" Soviet Communists in control and the American Negros who would be affected by this party line.

Despite the manipulation of communists in granting the right to self-determine to blacks, this period marks large increases in Negro membership and a collective effort to appeal to Negroes. Nathan Glazer asserts that the communist party made an unprecedented move to recruit Negroes (169), and William Nolan notes that "about twenty per cent of the articles which appeared in the official magazine of theory [*Communist*] during the first quarter of 1930s were devoted to the Negro question" (48). The party appealed to many Negroes as an organization that was pushing Negroes into positions of power; for instance, the communist party ran African-American James Ford as their vice-presidential candidate in 1932 and was quick to promote Negroes into visible positions. Even Nathan Glazer, in his 1961 study that reeks of McCarthyism and was funded by a series established to investigate American communism, acknowledges the allure for Negroes in the American Communist Party of the early 1930s:

> [American communists] showed themselves as the one element in American life that demanded the goal that even Negro political organizations hesitated to put forward: the complete merging of Negro and white in a common society. There was no hesitation, no equivocation in the demanding of such a merger. In the party, Negro members were treated with more than equality, and white female party members went out of their way to demonstrate how serious Communists were in eliminating all social barriers between the two races. The slightest hesitation in social relations with Negro party members, and indeed, some felt, in sexual relations, made a member suspect, and might lead to denunciation. (171)

The excerpt demonstrates the lingering misperception that conflates social and political equality with sexual promiscuity but nonetheless makes clear the distinctive agenda of the American Communist Party.[31] Despite the Comintern's 1928 shift of focus onto the American Negro as an "oppressed nation" (Howe 206) or their subsequent clarifications on language used to discuss the American Negro, and the eventual dropping of the language of self-determination by 1935, the typical African American was unlikely to be concerned with the nuances of the debate, if s/he was even aware of them.[32] In the midst of this period in which the Black Belt theory was being

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[31] The rumor of sexual baiting arises in *Native Son* as Jan Erlone is questioned regarding Mary's murder. The prosecutor insinuates that Jan urged Mary to have sex with Bigger as a means of recruiting him into the Party.

[32] In 1944, the conversation on the Negro and self-determination was reopened, with a hasty acknowledgement that the Black Belt Theory had been problematic. Doxey Wilkerson asserted that few Negroes knew about the concept of a self-determined national identity for Negroes, and "fewer still understood" (qtd. in Starobin 133). He argued that the "'separatist implications' of the self-determination slogan were not only 'theoretically incorrect' but also a 'source of irritation to the Negro people'" (132-33). In response to Wilkerson's reading of the situation, Max Weiss, former education director of the Communist party and current editor of *Political Affairs* stated, "It would be incorrect to draw the conclusion that, since the Negro people in the Black Belt are not conscious of being a nation, they are

debated but was falling out of popularity, as President Roosevelt was beginning to win the support of the communist party, and the Popular Front was drawing in new members, Richard Wright became deeply involved in the party.

In his biography of Richard Wright, Michel Fabre assesses Wright's initial attraction to the communist party, writing that "it seems that Wright's motives for joining … were more literary than political" (103). James Smethurst challenges this notion in *The New Red Negro: The Literary Left and African-American Poetry, 1930-1946,* arguing generally that the scholarship on this period minimizes the legitimacy of black involvement in the communist party. Too often, he believes, literary and historical scholars speak of a "conversion to radicalism… affecting the heart rather than the head. As a result, there is virtually no consideration of the possibility that the writers of the period could have been seriously engaged with the ideology of the Left, particularly the theoretical stands of the Communist Party of the United States on the 'national question'" (5). Maxwell affirms this notion in *New Negro, Old Left: African-American Writing and Communism Between the Wars*, arguing that Wright's enthusiasm as he read *The National and Colonial Question,* as detailed in the following passage from his autobiography, has been too often ignored or viewed as naïve. Wright recalls his optimism as he first encountered communism:

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therefore not a nation" (qtd. in Starobin 134). Similarly, Francis Franklin, a white southerner who reflected that Negroes had experienced what Starobin calls an "ambiguous evolution," "halfway in the American nation, halfway out," saw integration as "unsound" (qtd. in Starobin 133). Weiss went so far as to support redrawing state lines to create a Negro nation within the Black Belt, though the redefined Communist stance on the Negro question by 1944 came from Earl Browder who announced that "Negro people had in fact exercised their right of self-determination by opting for integration" (qtd. in Starobin 132). Joseph Starobin, who offers a most thorough discussion of the Black Belt Theory, concludes that the party was never able to meld the "contradiction between a movement based on integration and the search for the national essence of a Negro situation" (135).

> The revolutionary words leaped from the printed page and struck me with tremendous force. It was not the economics of Communism, nor the great power of trade unions, nor the excitement of underground politics that claimed me; my attention was caught by the similarity of the experiences of workers in other lands, by the possibility of uniting scattered but kindred peoples into a whole. My cynicism—which had been my protection against an America that had cast me out—slid from me and, timidly, I began to wonder if a solution of unity was possible. My life as a Negro in America had led me to feel—though my helplessness had made me try to hide it from myself—that the problem of human unity was more important that bread, more important that physical living itself; for I felt that without a common bond uniting men, without a continuous current of shared thought and feeling circulating through the social system, like blood coursing through the body, there could be no living worthy of being called human. (*Later Works* 302)

Urging readers to contextualize the moment of writing rather than the moment being recollected, Maxwell reminds us that the recollection was "composed in 1943, in the dead center of his protracted separation from organized Communism" (163). An overview of the shifts within the communist party in the 1930s illuminates Wright's recollection of first reading in *New Masses* in 1933. Wright was not merely a passive participant in a popular organization, but became and continued to be an invested member of the communist party, inspired by the ideas of nationhood which denoted, to twenty-five-year-old Wright, an acknowledgment of Negroes and their rights.

Jan Erlone and the Complexities of Communism

Richard Wright, devoted as he once was to the potential of the communist party, does not end his representation of communist Jan Erlone on a drunken evening that ends with Bigger's accidental fatal suffocation of Mary Dalton. Wright complicates the character of Jan through the relationship he develops with Bigger, who is beginning to realize the gravity of not only the crime that he committed but also his social position. Bigger has directed suspicion toward Jan by signing a ransom note "Red." After a police interrogation at the Dalton home, Jan confronts Bigger in an attempt to help him, but with no precedent for a relationship with a white man, Bigger responds to Jan with fear and distrust. As the snow "form[s] a delicate screen between them," Bigger finds "no way to atone for his guilt" (162). Bigger cannot comprehend the compassion of this white man, so when Jan suggests that they "go somewhere and get a cup of coffee and talk this thing over," Bigger pulls a gun on Jan in order to make him "go 'way," iterating the inability to cross the boundaries that Jan imagines as permeable but Bigger's experience has proven to be solid (162).

While early in the novel Jan appears irresponsible and condescending and in the above scene represents for Bigger fear of the unknown, he later plays a central role in the development of Bigger's consciousness. Jan denies his own individual subjectivity in order to acknowledge his position within an oppressive culture of whiteness. Although Jan says, "I've never done anything against you and your people in my life" (268), he understand Bigger's fear and hatred of whiteness:

> But I'm a white man and it would be asking too much to ask you not to hate me, when every white man you see hates you. […] I can't take upon myself the blame

> for what one hundred million people have done. […] I was in jail grieving for Mary and then I thought of all the black men who've been killed, the black men who had to grieve when their people were snatched from them in slavery and since slavery. (267-68)

Jan thus historicizes Bigger's actions by acknowledging the role of white complacency in creating the situation that led to Bigger's violence. Rather than assigning blame, Jan wants to work to break the cycle of violence and recommends communist Boris Max to serve as Bigger's lawyer. Jan's words and actions are revelatory for Bigger, quite literally making him see anew:

> He looked at Jan and saw a white face, but an honest face. This white man believed in him, and the moment he felt that belief he felt guilty again; but in a different sense now. Suddenly, this white man had come up to him, flung aside the curtain and walked into the room of his life. Jan had spoken a declaration of friendship that would make other white men hate him; a particle of white rock had detached itself from that looming mountain of white hate and had rolled down the slope, stopping still at his feet. The word had become flesh. For the first time in his life a white man was a human being to him; and the reality of Jan's humanity came in a stab of remorse: he had killed what this man loved and had hurt him. He saw Jan as though someone had performed an operation upon his eyes, or as though someone had snatched a deforming mask from Jan's face. (268)

In this important passage, Bigger reveals that "white" and "honest" had occupied oppositional spaces until now. Bigger has never had an experience with whiteness that was positive; whiteness has appeared only as an unattainable desire or a controlling force. As Jan puts aside his own grief to contextualize Bigger's actions within the racist culture that created him, Wright shifts attention from Bigger's individual criminal acts toward a reconsideration of white American society's responsibility, according to Max, for such criminality.

While Jan is physically absent for much of the remainder of the novel, his symbolic unveiling of Bigger establishes his centrality throughout the last book, "Fate," during which Bigger awaits trial and execution. For the first time, Bigger relates to a white man during the inquest, when Jan is reamed with questions from Buckley, the state's attorney. Following the questioning, Bigger "knew how Jan felt. He knew what the man [Buckley] had been trying to do in asking the questions. He was not the only object of hate here" (301). Importantly, the mere existence of Jan and the concept of white humanity open for Bigger alternative imaginings of his own life, which is coming to an end. Bigger's existential awakening, though limited, results from conversations with both Jan and Max. While Max's role is far more central in the latter part of the novel, Jan more centrally occupies the selfless position on which Bigger focuses. Samuel Sillen reads Bigger's final statement of the novel, "Tell…Tell Mister…Tell Jan hello," due to the "dropping of the Mister… [, as] an affirmation of that solidarity with other human beings in which only Jan and Max have taught him to believe" (qtd. in Butler 32).

Reflecting not only his own positive experiences within the communist party but also the party's controversial relationship to the "Negro" in the 1930s, Wright positions Jan to reflect the contradictory communist party that he knew. In a letter to Mike Gold, dated April 29, 1940, Wright explained Jan's character thus: "My aim in depicting Jan was to show that even for that

great party which has thrown down a challenge to America on the Negro Question such as has no other party, there is much, much to do, and, above all, to understand" (Fabre 186). Indeed, Wright's representation of white communists was not based only on his early, generally positive experiences but also on the complexities of the party and Richard Wright's conflicted feelings about the party by 1937 and 1938, when he wrote *Native Son.*

1933-1935: Transition for Communists, Transition for Wright

Nineteen thirty-four was, for Richard Wright, a transformative year in terms of his relationship with the American Communist Party, which his experience at the Communist Party's Middle West Writers's Congress epitomized. In his autobiography, Wright recalls with disappointment that the Comintern determined that the congress would address "political questions," though he was more interested in discussing "craft problems:"

> I asked for a definition of what was expected from the writers, books or political activity. Both, was the answer. Write a few hours a day and march on the picket line the other hours. I pointed out that the main concern of a revolutionary artist was to produce revolutionary art, and that the future of the club was in doubt if a clear policy could not be found. (*Later Works* 325)

Wright "contended that it would be a mistake for the communist party to persuade writers to abandon imaginative work to write pamphlets," but the congress was unmoved by his argument

(325).[33] By the close of the gathering, the congress decided that the writers should cease writing fiction and poetry in order to focus on pamphlets, and dissolved the John Reed Clubs. The League of American Writers, which historian Fraser Ottanelli describes as a "national congress of writers with a much broader, less sectarian mandate," replaced the John Reed Clubs (64). Wright's frank and contentious response to these changes labeled him a political traitor. The fear that he began to feel from within the communist party at a moment of its supposed opening up to form a "popular front"—which marked unprecedented growth within the party and a wider range of programs and participants—pushed Wright away. Of this period, Wright recalls, "My relationship with Communists reached a static phase. I shunned them and they shunned me" (*LW* 329). Despite this mutual shunning, Wright remained involved with the party and published in *International Literature* and *New Masses* while continuing to run the South Side Chicago office until he moved to New York in 1936 (Fabre 116).

"Communism is the Americanism of the Twentieth Century": The Popular Front [34]

In 1933, national and international changes took place which would reverberate for decades: Adolf Hitler came to power in Germany, and the United States passed the National Industry Recovery Act (NIRA). The NIRA authorized the President of the United States to regulate businesses, shifting control away from labor and allowing links between the public and

[33] As a relative newcomer to the party, Wright spoke out, making a public statement in support of the John Reed Clubs, which he recalls in his autobiography: "It was not courage that made me oppose the party. I simply did not know any better. It was inconceivable to me, though bred in the lap of Southern hate, that a man could not have his say. I had spent a third of my life traveling from the place of my birth to the North just to talk freely, to escape the pressure of fear. And now I was facing fear again" (327-28).
[34] General Secretary of the American Communist Party Earl Browder said, "Communism is the Americanism of the Twentieth Century" (qtd. in Nolan 104).

private sectors which might disadvantage the worker.[35] The impact of these events was not immediate, though *New Masses*, a publication of the communist party, ran a timely letter in March condemning Nazism as an affront to human rights *and* to art. These national and global shifts which limited the power as well as the artistic expression of the masses encouraged the Communist Party U.S.A. to loosen the pressures on its own writers and to build ties that blurred the once clear party line.

Between 1934 and 1935, subtle political shifts changed the environment and the line of the Communist Party U.S.A. Nationally, a major transformation occurred as President Roosevelt earned the support of the American Communist Party with his passage in 1934 of a handful of bills and acts that constituted for the communists a commitment to the proletariat masses in spite of big business—the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA), the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) and the National Recovery Administration (NRA).[36] As conservative business leaders criticized FDR and the New Deal, the communist party lent its support. In 1935, the Supreme Court ruled part of the New Deal unconstitutional, an act in which "the entire structure of the New Deal was threatened and the safeguards for labor… were swept away," leading the government to build new allegiances and coalitions out of the threat of total collapse (Ottanneli 74). An unlikely relationship was formed between American democracy and the American Communist Party. FDR and the communists were ready to build

[35] The NIRA was overturned in 1935, leading to the passage of the Wagner Act of the same year which protected the rights of workers in the private sector to organize labor unions and participate in collective bargaining and strikes.

[36] According to Leslie H. Fishel, Jr., these and other administrative decisions were also beneficial for African Americans. He writes, "For the Negro, the most significant were the Federal Employment Relief Administration (FERA), the National Recovery Act (NRA), the Works Progress Administration, later called the Work Projects Administration (WPA), The Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA), the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), the National Youth Administration (NYA), the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), and the public housing efforts of several agencies. …[F]or the first time, the federal government had engaged and was grappling with some of the fundamental barriers to race progress" (10).

coalitions at precisely the same time—FDR due to pressure on the New Deal, and the communist party due to the rise of fascism, models of effective coalition building, and an expanding perspective on radicalism due, in part, to the Youth Communist League (YCL).[37]

In 1934, student strikes organized by the YCL revealed that even middle-class intellectuals could be radical, causing administrators of the communist party to rethink the organization's membership and appeal. Inspired by university students in Oxford, England, American students participated in a mass demonstration, the Student Anti-War Strike, in which 25,000 students walked out of classes, forcing instruction to halt while the students signed the Oxford Pledge "not to support the government in any future wars" (Howe 34). For the next three years, more and more students participated in the annual strike, with numbers reaching 1,000,000

[37] The consistent work of student radicals convinced the Communist Party to rethink their definitions of radicalism in order to build coalitions. According to Fraser Ottanelli, "The depression and growing world tension overcame political apathy among the students," whose youthful enthusiasm made them ideal recruits and devoted members (59). While the Communist Party had been distrustful of students and intellectuals in the formative years of the Party in America (1918-1928), a youth movement born in the early thirties nurtured a new generation that would categorize themselves as "radical," many of whom would go on to work in the early Civil Rights Movement. Howe explains, "Ingrown and provincial, more of a club than a political movement, the Communist youth organization combined a mild Bohemianism (the revolt of its members against the puritan modesty of immigrant family life) with a rigid fanaticism (the desire of young converts to outshine the older Communists in the zeal of their attachment)" (198). Howe is careful to complicate this image of naivety, and acknowledges that "[n]o one was likely to join the YCL [Youth Communist League] in 1932 out of ordinary careerism or because it was the 'thing to do'" (Howe 199). A new generation, to which Richard Wright belonged, was shaped by the vigor and promise of the radicalism of Communism and was given opportunity to put the theories into practice during a period of instability and disquiet. Irving Howe remarks, "The radical student groups, coming into existence in an atmosphere of fright and hope, thus created a student movement that would have a measurable influence upon American political and intellectual life during the next two decades" (Howe 203). With the shift from the Extreme Left Period (1928-33) during which the student, "no matter what his activity or zeal, was likely to be regarded as a dubious type by the older comrades" (Howe 201) to the Popular Front Period (1934-49), which embraced students and middle-class youth, Socialist and Communist campus organizations followed the call to build coalitions and formed the National Student League as the "campus appendage" of the Youth Communist League in 1932. Drawing in the Socialist Student League for Industrial Democracy (SLID) and the Communist National Student League (NSL), the Popular Front in American colleges and universities established a solid youth base committed to the more moderate "radicalism" of the period.

by 1936.[38] By 1937, the communist party leaned even further toward the center in order, according to Fraser Ottanelli to, "join together in an anti-fascist alliance to defend bourgeois democracy" (83). That year, General Secretary Earl Browder asked the Youth Communist League and the National Student League to forego the Anti-War Strike, saying that the time for generalized pacifism had passed.[39] An era of American communism defined by radical pacifism, proletariat writing codes, and adherence to a strict and critical communist view of American "democracy" as imperialism had come to a close. The adjusted pressures on what constituted communist writing and broad recruitment of writers focused more on quantity than the quality of its members further prove the shift from Extreme Left to Popular Front communism. The January 1935 *New Masses*'s call to "all writers who have achieved some standing in their respective fields; who have clearly indicated their sympathy for the revolutionary cause and who do not need to be convinced of the decay of capitalism, of the inevitability of the revolution" to attend a national congress represented a shift away from the radicalism of the Extreme Left period as well as a slackening of the artistic control which alienated Wright (qtd. in Fabre 116). Although the call included Wright's signature, the shift that it signified would eventually correspond with Wright's break from the American Communist Party.

The period of broadening and bridge-building, widely known as the Popular Front, was in full force by 1934-1935. Ottanelli's history marks 1935 as a dramatic "turning point in the history of the Communist movement" as the Comintern realized "the need for all socialist

[38] Howes acknowledges that while 1,000,000 may be an elevated estimation, even the conservative *New York Times* reported 500,000. The actual number of participants in the Student Anti-War Strikes is likely somewhere within this range.

[39] This same year the Communist Party formed the International Brigade, colloquially known as the Lincoln Brigade, to defend Spain against attacks from Franco, Mussolini, and Hitler; the pacifism of the Communist Party was clearly at an end.

organizations and democratic forces to join together in an anti-fascist alliance to defend bourgeois democracy" (83). Central to this shift was the communist party's inaugural support of the U.S. President. Since his election, the party had been critical of President Roosevelt and his New Deal. In 1935, the Supreme Court ruling against portions of the New Deal caused Roosevelt to "make a leftward turn which won the allegiance of the unions and liberals and brought with it the most impressive legislation of the Roosevelt years: the Wagner Act, Social Security, TVA, etc." (Howe 233-34). The *new* New Deal, or what William Leuchtenberg calls the "second New Deal," pleased the communist party, coinciding as it did with the rise in international fascism and the increasing desire to build coalitions across party distinctions in the name of anti-fascism. For the first time in its history, the American Communist Party supported the government that it had sought to overturn.

The communist party of the mid-1930s had, thus, become increasingly American. The "Star Spangled Banner" played along with the "International" at official party events—a fact that could not have been predicted prior to Hitler's rise to power. *New Masses* became more popular-oriented in its appeal, running articles on black athletes like Joe Louis, for example. As William Nolan notes of the Americanization of the Communist Party U.S.A, "By the fall of 1936, the hammer and sickle had disappeared from the front page of the *Daily Worker*, which now became the "People's Champion of Liberty, Progress, Peace and Prosperity" (104).

The period of the mid-1930s has also been called the Democratic Front of the American Communist Party, an oxymoronic term given the party's historic criticism of capitalism and the United States's vision of capitalist democracy. In 1936, Earl Browder stated there could be no "neutral position" in the struggle between "the forces of reaction, fascism and war" and what he called "the forces of popular democracy, and first of all the labor movement." In such a line-up,

he concluded, there was "but one possible place for the Communists, on the side of democracy" (Ottanelli 111). Whether it was Americans' growing ease with a democratic and American Communism or fear of fascism abroad, the newly broadened strategies of the Communist Party worked: membership more than doubled between 1935 and 1938 (Ottanelli 128).

To Wright, the communist party of the Popular Front sacrificed its radicalism and political dogma in order to reach a broader audience. Although he welcomed the loosened constraints on art forms, the simultaneously softened focus of the party regarding anti-racism and pacifism turned a once-radical political party into an American coalition that would be used in ways that Wright could never have imagined the night that he read of Negro national sovereignty in 1933. Wright, however, remained radical and, in fact, was eventually more radical than the American Communist Party.[40] His break was gradual and quiet, and is reflected in the representations of white communists within *Native Son,* written while he was still a member in search of a way out of the current organization but devoted still to Marxist ideals.

Writing His Way Out: Richard Wright at the Close of the 1930s

Biographer Michel Fabre reads Wright's continued involvement with the communist party through the late 1930s as his trade-off for artistic support:

> Wright had defined his role primarily as that of a writer, a function which had been amply recognized by the Congress. He wanted to be a writer first, but since he was black

[40] Even after the Stalin-Hitler Pact of 1939, which led to a dramatic decrease in membership—especially among those who had jumped aboard in answer to the 1935 open call to artists opposed to fascism—Wright was loyal to the Party, supporting the Comintern over an American idea of democracy.

> his only option, for the moment at least, was to be a Communist writer. He therefore consented to remain a Communist in order to remain a writer. (120)

According to Wright's own recollections, he was ready to break with the communist party in Chicago by 1936. He recalls, "I lay reviewing the life I had lived in the party and I found it distasteful. […] Again I resolved to leave the party, for the emotional cost of membership was too high" (*Later Works* 334). Wright did not leave the party, however, but quietly broke with the Chicago organization after the trial of a fellow member awakened him to the power of the masses and his fear of their misdirection:

> Acting upon the loftiest of impulses, filled with love for those who suffer, urged toward fellowship with the rebellious, committed to sacrifice, why was it that there existed among Communists so much hate, suspicion, bitterness, and internecine strife? I stood in the midst of people I loved and I was afraid of them. I felt profoundly that they were traveling in the right direction, yet if their having power to rule had depended upon my lifting my right hand, I would have been afraid to do so. My heart throbbed and I whispered to myself: God, I love these people, but I'm glad that they're not in power, or they'd shoot me! (*Later Works* 351)

After being physically thrown out of the 1936 Chicago May Day Parade as a traitor, Wright recognized the end of an artistic if not political era for himself. Wright reflected on several of his previously published short stories such as "Big Boy Leaves Home" and "Long Black Song,"

later published in *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938), realizing that they belonged to a different period and in many ways a different author:

> I remembered the stories I had written, the stories in which I had assigned a role of honor and glory to the Communist party and I was glad that they were down in black and white, were finished. For I knew in my heart that I would never be able to write that way again, would never be able to feel with that simple sharpness about life, would never again express such passionate hope, would never again make so total a commitment of faith. (*Later Works* 363)

Despite this and aforementioned resolutions, Wright remained an active organizer and writer within the party. Between 1936 and 1938, Wright worked both for the communist party and the Works Progress Administration, specifically the Federal Writers Project and the Federal Theater Project.[41] Cut off from the intellectual environment and creative outlet of the former John Reed Clubs, Wright was led to form the South Side Writers' Group with friend and fellow poet Margaret Walker. His growing frustration with the party corresponded with his publishing success. Taking advantage of new family financial stability[42] and paid transportation to New York as a delegate for the Second American Writers' Congress in June, 1937, Wright relocated to New York to "give [himself] a chance" (qtd. in Fabre 139).

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[41] Wright describes his challenges within the FTP at the Federal Negro Theater of Chicago, where he attempted to direct progressive shows in which black actors could expand their ranges, rather than performing stereotyped roles. The actors revolted, telling Wright they preferred the old roles. In Wright's assessment of the situation, he was run out of this position by Communists who distrusted him. (*Later Works* 358)

[42] Most of Wright's family had followed him to Chicago; he was the primary breadwinner responsible for an extended family. His cousin's health improved, enabling him to return to work and lighten the economic burden on Wright.

In his early years in New York, Wright lived with Herbert and Jane Newton, white communists with whom he developed a close relationship.[43] During these years, Wright actively wrote and revised *Native Son*, which reflected on his time in Chicago as well as from his experiences in New York. Because his "rupture" with the communist party in Chicago had been kept quiet, Wright maintained his membership in the party, wrote for the *Daily Worker,* and was appointed Director of the Harlem Bureau upon his relocation to New York. *Native Son* drew from Wright's experiences in Chicago but also from his positive contemporary experiences with communists like the Newtons. His writing was not meant to capture a specific period; in fact, the details of Bigger's trial were taken from contemporary newspaper clippings.[44] The communist party and in particular the white communists that Wright represents in *Native Son* are most likely a composite of his youthful awakening into communism, his eventual negative experiences in Chicago, his positive experiences with white communists in New York, and his understanding of the socio-political position of the American Communist Party of the late 1930s. His representation of black urban youth, as embodied by Bigger, draws from his youth in the Jim Crow south as well as his time in the South Side of Chicago, 1931-37.[45] Swedish economist Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma*, a sociological study on the American Negro focusing

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[43] Jane Newton, particularly, became a close friend. Each morning, Wright would leave the house to write and then return to read to Jane from his notes. According to *American Hunger* and Fabre's biography, Newton influenced Wright's development of the novel substantially. A memorable example is the description of Mary's decapitation. Wright originally wrote that Bigger cut off Mary's head with a knife until Jane Newton handed Wright a chicken carcass and a butcher knife, demonstrating the impossibility of such an action. Wright revised the action and had Bigger decapitate Mary with an ax instead.

[44] Margaret Walker, whom Wright had known through the South Side Writer's Group, agreed to send clippings to Wright on the ongoing trial of Robert Nixon, an "18-year-old black boy" who had murdered a woman in Chicago in 1938 and later confessed "probably, under torture, to another crime […] as well as five attempted murders of which it was not at all certain he was guilty" (Fabre 172). In fact, much of the newspaper article on page 316 of *Native Son* came directly from the clippings that Walker sent.

[45] In "How Bigger Was Born," Wright explains that Bigger was a figure that he saw in acquaintances from childhood as well as in his experience working for the South Side Boy's Club in Chicago.

on 1937-39, offers a context for the dichotomous black/white world that Wright presents in *Native Son*.

The American Dilemma of the late 1930s

"The Negro problem in America is not beyond solution."

Richard Wright, "How Bigger Was Born" (1940)[46]

In 1937, Gunnar Myrdal received an invitation from Frederick P. Keppel, President of the Carnegie Corporation of New York, to direct "a comprehensive study of the Negro in the United States, to be undertaken in a wholly objective and dispassionate way as a social phenomenon" (quoted from Keppel's invitation; Myrdal li).[47] Myrdal's reputation as "an inventive and productive scholar and a man of great intellectual breadth," paired with his objective outsider perspective as a European fluent in English, made him an ideal candidate to Keppel and the Carnegie Corporation (Southern**).**[48] He eventually accepted the offer and spent the next two

[46] "I Bite the Hand that Feeds Me," published in May *Atlantic Monthly*, responded to a review of *Native Son* by David L. Cohn, which argued that "The Negro problem in America is insoluble" and Wright's "incitement to violence can only make a tolerable relationship intolerable" (qtd. in Abcarian 80).

[47] In 1935, Newton D. Baker, board member of the Carnegie Corporation and grandson of a Confederate officer, opened a dialogue on domestic racial inequity, questioning the effectiveness of the organization's historical support of Southern Negro schools, a practice that reflected the politics of gradualism within the corporation and was initiated through the friendship between founder Andrew Carnegie and educator Booker T. Washington. In order to take a step toward eradicating a problem, the organization knew that it first must assess the problem itself. Baker advised the corporation of the need to "know more about racism in America before it could spend its money with confidence that it was doing the most for the black minority" (Southern 3).

[48] Due to his European citizenship, Myrdal's selection was quite controversial and was challenged by scholars like African-American Walter White, then executive secretary of National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), as well as Euro-American Donald Young, race scholar with the Social Science Research Council. Myrdal himself questioned whether he was the best choice given his self-admitted ignorance of the issue of race.

years (1939-1940) supervising researchers and writing what would become *An American Dilemma* (1944). These two years correspond with the years that Wright revised and published *Native Son*; both texts reflect similarly on the previous decade. In *Communism Versus the Negro* (1951), William Nolan justifies his seemingly anachronistic use of *An American Dilemma* to understand better the 1930s, explaining that "its data and its conclusions apply as accurately to that earlier period as they do to the present. And for two reasons. First, because it covers the problem historically and, therefore, covers all the significant data on the past. Secondly, because the situation then was substantially the same as it was in 1942, the year when Myrdal completed his study" (20). Because the period of Myrdal's research so closely corresponds to Wright's completion of *Native Son*, they were assessing similar worlds, although these two intellectuals would not meet until later and could not have directly influenced one another during their early writing.

In *An American Dilemma*, Gunnar Myrdal begins, "There is a 'Negro problem' in the United States and most Americans are aware of it, although it assumes varying forms and intensity in different regions of the country and among diverse groups of the American people. Americans have to react to it, politically as citizens and, where there are Negroes present in the community, privately as neighbors," setting the tone for the work that asks the question: "What is white America to do about the race issue?" (lxix). Assessing his predominantly white audience and the white-dominated power structure of the United States, Myrdal chooses to "give primary attention to what goes on in the minds of white Americans" (lxxv). The solution, Myrdal and his researchers argue, depends upon the hope that "the Negro people succeed in acquiring and institutionalizing footholds of power in society with the help of interested white groups" (lxxvi).

The research catalogued in *An American Dilemma* is extensive, ranging from detailed statistics on income levels, disease ratios, dietary intake, and political and religious affiliations by race. Myrdal states the obvious: as long as society perceives African Americans as substandard, they will be treated as such. The onus, then, is on white Americans[49] to shift these perceptions. As Myrdal acknowledges, "The Negroes do not by far have anything approaching a tenth of the things worth having in America. It is thus the white majority group that naturally determines the Negro's 'place'" (lxxv). It is up to the white majority group, too, to redefine that "place." Myrdal acknowledges the complex social and historical position of the American Negro:

> The very presence of the Negro in America; his fate in this country through slavery, Civil War and Reconstruction; his recent career and his present status; his accommodation; his protest and his aspiration; in fact his entire biological, historical and social existence as a participant American represent to the ordinary white man in the North as well as in the South an anomaly in the very structure of American society. (lxix)

To Myrdal, the "American Dilemma" arises when those who are privileged by and believe in the American Creed ignore the blatant fact that not all Americans have access to its promises. So strong is the desire to believe in the Creed, he asserts that "people will attempt to conceal the conflict between their different valuations of what is desirable and undesirable, right or wrong, by keeping away some valuations from awareness and by focusing attention on others. For the

[49] Myrdal simply refers to "Americans" and "Negros," with the assumption that Americans are white. He does occasionally specify "white Americans."

same opportune purpose, people will twist and mutilate their beliefs of how social reality actually is" (lxxiii). Change, therefore, necessitates a simple solution, involving a shift in perspective, and a difficult solution, requiring a revision of the most shared belief in America by acknowledgment of the limitations of the myth of America.

Chapter Two of *An American Dilemma*, "Encountering the Negro Problem," emphasizes white responsibility to right the racial wrongs of the past. Myrdal spends several pages citing writers, black and white, who have pointed to the need for white action on the issue of race.[50] Overtly, Myrdal calls for action from white readers based upon the assessment that white Americans not only *should* grapple with the American Dilemma but that only they *can*. Faith is central to Myrdal's study and dictates the second volume of the work where he proposes solutions for whites. What Myrdal captures in his dense sociological study through research, Richard Wright portrays through image in his own genre of naturalist fiction. Myrdal's data and Wright's narrative weave together to provide a deep-focus snapshot of a moment in African-America, with a particular emphasis on white responsibility, embodied in *Native Son* by Jan Erlone and Boris Max.

Bigger's Dilemma

In *Native Son*, Richard Wright structures a narrative around Bigger Thomas's own American dilemma; Bigger strives to access an imagined creed which he sees granted only to whites and

[50] From African American James Weldon Johnson, who wrote, "…the main difficulty of the race question does not lie so much in the actual condition of the blacks as it does in the mental attitude of the whites," to Euro-American Ray Stannard Baker, who wrote, "It keeps coming to me that this is more a white man's problem than it is a Negro problem," Myrdal makes it clear that whites are responsible for correcting this dilemma (Myrdal 43).

struggles to cope with white control of his world and his resulting fear of whiteness. His simultaneous fear of and desire for whiteness paralyze Bigger early on in the novel but eventually push him toward a self-fulfilling prophesy of violence and entrapment.[51] In one of the novel's first treatments of normative whiteness, Wright presents Bigger's dual relationship with whiteness—attraction and repulsion. Early in the novel, Bigger and his friend Gus "play white," imagining themselves to be wealthy and powerful with the perceived access and privilege of whiteness—role-playing a U.S Army General, the wealthy financier J.P. Morgan, and the President of the United States. Although they are initially jovial, Bigger quickly transitions from attraction to repulsion, shouting, "Goddammit!... They don't let us do *nothing*!" (22). Gus warns Bigger to let it be, but Bigger explodes in his first show of what will become a pattern of reactive anger: "Goddammit, look! We live here and they live there. We black and they white. They got things and we aint. They do things and we can't. It's just like living in jail. Half the time I feel like I'm on the outside of the world peeping in through a knot-hole in the fence…." In response, Gus quiets him by "mumbl[ing] good-naturedly, 'Aw, nigger, quit thinking about it. You'll go nuts'" (23).

Similarly capturing the desire for the unattainable, the controversial movie theater masturbation scene of *Native Son* offers a poignant example of the erotic desire for whiteness. The original manuscript and the restored text of the scene include a description of Bigger and his friend Jack masturbating as they watch the films *The Gay Woman* and *Trader Horn*.[52] Whether

[51] In an early conversation with his friend Gus, Bigger says, "Every time I get to thinking about me being black and they being white, me being here and they being there, I feel like something awful's going to happen to me…" (23).

[52]The original publisher, The Book-of-the-Month Club, asked Wright to edit out this controversial scene, and he complied. Not until 1991 did the Library of America publish the original manuscript and include this scene. In his review of the 1991 printing of *Native Son* in its original manuscript form, Eugene E.

the boys act out their social longing via a physical, symbolic act in the movie theater or not, the idealization of imagined whiteness is clear in either version of the novel.

The narrow and constructed images of idealized whiteness impact Bigger as he watches the two films which exhibit powerful Hollywood images of white civilization and sophistication contrasted with black animalism. According to the narrator of *Native Son, The Gay Woman* is set "amid scenes of cocktail drinking, dancing, golfing, swimming, and spinning roulette wheels, a rich young white woman kept clandestine appointments with her love while her millionaire husband was busy in the offices of a vast paper mill" (34). In the style of Classical Hollywood Cinema, the white woman is glamorous and beautiful, and the story's closed ending restores cultural values. The luxurious set and the material excess of the characters's lifestyle appeal to Bigger and Jack:

> "I bet their mattresses is stuffed with paper dollars," Bigger said.
>
> "Man, them folks don't even have to turn over in their sleep," Jack said. "A butler stands by their beds at night, and when he hears 'em sigh, he gently rolls 'em over…." (34)

Although many of the film's viewers might respond to the representation of extreme wealth with exaggerated imaginings like the one involving the cash mattress and a bed butler, Jack and Bigger have no context for whiteness that is not imaginary. Unable to ground whiteness through

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Miller offers a bold reading of the political implications of the "new" text, specifically with regard to gender and sexuality. Miller argues that the "sexually vibrant" Bigger of the manuscript contrasts with the "emasculated" Bigger of the 1940 text, significantly complicating fifty years of literary scholarship. See Miller, Eugene E. "Review: Authority, Gender, and Fiction." *African American Review* 27.4 (1993): 687-91.

genuine interaction with whites, Bigger wonders, "Was what he had heard about rich white people really true? Was he going to work for people like you saw in the movies? If he were, then he'd see a lot of things from the inside; he'd get the dope, the low-down" (35). As literary scholar James Nagel points out, "his response to the movies underscores Bigger's refusal to identify himself with black society and reveals his quest for the amorphous splendor of the white world" (89). In the absence of legitimate and complex interactions with whites, Bigger presumes that all whites experience Hollywood-style access and excess, creating an irrational and debilitating longing for and fear of whiteness.

Wright establishes Bigger's fear of whiteness in the opening of *Native Son* as Bigger leaves his family's crowded apartment in Chicago's South Side into the white world that confronts and taunts him. The novel's earliest image of whiteness comes in the form of an advertisement for the re-election of Buckley, the state's attorney. Bigger describes the omnipotence of the image of Buckley:

> …the white face was fleshy but stern; one hand was uplifted and its index finger pointed straight out into the street at each passer-by. The poster showed one of those faces that looked straight at you when you looked at it and all the while you were walking and turning your head to look at it it kept looking unblinkingly back at you until you got so far from it you had to take your eyes away and then it stopped, like a movie blackout. Above the top of the poster were tall red letters: IF YOU BREAK THE LAW, YOU CAN'T WIN! (16)

An opening image of white surveillance is appropriate in this early scene, but it also foreshadows the powerful whiteness that eventually surrounds and captures Bigger as the novel unfolds.[53] The white eye in *Native Son* functions like Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon; Buckley's ever-watching eye—representative of white surveillance and governmental power—maintains effortless control in a system built on imaginary boundaries and fear.[54]

Ironically, Bigger also feels this surveillance from Mrs. Dalton, who is blind. As Bigger first sees Mrs. Dalton, she appears "completely white; she seemed to him like a ghost" (48). Always dressed in white, followed by her white cat, carrying herself gracefully with an uplifted head, Mrs. Dalton's presence is almost supernatural to Bigger. In *White*, film scholar and cultural critic Richard Dyer offers analysis of frequent literary and cinematic images of "whites as both themselves dead and as bringers of death" (210).[55] Mrs. Dalton functions in the novel as a symbol of white deathliness; her white presence, after all, causes Bigger, aware of the proximity of his own blackness to Mary's whiteness, to panic and suffocate Mary to death. Bigger sees Mrs. Dalton in only two other places, in or near the basement while Mary's body burns in the furnace and at the inquest where the remains of Mary and Bessie Mears, Bigger's girlfriend, are revealed. Mrs. Dalton's silent figure provokes a fear in Bigger that, despite her blindness, she holds the power of the gaze.

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[53] Buckley is eventually the prosecuting attorney in Bigger's trial.

[54] Bentham's Panopticon, discussed in Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, involves a tower holding a prison guard who can potentially see all prisoners, while the prisoners cannot see the guard. The brilliance of the system is its efficiency; it is the fear of being watched and the belief that one is always being watched that controls the prisoners. Eventually, no one need stand guard. The fear of being watched proves a powerful deterrent.

[55] Dyer discusses works by both white and non-white writers and directors who, often unconsciously, represent whiteness as deathliness.

The imagined[56] power of whiteness exists not only as surveillance but also as a "line" that separates white from black. Bigger first invokes the line when he and his friends discuss whether to rob Blum, a white Jewish storeowner. Blum's whiteness positions him on the other side of the line, the crossing of which Bigger names as "a violation of ultimate taboo" (18). Bigger explains, "…they had never held up a white man before. They had always robbed Negroes. They felt that it was much easier and safer to rob their own people, for they knew that white policemen never really search diligently for Negroes who committed crimes against other Negroes" (17). While equally criminal, robbing other Negroes not only lessens their chance of punishment but lessens the thrill and the significance of the act which is purely rebellious—a test of masculinity that they consequently fail. Bigger imagines that to rob Blum's would be "a trespassing into territory where the full wrath of an alien white world would be turned loose upon them; in short, it would be a symbolic challenge of the white world's rule over them" (18).

Bigger fails to cross the line illegally with the decision not to rob Blum but chooses to cross the line in search of legitimate work by making his appointment with the Daltons. Crossing a boundary with more social than geographic function, Bigger realizes that he will be "going among white people" into a "cold and distant world; a world of white secrets carefully guarded" (44, 45). He resolves, then, to "take his knife and his gun; it would make him feel that he was the equal of them, give him a sense of completeness" (44). Despite the fact that Bigger has been called across the line for legitimate reasons, he is keenly aware of the boundary that he is crossing as well as the transcendent quality of whiteness. Wright conflates both the surveillance and the territoriality of whiteness in the following quote:

[56] To call this power "imagined" does not necessarily mean that it is false. My emphasis here is on the imagined power of whiteness as a debilitating force for young men like Bigger.

> To Bigger and his kind white people were not really people; they were a sort of great natural force, like a stormy sky looming overhead, or like a deep swirling river stretching suddenly at one's feet in the dark. As long as he and his black folks did not go beyond certain limits, there was no need to fear that white force. But whether they feared it or not, each and every day of their lives they lived with it; even when words did not sound its name, they acknowledged its reality. As long as they lived here in this prescribed corner of the city, they paid mute tribute to it. (109)

Wright thus represents the physical and psychological presence of whiteness for this young man born across the line, making clear the necessity for an alternative vision of racial interaction, perhaps as imagined and modeled by the communist party. In Myrdal's assessment, however, the belief in the American Creed overpowers most Negros's desire for revolution. More than they want to revise the system which privileges whites disproportionately, they want access to the same social and economic privilege.

Richard Wright's response to *An American Dilemma* was positive; he called the work "monumental," saying that it "cut a path that was awesome and caustic" (Fabre 208). Wright aligned himself with Myrdal when he wrote that "[t]he imposed conditions under which Negroes live detail the structure of their lives like an engineer outlining the blue-prints for the production of machines" (Drake xx). Wright and Myrdal saw Negroes as reactive, victims of a racist society that degraded and abused based upon skin color—and both saw white acknowledgement of this mistreatment and neglect as key to change.[57] Ultimately young men like Bigger are afraid to cross the "line," whether it be to rob a white man or to join the American Communist Party.

[57] Wright and Myrdal met in 1951, beginning their long and productive friendship; the two would later collaborate on *The Color Curtain: A Report on the Bandung Conference* after Wright's participation in the Bandung Conference in 1955.

because they, like the subjects in Myrdal's study, needed to believe in the American Creed. To rob a white man or to join a revolt is to disrupt the myth of America, shattering the dream that Bigger and his friends have absorbed passively, revealed through their imaginings of whiteness and their barely contained ire. As illogical as it may seem to a reader of either *An American Dilemma* or *Native Son*, men like Bigger imagine themselves benefiting from the American Dream. The inability to access that dream fully first, keeps them from revolutionary ideas like communism, and second, traps them in violent retaliatory fear. Desire and fear repeat in a stagnating cycle for young black men like Wright's naturalist "everyman" or the nameless cases in Myrdal's report.[58]

Boris Max: The Glory and Futility of the Communist Party

In the last book of *Native Son*, "Fate," Wright presents readers with both the promise of the communist party *and* the emptiness of that promise. In the character of Boris Max, Bigger's lawyer from the labor union,[59] Wright portrays the idealism of the communist party that he admired and to which he remained loyal until 1942.[60] Through the character of Max, Wright captures the potential of the communist party as well as the futility of the party in the context of

[58] Bigger is clearly intended as representative. Wright has Max, Bigger's defense lawyer, approach the case with this in mind. Max calls Bigger "a symbol, a test symbol" (354), and says, "Multiply Bigger Thomas twelve million times, […] and you have the psychology of the Negro people" (364).
[59] The character's name is Boris Max, though everyone in the novel refers to him simply as Max or, occasionally, as Mr. Max. In an interesting contrast, Jan is called by his first name.
[60] Wright broke from the party officially after the Party withheld "support from any attempt to combat government discrimination in the courts" (Fabre 229). In a letter to Edward Aswell in 1955, Wright explained, "…I broke with the Communist Party in 1942; I left under my own steam. I had intuitively realized much of what is now in the daily press about the Communist Party, including its infiltration by the F.B.I., agents, etc. In short, when I was a member of the Communist Party, I took that party seriously, and when I discovered that I was holding a tainted instrument in my hands, I dropped that instrument" (qtd. in Fabre 230).

a capitalist bureaucracy. "Fate" is devoted to Bigger's trial and serves to espouse the ideology of the communist party via Max's defense of Bigger. The casual conversations between Max and Bigger are as crucial to Wright's representation of communism as are Max's formal speeches in the courtroom. Both establish the communist devotion to racial equality, the need for interracial cooperation, and the inevitability of communist defeat.

As a black man and as a murderer, Bigger simultaneously relies on Max to come to his aid and resents that he cannot speak for himself: in the narrator's words, "The more he saw others exerting themselves, the emptier he felt" (272). His inability to explain his subject position leads him to trust Max out of desperation: "He would have gladly admitted his guilt if he had thought that in doing so he could have also given in the same breath a sense of the deep, choking hate that had been his life, a hate that he had not wanted to have, but could not help having. But how could he do that? The impulsion to try to tell was as deep as had been the urge to kill" (286). Bigger needs to confess his actions and express his impotence but has no language with which to do so. Bigger acknowledges the distance between himself and Max:

> He trusted Max. Was Max not taking upon himself a thing that would make other whites hate him? […] He felt that he should have been able to meet Max halfway; but, as always, when a white man talked to him, he was caught in No Man's Land. (321)

Max and Bigger eventually meet in this "No Man's Land"—a liminal space between black and white where trust is built and coalitions are potentially formed. For Bigger, however, it is too late to find a way out, although "No Man's Land" provides him with the beginnings of an awakening.

Bigger and Max are able to meet in this liminal space, in part, because Max establishes his kindness and devotion to the Negro's cause. Similar to Jan's earlier speech which contextualizes Bigger's fear and hatred of whiteness, Max explains, "Bigger, I know my face is white… And I know that almost every white face you've met in your life had it in for you, even when that white face didn't know it. Every white man considers it his duty to make a black man keep his distance. He doesn't know why most of the time, but he acts that way" (321). Bigger eventually comes to trust Max while realizing that Max is the exception to the rule. He says, "Mr. Max… If all folks was like you, then maybe I wouldn't be here. But you can't help that now" (332). Instead, all folks are not like Max; many are calculating and judgmental and, like Buckley, benefit from the privilege of a racist system of oppression.

By establishing Buckley as a capitalist politician who despises communists, Wright critiques the power structure which intentionally undermines the communist party in an attempt to create ruptures among the masses. The weakness of the party when contrasted with the power of Buckley is not lost on Bigger, who reflects, "What did the puny friendship of Jan and Max mean in the face of a million men like Buckley," whose cigar, hat, and white silk handkerchief represent his authority as he "tower[s] over Bigger" turning the "breath of warm home which Jan and Max had blown so softly upon him" to "frost under [his] cold gaze" (271-72).

Even in Bigger's "awakening," Wright resists romanticizing the potential of the communist party when functioning in an actual political context. That is, Bigger begins to trust Max and, in so doing, is aroused by questions that he had never been asked. Max grants him an agency that Bigger had never granted himself. Bigger realizes that he was completely honest with Max, that "he had spoken to Max as he had never spoken to anyone in his life; not even himself" (333). Aided by Max, Bigger feels, for the first time, "an urge to talk, to tell, to try to

make his feelings known" (323). The hopeless situation in which Bigger is placed quells Bigger's relatively positive representation of enlightenment. Capturing the complexity of Wright's own feelings about the communist party at the close of the 1930s, he writes of Bigger:

> For the first time in his life he had gained a pinnacle of feeling upon which he could stand and see vague relations that he had never dreamed of. If that white looming mountain of hate were not a mountain at all, but people, people like himself, and like Jan—then he was faced with a high hope the like of which he had never thought could be, and a despair the full depths of which he knew he could not stand to feel. (334)

Had Wright stopped short, leaving Bigger atop this pinnacle of feeling, Max and communism would have stood as heroic. Instead, Wright places that feeling of "high hope" in a cell on death row in the mind of a "black boy" who has no outlet for these feelings, turning the hope to despair. Espousing a communist vision of the future, Bigger imagines "a black sprawling prison full of tiny black cells in which people lived" from which "hands in the darkness" with "fingers spread weakly open" might "[feel] other hands connected with other hearts" (335). Asking "what he was in relation to all others that lived, and the earth upon which he stood," Bigger comes to the stark realization of the futility of his questions which have come "too late," as he "lift[s] his hands to his face and touch[es] his trembling lips," whispering "Naw…. Naw...." and then falling silent (334-36). Worse than his aborted awakening is his justification of murder through his half-awakening and misunderstanding of Max.

In his last effort to reach Bigger, after he has been sentenced to death, Max explains that in a culture in which "people on the other side of the fence… rule and regulate life," it is

essential for a man like Bigger to "believe in [himself]" because "the side that feels life the most, the side with the most humanity and the most men" is the side that wins (391). Only partly understanding Max, Bigger, desperate for closure and peace, exclaims, "But what I killed for, I *am*! It must've been pretty deep in me to make me kill! […] I didn't know I was really alive in this world until I felt things hard enough to kill for 'em" (392). Missing the fullness of Max's explanation, which included a clear judgment of Bigger's actions as he said, "Bigger, you killed. That was wrong. That's not the way to do it" (390), Bigger uses Max's words to construct a justification for the murders. At the close of *Native Son*, Wright leaves the reader not with a peaceful resolution or even a political awakening. Instead, he ends with Bigger's premature grasp on humanity from death row in which he uses images of equality to justify his brutal actions in a world of inequality.

As the novel comes to a close and Bigger approaches execution, after being found guilty, nothing of substance has changed. Bigger will die. Max will continue to be underpaid and socially ostracized. The Daltons will continue to charge exorbitant rents on the South Side. The poor will continue to strive for and believe in the American Creed that lies just beyond their reach**.** The onus, then, is on white Americans to right the wrong that they created and from which they benefit. In 1938 and 1939, as Wright concluded and revised *Native Son* from his bedroom in the home of the white communist Newton family, he believed in the possibility of white responsibility and reckoning.[61]

[61] Michel Fabre pays particular attention to the collaborative effort that Jane Newton put into Wright's revisions of *Native Son*, and argues that his interaction with this family and their friends influenced Wright's text. Fabre writes, "Perhaps Wright had acquired a better opinion of white Communists from staying with the Newtons, mixing with their friends and working at the WPA" (174).

Conclusion: The End of an Era

"Yes, the whites were as miserable as their black victims, I thought. If this country can't find its way to a human path, if it can't inform conduct with a deep sense of life, then all of us, black as well as white, are going down the same drain."

Richard Wright, *Black Boy* (1937) [62]

In the early 1930s, when Richard Wright was first introduced to the ideology of Karl Marx, the American Communist Party envisioned a radical transformation not only of the nation's political and economic system but also of its racial hierarchy. With just enough frustration and desperation among citizens who were experiencing the poverty and hunger resulting from unemployment, the party was positioned to take action and make the transformation a reality. The radical Black Belt Theory acknowledged the disenfranchisement of African America and imagined a power coming from that "nation" which could lead the American Communist revolution. By mid-decade, however, a progressive President had been elected, a fascist dictatorship threatened global security, and the communist party shifted toward the center in order to build coalitions based on anti-fascism rather than anti-capitalism and anti-racism. The moment that depended upon black revolutionary leadership passed as quickly as it was formulated and clarified.

Within *Native Son*, if Richard Wright is to be true in his naturalist depiction of a young disempowered black man, Bigger must die, and the revolution must remain unfulfilled for three

[62] 365.

reasons.[63] First, Bigger never finds his voice but always remains a passive victim relying on whites to speak for and defend him. Although Max and Jan attempt to grant him agency, Bigger fails to embody a subject position and reaches the end of his life with only a misunderstood half-awakening which frightens Max into an acknowledgement of his own power in contrast to Bigger's weakness. Second, the revolution fails within *Native Son* because of a lack of coalition building. Even among poor blacks living in the same desperate conditions as are Bigger and his family, their allegiance is to an imagined Americanism over localized community. As Bigger flees the police, he overhears blacks on the South Side admitting that they would turn in Bigger: "Jack, yuh mean t' stan' there 'n' say yuh'd give tha' nigger up t' the white folks?" "Damn right Ah would!" (235). Finally, the marginalization of the communist party within the novel makes any revolution unrealistic. Through Bigger's stereotypes and the media representation of the communist party, Wright establishes the unstable political position of the party by the late 1930s, especially in the characters of Jan Erlone and Boris Max.

Wright's novel reflects the culture in which it was written and within which he lived; as is the case within the narrative, at the time of *Native Son's* publication, there was a similar disempowerment of individual black men like Bigger, a lack of coalition-building, and a marginalization of the American Communist Party. More specifically, within the historical

[63] Naturalism appealed to Wright during a period in which he could not only see the general inequity in Black America which Myrdal reported but could glimpse, too, the futility of the promise of the communist party to which he had clung and for which he had worked during the 1930s. According to an oft-recollected tale, as a young man in Mississippi, Wright deceptively checked out library books disguised as a delivery boy in order to read, for the first time, H.L. Mencken, whom he had read about in the newspaper. Upon reading Mencken, Wright saw "a man engaged in warfare, a man fighting, and he was doing it with words" (Gayle 46). Through Mencken, Wright came to read Dreiser, Crane, and Dos Passos; Wright's literary fathers led him into naturalism as a means to use "words as weapons" (Gayle 47). In *Native Son*, as in his earlier poetry and short fiction, Wright felt compelled to reveal the harshness of black life that he had seen firsthand in a form that naturalist fiction had modeled for him.

context in which Wright was experiencing the communist party and writing *Native Son*, global, local and structural factors led to a dismantling of the potential moment of racial transgression and a revisioning of American racial hierarchy. Globally, as Hitler rose to power and the world entered a war to ward off fascism, the grounding of the communist party became increasingly unstable. Especially in the period between the signing of the Stalin/Hitler Pact in 1939 and the German invasion of Russia in 1943, the communist party was not in a position to bring in radicals who were, like Wright, anti-war, anti-imperialist, and anti-racist. As the focus shifted completely toward anti-fascism yet the party signed a treaty of non-aggression with the leader of fascism, the party lost much of its allure. Nationally, as Myrdal observed, there continued to be an allegiance to the American Creed regardless of access to that creed. These factors combined with shifting national and international concerns to soften the communist party's focus on race in America, marking the end of an era of radical potential.

Finally, although it might shock the devoted Boris Max of *Native Son* and the racially aware whites in whom Myrdal imagined the potential to revise the racial inequity that he pointed to in *An American Dilemma*, the communist party's imagining of a racial revolution failed in part because of white investment in the established system. In "The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: Racialized Social Democracy and the White Problem in American Studies," George Lipsitz asserts that, for various historical reasons, whites have been overtly or covertly encouraged to invest in whiteness. That is, whites are invested in a system from which they benefit but about which, according to anti-racist activist Peggy McIntosh, they are "meant to remain oblivious" (97). Within 1930s America, during which Wright was coming of age and was writing *Native Son*, this unconscious investment in whiteness presented itself to Wright from within the American Communist Party. Although Wright never criticized the hypocrisy of the

party in quite the same way that Ralph Ellison later would in *Invisible Man* (1952) through his depiction of the Brotherhood, he does resist what he called the "notion prevailing among ninety per cent of all party members that all party comrades should be represented in fiction as white knights charging heroically into the enemy" and instead insists upon "plung[ing] into the complex jungle of human relationships" in order to acknowledge the "international framework in which we live and struggle today" (letter to Mike Gold qtd. in Fabre 185-86). Further, Wright aimed not only to blame whites for this reality but also to implicate passive blacks. Wright's approach was dangerous, he knew, but was his only viable option. Having felt like a pawn in the communist party, Wright knew that he could no longer glorify a problematic organization, yet neither could he blindly criticize the organization that had led him to his own political awakening, not unlike Bigger's in its limited scope. Despite his desire for an international coalition that would empower the masses—the concept that drew Wright to the party and toward which he would continue to work after breaking with the party—Wright reflected what he saw—a potentially powerful party at the end of an era unable to exercise control in a world focused on national security and democracy and in a nation that had endured and survived a capitalist crisis.

At the moment that Richard Wright was entering the literary and political spheres, the American Communist Party of the 1930s was in the midst of its most productive and fruitful period. The party's unprecedented focus on the "Negro question" drew many members, black and white, searching for a means to revise racial patterns that disproportionately privileged whites and disadvantaged blacks. Coinciding as it did with the Stock Market Crash and subsequent depression, the party drew in those idealistic or desperate enough to imagine an alternative system which would depend on cross-racial unification in the name of working-class solidarity. For a time, in the early 1930s, the communist party was poised for a revolution not

only of economic system but, necessarily, of racial classification as well. At the moment of truth, however, the Comintern chose to shelf the "Negro Question" in order to broaden its appeal during the Popular Front of the mid-thirties. Its decision, combined with other internal and external factors described above, closed off the potential for significant revision of the American racial hierarchy and relied on whites to lead its organization. Instead of unifying the party, this shift in agenda meant that the most radical members left a weakening organization that had appealed broadly in order to increase membership at the expense of supporting committed members willing to work through the upcoming challenges that World War II would bring. The communist party that inspired Richard Wright as well as a generation of radical thinkers and activists was revealed to be, more than a cohesive organization enacting a Marxist philosophy, a group of complex individuals living in vastly different political climates, differently invested in the shifting ideology of the Comintern. In *Native Son*, Richard Wright not only validates the need for an alternative society for men like Bigger Thomas but also reveals the contradictory nature of the communist party in the characters of Max and Jan and in the weak socio-political position of the party itself. Neither a condemnation of communism nor a laudatory homage to it, *Native Son* captures the end of an era that promised revolution but fell victim to a new era of homogenization, control, national mobilization to external threat, and status quo—all of which benefited whites at the detriment of blacks. As Bigger dies, so does the potential for revolution, both murdered from within.

Chapter Two

Guess Who's Coming to Dinner and In the Heat of the Night: Whiteness at the End of the Civil Rights Movement

"A good many observers have remarked that if equality could come at once the Negro would not be ready for it. I submit that the white American is even more unprepared."

Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go From Here?* (1967) [64]

In 1967, the coalition that came to be known as the Civil Rights Movement was suffering a crisis of identity. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who had stepped into prominence in Montgomery eight years earlier helping to lead the year-long bus boycotts, acknowledged the end of one era and the onset of another, writing, "By 1967 the resounding shout of the Negro's protest had shattered the myth of his contentment" (18). In the place of the nonviolent integration associated with King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), of which he was the chair, was the separatist notion of "Black Power," as associated with Stokely Carmichael and the transitional Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). SNCC was in transition after a contentious election which named Carmichael as its head over John Lewis, a young minister closely aligned with King and the Democratic Party. Carmichael bitterly joked that "Asking Alabama Negroes to reform the Democratic Party was… like asking Jews to reform the Nazi Party" and called for a more substantive revision of the organization, including its stance on white participants[65] (Bell 175). His point was made when he defeated

[64] 9.

[65] Since 1963, SNCC had utilized white volunteers and in 1964 hired several white staffers. As Emily Stoper makes clear in *The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee: The Growth of Radicalism in a Civil Rights Organization*, Carmichael's election in combination with the independent formation of the

Lewis, taking SNCC to a new position left of center from which it would eventually form allegiances with the radical Black Panthers.[66] As political scientist Cedric Johnson explains, "Carmichael's election only a few short months after Malcolm X's assassination reflected a deeper ideological shift in SNCC from interracialism and nonviolent direct action toward the politics of racial self-assertion" (xxi).

In the midst of the transition from "We Shall Overcome" to "Black Power," white America was struggling to find its role—whether within the movement, in support of the movement, or opposed to the movement. The shift in black roles, and in particular the shift toward separatism and acknowledged distrust in whites, clearly affected white roles as well. Scholars have acknowledged the impact of Black Power on the changing role of black politicians (Cedric Johnson's *Revolutionaries to Race Leaders: Black Power and the Making of African American Politics*, 2007), and have contextualized the Black Panthers alongside the Black Power movement (Jama Lazerow and Yohuro Williams, eds. *In Search of the Black Panther Party: New Perspectives on a Revolutionary Movement*, 2006). Similarly, historians and memoirists have acknowledged and celebrated white involvement in the Civil Rights Movement. Personal narratives of white volunteers in the Civil Rights Movement are included in Lillian Smith's *Killers of the Dream* (1994), Constance Curry's *Deep in Our Hearts: Nine Women in the Freedom Movement* (2000), and Becky Thompson's *A Promise and a Way of Life: White Antiracist Activism* (2001). Others have commemorated the participation of white activists from

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black-led Lowndes County Freedom Organization, which inspired the Black Panther Party, marked a shift away from white participation in SNCC.

[66] In Oakland, California, Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale formed the Black Panther Party in 1966. Influenced by Franz Fanon, the Black Panthers advocated for militant self-defense—a far cry from the Mahatma Ghandi-inspired integrationism of the Civil Rights Movement. See Stephen Shames, *The Black Panthers* (2006), and Philip Foner, *The Black Panthers Speak* (1995).

outsider perspectives, drawing from personal interviews as in David Chappell's *Inside Agitators: White Southerners in the Civil Rights Movement* (1994) and Alphonso Pinkney's *The Committed: White Activists in the Civil Rights Movement* (1968). While both history and political science offer important ways of understanding the transition toward Black Power at the end of the Civil Rights Movement, as well as the role of whites within that movement, the impact of separatism on whites—inside and outside of the movement—is an area of study that deserves more attention. This is, in part, the intention of this chapter—to examine white responses around 1967 as racially inscribed roles were shifting and, for the first time, whites were not *quite* in control. Ultimately, from this uncertain period following a decade of diligent and patient strivings toward equality, whites walked away and were pushed away from the Civil Rights Movement with their own, often unconscious, social privilege intact. Working for the elevation of blackness, whites sat atop the racial hierarchy resistant to significant change, even in the face of scathing scrutiny.[67] This project also treats the stability of both white privilege and a black/white dichotomy, even at the height of racial tension and transformation. Through an assumed authority which remains invisible because it does not need to be proven, whiteness maintains its normative position. I will read two films from 1967, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (Dir. Stanley Kramer) and *In the Heat of the Night* (Dir. Norman Jewison), to demonstrate the normativity and privilege of whiteness in the midst of racial tension.

[67] As established in the introduction, a significant hierarchy based upon class, geography, religious and political affiliation exists among those read as white in the United States. I intentionally generalize whiteness in my discussion here, as in Chapter One, because white privilege depends upon a generalized idea of whiteness. In fact, white privilege begins to dissipate when diversity becomes visible. I do, however, acknowledge the range of white characters within the two films which serve as the focus on this chapter.

Reading this historical moment through two white-produced films at the close of the Civil Rights Movement offers examples of both overt and subtle racism, demonstrating the centrality and persistence of normative white dominance even when positioned in films that were considered, to varying degrees, racially progressive. Through its optimistic narrative, Stanley Kramer's *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967) expresses the rhetoric of integration associated with the early 1960s and King, while Norman Jewison's *In the Heat of the Night* (1967) captures the tension and uncertainty of white America at this transitional moment of fragmentation of the Civil Rights Movement. In the first film, the African-American character asks permission to merge into a white family, and the narrative ends in racial unity. In the second, the African-American character is more assertive, and the narrative ends in the separation of the primary characters—one black and one white. In this and other stylistic ways, the films differ; significantly, both films reinforce white dominant normativity as they demonstrate the authority of white figures. In both *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* and *In the Heat of the Night,* the white characters walk away from tense interactions with black men, having undergone minor personal transformations but calling for no institutional change. Neither major black character, John Prentice or Virgil Tibbs (both played by Sidney Poitier), is separatist; both films leave white systems of privilege intact through the invisibility and normativity of whiteness.

Guess Who's Coming to Dinner: A Film of the Integrated Civil Rights Movement

"I was what my era called a revolutionary. I don't really know what that means, but I did feel the sharp edge of my revolutionary being in relationship to the cinema establishment."

Stanley Kramer (2006) [68]

"Kramer obviously scrutinized the racial scene carefully and concluded that the American public is ripe for such a film, so long as it is a lush, chicken-hearted fairy tale where everyone is attractive, wealthy, intelligent, and witty. It is the kind of film that attracts hordes of white liberals who howl maniacally at what passes for humor, though they would take a shotgun to the first Negro their daughter or sister brings home."

Dennis Hunt (1968) [69]

In 1962, when screenwriter Bill Rose pitched to director Stanley Kramer the idea of an interracial marriage as the subject of a drawing room comedy, it was a bold idea.[70] The Civil Rights Movement was well underway with boycotts, sit-ins, and Freedom Rides, but it would be another year before the March on Washington brought concerted national attention to issues of racial equality rather than treating it as a Southern dilemma.[71] Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was

[68] Quoted in Stevens, George, Jr., ed. *Conversations with the Great Moviemakers of Hollywood's Golden Age at the American Film Institute*. 2006.
[69] "Untitled Review: *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?" Film Quarterly* 21.4 (1968): 58.
[70] According to legend, Rose proposed that the interracial marriage be between a white woman and an African man, set in Africa. Kramer asserted that if you set it in America, you would have a story. Rose later wrote that he never proposed Africa for the setting.
[71] Evaluating the Civil Rights Movement necessitates defining the start of the movement itself, which proves difficult if one considers the critical and often forgotten gestation period preceding its birth. Histories of the movement begin with the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955-1956, the SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) sit-ins of 1960, or the March on Washington in 1963. The *Eyes on the Prize* series, created and executive-produced by Henry Hampton, begins in 1954. Most histories agree that 1960-1966 can be considered the most active and productive years of the movement, growing out of

already well-established as a public figure and black leader, but had yet to deliver his most famous "I Have a Dream" speech. White volunteers had boycotted and sat in but the massive organizing effort that brought so many white college students from the North to the South, opening up significant questions about authority and access, was yet two years away. By the time that the film exhibited in 1967, the world had changed—particularly in regard to race relations. The film that Kramer and Rose created—*Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?*—was a depiction that harkened back to the early Civil Rights Movement, the integrationist period most associated with Dr. King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

Whites in the Integrationist Civil Rights Movement

In 1956, as the African-American communities of Montgomery, Alabama, orchestrated a response to Rosa Parks's arrest after she refused to bow to legalized segregation and socialized bigotry, the discontent of a generation gave birth to the Civil Rights Movement. A then little-known minister Martin Luther King, Jr. emerged to help guide the movement, shaping it into one of passive resistance.[72] As members of the community assessed the situation, they decided to illuminate Montgomery's dependence on the financial contributions of African Americans by staging a boycott of the city's public bus system—the site of Parks's arrest for refusal to leave a designated white section of a bus, as well as countless incidents of unreported racial degradation for African Americans.

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the work of the late 1950s and morphing into a slightly more radical movement toward the end of the 1960s.

[72] Born and raised in Atlanta, Georgia, Dr. King was living and working in Birmingham as the pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church when the Montgomery Bus Boycott began. King read Mahatma Gandhi's writings on civil disobedience, nonviolence, and Satyagraha.

From the earliest organized boycott, King approached the struggle for human rights with the idealism of integration. He welcomed the support of whites, recognizing that the social power unduly granted to whites in American culture might well be harnessed and utilized in the fight against a racist hierarchy built not only upon bigotry and hatred but also maintenance of privilege. In *Why We Can't Wait* (1964), King entitles one of his chapters "Black and White Together," iterating his consistent message of the "nonviolent crusade" for unity and integration (2).

Variously motivated, whites became and remained involved in the Civil Rights Movement from its beginnings. As scholars and activists have effectively documented, the rebellion of white women in Montgomery during the year of the bus boycott as they drove their domestic workers to and from work enabled the boycott's continuation.[73] Selfish pragmatism, rather than a sense of social justice, seems to have motivated many of these white women. When the mayor of Birmingham issued an order that black maids should be dismissed in order to break the boycott, white women replied, "Tell the mayor to come and do my work for me, then" (Hampton 27). Until then, they would do what they must to ensure that they had domestic help, even if that meant inadvertently supporting a political strike that challenged their white privilege in the long term, while stratifying the hierarchy built upon black labor in the short term. The apolitical and self-centered involvement of these upper-class white women of Birmingham is not fully representative of the work of whites in the Civil Rights Movement. In contrast, Virginia

[73] See Brown, Cynthia Stokes. *Refusing Racism: White Allies and the Struggle for Civil Rights*, 2002; Murray, Gail S. *Throwing Off the Cloak of Privilege*, 2004; Chappell, David L. *Inside Agitators: White Southerners in the Civil Rights Movement*, 1994 and Thompson, Becky. *A Promise and a Way of Life: White Antiracist Activism*, 2001.

Durr, white southerner in support of the boycott, recalls the dual purpose that the boycott served for her. Durr compares American racism to Nazi anti-Semitism, and then asserts that the boycott was a legitimate entry into the movement for many whites:

> The boycott took off some of the terrible load of guilt that white southerners have lived under for so many generations, such a terrible load of shame and guilt that we won't acknowledge. […] At least [the] Nazis…never even pretended to like the Jews, but in the South it was always that terrible hypocrisy [of childhood devotion to blacks and adult judgment of them]. So I thought the boycott was absolutely marvelous. (Hampton 27-28)

Other whites like Durr were drawn into the movement; Myles Horton, whose Highlander Folk School in East Tennessee was formed in 1932 to educate poor rural Southerners and train labor organizers, shifted his focus in anticipation of the *Brown v. The Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* decision in 1954 to accommodate the burgeoning activism focused on challenging Southern segregation and discrimination. Serving as a training ground for activists, Highlander hosted meetings during which large and small scale operations were organized, including Freedom Summer (1964) and the James Meredith March (1966).[74] The Highlander Center was, according to white activist Bonnie Kerness, "the only place in the South where people could

[74] For recollections on this period of the Highlander Center, see Adams, Frank. *Unearthing Seeds of Fire: The Idea of Highlander*, 1975; Jacobs, Dale, ed. *The Myles Horton Reader: Education for Social Change*, 2003; and Horton, Aimee Isgrig. *The Highlander Folk School*, 1989.

pretty much meet comfortably in mixed cultural circumstances" and thus demonstrates the committed work of activists (Thompson 4).[75]

In 1964, SNCC embarked upon a highly publicized effort of integrated work as they invited white volunteers into the Deep South to increase registration efforts as well as media coverage.[76] Organized by the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO), which consisted of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Freedom Summer epitomized the challenge and the promise of what Bob Moses referred to as "liv[ing] as a sort of island of integration in a sea of separation" (Hampton 183). Over one thousand volunteers, most of whom were Northern white college students, trained for two weeks before spending ten weeks registering voters in rural Mississippi.

The decision to bring white students into Mississippi was contentious, both from inside and outside of the Civil Rights Movement, and opinions were not clearly drawn across racial lines. Those in support of the Northern volunteers argued that the movement would benefit from the press that white outsiders would bring. Lawrence Guyot, a black Mississippi native, noted positively the appearance of FBI and press when white volunteers showed up in Mississippi. According to historian Wesley C. Hogan, "[Guyot] supported importing larger numbers of whites during the following summer, because it would bring 'the wives, daughters, sons, nephews of the Binghams who were in Congress, the Rockefellers, into the Freedom Houses of

[75] A large body of scholarship and memoirs commemorate white involvement in the Civil Rights Movement during the early phase in which integration was both the goal and the practice. Charles Levy, *Voluntary Servitude: Whites In The Negro Movement*, 1968, and Alphonso Pinkney, *The Committed: White Activists in the Civil Rights Movement*, 1968, are among the most focused discussions of white involvement in the Civil Rights Movement.

[76] In the fall of 1963, in "Freedom Vote," white students from Yale and Stanford canvassed black voters, which resulted in a debunking of the myth of "black political apathy" as well as national media attention (Hampton 181).

Mississippi'" (149). Reflecting positively on Freedom Summer, Unita Blackwell, a Mississippi native who was registered to vote during the summer of 1964, recalls, "For black people in Mississippi, Freedom Summer was the beginning of a whole new era. […] There was interaction of blacks and whites. […] We was sitting on the floor and they was talking and we was sitting there laughing, and I guess they became very real and very human, we each to one another" (Hampton 193). The white volunteers who have shared their experiences in Freedom Summer recall it in noble terms. Sandra Cason, who was a white SNCC worker living in Mississippi before Freedom Summer recalls, "[Students] all wanted to come to where the action was, you know? I mean, what was happening in the South was so dramatic and heroic" (186). Peter Orris, then a freshman at Harvard, exemplified the outsider status that worried locals, noting that "being Jewish was important in terms of identifying with the underdog, with people who were suffering repression and discrimination" (186).

However, other SNCC workers like Hollis Watkins were concerned that outsiders would set the movement back. Watkins recalls his fear that the students "would destroy the grass-roots organizations that we had built and were in the process of building" and that "local indigenous people […] would become complacent, they would feel inferior and fall back into the same rut that they were in before we started the grass-roots organizations" (Hampton 183). Willie Peacock, another black Mississippian, said that summer volunteers got "in the way of community organization and grass roots organization among black people." Martha Prescod Norman, a northern volunteer herself, agreed: "I think most people came out of the summer feeling that it was a mistake to have brought in so many northern, white people. It tended to push the local people out of things, as well as the northern, middle-class blacks who were active. They got sort of overwhelmed" (Hogan 203-04). Peter deLissovoy, another white Harvard

student who worked with SNCC, acknowledged the threat of naïve and assertive whites in the movement when he explains:

> Whiteness is the problem of a tenacious if sometimes comical little minority within the American Negro Movement. It is not an insurmountable problem, as the cynics would insist, but it is difficult, tree-like in its old deep roots and twisting ramifications, and if not faced honestly and quickly by the afflicted, it can be crippling. (Zinn 182)

The issue of white authority and dominance was not faced honestly and quickly, and perhaps because of the deep roots of racism and white invisibility, many would argue that it became crippling. Hollis Watkins maintained that his imagining of the negative impact of Freedom Summer on the grassroots movement was prophetic. The tension between black and white which was certainly heightened and magnified through the media in the summer of 1964 offers a way of understanding the complex power dynamics that remained at play and eventually came to a head in 1966.

Freedom Summer is infamous because of the murders that summer of volunteers Andrew Goodman, James Chaney, and Michael Schwerner. Two of the victims were white, which immediately drew the national media to the scene. The subtext of the coverage, especially the inequality of coverage between black and white victims, was a privileging of whiteness. In the midst of the search for the three bodies, SNCC field secretary Dave Dennis recalls that many other black bodies were discovered and ignored:

> They found torsos in the Mississippi River, they found people who were buried, they even found a few bodies of people on the side of roads. As soon as it was determined that these were not the bodies of the three missing workers […] those deaths were forgotten. (Hampton 194)

The obvious disparity in reportage between black and white deaths only strengthened the need for greater representation for blacks in the Deep South, some in support of the project maintained. Without interference from white Northerners, others argued, lives could have been saved, *and* more voters could have been registered.

Questions of access to the Deep South and the role of whites in the movement at large divided those involved as they debated whether whites could participate in the movement without taking it over. King and SCLC maintained that cooperation with whites was central to success, despite the ways that the March on Washington in 1963 had been arguably controlled by whites. Malcolm X called the March on Washington a "sellout," arguing that whites "joined it" and promptly "took it over." He continued, "And as they took it over, it lost its militancy. It ceased to be angry, it ceased to be hot, it ceased to be uncompromising. Why it even ceased to be a march. It became a picnic, a circus." The whites, specifically President Kennedy who "persuade[d] the civil rights leaders that they should not lay siege on Capitol Hill," asserted control of the black-led movement and march (Zinn 458). As late as 1967, in his final book, King advocated for interracial cooperation even as he recognized the end of that era: "To succeed in a pluralistic society, and an often hostile one at that, the Negro obviously needs organized strength, but that strength will only be effective when it is consolidated through constructive alliances with the majority group" (50). King vacillates between dominant and

alternative ideologies, but is consistent as he strives toward integration and interracial cooperation.

Guess Who's Coming to Dinner

When Stanley Kramer and Bill Rose put their 1962 idea into the form of a film in 1966 and 1967, they were operating unaware of the subtleties of the Civil Rights Movement. Painting in broad brush strokes, they worked to make a film about interracial marriage that might expose the hypocrisy of white liberals only theoretically in support of integration. Inadvertently, Kramer and Rose gave credence to anxiety from within the Civil Rights Movement about white authority and dominance in their film, which is ostensibly about a young interracial couple but actually centers—literally and figuratively—on the white patriarch in his assumption of authority.

According to Alphonso Pinkney in *The Committed: White Activists in the Civil Rights Movement*, "Liberalism on matters of race is fashionable in the 1960s, and few people are tested for the quality of their liberalism. It is not at all uncommon for a person to urge desegregation in public education but rush to the 'all-white' suburbs when non-whites move into the neighborhood" (21). The patriarch of the film *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner,* Matt Drayton (Spencer Tracy), is "tested for the quality of [his] liberalism" and comes up short. Regardless of his acknowledged hypocrisy and his efforts to maintain control, which provide comic relief, Drayton maintains heroic masculine white authority. Within the day that the film takes place, he

shifts from condemning the proposed interracial marriage[77] between his white daughter Joanna (Katherine Houghton) and black Dr. John Prentice (Sidney Poitier), which he disapproves of not because of his own prejudice but because he wishes to protect his daughter from societal prejudice, to not only consenting to the marriage but asserting that they *must* get married. Throughout his various conversations and confrontations with the film's small cast of characters, Drayton never loses his authority or confidence. Further, his change of mind allows the targeted audience who consider themselves white liberals to applaud his heroism. Even in moments that he is called a "broken-down old phony liberal coming face-to-face with his prejudices," Drayton remains powerful and vocal.[78] The film's final scene—script to cinematography to musical score—demonstrates both the romantic ideal *and* the actual imbalance of power in the room, inadvertently mirroring the integrationist period, particularly during a short-term project like Freedom Summer of 1964. That the film was written, filmed, and released in the midst of the transition toward Black Power reveals both the privilege of its director and writer in their oblivious glorification of a past of which they were never a part as well as the limitations of the form of film, which tend to address social issues after they have come into discussion in the broader culture.

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[77] Until 1966, this film could not have been made in Hollywood because the subject matter violated the Production Code. Established by the Hayes Office in 1930 and solidified in 1934, the Production Code Administration was established to control what was considered "decent." The Code dictated in Section II, rule 6, for example, that depicting "[m]iscegenation (sex relationship between the white and black races) is forbidden" (Jowett 469). The Code held sway until 1966 when it was replaced by the Motion Picture Producer Association ratings, which are still in place. The shift from Production Code to rating system dramatically impacted what could be shown in films, and allowed directors to treat more serious issues like race relations with complexity and truth.

[78] Drayton's best friend, Monsignor Ryan, delivers acrid and poignant damnation of his hypocrisy with humor. Interestingly, Ryan is older than Drayton and is portrayed as less powerful than he is, even in this scene in which Drayton stumbles about unable to match socks or tie his own necktie. Ryan is discredited because of his physical stature and his position in the church which leaves him childless and unable to relate, as well as nonviolent and unable to force his morality upon Drayton.

Contemporary and recent scholars, critics, and audiences alike have acknowledged the outdated quality of the film, which ranges from sets and costuming to lighting, editing, and cinematography to acting style and script. Hollywood was on the verge of a major transformation; the birth of "New Hollywood" is generally dated as 1967 with the films *Bonnie and Clyde* (Dir. Arthur Penn) and *The Graduate* (Dir. Mike Nichols) which challenged both the cinematographic styles and moral perspective of Classical Hollywood Cinema. Classical Hollywood Cinema refers to a set of characteristics developed between 1915 and the 1930s which used stylistic devices like continuity editing and unobtrusive lighting, and narrative techniques like linear plots and resolved endings which uphold the status quo, or the dominant ideology. Both the film style and the dominant ideology are rendered invisible, which gives them normative power. Filmmakers assumed that viewers no more wanted to realize that three-point lighting was being used to create a "natural" effect on an actress than they wanted to believe that Hollywood was constructing their perceptions and identities. They claimed merely to be telling good stories on film. By 1967, the invisible style and the moral assumptions associated with Classical Hollywood Cinema were being unveiled as constructed in some quarters. Caught in the middle of this shift are both *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* and *In the Heat of the Night*; the film style and narrative of *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* place it firmly in a previous period of filmmaking while its political ideology also places it in the earlier period of the Civil Rights Movement.

Histories of *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*[79] assert that the most central figure of the film from a production standpoint was neither the director Stanley Kramer, who had by this point

[79] Stanley Kramer's autobiography, *A Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World* (1997), as well as biographies like Donald Spoto's *Stanley Kramer: Filmmaker* (1978) and George Stevens, Jr's. *Conversations with the*

proven himself as a director with a tendency toward issue films,[80] nor was it Sidney Poitier, who would become the highest grossing actor of 1968. The center of *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, from casting onward, was Spencer Tracy. Having acted in films in the Classical Hollywood style for forty years, he expected his final film to belong to the same school. As Mark Harris explains in *Pictures at a Revolution*,[81] "Kramer accommodated [Tracy] with a production style that, in most ways, owed more to 1947 than to 1967" (296). From the constructed set on the Columbia lot, representing a house on a hill overlooking the San Francisco Bay, to the lighting by sixty-three-year-old cinematographer Sam Leavitt, which "obliterated every shadow," the look of the film belonged to another generation—the Spencer Tracy generation. Katherine Houghton, the actress playing opposite Sidney Poitier, later reflected that even her costuming belonged to a previous generation: "They were clothes that were out of another time and place, things I'd never wear in thirty years!" (Harris 297). Houghton, at twenty-one, was aware that this film was not for her generation, reflecting, "The real event of the film was the relationship between Katherine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy—that was what was going on for audiences. The love affair between the white girl and the black man? That was never given any reality. It was a fable" (Harris 400). Tracy's imminent death—he was dying of cancer—*and* Kramer's insistence on Tracy in the role of the patriarch, Matt Drayton, situated the

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Great Moviemakers of Hollywood's Golden Age at the American Film Institute (2006) offer histories of the making of the film.

[80] *The Defiant Ones* (1958) featured Sidney Poitier and Tony Curtis as escaped convicts forced to face individual racism as they are literally chained together and on the run. *Inherit the Wind* (1960) centers on the 1925 Scopes Monkey Trial in which John T. Scopes was convicted for breaking the law by teaching evolution, though the film speaks more generally about McCarthyism. *Judgment at Nuremberg* (1961) is Kramer's fictionalized representation of the post-World War II trial of Nazi judges, famous for its use of historical footage of concentration camps which do not shy away from the atrocities of World War II or celebrate the United States without first referring to its own reliance on eugenics and history of genocide.

[81] In his fascinating and detailed work, Harris looks closely at the five films nominated for the Best Film category of the Academy Awards of 1968, arguing that this year marked the transformation to New Hollywood and the close of a former production style that had long dominated Hollywood.

film in a quickly shot and produced category for both pragmatic and aesthetic reasons. Kramer knew that he must shoot the film before Tracy died, which happened less than three weeks after shooting wrapped, and he preferred the look of films of the previous generation. Due to former alliances and aesthetic preference, Kramer surrounded himself with a crew[82] that knew Hollywood, even if it did not realize it was about to become Old Hollywood.[83] The look of the film, with its Technicolor and constructed sets, situates it in the Old Hollywood school, while the script situates it in the political past.

The key artistic partnership for Kramer in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* was with screenwriter Bill Rose, whose racial bias comes through most pointedly in his depiction of black characters but can also be seen even in his white characters. Rose describes Tillie the housekeeper as "a tough but lukewarmhearted darkie," while of Prentice he writes, "[He] isn't at all ashamed of [being called] Prentice. Nor does he really care who he might have been, or what he might have been called, somewhere in the Continent of Africa," dismissing the shift toward Afrocentrism and the public profile of Black Muslims like Muhammad Ali, who changed his name from Cassius Clay (Harris 180). That Sidney Poitier was working alongside Harry Belafonte in SNCC fundraisers and that Beah Richards, the actress playing the meek Mrs. Prentice, was a "deeply committed political activist" on whom the FBI had kept a file for sixteen years was not referenced in the film. The silent complacency of these black characters speaks to

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[82] Sam Leavitt, cinematographer, had been filming movies since 1932 and would only do a handful more after *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*. Editor Robert C. Jones had worked with Kramer on *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World* (1963) and *Ship of Fools* (1965), and would go on to work on films for another thirty-five years. Set designer Frank Tuttle had worked on over 120 films at this point, primarily produced in the 1940s and 1950s, and was nearing the end of his career with *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*.

[83] Of *Bonnie and Clyde*, Kramer later admitted "I don't know what it means," and went on to dismiss filmmakers who were gaining critical success, like Arthur Penn and Mike Nichols, as "creative cowards" (Harris 399).

the dominance of white men in Hollywood and on this set, as well as the narrow roles available for blacks even a decade into the Civil Rights Movement (Harris 305). Rose's motivation in writing this script is never discussed in political terms but, rather, in business terms of what will sell. Kramer, too, was focused on gauging the American public, and he told Houghton, "You don't know America the way I do. The American public… won't forgive you if you go into this relationship [with a black man] with open eyes" (Harris 301). Kramer turned out to be simultaneously prophetic and dead wrong.

Like the black characters of *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, the white characters that Rose and Kramer create serve to solidify the racial structure through their presumptive superiority. All five of the film's white characters are firmly upper-middle class, which is established through costuming and set. The patriarch's conservative business suit, the matriarch's well-tailored ensembles, and the daughter's matching gloves and hat align with a home which has a fireplace in every room, book-lined shelves, and smiling faces beaming from framed photographs. Although the film takes place over the course of only twelve hours, all of the Draytons change outfits at least once. Each of the white characters represents a perspective on what Kramer believes to be a continuum of racial tolerance. The most overtly racist character is not the stereotypical Southerner but, rather, Hilary St. George (Virginia Christine), a gossipy employee at the art gallery where Christina Drayton (Katherine Hepburn) works. Despite her social class and stature, her racist remarks in response to the prospect of an interracial relationship cost her her friendship with the Draytons, her job, and the respect of the audience.[84]

[84] When Hillary demonstrates her bigotry, Mrs. Drayton fires her in the following speech, which is one of her longest of the film: "Now I have some instructions for you. I want you to go straight back to the gallery - Start your motor - … Then carefully, but carefully Hilary, remove absolutely everything that might subsequently remind me that you had ever been there, including that yellow thing with the blue

This alternative imagining of the bigot, dressed in designer clothes and driving an expensive car, arguably calls into question the presumptive link between education and understanding but simultaneously maintains the center of the picture as the privileged class of whites. At the opposite end of the spectrum of racial understanding is Monsignor Ryan (Cecil Kalloway). Even to the non-Catholic Draytons, this religious figure serves as the moral voice[85]. Ryan, though a Catholic priest, is comfortable in the home, helping himself to the well-stocked bar and entering Drayton's room while he is dressing for dinner. Ryan unflinchingly supports the union between Prentice and Joanna, and takes Drayton to task for his misgivings. Between Ryan and St. George are the Draytons themselves. Matt Drayton, the patriarch, has long been the editor of the local liberal newspaper, and imagines himself a champion of human rights and an open-minded, socially just individual while Christina Drayton, his wife, runs a downtown art gallery and is equally liberal. Their daughter, Joanna, who returns unexpectedly from a vacation in order to announce to her parents that she has fallen in love and is engaged to be married, is bouncing and giddily naive. Joanna's choice of a husband is dismissed within the plot, and her agency removed when Prentice insists on Drayton's support before he will marry his daughter. She, therefore, does not register as a full character with whom an audience might relate. Instead, audiences are meant to empathize with Christina and Matt Drayton as they wrestle with the gap between professed beliefs and actual behavior. Christina's romantic perspective influences her and she quickly comes to Joanna's side, but Matt Drayton's growth takes center stage in the

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bulbs which you have such an affection for. Then take the check, for $5,000, which I feel you deserve, and get - permanently - lost. It's not that I don't want to know you - although I don't - it's just that I'm afraid we're not really the sort of people that you can afford to be associated with. Don't speak, Hilary, just... go."

[85] Christina Drayton explains that they are "nothing at all, really," referring to their lack of religious affiliation. Ryan's role is not explained outside of the explanation that he is a family friend with whom Matt Drayton was scheduled to play golf the afternoon of the film's setting. When Drayton cancelled their golf date, Ryan drops by to check on the family and is invited to dinner.

drama, leaving him the heroically transformed bigot by the film's end. Though Kramer questions the façade of white liberalism, by the film's end, he celebrates whiteness.

Stanley Kramer knew that he was not breaking ground in terms of character development but hoped that the film would appeal to a white liberal audience by awakening them from complacency and bringing the questions of the film into their own living rooms. Kramer told Poitier when he pitched the film, "Look, the revolution is only a backdrop with a thing like this," presenting what Aram Goudsouzian describes as a "light plea for tolerance" rather than an "honest social drama" (278). In order to fit into the category of social problem film *and* meet the expectations established through Classical Hollywood Cinema,[86] Matt Drayton must do the right thing and support the interracial marriage that is, except for a "pigmentation problem," an ideal match within the context of the film. In his autobiography, Kramer recalls, "I wanted the prospective bridegroom to be a person so suitable that if anyone objected to him, it could only be due to racial prejudice" (219). John Prentice fits the bill. A medical doctor trained at Johns Hopkins who educates third world inhabitants in the practice of medicine, his age and history establish his credibility: he was previously married but lost his wife and son in an accident eight years earlier. He can commit, reproduce, recover, and provide for Joanna, leaving their difference in race the *only* problem.

[86] According to Peter Roffman and Jim Purdy in *The Hollywood Social Problem Film: Madness, Despair, and Politics from the Depression to the Fifties, "*the problem film combines social analysis and dramatic conflict within a coherent narrative structure. Social content is transformed into dramatic events and movie narrative adapted to accommodate social issues as story material through a particular set of movie conventions" (viii). In their survey of social problem films, Roffman and Purdy begin with silent films like D.W. Griffith's *A Corner in Wheat* (1909) and move through Stanley Kramer's *The Defiant Ones* (1958). By definition, these films were didactic, most often dealing with issues of class struggle and at times crossing into race and gender inequality.

By the end of the night, Drayton should be apologetic and humbled—his best friend Monsignor Ryan threatens to fight him and his wife expresses her deep disappointment in him.[87] Despite the potential for Drayton to recognize his mistake, his privilege remains intact, and he unapologetically gets the last word. Gathering the group around him in a semicircle—including Dr. Prentice's parents, the black maid, Tillie (Isabel Sanford), and Monsignor Ryan—Mr. Drayton grandly announces that he has come to the conclusion that Joanna and John *must* get married.[88] After issuing commands throughout the film, Drayton does not stop here. Joanna and Dr. Prentice attempt to speak at various moments, but Drayton immediately silences them with confidence and a command of the moment. Drayton says to Joanna, in fact, "This may be the last chance I ever have to tell you to do anything, and I'm telling you—shut up."[89] No one else speaks in the long soliloquy, which would be Spencer Tracy's final bow; they only smile in appreciation or chagrin as Drayton speaks the truth, or glisten at the eyes in celebration of Drayton.

Editing, camera distance, and camera movement support Drayton's authority in this climactic scene. While Drayton speaks, he is generally framed in a medium close-up while the other actors, in reaction shots, are generally in medium or medium long shots. This consistent difference in camera distance emphasizes Drayton's importance in this scene. The reaction shots

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[87] Tapping into the escalating guilt that Drayton feels, Mrs. Drayton effectively accesses his weak spot by telling him, stumbling over her own words, "It's important that you understand just how wrong I think you—I believe you're making the worst mistake you've ever made in your— I think you're going to regret it with more bitterness than you've ever known in— for as long as you live."

[88] This configuration is in keeping with the 180 degree convention in editing, which clarifies the viewer's position in relation to the speaker. Because Drayton is the only speaker in this scene, all other actors are placed in relation to him.

[89] In "Sidney Poitier's Civil Rights: Rewriting the Mystique of White Womanhood in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* and *In the Heat of the Night*," Andrea Levine reads this moment as representative of Joanna's "paradoxical position" as "essential to the film's ideological project" while also being "almost comically irrelevant" (375).

of the audience establish the emotional impact of Drayton's speech. Cast and crew of the film repeatedly reported Katherine Hepburn's uncanny ability to moisten on demand—not quite crying but allowing one tear to drop on cue. Hepburn's acting proves that Christina is responsive to her husband, as she sits uncomfortably on the arm of a chair between Drayton, who stands tall, and everyone else, who sink into their chairs. Kramer films reaction shots of Joanna and Dr. Prentice from a slight high angle shot from Drayton's perspective, which functions to diminish them and maintain his centrality.

After preaching to the young couple about the social responsibility that he denied at the beginning of the film, Drayton portrays himself as nurturing and kind, explaining "As for the problems … you're going to have, they seem almost unimaginable. But you'll have no problem with me." Here, Drayton is in close-up, which heightens emotion and tightens the focus, literally, onto him. The camera pans as Drayton paces the room in front of his seated, passive audience. In what is a somewhat dizzying moment, Drayton is encircled by the camera. Never moving, he is shown from the front and both sides, as if he is central not only to the scene and the film, but also the world of the film. Production histories explain that Tracy's illness made it impossible to film this scene in one take and relied upon reaction shots filmed after Tracy had left the studio. This long take which wraps around Drayton, then, exemplifies Tracy's determination to deliver the crux of the speech without interruption. After so many reaction shots, this long take is made even more poignant.

With soft focus and high key lighting, Kramer heightens the emotion of the scene and establishes Drayton as the hero—the reformed and redeemed bigot in the spotlight to inspire others. Contrasted with Drayton's disapproval, during which he asserts that he will not support his daughter's interracial union, the final words and lasting image of the film are poignant and

deserve critical attention. Following the speech in which Drayton says everything that the film intends to say, there are hugs and tears. Tillie, the black maid always in full uniform who has served as comic relief throughout the film delivering lines such as "Civil Rights is one thing. This here is another," has listened in on the decision as a "part of the family." With his conclusion, however, Drayton says, "Now damn it, Tillie, when are we going to eat?" The group moves to the table together as Tillie's social position is reinscribed. While the interracial group is sitting down at the same table, an image that Dr. King often used in his speeches of the integrationist period, it is critical that the power dynamic establishing Drayton as employer/master and Tillie as employee/servant remain visible. Further, in the film's final moments, the only song of the film provides a non-diegetic distance from the scene, reminding us that we are only watching a movie and serving the same purpose as the soft-focus cinematography. Jacqueline Fontaine sings, "You've got to laugh a little, cry a little, and let your poor heart die a little. That's the story of, that's the glory of love," reminding us that this is merely a love story and everyone faces trials in their relationships. Between the formulaic music and the soft lighting, the tension eases, and challenges appear surmountable with a heroic white man at the helm. Drayton finally establishes the film's moral ground while reconciling the near family dispute. It is important to note that, even though the ending is constructed as happy, with non-diegetic music and plot closure, Drayton silences Mr. Prentice, whose serious reservations which he says would "take eight hours to express" are deemed irrelevant.

In his review of *Native Son*, "Everybody's Protest Novel," James Baldwin recalls his response when "an American liberal" said to him, "As long as… books [like *Native Son*] are being published everything will be all right" (1703). Baldwin responded emphatically that protest novels ironically cause complacency by letting readers off the hook, letting mental

revelation be enough and stopping short of revolutionary action. Readers presume that someone else is dealing with the problems, making everything "all right." The complacency of a white reader of protest novels mirrors the complacency of white audiences of *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*. While striving to encourage white viewers to rethink their own racial prejudices, white social problem films hold firmly to the belief that individual white redemption is possible and sufficient *and* is the solution to oppressive and systemic racism. Rather than inciting action or leaving unanswered questions, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* looks back at the integrationist period of the Civil Rights Movement, assuring audiences and confirming one's own sense of liberalism. Ironically, the historical context in which the film was filmed, produced, and screened made hypothetical living room conversations like the one in the Drayton home seem passé and misguided. The doubts that Freedom Summer of 1964 raised came to a head by 1966, leading the American Civil Rights Movement away from the gentle conversational debate over rights toward a more aggressive assertion of rights. This transition was gradual but is epitomized in the Meredith March of 1966.

White Privilege and Black Power—The Transition of 1966

In 1966, Black Power forced aside the integrationist Civil Rights Movement as James Meredith, the black man who had integrated the University of Mississippi in 1962, began a solitary march throughout the Deep South. His march was stopped short when he was shot on the second day; this violent act led SNCC, CORE, and the SCLC to co-sponsor the continuation of the march. These three organizations were, in 1966, significantly unique from one another in terms of organizational structure, ideology, and makeup. Stokely Carmichael was the new leader

of SNCC after defeating John Lewis, Floyd McKissick was the new head of CORE after replacing pacifist James Farmer and shifting the organization toward radicalism, and Martin Luther King headed SCLC, maintaining a Christian non-violent approach. These three leaders found themselves forced to address their differences as they decided whether and how to move forward with the Meredith March. King recalls hearing activists shout, "I'm not for the nonviolence stuff anymore" and "If one of these damn white Mississippi crackers touches me, I'm gonna knock the hell out of him" (King 25). Within a few days, the tension that had remained under the surface would show itself and arguably fracture the movement.

In *Where Do We Go From Here* (1967), King recalls his realization that the Civil Rights Movement had reached a crossroads. He traces this split back to Freedom Summer:

> I surmised that much of the change had its psychological roots in the experience of SNCC in Mississippi during the summer of 1964, when a large number of Northern white students had come down to help in that racially torn state. What the SNCC workers saw was the most articulate, powerful and self-assured young white people coming to work with the poorest of the Negro people—and simply overwhelming them. That summer Stokely and others in SNCC had probably unconsciously concluded that this was not good for Negroes, for it simply increased their sense of their own inadequacies. (27-28)

Despite Carmichael's distrust of white participants and the division among the three organizations over non-violent protest, SNCC, CORE, and SCLC agreed that the march would be nonviolent and interracial and would refrain from naming a slogan which would label the participants. In Greenwood, Mississippi, however, Stokely Carmichael began chanting "Black

Power" to rouse a crowd that had gathered in support of the marchers. The response to these words was diverse, yet powerful. According to some scholars, this evening in Greenwood marked the end of an era of the Civil Rights Movement.

King did not support using this slogan but recalls its impact: "For people who had been crushed so long by white power and who had been taught that black was degrading, it had a ready appeal" (29). David Dawley, a white student and participant in the Meredith March, recalls the shift that occurred as these two words were chanted:

> "Black Power" began to dominate until finally everyone together was thundering, "Black Power, Black Power." And that was chilling. That was frightening. Suddenly the happy feeling of the march was threatened. Suddenly I felt threatened. It seemed like a division between black and white. It seemed like a hit on well-intentioned northern whites like me, that the message […] was "Go home, white boy, we don't need you."… [T]he atmosphere was clearly different. … Suddenly I was a "honky," not "David." (Hampton 290)

Similarly, Arlie Schardt, white correspondent for *Time* who had long known and been friendly with Carmichael, notes Greenwood as the shift during which their relationship changed: "There was a definite barrier between us, and he wanted us to call him 'sir' from then on; he wanted a little more formality, at least publicly, in our relationship, which had been very casual in the past" (Hampton 293).

Both the Black Power slogan and the Black Panther Party came to fruition in 1966. Although "Black Power" was hardly a spontaneous outburst in Greenwood, Mississippi, but was

instead a carefully planned shift from within the new SNCC leadership while the Black Panther Party grew out of the West Coast and was influenced by sociologist Franz Fanon and existed outside of the Civil Rights Movement, both the Black Power movement and the Black Panther Party reflect a shift from within African-American communities at large. Scholars debate the moment or the place that the split between integrationist and separatist perspectives occurred within the movement, but most acknowledge that it had much to do with varying ideas about self-rule and the role of white activists. Certainly after Greenwood, the Black Power slogan took off, aided by the massive media coverage of the split within the movement, frequently exaggerating the militancy of the new black activist.

With the shift in representation and governance that occurred around 1966, the former coalition of organizations that made up the Civil Rights Movement began formally to splinter. David Barber explains, "SNCC insisted that black people would define the terms, strategy, and organization of their own liberation. Concretely, this meant that white activists were no longer wanted in the black community, except as allies on terms established by black activists" (225). The role of white allies that Barber references was not clearly defined. According to Alphonso Pinkney, "The ensuing debate on the concept of Black Power served to divide the militant, radical civil rights organizations from the more moderate, reformist ones" (207). Not only did it divide moderate from radical, it effectively divided black from white. In his history of SNCC, Wesley Hogan recalls that during the period after the call for Black Power, "…the few whites who had broken through the caste system … suddenly found that their 'whiteness' now prevented them from living within the group that SNCC had become by the end of 1966" (289). Scholars of the period agree that 1966 was a turning point—an end to the integrationist period

which welcomed white involvement and the beginning of the more radical, black-led Black Power period. Dr. King recalls the transition from collaboration to separation:

> The paths of Negro-white unity that had been converging crossed at Selma, and like a giant X began to diverge. Up to Selma there had been unity to eliminate barbaric conduct. Beyond it the unity had to be based on the fulfillment of equality, and in the absence of agreement the paths began inexorably to move apart. (4)

At this splitting of paths, while *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* was firmly positioned half a decade earlier, another filmmaker allowed his film to reflect honestly the complexity and confusion of the moment. *In the Heat of the Night* echoes the "chilling" and "frightening" sentiment that white activist David Dawley described during this period of transition, and values an honest and chaotic snapshot of the political climate over a clear message.

***In the Heat of the Night*: At a Crossroads**

In the Heat of the Night director Norman Jewison was in a significantly different position than Stanley Kramer in 1965 when Marty Baum, his agent, presented *In the Heat of the Night* to him as a potential project. Jewison's career, which began in 1950 in television shows like *Your Hit Parade*, had left him dissatisfied. Jewison had recently directed films like the Rock Hudson and Doris Day vehicle *Send Me No Flowers* along with the comedy *The Russians Are Coming The Russians Are Coming*.[90] Jewison wrote, "my life was being wasted on these commercial

[90] Interestingly, Jewison worked with screenwriter Bill Rose on *The Russians Are Coming The Russians Are Coming*, who later wrote the script for *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*?

comedies where everyone ended up happy and went to the seashore" (92-93). According to Mark Harris, Jewison "hadn't spent a decade paying his dues in television only to end up directing feature films that looked and read like sitcoms" (143). He was ready for a shift toward drama and issue films. In his autobiography, Jewison recalls the decision to direct *In the Heat of the Night*: "I was ready to direct the movie. More than that, I felt that I *needed* to direct it" (134). As film histories of this period make clear, Jewison was not alone in this desire. Hollywood experienced a major shift between the early 1960s and the late 1960s, exemplified by the fact that Doris Day was "number one on Hollywood's list of 'most profitable stars' for each of the years from 1960 to 1965" but never again appeared on the list (Monaco 121). The American public turned out to be more adaptable than was Doris Day. Although some colleagues in Hollywood warned him against making such a controversial film— and a suffocatingly inadequate budget of two million dollars might have dissuaded him—Jewison entered into the project with vigor and optimism.[91] In a personal conversation with Jewison, Senator Bobby Kennedy,[92] the embodiment of white liberalism until his 1968 assassination, confirmed that "the time [was] right for a movie like this" (Jewison 136). These words offered the motivation that Jewison needed to commit to making a film based upon a crime novel in which a black detective, Virgil Tibbs, solves a racially motivated murder while passing through a white Southern town.

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[91] Jewison had just been stuck in a contract with Universal making films that did not, in his opinion, represent his potential. In 1964, with the guidance of his agent Abe Lastfogel, he brought up a "long-forgotten clause" which allowed him to break his contract without having to make a fifth Doris Day genre film. After this, Jewison was suspicious of contracts and signed only a two-film contract with the Mirisch Brothers (Harris 145).

[92] Kennedy's whiteness is complicated by both his religion, ethnicity, and social class. Irish Catholics, like Kennedy, were not always considered white. See Ignatiev, Noel, *How the Irish Became White*, 1996; Knobel, Dale T., *Paddy and the Republic: Ethnicity and Nationality in Antebellum America*, 1986; Brookhiser, Richard, *The Way of the Wasp*, 1991 and Glazer, Nathan and Patrick Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot*, 1963 for more on the transition of the Irish from "other" to "white." Peggy, the Dalton housekeeper in Richard Wright's *Native Son*, draws parallels between herself and the position of the poor black protagonist, Bigger.

Jewison recalls that this was "incendiary material" in the Deep South of 1965: "In that atmosphere, a novel with a black character who was smarter than the white characters, better informed, better dressed, and more sophisticated, seemed revolutionary" (135). As a director with nothing to lose, Jewison offered his actors significant flexibility in the making of *In the Heat of the Night*, which, in turn, reflects the shifting social structure created by the oppositional ideology of Black Power in ways that the carefully scripted and integrationist *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* could not.

The production quality of *In the Heat of the Night*, which contributes to the raw representation of a contentious moment, is due in equal parts to aesthetics and pragmatism. The limited budget of two million dollars, the short shooting schedule of just over forty days, the lack of availability of the Goldwyn Studio, and the rising anxiety in the mid-1960s of a "runaway production" contribute to the sparse feel of the film. *In the Heat of the Night* drew a well-established crew which was also committed to progressive filmmaking, from cinematographer Haskell Wexler and editor Hal Ashby,[93] who were inspired by New Hollywood and were pushing the limits of this film's stylistic conventions, to screenwriter Stirling Silliphant and director Jewison who pushed one another to make the script as politically relevant as possible.[94] Combined with the tense production conditions and tight budget, this team constructed a film in

[93] In his analysis of the film, Mark Harris makes much ado of the role that Hal Ashby played in the production of the film. Not only the editor, he was involved with Jewison in daily decisions regarding shoots and scripting. Harris explains his role: "Although Ashby's only credit on *In the Heat of the Night* is as its editor, he was, by every other definition, what would now be considered a co-producer; his work with Jewison was, according to cinematography Haskell Wexler, the single most important creative partnership on the movie, and it started before a foot of film had been shot" (203).

[94] Cinematographer Haskell Wexler had been working for a few years in Hollywood and had just made a breakthrough with *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*? In 1966, Hal Ashby had worked in editing for one year and went on to direct the cult classic *Harold and Maude* (1971) and the Oscar-winning *Shampoo* (1975). Screenwriting Sterling Silliphant wrote *The Slender Thread* (1966), for which he won a Golden Globe, but then wrote mostly for television. In comparison to the crew of *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?* this group was younger and at the beginnings of their careers.

which the anxiety is palpable and the setting is at once realistically familiar and hauntingly insular.

The opening shot of *In the Heat of the Night* exemplifies both the aesthetic and economic sparseness of the film. The headlights of a train heading into the small Southern town of Sparta, the setting of the film, establish the tone for and open the film.[95] This train opens up the narrative as it carries Virgil Tibbs into Sparta and leaves him to wait for the next train, scheduled to arrive several hours later. Cinematographically, Wexler wanted to establish the town's atmosphere of general dank decay—an antiquated town that has not escaped the contemporary racial tension. The opening shot of the train's headlight first reads as abstract color which eventually focuses and becomes clear. Wexler obtained this visually uncomfortable image by holding a piece of screen door in front of the camera and slowly shifting focus from the screen to the train. Choices like this one are financially savvy and aesthetically provocative. The harshness of the on-location filming translates effectively to the harshness of Sparta. Viewers' discomfort in watching the low-lit and out-of-focus images is echoed in Lieutenant Sam Woods's (Warren Oates) anxiety and contrasts with Virgil Tibbs's collected demeanor, even as he is being arrested for a murder he did not commit.

Cinematographer Haskell Wexler aimed to capture the action and tension of the narrative and of the period without presenting either to the audience in too neat a package. Wexler was getting his first opportunity to shoot in color and was determined to resist the conservative framing, lighting, and camera movement conventions to which many black-and-white directors adhered when they switched to color. The "jaded, shadowy work" of Raoul Coutard,

[95] The novel and the original script were set in Wells. When the crew arrived to film in Sparta, Illinois, they decided to change the name of the town rather than repaint the signs and water tower that would serve as the set. This, too, exemplifies their attempt to be more realistic and to save money and time.

cinematographer for Jean-Luc Godard and Francois Truffaut, inspired the lighting design of *In the Heat of the Night*. Taking a page from Coutard, Wexler maintained low-key lighting while using bounce-light to soften the look of nearly every scene (Monaco 80). According to Mark Harris, Wexler was one of the few people in his field who knew that skin tone dictated the type of lighting that should be used. He explains, "The low light he used throughout *In the Heat of the Night* was designed in part to make his star's facial features completely clear; Poitier had often been the victim of thoughtless over-lighting designed for white actors that added glare to his face and rendered his expressions indistinct, but here, Wexler and Jewison made sure that every unspoken thought that played across his lips and eyes would read on camera and be visible to moviegoers" (221). In direct contrast to this idea, critical race and film scholar Richard Dyer argues in his book, *White*, that Wexler's lighting choices conforms to the "movie lighting [hierarchies]" which are built upon race and gender. In a scene set in Gillespie's living room, Dyer asserts that Wexler's choice to light Steiger fully and shoot face on versus the sidelighting and silhouette shooting of Poitier has the effect of privileging Steiger. As he explains, "not only is Steiger more fully visible to us, but he can display a range of modulations of expressing that indicate the character's complex turmoil of feelings and reminiscences. Poitier, by contrast, remains the emblematic, unindividualised, albeit admirable, black man" (99). Regardless of readings of the effects of lighting, the fact that Poitier was one of the first black actors to play central roles in a period that filmmakers were experimenting with lighting and film stock demonstrates this as a transitional period during which white men maintained the power of representation off screen and the power of decision on screen.[96]

[96] It is important, too, to question how many of these moments of darkness which might privilege Steiger over Poitier are the effect of budgetary limitations rather than artistic choice.

Along with what Wexler considered innovative lighting choices, his camera movement was similarly frugal and experimental. Throughout the film, Wexler took risks due to budget constraints that positively impacted the look of the film. For instance, rather than hiring a train for one shot, the crew had to work around the schedule of a local freight train. Mark Harris explains that Jewison and Wexler "would just tell [the actor] to start sprinting as soon as he heard the railroad whistle and hope that he wouldn't run out of camera range. In the climax of the chase scene […], Wexler used a zoom, giving the shot a semi-documentary feel" with a "rough, grainy quality that evoked the Zapruder film" (22).

Similarly, editor Hal Ashby valued innovation and artistic quality over traditional continuity editing, a convention of Classical Hollywood Cinema. According to producer Walter Mirisch, Ashby worked with Wexler's takes to make "interesting and innovative edits" that were visually powerful, relying on visual match rather than narrative structure (252). Although Mirish does not give examples, he recalls that Jewison changed the narrative structure to enable Ashby's editing choices.

The artistic team that Mirisch and Jewison had assembled matched the progressive nature of the scripting, which was in active revision until after production wrapped. Screenwriter Stirling Silliphant, known for his expedient writing, was in active conversation with Jewison on details of the script. According to film historian Paul Monaco, *In the Heat of the Night* relies upon the "dialogue and classic development of character" to demonstrate "a human relationship that strained plausibility, but which tugged at all the right emotions for the mass audience" (167). Silliphant took the 1965 John Ball novel which focused on Sam Wood and dramatically shifted focus to build tension between Sheriff Gillespie and Detective Tibbs. Together, Jewison and Silliphant made the decision to change the victim of the murder. In the novel, an outside

investor has proposed establishing a classical music festival in Sparta, with the hope that it will provide an economic boom from tourists. Silliphant changed the murder victim from a music promoter to a "northern liberal industrialist" whose mere presence threatened the racial status quo of this sleepy Southern town and whose factory promised better-paying jobs to the community, including many in the segregated black community. Jewison's directing, which allowed for improvisation and actor revision of the script, his resistance to closure, both in particular scenes and of the film as a whole, and the aesthetic of the film mark it as progressively aligned with evolving New Hollywood. Yet in important ways, *In the Heat of the Night*, while capturing the uncertainty of the historical moment, also reflects the inadvertent privileging of whiteness and maintenance of white normativity.

While *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?* screenwriter William Rose portrays Matt Drayton as heroic in his bigot transformation and a white audience is meant to identify with his conflict as he confronts the gap between his unprejudiced ideals and his bigoted practice, screenwriter Sterling Silliphant does not offer a clear white hero in *In the Heat of the Night*.[97] Rather, the transformation of Mississippi Sheriff Bill Gillespie is incomplete precisely because of his shifting cultural setting. The racial hierarchy is faltering as black detective Virgil Tibbs asserts his superior knowledge of the law. Gillespie's social position is unsettled, but the white conservatives in Sparta are numerous and effective in their attempts to maintain the status quo, keeping Gillespie from undergoing a Hollywood-style awakening.

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[97] *In the Heat of the Night* won the Oscar for Best Adapted Screenplay by Stirling Silliphant in 1968. Silliphant adapted the 1965 novel of the same name by John Ball. Ball's version of Gillespie is taller, thinner and more thoughtful than the more stereotypical redneck sheriff that Gillespie becomes in the film. This transition is due, in part, to Silliphant's revisions which concentrate on the tension between Gillespie and Tibbs. Rod Steiger's acting method also contributed to an embodiment of a particular character type, from the weight that he gained for the role to his constant gum-chewing, both of which detract from his heroic profile in the film.

By restructuring the novel, Silliphant and Jewison were able to create white characters representing a range of political perspectives. At the most progressive end is the widow of the Northern industrialist, Mrs. Leslie Colbert (Lee Grant),[98] who, according to the script, finds Tibbs's race irrelevant. She remains in town during the investigation of her husband's murder, and is privy to the small town cover-ups and unfounded assumptions that are interfering with solving the crime. After witnessing that Tibbs's superior detective experience and his race obviously threaten Gillespie, Mrs. Colbert speaks for the Northern liberal outsider when she says, "My God. What kind of place *is* this?" While Colbert has economic privilege—she threatens to build her husband's factory elsewhere if the Sherriff, Mayor, or City Commissioners remove Tibbs from the case—her outsider status limits her social power. Mrs. Colbert thus represents the limitations of white Northern volunteers or allies of the Civil Rights Movement.

At the other end of the spectrum is the character of the town of Sparta, which appears in the lawless form of "crackers" who threaten Tibbs physically and the more powerful "lawful" form of the city council who threaten Tibbs indirectly. Eager to reestablish white authority in Sparta, members of the City Council threaten Gillespie if he does not remove Tibbs from the case. Both embodiments of prejudice—overtly physical and subtly political—threaten Tibbs's safety and sense of manhood while he remains in Sparta. These same forces maintain white dominance after he leaves town.

Caught between what is legally just and what is socially accepted, Sheriff Bill Gillespie attempts to make peace with his own deeply rooted prejudice as he interacts with Virgil Tibbs. Althusser's concept of interpellation, in which an individual is placed into a subject position

[98] Jewison insisted upon casting Lee Grant in this role in part as a political statement. Grant and her husband, playwright/screenwriter Arnold Manoff, had been blacklisted during the McCarthy era and had not worked in many years.

through naming or hailing helps us understand how Gillespie asserts his authority.[99] In the film, Gillespie calls the outranking Philadelphia homicide detective "boy" and "nigger" in a setting that limits Tibbs's role and helps enforce his subject position as "boy" or "nigger." Gillespie knows that in the small Southern town Tibbs has little recourse to correct him. The more effectively Tibbs works, proving his intellectual superiority over Gillespie, the more blatant is Gillespie's response of insecurity. After Tibbs has exhibited impressive detective skills by disproving one suspect, Gillespie's taunting remarks force Tibbs to assert himself. Rather than thanking Tibbs for proving the innocence of one suspect, Gillespie works to undercut him personally, saying, "Virgil. That's a funny name for a nigger boy from Philadelphia." To Gillespie's question, "What do they call you up there, Virgil?" Tibbs defiantly replies with the famous line, "They call me Mr. Tibbs." Despite Tibbs's assertion and the relationship that develops between the two men throughout the film, Gillespie makes clear the limits to his respect for Tibbs as a peer by continuing to call him either "boy" or, later in the film, "Virgil."

To establish Gillespie's conflict over Tibbs, Silliphant includes sympathetic scenes in which Gillespie confronts his own racism and the white dominated racial hierarchy. Steiger's embodiment of Gillespie stunts the character's potential growth, aiding the film's representation of confusion and anxiety over white roles in race relations. As the Sparta police are unable to solve the murder quickly, Tibbs packs his bags to return to Philadelphia. Gillespie must swallow his pride and ask Tibbs to stay. His method is unusual and reflects a shifting power dynamic between black and white. At the beginning of the film, Gillespie would have forcibly insisted that Tibbs remain and would have felt justified in his aggressive approach as a white man

[99] Althusser's famous example involves a policeman saying, "Hey you," when looking for a suspect. Turning to answer this call, an individual steps into the suspect position.

speaking to a black man. Gillespie cleverly traps Tibbs with tactics that may have only worked during a transitional period in which blacks were actively redefining their social roles. Gillespie approaches a resistant Tibbs at the train station, asks him to stay, and then confidently walks toward the car waiting for Tibbs to follow after explaining that he knows that Tibbs "can't pass up the opportunity" to assert his intelligence. Gillespie's rhetorical appeal works, and Tibbs quietly picks up his bag and follows Gillespie.

Gillespie first actively steps outside of his original position when his duties as a police officer and his burgeoning respect for Tibbs call him to act outside of the prescribed social role and save Tibbs from local racist reactionaries. Gillespie arrives at an abandoned warehouse in the nick of time, finding Tibbs surrounded by "crackers" who are bent on teaching him a lesson in social roles and racial hierarchies. A scene like this may have occurred in any number of films with any actor, but a recent similar experience marks Poitier's "acting" here as particularly powerful and changed the way that the scene was scripted in order to capture the anxiety of a black man traveling in the South in the mid-1960s. According to Jewison's autobiography, shortly before the shooting of the film, Poitier and entertainer/activist Harry Belafonte had "flown to Mississippi to deliver money to a civil rights group led by the activist Stokely Carmichael. After they had been picked up at a small airfield in Greenville, a bunch of crackers followed their car" (Jewison 140). During that sleepless night in Mississippi, Poitier and Belafonte hired armed guards to protect them from prowling armed locals.[100] The result of his trip into Mississippi was two-fold: Poitier refused to film south of the Mason-Dixon line, and a car chase sequence, immediately preceding the warehouse scene, was written into *In the Heat of*

[100] In *This Life*, Poitier also recalls this experience particularly that he and Belafonte spent all night lying in their beds anxiously making jokes to distract from their fear.

the Night, "inspired by Sidney and Harry's real-life adventure in Mississippi" (140). Perhaps "crackers" would have followed two black men regardless of their destination, but the presence of Stokely Carmichael in the area, less than a year after his call for "Black Power," must have made Mississippi in 1967 an especially tense space for Poitier and Belafonte. As Gillespie steps in to rescue Tibbs from the local rednecks, he is challenging the unspoken racial hierarchy that has held sway in towns like Sparta.

The original script and the finished film differ importantly in the representation of the relationship between Gillespie and Tibbs. In the screenplay, Gillespie comes to respect Tibbs; he cannot deny that Tibbs has the professional upper hand. He bonds with him over drinks, saves him from local racist "rednecks," and offers him more time to solve the town's racially charged murder of a Northern businessman who was coming to town to build a factory whose employees would be predominantly black. If this is a narrative of a murder, the ending is relatively resolved. In the tradition of Classical Hollywood Cinema, Tibbs solves the crime and returns to Philadelphia. However, *In the Heat of the Night* is more than a murder mystery. It is a narrative of race relations. That narrative is acutely unresolved, thanks in part to Jewison's fluid directing style. Jewison allowed for improvisation and welcomed the method approach which kept Steiger in the character of Gillespie even off set.[101] The awareness that this was more than a film about a murder, combined with Jewison's willingness to experiment in order to best represent the truth

[101] The Actors Studio in New York City teaches "method acting" in which an actor becomes completely immersed in the character that s/he is playing. During method acting, the actor lives as that character for the duration of the production.

of the moment, shifted the narrative away from a pert bigot transformation and allowed the film to capture the white anxiety of the 1967 winter in which they were filming.[102]

Two key scenes of the film exemplify both the production atmosphere which captured, through improvisation, white uncertainty and the scripting which pushed the narrative away from an easy Hollywood reconciliation. Jewison consulted with the actors, and worked throughout production to enable the actors, rather than the script, to dictate the direction and tone of the film. Both of the scenes discussed below are the result, in part, of contributions from the actors during production. These actors, living and working in a tense period of American racial history, imprint their lived experiences into the film.

The on-location filming of the "dramatic centerpiece" (Harris 226) of the film captures not only historic racism, but contemporary racial tension. Tibbs and Gillespie travel together to the old plantation home of Eric Endicott (Larry Gates), "the symbol of a dying racist South," to question the owner of a cotton farm[103] and factory, and the "wealthy, aristocratic patriarch of the town" (Jewison 143). Both Jewison and Wexler aimed for realism in this scene; Jewison refused to construct a plantation set, and insisted on filming this one scene south of the Mason-Dixon Line, while Wexler insisted that they film Tibbs looking out of the car at black men and women

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[102] Production histories point out that the Illinois winter made it especially difficult to create the sense of Southern summer heat. For outdoor shots, the actors had to hold ice chips in their mouths until just before the shoot in order to avoid showing their warm breath in the cold air. That the film feels so muggy and hot is a testament to both the acting and filming.

[103] The choice to use cotton is significant, not only historically, but also symbolically. In the establishing shot of the former plantation, Wexler emphasizes through extreme close up, black hands picking white cotton. The stark whiteness of the cotton in a worn black hand is a literal reminder of the contrast between black and white. More significantly the historical reference to cotton directs viewers toward images of slavery, a past which Endicott mythologizes in the following statement: "Negroes are like [orchids]. They need constant care and feeding to keep them alive." Jewison has potentially let the stereotypic cotton plantation take over the realism for which he strived throughout the film, which is exemplified by the presence of both cotton-picking machines and poor black pickers whose costuming is of a previous century.

picking cotton rather than using the more common rear-projection photography.[104] Wexler and Jewison, because of pragmatics and aesthetics, captured Poitier's fear of the South as they filmed in Dyersburg, Tennessee. While there, Poitier's fears about the South were verified, though he was better prepared this time than the first. Jewison recalls an intense and threatening night in Tennessee.

> Late one night at the beginning of the week a bunch of locals descended on the Holiday Inn where the cast and crew were staying. The locals buzzed the place in their pickup trucks, roaring around the parking lot and banging on doors. I never found out what these men were up to…. All I knew at the time was that, up in the room where I'd been asleep, I woke to the sound of heavy pounding on doors all around me. (147)

Jewison called Poitier to check on him and was told, "No problem in my room, Norman, I got a gun under my pillow." Poitier said that he would not use it unless "one of those crackers comes through the door" (147). Their fearful experience, combined with the racial reality for Poitier, arguably changed the scene that was filmed that week in Dyersburg.

The centrality of Gillespie in the key scene of confrontation between the old South and a young black man is evident in the framing and editing of the scene. The Endicott scene opens with slow pans of the cotton fields, peopled with blacks with whom Tibbs cannot and does not desire to relate. The scene climaxes when Tibbs implicates Endicott in the murder, Endicott backhands Tibbs, and Tibbs unhesitatingly slaps him back. When Endicott slaps Tibbs, the two

[104] In contrast, the driving scenes of *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* both use rear-projection photography and are less realistic for that choice. The controversial black/white kiss which takes place in the back of a cab as the film opens is shown only indirectly, through the rear-view mirror.

are shown in a medium shot with both the black butler and Gillespie in the background of the frame. The second slap occurs quickly in the same take. Immediately following this action is a reaction shot of Gillespie during which the camera tightens to a medium close shot, privileging his response over the action itself. After Tibbs slaps Endicott, Wexler pulls back to frame Endicott in a medium shot as he says, "Gillespie, you saw it?" Endicott's immediate concern with perception is one of the more nuanced moments of the film as it establishes the tenuous power structure on which this small town is built. In this moment of triangulated power, Tibbs holds the physical power, Endicott the social power, and Gillespie the legal power. Each depends upon the cooperation of the other. The camera distance and direction facilitate the shift of power, belittling Endicott by zooming out and offering Tibbs's perspective of Gillespie. Endicott is powerless in this moment, having just been slapped by a black man in front of his butler, waiting for the sheriff to dictate his next move. The tension between Endicott and Tibbs shifts and lies entirely with Gillespie. His inability to answer the ultimate question— "What are you gonna do about it?"— is captured in the composition of the shot. Both Tibbs and Endicott look to Gillespie to answer the question and set the tone of the scene. His answer to this question is nothing short of the town's answer to shifting racial identity. Gillespie maintains his focus on Tibbs as he finally says, "I don't know." The scene ends as Tibbs walks away from the greenhouse, followed by Gillespie. An extreme long shot show these two nearing the front door of the house while the butler looks at Endicott and slowly shakes his head. Ashby uses an ironic visual match as he cuts from the interior to exterior shot, matching the butler—who silently but powerfully judges Endicott—with a lawn-jockey that is especially outdated as Gillespie and Tibbs drive away from the former plantation.

Recollections of this scene in memoirs and productions histories differ. In his "spiritual" autobiography *Measure of a Man* (2000), Sidney Poitier recalls that in the Endicott plantation scene, he refused to play the part as it was written. Poitier writes, "In the original script I looked at him with great disdain and, wrapped in my strong ideals, walked out. That could have happened with another actor playing that part, but it couldn't happen with me" (136). Poitier "insisted" that the script be changed.[105] Jewison's autobiography does not give mention to Poitier's significant change to the script but recalls that it created "serious trouble" for Rod Steiger in the role of Bill Gillespie. Steiger is a method actor, a graduate of The Actors Studio, which encourages complete embodiment of a role for the duration of the part. The effect, for Steiger and those on set, was that "Rod stayed inside Gillespie, in character, for the entire shoot" (Jewison 142). From within his embodied role, Steiger had difficulty with his response to the "first time in an American movie that a black man had slapped a white man back" (143).

When Gillespie replies, "I saw it," Endicott asks, "What are you gonna do about it?" Gillespie's simple line that follows is the one that tormented him: "I don't know." Jewison recalls coaching Steiger through this scene, saying, "Rod, the reason you say 'I don't know' is because you really *don't* know what you're going to do. You're completely baffled. It's a situation you've never confronted before. It's beyond your wildest imagination. You don't know. … You're at a crossroads," to which Steiger responded, "Ah, a crossroads," and then effectively delivered the line as if he has "come to a turning point in his life" (144).

[105] In the published version of the script, available at http://www.script-o-rama.com/movie_scripts/i/in-the-heat-of-the-night-script.html, the scene calls for Tibbs to strike Endicott back. This version of the script may, in fact, reflect the scene that Poitier recalls as improvised.

The slapping scene, perhaps more than any other in the film, captures the period in which black and white social roles were shifting.[106] No longer could Endicott "have [Tibbs] shot," and no longer can Gillespie unquestioningly grant him white skin privilege, protecting the wealthy white man over the "uppity black man" (Jewison 143). Importantly, Tibbs's role has also shifted. He no longer has to turn impotently the other cheek. With Carmichael's call to Black Power, the clenched fist[107] took the symbolic place of the passive hands at one's side, and the social role of whites, regardless of their intentions, became uncertain. Reflecting on the tension during the filming in the South and the unwillingness of Poitier to be slapped on screen and walk away, the slapping scene made it a larger film than Jewison had ever imagined. Gillespie's "I don't know" reflects the thoughts of many whites across America at that very moment, unsure how to respond to a "crossroads" in the American racial narrative.

A second key scene of *In the Heat of the Night*, the drinking scene, presents the transition with even more discomfort. The script calls for Tibbs and Gillespie to "experience a measure of bonding, where they acknowledge one another as men," and includes a scene in which the two are at Gillespie's house having a drink late at night (Jewison 146). They are at Gillespie's because local "crackers" are on the prowl for Tibbs, and Gillespie knows that his house will be a safe hide-out. This narrative fact establishes Gillespie's power and Tibbs's dependence. The script dictates that Gillespie drinks bourbon while Tibbs abstains, and Gillespie opens up while remaining oblivious, "thinking more of himself than the world around him" (*In the Heat of the*

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[106] At the 2002 Academy Awards, at which Poitier received an honorary Oscar, Ving Rhames recalled the moment that Tibbs slaps Endicott back in *In the Heat of the Night* as transformative, saying, "it made a statement to me about what it is to be a man" (Goudsouzian 379).

[107] In the 1968 Summer Olympic Games in Mexico City, African-American members of the USA track and field team, gold medalist Tommie Smith and bronze medalist John Carlos, raised their clenched fists during the ceremonial playing of the National Anthem. This action showed political devotion to Black Power and resulted in their expulsion from the games.

Night 124). On location, a loud rain delayed filming; Steiger, Poitier, and Jewison waited out the storm in a car and improvised lines, with Steiger consistently in the Gillespie character. According to most accounts, Steiger and Poitier improvised the scene that Jewison eventually filmed which resists closure and interracial connection.

The lighting of this scene, as well as the framing and camera distance, correspond with the improvised dialogue maintaining Gillespie's centrality and revealing his inability to treat Tibbs as a peer. The scene opens with an establishing shot of Gillespie and Tibbs in a room lit only by a floor lamp. Wexler films both men at low levels, contributing to the sense of comfort as they both recline. In a medium closeup, Gillespie lets his guard down as the two head toward the originally scripted recognition of one another "as men." In traditional shot-reverse-shot patterns, the two men discuss insomnia. In flattering low-key light, Gillespie confesses that no one besides Tibbs has ever been in his home. At this point, Steiger begins to improvise, taking the conversation into a more personal realm. As Gillespie continues to direct the conversation, he is consistently framed with the bourbon bottle in the foreground, still in medium and medium close-ups. The slow-paced shot-reverse-shot is disrupted when Tibbs speaks as an equal, alluding to their common human experiences and disrupting the brief connection. Gillespie asks Tibbs, "Don't you get a little lonely?" to which Tibbs, unflatteringly lit and shown in profile, replies, "No lonelier than you, man." The term "man," used among peers and equals, combined with Gillespie's momentary vulnerability as he discusses loneliness, snaps him out of the moment of bonding. He quickly stands up, asserting himself physically over Tibbs, who responds by narrowing his eyes and leaning forward in his chair assertively. Gillespie, now shown in a closeup says, "Oh now, don't get smart, black boy. I don't need it. No pity, thank

you. No thank you" (146).[108] Although he has learned to respect Tibbs professionally, Gillespie cannot allow social equality. In response, the scene ends with Tibbs telling Gillespie that he is going, "where whitey can't go," emphasizing the separatism that occurs as a result of miscommunication and deep prejudice. In Goudsouzian's assessment, "Their relationship stays ambiguous, their common humanity blocked by race" (265). Ambiguity reigns in *In the Heat of the Night*, just as ambiguity reigned as the calls of Black Power drowned out the harmonious songs of integration. In the place of reconciliation, a goal of Classical Hollywood Cinema *and* integrationist politics, the film reflects the inability to reconcile differences in the absence of communication and empathy.

In his first autobiography *This Life* (1980), Poitier recalls that *In the Heat of the Night*'s screenwriter Sterling Silliphant never felt comfortable with the film's portrayal of blacks, worrying particularly that Poitier's character was too aggressive. Poitier writes, "But I think he was reflecting the revolutionary changes America had gone through since he wrote his script, and so in some way he was apologizing for something that he couldn't have helped. At the time he wrote the script, most of America was where he was, and to my mind it was a very forward-looking piece of material" (288). Certainly in contrast to earlier more passive and less complex roles, Poitier was able to act out his own shifting racial sensibility. Goudsouzian compares Tibbs's reactive slap in *In the Heat of the Night* to the Poitier character's passive action in *No Way Out* (Dir. Joseph Mankiewicz, 1950), in which Poitier plays a medical doctor who must put aside his own angry pride in order to save members of a brutally racist family. Goudsouzian writes that in *No Way Out*, "Poitier's doctor endures spit in his face without retaliation.

[108] The original script read, "Don't treat me like the nigger!"

Seventeen years later, his detective's reaction connotes a measure of progress, an insistence on black dignity" (264). Jewison's flexibility—perhaps *his* radical approach to step aside and let the film capture the moment rather than controlling it completely—arguably allowed *In the Heat of the Night* to become a film representative of its moment.

Although the uncertainty of white response via Gillespie is represented clearly in the film, it nonetheless maintains white authority structures. The film's final scene offers a way of reading the ambiguity. Coming full circle, the closing scene takes place at the train station as Gillespie drives Tibbs to catch his train. Notably, Gillespie carries Tibbs's bag and initiates a handshake, marking the first time that the two men touch. While there are optimistic aspects of the ending—both men are smiling as the train pulls away from the station—the ending is not quite a traditional closed ending. Although the film closes with non-diegetic music, standard for a Classical Hollywood Cinema ending, the melancholic lyrics of the song offer juxtaposition to the expectations of optimistic closure. The narrative itself is closed and the murder mystery is solved, but the larger social issue of racial tension remains unresolved. What is revealed is not only the uncertainty of white response but the maintenance of white authority. While Gillespie is not a heroically transformed bigot like Matt Drayton of *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?*, he maintains his position in a town that may one day open up to political change but at the close of the film remains hostile and white-dominated.

Contemporary reviewers were quite critical of both the style and content of *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?* paying particular attention to the centrality of the white characters at the expense of an exploration of controversial topics. In a review in the *Daily Defender*, a black daily Chicago newspaper, Vernon Scott acknowledged that Stanley Kramer "is crying out for tolerance, an end to racial discrimination," but he recognizes, too, that Spencer Tracy and

Katherine Hepburn overshadow the young interracial lovers of the plot (13). Dennis Hunt's *Film Quarterly* review characterizes the film as unrealistic and erroneously aimed at "white liberals." Hunt, like other reviewers, argues that the film misses an opportunity to treat an issue that is "more relevant, and forceful" because it "might be too tough for tender liberals to handle" (58). In a *New York Times* review, Renata Adler wrote frankly of *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?* and its characters, "The thing is, the years have passed these people by. It is a forties confrontation. In the sixties a black doctor's engagement to a white educated girl has turned out not to be the context where problems exists" (D1). Similarly, a *Newsweek* review surmised that even if it had been radical in 1966, by late 1967 "it seem[ed] an absolute antique" (Goudsouzian 285). The production quality did not escape ridicule from critics; Joe Morgenstern wrote that "the film might have been made a decade or two ago with its painted sunsets, sclerotic photography, glaucomic process shots and plastic flowers pummeled by floodlights" (Harris 373).

Contemporary reviews as well as critical analysis of both films in the four decades since their release demonstrate the shift toward the raw look and ambiguous hero of *In the Heat of the Night*, though they read the treatment of race rather optimistically. Reviewers praised, in particular, Haskell Wexler's cinematography, calling it "beautifully shot" (Shatnoff and Corliss 47). Paul Monaco cites Wexler's cinematography as beginning a "distinctive trend" toward documentary-style on-location filming which was "immediately influential and widely copied" (80) in his historical analysis *History of the American Cinema: 1960-1969*. *In the Heat of the Night* has retained the respect of filmmakers and scholars, whereas *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?* has become something of a relic. Renata Adler, who was critical of *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, reads *In the Heat of the Night* as a powerful film that offered viewers black

roles that were "involved in some fairly credible way" (D1). She recalls particularly the famous scene in *In the Heat of the Night* during which Poitier slaps Endicott, calling it one of the "most electric moments on film in the past year" and asserting that Poitier's "small act of violence also contains awareness of his real situation" (D1).

Poitier himself was a source of debate; some black radicals blamed him for his limited roles while audiences—black and white— showed their support with their ticket purchases. In an infamously brutal *Times* article entitled "Why Does White America Love Sidney Poitier So?" playwright Clifford Mason criticizes Poitier for "taking on white problems and a white man's sense of what's wrong with the world." Regardless of this criticism, the films were financially lucrative. *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?* sold well in the North and the South, and was the "highest-grossing movie Kramer, Hepburn, Tracy, or Poitier had ever made, and the biggest success in the history of Columbia Pictures" (Harris 374). The disparity between critical response and popular response is not uncommon; Arthur Knight speaks to this, explaining that "the very elements that prevent it from coming to grips with its potentially explosive material are probably also the ones that would commend it to a wide audience" (Harris 374). *In the Heat of the Night* was also a box-office hit, easily earning back its meager two million dollar budget in its first eight weeks. In September, 1967, *In the Heat of the Night* was the top grossing film in the country. Eventually, Jewison's quiet film, which he directed with budget and political constraints, brought in $7.5 million.

In the Heat of the Night was frequently lauded for its effective take on the racial tension that erupted during the summer that the film was exhibited. Mark Harris dismisses this "coincidence," noting that the director could not have known what would have happened after production wrapped. However, I would argue that with his attention to realism and his

allowance for improvisation and script revision, Jewison, with the help of his collaborators, did consciously represent in the film a racial tension that was present long before it erupted in the summer of 1967. In contrast, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?* may have been a financial success but was celebrated even then as a retrospective comedy of integration rather than a current drama of racial transformation.

Conclusion

The differences in narrative structure, film style, and theme in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?* and *In the Heat of the Night* demonstrates the lack of consensus or approach to issues surrounding black/white relations in America in the mid-1960s. Situated as they are at the end of the integrationist era of the Civil Rights Movement, as Black Power began to dominate the media, both films speak to whiteness from within a transitional era. Whereas Kramer's film tends to reflect the integrationist ideology of the King era and Jewison's film at least acknowledges the presence of a separatist ideology like Carmichael's, both films ultimately reinforce the black/white dichotomy and allow white male characters to maintain dominance.

Both Matt Drayton and Bill Gillespie experience personal transformation through their interactions with a model African-American man. While Drayton agrees to change the racial makeup of his family, he maintains his position as the patriarch and commands the attention and respect of those around him. As a representative of order in a Southern town, Gillespie is ruled by antiquated social "law" more than justice and manages a compromise in which he validates an individual black man while maintaining the status quo, from which he benefits. In so doing, Gillespie resists a dramatic awakening, reflecting a new era which distrusted demonstrative

white support and tended toward separatism. Notably, the conclusion of *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?* is the integration of a black family with a white one while the conclusion of *In the Heat of the Night* is the separation of black and white, which finally eases the tension of the film. Regardless of personal interactions, both Drayton and Gillespie maintain their white normative power *and* earn praise for their ability to treat a black man with some level of human dignity.

The rise of the oppositional ideology of Black Power rather than significantly challenging the dominant ideology solidified it. Poitier, who was the highest-grossing actor of 1967 and was assumed to be on the brink of major success, was actually on the brink of unemployment. In part because of critiques from radical blacks who insisted on calling Poitier an "Uncle Tom," Poitier's career as a top-line mainstream Hollywood star was essentially over.[109] He made a few films in the next decade and then took a twelve-year hiatus from Hollywood. In the late 1960s, Poitier wrote with frustration, "One day people will realize that I'm doing my part…. How long do you think I'd last if I came on like Stokely Carmichael or Eldridge Cleaver?" (Harris 349). It is revealing that subsequent generations revere Poitier as an important black actor. In 2001, Poitier received an NAACP Image Award, and the following year he received an honorary Oscar. His integrationist roles are still more acceptable to dominant white America than the separatist roles in Blaxploitation films of the era. From black politicians like Barack Obama and Colin Powell to a black entertainer like Bill Cosby, those who represent the dominant ideology gain more access than those who adamantly challenge the system. While Sidney Poitier was limited in the ways that he could shape his own film roles, the criticism he endured in the late 1960s and the praise he elicited a generation later demonstrates the short life of Carmichael's

[109] Following his blockbuster year in 1967, Poitier remained present in Hollywood films, but made sequels (*They Call Me Mister Tibbs!*, 1970 and *The Organization*, 1971) that did not sustain his popularity.

oppositional Black Power and the stability of white normative authority, both within these two films and in the society that they reflect and construct.

Chapter Three

The Failure of Trey Ellis's Cultural Mulatto: Passing as White, Passing as Black in *Bamboozled* and *Erasure*

"The ultimate condition of production is therefore the reproduction of the conditions of production"

Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" (1970) [110]

"For I found the greatest difficulty for a Negro writer was the problem of revealing what he truly felt, rather than serving up what Negroes were supposed to feel, and were encouraged to feel"

Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act* (1953) [111]

More than two decades after the Poitier films of 1967, novelist and scholar Trey Ellis writes in "The New Black Aesthetic" (1989) about "cultural mulattoes" who are phenotypically black but are culturally white enough to "navigate easily in the white world" (189).[112] Categorizing the burgeoning black artists of the 1980s who define themselves outside of traditional racial categories, Ellis names his theory the "New Black Aesthetic," signifying on both the conversations around the New Negro in the mid-1920s and The Black Aesthetic in the

[110] 127.
[111] 115.
[112] Trey Ellis began "The New Black Aesthetic" as a midterm paper at Stanford, which he expanded upon when *The New York Times Magazine* approached him to write a "hip and young and cutting edge" piece (xii). For that assignment, Ellis traveled across the United States interviewing young black artists like Fishbone, Spike Lee, Living Colour, Chris Rock, and the Hudlin Brothers, who were then all unknown but who would go on to reach celebrity. Nearly two decades later, Ellis's assessment of his generation stands as a poignant and controversial snapshot of a transitional moment in black artistic representation and expression.

late-1960s, and positions a new generation within a larger aesthetic and political dialogue. Ellis hoped that these New Black Aesthetic artists, diverging from the overtly political Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, would be free to create art without the pressure of politics or the boundaries of race. To use the words "cultural mulatto" is to evoke the history of mixed-race individuals in America and to reclaim their often unstable social position. With this term, though, Ellis also awakens the never-quite-sleeping monster of miscegenation and, along with it, the troublesome issue of passing. He imagines a generation of artists functioning in the transgressive realm of a "third race," to signify on Homi Bhabha's "third space," as "thriving hybrids" instead of the "neutered mutations" that history had made them to be (201). A decade after Ellis published his manifesto generating significant scholarly debate, two artists that categorically and chronologically belong to his movement—filmmaker Spike Lee and novelist Percival Everett—offer a less idealistic perspective on cultural mulattoism and recall the difficulty for many genealogical mulattoes before them. Lee and Everett produce works that reveal the failure of liminality for the cultural mulatto while focusing on "the interplay of self-deception and self-awareness" necessary in any effective performance of identity or race (Lucia 10). According to Lee and Everett, cultural mulattoes are not freed of the racial constraints propagated by a binary system, although that very failure highlights the limiting discourse that has historically essentialized racial identity. Lee and Everett, through *Bamboozled* (2000) and *Erasure* (2001), respectively, present cultural mulattoes who reveal the limitations of their liminal space as black men who are more comfortable in and influenced by stereotypically white spaces than stereotypically black spaces. Through their works, which are experimental and postmodern in both form and narrative content, Lee and Everett indirectly challenge Ellis by showing that cultural mulattoes cannot inhabit any transgressive or hybrid space and are instead performing

mutually exclusive racial roles. The failed racial satires enfolded within the texts themselves, furthermore, suggest that (especially white) Americans cling tenaciously to racial performances that reify a racial hierarchy that maintains the cultural supremacy of whiteness. Lee and Everett thus indirectly challenge Ellis by showing that a cultural mulatto, rather than embodying a third race, alternately passes as black and as white.

The term "passing" evokes a history of racial segregation that perpetuated the opportunity primarily for very light-skinned blacks to pass as white, an act especially prevalent during the early twentieth century. The distinction between passing and merely acting or "playing" is important, and relies on both the subject's intent and the audience's reception. That is, the passing subject needs both the phenotypic *ability* and, in any intentional act of passing, the *desire* to be read as white, while the audience must *read* or interpret that person's performance as an embodiment of whiteness. The interpretation of the performance relies upon a belief in essentialized blackness and whiteness, and in the existence of a racial line *to cross*. Because passing from black to white is understood historically as a means of literal access to white spaces, passers must usually forfeit their association with blackness. Thus, this movement into whiteness is simultaneously a direct and disruptive step out of blackness. Most passing narratives, such as Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929) and Jessie Redmon Fauset's *Plum Bun* (1929), emphasize this necessary disconnect from blackness associated with passing as white.

Post-segregation passing is significantly different but relies on a similar desire for access—cultural rather than physical. To pass into one of these sanctioned spaces is theoretically easier. Without a "whites only" sign on the door, one should be able to walk right

in. Instead of a brown bag test,[113] the entry is based upon a demonstration of racial authenticity, which is variable, but is similarly dependent on the idea that there is an authentically black or authentically white way of behaving. Passing depends, still, on a desire to enter one space while leaving another behind and is contingent on the acceptance of the audience. Performing race or "playing," in contrast to passing, does not depend on audience reception. In *Playing Indian*, Philip Deloria asserts that when whites "play" Indian, whether white protesters at the Boston Tea Party or mascots at a sporting event, they are allowed brief access to another race without losing the privilege of their own racial identity. This sort of playing is not meant to convince anyone but, rather, allows a safe, because it is controlled, entry into another perspective. When playing a race, as is the case with blackface, convincing and realistic costuming is not essential. Costuming may well be outrageous and tend toward caricature, as in the phenotypic exaggerations associated with minstrelsy. The audience remains aware of the performance and the knowledge that one is only stepping into this world in order to be able to step back into his or her own "real" world. Therefore, my treatment of passing as black and passing as white is unlike *playing* black or white in that the former requires acceptance from the insider, an intentional separation from one's "real" race, and a consistent performance that relies upon essentialist conceptions of race.

Contemporary cultural passing is central to both *Bamboozled* and *Erasure*. In *Bamboozled*, protagonist Pierre Delacroix (Damon Wayans) is a phenotypically black television writer whose affected diction, sharp dress, and distance from ghetto-blackness mark him as

[113] During the early twentieth century, entrance to certain clubs was granted or denied based on phenotype. Skin lighter than a brown paper bag allowed entry while those with darker skin were denied. See Audrey E. Kerr's "The Paper Bag Principle: Of the Myth and the Motion of Colorism" in *Journal of American Folklore*.

culturally white. As his network's only "black" writer, however, he is expected to create television shows that are authentically "black." *Erasure* centers on Thelonious Monk Ellison, a phenotypically black novelist and scholar whose interests in woodworking and semiotics are deemed "too white" by his publisher for his prospective audience. Although Ellison does not affect whiteness through external cultural markers like Delacroix, he, too, is accused of performing, or imitating, whiteness. The *way* that these two men are black threatens the culturally sanctioned ideal of a pure, distinct, differentiated, and natural whiteness in that *their* blackness looks like whiteness. In response, white figures around and above these two men force them to perform and perpetuate a particular type of stereotyped blackness and, in particular, a ghettoized blackness perpetuated by films and popular culture of the 1990s[114] which feels to Delacroix and Ellison like passing as black.

Delacroix and Ellison respond similarly—each writing a parody of blackness. In *Bamboozled*, Delacroix schemes a way to break his contract and make a political statement by pitching *Mantan: The New Millennium Minstrel Show*, complete with the most racist roles retrieved from minstrel shows of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. To his shock, the show is picked up and becomes an overnight success. Delacroix then shifts from passing as culturally white to passing as black. In *Erasure*, Ellison writes *My Pafology*, an absurdist take on Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) which is so "ghetto" and so "hardcore" that he eventually changes the book's title to *Fuck*. Ellison writes this text under a pseudonym and watches the novel not only make it to publication but become an award-winning bestseller heralded for its

[114] Films of the early 1990s such as John Singleton's *Boyz N the Hood* (1991) and Ernest Dickerson's *Juice* (1992) emphasize and perpetuate the myth of urban black violence against which Pierre attempts to write an alternative, and more representative, middle-class black narrative.

honesty.[115] Ellison plays the role of the imaginary novelist of *Fuck*, thus vacillating between passing as either the too-white black writer or the ghetto-black black writer. His dual performance also calls into question the nature of racial boundaries and characteristics.

As these protagonists pass as black and as white, Lee and Everett expose how racial constructs delimit and legitimate both individual identity and artistic representation. Lee and Everett demonstrate that the cultural mulatto passes from one race to another, stabilizing either side of a binary rather than opening a liminal space between. The cultural mulattoism of *Bamboozled* and *Erasure* suggests that dominant white society still polices race uni-directionally: it allows passage into blackness but guards entry into whiteness, maintaining its purity and power. What Homi Bhabha calls the "hybridity of imagined communities" cannot stand against what George Lipsitz calls the "possessive investment in whiteness." Racial passing and the protection of whiteness thus complicate Trey Ellis's ideal fluid cultural mulatto.

Central to Ellis's optimism regarding cultural mulattoes is his presumption of agency from within the hybrid borderland of black and white. Theorists like Paul Gilroy, Arjun Appadurai, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Donna Haraway imagine a transgressive space between boundaries.[116] For Gilroy, it is the fluidity of transnational identity that allows for what Appadurai optimistically describes as "imagined worlds" created by globalization which can

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[115] The raw "honesty" that is assumed of Ellison's parody evokes questions about both the role of art and the responsibility of a viewer. Reviewers express that *Fuck* is simultaneously horrific and true, and celebrate it as cultural outsiders whose positions of privilege are maintained through the "real" story they applaud. This is reminiscent of President Woodrow Wilson's response to D.W. Griffith's film *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). In a private screening at the White House, Wilson watched the first full-length film. At the end of the 187-minute film based upon Thomas Dixon's novel *The Clansman* which chronicles the Reconstruction South through damning representations of blackness, Wilson is quoted as saying, "it is like writing history with lightning. And my only regret is that it is all so terribly true."

[116]See Gilroy, Paul, *The Black Atlantic* (1994), Appadura, Arjun, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy" (1986), Anzaldúa, Gloria, *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987), Bhabha, Homi, *The Location of Culture* (1994) and Haraway, Donna,"The Cyborg Manifesto" (1991).

"contest and sometimes even subvert" the dichotomies that call for a border in the first place (222). Anzaldúa and Haraway relish the spaces between as reproductive sites ripe for "recoupling" the once contentiously separated sides of a dichotomy—Mexico/America or Machine/Organism. Each of these theorists variously imagines a subject position from within the margin that maintains sufficient agency and vocality to disrupt the seemingly natural dichotomy in which the two sides depend upon one another to exist. For Ellis, the cultural mulatto is unique from mulattoes of the past precisely because of the ability to transgress borders and speak freely from this "imagined world."

Questions of agency become more complex when those within the liminal space begin producing texts. According to Louis Althusser, power rests with the producer of images, which is notably not the same as the artist him/herself but is, rather, linked to the system of production—in the case of Lee's protagonist, Delacroix, the television network, and in the case of Everett's protagonist, Ellison, the publishing world. In his reading of Marx, Althusser aligns the consumer of images with the masses who are interpellated into a particular subject position and passively respond according to how they are hailed and how they understand themselves within that particular moment and structure. Lee and Everett, however, also acknowledge the active power of the consumer, asserting that the consumer of images participates importantly in making the meaning of those images. Although the consumer is a part of a machine which he is not meant to and often does not see, the consumer interacts with texts in order to make them matter. As Jonathan Culler explains in terms of literary texts, "the reader becomes the name of the place where the various codes can be located, a virtual site" (38). Complicating Culler's perspective, which grants power to the consumer, and Althusser's perspective, which grants power to the producer, texts like *Bamboozled* and *Erasure* reveal that each is situated within a racial hierarchy

which privileges whiteness and depends upon blackness as its Other. The meta-audiences of both texts are unconsciously perpetuating a racial dichotomy which privileges whiteness while the artist within each narrative is reproducing "the conditions of production." Lee and Everett problematize Ellis's cultural mulatto by revealing that producers, artists, and consumers are all part of a hegemonic capitalist power structure which is designed for profit and embedded in a culture of racial hierarchy. Although "The New Black Aesthetic" is not framed in these terms, Ellis imagines a system which ignores producers, empowers artists, and trusts consumers. Ellis puts faith in the idea of artists inhabiting the third race and creating texts that do not *have* to challenge the system, even as he optimistically assumes that these texts will, through their embodiment of the margin, silently erode its borders.

Passing as White

Erasure's protagonist,Thelonious "Monk" Ellison, does not imagine himself to be passing as white, although as an individual and as a writer, others deem him "too white" because he is a woodworker whose novels are set in Greece and whose scholarship is grounded in European post-structuralism.[117] As the narrator, Ellison identifies himself racially in order to debunk the impact of race; he introduces himself to readers by saying, "I don't believe in race" and goes on to describe his racial heritage and phenotype (2). His Du Boisian "double consciousness" makes him acutely aware that the society in which he lives sees him as black and expects him to perform a particular blackness because he has "dark brown skin, curly hair, a

[117] Percival Everett himself has been pressured to be a more authentically black writer, which he discusses in interviews and his essay "Signing to the Blind" (1991).

broad nose" and because "some of [his] ancestors were slaves" (1). He always sees himself as others see him and is resentful of his self-awareness. Thelonious "Monk" Ellison evokes blackness in his very name, which signifies on the jazz great and the novelist, both black— "an obvious composite of the jazz innovator and the author of *Invisible Man*" (Russet 364-65). Although his name evokes blackness, he goes by "Monk," the one part of his name which—thrown out of context by the erasure of "Thelonious"—evokes an image of whiteness and austerity. Describing himself to readers, Monk emphasizes his class and education as more important than his race. He explains that he "graduated summa cum laude from Harvard" and that his "family [of doctors] owned a bungalow near Annapolis" (1-2). According to others, these aspects of his past are deemed white, and he is frequently accused of passing as white. He refuses to accept cultural readings of black and white as grounds for his self-definition, however, and attempts subtly to embody the marginal space of a cultural mulatto. This attempt makes palpable the ludicrous racial dichotomy in which Monk is an outsider and calls into question the very meaning of black and white. Thus early in the novel, Everett seems aligned with Ellis as he explores the potential for Monk's racial transgression despite the pressure to conform to mutually exclusive racial categories. Monk is aware both of the expectations for him to enact blackness—to enact a cultural identity that matches his phenotype— and of the resistance to the way he enacts a white cultural identity. Like Ralph Ellison, who wrote, "For I found the greatest difficulty for a Negro writer was the problem of revealing what he truly felt, rather than serving up what Negroes were supposed to feel, and were encouraged to feel," Monk is optimistic that he can exist beyond race (115).

In Spike Lee's *Bamboozled*,[118] the protagonist similarly defines himself outside of stereotypical blackness, emphasizing a performance of class and educational pedigree stereotypically associated with whiteness. Pierre Delacroix introduces himself to the audience in French with exaggerated enunciation that film scholar Cynthia Lucia calls an "odd Grace-Kelly-meets-James-Earl-Jones accent" (10). His past—he was born Peerless Dothan to a working-class family—motivates the performance which opens the film. Along with his Harvard degree, Peerless takes another name, accent, attire, and attitude—a creation that inspires his own father (Paul Mooney) to ask, "Nigger, where the fuck did you get that accent?" Like Monk, Pierre is considered too white by those around him—especially by white people around him. Early in the film Lee makes clear that Pierre's whiteness is an intentional performance, his voice a practiced caricature that black comedians have long used to imitate "crackers." Though a performance, it is also an attempt to pass as white, as Pierre desires access to white culture and depends upon the acceptance of the in-group audience. Despite his performed whiteness, Pierre is the token black man at work expected to perform and produce blackness while representing the Black race—the same race from which he seems to be racing.

Their peers read both Monk and Pierre as disingenuous in their embodiments of race, especially as artists who are expected to create art that speaks to the "black community" writing out of what Pierre's boss, Dunwitty (Michael Rapaport), calls his "pain as a Negro." Monk's editor, Yul, urges him to produce blacker books, saying, "The line is, you're not black enough."

[118] Spike Lee, like the characters that he writes in his film, is bound by the label of race. That he owns his production company and is well-established both serves Lee and types him—many consider Lee *the* figurehead of black filmmaking. Criticism of Lee centers on his treatment of race even though some of his films (*Summer of Sam, 25th Hour*) are not primarily "race films." Lee is alternately "a mediator between the African-American community and the white establishment" (Pouzoulet 32) and "the quintessential buppie" (Baraka "Spike Lee" 146) whose "'crafty' houseslave, is [the only black character] *dignified*" in his films (145). In *Bamboozled*, Lee addresses issues of racial performance and expectations of blackness like those that he has confronted in his own career.

When Monk rebuts, asking how they even know that he is black, Yul responds with a reference to phenotype: "They know because of the photo on your first book. They know because they've seen you. They know because you're black, for crying out loud" (43). Yul insinuates that Monk's novels are "not black enough" out of dishonesty on Monk's part and that if Monk wrote more authentically, his work would be more black. Similarly, Pierre faces criticism from Dunwitty to create "real" black television shows. When Pierre challenges the expectations placed on black art, Dunwitty calls him out, saying, "Brother man, I'm blacker than you. I'm keepin' it real. You're just frontin' tryin' to be white." Both Yul and Dunwitty charge Monk and Pierre, respectively, with a variety of methods of passing as white—writing novels that are "not black enough" and "frontin'" as white. These white men and the executives above them encourage Monk and Pierre to "keep it real," so long as "real" meets their expectations of blackness and steers clear of whiteness.

Yul and Dunwitty represent what Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer refer to as the "circle of manipulation" which is active in the culture industry (33). Discussing television, they explain that "there is the agreement—or at least the determination—of all executive authorities not to produce or sanction anything that in any way differs from their own rules, their own ideas about consumers, or above all themselves" (34). The white executives in power deem the art that Monk and Pierre create too white—too white to come from black men, at least. If black men can create white art, the idea of white art and of whiteness itself comes into question, revealing the absence of the original through its imitation.

Judith Butler questions the transgressive potential of imitation asking of gender performativity: "Is drag the imitation of gender, or does it dramatize the signifying gestures through which gender itself is established?" (viii). Spike Lee and Percival Everett explore the

concept of drag as imitation when applied to racial performativity, asking whether overt racial passing, as performance, might "dramatize the signifying gestures" of racial construction in order to destabilize race altogether and allow for a more liberated embodiment of self free of racial expectations. The protagonists in each work, Pierre and Monk, have met resistance as they have attempted to embody their own subject positions not primarily defined by race or associated with the *wrong* race. Perhaps, like Butler's playful imaginings of gender performativity as a means of disrupting the seemingly natural binary of male/female, a playful performance of race might disrupt the black/white binary.

Like Derrida's *transcendental signified*—the center around which everything else aligns—whiteness is arbitrarily constructed yet is a "function (that) is absolutely indispensable" (Macksey and Donato 278-79). Ruth Frankenberg explains the function of this *transcendental signified* in terms of whiteness:

> Within the dualistic discourse on culture, whiteness can by definition have no meaning: as a normative space it is constructed precisely by the way in which it positions others at its borders. To put it another way, within that discourse, "whiteness" is indeed a space defined only by reference to those named cultures it has flung out to its perimeter. Whiteness is in this sense fundamentally a relational category. (231)

Similarly, film and whiteness scholars Hernan Vera and Andrew Gordon explain this dependence on oppositional definition: "The image that whites have of themselves is acquired by contrast to the images of others; the image these 'others' have of themselves is acquired by contrast to the image of whites" (2). The irony, of course, is that whiteness can be understood to be a construction, yet in order to maintain any authority as the dominant "race," it must appear

natural. Whiteness scholars have discussed the importance of invisibility in maintenance of white privilege; Peggy McIntosh, for instance, describes the "invisible package of unearned assets about which [we are] meant to remain oblivious" (291), and Richard Dyer explains, "Whites must be seen to be white, yet whiteness as race resides in invisible properties and whiteness as power is maintained by being unseen" (45). If invisibility is key to appearing natural, the Butlerian urge to expose the performativity of race could potentially destabilize whiteness as a *transcendental signified* and thus shatter the racial hierarchy altogether, if it is built upon opposition.

With a career that took off with his first feature film, *She's Gotta Have It* (1986), Spike Lee has at times been *the* figurehead for black film throughout his two decades of directing nearly twenty feature-length films. As a filmmaker whose job description is most often preceded with the word "Black" or "African-American," Lee carries the burden of representation that traces back to filmmakers like Oscar Micheaux (1884-1951) and Melvin Van Peebles (b. 1932) who were responding, in vastly different ways, to the burden of representing their race in film. Micheaux tended toward films that presented middle-class blacks in order to humanize and demystify blackness in the 1920s and 1930s. Four decades later, Van Peebles rebelled against stereotypic representations of African Americans and arguably catalyzed the Blaxploitation film movement with *Sweet Sweetback's Baadassss Song!* (1971). Following Blaxploitation, films by African Americans were sparse until the renaissance of black film in the late 1980s, led by Spike Lee.

As "black" filmmakers, Lee, Micheaux, and Van Peebles create art that perhaps unfairly comes to speak for the black community. Barry Michael Cooper writes, "Lee has done more to demystify the Black experience—not only in Brooklyn, but nationally and, in a psychic sense,

globally, too—than any other director in recent memory" (15). While Martin Scorsese or Jim Jarmusch can make films on a range of topics with no discussion of what this says about the "white" community, Lee's films have been a way of reading black culture—and of shaping it.

Black film not only impacts *and* represents black culture to black audiences; it also comes to speak to white audiences for the black community. Scholar Catherine Pouzoulet praises Lee as "a mediator between the African-American community and the white establishment" (32) and for his work against "re-circulat[ing] stereotypes such as the unemployed, murderous drug-dealing black youth" (35). Lee deserves praise for reaching more than *just* a black audience and for "mediating" to a white audience, but his "crossover" success has also drawn criticism. For instance, in a critique that quickly becomes harshly paternal and condescending, Amiri Baraka begins his piece "Spike Lee at the Movies" (1993) saying that "Spike Lee was unique because he was making independent films while 'utilizing' the 'major league' producers and distributors" (145). Baraka then unveils his difficulties with Lee, calling him "the quintessential buppie" (146) and arguing that "only the Black middle class, including the 'crafty' houseslave, is *dignified*" in Lee's representations of African Americans" (145).

If Baraka engages in a "paternal" criticism of Lee, his punishment constitutes a slap on the wrist in comparison to the lashing that bell hooks and Arthur Jaffa give Lee in *Reel to Real: Race, Sex and Class at the Movies* (1996). hooks and Jaffa discuss problematic representations of African Americans in film, and they focus on Lee to exemplify their point. They write that "Black audiences have wrong-mindedly believed that the push for more 'positive' images would necessarily lead to diverse representation of blackness" while Lee's films subtly reinscribe negative stereotypes (105).

Most scholarship on Spike Lee primarily treats his race and his representation of race. Although several of Lee's films overtly treat issues of race (*Do the Right Thing, Jungle Fever, Bamboozled*), later films treat issues of humanity more broadly without being "about race" (*25th Hour, Summer of Sam*). Spike Lee speaks of his frustration at criticism that focuses on his personality and assumes autobiographical threads in his films. Referencing *Taxi Driver,* Lee says, "why is it that [Scorsese] can not only direct that film, but also play that character, and critics are able to distinguish between Martin Scorses and the character he plays, whereas in my films—even when I'm not playing a character in a scene—critics assume that those are my thoughts, my beliefs, and not those of the characters?" (8). For most people Spike Lee is a *black* filmmaker who is expected to represent blackness. Similarly, Percival Everett is branded with "African American" preceding the aptly descriptive title "novelist."

In the midst of a prolific career in which he has written on a dizzying array of topics, Percival Everett is similarly branded as a black writer. In a special issue of *Callaloo,* friends and writers were asked to contribute pieces to celebrate Everett. Each of the essays included discusses Everett's race. Michael Knight is taken over by the presence of Everett's race and writes an oddly appropriate piece that turns out to be not actually about Percival Everett but more about his own experiences with blackness. Claude Julien shares an experience teaching an Everett short story in which he had "blind" readers who knew nothing about Everett and "informed" readers who knew that Everett is black. He spends the majority of his article discussing the relevance of Everett's race to his writing, leaving little room for a discussion of the writing itself. Even in a special edition devoted to the diverse writing of a relatively young writer who frequently chooses either *not* to race his character or not to emphasize race in the narrative (*Cutting Lisa, Walk Me to the Distance*), Everett's race draws focus.

Unlike Lee, who begrudgingly accepts the responsibility of representing blackness and who, for the most part, focuses on African America in his films, Percival Everett resents the labels of race and has generally refused to race his characters in his career since 1983. Margaret Russet notes his self-conscious avoidance of race: "Not only does Everett refuse to be known as a 'black' novelist; he refuses to be a Western or comic or fantasy or mystery or, finally, even experimental novelist either. Nor has he, until recently, made any concessions to the autobiographical fallacy that underlies the demand for 'real' pictures of black life. Everett's fictions are not self-extensions; if anything, the author has been ostentatiously absent from the spaces he creates" (363). In interviews, Everett is inevitably asked how his race influences his work. In an interview with New England Press, publisher of several of his works, Everett states his frustration with the question and opens up a dialogue on white privilege:

> I am a writer. I am a man. I am a black man in this culture. Of course my experience as a black man in America influences my art; it influences the way I drive down the street. But certainly John Updike's work is influenced by his being white in America, but we never really discuss that. I think readers, black and white, are sophisticated enough to be engaged by a range of black experience, informed by economic situation, religion (or lack thereof) or geography, just as one accepts a range of so-called white experience.

Nevertheless, bookstore workers who shelve his works, reviewers whose approval graces his book covers, and scholars who analyze his work tend to read Everett as a black writer and thus

place on him the same burden of representation that Spike Lee carries—as well as Micheaux, Van Peebles, Ellison, and Wright before them. Even in an attempt to work outside of that racial boundary, reviewer David McGoy first acknowledges Everett's race in his comment that made it to the book's cover: "This is not a good book by a Black writer, nor is it a Black book by a good writer; it is a remarkable work of fiction that transcends labels." Even if it transcends labels, McGoy first draws attention to those labels. More typical reviews do not even attempt to shy away from their racial characterization of Everett and his work, unable to resist the comparative urge that ultimately names Everett as an African American. The review in *Publisher's Weekly* notes, for example, that "Percival's talent is multifacteted, sparked by a satiric brilliance that could place him alongside Wright and Ellison." That this reviewer evokes two of America's most influential black writers is representative of Everett's persona as a *black* writer, despite his diverse interests and styles.

The characterization of Spike Lee and Percival Everett makes clear the boundaries for even successful and established artists whom society reads as black. When Everett is made to talk about race and explain his goals as an *African-American* writer while his work is only compared to other black texts, and Lee is considered a great *black* filmmaker whose films speak on behalf of "the black community," there is certainly a marked limitation to the freedom that class or educational privilege can bring. In the cases of Spike Lee and Percival Everett, the burden of representation takes over their identities, disallowing them to be writers or filmmakers without the precedent "black." Out of these lived experiences, Lee and Everett both created works that respond to Trey Ellis's conceptual cultural mulatto, offering their satiric readings of racial performance and passing at the turn of the 21st century.

Ellis's enthusiasm for a new space less defined by race and his questions about the role of

black art are both historically and politically a product of the questions about the New Negro in the 1920s and about the agitprop Black Arts Movement of the 1960s. In reaction to political works by artists like Amiri Baraka and Sonia Sanchez, Ellis imagines a new generation that is less overtly political. Ellis writes that "the new black artists [are not] shocked by the persistence of racism as were those of the Harlem Renaissance, nor are we preoccupied with it as were those of the Black Arts Movement. For us, racism is a hard and little-changing constant that neither surprises nor enrages. [. . .] We're not saying racism doesn't exist; we're just saying it's not an excuse" ("The New Black" 197). Youth and economic privilege arguably enable Ellis to make such statements. That is, he is not living in a world of legalized segregation or frequent lynchings. Neither is he living in a poor neighborhood concerned daily with gang violence. Trey Ellis and the artists he includes as a part of the New Black Aesthetic (NBA) are the elite—a contemporary manifestation of W.E.B. Du Bois's "talented tenth." Wealthy and educated, the NBA artists have parents who read *Native Son*, have law degrees, and relate more to Max Erlone, the white Jewish lawyer, than to Bigger Thomas, the black criminal protagonist. Ellis admits that the aesthetic transition is linked to class and education:

> For the first time in our history we are producing a critical mass of college graduates who are the children of college graduates themselves. Like most artistic booms, the NBA is a post-bourgeois movement driven by a second generation of middle class. Having scraped their way to relative wealth and too often, crass materialism, our parents have freed (or compelled) us to bite those hands that fed us and sent us to college. We now feel secure enough to attend art school instead of medical school. (192-93)

Out of their parents' labor thirty years ago, this new generation was raised in a post-segregation

America with access and hope. To Ellis that equates to freedom from protest writing and an ability to live outside of racial constraints. This privilege is what enables Ellis to call for an acknowledgment of a New Black Aesthetic that answers to neither white nor black expectations. Ellis, of course, descends from a history of debates about art and politics. Each generation seems to ask its own questions about the role of the artist, and this is perhaps particularly true with black artists.

In his 1925 essay[119] "The New Negro," for example, Alain Locke lauds the blossoming of Negro art and culture: "the mind of the Negro seems suddenly to have slipped from under the tyranny of social intimidation[,] the psychology of imitation and implied inferiority" (985). Locke is invigorated to see new voices bursting forth from his "New Negro," which he locates "between defiance and appeal, midway almost between cynicism and hope" (990-91). According to Locke, these are not merely writers but are *Negro* writers whose "race pride" is "a healthier, more positive achievement than a feeling based upon the realization of the shortcomings of others" (991). In response, George Samuel Schuyler challenged Locke's perception of Negros and their art in "The Negro-Art Hokum," published in *Nation* in June 1926. Schuyler argues that there is no artistic movement among Negros and goes so far as to say that there is no shared experience among Negros and, in fact, that there is hardly such a thing as a Negro but, rather, only a "lampblacked Anglo-Saxon" (1222). Granting that many of the great Negro artists were trained in Europe or at America's elite institutions, Schuyler argues that Negros are as influenced by European standards as any other Americans, and that rather than the classification "Negro,"

[119] Alain Locke edited a special edition of *Survey Graphic* magazine entitled "Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro" which was later expanded into a collection entitled *The New Negro.* These publications included works by writers such as Du Bois, Weldon Johnson, Cullen, Hughes, McKay, Grimké, and Spencer as well as an essay by Locke entitled "The New Negro."

we should all be "just plain American" (1222).[120] To characterize Negro art as a separate art coming from a particular race, he argues, is to devalue the art and to focus on the "peculiar[ity]" of both the art and the artist. Langston Hughes rebuts Schuyler's denial of racialized art in "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," also published in the 1926 *Nation*. Hughes equates the desire to ignore race in the name of art with "the race toward whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible" (1311). Looking back at the pressure on Negro artists to write a particular type of African-American character, Hughes sees a new freedom for artists to express the diversity of Negro life. Like Locke, Hughes sees the 1920s as a fruitful period of growth and possibility for African-American artists and urges each artist to "be free to choose what he does, certainly, but he must also never be afraid to do what he might choose" (1314). Hughes imagines a Negro art emerging that is grounded in "his own racial world" which does not shy away from "the strange un-whiteness" of his subject (1314). Writing with the same strain of optimism and vigor that Ellis evokes seventy years later, Hughes announces, "We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame" (1314).

The Locke/Schuyler/Hughes debate on the role of the Negro artist begins to capture the contentious topic that each subsequent generation has revised and that is taken up by Trey Ellis. To ask whether there is "Negro art" is also to ask what it means to be "Negro" or Black or African American. Even if a definitive Negro experience or identity could be acknowledged, the

[120] Further, Schuyler asks, "If the European immigrant after two or three generations of exposure to our schools, politics, advertising, moral crusades, and restaurants becomes indistinguishable from the mass of Americans of the older stock [. . .], how much truer must it be of the sons of Ham who have been subjected to what the uplifters call Americanism for the last three hundred years" (1222).

role and responsibility of art coming from such a community only generates further questions. In "Blueprint for Negro Writing" (1937), for example, Richard Wright called for attention to politics in literature: "… a simple literary realism which seeks to depict the lives of these people devoid of wider social connotations, devoid of the revolutionary significance of these nationalist tendencies, must of necessity do a rank injustice to the Negro people and alienate their possible allies in the struggle for freedom" (1406). A precursor to Ellis, Ralph Ellison contested Wright's emphasis on Negro people and argued that "the Negro American writer is also an heir of the human experience which is literature, and this might well be more important to him than his living folk tradition" ("Change the Joke" 1578).

The controversy over the focus and form of black art persisted and re-emerged with the Black Arts Movement as writers such as Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal imagined a movement that was the "aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power Concept." Addison Gayle, Jr. wrote in "The Black Aesthetic" (1971) that "speaking honestly is a fundamental principle of today's black artist" whose question is "not how beautiful is a melody, a play, a poem, or a novel, but how much more beautiful has the poem, melody, play, or novel made the life of a single black man? How far has the work gone in transforming an American Negro into an African-American or black man?" (1917). The literature of this movement is activist, vibrant, political, and vehement. In his 1969 poem "Black Art," Amiri Baraka rants, "We want 'poems that kill.'/ Assassin poem, Poems that shoot/ guns. Poems that wrestle cops into alleys/ and take their weapons leaving them dead/ with tongues pulled out and sent to Ireland" (1943). By the late 1960s, at the close of the Civil Rights Movement (1960-1966), as Sidney Poitier is publicly called an "Uncle Tom" for his integrationist roles, the Black Arts Movement was pro-African, pro-Black, and necessarily overtly political, closing—for a time— the century-old debate of art

and politics in black writing.

Out of this artistic and political lineage, Trey Ellis envisions the New Black Aesthetic as the perspective of a hopeful new generation freed entirely from the debate that was inevitably revived. Rather than promoting the naturalism of Richard Wright or the political fury of Addison Gayle, Ellis explains that the NBA is primarily ironic and humorous with only small doses of bitterness. There is a realism and a promise in the new black space—a third race— he sees born of generations of protest and a new level of societal as well as financial security. In Ellis's New Black Aesthetic, "you just have to *be* natural, you don't necessarily have to *wear* one" (190).

When Ellis recalls, "It wasn't unusual to be called 'oreo' and 'nigger' on the same day," he focuses on the opportunity rather than the limitations of that liminal experience[121] (189). Although Ellis asserts that the cultural mulatto is one who is able to navigate both black and white worlds, having been shaped by both, his use of the aforementioned racial slurs points to the cultural belief that one can be read as black on the outside and white on the inside *and* simply as too black. But Ellis emphasizes the mobility of this position and writes about the many young blacks who "admit liking both Jim and Toni Morrison," those who have grown up "feeling misunderstood by both the black worlds and the white" (186-87). Some of these cultural mulattoes "desperately fantasize themselves the children of William F. Buckley," while others "affect instead a 'superblackness' and try to dream themselves back into the ghetto. Either way, they are letting other people define their identity" (190). Ellis's dream is that the masses who find themselves in the position of neither/nor "go out and create (their) own" world rather than

[121] Like the cookie, which is chocolate/black on the outside and vanilla/white on the inside, this pop reference evokes the idea of an essentially white and black way of acting and looking. So, for Ellis to be called an oreo is to be called inauthentically black.

being torn between the two. This hybrid movement reveals to Ellis glimpses of the potency and agency of black art that could blossom into "one of the most fertile periods black culture has ever known" (202).

For Ellis, the New Black Aesthetic and the cultural mulatto offer a freedom from racial expectations that have long limited the artistic expressions of those that society calls "Negro" or "Black" or "African American." Although African Americans have been tied for generations to a need to prove one's humanity *and* change one's conditions, Ellis imagines a new day in which New Black Aesthetic artists, through their "unshakable belief that our youthful black power can perfect society and perfect the soul," do, in fact, change the world—one novel or film or album at a time.

What Ellis sees as expansive freedom without the political pressures of the past, however, some critics read with less enthusiasm. In *Black Intellectuals,* William M. Banks worried that the artists Ellis identified have no "common theme or set of artistic values" (219). Eric Lott began his "Response to Trey Ellis" thus: "Optimism and desire burst so infectiously from Trey Ellis's essay that you want to forget its occasional glibness," and he then points to the absence of politics in the movement and the classism of Ellis's definitions of the NBA artists (244). Ultimately, Lott calls Ellis naïve in his portrayal of a new movement, worrying that "what finally undercuts Ellis's essay is the gap between the hope for such institutions [which will offer support to black artists] and their act of paucity" (246). Ellis, who was further attacked for his sexism (Tera Hunter) and his classism (J. Martin Favor), offers a rebuttal by reiterating his belief in the transgressive space of the cultural mulatto through what he calls an "anti-aesthetic." [122] Although

[122] In her piece entitled "'It's a Man's Man's Man's World': Specters of the Old Re-Newed in Afro-American Culture and Criticism," Tera Hunter attacks Ellis, specifically taking issue with

he asserts that the New Black Aesthetic Movement "synthesizes the last two black art revivals, the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement," he clarifies his vision for the movement:

> It is important to remember that the New Black Aesthetic I try to define is really an anti-aesthetic that defies definition. The NBA is an attitude of liberalism rather than a restrictive code. … I was trying to argue that today we can be more honest and critical of ourselves than ever before, and this open-minded far-sightedness may very well produce some of the greatest works of art the world has ever known. (251)

Ellis maintains his idealism about freedom from limits and the ability to "navigate" in both black and white worlds. For Spike Lee and Percival Everett, that navigation is limited, and each argues in their work that performativity of racial essentialism is inevitable for the cultural

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the choices Ellis made as he highlights mostly male and often anti-female black artists. Paying particular attention to Public Enemy, Hunter criticizes Ellis for imagining them as critical players in a movement that is supposed to be new but that maintains the same sexism that was prevalent in the Black Arts Movement. She wonders to what end Ellis promotes the New Black Aesthetic and concludes her piece by writing, "What we need is not only a new aesthetic, but also more incisive and disturbatory critiques" (249).

While Hunter points to Ellis's sexism, J. Martin Favor challenges the classism of his manifesto. In "'Ain't Nothin' Like the Real Thing, Baby': Trey Ellis's Search for New Black Voices," Favor argues that Ellis "is concerned with both recording and constructing a multitude of voices emanating out of Black America" (694), but ultimately determines that "Ellis's NBA is a class-conscious manifesto concerned with the repositioning of certain types of epistemological power" (704). Favor is concerned about the "political and literary consequences—especially for African American women and a black bourgeoisie" that the NBA manifesto might have class as its focus rather than race. Favor also deals with an issue that both Percival Everett and Spike Lee take up in their fictional works: "Merely to signify on Ol' Massa, to remain in his margins, requires the African American artist to define himself/herself in terms of whiteness, or—more precisely—not-whiteness" (696). Reminiscent of Langston Hughes's belief that "The whisper of 'I want to be white' runs silently through their minds," Favor warns that any black art that is not grounded in race ascends toward "white" standards and forms at the expense of authenticity.

mulatto.

Erasure and *Bamboozled* play with racial performance as the central characters pass as both white and black. Early in their texts, Lee and Everett set up believable performances of race as Pierre and Monk are criticized for passing as white, followed by caricatured racial performances as they pass, and are accepted, as black. However, with the absurd racial passing of "black" men passing as black, the texts disintegrate into chaos to reveal the lack of a centered racial reality in the presence of constructed racial "norms." The imitation reveals the absence of an original—to pass as white thus becomes threatening as it reveals the falseness of any intact natural whiteness.

Passing as Black

In "Racial Cross-Dressing and The Construction of American Whiteness," Eric Lott asserts that the practice of blackface—an overt performance of blackness that relies on caricature—"reifies and at the same time trespasses the boundaries of 'race'" (243). To "trespass the boundaries" calls to mind the theories of transgression that Anzaldúa articulates in *Borderlands/La Frontera*, yet Lott's use of the word "reifies" suggests the limits to such transgression. Like Lott, Baz Dreisinger points to the hope in racial passing but ultimately admits to its limits: "[T]hough [passing] seems to undermine essential racial categories—when someone who looks white *isn't* white, then who is?—passing ultimately reinforces them, because talking about passing from one race to another assumes that there are distinct races to pass in and out of." Lee and Everett, through their depictions of characters passing alternatively as white *and* as

black, illuminate the important directional differences in trespassing into whiteness and trespassing into blackness. Entry into blackness is less guarded than entry into whiteness, as demonstrated in the satires[123] of black culture that Pierre and Monk produce. While blacks who "front" as white cause discomfort and even anger, blacks who absurdly "front" as ghetto-black by assuming the most outrageous stereotypes available are applauded for their honesty, stabilizing an essentialist notion of race and its characteristics. In *Bamboozled,* Pierre satirizes his imagining of white expectations of black art, dreaming up a show that "will be so negative, so offensive and racist" that everyone will soon understand that "the network does not want to see Negroes on television unless they are buffoons." He evokes racial performativity in *Mantan: The New Millennium Minstrel Show,* revising late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century minstrel shows which featured black and white performers donning blackface, acting out overtly racist skits, and dancing and singing for the enjoyment of white audiences.[124] Set in a watermelon patch, the show stars Mantan (Savion Glover) and Sleep-n-Eat (Tommy Davidson)—"two real coons" who are "ignorant, dull-witted, lazy and unlucky," playing on centuries of damning black representation. As Donald Bogle and others[125] have shown, representation of the "coon" served an imperative purpose in the social positioning of blacks as non-threatening and undeserving of full access to citizenship and civil rights. Lee accesses this history through Pierre's satire, emphasizing the continued dependence on white-imagined stereotypes of blackness in culture.

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[123] I use the word "satire" here, although "parody"—as a form of "satirical mimicry"— might be a more appropriate term. Certainly, *Fuck* is a parody of *Native Son* while *Mantan* signifies accordingly on a composite of minstrel shows of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. I settle upon "satire" primarily because Spike Lee begins *Bamboozled* by defining satire, which suffices in my work as the broader category.

[124] For discussion on blackface and minstrel shows, see Eric Lott, *Love and Theft.*

[125] See also Cripps, Thomas, *Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Films*, 1977 and Leab, Daniel, *From Sambo to Superspade: The Black Experience in Motion Pictures*, 1975.

In *Erasure,* Monk's satire is inspired by Juanita Mae Jenkins, a black woman who writes *We's Lives in Da Ghetto* as an insider but who is actually a mid-westerner who spent only "a couple of days" visiting relatives in Harlem but nevertheless felt justified to write "our stories" from that "insider" knowledge (53). Monk describes his own loss of agency and equates reading Jenkins's book with "strolling through an antique mall, feeling good, liking the sunny day and then turning the corner to find a display of watermelon-eating, banjo-playing darkie carvings and a pyramid of Mammy cookie jars" (29). Under the pseudonym Stagg R. Leigh,[126] Monk writes a contemporary satire of Richard Wright's 1940 novel *Native Son,* originally entitled *My Pafology* and changed to *Fuck*. The satire centers on the young black narrator Van Go Jenkins and his employment by the wealthy *black* Daltons—a significant change from the original novel in which the *white* Daltons employ the protagonist Bigger Thomas. While Pierre, in *Bamboozled,* plays on white expectations of black ignorance in an antebellum rural setting, Monk fulfills white expectations of black ignorance and apathy through use of a markedly urban setting and tone. Mantan and Sleep-n-Eat shuffle along stealing chickens in a rendering of historical stereotypes, as Go enacts contemporary stereotypes by saying, "My name is Van Go Jenkins and I'm nineteen years old and I don't give a fuck about nobody, not you, not my Mama, not the man. The world don't give a fuck about nobody, so why should I?" (66). Playing on misreadings of black culture and the performative nature of blackness, both Pierre and Monk create outrageous satires in order to force their white employers to acknowledge the limited realm of their expression as black men. In both cases, their experiments backfire dramatically.

[126] Stagg R. Leigh refers to the figure of Stagger Lee or Stagolee, whose mythic status as a black man unafraid of standing up to the white man is based upon an 1895 murder in which Lee, a cab driver and pimp, killed William Lyons over a Stetson hat. Mississippi John Hurt popularized the ballad in 1928, although it has been revised throughout music history.

In *S/Z,* John Barthes explores the concept of readerly texts and writerly texts, asserting that particular texts empower particular readers to move from the position of consumer to producer.[127] That is, the text does not exist until it is read and thus depends upon the reader to "actualize" its potential meaning. A satire, especially, may be called a readerly text which depends upon an adroit reader to decode the text and make meaning of it. The failure of an audience to read satire appropriately or to be interpellated appropriately by satire is recorded as early as 1704 by Jonathan Swift who wrote, "Satire is a sort of glass wherein beholders do generally discover everybody's face but their own, which is the chief reason for the kind of reception it meets in the world, and that so very few are offended with it" (*Battle of the Books* xiv). If, as Culler proposes, the intersection of text and reader becomes a "virtual site" where meaning is made, Lee and Everett reveal the prevalence of misreading, misrecognition, or what Lacan terms *méconnaissances* that is essential in the construction of identity.

For example, Pierre proposes *Mantan: The New Millennium Minstrel Show* with hope that the audience, as a virtual site, will reveal to the executives the limited opportunities for African Americans and protest the negative history of African-American representation. Speaking of *Bamboozled* and its weak reception, Spike Lee acknowledges that the film's final montage is difficult to watch, but "so is the footage from the Auschwitz concentration camp, but you have to look at it. This stuff cannot be swept under the rug" (9). Within the film, Pierre approaches the images with the same vigor and desire for social change as Lee, explaining to his assistant, Sloane (Jada Pinkett-Smith), "the good Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King did not enjoy seeing his people beaten on the six o'clock news. However, white America needed to see that in

[127] Importantly, Everett signifies not only on Richard Wright but also on Barthes' *S/Z.* Within the novel, Monk writes a conference paper which responds to *S/Z* and causes a riot. Everett draws from both traditions and playfully rewrites both within the text of *Erasure*.

order to move this country to change. They need to see this show for that exact reason." At the taping of the pilot, Pierre braces for the riotous response he expects from the mixed-race audience, eager to prove to Dunwitty and the other executives that America will not condone the racist work that he has been asked to produce. The scene opens with a pan of the audience and breaks down into medium-closeups and reverse shots on individuals of various races. Cutting alternately to Pierre in the sound booth, watching the audience, to quick takes of the audience watching the stage and finally Mantan and Sleep-n-Eat on the stage, the power triumvirate of producer/text/audience is captured through reaction shots making clear the transition from uncertainty to approval, which is driven by the audience. Instead of a riot, after stalled applause and uncomfortable silence, the white audience members take their performative cue from the black audience members shown through medium close shot and reverse shot of black and white audience members who end the taping with a standing ovation. Lee points to this moment as a key scene of the film in which "the white people look around to see if black people are laughing, because if they are, then it's sanctioned, and it's OK for them to laugh, too" (6). In this moment of reception, the agency is located entirely within the consumer audience. Further, Pierre has inadvertently resurrected the racist images that he sought to transgress through blackface performance and has simultaneously "reproduce[ed]… the conditions of production," highlighting black complicity in its own subjugation.

Where minstrel shows like *Mantan* draw on and emphasize historical racial stereotypes, Monk's satire *Fuck* is a composite of contemporary negative stereotypes. The protagonist Go is the epitome of apathy, the embodiment of the myths of Generation X, angry black men, and welfare recipients combined. The novel is so outrageous that Monk awaits the publisher's shock, much like Pierre at the taping, anticipating the freedom to follow from the white enlightenment

he enables. After reading the book, Yul remains bound by commercial pressure and says, "I appreciate your position and I even admire the parody, but who's going to publish this?" (132). In frustration, Monk tells Yul to send the book "straight," without qualifying it as a parody: "If they can't see it's a parody, fuck them," Monk says (133). "They" don't see it as a parody, however, and "they" love it. Random House offers $600,000 for the book, calling it "true to life" and "magnificently raw and honest" (136). Like Pierre, Monk is stripped of his agency; both men let pass their opportunities to claim their works as satirical and passively observe the intersection of text and audience—stunned by the reception and the (re)making of meaning.

A decade before the publication of *Erasure,* Everett's essay "Signing to the Blind" sets up many of the issues of misreading that are central to the novel and confirms Jonathan Culler's perception of the reader as a "virtual site" in which meaning is made; as he says, "Writing is not just the putting of words on paper, but also the getting of the words to a community" (11). Acknowledging the agency of the reader, Everett urges for more informed and critical readership: "I do not believe that the works we produce need to be any different; the failing is not in what we show but in how it is seen" (10). Certainly in the fictional experiences of Pierre and Monk, the failing is significant, as the community seems unarmed to read critically and rather passively assumes its position of power like programmed proletariat in a capitalist scheme. As Everett concludes "Signing to the Blind," his tone is defeated and exhausted: "We have no audience. At least, no audience that reads with political empowerment. And so our work becomes a matter worse than preaching to the choir. It is more like we are standing in the dark signing furiously to the blind" (11). According to reader-response theory, which empowers the audience, the satires that Pierre and Monk produce have the capacity to shock the audience and enable a transformative splintering of the black/white dichotomy that alienates the cultural

mulattoes caught between the two worlds. Instead, as Everett points out in his critique of American readership, when the audiences of both satires respond to the racist caricatures as opportunities for their amusement rather than as harsh social critique, turning the TV program and the novel into hits, they literally buy into the very ideas that the artists sought to challenge.

On a superficial level, Pierre and Monk pass as black by producing texts that meet their perceptions of white expectations of blackness. Lott calls this experience "self-mimicry," which results in a loss of identity ("Racial Cross-Dressing" 254). Lee and Everett push Pierre and Monk further into a performance of blackness, however, as each man begins to affect the very imagined blackness he satirizes. Like the Invisible Man, whose performance of Rinehart takes over his identity, Monk's performance of Stagg, with "black shoes, black trousers, black turtleneck sweater, black blazer, black beard, black fedora" (245), takes over his "real personality" (365). Monk begins to live part of his life as Stagg R. Leigh—passing as black by acting aloof, inarticulate, and rude, and dressing in the uniform of black militants from three decades past. Monk also alternately passes as white, living as "Monk" in his family's Annapolis cottage and dating a white woman named Marilyn. For a time, Monk is able to maintain a balance and inhabit the liminal space by means of being both/and rather than neither/nor. However, he is not a cultural mulatto because he specifically does not live in a space in-between or overlapping; his performances are geographically and physically distinct. In *Bamboozled*, Pierre quickly loses his position as a cultural mulatto and begins passing as black, collecting black artifacts and embracing his position as a black man in the eyes of those around him. Both men are decentered by their performance of blackness and are interpellated into the sort of black self-hatred that each attempted to criticize but now embodies. Monk as Stagg devolves into a buffoonish caricature of black urban youth at the novel's close while Pierre surrounds himself with demeaning black

artifacts and literally embodies a racist caricature by wearing blackface in the film's final scenes.

Once Monk begins to understand his complicity in the reproduction of negative black stereotypes, this further disrupts his identity. He contemplates his role in a historical continuum of literature:

> The fear of course is that in denying or refusing complicity in the marginalization of "black" writers, I ended up on the very distant and very "other" side of a line that is imaginary at best. I didn't write as an act of testimony or social indignation . . . and I did not write out of a so-called family tradition of oral storytelling. I never tried to set anybody free, never tried to paint the next real and true picture of *my* people, never had any people whose picture I knew well enough to paint. ... I was a victim of racism by virtue of my failing to acknowledge racial difference and failing to have my art be defined as an exercise in racial self-expression. (212)

In their performance of imagined blackness, Monk and Pierre pass out of their more inherent personalities, built from their lived experiences around both blacks and whites at elite universities and among white colleagues. Acting out the blackness that Monk and Pierre perceive white America urging them toward, both artists lose themselves. Monk reflects, in a splintered recognition: "So, I had managed to take myself, the writer, reconfigure myself, then disintegrate myself, leaving two bodies of work, two bodies, no boundaries yet walls everywhere" (257). Both men lose themselves in the costuming they construct. Monk's performance of Stagg R. Leigh melds with his "true" identity, while Pierre blackens his face in the tradition of minstrel

actors. The disguise takes over, and the men who were once accused of passing as white have now passed into blackness at a huge cost. The racial dynamics affect not only these two men who are lost to performance but empower whites who maintain the purity of whiteness. By disallowing Monk and Pierre into the society of whites, interpellating them as "niggers" who should write about their "black pain," whites uphold whiteness as an elite standard toward which a black man, no matter how wealthy or educated, cannot strive without significant expense. Even if he strives mightily, he can never truly achieve the stable privilege of whiteness which depends upon the oppositional force and presence of blackness.

In a review of *Bamboozled* included in a symposium on the work published in *Cineaste*, Greg Tate asks whether it is "possible to perform blackness and not be coonin'" (16). For Pierre, who shapes and markets Mantan, and for Monk, who creates Van Go *and* Stagg R. Leigh, the answer is no. To perform blackness in these two works is to give in to a cultural (white) imagining of blackness, which demeans and underestimates an entire race on the basis of a narrowly performed role. All elements of parody and subversion are lost on the white audiences who "blacken up"—either literally as in *Bamboozled* or figuratively as in *Erasure*—as they consume the black performance without realizing that it is, in fact, a performance. This audience remains in the dark, missing the "furious" signs coming from Pierre and Monk—misidentifying themselves in the mirror of the satire.

In both texts, the white establishment urges the cultural mulatto out of the "third race" into a performance of blackness. White viewers and fans of *Mantan* revitalize the once demeaning act of wearing blackface without revising its significance. More subtly, white reviewers of *Fuck* awkwardly affect ghetto-blackness by saying "it's a black thang" without interrogating the essentialism of the mere existence of "a black thang" or questioning their own

access to that racial performance (260). The blackness that Stagg and post-*Mantan* Pierre enact makes whites far more comfortable than the supposed whiteness that Monk and pre-*Mantan* Pierre enacted. To be read as black, these works show, is to be expected to "shuck and jive." Stagg answers this call more directly while Pierre's performance is the quieter "yessir" which enables and condones Manray's "shucking and jiving."[128] Other roles—writer of experimental novels, appreciator of opera, woodworker, fisherman, or Harvard alumnus—make whites assume that the cultural mulatto acts out of imitation. The white audience fails to recognize the absence of an original.

Post-colonial theorists have attempted to challenge the Marxist assertions of early cultural studies theorists, hoping to answer affirmatively Gayatri Spivak's question "Can the Subaltern Speak?" by envisioning a space which crosses borders and whose inhabitants point to the performative construction of the seemingly natural—in this case, racial identity. Trey Ellis, on the brink of what he envisioned as a renaissance in black art which could embrace what Greg Tate calls a "post-liberated aesthetic," joined the ranks of post-colonial thinkers, hoping to empower those inhabiting the liminal space in an effort to disrupt the socially constructed dichotomy of race in American culture (Ellis "The New Black" 190). With the "optimism and desire" that Eric Lott said "burst so infectiously from [the] essay," Ellis imagines an unprecedented agency for the cultural mulatto (Lott 244). Despite its optimism, however, two artists who might be considered a part of the New Black Aesthetic suggest through *Bamboozled* and *Erasure* that the aesthetic fails to address the socio-political and enduring power function of

[128] A key scene which marks Pierre's complicity in the system of perpetuating racist images in exchange for success involves a white publicist, Myrna Goldfarb, who comes to help CNS "manage" the racial issues surrounding the show. Even as Pierre responds negatively to and challenges Goldfarb, he eventually nods and grants permission for the show to continue.

racial boundaries and the "predominantly white-crafted myth of absolute racial difference" required to maintain white privilege in America (Hale 30). As Spike Lee and Percival Everett demonstrate in *Bamboozled* and *Erasure*, the cultural mulatto fails to sustain "thriving hybrid[ity]" when the intersection of text and consumer grants agency to the consumer to make meaning—and that meaning is born of a climate in which performance is taken as reality and racial boundaries must remain intact.

Chapter Four

"Claiming":
White Ambition, Multiracial Identity, and the New Racial Passing

"This world is white no longer, and it will never be white again."

James Baldwin, "Stranger in the Village" (1953) [129]

"In the United States the concept of race applies strictly to blacks and whites in the sense that 'traceable ancestry' really means that to be white is to have *no* non-white ancestry and to be black is to have *any* black ancestry. With few exceptions we can safely assume that there will be only a one-way transference of consciousness, that is, black people will acculturate into the dominant white mainstream."

Tommy Lott, "The Invention of Race" (1999) [130]

"Unless the one-drop rule still applies, our president-elect is not black."

Marie Arana, "He's Not Black" (2008) [131]

In *The Chronicles of Riddick*, protagonist Richard Riddick, played by multiracial actor Vin Diesel, roams his science fiction universe as a cultural anomaly. He does not belong to any of the stable ethnic communities in which individual inclusion is based upon a shared geography, physicality, and belief. His own mysterious background enables him to move through existent groups to fight the powerful Necromongers that threaten to homogenize and control the once diverse universe. In a climactic scene, one of the Necromongers asks in frustration, "Who are his people? Where does he come from?" There is no clear answer. Because of his fluid identity, Riddick eventually prevails and becomes the new Lord Marshal, the spiritual leader of

[129] 1713.
[130] 65.
[131] B1.

the Necromongers. The film ends ambiguously, however, leaving Riddick with the potential either to restore diversity to the universe or to continue the push toward homogeneity.

In the reality of the United States in the twenty-first century, as claims to multiracial identity increase and racial categories are revised, racial hybridity is less nuanced than in a Hollywood science fiction film. That is, multiraciality does not clearly endow one with the power to unite peacefully different races. The potential of multiracial Americans to erase the divisive binary between white and non-white has been contested, especially in the final decade of the twentieth century. Some advocate for multiracial identity development[132] as a step toward a post-race culture while others fear the loss of racial identity threatened by the spread of multiraciality[133] or—more clearly—the shifting political valence of multiracial identity. Readings of popular multiracial figures actor Vin Diesel, golfer Tiger Woods, and politician Barack Obama demonstrate their limited subjective agency and illuminate the power of the audience to determine meaning *and* the unconscious desire of many audience members to monoracialize the multiracial while elevating whiteness. In the examples that follow, categorical distinctions are upheld while those whose bodies are not easily read are re-imagined and made to fit into one of two distinct binaries, white or non-white. In an American culture of unequal racial binaries, historical precedents documenting the social imbalance between these oppositions create a desire to move out of the impotent and oppressed position into the powerful position. Historically, the desire to effect a power migration translates as a move toward whiteness. Vin Diesel, Tiger Woods, and Barack Obama enact multiraciality differently yet are similarly and

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[132] Maria P.P. Root, G. Reginald Daniel and Naomi Zack are at the forefront as advocates for the multiracial movement.

[133]Mary Thierry Texeira, Ranier Spencer, and David Brunsma all distrust the multiracial movement and/or the census shift to allow for multiracial identity.

frequently read as monoracial, leading some to read their claims to multiraciality as an escape from blackness, echoing Langston Hughes who in 1926, in "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," wrote that when he heard a Negro poet say, "I want to be a poet—not a Negro poet," he understood the poet to say, "'I want to write like a white poet,' meaning subconsciously, 'I would like to be a white poet'; meaning behind that, 'I would like to be white'" (1311). Claiming multiraciality often turns on a similar syllogistic reasoning terminating in the denial of race—most often the denial or invalidation of the darker one.

Black-to-white passing, especially prevalent during the early twentieth century, allowed individuals of African ancestry who could perform and appear as Anglo or European to escape from blackness in order to gain access to white spaces and privileges. Conceptually, racial passing offered a way to destabilize race, though many critics[134] of the trend point to the dependence upon racial stability in order for passing to persist. Some scholars have idealized claiming multiracial identity, like black-to-white passing, as a politically viable way to destabilize race. Maria P.P. Root, a scholar and advocate for mixed-race identity writes, "Clinging to a mixed-race identity in racialized ethnic groups, particularly if the other race is European derived, challenges the foundations on which perceived solidarity was constructed" (7). Claiming multiracial identity is read as a means of "undermining the very basis of racism, its categories" (Spickard 291). Cultural critic Aubyn Fulton finds the mere "existence" of interracial individuals to be "corrosive to and undermining of the current racial status quo (in this context I think that 'corrosive' and 'undermining' are *good* things, since I think that the current racial status quo is a bad thing and should be corroded and undermined)" (qtd Spickard 291).

[134] See Belluscio, Steven, *To Be Suddenly White*, 2006; Pfeiffer, Katherine, *Race, Passing, and American Individualism*, 2003 and Bennett, Juda *The Passing Figure*, 1996.

Similarly, Reginald Daniel argues that claiming multiracial identity offers a means of "subverting the racial divide" while Ronald Glass and Kendra Wallace assert that only the multiracial can cross this divide: "an even stronger challenge to race can come from people at the margins to all racial centers; that is, from people expressive of multiracial existence and evident human variation, who resist efforts to be subdued and brought within racial orders" (344).

Like the critics of black-to-white passing, not all see claims of multiraciality as a means to deconstructing a racial hierarchy. In *Amalgamation Schemes: Antiblackness and the Critique of Multiracialism*, Jared Sexton asserts that the multiracial movement is not "a fundamental challenge to the living legacies of white supremacy… but rather the reinforcement of longstanding tenets of antiblackness" (1). Mary Thierry Texiera argues that "we cannot understand the movement unless it is placed in the context of white supremacy," a system in which "divisions, including racial labels and categories among people of color in the United States, have always benefited a white power structure that has often endorsed attempts to disunite nonwhites" (22). Rather than disrupting a constructed but considerable racial dichotomy of white and nonwhite, Texiera sees this multiracial identity movement developing in terms of "who is white(r) and who is not white" (33), sustaining rather than weakening racial identity. Texeira notes Orlando Patterson's naïve optimism about multiracial identity as he says that "mixing is the best thing that could happen because by means of such a middle group people feel an investment on both sides" (29). Texeira is quick to rebut that Patterson fails to recognize that the "'middle races' have always identified more with the dominant group" (29). Scholars like Jon Michael Spencer argue that multiracial identity is a move toward a three-tiered racial hierarchy akin to South Africa's with "White on top, multiracial in the middle, and Black on the bottom" (Spickard 292) while Eduardo Bonilla-Silva and David G. Embrick assert that the

"United States is developing a loose triracial stratification system with *whites* at the top, an intermediary group of *honorary whites* (similar to the middle racial strata in Latin America and the Caribbean), and a nonwhite group or the *collective black* at the bottom" (33). Bonilla-Silva and Embrick place "most multiracials" in the *honorary white* category, but "white-looking" multiracials in the *white* category (34). At the heart of the debate are the issue of agency and the question of sustaining an existence in the "third race" in order to challenge the racial dichotomy long in place in the United States.

Advocates of multiracial identity often envision a transgressive liminal space opening up between black and white, bridging the two while empowering the racial "other" to exist outside of racial expectations and limitations. Idealized theories of liminality ranging from that of Paul Gilroy whose *Black Atlantic* (1994) imagines a transnational identity that is liberating in its fluidity to those of Donna Haraway ("The Cyborg Manifesto," 1991) and of Gloria Anzaldua (*Borderlands/La Frontera*, 1987) who envision an embodiment of the marginal space as a means of "recoupling" two sides of a contentious dichotomy (Haraway 274) depend upon the assumption that the racialized other can achieve and maintain sufficient agency to embody and speak for a new racial identity. In this model of racial transgression, the power to interpret the sign of the body lies with the signified, the claiming or passing body. As film scholar Laura Mulvey makes clear, though, the gaze enables the audience to make meaning by interpreting images. Similarly, reader response theorist Jonathan Culler asserts that "the reader becomes … a virtual site" where images are decoded and meaning is made (38). The identity of a mixed-race person becomes the object of the gaze and the text waiting to be read. Taking a page from Stuart Hall, whose historically and culturally grounded readings situate power hierarchies and textual relationships within a space and time that is specifically raced, classed, and gendered, the reading

of a multiracial individual must take place within a socio-political climate that is built upon concrete and distinct definitions of race and tends toward monoracial readings of even the most adamantly multiracial individual. In *Black White Other*, a collection of narratives of mixed race individuals, editor Lise Funderberg attempts to assert that "racial identity is defined not… by appearance, but by how people choose to define themselves" (170), yet she includes photographs of her subjects. Reading Funderberg's collection, Raquel Scherr-Salgado points out that "black-looking subjects… tended to identify with Blacks, despite their desire for other affiliations, whereas light-skinned biracials were largely not accepted by Blacks, even though they may have identified themselves as Black," positing the significance of phenotype "when dealing with mixed race within a culture that still operates according to a Black-White binary (52). Stefanie Dunning concurs, writing about the "difficulties of occupying a racially liminal space in American society and the ways in which one is penalized for claiming an identity one does not 'look' like" (128). As Elliot Lewis describes multiracial experiences: "We come from families where the racial fault lines are exposed" (7). Those fault lines do not necessarily open up a productive or inhabitable space. Instead, the potentially subversive claim to a liminal multiracial position creates a third race that is less idealized than Radhakrishnan's imagined third space but is more progressive than Hayward Horton's assertion that "the neo-mulattoes have simply returned to their antebellum role as a buffer between blacks and whites" (118).[135] While the social and political access granted to the multiracial individual is subject to debate, it is clear that

[135] Horton expands his idea to define "whitespace" as "those physical and social places that have been culturally defined as being designated primarily as being appropriate for the dominant population" and argues that the "neo-mulatto" may have "greater access to whitespace, but the essential racist nature of the social structure can be maintained because these neo-mulattoes are defined as other than black" (118).

the stability and validity of whiteness remains intact and is arguably affirmed by the multiracial movement.

Black becomes White: Passing in the 1920s

In *Ethnicity and Race: Making Identities in a Changing World*, Stephen Cornell and Douglas Hartman define ethnicity as "a group of people with a shared history, culture, and symbolism—such as language, spiritual belief, geographical region, etc." They define race, on the other hand, as "a social construct, based on physical characteristics" (144).[136] While race may well be a construct, and many theorists agree that it is, most people believe it to be a reality. The history of the United States is built on racial oppression—particularly the racial oppression of enslaved Africans, of their descendants, and of all those who bear the physical characteristics of non-whiteness. Race, like ethnicity, carries assumptions of shared cultural experiences—particularly the experiences of privilege associated with whiteness and the prejudice whiteness heaps upon non-whiteness. In a culture that judges others' racial reality based on a subjective reading of appearance, those judgments may often be incorrect. It is this fluid subjectivity that both supports the idea that race is a detrimental social construct and allows generalizations and judgments to hold sway. There is not, after all, any way to prove these judgments wrong when they are based on subjective perception rather than on objective fact. In the absence of an "objective" blood test to determine racial heritage, presumptive skin and phenotype visual scanning suffices. Visual scanning has long allowed many exceptions to the "one-drop" rule to

[136] It is worth noting that identities like "Black" and "White" have shifted substantially. Noel Ignatiev's *How the Irish Became White*, 1995 and Karen Brodkin's *How the Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race in America*, 1998 treat the malleability of ethnic and racial definitions.

pass as white. Negative and limiting social strictures imposed upon the black body, combined with the desire of the oppressed to escape from the terrorism and racism of the Reconstruction period and to access power, explain the black to white passing migration that took place in the post-Civil War years.

The early twentieth century was a perilous time to be black in America. It is estimated that in the decade of the 1920s, as many as 281 people who were identified as black were lynched. As Grace Elizabeth Hale explains in *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940*, "It was a world where people who went to church some days watched or participated in the torture of their neighbors on others" (201). During this period, the number of governmental offices held by those regarded as black was at a historic low. Although Reconstruction welcomed African Americans into positions of power, with 199 legislative representatives appointed between 1868 and 1869, their number dramatically declined by the 1920s, with only one black legislative representative appointed in 1929.[137] Segregation was a common and legal practice throughout the nation, and whites limited occupational opportunities for those whose bodies they read as black. To be "black" in the early twentieth century was to be outside of or subservient to the dominant European-American culture.

With no physical test to assess race, many fair-complexioned African Americans who identified as black or whom the one-drop rule deemed non-white recognized the potential to claim whiteness and migrate into privilege. Although statistics are inconclusive, especially since passing is a covert activity, it has been estimated that between 100,000 and 500,000 individuals passed as white between 1900 and 1920. African-American novelist Jessie Fauset, who

[137] For more on Black politicians during Reconstruction, see Foner, Eric, *Freedom's Lawmakers: A Directory of Black Officeholders During Reconstruction*, 1996 and Rabinowitz, Howard N. *Southern Black Leaders of the Reconstruction Era*, 1982.

published *Plum Bun* (1929), a fictional passing narrative, felt that clandestine transracial migrations were even more frequent and reported that 20,000 non-white people were passing as white in New York City alone (Salzman 2108).

A literary trend during the 1920s and a filmic trend in the 1930s and 1940s mirrored the historical trend of passing. Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929) follows protagonist Clare Kendry's migrations between black and white worlds that ultimately end with her ambiguous suicide or murder. Most scholars read Larsen's *Passing* as a cautionary tale mapping the pitfalls of black to white passing and negating the black self, perspectives echoed in other passing narratives of the 1920s era known as the Harlem Renaissance. Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bun* (1929), Walter White's *Flight* (1926), and George Schuyler's *Black No More* (1931) all treat racial passing as a denial of one's "true" heritage. The films of the 1930s and 1940s that narrate passing follow a similar formula. All three versions of *Imitation of Life*, the 1933 novel by Fannie Hurst, the 1934 movie directed by John M. Stahl, and the 1959 remake directed by Douglas Sirk, damn the biracial Sarah Jane for passing as white. Other like films include Elia Kazan's *Pinky* (1949) and Alfred Werker's *Lost Boundaries* (1949). The early twentieth-century growth in literary and filmic depictions of racial passing not only reveals an interest in the practice but categorically condemns it. According to Baz Dreisinger, both Nella Larsen and Douglas Sirk "delivered punishment—usually death—to passers, whom we were meant to believe had overstepped 'natural' boundaries."

The literary depictions of racial passing reflect a common curiosity not only in how passing works but also in what it does with respect to race and power. As an individual who has been raced in a particular way, and (mis)treated on that basis, steps outside of that racing and enters the position deemed powerful and privileged, there exists subversive potential. The

concrete concept of race and the physical characteristics that categorize it lose substantive merit as one crosses the racial divide. In the revelatory moment, when the reader recognizes that the protagonist has successfully passed and simultaneously superseded categories of race, there is enormous potential for the often limiting racial category to disappear. With no means of determining black or white, black and white ostensibly cease to exist. Gender theorist Judith Butler posits that by pointing to the performativity of gender, the seemingly natural male/female dichotomy is revealed as a farce, promising liberation from narrowly defined gender roles and expectations. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler asks, "Is drag the imitation of gender, or does it dramatize the signifying gestures through which gender itself is established?" (viii). Extending Butler's exploration of gender construction, one can argue that a black individual's performance of whiteness as a means of disrupting the white/non-white dichotomy is promising. In a system of oppositional definition like race or gender, inhabiting the other position offers an opportunity to disrupt the normative standards. Gayle Wald explores this potential in *Crossing the Line: Racial Passing in Twentieth-Century U.S. Literature and Culture*, writing of "the enterprise of 'crossing the line' as a strategic appropriation of race's power, emphasizing the stakes of such appropriation for racially defined subjects" (ix). Considering that everyone in the United States (and beyond) is a "racially defined subject," more overtly so if the subject is not defined as white, many people have much at stake when racial passing occurs. Categorical racial judgments, as well as unearned racial privilege, are at stake if race is deemed to be fluid. Wald is interested in the ability of passing narratives "to demonstrate the failures of race to impose stable definitions of identity or to manifest itself in a reliable, permanent, and/or visible manner" (ix). According to many scholars, however, this act of destabilizing alone fails to produce change.[138]

[138] See, for example, Kennedy, Randall, *Sellout: The Politics of Racial Disloyalty*, 2008, and the essay

Rather than tearing apart the dichotomous system in place, passing reifies the existence of race as a stable marker of identity. Passage from one to the other strengthens the existence of both. In most passing narratives, not only are the passers punished for their transgressions, but racial difference and hierarchy are upheld. In Fauset's *Plum Bun*, the female protagonist, Angela Murray, is unfulfilled while she passes as white. When she "comes out" as black, Fauset presents her return to her first socially constructed identity as natural and right. Murray, who is deemed black, can finally find peace as she claims her "true" racial identity. In Larsen's *Passing*, Clare Kendry refuses to admit her racial truth and must die in order to support Larsen's moral of racial fealty. Similarly, Sarah Jane, who passes in *Imitation of Life,* is destined to live a life of regret for her refusal to admit her "true" race. In each of these cases, once an individual admits to her blackness, she is deemed thoroughly and completely black. The "one-drop" rule prevails.

Gayle Wald, for all of her hope in the subversive potential of passing, reads racial passing not as a complete failure but as an individualized effort with narrow influence outside of the personal. She explains, "Passing entails, then, not racial transcendence, but rather struggle for control over racial representation in a context of the radical unreliability of embodied appearances" (6). Ultimately, in a culture that determines race by physical characteristics, the power to interpret them lies with the gazer rather than the viewed—with the signifier rather than with the signified. Literary and media critics ranging from Stuart Hall to Jonathan Culler agree that meaning is made at the site of intersection between text and audience. A text with no audience has, according to this line of thinking, no existence. In terms of racialized bodies as texts, the reader—enveloped in a material reality built upon and influenced by monoracial

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collection edited by Loury, Glenn C., *One by One: From the Inside Out*, 1995.

categories—interprets that body-as-text based upon his or her own cultural point of reference. In passing narratives, then, as quickly as the gazer learns the "true" race of a passer, the novel or film wraps up tragically, and, often, the status of a "real-life" passer dramatically changes.

These facts reveal the high stakes of racial passing and the desire to adhere to established racial categories. Further, the idealized concept of a colorblind United States, while theoretically appealing to some, is appalling to many. Gayle Wald investigates a colorblind approach as she shows the "potential pitfalls of such a predetermined 'blindness' to collective identities that are at once sites of self-recognition and self-identification and also regulated and enforced by racial ideology" (185). One runs into difficulty when attempting to identify as an individual who disregards the racial group to which s/he is assigned. The "imagined community," to borrow Benedict Anderson's term, which is in this case based on race, acts as an actual community that accepts, rejects, claims, or outs its members. Racial hierarchies tend to remain intact even when an individual steps out of his/her prescribed racial role. As Kathleen Pfeiffer shows in her analysis of passing novels in the three decades following *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), which legalized and solidified segregation, "passing for white has long been viewed as an instance of racial self-hatred or disloyalty" (2). Arguing that passing, counter to Gayle Wald's assertion, is not necessarily an act of political resistance, Pfeiffer acknowledges that a passing individual may "value individualism, […] may be idiosyncratic, self-determining, or inclined toward improvisation" (2). Both Wald and Pfeiffer agree that black to white passing "tends to reinforce the very logic of segregation by which passing is constructed" (Pfeiffer 17). Passing from black to white invites ejection from the white race if it detects "one-drop" of black blood—maintaining the purity of whiteness—while detection of passing encourages an outing from the black community—often done out of a sense of injustice. After all, why should someone equally

"black" get undeserved access to the white world, especially when no collective social change occurs with individual advancement? On either side of the color line, some agree that passing has little result outside of the individual passer's life. It hardly challenges the status quo and certainly does not challenge the cultural role of race in any way. These limitations to racial passing, combined with a surge of racial pride associated with the black-led Civil Rights and Black Power Movements of the mid-twentieth century, have deemed passing for white a damnable offense. In its place, claiming multiracial identity has emerged as the new passing of the twenty-first century.

Toward Whiteness: Claiming Multiracial Identity in the Twenty-First Century

While the rhetoric of colorblindness, growing out of and often misrepresenting the King era of the Civil Rights Movement, pervades discussions of race in the United States by encouraging an ignoring of race, Cornel West and other critical race theorists have posited that race does indeed matter in America, a country in which thirteen percent of today's population descended from enslaved Africans while another one percent descended from Indigenous Americans who were similarly disenfranchised and disempowered. Using traditional definitions of race, which physicality and presumed geographical origin circumscribe, Americans have been multiracial as long as the landmass they populated has been called America. With European colonizers, deemed white, came the rape of and consensual relations with Indigenous and enslaved "Americans," deemed non-white, creating the first American multiracial generation. In *Loose Cannons*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. reminds us that "the world we live in is multicultural already. Mixing and hybridity are the rule, not the exception" (xvi). While Gates' form of

multiculturalism and genealogically multiracial Americans have long existed and identified as multiracial,[139] as a "category" it has only begun to "count" in a more legitimate way in the past few decades as shifts in public identity and governmental classification have taken place.

From the inaugural Census in 1790 until 1970, enumerators who went door to door to collect United States Census information determined the subject's race and/or ethnicity. From the 1970 Census onward, citizens have been able to identify themselves by choosing from an expanding list of possibilities (See Plate 1). On these early Census forms, the conceptualization of race was limited to and limited by the Census's system of categorizing. According to population scholar Tamar Jacoby, "Race was an exclusive category—if you were one thing, you were necessarily not something else, just as you were either male or female" (37). After choices for self identification increased, the next monumental change in the Census came in 2000, as citizens were allowed to mark more than one race or ethnicity (See Plate 2). More than seven million Americans marked more than one category on the 2000 Census, a little less than three percent of the population. Jacoby, who views the new census with optimism, believes that the multiracial/ethnic selection shift "may well herald the beginning of the end of racial classifications as we know them" (37).

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[139] Many whom we consider integral to African American letters and culture are, in fact, multiracial. According to Gregory Stephens, "In 1886, [Frederick Douglass] told an audience: '[A man painting me insisted I show] my full face, for that is Ethiopian. Take my side face, said I, for that is Caucasian. But should you try my quarter face you would find it to be Indian. I don't know that any race can claim me, but being identified with slaves as I am, I think I know the meaning of the inquiry.' Douglass' public persona was that of a defender of the rights of Afro-Americans. But his private identity was multiethnic" (104). Paul Spickard similarly remarks that "some, like Du Bois gloried in their multiraciality even as they chose monoracial lives. Some, like Malcolm X, hated their White ancestry. However, all recognized their multiplicity even as they chose to serve communities of color. … The important issue for monoracial communities of color is not whether multiracial people claim their multiraciality, but whether, having done so, they continue to serve the needs of those communities of color" (Spickard 296).

The revisions to the Census, which went unnoticed by many respondents, were the result of at least a decade of work by grassroots organizers who were lobbying for a change in the racial/ethnic classification system. Multiracial organizations like AMEA (Association of Multiethnic Americans) and Project RACE (Reclassify All Children Equally) challenged the categories in place arguing that they were forced to privilege one parent's race over the other. Their plea was for "multiracial" to be included as a selection in the "race" section. A multiracial category, organizers believed, would satisfy the large number of citizens left frustrated by the lack of representation in the present classification. As the debate drew growing public attention, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the National Urban League, and the National Council of La Raza voiced concern about the proposed shift in racial classification. The burgeoning of a "non-white" group would place considerable strain on projects that receive Affirmative Action funding while the official count of African Americans, Spanish/Hispanics/ Latinos, or American Indians or Alaska Natives would decrease dramatically. Arthur Fletcher, then chair of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, imagined "a whole host of light-skinned Black Americans running for the door the minute they have another choice [to say], 'I am something other than Black'" (Spencer 104-05).

When the Office of Management and Budget ruled, it forwarded a compromise. Rather than adding "multiracial" as a category, the office decided to allow citizens to choose multiple categories. The multiple selection compromise was seen as a victory for some advocates of multiracial identity, while the ruling panicked other civil rights organizations. The result was a mass advertising campaign, sponsored by organizations including the NAACP and the National Asian Pacific American Legal Consortium, costing millions of dollars, to encourage individuals identifying as African Americans, Spanish/Hispanics/Latinos, and American Indians or Alaska

Natives to check only one box. According to Jon Michael Spencer, "Monoracialist critics say that advocacy of a multiracial interpretation encourages individuals to flee identification with communities of color and seek a middle social position, lightened by recognition of their ancestral multiplicity" (Spickard 292). From racially mixed singer Lenny Kravitz's warning—"In this world, if you have one spot of Black blood, you are *Black*" (qtd Spencer 104)— to radio commercials urging African Americans to check only the black box "regardless of whether they had white or other ancestry" (105), there was an audible urgency to remain monoracial. Paul Spickard cites Michael Gelobter's question posted on an online forum— "Should Frederick Douglass … and W.E.B. Du Bois have checked white and black?"—to assert that "This is the core of the monoracial argument against the expression of a multiracial identity: claiming a multiracial identity means abandoning Black America" (Spickard 293). The result of the new option to mark all that apply was that "5 percent of blacks, 6 percent of Hispanics, 14 percent of Asians, 40 percent of American Indians" identified as belonging to more than one racial category (Jacoby 38).

If proponents for the allowance of multiple identities in the 2000 Census had hoped for clarity, they were sorely disappointed. Much confusion followed the tallying of Census figures, with Census workers uncertain about how to count specific citizens. As the Census figures were tabulated, multiracial individuals were counted for each race or ethnicity claimed, making it impossible to compare the 2000 Census with previous decades. Jacoby looks at one example from the 2000 Census that shows the level of confusion resulting from the new categories:

> How many blacks are there in the United States today? If one counts only the people who check black alone, the answer is 34.7 million. But if one includes those who

> checked both black and something else, the number rises to 36.4 million. Are blacks still the country's largest minority group, or do Latinos now outnumber them? It depends on whether one includes those extra 1.7 million: yes if one does, no if one does not. (38)

The response to the new Census forms was as mixed as the response to the petition to change the racial categories. A *USA Today*/CNN/Gallup poll from March of 2001 found that 64 percent of the public thought it was "good for the country" for more Americans to "think of themselves as multiracial rather than belonging to a single race" (39). Former head of the Census Bureau Martha Farnsworth Riche called the new Census "the beginning of the end of the overwhelming role of race in our public life" (Kassendorf, El Nasser). William Frey, a University of Michigan demographer, reads the shift as a new "democratic approach to race and ethnicity."

Those engaged in the debate and hearings with the Census Bureau were less optimistic about the 2000 United States Census. Although citizens were allowed to mark as many categories as they wished, their options were still fairly limited. There were six broad racial categories: 1) White, 2) Black, African American or Negro, 3) American Indian and Alaska Native, 4) six Asian subcategories and one write-in "other" box, 5) three Pacific Islander subcategories with one write-in "other" box, 6) Spanish/Hispanic/Latino with three subcategories and one write-in "other" box. To provide a seventh and final option, a write-in box for "some other race" was provided (See Plate 2). Even as the various combinations of these races or ethnicities were growing exponentially, the concept of racial definition began to seem superficial when it was self-defined. As Naomi Zack, advocate for mixed-race identity, asserts in "American Mixed Race: The United States 2000 Census and Related Issues," multiethnicity is a

social construct—a fiction without biological reality. What this exercise in checking boxes proved is that all of race is a fiction:

> Race, however, is a social construction on all levels. Not only are the links between so-called biological race and culture the result of history, tradition and current norms, but the existence of biological racial taxonomies is itself the result of such social factors…. Since human biological race is a fiction, so is mixed race. (13)

For Zack, the fiction of race was not adequately revealed with the "mark all that apply" compromise in the 2000 census. Zack's disappointment stems from her work for a multiracial category. Ranier Spencer, on the other hand, criticizes the 2000 census for the lack of clarity it created in terms of racial categories. Spencer argues that an acknowledgment of race is the only means to acknowledge racism and statistical tracking, which relies upon racial categories, and serves to "check for indications of possible covert and institutional discrimination. […] The point is that without the collection of racial statistics none of this kind of analysis is possible" (101-02).[140]

For those desirous of upholding racial categories, the idea of easily choosing another category or two does not respect the legitimacy of one's primary or perceived race. For those who wanted to see an end to race as a defining category, the 2000 Census shift was equally unsatisfying. Neither of these political polarities offers a subversion of the current white

[140] According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the 2010 Census will offer the same choice in racial categories as did the 2000 Census. According to their website (www.ask.census2010.gov), "The Office of Management and Budget, which has jurisdiction over this matter, made this decision after reviewing the results of the census tests and hearing recommendations from an Interagency Committee." The Interagency Committee recommendations remain unpublished.

dominated racial hierarchy in America. Merely to preserve existing racial categories is to uphold a system that historically disenfranchises and disempowers on the basis of race. At the other extreme, to pretend that race does not matter naively ignores contemporary cultural characteristics and denies a history of racially determined social caste. A passive colorblind approach has failed to cause the racial revolution for which many once hoped and generally allows those in positions of power to maintain that power without any accountability. Proponents of the revised Census hoped that the selection of multiple racial categories would not only more accurately represent the majority of Americans but would also challenge the meaning of race as it complicates assumptions and subverts the power structure by deconstructing whiteness. Critical white studies critics like Peggy McIntosh and Richard Dyer have suggested that whiteness maintains its power because of its invisibility, which results in a sense that whiteness is un-raced and thus becomes the norm. McIntosh calls for an attention to the "invisible package of unearned assets" granted by white skin (291) in order to answer Dyer's call to "make whiteness strange" by seeing it as the constructed identity that continually asserts itself as natural (6). By seeing whiteness as a race and by acknowledging the performativity of race, the constructed nature of the elite position of whiteness may be revealed. The subversive potential of the liminal space posited by Anzaldua and others is erased, however, when borders are patrolled by a governmental agency. The playfulness of the third race proved too uncomfortable to advocates of a revised census; rather than acknowledging a mutable liberatory identity, the insistence on racial categories pins down and labels all Americans, further legitimizing the stability of the constructed categories of race in America. It is said that Native Alaskans have 40 official words for snow—so prevalent and central to their understanding of the world; the United States now has 63 official races.

While the statistical results of the 2000 Census did alter the way that demographers think about race in the United States, their impact on the average American has been imperceptible. When the majority of Americans, especially the 97 percent of Americans who identify as monoracial, see an individual on the street or on the television screen, most within the majority interpret that individual as a member of a designated race, and that racial interpretation may vary from person to person, from household to household. What remains true, even in light of a shifting focus toward multiraciality, is that an individual's self definition of him/herself often fails. Instead, the gaze empowers the viewer to read—and race—the viewed. Regardless of how emphatically the multiracial individual disputes monoracial reading, the viewer has the power simply to hit mute. Perhaps a new racial hierarchy is being created, but it is a hierarchy in which whiteness maintains its pure position on top.

"You're Obviously Something": Misidentification and Multiracial Narratives

In the 1990s, in the midst of the debate about the Census and the multiracial movement, a number of multiracial autobiographies and collections of multiracial narratives were published.[141] As Danzy Senna jokes in "Mulatto Millennium: Since When Did Being the

[141] Though incomplete, the following is a brief bibliography of multiracial narratives from the 1990s: Azoulay, Katya Gibel. *Black, Jewish, and Interracial*. Durham: Duke UP, 1997; Camper, Carol. Ed. *Miscegenation Blues: Voices of Mixed Race Women*. Toronto: Sister Vision, 1994; Funderburg, Lise. *Black, White, Other: Biracial Americans Talk about Race and Identity*. New York: Morrow, 1994; Gaskins, Pearl Fuyo. *What Are You? Voices of Mixed-Race Young People*. New York: Holt, 1999; Haizlip, Shirlee Taylor. *The Sweeter the Juice: A Family Memoir in Black and White*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994; Hara, Marie and Nora Okja Keller Eds. *Intersecting Circles: The Voices of Hapa Women in Poetry and Prose*. Honolulu: Bamboo Ridge, 1999; Jones, Lisa. *Bulletproof Diva: Tales of Race, Sex, and Hair*. New York: Doubleday, 1994; McBride, James. *The Color of Water: A Black Man's Tribute to His White Mother*. New York: Riverhead, 1996; Minerbrook, Scott. *Divided to the Vein: A Journey into Race and Family*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1996; Obama, Barack. *Dreams of My Father:*

Daughter of a WASP and a Black-Mexican Become Cool," "Pure breeds (at least the black ones) are out and hybridity is in. America loves us in all of our half-caste glory."[142] Senna responds with satire in her article to the superficial popularity of multiraciality countered by the often bitter reality of attempting to inhabit a liminal space without full capacity to claim one's own position. In her novels, *Caucasia* (1998) and *Symptomatic* (2004), Senna treats multiraciality with more complexity and gravity, writing biracial narrators who struggle variously to inhabit a space between and find themselves pushed to pass as white, as in *Caucasia*'s Birdie Lee, or to resist being an "optical illusion" as in the unnamed protagonist of *Symptomatic* (84). Senna, who is herself multiracial, expresses her anxiety about "the way that multiraciality has become fetishized in the media and in the popular discussion of race," and worries that "we're becoming more like Brazil, where complexion rather than race is the predominant system of identification. In Brazil," she warns, "racism is able to function within a 'land of miscegenation'" (448). The idea that racism and a racial hierarchy might stand despite the multiracial movement is one concern for Senna. Another is the anxiety and responsibility of maintaining a middle ground despite being always defined by others.

The difficulty of inhabiting the liminal space is perhaps best demonstrated by a glance through several multiracial narratives, nearly all of which include frustrated discussions of being misread. Teja Arboleda writes:

A Story of Race and Inheritance. New York: Times Books, 1995; O'Hearn, Claudine Chiawei. Ed. *Half+Half: Writers on Growing up Biracial +Bicultural.* New York: Pantheon, 1998; Penn, William S. Ed. *As We Are Now: Mixblood Essays on Race and Identity*. Berkeley: U California P, 1997; Senna, Danzy. *Caucasia*. New York: Riverhead, 1998; ---. *Symptomatic*. New York: Riverhead, 2004; Williams, Gregory Howard. *Life on the Color Line: The True Story of a White Boy Who Discovered He Was Black.* New York: Penguin, 1995.

[142] Senna's essay has been widely distributed and is published on a number of websites (www.salon.com and www.utne.com) as well as the collection edited by Claudien Chiawei O'Hearn, *Half+Half: Writers on Growing up Biracial +Bicultural*.

> I've been called *nigger* and a neighbor set the dogs on us in Queens, New York. I've been called *spic* and was frisked in a plush neighborhood of Los Angeles. I've been called *Jap* and was blamed for America's weaknesses.… I've been called *mulatto, criollo, mestizo, simarron, Hapahaoli, masala, exotic, alternative, mixed-up, messed-up, half-breed,* and *in between.* I've been mistaken for Moroccan, Algerian, Egyptian, Lebanese, Iranian, Turkish, Brazilian, Argentinean, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Mexican, Indonesian, Nepalese, Greek, Italian, Pakistani, Indian, Black, White, Hispanic, Asian, and a Brooklynite. I've been mistaken for Michael Jackson and Billy Crystal on the same day. (1)

Raquel Scherr Salgado, like Arboleda, recalls "I have been asked in different stages of my life whether I was Italian, Moroccan, Brazilian, Filipina, Eurasian, or 'some Black mix,' depending on when and where I was. … I have always been a 'what are you/', a guessed-at person, a question mark" (43). Demonstrating the power of the gaze as well as frequent determination to identify a multiracial individual, Alice White recalls being told, with some exasperation, "You're obviously *something*" (119). After listing the ways that she has been variously raced, Evelyn Asultany explains, "these experiences illuminate the commonness of the question 'Where are you from?' They also reveal that the 'correct' answer to these questions changes depending on the context" (142). The "correct" answers have much to do with phenotype and the ability to pass variously—both physically and socially. Orathai Northern, reflecting on questions from within her own family about her ability to perform race in particularly raced settings recognizes that the "compelling force behind [this] query moves many of us (sometimes persistently) to ask, *Well what is she anyway*? A query homegrown in a United States context that is heavily

predicated on visual registers" (108). Affrilachian poet Keith Wilson[143] echoes this sentiment, in "Robotto Mulatto":

> my skin is controlled like a remote
> with the styling of my hair
> I shift color circuits
> first mustached Mexican, now bearded Egyptian,
> maybe the mysterious collage of whatever
> your half-cousin is

Wilson touches on not only the mutability of multiraciality but the desire of an onlooker to place the multiracial in a digestible category. Although the narrator finds playful power in the performance of phenotype, he ultimately ends with an acknowledgment that he does not fit: "my weakness is that silicon valley/ isn't big enough for the idea of me,/ and that around here things move so fast/ that before the world is ready for me/ I'll have already become obsolete." His "weakness" is the lack of productive space—the inability to inhabit the liminal in a world that categorizes and dictates meaning based upon hair type and skin tone. These multiracial voices demonstrate a shared experience of misrecognition but have little else to unite them other than their active and vibrant voices speaking back. These voices are valid and are potentially shifting the conceptualization of race. Currently, however, as demonstrated by the adamant claims to

[143] I got to know Keith Wilson through the Affrilachian Poets' tour through Tennessee and Virginia in February, 2009. This poem is yet unpublished, but other of Wilson's work is available at <www.keithswilson.com> where his two chapbooks are available.

multiraciality by Tiger Woods and Vin Diesel who are continually read primarily as monoracial, the binary stands and whiteness maintains it privileged position.

The "Cablinasian" Identity of Tiger Woods

When Tiger Woods entered the mainstream of American popular culture after winning the Masters Golf Tournament in 1997, the stability of race and ethnicity seemed to quake momentarily. Spectators and media identified the multiracial Woods, whose father has African, American Indian, and Chinese heritage, and whose mother has Thai, Chinese, and undisclosed European heritage, as monoracially black. Many viewers took a stance on Tiger Woods's ethnicity when "white" golfer Fuzzy Zoeller made his infamous remark urging Woods not to request "fried chicken … or collard greens or whatever the hell they serve" for the 1998 Champions Dinner, whose menu the previous year's winner decides ("Golfer"). To the dismay of those who had claimed him exclusively as one of their own, Woods identified himself as African American *and* Asian American in a statement to the press:

> My parents have taught me to always be proud of my ethnic background. Please rest assured that is, and will always be, the case—past, present and future. The media has portrayed me as African American, sometimes Asian—in fact, I am both. …Truthfully, I feel very fortunate, and EQUALLY PROUD to be both African American and Asian! The critical and fundamental point is that ethnic background and/or composition should NOT make a difference. It does NOT make a difference to me. The bottom line is that I am American…and proud of it!

He later expanded his identity to Caucasian, Black, Indian, and Asian, from which he created the racially melded term "Cablinasian." Woods has maintained this multiracial identity and continually counters exclusive monoracial labels.

As someone who identifies as multiracial, it makes little—or as much—sense for Woods to identify as black as it would for him to identify as Native American. Yet, despite his press statements, many admirers and critics deny him multiracial identity, deeming him monoracial or biracial. The African American Registry lists him as golf's "Main Man," calling him an "African and Asian American professional golfer." The motivation here, presumably, is to lay claim to a successful individual who identifies, at least in part, as African American. The African American Registry that places him in only two racial camps ignores Woods's claims of multiraciality. In other instances, as in a post on the white supremacist website of former politician and Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke, Woods's later claims of multiraciality are denied, and he is made monoracially black. Given his neo-Nazi leanings, Duke must deny Woods access to whiteness, and because multiraciality is a step toward whiteness, it, too, must be denied. Instead, Duke ignores the complexity of Woods's identity and discusses him as a black man, which is to say, without showing Woods much respect. As Duke writes to his white supremacist followers, he quells anxiety that Woods has made it into the white realm by assuring his readers that while Woods might be a golfing champion, he is still a black man living in a white world that denies him full access to power. Duke warns his audience of "racially aware Whites" that support of a "Black" athlete like Tiger Woods "affirms Black racial pride and a sense of supremacy and solidarity" ultimately "add(ing) to the myth that most Blacks are just like us." To Duke, Woods is simply a black man, despite his repeated claims of multiraciality.

Just as David Duke wants Tiger Woods to be black so that he is not mistaken as white, others are invested in making Woods monoracially black to the point of calling him black in defiance of his repeated claims that he is multiracial. Woods told the *Washington Post*, "My mother is from Thailand…. My father is part black, Chinese and American Indian. So I am all of these. It's an injustice to all my heritages to single me out as black" (qtd. Alsultany 153). In spite of this "injustice," many reporters waxed eloquent about the beauty and justice of Woods's 1997 Masters victory, referring to him as the first black man to win the tournament. In one of the most sentimental depictions of a golf victory, Jay Mariotti of the *Chicago Sun-Times* wrote, "On a windy Sunday in the Georgia hills that seemed to blow away sports and society evermore, the clenched fist of Tiger Woods was a vision of triumph and, let's hope, a bridge to a colorblind world" (qtd. in Futrelle). Mariotti's perspective, reflective of the general mood following Woods's victory, disregards and simplifies both Woods's multiracial identity and America's racial history. By designating Woods as black when convenient, the white media, sports community, and general populace can feel progressive and inclusive without interrogating the psychology that approves of the racially mixed over the "monoracial" and yet continuing to ignore his repeated claims to multiraciality.

Woods himself acknowledges that regardless of his desire to be understood as the product of multiple cultures, he is most often read as monoracially black. In an interview with Charles Barkley, Woods explains, "Being black is just looked at differently. And in this country I'm looked at as being black." In order to challenge racial assumptions and white privilege, then, multiracial individuals must continually assert their racial makeup, resisting social tendencies to view them as monoracial. The function of claiming multiraciality is subject to debate. Scherr Salgado sees the act of claiming as transgressive in itself, calling into question the mere notion of

race: “Tiger Woods’s ‘translation’ of self as a Cablinasian transcended the very word he had invented by demonstrating the limitation of words and the absurdity of categories that try to locate identity” (48). Danzy Senna links Woods’s privilege to his ability even to effectively claim multiraciality as she writes, “The fact is, we’re not all Tiger Woods. Racial ambiguity, fluidity, comes with privilege. Take away Tiger Woods’s money, his ‘white’ sports affiliation (put him on a basketball court in Harlem), take away his Stanford education, and let’s see how fluid his racial identity is” (449). To claim actively multiraciality seems to depend upon either the privilege of phenotype (“good” hair and Anglo-features), education, or class—and even then is limited in the ability to convince an audience out of habitual monoracialism or to challenge the “purity” of whiteness.

Outing Vin Diesel

In the mid-1990s, actor Vin Diesel was having little success at finding film work. He recalls that casting agents read him as “‘too Italian’ for gangsta films, ‘too black or Latino’ for mobster things, and ‘too Jewish or Asian’ for commercials” (Solotaroff 110). Frustrated by these physical judgments, Diesel saved three thousand dollars and, with the guidance of a filmmaking book that his mother gave him, wrote and starred in the short film *Multi-Facial* (1995). The film screened at the Cannes Film Festival, where Steven Spielberg saw the young actor and cast him as the Italian-American Adrian Carpazo in *Saving Private Ryan* (1998). From there, Diesel went on to play African-American Richard Riddick in *Pitch Black* (2000), and “ethnically indeterminate” characters like Chris Varick in *Boiler Room* (2000) and Xander Cage in *xXx* (2002). As his résumé and his olive complexion demonstrate, Vin Diesel is the “kid who grew

up checking all 12 boxes on the census form for race" (66). Although, as was already pointed out, multiple selection was not an option until 2000, Diesel identifies as multiracial. Beyond that label, he is reluctant to define himself. Whereas Tiger Woods gives the ancestral equation comprising his race, Vin Diesel prefers to remain silent, repeatedly referring to himself as a chameleon when pressed by interviewers for clarity.

Diesel's fluid identity, however, has only brought more attention to the question of his race. Surfing for "Vin Diesel" on any internet search engine quickly turns up dozens of sites devoted to the topic. Many interviews with Diesel focus on his race, as each journalist hopes to be the first to report Diesel's identification of himself. Even discussion boards on general fansites inevitably turn to the multiracial debate swirling around Diesel. On these sites there is some allowance for Diesel's multiracial identity, but a sense of exigency for him to identify *which* of the multiple races he means by multiracial pervades the discussion. Attempts to link him to specific races reveal the instability of what constitutes race as well as the "authority" used to determine one's link to a racial group:

> "I read an article that his real father is black and Vin Diesel is mixed with Dominican, Mexican and Irish." ("Multicultural")
>
> "I heard Mariah Carey said that he was mixed black and white." ("Multicultural")
>
> "I read an article recently in *Time* magazine that stated Mr. Diesel has a twin brother with BLONDE hair and BLUE eyes." ("Vin Diesel")
>
> "If Vincent is his last name, then he's probably English… I'd say from looking at him that he's Dominican and Italian and that's what I've always thought." ("Multicultural")
>
> "Vin is black, I read it in a local newspaper article on him. Look at his hair and his facial features, and his voice… He is also Italian, you can tell by his nose. I am black and

> Italian also, and many people in my fam, even me, have the same features." ("Multicultural")
>
> "Access Hollywood showed a clip of Vin over the weekend and he had a big afro, an Adidas jog suit and he was break dancing to 'Crush Groove.' Now that really busted him out." ("Outing")

Based on anecdotal testimony, phenotypic outing and onomastics, discerning Diesel's race becomes fans' obsessive preoccupation. Rather than clarifying the meaning of race, these assessments anatomically dissect Diesel and depend upon rumor for validation. The need to identify Diesel and the need to identify *with* Diesel both contribute to a disregard for his desire to deny all racial affiliations. One discussant on a Diesel discussion board wrote, "I just wonder sometimes when people say that they want to be thought of as multi-racial or cultural they just mean 'don't think of me as black'" ("Outing"). Adherence to race as a stable definitional category pervades discussions of race. Diesel's denial of race especially frustrates many viewers who identify as black. The anonymous moderator of a discussion entitled "Outing Vin Diesel" on bet.com writes,

> Vin Diesel, you need to be careful. Don't worry about fighting evil spies or ferocious flying aliens. You need to keep your eyes out for…. THE BLACK COMMUNITY! You know the old saying, "it takes one to know one"? Well, you are one. One of us, that is. The Rock, Jennifer Beals, Tiger Woods—none have been able to escape! And you're next.

Though the moderator uses wry humor, the message touches on a cultural reality in which failure is associated with blackness while success is linked to whiteness. The BET moderator and

others' viewing of Diesel or Woods as monoracial and black is as logical as an oppressed black American wanting to out someone passing as white in the early twentieth century. Out of fear, pride, envy, disgust, or disappointment, many who identify as black use the power of the gaze to define the multiracial as monoracial. In response to the question "Should it bother us that Diesel doesn't play up his 'blackness'?" one contributor wrote, "I look at that like I look at Tiger Woods: he's a great champion, he makes golf more palpable, and he's part of the Family, even if he doesn't claim full membership" ("Vin Diesel"). Regardless of Woods's or Diesel's claims to multiracial identity, this viewer and others like him can disregard those claims and identify them as black—as brothers in the "Family." Diesel's coy treatment of his race potentially separates him from blackness, offering the white access and association that is more often granted to one with light skin. Ultimately, though, the viewer decides if Diesel's ancestry is African, Asian, or Hispanic. As one fan adamantly asserts, "He should admit his race and satisfy his fanbase for we are the ones that supposedly make him the star that he is. We decide and that's what matters" ("Outing").

The New American Passing: Claiming Multiracial Identity

Many scholars and activists maintain that multiracial identity can and will lead to a world less divided by race. Jack Foley, in "Multiculturalism and the Media," hopes that multiculturalism will offer "a way of seeing the world *without whiteness*" because it "implies a continual effort of construction and deconstruction" (369, 370). Similarly, G. Reginald Daniel writes, "The new multiracial identity is a form of resistance to 'common sense' notions of race based on the one-drop rule" (125). Evelyn Asultany imagines a way in which insisting on a

multiracial identification "poses a challenge to monoracial cultural logic and as a result might introduce the possibility of a multiethnic conceptualization into our narrow ethnic cartography" (148). Each of these writers, even in their optimism, is unconsciously acknowledging, via their talk of resistance and insistence, the powerful cultural urge to read individuals as monoracial and to deny white access whenever possible. Otherwise, such assertion would not be necessary.

San San Kwan and Kenneth Speirs, editors of *Mixing it Up: Multiracial Subjects*, explore the ways that multiracial identity has long been read:

> Historically, multiracial identity in the United States has been a mark of shame and ignominy. The need to establish and sustain firm categories of race as a way to maintain White dominance in America left no place for the multiracial. Thus the mixed blood, who threatened these categories, was either monoracialized or represented as "deviant" and "pathological." (1)

There has not been a space for the multiracial in the United States, although the U.S. Census Bureau projected a 9.5 percent increase in multiracial Americans between 2000 and 2003 (U.S. Census Bureau 15). Instead, as Kwan and Spiers reveal, those who cannot be made to fit one race or another have been ostracized. Evelyn Asultany, who is Latina and Arab, finds this to be true today. As she understands it, "identities that make sense within the cultural logic (monoracial) are rewarded with belonging, while those posited as 'illogical' (multiethnic) are denied community belonging" (143). Whether consciously or not, categorization takes place in an American climate that prides itself on being a melting pot of cultures, races, classes, and experiences. Instead of melting together, there continues to be a stew, chunks of separation

based on imagined communities of difference. Within this American pot there is no in-between space. Rather, an individual who might identify with multiple communities must choose, just as the early censuses forced multiracial Americans to choose. While governmental records now allow an intermediary position for those who do not easily fit one category or another, American sensibility has not historically allowed the same flexibility. According to Asultany, there is too much at stake for most Americans:

> For some Whites, the multiethnic represents the pollution of the White race; for some African Americans the multiethnic represents an attempt to escape blackness; and for other ethnicities, such as South Asians, Latinos, or Arabs, the multiethnic can be seen as ill-equipped to perpetuate cultural traditions and therefore represents the dilution of that particular culture. (145)

For many, then, the response is to monoracialize those who do not fit. These judgments are based most frequently on visual cues and sometimes, as with Diesel, on behavioral or cultural assumptions. What follows is a return to the pattern that took place in the early twentieth century in which those with light enough skin became white. In the twenty-first century, those not quite white enough to pass entirely can attempt to exist in the middle ground of multiracial—not quite black but certainly not white.

The election of biracial U.S. President Barack Obama can be read as emblematic of progress toward what Daniel Mendell calls "post-racial politics." Certainly his election demonstrates significant shifts in racial politics. It deserves attention, though, that Obama is read primarily as black. Jason Carroll asserts that voters and the media have relied on the one-drop rule, summing up Obama's background with the following equation: "Black + White = Black."

Obama himself acknowledged that he is read and judged as a black man, speaking to Steve Kroft on CBS's *60 Minutes*: "If you look African American in this society, you're treated as an African American. I am rooted in the African American community, but I am not defined by it." In the days following Obama's November, 2008, election, headlines around the world heralded the election of America's first black President. The front page of *Washington Post* read "Obama Makes History: U.S. Decisively Elects First Black President," prompting columnist Marie Arana to write an article entitled "He's Not Black" in which she states, "Unless the one-drop rule still applies, our president-elect is not black" (B1). Arana is right to point to Obama's multiraciality, as he has throughout his career, but to most, Obama is black. To some, Obama is not black enough for a black candidate because he does not fit the traditional black politician, emerging from the Christian church. For others, his Kenyan father negates his access to blackness: "A personal connection to slavery and Jim Crow laws is still a common measure of who is and who isn't African American," said Melinda Chateauvert, an assistant professor of African American studies at the University of Maryland (Leslie Fulbright). What journalists like Juan Williams[144] have asserted, though, is that Obama's multiraciality has allowed him access to a space as a "black" man that an authentically "black" man would be denied. Obama may be a "neo-Mulatto" in the position of an "honorary white," but the system that has persisted throughout the twentieth century that protects whiteness by maintaining a sense of purity with a divisive line between white and other remains. Multiraciality may take individuals one step closer to the privileges of whiteness, but it never disturbs whiteness itself. The trend that emerges, from the conscientious white communist of the 1930s or activist of the 1960s who maintains his/her

[144] See Juan Williams on Obama's race at:
<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/30/opinion/30williams.html>.

privilege through the attempts to shift toward cultural mulattoism or multiraciality, demonstrates the stability of whiteness in a system which depends upon a binary and thus disallows an intermediary position. Further, when a system that depends upon binaries and is uncomfortable with hybridity enables an audience to determine who is black and who is white, claims of multiraciality are subject to the judgments of viewers—viewers deeply embedded in a system of racial classification built around racial categories that only make sense in opposition to one another.

Conclusion

To Transform Whiteness

"To encounter oneself is to encounter the other: and this is love. If I know that my soul trembles, I know that yours does, too: and, if I can respect this, both of us can live"

James Baldwin, *The Devil Finds Work* (1976) [145]

Throughout the twentieth century, whiteness has continually transformed in order to maintain invisible privilege. A retrospective chronological reading of whiteness demonstrates that out of periods of racial reconstruction, the concept of whiteness has continually morphed in order to maintain its desirable status. At the close of the twentieth century, despite the shift from somatic embodiment to cultural performance, whiteness remains a functional marker of identity. The benefit of distance and retrospection shows whiteness as mutable, validating the constructedness of whiteness. While this is a necessary first step toward dismantling white privilege, acknowledging traits associated with whiteness helps further demonstrate its constructedness. The racial category of whiteness is essentially devoid of cultural depth, maintaining a perception of normativity. To look at the whiteness of Mr. Dalton beside the whiteness of Vin Diesel reveals both the mutation and the constancy of whiteness. The ability to transform invisibly while appearing natural grants whiteness a desirable position atop a racial hierarchy. Despite a burgeoning multiracial movement and the growth of a Hispanic population which have arguably shifted racial sensibility, a white/non-white binary remains dominant, protecting white "purity" as natural and ideal. In order to disrupt this binary around which race

[145] *The Devil Finds Work*, 146.

in America has been built, whiteness needs to be conceptualized as a race *and* needs to be positioned alongside other races.

American whiteness is necessarily empty, having been created as an oppositional marker of absence. In 1984, James Baldwin wrote, in "On Being White… And Other Lies," "No one was white before he/she came to America" (90). To be white in colonial America was to be not-black and not-Indian. This absence remained desirable until the American voice became polyphonic, complicating the assumed dominance of whiteness. During Reconstruction, for example, when a small voice was given to blacks, the beauty and angst of a common experience took on a richness that drew white attention. The very concept of this shared experience was a matter of debate four decades later, most notably between George Schuyler, who challenged the concept of a shared Negro sentiment and means of expression, and Langston Hughes, who let the "low down" folk speak for Negroes from Du Bois' "talented tenth" on down. Oppositional voices began to form, and white America began to look at itself and see its vacuity. As Eric Lott has argued, as early as the late nineteenth century, with blackface minstrelsy, whites have blackened up in order to access a cultural presence that was lacking in the coveted position of whiteness. In order to maintain its unconscious and unspoken appeal to the masses, like an effective politician, whiteness could not be too much of any one thing. Whites began to access black culture, always knowing that the burnt cork would wash off and one could stroll back into the safe, if dull, lull of whiteness. Similarly, as Philip Deloria asserts in *Playing Indian*, whites—especially white men—have accessed aspects of Indian culture with a similar certainty that war paint is impermanent and leaves one's skin as white as it was to begin.

To a much larger degree, by the opening of the twenty-first century, the cultural absence of whiteness stands in stark contrast to conceptual multiculturalism that, in itself, has been

meaninglessly filled to the point of being empty. American popular culture is a surface skimming of myriad national and ethnic identities, thrown together in a laughable admixture of mere signifiers that are empty of connection and context. In the place of a legitimate acknowledgment of cultural difference is a lunchroom multiculturalism that only goes as deep as preparing latkes, lasagna, and lentils to access international cultural practices. In *White Boy Shuffle*, Paul Beatty writes, "Everything was multicultural, but nothing was multicultural" (29) at "Mestizo Mulatto Mongrel Elementary, Santa Monica's all-white multicultural school" (28). Nominal multiculturalism creates a desire for the superficial markers of culture and race without an interrogation of white privilege. As a white student dressed in the stereotypical attire of black urban youth recently said when I asked if he wished that he could actually be black, "Hell, nah, G." To him, the benefits of whiteness are visible enough to hold to underneath the borrowed attire from another culture. For others, even if white privilege remains invisible, Noel Ignatiev's call to commit treason against whiteness falls on deaf ears—or ears that are plugged with earphones blasting Eminem singing, "I am the worst thing since Elvis Presley/ to do Black Music so selfishly/ and use it to get myself wealthy" ("Without Me").

Seeing Whiteness: "Stuff White People Like"

This project has worked to demonstrate the transformative ability of whiteness, particularly the ways that whiteness has morphed from a bodily construction to a cultural one while depending on phenotype to grant or deny full white access. In addition to seeing whiteness as malleable, the perception of constancy reveals the effective complexity of an invisible racial

construct. Christian Lander's blog, which spawned a Random House book publication in 2008, *Stuff White People Like*, exemplifies through ironic humor a particular American whiteness.[146]

Lander's entries demonstrate a consistent white desire to accessorize in multiculturalism while maintaining middle-class white privilege. Landers' observations fall into a few categories, most notably activities or possessions which demonstrate access to money with a simultaneous distaste for it and an affinity for multiculturalism that does not challenge whiteness but allows whites to announce their dislike of whiteness. While Lander's list is ironic, he reveals both class position and cultural colonialism, which whiteness and multicultural theorists have asserted help maintain white privilege.

Essential to the ability to try on other cultures is one's own firm standing in a middle-class white position of privilege. In an interview posted on his blog, Lander explains that the whiteness he discusses is "partially about race, but it's fundamentally about class. It's about a generation and class that values authenticity and credibility more than monetary wealth." An entry that fits this category asserts that white people like "Unpaid Internships" which "put them on the path for careers that will generally result in a DECREASE of the material wealth accumulated by his/her parents." Similarly, "Sea Salt" is a favorite of white people because said white person can "learn about other more expensive salts so that [s/he] can complain about not having them. To a white person, this shows that [he] know[s] and love[s] expensive things but feel[s] sad that [he] can't yet afford them." Lander's white person is situated comfortably in the middle class, with enough privilege to reject the middle-class trappings of his/her parents.

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[146] Lander is stereotyping a very specific type of white people who are upper-middle-class, have educational privilege, and are at least the second generation in this position, which enables them to dismiss and criticize mainstream suburban upper-middle-class whites. Significantly, Lander never specifies this and simply writes about "white people," bring attention to the generalizations made about the racial "other" for years.

Lander astutely draws attention to the inability to discount financial stability. One of his most recent posts explains that white people like "Taking a Year Off" yet do so with some limitation because the traveler has no intention of working during this year, which "explains why a white person with an $800 backpack will haggle with a poverty-stricken street vendor about a 2 dollar plate of food." The simultaneous ability to buy expensive things while criticizing the system that enabled them to buy these expensive things is key to Lander's white people. Like George Lipsitz's "possessive investment in whiteness," Lander points to a white investment in possessions.

Lander's category that is perhaps most ironic and telling situates white people as cultural colonialists. Lander writes that "White people love ethnic diversity, but only as it relates to restaurants," and he explains that "Many white people from cities like Los Angeles, San Francisco and New York will spend hours talking about how great it is that they can get Sushi and Tacos on the same street. But then they send their kids to private school with other rich white kids, and live in neighborhoods like Santa Monica or Pacific Palisades." Along these same lines, white people, according to Lander, love hummus and scarves, especially if they are keffiyehs which lend a Palestinian look to an otherwise non-descript white person. A white person can eat sushi and hummus while wearing a keffiyeh and begin to forget his or her own absence of culture. Lander goes further to assert that white people like "Having Black Friends" and enjoy "Asian Girls" primarily as a means of assuaging their white guilt. To a white person, being a fan of someone like Mos Def is ideal because "He is everything that white people dream about: authentic ("he's from Brooklyn!"), funny ("he was on Chapelle's show!"), artistic (have you heard "Black on Both Sides?"), an actor ("he's in the new Gondry film!") and not white ("I don't see race")." Mos Def epitomizes a white person's concept of blackness, and a white

person can feel less white for liking Mos Def without actually challenging his/her white status. For similar reasons, Lander's white people like "Self Aware Hip Hop References." The self awareness is key because "Though it is very acceptable and common for the right kind of white people to dress and act as though they were Japanese, Chinese, or European, it is completely unacceptable for them to act like rappers." Lander's analysis posits that the humor relies upon the speaker's firm position as a white person self-consciously accessing another culture: because this is said by "people who are very aware of their whiteness, it is hilarious, but if it were to be said by wiggers, it would be tragic. The difference is subtle but essential." Lander draws attention to the practice of only accessorizing with culturally interesting figures of speech, particles of clothing, or side dishes. White people only like "Black Music that Black People Don't Listen to Anymore" because they can do so without risking the privilege of one's own culturally empty whiteness.

Not only do Lander's white people like to dress and eat ethnic while asserting their diverse tastes, they also like to be "an expert on your culture" because "White people are pretty conflicted about their culture. On one hand, they are proud of the art, literature, and film produced by white culture. But at the same time, they are very ashamed of all the bad things in white culture: the KKK, colonialism, slavery, Jim Crow laws, feudalism, and the treatment of native americans." White people consume superficial markers of race or culture in order to shore up their own whiteness.

Another common theme among Lander's posts is the desire to be seen as not racist. White people will study a culture in order to "order certain 'more authentic' dishes in restaurants" which will serve as a "reminder that they are not racist, which also makes them feel terrific." Lander asserts that white people love "Being Offended" because it gives them an

opportunity for "raising awareness among white people who hope to change their status from 'not racist' to 'super not racist.'" The maintenance of non-racist status as well as finding material comfort while still disliking overt wealth depends upon Lander's white person's careful superficial veneer of multiculturalism which ironically serves to protect one's particular sort of whiteness.

Lander's blog, which has had over 56 million hits as of February 2009, gives voice to a particular type of whiteness that, as he asserts, is seen as American whiteness. Part of the humor of his blog depends upon the fact that his type of white person is narrowly defined by educational status, age, class, and cultural access. His pseudo-scientific approach in which he blatantly stereotypes all white people without apology builds on and silently critiques similar stereotyping of non-whites. Lander's evaluation of whiteness, in which he exaggeratedly names whiteness as a stable marker of identity, works simultaneously to acknowledge the ways that whiteness functions as racial category *and* to deconstruct the notion of racial categories altogether. "Stuff White People Like" answers, with effective sarcasm, the call from whiteness scholars to "make whiteness strange" by calling out common stereotypes and offering ridiculous, but often accurate readings of what it means to be white in America in the early twenty-first century.

Contexutalizing Whiteness: Crash

To deconstruct white normative privilege, whiteness must first be seen and then must be placed in non-binary relation to multiple races. Too often, throughout the American conversation on race, the emphasis has been on an elevation of the racial other. The American

Communist Party of the 1930s asked "The Negro Question" in much the same way that a philanthropist takes an interest in a social problem—with condescension and paternalism. In the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, white activists were more nuanced in their relationships with Black America but still set as the goal an elevation of blacks without a full interrogation of whiteness. In the decades following the Civil Rights Movement, as racism became far more covert, the politics of race remained grounded in a perspective of white and non-white, majority and minority. To unsettle white normativity, this binary racial thinking must be complicated.

In *Crash* (2004), director and screenwriter Paul Haggis deconstructs the black/white binary that predominates racial thinking in America by giving voice to multiple racial and ethnic positions and by offering multiple perspectives from within the black/white binary. The convergence of plots, the presentation of multiple racial perspectives, and the lack of a central figure problematizes the American narrative concerning race. Haggis relies upon *and* deconstructs racial stereotypes to the extent that the viewer is forced to judge the character as more than a type or an anti-type. Haggis disrupts viewers' expectations of blackness—presenting it as neither purely positive nor negative—through his depiction of a variety of African-American characters. He conflates four characters: Anthony (Chris "Ludacris" Bridges) seems to fulfill a black urban male youth stereotype, yet he performs an act at the end of the film that defies those stereotypes to an extent. Det. Graham Waters (Don Cheadle) has worked his way out of the projects to a position of power within the LAPD , and his mother (Beverly Todd) is a crackhead. Waters' relationships with his mother and his Latina lover complicate his character. The cultural mulatto television director Cameron Thayer (Terrence Howard) must produce a particular kind of blackness while performing an entirely different sort. These and

other depictions of African Americans in *Crash* make it impossible to stereotype blackness as one thing.

Similarly and importantly, Haggis offers complicated views of whiteness. Whereas directors tend to portray whiteness as relatively one-sided in films ostensibly about race, Haggis offers contradictory images of whiteness, even within the same character. Puppetmaster politician Rick Cabot (Brendan Fraser) demonstrates his disconnect between actual blacks like his assistant (Nona Gaye) and conceptual blacks like the "black vote," while the naivety of Officer Tom Hansen (Ryan Phillippe) leads him to follow an anti-racist impulse which conflicts with his deep-seated racial prejudice that results in his shooting of an innocent black man (Larenz Tate). Officer John Ryan's (Matt Dillon) seemingly overt racism is drawn into question, yet Haggis resists typical cinematic resolution and leaves him as a complex and problematic white figure. Jean Cabot (Sandra Bullock) is represented in a generally unsympathetic light as a spoiled and wealthy white woman, yet a glimpse into her isolation reveals her own cultural trappings. A white criminal benefitting from and perpetuating black male carjackings is smart enough to walk away unscathed while a potentially honest white undercover cop is framed for the murder of a corrupt black cop in order to facilitate the reelection of a white district attorney. The complexity of character alone would not necessarily break new ground, but Haggis's positioning of complexity within a multicultural Los Angeles replete with multiple representations of Hispanic, Asian, and Persian characters legitimately complicates binary thinking about American race.

As America imagines itself to be in the midst of a multicultural era which threatens/promises to bring an end to race altogether, to see whiteness and acknowledge the relationship between race and power are essential in order to resist a tendency toward passive

ignorance of difference and elevation of the next embodiment of invisible whiteness. Granting that whiteness transforms through continuous minute mutations within a dichotomous racial system, maintaining a dominant position through a silent assertion of normativity, whiteness must be seen as ever-changing and must be named as a functional yet constructed racial category. Further, following the example of Paul Haggis, whiteness must be placed alongside multiple racial categories in order to decenter whiteness and disrupt a racial binary. As Haggis demonstrates in *Crash*, America's racial map is complicated by class, gender, geography, education, occupation, and experience. Like Christian Lander's sarcastic quips that exaggerate the commonalities among white people, assumptions about race—especially the invisible and dominant white race—need to be called into question as well as put into conversation among multiple races in multiple embodiments. This active disruption of categories, if maintained in resistance to passive assumptions, offers hope for a way of thinking outside of and calling into question the invisibility of whiteness.

Haggis and Landers serve as examples but are certainly not the *only* texts that have worked to contextualize whiteness in order to decenter it. Mark Twain, whose *The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894) questions the validity of phenotypic racial assignment by demonstrating the power of misreading, and Philip Roth, whose neo-passing narrative *The Human Stain* (2000) revises the tradition of the tragic mulatto, are examples of white writers who have continually questioned the American racial script. In film, George Tillman's *Soul Food* (1997), Gurinder Chadha's *What's Cooking* (2000), and Alejandro González Iñárritu's *Babel* (2006) each treat the intersections of race and ethnicity with some degree of productive complexity. *Crash* and "Stuff White People Like" are effective in the ways that they decenter whiteness through multiple racial perspectives, whereas Twain and Roth tend to treat a

black/white interaction and Tillman focuses on diversity within African-American culture. Haggis and Lander remain focused on the shifting *American* racial system while Iñárritu takes an effective look at global interactions and misreading.

An emergent field of literature and film treats race by challenging the white/non-white binary, while acknowledging the construction of race—including whiteness. The texts here belong to a school and offer hope in a transformation and deconstruction of whiteness in a new multicultural era. Lander situates whiteness by fulfilling Elliot Oring's definition of an ethnic group which he argues "can exist only after a claim has been made for their existence" (25). By naming and situating whiteness, even through satire, Landers allows whiteness to be removed from a mystical invisible position in order to be placed in conversation with other races and ethnicities. Haggis offers a disturbing view of one such conversation, as multiple perspectives "crash" into one another, lacking a common language or experience, with some promise that transformation is possible even through collision.

Suzanne Evertson Lundquist, writing about ethnocriticism, calls for the creation of a new space in order to think productively about a new racial order. Rather than elevating the racial other, the non-white, to a dominant space of whiteness, as has been attempted historically and demonstrated through this work, Lundquist's new space must emerge from a multi-perspectival revision of race and "can be the ground on which many cultures meet to revise stories—both dominant and minority discourse" (Lundquist 271). In that space is the potential to take whiteness, which has continually transformed in order to maintain privilege, and transform it in order to disrupt its privilege. There exists the opportunity, through an understanding of the transformation of race across the twentieth century, to transform race for the twenty-first.

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