

## ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: RACIAL CHOICE AT CENTURY'S END IN  
CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN AMERICAN  
LITERATURE

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This dissertation introduces the term “racial choice” to describe a contemporary idea that racial identity can be chosen or elected, as can the significance and the influence of race on an individual’s identity. Racial choice emerges out of the shifting historical, cultural, and social discussions of race and identity we have witnessed after integration. This dissertation examines the resulting representations of contemporary black identity in African American literature by analyzing texts that were published in the last quarter of the twentieth century and that feature protagonists that come of age during or after integration. Andrea Lee’s Sarah Phillips (1984), Danzy Senna’s Caucasia (1998), and Paul Beatty’s The White Boy Shuffle (1996) are representative texts that engage racial choice to register how the racial hierarchy has changed in the late twentieth century and how that change affects the African American literary tradition of race writing. In their attempts to write outside of the existing racial paradigm—using white flight, passing, and satire

as narrative strategies—the authors test the racial boundaries of African American literature, finding that writing outside of race is ultimately unachievable.

The introductory chapter explains the cultural, literary, and scholarly context of my study, arguing that because race matters differently in the late twentieth century contemporary African American literature handles race uniquely. I argue in my first chapter that Lee uses white flight as a narrative form to move Sarah Phillips beyond the influence of racialization and to suggest class as an alibi for racial difference. Continuing this theme amidst the Black Power Movement of the 1970s and the multiracial project of the 1990s, my second chapter analyzes Senna's Caucasia, which revises the passing narrative form and explores the viability of choosing a biracial identity. In my third chapter, I show how Beatty's The White Boy Shuffle satirizes the African American protest tradition to point up the performativity necessary in maintaining racial binaries and suggests that culture is a more accurate identifier than race.

My concluding chapter argues that though the three novels under study challenge racial categories—and by extension race writing—to different degrees, they all use similar methods to point up the shifting significance of race, racial categories, and racial identity. By historicizing attitudes about racial categories, challenging the dichotomous understanding of race, representing the tensions of racial authenticity, and showing the performativity necessary to maintain racial categories, the novels illustrate the traditional boundaries of racial choice and attempt to stretch the limits of the African American literary tradition.

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IN CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE

by

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Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the  
University of Maryland, College Park in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
2008

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation has been a labor of love that could not have been completed without the generous support of my advisers, colleagues, friends, and family. I would first like to thank my director, Mary Helen Washington, who worked tirelessly to push my readings of texts and to encourage my critical voice. Her enthusiasm for this discipline and for her role as director helped to make this dissertation possible.

Kandice Chuh also supported the vision of my project and helped to strategize its completion. I would also like to thank the other readers of the dissertation committee, Zita Nunes, Sangeeta Ray, and Bonnie Thornton Dill, and other faculty and staff who supported me along the way, such as Manju Suri, Johnetta Davis, and Theresa Coletti. I also received dissertation support from the Southern Regional Education Board.

I am appreciative of the friendships that were crystallized through this process. Kenyatta Albeny, Shirley Moody, Shaun Thomas Myers, Robin Smiles, and Christie Redding Williams were excellent sounding boards and provided me with endless friendship and emotional and spiritual support.

I would like to acknowledge my parents, Henry and Sandra Tucker, for their generous support of this endeavor and for giving me the freedom to choose my own path. I also thank other members of my family, including Georgia P. Conner, Nelda C. Lewis, Donald Conner, Tamelyn Tucker-Worgs, Leslie Perkins, Donn Worgs, Michael Perkins, Kamel Worgs, and Kamaria Worgs, for encouraging me along the way.

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## INTRODUCTION

### The Future American: The “Color Line” and “Racial Choice” at the Millennium

This dissertation introduces the term “racial choice” to describe a contemporary iteration of the idea that racial identity can be chosen or elected, as can the significance and the influence of race on an individual’s identity. I contend that the idea of racial choice emerges out of the shifting historical, cultural, and social discussions of race we have witnessed in the late twentieth century. These shifts have called into question the 1896 Plessy v. Ferguson Supreme Court codification of the one-drop rule, which established that individuals with any amount of “black blood” in their heritage could not claim whiteness. The Ferguson ruling set an enduring precedent of legislating race and privileging whiteness. The idea of racial choice challenges the one-drop rule by allowing such factors as white skin privilege, class allegiance, or a cultural identity to dominate over historical racial hierarchies in the determination of an individual’s identity.

This dissertation examines representations of contemporary black identity in African American literature by analyzing texts that were published in the last quarter of the twentieth century and that feature protagonists that come of age during or after integration. Andrea Lee’s Sarah Phillips (1984), Danzy Senna’s Caucasia (1998), and Paul Beatty’s The White Boy Shuffle (1996) are representative texts that investigate the concept of racial choice. I begin with these literary examples because they

incorporate the themes of contemporary race identity—the representation of class, color, and culture as stand-ins for race, the performance of race, and the meta-narrative of the literary representation of race in the late twentieth century—that are the subjects of this dissertation. These texts are indicative of a particular cultural climate present at the close of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first, and the chapters of this dissertation are organized around key historical and cultural moments that highlight the current dilemma of racial identity for the post-integration generation. This dissertation analyzes the anxieties surrounding racial identity for people of color and also clarifies the idea of racial choice—that one can choose his or her own racial identity—that accompanies it in order to identify the contemporary nuances of racialization and to determine those influences on African American literature.

## Cultural Contexts

The idea of racial choice that I am interrogating in this dissertation is a contemporary phenomenon produced by the current political and cultural climate in which “choice” over the impact of race is affirmed for some but not for others. The concept of racial choice also reflects national enterprises to assure racial equality through efforts like integration, multiculturalism, and changing the Census racial categories. These political movements advance the concept of racial choice in that

they rely on individuals opting to participate in postmodern systems of racialization. These movements operate on the assumption that individuals can choose to participate in these systems, and as a result, the concept of race will have different consequences.

Though this dissertation focuses on a contemporary version of racial choice, the idea of choosing race did not originate in the last quarter of the twentieth century. In the past, racial choice operated primarily through the option of passing for another race, generally blacks or other minorities passing for white. The contemporary version of racial choice is different from passing in that it does not rely on a person hiding his or her race, or pretending to be another race. This difference between past and present practices of racial choice reflects the shifting significance of racial categories present in the last quarter of the twentieth century, as well as the perception that one can highlight characteristics like color, class, or culture as more significant than racial identity.

Consider for example the following circumstances that highlight the shifting significance of racial categories and represent changes in policy and national consciousness in the late twentieth century. The most dramatic example of this trend is the debate surrounding, and the ultimate revision of, the racial categories of the 2000 Census. This change came about as a result of the lobbying efforts of parents of biracial children in the 1990s—which is generally described as the multiracial movement.<sup>1</sup> The multiracial movement sought to change the racial categories of the federal racial classification system and the racial categories of the decennial Census



in order to acknowledge more accurately the racial makeup of biracial and multiracial children. But the implications of this policy change extend beyond the categorical fate of the mixed-race population by directly challenging the Plessy v. Ferguson ruling and the one-drop rule that once divided the nation. Instead of relying on the rules of hypo-descent as in previous Census evaluations, this policy change allows for the creation of a new category—one that does not necessarily have to claim blackness and the biases that have historically accompanied this distinction. This Census change is also an example of the nation's recognition of the shifting significance of race and the increasing denominator of color privilege.<sup>2</sup> The privilege in this case is one of white skin, or mixed-race identity.<sup>3</sup>

The changes to the 2000 Census racial categories illustrate one example of the way that racial categories and racial identity are shifting. The changes represent a reconsideration of historical understandings of race as a biological fact, and at the same time acknowledge the social and legal construction of race. The new Census aims to establish biologically accurate racial categories, but does so by instituting through legislation what is supposed to be innate. The new Census also inadvertently privileges mixed-race individuals. Though white skin privilege has existed as long as racism has, the new Census represents yet another privilege that is available for select segments of the black population but is not available for others.

The implications of these changes to racial categories are far reaching and are visible in the recent statistics regarding African American enrollment at Harvard. A 2004 study in the New York Times explains that the majority of Harvard's

undergraduate black students are the children of biracial, West Indian, or African immigrant parents.<sup>4</sup> The article also reported that black students whose maternal and paternal grandparents are U.S. born African Americans are scarce and refer to themselves as “the descendants.” The Census policy implication for this phenomenon is that intended beneficiaries of affirmative action (“the descendants” of slaves), make up the minority of the black students at this institution, igniting an analysis of the black racial category. The small percentage of “descendants” and the related article illustrate the implied ethnic distinctions within the black racial category.<sup>5</sup>

In the particular circumstance of the Harvard undergraduate body, the intersection of color, class, and culture emerges as an indicator of a contemporary privileged identity. The “descendant” distinction indicates that new forms of privilege within the black racial category have emerged, and that the privilege of Harvard is being experienced less by certain segments of the black population (the descendants), and experienced more by black people of immediate biracial and West Indian descent and African immigrants. This example illustrates that racial categories are used by institutions to classify and document underrepresented groups, but the current racial categories are too broad to effectively document the intricacies of contemporary racial identities.

Privilege in the form of both economic class and access to the dominant culture contributes to a perceptible shift in the way that we have historically understood racial categories. Further illustrating this point is the image of Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice’s life, as well as her statements regarding the competing

interest that class and culture have played in creating her privileged (racial) identity. In a 2002 article entitled “BAP Like Me,” journalist Adrienne Crew describes Rice as a “BAP” figure that she describes as belonging to

a tribe of upper-middle-class African-Americans [who] prides itself on its heirs’ ability to assimilate and integrate. Growing up in white suburbs and attending elite schools and institutions of higher learning, black American prince and princesses are immersed in Anglo (often WASP) culture and emerge with modes of speech, behavior and grooming that brand them as “Oreos,” black on the outside and white in the middle. (Crew)

Crew’s description of the term further highlights the influence of the ideology of assimilation, especially as “BAP” is an obvious derivative of the term, “Jewish American Princess,” which is used to refer to elite Jewish women. Crew’s assessment also clarifies the distinction between Rice’s brand of black, middle class culture as separate from the long history of the black elite, because the BAP existence is predicated upon the experiences of integration.

Both the nation’s first black female national security advisor and first black female secretary of state, Rice grew up in a segregated middle class Birmingham, Alabama community. She was raised, as she recalls, so that “I was going to be so well prepared, and I was going to do all of these things that were revered in white society so well, that I would be armored somehow from racism. I would be able to confront white society on its own terms.” Rice’s preparation to combat white racism

under the strict tutelage of her parents was through mastering “high” culture— becoming an acclaimed pianist. Privilege based on mastering a cultured identity weaves itself through what we know about Rice’s life.

Rice also depicts her struggle with fighting segregation by asserting her class privilege. In a 2001 interview in The Washington Post, Rice recalls that her mother, Angelena Rice, insisted that her daughter be able to try on clothing in the dressing room of an exclusive boutique even though Jim Crow segregation forbade it.<sup>6</sup> The article describes how Angelena Rice forced her way into the privilege of using the dressing room by arguing not for racial equality, but for equal rights based on class and economic privilege. Her rationale was not that all people, including black people, deserved equality, but that because of her middle-class status she deserved the privilege afforded to other white people. It is an individualistic argument based on class privilege instead of racial equality. The Washington Post journalist, Dale Russakoff, reasons that this anecdote relays the fact that “class took the edge off race, even then.”

Rice’s experiences also illustrate a culture-based fracture in the color line. For example, in that same interview in The Washington Post, Rice explains that while at the University of Denver she was faced with a professor’s offensive eugenics philosophy on the inherent inferiority of African Americans. Rice responded to this personal affront to her humanity by recalling: “I’m the one who speaks French,” and “I’m the one who plays Beethoven. I’m better at your culture than you are.” Here, her reasoning was that her equality stemmed from her access and mastery of western

high-brow culture. Rice then went on to earn a Ph.D. in international relations from the Graduate School of International Studies at the University of Denver, further establishing her equality in the intellectual, cultural, and international arenas—all of which strengthen her sense of a privileged identity. Today, the image of Condoleezza Rice reflects a legacy of privileged African Americans who in a sense defy the belief that racial categories are limiting. The image of Rice and her perspective on the (in)significance of race reflects the emerging national idea that individually determined choices can render white racism void.

In a similar argument, in his controversial keynote address at the 2004 commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education*, Bill Cosby lambasted the black poor, namely for their precarious relationship to literacy and to education, but also for what can only be described as the culture of the poor.<sup>7</sup> With specific references to naming practices, clothing styles, and music choices, Cosby's overall message was not inconsistent with the dominant attitude on racial uplift. But what was remarkable about his speech was the repugnant tone of his attack on the black poor, and the effect—the ensuing debate about the widening gap between the black middle class and the black poor.<sup>8</sup> Cosby's remarks emphasized the public perception that social equality can be attained by discarding stereotypical behaviors of the black underclass.

Cosby's comments highlighted the fact that racial categories and racism still exist, and that no romantic allusions about fluidity can erase the reality of the black underclass. However, my narrative of Rice's class and cultural privilege, and also the

ethnic makeup of Harvard's black undergraduates both imply that the meaning of race in certain instances is more of a discussion about access to privilege, and a hierarchy based on circumstances like class, culture, and color. The above discussions illustrate the cultural context and assert that mastering the dominant "white" culture can work to neutralize racism; the very fact that mastering "white" culture is a means to eliminate racism reveals the pervasiveness of racism. When Cosby complains about the black poor, he argues that their inability to assimilate into the dominant white culture is the reason they fail to prosper. Cosby's argument highlights the fact that for the black underclass racial categories are not fluid but are quite stable.

Racialization is shifting in significance for certain segments of the population, and the idea of racialized culture plays an important, yet contradictory, role. In one sense, culture appears to erase the power of racial categories and equalizes a power hierarchy, because one can, like Rice, learn it. But in another sense, as in the case of the black underclass that Cosby complains about, the perceived lack of culture binds the power of racism.

The above examples indicate some of the racial politics that mark the contemporary moment. The changes to the 2000 Census race categories, the ethnic makeup of Harvard's African American undergraduates, and the statements about race, class, and culture made by prominent African Americans Condoleezza Rice and Bill Cosby reflect a contemporary and distinctive understanding that the meaning and significance of racial categories is shifting and that there exists an element of personal choice in racial identity. These perceptions are also at work in the principal works of

this study and also in many other texts that interrogate the shifting significance of racial categories. The shifts in the significance of racial categories are part of the phenomenon I call racial choice.

## Chapter Descriptions

The year 2004 marked the fiftieth anniversary of *Brown v. The Board of Education*, the landmark decision that ended segregation and began this nation's legal efforts toward racial integration. Both the *Brown* decision and the reassessment of integration fifty years later highlight the fact that the social and political landscape of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has been dominated by the idea that race matters. My first chapter analyzes *Sarah Phillips*, Andrea Lee's 1984 novel that is set in the aftermath of *Brown* and at the beginning of the integration era. The novel features a protagonist who integrates her school and enjoys the multifaceted benefits of integration. Chapter One, "Integration and White Flight in Andrea Lee's *Sarah Phillips*," analyzes the novel's interpretation of the influence of integration, paying particular attention to the influence of class privilege on racial identity.

By portraying an identity based on class instead of racial affiliation, the novel contemplates the possibility of assuming a racially ambiguous identity. The novel also engages the white flight phenomenon—white people leaving urban areas and public schools after World War II and after the *Brown* decision that desegregated

schools—not only as it influences the main character’s identity, but also metaphorically as a narrative structure. As the protagonist has more integrated experiences, she flees from a black cultural identity until she finally seeks to erase blackness from her life by living in Europe. The narrative evolves from one filled with black characters, with markers of black culture, and with a modest investment in critiquing white racism to a narrative devoid of black characters that refuses to make any definitive challenge to racism. The novel is ultimately unsuccessful in its attempt to create an ambiguous identity because even as it attempts to extend beyond U. S. race, the text is still reliant on U.S. racial hierarchy.

In the second chapter, “Racial Choice and the Contemporary Passing Paradigm,” I analyze Senna’s first novel, Caucasia, which highlights two historical moments. Senna places the text in 1970s Boston amidst the cultural milieu of the Black Power Movement and the realization of civil rights. Yet at the same time, because of its publication date (1998) and the racial makeup of the protagonist (biracial and phenotypically racially ambiguous), the novel also signifies the debates surrounding the changes to the 2000 Census and the ability to choose more than one racial category. The 2000 Census produced a debate over the changing significance of race as biracial and multiracial citizens demanded the right to record their race in specific terms previously unavailable. In one sense, the Census policy supports the use of racial categories by asserting that it is important that individuals instead of the state are able to assess and determine race for themselves. This change is in effect a form of racial choice, as citizens can for the first time decide for themselves the racial



category to which they imagine they belong. In another sense, however, the Census policy is also an argument challenging the significance of racial categories and the traditional sense of the one-drop rule determining strict racial categories.

“Racial Choice and the Contemporary Passing Paradigm” highlights the constant struggle between exposing the inconsistencies of racial categories and preserving the existing racial hierarchy by revising the traditional passing narrative. By rewriting the tragic mulatto character and departing from the minority to majority passing paradigm, Caucasia points up the false division necessary to maintain racial categories and the difficulty of writing outside of race.

Unlike the settings of both Sarah Phillips and Caucasia, Paul Beatty’s 1996 novel, The White Boy Shuffle, features a narrative set at the apex of liberal multiculturalism. Beatty’s project is to reveal that despite the influence of the multicultural ideal, the racial hierarchy is still in place. In Chapter Three, “Satire, Performance, and Race in The White Boy Shuffle,” I address the sense of racial limbo caused by a multicultural orientation, racial stereotypes, and racialized performance. In his novel, Beatty parodies multiculturalism, racial categories, and by extension, race writing that depends on prescribed racial characteristics. I argue that Beatty’s use of satire critiques the protocols of African American literary traditions by showing that racial identification depends on the performance of stereotyped behaviors and that race writing also requires the same type of performativity.

All three texts anchoring this dissertation explore the idea of racial choice and the shifting significance of racial categories, and yet they all ultimately conclude that

the power of the racial hierarchy remains unbroken. These texts assert that though the racial hierarchy that privileges whiteness is still in place, that hierarchy is increasingly only disguised, not displaced, by the illusions of racelessness and racial choice.

This study takes up the novels of Lee, Senna, and Beatty because they explicitly document the changing nature of racial categories and critique the idea of racial choice that is a product of the contemporary moment. These texts are compelling because they present an intriguing contradiction—they make a strong case that racial choice is possible, yet they also make the case that total racial choice is an impossibility. The texts narrate a sense of racial fluidity and then reveal that though race matters differently in the late twentieth century, racism operates by subverting the more ethical aims of integration, multiracial acceptance, and multiculturalism. In their attempts to write outside of the existing racial paradigm—using white flight, passing, and satire as narrative strategies—the novels test the racial boundaries of African American literature, finding that writing outside of race is ultimately unachievable. In order to fully appreciate the critique of race in this group of novels one needs to perform a detailed literary analysis, paying close attention to characterization, plot movement and literary form, as well as to depictions of the performance of race and racial authenticity.

## Literary Contexts

The contemporary phenomena that I am investigating in this dissertation, racial choice and the shifting significance of race, are present in varying degrees in earlier texts, especially in the literature of reconstruction, the nadir, and the Harlem Renaissance, when racial passing was a prevalent theme. The texts of the Harlem Renaissance era are more analogous than modern and Cold War-era texts to the contemporary texts featured in this dissertation because they pointedly consider the option of choosing race through passing.

Consider, for example, the racial choices the narrator makes in James Weldon Johnson's The Autobiography of An Ex-Colored Man (1912). The narrator's double-conscious revelation that he is black and thus racially marked is a trope that is repeated throughout the African American literary tradition. The nameless narrator of Autobiography discovers in a class survey administered by the principal that he is not white like the majority of his classmates. Because he has white skin and straight hair like the majority of his white peers, he believes that he is white. The description of this moment is a textbook depiction of W. E. B. Du Bois's famous words about the double consciousness of African Americans. The narrator explains:

And so I have often lived through that hour, that day, that week in which was wrought the miracle of my transition from one world into another; for I did indeed pass into another world. From that time I looked out through other eyes, my thoughts were colored, my words dictated, my actions limited by one

dominating, all-pervading idea which constantly increased in force and weight until I finally realized in it a great, tangible fact. (9)

The narrator's racial realization stems from the discovery that he is not white and that he will always be racially marked as black. Such scenes of racial self-discovery focus on the act of seeing as the mode of racial definition. The visual aspect of seeing racial categories reflects the one-drop rule and the privilege of white blood. After the narrator realizes that he is racially marked, he makes decisions throughout his life to either identify as black, or to identify as white—as is his final decision. The racial choice in Autobiography is based on the secretive act of passing back and forth across the color line, and the moment of racial realization is based on the double-conscious realization of racial difference. This phenomenon is different from the contemporary form of racial choice that is not always based on the visual aspect of passing. In contemporary forms of racial choice, identity is based more often on cultural and class privilege because these identities reflect the shifting significance of racial categories and racial authenticity. Like Autobiography, countless other texts deal with the act of passing as a form of racial choice, and my chapter on Senna's Caucasia reviews that literature.

Writing during the same period as Johnson, Charles W. Chesnutt also writes about racial choice and racial passing. However, through his non-fiction writings, Chesnutt more pointedly considers the option of choosing race and goes beyond the

act of passing. For example, Chesnutt explains his “future American race” theory in his 1900 essay in The Boston Evening Transcript in which he argues that black people can gain equality through mass cultural assimilation and intermarriage between black, white, and Indian people. He further argues that individuals can make a (racial) choice to become a part of a future American race by aspiring to assimilate into the dominant class, color, and culture.<sup>9</sup> The formation of this race would lead to equality for all because there would be no means by which to discriminate. What is more, Chesnutt experiments with the possibilities and consequences of his theory in his novels The Marrow of Tradition, The Quarry, and Paul Marchand F.M.C. In each of these novels Chesnutt explores the dilemma of mixed-race, middle class, educated black men—arguing that they have the option of choosing a different race. This choice often involves the act of passing, but also, at times, involves a more abstract form of identity formation in which the protagonist enjoys the option of choosing to privilege his class and cultural identity over a racial identity.

Chesnutt’s future American option goes beyond the secretive act of passing and its obvious risks and relies on a certain level of acquiescence of the strict racial hierarchy that has always controlled this nation. Chesnutt believed the national consciousness would in time eventually allow for such racial maneuvers. Chesnutt’s theory, which makes up the beginning of this chapter’s title, reflects this dissertation’s goal of interrogating the future significance of race and also the fluidity of racial categories.

The texts I discuss in this dissertation, however, represent a new trend that focuses on the concerns of the racial politics of the contemporary moment. The rise of the black middle class, combined with (and in some estimations a result of) the integration of public schools and the work place, the increased recognition of the racial and ethnic diversity of the nation and multicultural politics, as well as the visibility of multiracial politics, have all had a cumulative effect on the way that racial identity is represented in contemporary African American literature.

Contemporary texts like the ones featured in this introduction voice the emerging racial consciousness of the late twentieth century. These texts are representative of other contemporary texts that similarly address the issues of racial identity.<sup>10</sup> Put simply, the difference between the racial choice that authors like Johnson and Chesnutt narrate and the racial choice that writers are producing in the contemporary moment is that contemporary texts do not rely solely on passing. Another distinction is that the contemporary texts reflect the current climate in which the state appears to be more invested in racial choice through promoting policies that suggest a flattening of the racial hierarchy.

For example, Percival Everett's Erasure (2001) addresses the representation of black identity in African American literature. The text critiques the bond of race, and suggests that a more meaningful foundation of identity might be based on class and cultural allegiances. The plot of the novel surrounds a year in the life of fiction writer and professor Thelonious "Monk" Ellison as he returns to his home, Washington, DC, to care for his mother and as he strives to find a publisher for his latest novel. During

that year, Monk confronts both his self-conscious relationship to stereotypical black identity and the politics of racial representation in the field of literature.

Everett presents the nuances of Monk's middle class life experiences as a constant source of contention with his racial identity. For example, the text describes the following incongruencies with his being categorized as "black": he is bad at basketball, but good at math. He is from Washington, DC, but does not consider himself to be from the inner city (or rural south). He went to Harvard, is a part of a family of doctors, and his family owns a summer home in Annapolis. These class characteristics represent the ironies associated with his contemporary racial identity. In Erasure, Everett has created a character whose life experiences cause him to feel like a consummate outsider, painfully aware of how economic class and cultural differences set him apart from many other black people and, consequently, always worried if black people will find him "black enough."

In addition to featuring the protagonist's struggle with racial identity, the text also critiques contemporary race writing and what is considered a "black text." Monk is a writer of obscure fiction that reworks Greek tragedy. His books do not sell because, as his agent tells him, they are not "black enough." Meanwhile, Juanita Mae Jenkins, another contemporary black author, is enjoying extreme success with her recent release, We's Lives In Da Ghetto. In a fit of rage at Jenkins's representation of stereotypical black ghetto life, Monk satirically pens My Pafology (later titled simply, Fuck) and insists that his agent send it out under the pseudonym "Stagg R. Leigh." Surprisingly, the book is taken seriously and published—delivering the much-needed

money that Monk needs to care for his ailing mother. The novel also becomes a finalist for the American Book Award. Monk, who is on the award committee, objects to the inclusion of his novel because he believes it lacks artistic merit, and that like We's Lives In Da Ghetto, it capitalizes on negative fantasies of African American life. Despite his objections, however, the book is chosen for the prestigious award. The novel ends as Monk is forced to reveal his true identity as the author of the book.

Everett's novel critiques the performance of race through the protagonist's evaluation of his own cultural and racial identity and also through the example of Monk's satirical novel. For example, an award committee member asserts that My Pafology "is the truest novel I've ever read. It could only have been written by someone who has done hard time. It's the real thing" (261). In response, speaking through his protagonist, Everett asserts that no single novel can be taken as "the truth" about black people—especially a novel that is wholly comprised of negative stereotypes about black life. Erasure addresses the themes of this dissertation—the shifting significance of racial categories, the representation of racial authenticity, and racial choice.

Similarly, Toni Morrison's 1991 short story, "Recitatif," investigates contemporary black identity and also the way that race is literarily represented. While Everett's Erasure objects to a tragic representation of blackness, in "Recitatif" Morrison critiques the reliance on racialization in literary texts.<sup>11</sup> "Recitatif" follows the relationship between two orphan girls through several vignettes calculated to



highlight the narrative consequence of relying on racial descriptions. For example, readers of the text will know almost immediately of the racial difference of the two characters, but not their actual race. Morrison never reveals either character's race, even as she employs the conventions of literary racialization and representation with common racial references like hair and allegiance to certain political interests. The text taunts its readers to discern the race of the two main characters and mocks its readers' inability to do so.

The remainder of the story traces the chance meetings between the two main characters after they have grown up and relocated to upstate New York. The tension between the two women is class and race based—which is illustrated when the two women meet on opposite ends of the integration debate. That the reader still does not know which woman belongs to which race reflects the significance of Morrison's experimental text, calling attention to the shifting implication of race in the contemporary moment.

Morrison's experimental story highlights the perception that race does not matter but at the same time asserts that racial categories and racial representation are critical to the meaning of the text. Morrison's exercise in textually representing racial ambiguity emphasizes both the current perception that race does not matter and at the same time highlights the continuing significance of race by referencing the legacy of segregation and the political struggle surrounding school integration. Racial categories are critical to the meaning of the text because the story revolves around the cultural climate that is the aftermath of integration. As Everett does in Erasure,

Morrison also interrogates racial authenticity as well as the act of reading and writing race. “Recitatif” raises all of these issues about representing race in the latter half of the twentieth century.

Like the raceless characters in “Recitatif” and the esoteric protagonist, Monk, in Erasure, the protagonists of the novels under study in this dissertation all contend with the performativity of racial authenticity and the consequences of its prevalence in American culture. They all suggest that currently we are witnessing a shift in the traditional way that racial categories have been understood to be fixed and the fact that racial identity has gained a postmodern sense of fluidity. These texts also confront contemporary literary racial representation—how to represent race in a context that at once disregards the influence of racialization but is also driven by the recognition of the historical legacy of racism and racial categories.

My dissertation functions on two levels. First, my research establishes that the texts under study represent a larger trend in contemporary African American race writing. I argue that Sarah Phillips, Caucasia, and The White Boy Shuffle are exemplary of contemporary African American texts that illustrate, and then critique, the idea of a racial choice that has entered into the national consciousness as a result, in part, of integration, multiracial politics, and the multicultural movement. These texts emphasize that these state-sponsored initiatives advocate, perhaps inadvertently, adopting a class, color, or cultural identity over traditional racial identity. I am arguing that racial choice is an illusion, and that texts that engage the concept of racial choice get trapped into the very language of race that they attempt to escape.

Despite their aesthetic and historic value, contemporary novels that engage the future of race contradict themselves by critiquing, but also reifying, racial systems they are unable to avoid. Like a rubber band, they stretch to great depths, but then snap back to the original circumference.

The second contribution of this study is in modeling an approach to analyzing the racial projects in contemporary African American literary texts. This dissertation provides a model for analyzing these texts of racial choice by exploring the themes of racial authenticity and racial performance that weave their way throughout the novels and, consequently, my analyses of them.

### Critical Scholarship Contexts

I draw from a range of literary and critical race theories that support the central assertions of this dissertation: Contemporary African American texts reflect the shifting significance of racial categories, critique the racially anonymous identity that has entered into the national consciousness, and document the effects on African American literature. This literature review will explain how my dissertation draws from the literary theories of postmodernism, the discourse of the post-soul aesthetic, and literary representation of racial categories, including the related discourse on racial performance and authenticity. I will then conclude by reviewing race theories

that address the future of racial categories and serve as a basis for my theory of racial choice.

My dissertation engages the discourse of postmodernism and the post-soul aesthetic because the texts under study were all written in the last quarter of the twentieth century and all feature narratives that take place after the start of integration. My own analysis of the primary texts interrogates the nuances of African American texts and the degree to which they contend with the postmodern concept of racial choice. Critics like Madhu Dubey and W. Lawrence Hogue similarly describe how the postmodern condition interrogates racial authenticity and the shifting significance of racial categories. Dubey explains in Signs and Cities: Black Literary Postmodernism that racial politics and racial unity “begin to appear increasingly obsolete in the post-Civil Rights period” (30). Dubey further describes that the “sense of crisis” in the black racial category stems from the increasing urbanity of the black race and the rise of the black middle class. This demographic shift—from the rural south to cities throughout the U.S.—impacted black identity and the structure of the black community by fracturing the “idea of a cohesive and singular black identity” (5). Where Dubey finds significance in the increasing urbanity of African Americans, Hogue focuses on the economic ascension of people of color to explain how the postmodern era shapes racial identity.

Hogue’s premise relies on his interpretation that before the 1960s, segregation and institutional racism forced racial loyalty and simultaneously worked to suppress perceived racial difference. After the 1960s, however, economic, political, and

cultural events “propelled members of these communities into classical modernity and into a postmodern America” (Hogue 10). The result of this shift is that racial identity is challenged by a modern, class-based identity because, as Hogue describes, the “mythical vision of the racial community as an integral cultural whole became untenable” (16). What is also emphasized by the deconstruction of racial communities is that race is not a biological fact, but is instead a social construct.

Dubey and Hogue both contend that the concept of race is vulnerable—because of geographic and economic changes—and is therefore subject to transformation. Dubey’s work on cities and the postmodern condition impacts my focus on texts that feature the urban, black middle class as a site with ample elements of racial choice, and Hogue’s research on the impact of the civil rights movement and class ascension influences my choice to focus on literary texts that narrate the influence of integration on racial identity.

The post-soul, new-black aesthetic, represented here by the work of Mark Anthony Neal and Trey Ellis, is another postmodern project that, as Neal describes, attempts to “liberate contemporary interpretations of ... [black] experience from sensibilities that were formalized and institutionalized during earlier social paradigms” (3). Neal defines the post-soul aesthetic as representative of the “political, social, and cultural experiences of the African-American community since the end of the civil rights and Black Power movements” (3). Neal’s analyses on black middle class identity and post-soul gender politics serve as insightful models for interrogating the themes of this body of artistic expression.

Ellis describes his vision of the new-black aesthetic as an extension and synthesis of both the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement in his 1989 manifesto, "The New Black Aesthetic." Ellis argues that this movement engages black postmodern projects created by artists who are likely linked by the black bourgeoisie boom, which he describes as "a post-bourgeois movement driven by a second generation of [the] middle class" (237). The new-black aesthetic artist is also a cultural mulatto, which Ellis defines as "educated by a multi-racial mix of cultures, [and] can also navigate easily in the white world" (235).<sup>12</sup> Ellis's essay is integral to my choice of authors and texts that feature racial choice and also the image of the cultural mulatto in the contemporary moment. My study also delineates some of the literary characteristics of the new-black aesthetic: the shifting significance of racial categories, racial authenticity and performance, and the dilemma of racial choice.

The theories of postmodernism and the new-black aesthetic address the changes in racial community and racial identity due to migration and the rise of the black middle class. Literary scholarship about racialization, often referred to as critical race theory, further unravels the contemporary significance of race. I introduce these critical race theorists because their work has prompted literary critics to reread texts to illuminate American literature's inherent reliance on the concept of whiteness and blackness.<sup>13</sup> Toni Morrison's work has especially stimulated theorists to consider the impact of racialization in literary texts. For example, Toni Morrison's Playing in the Dark is one of the earliest pieces to analyze the influence of racialism in American literature. Her text examines the presence of "literary whiteness" and

“literary blackness” and their implications in studying American literature. Morrison also addresses the disregard of the black presence in white literature by what she calls “American Africanism.” She explores how “Africanist personas” constructed by white writers reflect the subconscious thoughts of these writers. Morrison’s study is influential because its focus on the analysis of racialization of canonical white American texts opens the door for similar studies on African American texts. Morrison’s text paved the way for what has become a flood of whiteness studies in literature and her impetus is reflected in my own attention to the impact of race, even when racial categories appear immaterial.

Valerie Babb takes on Morrison’s project in Whiteness Visible: The Meaning of Whiteness in American Literature and Culture (1998), arguing that whiteness is a constructed identity (as most now agree), and is reified through literature, popular culture, and other aspects of everyday life as normative. My work also investigates racial categorization, and its implications in African American literature, attempting to analyze how these categorical shifts influence identity politics for African Americans. Since all of the novels that I analyze feature black main characters who are influenced by the concept of white identity, whiteness studies is integral to my work because those studies interrogate the significance the white racial category occupies even when white characters seem immaterial.

My research examines African American texts not just as reflective of contemporary racial paradigms, but as vigorously inventive in the racial paradigms under which they operate. The novels under study drive toward narrating outside of

traditional race paradigms. My methodology draws from Stephen P. Knadler's call to represent African American literature's "complicated agency" in interrogating racialization and whiteness. In The Fugitive Race: Minority Writers Resisting Whiteness, Knadler argues that "white people ... do not in fact control the terrain of white racial discourse" by charting "a long history of minority interventions, articulating and shaping the performance of whiteness within nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century narrative fiction" (ix). Knadler goes on to claim that the African American voice has remained passive in whiteness studies, reasoning that "although most critics have noticed that whites used the black presence, their framing of the central questions structuring whiteness studies has denied African Americans a complicated agency" (xv). For example, Knadler discusses David Roediger's collection, Black on White: Black Writers on What it Means to Be White, arguing that it reproduces the binary between blackness and whiteness by separating these texts from their white contemporaries. He further argues that the collection presents black agency as "always something separate or secondary to a self-perpetuating and insulated whiteness" (xv). Knadler argues that African American literature does not passively reflect the dominant culture's representation of racialization but also works actively to create those representations. Knadler's study drives my own analysis of African American texts as agents in creating racial categories, primarily through the representation of racial performances and racial authenticity.

As illustrated in the brief descriptions of the texts under study, Sarah Phillips, Caucasia, and The White Boy Shuffle (as well as discussions of Erasure and



“Recitatif”), the shifting significance of race is dependent upon the increased reliance on the performance of race and the belief in racial authenticity. My discussion of racial performance borrows from Judith Butler’s discussion of the materiality and the performativity of sex and gender, in which she argues that sex is an unstable category that is “materialized” over time through its “performativity.” Performativity, she argues, does not name one instance of performance but is rather a meta-narrative of the ideals of that performance, which in turn produces defining characteristics (2).

The performativity of racialized behavior functions to highlight the instability of cultural race, and it also represents the dilemma raised by Butler regarding the degree to which the discourse of authenticity works to “gain the authority to bring about what it names through citing the conventions of authority” (13).<sup>14</sup> Thus, I use Butler’s theory of performativity in this dissertation primarily in reference to the performance of race and identity but also to offer a dialogue about the power of performativity and the discourse surrounding that performativity to enforce the very racial authenticity that it aims to name.

The performance of race depends on establishing characteristics regarded as authentically representative of a group. All of my chapters discuss the texts’ portrayal of racial authenticity and the effect of authenticity on experiencing racial choice. My focus on racial authenticity, especially regarding class-based representation of blackness in Sarah Phillips, is bolstered by the work of Martin J. Favor, author of Authentic Blackness: The Folk in the New Negro Renaissance. Favor investigates the origins of a black literary identity and its connection to folk

culture in Harlem Renaissance era texts. He argues that the way we value cultural differences, color, class, geography, and gender influence what we call “race” and prompts the idea of authentic blackness that excludes the black middle class.

While Favor examines the discourse of authentic blackness that affected Harlem Renaissance era texts, I focus specifically on the discourse of authenticity in the post-integration era. For example, my reviews of Sarah Phillips, Caucasia, and The White Boy Shuffle reveal the influence of integration, the rise of the black middle class, the civil rights movement, and Black Nationalism on contemporary notions of racial authenticity and identity. I draw on research that analyzes the legacy of racialism, like the edited collections by Wahneema Lubiano, The House That Race Built: Black Americans, U.S. Terrain, and Gerald Early, Lure and Loathing: Twenty Black Intellectuals Address W. E. B. Du Bois’s Dilemma of the Double-Consciousness of African Americans. For example, in an essay in The House that Race Built, Rhonda M. Williams explains the tendency for black people to displace certain characteristics as “other” or “white” because they negate the Black Nationalist agenda. She explains that what is thought of as outside of the conservative black norm is projected onto “whiteness.”<sup>15</sup> The texts under study in this dissertation constantly question the relevance of racial authenticity and the shifting characteristics, like whiteness, that denote it.

The discourse of racial performance and authenticity briefly described above, as well as the literary theory of black postmodernism, all work toward supporting my contention that the perception of racial choice is becoming the hallmark of racial

consciousness in post-soul generation texts. All of the novels feature protagonists who experiment with the ability to choose race, in effect acting out theories by Werner Sollors, Howard Winant, Herbert J. Gans, and George Yancey that detail the future of racial categories in America. Sollors, Winant, Gans, and Yancey's theories are emblematic of contemporary scholarship, including this dissertation, which pointedly predicts the future of race: how race will be codified by the state, how current racial systems will change, and how racial identity might shift.

For example, my theory of racial choice recognizes the ideological shifts of the late twentieth century that allow individuals to contemplate different conditions under which they might be able to "consent," or make a racial choice. Werner Sollors's explanation of identifying in terms of "consent" and "descent" similarly describes a form of racial choice. Sollors explains that identifying by descent means that one relies on the laws of blood and marriage and is upheld by the *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling. On the other hand, he argues, "consent language stresses our abilities as mature free agents and 'architects of our fates' to choose our spouses, our destinies, and our political systems" (6). Racial choice stems from the idea of consent and individual choice. Sollors's description is limited, however, to the circumstances of the deep-rooted one-drop rule that rarely allowed people of color to openly and honestly make a racial choice.

Racial choice is an inconsistent phenomenon, clearly visible in some instances and strongly disputed in others. The novels under study all narrate this inconsistency, illustrating characters making choices about their own racial identity in

some cases, and being subjected to traditional forms of racialization in others.

Howard Winant's theory helps me to define the contradictory circumstances of racial choice—that racial categories are still important, but racial hierarchy is veiled by the perception that race is no longer an issue.

Winant argues that race matters today as it has in the past but that the significance of racial categories has shifted. Rationalizing that we are currently in a period of universal “racial dualism,” Winant describes the earlier Du Boisian “color line” period as one of nearly “monolithic racial hierarchy”—a period in which white supremacy and privilege were obvious and uncontested. Currently, however, Winant argues that racial debates have shifted to deciding if race matters at all, because under racial dualism “everyone’s racial identity is problematized.” Today’s more subtle form of racism that masks as privilege yields a different reality—one in which the perception is at different instances that race does not matter, and also that race does matter. Winant argues that “race matters, then, in a second sense: it matters not only as a means of rendering the social world intelligible, but simultaneously as a way of making it opaque and mysterious. The ineluctably contradictory character of race provides the context in which racial dualism—or the ‘color-line’ as Du Bois designated it—has developed as the problem of the 20<sup>th</sup> century” (90).

Racial choice in some ways mirrors the concept of the model minority, which describes members of certain minority groups being accepted in dominant society and experiencing greater levels of success than average. The main characters in Sarah Phillips and The White Boy Shuffle both experience being singled out as an example

of a model minority. The model minority concept operates in what Herbert J. Gans argues is a new racial hierarchy that builds upon a binary between blackness and whiteness but that shifts “insofar as the old white–nonwhite dichotomy may be replaced by a nonblack–black one” (371). The new racial hierarchy stems from the present (and past) dual racial hierarchy that both Du Bois and Winant describe but incorporates the idea of the model minority. The hierarchy in effect turns these model minorities into “quasi whites” because they are nonblack.

Gans essentially argues that in a black/nonblack hierarchy, the black part of the equation would continue to be comprised of African Americans, other blacks, dark Hispanics, Native Americans, “and anyone else who is dark skinned enough and/or possessed of visible bodily features and behavior patterns, actual or imagined, that remind nonblacks of blacks” (373). The second component of that equation would be made up of people who are already accepted as members of the white race as well as racial minorities who qualify for a kind of honorary white status. The exception to this hierarchy is the category that Gans calls, “residuals.” This category is made up of persons belonging to a middle category (between black and nonblack) who are awaiting society’s pronouncement as to how they will be categorized. Within the residual category Gans counts both multiracials and light-skinned black people who have reached a certain class. Racial choice is a slippery concept—experienced by people of varying gender, class, color, geography, etc. Gans’s theory about residuals informs my delineation of individuals who are eligible for racial

choice and helps to explain why racial choice is available to some characters and not to others.

George Yancey's theory, like Gans's description of residuals, helps to define my conception of racial choice as available to particular individuals like those who identify as multiracial, which is especially relevant in my chapter on Caucasia. Yancey anticipates a broadening of the white category to include racial minorities who identify as nonblack or are identified by racial structures in this way. Yancey argues that because African Americans are alienated in ways unlike any other racial minority their efforts to assimilate and thereby gain the privileges granted by mainstream white society will continue to be thwarted. Yancey also describes Gans's residual category but focuses on those claiming multiracial identity. He writes that multiracials function as a buffer space that will eventually assimilate into the majority group. Yancey also foresees significant implications for this shift in racial categorization, including but not limited to: the demise of the "rainbow coalition" as nonblack minorities become accepted by the dominant white culture; less political power especially in terms of securing government to rectify previous racial injustice (affecting, for example, affirmative action and school desegregation); and the continued marginalization of black culture.

The racial theories of Sollors, Winant, Gans, and Yancey most pointedly predict the future of race: how race will be codified by the state, how current racial systems will change, and how racial identity might shift. Gilroy, Winant, Gans, and Yancey's theories and predictions about racial categorization and identity anticipate

the following questions: How will the color line, described by W. E. B. Du Bois to be the problem of the twentieth century, influence racial politics and identity in the late twentieth century and in the new millennium? This dissertation extends this discussion to the realm of African American literature and questions how it responds to the perceived shift in the line that demarcates the racial binary between blackness and whiteness.

My dissertation shows that the concept of racial choice has entered into the national consciousness and is increasingly represented in African American literature. As new ways to conceptualize racial categories abound, contemporary authors of African American literature will continue to interrogate the concept of race and the fact that it is a construction. However, despite the fact that racial categories appear to be changing, the white racial privilege that fuels this society continues to dominate the collective significance of racial categories. The authors of the texts under study aggressively attempt to envision a world where race matters differently and also to escape the patterns of racialization—even though their texts remain masked in and marked by the traditional implications of race.

## Notes to Introduction

1. Key in this movement are Project RACE (Reclassify All Children Equally), and AMEA (Association of MultiEthnic Americans).
2. I use the term color privilege, or colorism, to describe the act of privileging white skin. See Kathy Russell's The Color Complex for a complete discussion of the historical legacy of relative privilege afforded to light-skinned blacks. George Lipsitz contends in The Possessive Investment in Whiteness that white identity affords a certain level of material privilege.
3. See Spurious Issues: Race and Multiracial Identity Politics in the United States by Ranier Spencer for a more complete description of the political implications of the changes to the race categories in the 2000 Census.
4. In a 2004 New York Times article, "Top Colleges Take More Blacks, but Which Ones?" Sara Rimer and Karen W. Arenson report that black students make up 8 percent of the undergraduates at Harvard. But over two-thirds of that number are the children of biracial, West Indian, or African immigrant parents.
5. Also significant is the association that Harvard holds in the American consciousness as a symbol of power, privilege, and intellectualism—all characteristics that denote a sense of class and culture once reserved only for white students.
6. "Lessons of Might and Right" in The Washington Post, Sept. 9, 2001. The headline read: "While others marched for civil rights, Condoleezza Rice's



family taught her to make her own freedom. It's a philosophy she's brought to the Bush White House."

7. The event was held at Washington, DC's Constitution Hall and was sponsored by the NAACP, the NAACP Legal Fund, and Howard University.
8. See, for example, Michael Eric Dyson's Is Bill Cosby Right? Or Has the Black Middle Class Lost Its Mind?, 2005.
9. "The Future American" series appeared in three parts in 1900 in The Boston Evening Transcript. In these essays, Chesnut proposes a "perfection of type" that will be brought about by "a combination of the different European races, and the elimination, by some strange alchemy, of all their undesirable traits," consisting of Africans, Europeans, and Indians. The race would be white in color, and would have "absorbed" the "blood" of Africans and Indians—meaning that the physical racial characteristics of Africans and Indians would eventually expire resulting in a "browner" white type.
10. See novels like Fran Ross's Oreo (1974), Toni Morrison's Tar Baby (1980), Trey Ellis's Platitudes (1988), Darius James's Negrophobia (1992), Brent Wade's Company Man (1993), Ishmael Reed's Japanese by Spring (1996), Colson Whitehead's The Intuitionist (1999), and James Alan McPherson's Crabcakes (1999) for texts that similarly address the issues of racial identity.
11. Morrison names this trend "literary blackness" and "literary whiteness" in Playing in the Dark.
12. For other writings on black postmodernism see "Postmodern Blackness" by bell hooks and "Shukin' off the African-American Native Other: What's 'Po-

Mo' Got to Do with It?" by Wahneema Lubiano, and Buppies, B-Boys, Baps, and Bohos: Notes on Post-Soul Black Culture by Nelson George.

13. In his collected volume, Black on White: Black Writers on What It Means to Be White, David Roediger focuses on how whiteness manifests in African American literature. Roediger, a social historian, turns to African American literature because, as he argues in the introduction to this collection of fiction by African American authors, African American literature is poised to reveal a particularly salient perspective on whiteness. The volume confirms other potential sites for analysis as it collects texts that interrogate the concept of whiteness. Bringing together writings by a variety of black authors, scholars, and historians that describe what whiteness represents in American society, the collection features writings by George S. Schuyler, Derrick Bell, James Baldwin, and Harriet Jacobs on themes as diverse as "white terror" and "seeing through race."
14. See Neil Gotanda's "A Critique of 'Our Constitution is Color-Blind'" for a complete discussion of "culture race." Gotanda describes "culture race" to describe the process by which cultural practices are used as a stand-in for formal racial categories.
15. Rhonda M. Williams, "Living at the Crossroads: Explorations in Race, Nationality, Sexuality, and Gender," in The House That Race Built, 1998.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Integration and White Flight in Andrea Lee's Sarah Phillips

“For sixty years, until the day I arrived there, the Prescott School for Girls had operated on a simple and logical basis: the students and teachers were white, and the domestic staff was black” (Sarah Phillips 52).

#### Introduction

Andrea Lee's lifestyle, including her elite integrated education, interracial marriage, exotic travel, and affluent upbringing, has come to embody a classed existence that contends with pre-integration African American racial identity. Consequently, the integrated experience and post-soul identity chronicled in Lee's memoir, Russian Journal (1981), for which she received a nomination for the American Book Award; her first novel, Sarah Phillips (1984); her latest collection of short stories, Interesting Women (2002); her 2006 novel, Lost Hearts in Italy; and in her many published interviews challenge the limits of what we associate with black womanhood. Lee's texts narrate the freedoms and opportunities of integration and her examples are not limited to the logistics of access to education, suburban life, and different opportunities for work. Instead they speak to the more significant, yet subtle, issue of freedom from the influence of race.

For example, an interview published shortly after the publication of Interesting Women refers to that text as the “Sex and the City for the international set.”<sup>1</sup> Lee was delighted with the comparison because of what she sees as a thematic overlap of isolation and “women coming to grips with the vagaries of human nature, examined through the lens of sex and love.” What is even more emblematic of the spirit of cosmopolitan privilege linking the television series with Lee’s work is her statement that like the four characters on the show, the “Interesting Women heroines, though I don’t mention it, are all familiar with shoe therapy.” The idea of “shoe therapy”—shopping for expensive shoes as a pastime and as a panacea for the ailments of postmodern love and life—implies the bourgeois cosmopolitanism that the interview projects of Lee.

The interview also reveals that Lee currently lives abroad in Turin with her Italian husband and young son while her daughter attends an exclusive preparatory school in the States—the very school that Lee integrated thirty years earlier. Responding to the comment that she is personally perceived as having the “perfect” glamorous life complete with “successful career, children, husband, etc.,” Lee answers: “my family has always loved to travel, and since I was a child I always wanted to live in Europe, or some romantic place far from suburban Philadelphia where I grew up. But the most exotic place has a way of becoming mundane when you live there (sic). What do I dream about now? New York! And, at times, dare I say it, the malls of suburban Philly.” The unspoken in this exchange is the impact of integration on her experience, and thus, the narratives that always haunt her life.

Lee's conversation, filled with talk about suburban life, shopping malls, exotic travel, and Sex and the City, expresses a class and cultural affinity with the international and privileged, but not necessarily with what we imagine as the typical black woman. Lee's lifestyle, including her elite integrated education, interracial marriage, and affluent upbringing, has come to embody a classed existence that contends with pre-integration African American racial identity. Consequently the integrated experience and post-soul identity chronicled in her fiction, memoir, and published interviews challenge the limits of what we associate with black womanhood. This freedom, for example, allows Lee to envision herself as a member of the white foursome in Sex and the City. Lee fractures the racial protocol that governs the conventional parameters of black identity in both her personal life and in her professional work as a writer.<sup>2</sup>

Despite what should make Sarah Phillips a popular text—the authorial intrigue, the text's timely subject, its concise and accessible chapters, and general literariness—the novel remains critically unrecognized and ignored by popular fiction standards. In her 1993 foreword to the reissue of the text, Valerie Smith attends to critics' disregard of the novel and only cites reviews by Mary Helen Washington and Sherley Anne Williams and a work in progress by Harryette Mullen, in addition to her treatment of the text in a longer article about black feminist theory, as the only critical examination of the novel.<sup>3</sup> More than twenty years later, that collection of criticism has increased only minimally. The combined criticism during the past two decades has split along modernist and postmodernist readings of the novel—

concerned primarily with the text's connection to, or break from, traditional texts by African American, and particularly African American women writers.

This chapter, "Integration and White Flight in Andrea Lee's Sarah Phillips," explores how Lee's novel documents the shifting significance of racial categories at the beginning of the integration era. By deliberately grounding her novel within the black middle class and at the dawn of integration, Lee uses the timely concepts of school desegregation and white flight as narrative and structural conventions to move her novel beyond the traditional treatments of racial identity. In Sarah Phillips, Lee experiments with the possibility of moving beyond the consuming influence of race in favor of a more fluid sense of racial identity based on class privilege. But despite Lee's attempt at flattening the significance of race, her novel remains driven by the traditional racial hierarchy and her text ends up reaffirming the conventions of racial identity that it attempted to thwart.

Sarah Phillips is a novel that identifies the integration experience as a monumental shift in black consciousness, reflecting that racial identity has gained a postmodern sense of fluidity. This text is exemplary of other contemporary African-American texts that at the end of the twentieth century represent blackness through the ambiguity of racial choice. Lee structures her novel by beginning with distinct representations of blackness, gradually moving the text toward being dominated by representations of whiteness. This chapter first describes how Lee crafts in her protagonist an identity based in the black middle class. Next, the chapter illustrates the text's depiction of the integration experience as it functions to further complicate

racial identity and as it reaffirms class affiliation. The third part of this chapter reveals Lee's narrative use of the concept of white flight as her protagonist's existence is, by the end of the novel, consumed by white people and white culture. I conclude this chapter by arguing that Lee's novel, though it attempts to realize racial ambiguity and white flight, ultimately ends with a sense that the influence of race is immutable.

#### Part 1: Developing a Middle Class and Integrated Identity

The eponymous protagonist, Sarah, describes herself early in the novel as “light skinned,” “pretty,” “snobbish,” and with a “lively appetite for white boys (4).” This string of adjectives describing the quintessential middle class young woman seems to be an obvious play on Lorraine Hansberry's vividly descriptive book title, To Be Young, Gifted and Black, and establishes the key elements that drive this text.<sup>4</sup> The first section of the novel places Sarah within the black middle class and represents the beginning of Sarah's progression toward integration.<sup>5</sup> This section is populated with black people and institutions—all elite—including Sarah's middle-class family, exclusive neighborhood, and influential church. This section also narrates the elder Phillips's leadership in the civil rights struggle.<sup>6</sup> The text continues to emphasize Sarah's classed position in the black community and also the privilege that sets her apart from other black people. For example, in the “Mother”

chapter, the narrator relates Sarah's matrilineal genealogy of a bourgeois, light-skinned family from south Philadelphia, and includes a description of their pastimes and social desire to continue their middle class life in the suburbs. The "Gypsies" chapter describes Sarah's black suburban neighborhood, comprising "doctors, ministers, teachers, who had grown up in Philadelphia row houses—the lawns and tree-lined streets represented the fulfillment of a fantasy long deferred, and acted as a barrier against the predictable cruelty of the world" (39). The text highlights the social divisions that integration creates, particularly the ways in which suburbanization has led to the segregation of the black middle class from the black working and lower classes in all-black neighborhoods.

In his 2000 history of the black elite, Lawrence Otis Graham describes the black upper class as "our kind of people," which, according to Graham, is a term that elite blacks use to describe other elite blacks. Historicizing the existence of a black elite class, Graham explains that this group is defined largely through family background, quality of education, and prestige/earning power of profession. He also alludes to the insider nature of these kinds of distinctions when he says that members of this group would always be able to recognize each other. The Phillips fit Graham's portrayal of the black elite in every major way: The elder Phillips are a part of the professional class—the father is an influential minister and the mother is a school teacher—the younger Phillips, Sarah and her brother Matthew attend elite private schools; and the family lives in an expensive, though all-black, suburban community.



The text's focus on middle-class African Americans challenges the notion of authentic black identity and, as Martin Favor argues, the assumption that authentic blackness rests with the folk culture. In Authentic Blackness: The Folk in the New Negro Renaissance, Favor establishes that "the perceived necessity to delineate ideologically and aesthetically that which is most 'real' about African American experiences has been a driving force behind social and artistic movements" (3). Favor's goal is to examine black literary identity and its connection to folk culture, as well as its consequent dissociation from the middle class.

Valerie Smith and Nicole King both make arguments about the influence of racial authenticity in Sarah Phillips. Smith argues that the novel challenges what readers expect of black women's writing, especially what is meant by the categories "blackness" and "black womanhood." She argues that the text presents a different kind of black womanhood, one that is the beneficiary of integration, "which frees writers like Lee to illuminate the range of behaviors and attitudes displayed by African Americans in the late twentieth century" (Foreword xi). King, also analyzing the novel in the context of the integration era, deems the text "post race" and the protagonist "post black." She writes: "It is within the context of the post-civil rights 1980s—in which a stable 'black' identity said to issue from a unified community is paradoxically both asserted and questioned—that a 'postmodern' critique which defamiliarizes received 'modern' identities emerges" (211). King argues that the text questions the romance of a black community, as if there "is something lacking in the

way that our identities are now constructed” that warrants a “fictionalized past of singular black community” (228).

The chapter about Sarah’s experience in her father’s church offers the most detailed description about her contradictory feelings of belonging to a community, her ambivalence toward the community, and the complexity of developing an integrated identity.<sup>7</sup> These descriptions contribute to the text’s running critique on racial authenticity. The chapter is infused with illustrations of African American culture and Sarah and Matthew’s conflicting relationship to it, which they can best identify while they are at church. For example, the protagonist describes the complexities of her church experiences:

Matthew and I, suburban children, felt a mixture of pride and animosity toward the church. On the one hand, it was a marvelous private domain, a richly decorated and infinitely suggestive playground where we were petted by a congregation that adored our father; on the other hand it seemed a bit like a dreadful old relative in the city, one who forced us into tedious visits and who linked us to a past that came to seem embarrassingly primitive as we grew older.

(18)

The text illustrates that Sarah’s sense of discomfort within the black community is not limited to her feelings about the church. She also expresses a disconnection from slavery and a past of oppression and racism. For example, the spirituals sung at the

church baptismal ceremony move her, but she “found it hard to picture the slaves as being any ancestors of mine” (26). The text shows Sarah distancing herself from the customs of black culture, even though it places her in the center of the black community. Sarah, for example, refuses to join the church over which her father presides, and muses over the thought that her “ambiguousness” with the church gives her “an inflated sense of privilege” (29). Sarah feels a sense of privilege as she distances herself from the church, and this distance and privilege eventually influence her relationship to black culture in general.

Despite these tensions of race, class, and privilege, the first section of the novel continues to grapple with racial oppression through the omnipresence of the Civil Rights Movement that historically places the novel. Sarah’s life experiences are a direct result of the political, social, and economic gains made during the Civil Rights Movement. Contrasting with the abstract image of the movement, for example, the novel illustrates the visible signs of the movement: Sarah’s Uncle Freddy is a NAACP lawyer, she attends “integration camp,” and the chapter entitled “Marching” is entirely about the 1963 March on Washington.

While her mother is vacationing in Europe and her brother is away at camp, Sarah and her father spend the summer in Washington, DC, as he helps plan the march. Even here the text juxtaposes the movement for racial equality with the Phillips’s bourgeois lives, complete with European vacations and leisure activities of the affluent. The civil rights issue is not personal for Sarah, and she accesses the present inequality that the movement seeks to address through a distant and foreign

history. Each time the text mentions the movement, the momentum is foregrounded by Sarah's ambivalence toward the subject. Sarah's thoughts about the March on Washington, for example, remind her of the Crusades and the French Revolution. The text never shows Sarah thinking about how her father's involvement in the movement affects the political rights that she enjoys.

Sarah ends up watching the march with romantic awe on television, and later she has an argument with Matthew, after which she admits "I wasn't sure what I really thought" about the events (51). Sarah is inspired by the drama of the movement, but makes no true connection between her life, black culture, and the fight for political rights. She is removed from the tumultuous activities that the black masses are experiencing as schools desegregate and she thinks of the omnipresent civil rights movement as a "dull" and "necessary burden on my conscience" (40). The text portrays Sarah only tentatively sympathizing with the large-scale and institutional attack on racism as represented by the civil rights movement and the March on Washington. The text, however, does depict Sarah's dealing with the lingering effects of racism on an individual level. For example, the middle chapters of the novel, "Servant Problems," "Matthew and Martha," "The Days of the Thunderbirds," and "An Old Woman," represent the text's examination of the integration experience and constitutes the preface to the novel's representation of white flight. During this period of her life, Sarah grapples, on a personal level, with racial inequality and the inconsistencies of race and class.

## Part II: An Integrated Experience

The Civil Rights Movement, especially the 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka* ruling that mandated the integration of public schools, sets the historical context for this novel. In addition to the explicit narration of school integration, the text also initiates an implicit discussion of white flight.

Desegregation efforts moved slowly in the 1950s but increased in the 1960s as the civil rights movement gained the nation's attention. At the same time that schools were integrating, white flight—the demographic trend of white people's move from cities into suburbs—became a national occurrence (especially in large northeastern and midwestern cities). White flight is commonly understood as the public backlash against desegregation policies that sought to integrate the nation's public schools.<sup>8</sup>

Linking school integration to the white flight phenomenon, Charles T. Clotfelter also documents white flight from public schools to private schools, arguing that as school districts became more integrated, the number of white students attending private schools grew. Clotfelter described private schools as “islands of whiteness in comparison to neighboring public schools systems” (101). He argues that acting on the private school choice is another example of avoidance behavior and reflects that the “region where desegregation had the largest effect on the racial composition of public schools attended by white students—the South—was also the region with the largest increase in private school enrollment” (184).<sup>9</sup> White flight describes Lee's narrative choices in *Sarah Phillips*. The Phillips family moves out of

the city to the suburbs, and even though the neighborhood is primarily black, it is a neighborhood segregated by class. The Phillips place their children in elite private schools—a choice that at once integrates the school and also initiates Sarah’s flight from the black community.

In the middle chapters, Sarah has graduated from her Quaker primary school and attends a prestigious, previously all-white private boarding school, Prescott School for Girls. In the chapter “Servant Problems,” Sarah officially begins her integrated life as the first black student at her school. She integrates the school in the formal sense, meaning she is a black student at a formerly segregated school. However, she does not socially integrate her school, as her interracial contact is limited to the formal aspects of the classroom. For example, she is excluded from the dance class with her school’s brother institution because the white students deliberately do not inform her of this extracurricular event. Sarah experiences other slights while integrating her school, though her experience is milder than the danger and violence that other blacks experienced while integrating public schools.<sup>10</sup> The text privileges these subtler, more individual instances of discrimination over the institutional racism and oppression that marks the era (like voting rights, desegregation, etc.). In this way, the text characterizes Sarah as concerned not with the structural and institutional instances of racism and oppression, but instead with private and personal racist slights.

Sarah is able to make one friend, Gretchen, who is also a social outcast. In the chapter “Servant Problems,” Sarah and Gretchen stumble upon the living rooms for

the school's servants and, seeing the conditions in which the black maids live, especially in contrast to the plush accommodations of the school, Sarah feels "uncomfortable," a feeling to which she is accustomed. Shortly after the incident, she reflects that the school makes her think about a poster that her brother has hanging on his wall: "a flock of white geese flying on a strong diagonal against a dark sky—except if you looked at it another way it was a flock of geese heading in the opposite direction" (57).<sup>11</sup> The print represents to Sarah the stark lines drawn between race and class, as well as her integration with whites that leads to segregation from other blacks. Sarah, no doubt, feels that the geese, grouped by color, represent the racial choice present in her life. Everything in her existence, especially the integration model, tells her to flee from blackness, as the white and black geese travel in opposite directions in the print. The text portrays Sarah shunning the black characters as a representation of her difference from them and also as a representation of her privileged, integrated social class. The black staff at Prescott, for example, collectively feel a racial allegiance to Sarah, though they are on opposite ends of the class spectrum. Sarah notes that the cook always waves to her, but she ignores him because his attention "filled me with a mixture of confusion and embarrassment" (52). The cook's attention and her response to it only contributes to her distance from black people and her ultimate progression toward white flight.

Despite Sarah's distance from the black employees, the consequence, utter isolation, offers her no solace. Sarah tells her parents that her experience at school is like being a character in a play because everyone is always watching her. They

respond with trepidation: “We have to be careful. That school might ruin Sarah,” says her father (53). Her parents have a distinct perception of the role that integration should play in their children’s lives. They expect that integration will give their children more social and economic advantages, but that their children will continue to identify with the traditions of the black middle class.

Sarah’s integrated experience is a privileged one, and using the language of George Lipsitz, the text portrays Sarah as “investing” in class status, just as Lipsitz argues that white people are encouraged to “expend time and energy on the creation and re-creation of whiteness.” According to Lipsitz, “nonwhite people (can) become active agents of white supremacy as well as passive participants in its hierarchy and rewards ... becoming an insider by participating in the exclusion of other outsiders” (viii). Portrayals of the black middle class are not a recent phenomenon and class distinctions have long figured into the themes of African American texts. But texts that feature narratives set after integration illustrate a more powerful form of privilege and fictionally portray Lipsitz’s concept that minorities benefit from white privilege when they invest in class hierarchy.

As both Sarah and her brother develop social aspirations distinct from the traditional goals of their parents, Sarah eventually expresses her desire to be a part of the white, upper middle class mainstream. Though she and Gretchen feign contentment with their status at Prescott School, Sarah reveals her secret desire to be included in the white social world at school:



But I had a secret: I wanted to fit in, really fit in, and if Lissa Randolph or Kemp Massie, rulers of the Olympian band of suntanned, gold-bangled popular girls, shimmering in their Fair Isle sweaters, had so much as crooked a finger at me, I would have left Gretchen and followed the way the apostles followed Christ. No one knew my secret—not my parents, who bragged with relief about my levelheaded adjustment; not my brother, Matthew, who might have understood. At night I gloated over a vision of myself transformed by some magical agency into a Shetland-clad blonde with a cute blip of a nick-name; reading the Sunday paper, I searched out references to Prescott in the society wedding announcements. (Lee 56)

Sarah admits that only her brother Matthew, who is more successful at social integration than is Sarah, would be able to understand this perspective. At this point in the novel, Sarah only has one friend, while Matthew is dating interracial—an activity that is purely social. While in college, Matthew brings his white girlfriend home for a weekend. The elder Phillips, disapproving of interracial relationships, believe that Matthew has gone too far with integration and urge him to find a proper black girl to settle down with. Both Sarah and Matthew find their parents' view of pro-civil rights and integration, but anti-interracial romance, hypocritical.

In the final chapter of this section, Sarah is thrust back into the realm of a raced experience when she and her mother visit an elderly parishioner, Mrs. Jellers,

on their way to a shopping trip. Instead of pleasant small talk, Mrs. Jellers recounts a horrifying story of her oppression as a woman of color. Sarah's response to the woman reflects the distance she feels about her own racial identity:

The sight of this old woman with the bare legs and shamelessly tossing breasts both disgusted and fascinated me; seeing her was shocking in a curiously intimate way, like learning a terrifying secret about myself.

(Lee 83)

Sarah's embarrassment here is the same embarrassment that she feels about her father's arrest during a civil rights event and that she feels about witnessing the maid's quarters at Prescott. She admits after the meeting with Mrs. Jellers that "For the first time, I was sensing the complicated possibilities of my own flesh—possibilities of corruption, confused pleasure, even death" (85). Instead of discussing these "complicated possibilities," Sarah and her mother continue on their shopping trip and do not mention the incident. By shifting the narrative to a shopping trip, the text signals that Sarah refuses to deal with her relation to past racial oppression, but instead embraces the materialism and middle-class ideology of the present.<sup>12</sup> Sarah's parents continually give her the choice of whether or not to develop a relationship to the black community. Sarah continually decides against it.

The text presents competing prospects for Sarah as a representative integrated African American that lie between her "authentic" place within the black middle class and her aspiration to transcend race. Sarah and her mother visit Mrs. Jellers as an

outreach function dictated by their relationship to the church over which Sarah's father presides. They visit this elder because of their allegiance to a common bond—the black church and the black community. The text places Sarah in a position to forge an alliance with this woman based on common history, but it then pardons Sarah from progression toward developing community ties. Nicole King explains this discord in terms of the tension between the individualism of the American Dream and the communalism of racial uplift. She argues that the Phillips's "class aspirations—sought after and achieved individualistically yet framed by the concept of uplifting the entire race—expose the naïve vision of a racial solidarity that reaches across generations as well as income levels" (King 218). King points out the inherent complexities between the doctrine of racial uplift and the inevitably ensuing class stratification that is one of the results of integration.

The text presents the contending forces of racial identity, American individualism, and class stratification. Sarah's response to these forces is that she does not want to be forever connected to the black bourgeois world with its occasional reminders of racism and a history of oppression. Instead, Sarah desires what France Windance Twine describes as a "racially neutral" identity. In her sociological study, "Brown Skinned White Girls: Class, Culture, and the Construction of White Identity in Suburban Communities," Twine aims to fill the gap in whiteness studies of research that investigates the influence of whiteness on those who are legally black. Her study examines how whiteness affects and influences women of African descent who grow up in suburban communities and argues that middle class

hegemony allows African-descended women “access to a white cultural identity” (224). Twine further argues that middle-class consumer culture “reveals the relationship between the ability to purchase material goods and the development of a class versus a racial allegiance” (226). The text suggests that the life Sarah’s parents provide for her, an integrated experience with material privileges, poises her for an integrated life in the white community. And while the elder Phillips try to ground Sarah in her history as a black American by taking her to see Mrs. Jellers, they offer her access to white identity by offering her means to conflate white culture with material culture. Sarah’s mother, in effect, gives Sarah permission to privilege her identity as a wealthy, educated, integrated American who also happens to be black.

### Part III: White Flight

As I have described, in the first section of the novel, Sarah lives clearly within the black community, and that part of the text is filled with images of other black people. In the second section of the novel, black characters appear more infrequently and Sarah is an agent of integration who is occasionally willing to grapple with issues of race and class. In the third and last section of the novel, Sarah has graduated from Prescott and attends Harvard. It is here, in the chapters “Negatives,” “Fine Points,” and “In France” that the text progresses from integration to white flight.<sup>13</sup> The text depicts Sarah mastering integration (both formal and social) and beginning to enclose herself in the white world. In the Harvard chapters, which represent the text’s

progression from integration toward white flight, Lee suddenly de-historicizes Sarah's experiences. This narrative break with historical circumstances—and narrative end of depicting black characters and the black community—signals the text's sojourn into whiteness and represents the protagonist's "white flight."

The 1970s was a period of high visibility for African Americans at Harvard. Lee, however, peoples the chapters set there with only one other black person besides the protagonist, shifting the significance of racial history and also reassigning the influence of race. While in the previous chapters the ironies of Sarah's life were alluded to, if not directly commented on, by the time Sarah goes to Harvard, the text no longer contends with the dilemma of race. Sarah's integrated identity and ambivalence toward race function as "racial choice," as she now has the ability to choose how and when race will impact her life. For example, the text does not describe other black people at the university but specifically reveals the numerous white people whom she befriends and dates.

At Harvard, the only other black person in the narrative is Sarah's childhood friend, Curry. Sarah and Curry stumble upon each other, and for a short while enjoy each other's company and shared interest in art and photography. They both acknowledge that entering into a romantic relationship would make sense—given their similar background and general and mutual fondness. However, they resist the urge to sustain a friendship or a romantic relationship because they "harbored ill-conceived ideals of leading lives that would almost geometrically contravene anything of which [their] parents would approve" (89). Entering into a relationship

with Curry would place Sarah back into the black bourgeois community—a position she desperately wishes to avoid. Curry, too, prefers to date interracially—his girlfriend at the time is Philippa, a blonde New Yorker.

Sarah's narrative segregation from other blacks is incongruous with the historical increase of black presence at Harvard during those same years that the text places Sarah there. Randall Kennedy's edited volume of reflections and analyses of the history of African Americans at Harvard documents that the number of black students, professors, and administrators grew in the late 1960s and early 1970s—due mainly to the impact of the civil rights movement influencing the nation's politics during this period (Kennedy). Also of serious note, campus life at Harvard witnessed two major racial controversies in the 1960s: In 1963, black students organized the Association of African and Afro-American Students, and in 1968-69 the Afro-American Studies Department was created. Kennedy theorizes that just as other public institutions became integrated “the history of blacks at Harvard mirrors, for better or for worse, the history of blacks in the United States” (Kennedy xvii). However, none of this controversy is present in the narrative; this experience is invisible in the Harvard chapters of Sarah Phillips, as is any other discussion of racial injustice that existed. As Harvard historically becomes more integrated, Sarah is presented narratively as more segregated from other black people.

Kennedy goes on to emphasize that “ambivalence is the word that best captures the way in which most African American students, professors, administrators, guests, and alumni seem to have perceived, and reacted to, Harvard”

(Kennedy xxx). That ambivalence is present in Farah Jasmine Griffin's selection for Kennedy's volume, "On Hair and Harvard." In it she speaks of the social and intellectual alienation she felt while at Harvard and the measures she took (visiting black hair salons for emotional support) to combat that alienation. In contrast, the alienation that both Kennedy and Griffin describe and that Griffin narrates in her selection is completely absent in Lee's selection, "Fine Points."<sup>14</sup>

The Harvard chapters of Sarah Phillips illustrate Sarah's successful social integration into the white world and her subsequent flight from race. She sustains close friendships with white people, has a white roommate, and dates white men exclusively. At the end of this period, Sarah's senior year, her father dies unexpectedly. She returns to Philadelphia for the funeral service, and surrounded by grief, mourning, family and friends, this event serves as a tipping point for Sarah. While at Harvard, Sarah contents herself with integration and the white flight that a Cambridge life could offer her. But after her father's death and her matriculation through college, Sarah is propelled even more deeply into whiteness and is significantly more alienated from the black world.

The chapter, "In France," represents Sarah's ultimate experimentation with white flight. No other era of her life more reflects the tension between white flight and racial allegiance than Sarah's young adult years in France because it is at this time that Sarah understands most acutely that she cannot escape U.S.-based racial categories.<sup>15</sup> The text has been building toward white flight, first, as the text positions Sarah as an agent of integration, and then also in her Harvard years when

the text erases blackness from her life. Now, finally, while the protagonist is in France, the text attempts to catapult Sarah into a space devoid of American race. In this chapter Sarah is in Europe, and continues with her quest to live and identify simply as an integrated, and thereby race-neutral, American. The text also portrays Sarah's attempt to further develop a class identity while discarding a racial identity.

While traveling in France, Sarah feels a sense of belonging because she is among "scores of [other] Americans [who] were still gamely struggling to cast off kin and convention in a foreign tongue, and I was among them" (Lee 4). Sarah adopts the notorious Kate, a rich American girl from Chicago, as a "sister" and alter ego. Sarah constantly thinks of her even though she has never met her—the idea of her allows Sarah to imagine herself outside of racial categories and unburdened by race. But the text is clear that Sarah's desire to deny race is not strong enough to overpower her own subconscious. Sarah passively searches for other blacks in Paris, and even admits that "some chemistry of air, soil, and civilization filled me with unwilling nostalgia, and I kept a sharp lookout in London for certain types of tourists: prosperous black Americans, a little overdressed and a bit uneasy in hotel lobbies, who could instantly identify where I came from, and who might know my family" (8). Despite these feelings of nostalgia toward tradition, Sarah's existence in France is the opposite of what her parents would expect for her. She quits her graduate program because her French boyfriend, Henri, suggests it, and ends up spending all of her time loafing with him and his friends.



Obsessed with American southern culture and having spent time in Texas, Henri routinely dons a confederate cap and sings the confederate anthem “Dixie”—as insensitive to Sarah’s history as she is. He even imagines Sarah as his African queen and little Indian, taunting her by calling her his “Reine d’Afrique, petite Indienne.” Part of Sarah’s attraction to Henri is his crude opinions about the history of U. S. race. She actually encourages racist jokes at her own expense, as if his behavior elicits a freedom from the gravity of racial allegiance. The climax of the chapter, however, occurs when Henri complains that Sarah is not fashionable enough and that she looks like a savage. He then continues to tell a shameless joke about Sarah’s fictional heritage comprising an Irish mother and an ape-father.

Until this moment Sarah has operated under the assumption that racism and racial identity had become a moot point. Living in Paris among white Americans and Europeans, she endeavors to experience life as though racial difference is insignificant. And to prove it, she participates in a culture of racist mocking. Though Sarah makes an effort to forget Philadelphia and transform herself into a raceless American traveling abroad, she admits that her thoughts return often to her life in Philadelphia. However, Sarah admits that in this situation the joke “illuminated for me with blinding clarity the hopeless presumption of trying to discard my portion of America ... I felt furious and betrayed by the intensity of nameless emotion it had called forth in me” (12). Sarah’s fury is accentuated by her characteristic placidity; alone in the bathroom, she utters “Oh, dear” and gently bites

her knee. She then decides to return home to Philadelphia and confesses her failed experiment with white flight:

Before that afternoon, how wonderfully simple it had seemed to be ruthless, to cut off ties with the griefs, embarrassments, and constraints of a country, a family; what an awful joke it was to find, as I had found, that nothing could be dissolved or thrown away. (15)

She then describes that what will follow will be a “complicated return” to her life in the U.S.

Conclusion: The Complicated, Yet Inevitable, Return to Race

Because the novel begins with the “In France” chapter, even though the events of that chapter conclude the novel’s narrative, it becomes important to consider why Lee structures the text so that the narrative begins where the story chronologically ends. The novel begins with the protagonist having attempted to flee from American racialism in favor of a class-based identity in France. Sarah’s sojourn in France represents the text’s passage from integration to white flight. Marilyn Elkins argues that Sarah’s return to the United States is a conscious and deliberate acquiescence to the tradition of racial protest. I argue that Lee’s protagonist returns to the U.S. to assess her identity, and her ambivalence overpowers any sense of “affirmation” that this act might imply.<sup>16</sup>

Though integration creates an opportunity to exchange a racial identity for an integrated and classed identity, the opportunity to abandon race does not fully materialize. Sarah realizes that she has less control over racial identity than she imagined, and the text confirms that racial choice is an ideal that does not materialize. For example, while in France Sarah's middle class African American social and racial identity continues to haunt her as she imagines other African Americans traveling. The image of members of her father's church people her dreams, and she realizes that her status as an integrated American has not completely suppressed her racial identity.

She is insulted by Henri's constant racial harangue, proving that a raceless identity remains unachievable. The text insists that Sarah cannot escape into an integrated identity unfettered by race, her flight into what she had hoped would be a "racially anonymous" experience in France is doomed, and that she must return to the United States where all are racially marked. The text experiments with moving beyond the influence of race by employing integration and white flight in the narrative and as a structure for the text. Ultimately, however, the text insists that race is inescapable.

Through her writings and interviews Lee has presented numerous portrayals of integration and has consistently questioned its significance and influence on identity. For example, in "Back to School," Lee's 1996 essay in The New Yorker, she writes about her experience in visiting her alma mater, which she had integrated thirty years prior, with her daughter who is a perspective student there.<sup>17</sup> She

explains that her daughter, who was born in Europe, “views the civil-rights struggles of the sixties as an antique heroic cycle . . . and sees her mother’s experience as a singularly tame example of integration” (168). Finding that her school has been dramatically affected by sustained integration and liberal multiculturalism, complete with a more racially diverse student body and faculty as well as the usual markers of the multicultural era, Lee is “disarmed and delighted” by the realization that her daughter will have a more positive experience. In a tense moment her daughter asks her why she cannot just forget the injustices of the past, and the elder Lee responds “The important thing is to pardon, even with joy, when the time comes—but never . . . to forget” (168).

In “Back to School,” Lee implies that integration has created change—a difference in the racial makeup of institutions, as well as a more nuanced difference in social interactions between the races. She also suggests that the most significant change, however, is the way that generations born after integration and born into middle class privilege, as represented by Lee’s daughter and Sarah Phillips, will attempt to understand and interpret racial difference as a concern of the past.

That Lee in this 1996 essay advises her daughter not to forget the past suggests the workings of the unconscious that are present in the novel. The mother, Andrea Lee, realizes that it is not so easy to dispense with the workings of race and racism when you know that all the abstractions about racial anonymity will not be able to offset the continued power of white supremacy.

## Notes to Chapter One

1. “Sex and the City” was an Emmy award-winning HBO series in production from 1998 to 2004 starring Sarah Jessica Parker. The series features four sophisticated, sexy, and career- driven single white women as they seek satisfaction through shopping and dating.
2. See Claudia Tate’s Psychoanalysis and Black Novels: Desire and the Protocols of Race for a more complete description and discussion of her term, “racial protocol.”
3. Originally published in 1984, the text was reissued in 1993 by The Northeastern Library of Black Literature edited by Richard Yarborough.
4. “Young, Gifted and Black” is also the title of Mary Helen Washington’s review of the novel printed in Women’s Review of Books 2 (March 1985).
5. See Sherley Anne Williams’s “Roots of Privilege” for a detailed discussion of the influence of the rise of the black middle class in select contemporary texts by African American authors.
6. The four chapters of the novel that chronicle Sarah’s life before she becomes an agent of integration are: “New African,” “Mother,” “Gypsies,” and “Marching.”
7. The protagonist’s integrated identity refers to the way she views her middle class and integrated experiences as central to her distinctiveness.
8. This demographic shift, however, was also the result of both the migration of

African Americans to cities during the decline of the sharecropping system, as well as the New Deal policies and economic boom of WWII that served as a catalyst for white Americans to flee from American cities to the suburbs.

9. For statistical evidence of white flight in terms of residential patterns and school enrollment data, see Clotfelter, Chapter 3.
10. For example, Sarah auditions for a role in the school play and is automatically given the role of Rheba, the black maid.
11. The poster is “Day and Night,” 1938, by Dutch graphic artist M. C. Escher. Escher’s wood-cut works are characterized by attention to space and contrasts between black and white and attempts to challenge the conventions of visual perception.
12. Lee portrays Sarah and her mother participating in the material culture of “shopping therapy” mentioned in the introduction of this chapter.
13. Lee places “In France” as the first chapter of the novel though the events of the chapter logically and chronologically place it at the end of the novel after “Negatives” and “Fine Points.” This narrative choice will be discussed in the conclusion of this chapter.
14. Lee’s selection for Blacks at Harvard is a chapter from Sarah Phillips—an account of Sarah’s relationship with her college roommate, Margaret, and their competing interests in dating members of the faculty.

15. Lee's 2006 novel, Lost Hearts in Italy, which details the experiences of a similar expatriate black American in Italy continues this subject to a greater degree.
16. On the issue of Sarah's narrative return, in "The Limits of Modernity: Andrea Lee's Sarah Phillips," W. Lawrence Hogue faults the text for its failed modernism and its reluctance to produce a protagonist to break completely from the past and tradition. Don M. Enomoto praises the novel for the very reasons that Hogue critiques it in "Irreconcilable Differences: 'Creative Destruction' and the Fashioning of a Self in Sarah Phillips." Enomoto discusses the discord between theory and tradition and also between essentialism and postmodernism and argues that Lee's success is that she "delineates the limitations of modernism, postmodernism, and traditional black criticism, and suggests that our hope lies in the ability to combine the best aspects of each perspective" (215).
17. "Back to School" appeared in the "Black in America" special issue of The New Yorker in 1996.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Racial Choice and the Contemporary Passing Paradigm

“Before all of this radical ambiguity, I was a black girl.”  
Danzy Senna, “The Mulatto Millennium”

In Sarah Phillips, Andrea Lee examines the influence of integration on racial identity. Addressing the white flight phenomenon as a narrative structure and an influence to the main character’s identity, Chapter One focused on the particular racial consciousness that is a result of that historic moment. I argued that Lee’s novel illustrates a sense of racial ambiguity that results from integration and that it represents a distinguishable shift in the racial consciousness of the late twentieth century. Danzy Senna’s Caucasia attends to a different historic moment that registers a similar shift in contemporary racial identity politics. Published in 1998 amid heated discussions about recognizing a federal multiracial category, Senna’s first novel, Caucasia, interrogates the questions that arise out of that discussion. It also illustrates a particular kind of racialization that is heightened by the Black Power Movement of the 1970s.

Because the novel takes place in the 1970s it would be anachronistic to signify the 2000 Census, but what Caucasia omits, Senna writes about elsewhere. The racial subject of Caucasia reflects the 1990s discourse of racial categories—a subject that



Danzy Senna addresses in her essays and interviews. For example, in her contribution to Half and Half: Writers on Growing Up Biracial and Bicultural, Senna states, “Mulattos may not be new. But the mulatto-pride folks are a new generation. They want their own special category or no categories at all” (“The Mulatto Millennium” 14). Senna is referring to the fact that in the 1990s, a grass roots movement of parents of mixed race children lobbied government to be able to count their children as multiracial.<sup>1</sup>

Senna contextualizes her passing novel within the debate that has surfaced in the last quarter of the twentieth century about the racial categories of mixed-race people, forging a connection between the literary passing form and the contemporary debate about racial categories. But what is most significant about Caucasia is the way in which it revises, extends, and critiques the African American literary form of the passing novel. From the nineteenth century on, the passing narrative was the form most often used to expose the inconsistencies of race in the U.S., allowing African American writers to critique racial ideologies and practices. Senna is fully aware of this literary tradition and uses the passing form to expose the inconsistencies of contemporary racial categories and the false binaries necessary to maintain them. Yet, she also sets out to revise the tradition in several ways, including reversing the trope of the tragic mulatto and departing from the minority-majority subject-identity passing paradigm. By revising the passing narrative, Senna not only brings to light the form’s continued capacity to critically assess the racial hierarchy, especially within the contemporary framework of race, but also points up the false divisions

necessary to maintain racial categories and the difficulty of narrating outside of the racial hierarchy.

### History of the Passing Narrative

Racial passing implies that a person is pretending to possess a racial identity that he or she is not legally entitled to, according to the one-drop rule that establishes that individuals with any amount of “black blood” in their heritage cannot claim whiteness. Passing operates under the assumption that race has essential characteristics that individuals either own or do not own, which reinforces our binary identification system. In The Passing Figure: Racial Confusion in Modern American Literature, Juda Bennett suggests that the origin of the term “passing” stems from both “the pass”—meaning the physical piece of paper that allowed a slave to travel alone freely—and the action of passing (i.e., to go by), as “white skin is itself a ‘pass’ that allowed for some light-skinned slaves to escape their masters” (Bennett 36). Bennet’s definition emphasizes the function of passing that allowed slaves to experience freedom from slavery. But the practice of passing extended after emancipation.

Werner Sollors offers other motivations and what he calls the “typologies” of passing. They include passing for opportunism, love, political reasons, and thrill. He also describes the distinctions between passing inadvertently or involuntarily, as well

as full-time and part-time passing (Sollors, Neither Black nor White yet Both: Thematic Explorations of Interracial Literature). His discussion allows for the idea that historically, passing allowed greater mobility of different kinds and that it is not only an antebellum occurrence. For example, legal scholar Cheryl Harris writes about her grandmother, who in the 1930s passes for white in order to gain employment in a Chicago department store. Harris explains that her grandmother's ability to pass for white is an economic asset and, thus, her whiteness can be counted as property. She writes, "Becoming white meant gaining access to a whole set of public and private privileges that materially and permanently guaranteed basic subsistence needs, and, therefore, survival" (Harris, "Whiteness as Property" 277).

Passing functioned during and after slavery as an avenue for freedom (among other goals, as explained by Sollors), and also as a popular narrative form. The passing narrative has remained a common trope throughout the African American literary tradition, and Clotel and Our Nig, two of the earliest novels by African American authors were passing novels.<sup>2</sup> Passing novels were so prevalent that M. Giulia Fabi argues that the "centrality [of the passing form contributes] to the rise and development of the African American novelistic tradition" (Fabi 4). Major passing novels can be categorized into those produced in the early period (from the 1850s to the 1890s) and those produced during the Harlem Renaissance.

Early passing narratives functioned to expose the cruelty of slavery and to elicit sympathy from the white reading public who would identify with the white-looking protagonist. This process of white identification and subsequent heightened

sensitivity and sympathy resulted in the “tragedy” of the mulatto figure. Passing narratives during the nadir functioned as a response to the terror of white prejudice. Passing narratives throughout the African American literary tradition, including the most recent examples, have been used to expose the constructedness of whiteness, and they do so by adhering to standard characteristics.

### Synopsis of the Novel and the Passing Form

Though it is executed in a different political, historical, and cultural context, passing in Caucasia functions in a similar way to the passing narratives of the antebellum and Harlem Renaissance eras. Senna deliberately crafts this novel around the passing narrative, a trope that helps her to expose the inconsistencies of contemporary racial categories and the false binaries necessary to maintain them.<sup>3</sup> Her novel conforms to the basic passing narrative form by featuring a mixed-race protagonist, presenting discussions of racial injustice, portraying a sense of secrecy, portraying the in-group clairvoyant character, and depicting the return home.<sup>4</sup>

The most fundamental way the text conforms to the traditional passing narrative is by featuring a mixed-race character. Though occasionally the biracial status of the passing figure is not central, or is vague,<sup>5</sup> usually the race of the parents in a passing narrative is a source of tension or is significant to the plot. For example, in Frances Harper’s 1892 novel, Iola Leroy, the fact that the protagonist’s mother is black and was previously her white father’s slave is central to the plot of the novel.

Likewise, the protagonist's mixed-race status is integral to the movement of the plot in Caucasia.

Caucasia is set in the mid 1970s, only a few years after the 1976 Supreme Court decision *Loving v. Virginia*, which found anti-miscegenation laws to be unconstitutional. And though interracial relationships were a reality, if not legally acknowledged, the *Loving* case was the first that legally recognized interracial marriages on a federal level.<sup>6</sup> Caucasia focuses on what becomes of the families that result from miscegenated marriages by representing how race and color can distort a family unit. Senna constructs the Lee family as an example of a family ruined partially by the dichotomous logic of race.

The novel opens with the biracial protagonist, Birdie, and her older sister Cole, living in a nuclear family that is quickly disintegrating. Their mother is Sandy Lodge Lee, a white Cambridge WASP, who has refashioned herself into a Black Power Movement activist and thus is politically and domestically involved with the black community. She is married to Birdie and Cole's father Deck Lee, a black former ghetto youth turned Ivy League intellectual whom she met while he was her father's graduate student at Harvard.

The novel takes place amidst the political upheaval of the Black Power Movement in the late 1970s,<sup>7</sup> and in this way conforms to the convention of presenting discussions of racial injustice in traditional passing narratives. The text does this by constantly representing the dichotomous nature of race and depicting the racially charged political climate. Drawing from the momentum of the Civil Rights

Movement, “Black Power” became a battle cry attributed to Stokely Carmichael of the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Both SNCC and The Black Panther Party for Self Defense, in their struggle for black self-determination against the forces of white oppression, provide the political backdrop to this novel because Sandy and Deck are a part of the Black Panther Party.

Though both parents align themselves politically with the Black Power struggle, their racial difference is important because it creates incessant racial divisions in their children’s lives. For example, instead of thinking about her family in terms of her maternal and paternal relatives, Birdie always distinguishes between her black family and her white family. When reflecting on her paternal grandmother, Birdie thinks: “We always referred to her as Nana, to distinguish her from our white one, who was always Grandma” (Senna 8, emphasis mine). The distinctions between blackness and whiteness, which function to bifurcate Birdie’s life, are also a part of Senna’s intent to challenge the dichotomous logic of race.

On the opposite end of the black/white divide, Birdie and Cole briefly attend a Black Nationalist school where they are initially shunned because of their perceived inauthentic and ambiguous racial identity. From the beginning of the novel their racial identity is questioned. But they quickly pick up on racial cues and successfully perform stereotypes of blackness like learning slang and wearing their hair in cornrow braids that are popular in the black community.

Racial divisions escalate when Sandy and Deck separate shortly after the novel begins. Sandy maintains custody of both children at first, but a more

permanent arrangement is needed after Sandy commits an unnamed political act that is connected to her involvement with the political unrest of the 1970s. As a result, the family splits up along racial and color lines because the authorities will be looking for a fugitive white woman with black children. The parents decide to travel with the child who phenotypically most resembles them, the child that “fits” the perception of federal racial categories. Cole had long been her father’s favorite child because she has dark skin, and when the family separates Cole travels to Brazil with Deck.<sup>8</sup> Because of her whiter skin and straight hair, Birdie travels with her mother to New Hampshire, passing for white to further protect her and Sandy from being identified by the police.

Thus, Caucasia also conforms to the sense of secrecy inherent in the passing narrative because Sandy and Birdie’s fugitive status forces Birdie to pass as white. Birdie and Sandy settle in a small town in New Hampshire as Sheila and Jessie Goldman. But Birdie never stops mourning the demise of her family unit or the loss of her beloved sister.

The text places Jewishness as a kind of third racialized identity located between blackness and whiteness. While in New Hampshire, Sandy creates a Jewish identity for Birdie because she believes that it would be a more believable explanation for Birdie’s dark hair. Sandy chooses this identity also in a misguided effort to shield Birdie from anti-black racism, but instead Birdie is ridiculed for her perceived Jewish background. Senna’s deployment of a mixed-race protagonist, who passes as a Jew and lives in a majority white community, embeds the text with an

enduring sense of the unfamiliar. Birdie's continually unfamiliar state of racial identity underscores the complexity of racial allegiances. Even while passing in her invented life, Birdie's identity grants her not peace and anonymity, but instead produces more prejudice and bigotry in her life.

While in New Hampshire, Birdie befriends the landlord's son, Nicholas Marsh, and a local girl named Mona, who both unknowingly offend Birdie with their racist comments. Birdie is forced to conceal her feelings and the fact that she is black. She is not allowed to talk about her old black life in Boston, and not only must she keep her black identity a secret, but she must also keep her fugitive identity a secret as well. The connection between Birdie's secret black identity and her fugitive position highlights the value of whiteness and the converse, the perceived liability of blackness. It is the secrecy of her race and fugitive status that most contributes to Birdie's unhappiness because she misses the other part of her family and also being a part of the black community.

The only reminder she has of her family or of her black life is her box of "negrobilia" that her father and Cole leave for her. Before they leave for Brazil, Deck and Cole give Birdie a cardboard box filled with remnants from their life in Boston. It includes markers of blackness like an afro pick and a program from an event at their Black Nationalist school. But even this small comfort, a material marker of race and identity, must remain private.

The novel also conforms to the passing narrative by portraying Birdie's classmate, Samantha, as the "in-group clairvoyant" character that Amy Robinson



describes in her theory of passing. The in-group clairvoyant relies on the idea that “it takes one to know one,” meaning that it takes another (racial) group insider to be able to read the racial markers of other group members. Robinson analyzes passing in terms of the participants in the action. She argues that in order for passing to occur, there must be at least three participants: the passer—the person who passes, the dupe—the person who believes the visual identity of the passer, and the in-group clairvoyant—the person who witnesses the pass and knows the real race of the person who is passing. Arguing that passing as represented in identity politics can be seen as racial literacy, Robinson states that “the claim to tell who is or who isn’t a member of one’s community of identity is more important than knowing if one’s suspicions are correct” (Robinson 723).

Samantha is a biracial girl in Birdie’s New Hampshire school who is raised by her adoptive white parents. Both Birdie and Samantha practice racial literacy: Birdie, the passer, as she sympathizes with Samantha for not being properly schooled in black culture; and Samantha as she correctly reads Birdie’s physical (and racial) body. Samantha is the first black person Birdie has seen in a long time, and the sight of her arrests Birdie: “The girl was black like me—half, that is. I could spot another one immediately. But her blackness was visible” (Senna 189). Samantha’s presence forces Birdie to relive her struggle as a biracial child trying to fit into an unaccepting culture. Samantha and Birdie’s racial literacy highlights the importance of being able to read race and read bodies especially because that racial recognition is an important emotional and psychological encounter for Birdie.

Peer pressure forces Birdie to shun Samantha, but deep down she longs to reach out to Samantha and help her fully appreciate herself in order to counter the constant negativity the town shows toward her. Instead, Birdie lives with the tension of passing, but finally breaks down after Samantha reveals that she knows that Birdie is black.

After being outed by Samantha, Birdie runs away from New Hampshire and returns to Boston to find information about her father and sister. Birdie's return home serves as a final example of how the novel conforms to the traditional passing narrative. She goes to the house that she grew up in, but of course another family lives there. She also visits her aunt and seeks out her old friend, Ali, whose father helps Birdie locate her father by telling her the truth about where her father has been all these years. Deck and Cole lived in Brazil for only two years, and he has since been living in Oakland, California. That there has been no real barrier to their reunification upsets Birdie because she has until this point believed that her father and Cole have been inaccessible. The significance of Birdie's revelation is a reiteration of the constructedness of racial divisions.

After Birdie confronts her father in Oakland, she goes to Berkeley to reunite with her sister. Senna ends Caucasia in Berkeley, California, a clear invocation of the multiracial category Census movement. During their reunion, Cole explains to Birdie that the Bay Area of California is a region that is inhabited by many biracial people. Senna ends the novel with Birdie and Cole in Berkeley, a place that is known for its

connection to the contemporary debate over choosing race through multiracial identity.

## Part I: Revising the Form, De-essentializing Passing Characters

Caucasia exposes the inconsistencies of racial categories and critiques the production and maintenance of racial binaries, which has been the passing form's historic function. But Senna's twentieth century version of the passing narrative extends the form by interrogating the very meaning of racial categories in a more critical way than her predecessors. Instead of only emphasizing the falsity of racial categories, Senna revises the passing form—by extending the candidates for passing and reversing the tragic idea of the mulatto—to point up the influence of racial essentialism, racial literacy, and racial performance that undergird the contemporary racial hierarchy.

Consider, for example, the distinction between earlier passing narratives' approach to analyzing race and the approach waged in Caucasia. In Autobiography and other classic passing texts, an important narrative strategy is the moment in which the protagonist realizes that he or she is a part of the black race. In the following passage from Autobiography, the narrator describes the precarious nature of racial identification:

And so I have often lived through that hour, that day, that week in which was wrought the miracle of my transition from one world into another; for I did

indeed pass into another world. From that time I looked out through other eyes, my thoughts were colored, my words dictated, my actions limited by one dominating, all-pervading idea which constantly increased in force and weight until I finally realized in it a great, tangible fact. (Johnson 9)

In the above passage, the narrator of Autobiography asks readers to consider the fact that there are racial categories and that they are arbitrarily created. Before this moment, the narrator believes that because his skin is white, he is as white as his peers. But he is struck by the reality of the binary racial project and the fact that a person who appears to be white can, because of the one-drop rule, indeed be legally black. This and other passing texts highlight the fact that race is a legal and social construct, but they also maintain it by continuing to use and accept a binary racial paradigm by which they either pass for white or live as black.

Caucasia also scrutinizes the assumed characteristics of race and challenges their relevance in racial identity. But instead of questioning how the racial line is drawn or questioning what characteristics are depicted as black or white according to the one-drop rule, Caucasia investigates racial identity on a deeper level, ultimately asserting that the entire concept of race is an illusion. This text focuses instead on the performative effect of racial difference, the perceived cultural and behavioral traits. At stake in this novel is not whether Birdie is legally defined as black or white; in a way, that distinction is an afterthought. What is more important is the weight and the process of her decision to choose a racial identity—whether it be assuming authentic

black behavior to fit into the black community or suppressing that behavior to fit into the white community. The constant focus on the ability of Birdie to morph easily from one racialized identity to another hints at the illusory nature of race and its shifting significance. In this way, Senna moves the racial discourse past exposing the inconsistencies of racial categories by departing from the minority-majority subject-identity passing paradigm and reversing the idea of the tragic mulatto—both which speak to the particular material and historic context of this novel.

I now turn to showing how Senna extends the passing narrative by departing from the traditional passing narrative that only represents passing as the movement from a minority to a majority subject identity, like black characters passing for white characters. In Caucasia, black characters passing for white are compared with black characters passing for black and white characters passing for specific variations on whiteness. By reversing the passer's race, and thereby extending the candidates for passing, the novel emphasizes the role of racial essentialism in maintaining racial categories, including the related influence of racial literacy and racial performance.

Diana Fuss defines essentialism as a “belief in true essence—that which is most irreducible, unchanging, and therefore constitutive of a given person or thing.” She locates essentialism in opposition to constructionism, which she argues “insists that essence is itself a historical construction.” Constructionists are concerned with “the production and organization of differences, and they therefore reject the idea that any essential or natural givens precede the processes of social determinism” (Fuss 2-3). I engage the discourse of essentialism to the purpose that Fuss suggests, to

examine its representation as a product to be studied. She introduces the term, stating: “In and of itself, essentialism is neither good nor bad, progressive nor reactionary, beneficial nor dangerous. The question we should be asking is not “is this text essentialist (and therefore ‘bad’)?” but rather, “if this text is essentialist, what motivates its deployment?” (Fuss xi). To this end, my discussion of Caucasia’s essentialist project aims to determine Senna’s literary objectives, which are showing how passing functions in the contemporary era and extends the passing narrative beyond the minority to majority paradigm.

The novel scrutinizes Birdie and Cole’s essential racial characteristics to examine the tendency of portraying passing as a movement from the minority to majority subject position, or from blackness to whiteness. Senna uses the scrutiny of essential racial characteristics to introduce the concept of passing from (relative) whiteness to blackness, emphasizing the historic and political context of the novel. In order to take on blackness, the novel portrays Birdie and Cole learning to read and perform essential characteristics of blackness. Their father, Deck, insists that the girls attend the Black Nationalist inspired Nkrumah School where they are properly schooled on black history and culture. It is when they attend Nkrumah that Birdie and Cole make a conscious effort to choose race and that the text begins to focus on the ability to perform and read essential racial characteristics. For Birdie and Cole, physical markers like skin color, hair texture, and clothing style; language; black family; and heteronormativity represent essential blackness. The girls fail to move beyond the stereotypical markers of race and they constantly make racial identity

superficial without ever delving into the more nuanced significance of blackness. Here, though, this behavior is complicated by the fact that they learn a kind of authenticity at school—not as essential characteristics or behaviors that are the result of genetic heritage, but characteristics that are culturally prescribed.

At first, their physical attributes prevent Birdie and Cole from being accepted because in this Black Nationalist school white skin is a detriment instead of a positive characteristic. Though white skin has historically afforded individuals more privilege, instead of less,<sup>9</sup> the reversal in valuing whiteness over blackness reflects the cultural and political context of the novel. In her study about the politics of skin color, Kathy Russell explains: “Traditionally, the color complex involved light-skinned Blacks’ rejection of Blacks who were darker. Increasingly, however, the color complex shows up in the form of dark-skinned African Americans spurning their lighter-skinned brothers and sisters for not being Black enough” (Russell 2).<sup>10</sup> The implication of Russell’s inversion of the color complex is the fact that in Black Power circles circa 1970, the traditional power structure is reversed and blackness is viewed as powerful. Accordingly, Birdie and Cole are ridiculed because of their phenotypic whiteness and accused of not being black enough.

Because of her easy assurance, charming good looks, darker skin and kinky hair, Cole is accepted more easily in the black community than is her sister. Cole “had a face that betrayed all of its origins, and she wore the expression of the already beautiful—a sleepy confidence that kept other children at her mercy; a face of those accustomed to being watched, used to the approving smiles of strangers” (Senna 41).

But even Cole has a lot of learning to do about the performance of blackness; both girls find that they are lacking in behavioral and cultural savvy and must be schooled in negritude. Birdie and Cole's social lessons are augmented by black history taught at Nkrumah.

Birdie and Cole's parents further reinforce the visual (and perceived racial) differences between them. Even in the privacy of their own home, the girls are treated differently based on their skin color. Because Cole is darker she is treated as if she is black, and because Birdie is lighter she is treated as though she is white. Sandy and Deck contribute an intimate, and therefore more hurtful, level of stereotyping race—because Cole has darker skin than Birdie, Deck treats Cole as if “[s]he was his prodigy—his young, gifted, and black [daughter],” while he virtually ignores Birdie (Senna 47).

Though Cole and Birdie eventually gain acceptance at school, racial identity is still an issue at home. For example, Cole's hair drives a wedge between her and her mother. Sandy does not know how to manage Cole's kinky hair, and Cole wants desperately to visually and physically fit into the black community. Cole relates her experience:

They all laughed at me last week. Just like the time my knees were ashy.  
'Cause of my hair. It looks crazy. They were calling me “Miz Nappy.” None of the boys will come near me. Mum doesn't know anything about raising a black child. She just doesn't. (Senna 44)



Cole blames Sandy for her own inability to fit in with the other black children at school. Cole and Sandy's dysfunctional relationship is not only a symptom of their racial issues, but represents both a gender and cultural issue as well.

The sisters learn cultural markers like looking neat and stylish. For example, Birdie describes that she and her sister start to use lotion in an effort to fit in with the other black kids at school. Birdie discloses, "the Jergen's lotion made me feel like I was part of some secret club" (Senna 41). The "secret club" is blackness, and referring to identity politics in terms of lotion implies that blackness can be reduced to the requirements for membership in an adolescent club. The sisters even teach themselves slang from reading an article in Ebony magazine, underscoring the idea expressed by Brenda Boudreau in "Letting the Body Speak: 'Becoming' White in Caucasia," that "language, as the entire novel makes clear, is at least as much a part of performing racial identity as anything else" (Boudreau 63). This linguistic performance is another example of qualifying race by behavioral traits.

In addition to learning to speak the language of her peers, Birdie also gains acceptance when she is romantically linked with Ali Parkman and joins "The Brown Sugars," a club for girls who already have a boyfriend. Birdie remarks after this occasion: "Now that I had been knighted black by Maria, and pretty by Ali, the rest of the school saw me in a new light" (Senna 55). Birdie's acceptance due to her connection to black masculinity<sup>11</sup> reinforces the heteronormativity of culture.

Birdie and Cole are successful in their passing effort because the students begin to accept them. But the text questions whether they really change and whether

successful incorporation of racial markers affects racial identity, or whether Birdie and Cole are simply performing in blackface. After Birdie makes the racial choice to become black, she reflects: “I learned the art of changing at Nkrumah, a skill that would later become second nature to me” and “Cole had already done it. Changed” (Senna 53). These statements suggest that Birdie and Cole really are different, that these racial markers really do have significance. But later in the text Birdie states, “But I did feel different—more conscious of my body as a toy, and of the ways I could use it to disappear into the world around me” (Senna 56). This statement implies that Birdie has not changed at all; rather she has learned to use her body and language to become whomever she chooses, further revealing the performativity of race.

The departure from traditional passing from black to white also highlights the reasons why majority characters might also pass and emphasizes the performative nature of passing. Senna shows the similarities between passing and performance when she places performances side by side with Birdie’s passing as Jessie Goldman. For example, in addition to the main pass of the novel in which Birdie passes as Jessie, Senna also depicts Birdie’s performance as an authentic African American at the Nkrumah School and gender performances when Sandy and Birdie live at a lesbian women’s commune. In addition to Birdie’s other performances, Sandy too performs heterosexual and homosexual identities, as well as a number of classed identities. Senna’s strategy is to foreground the visual aspect of “racial literacy”—the ability to tell blackness from whiteness—whenever Birdie comes into contact

with other characters. As a result, the text forces the reader to test his or her own racial literacy as well. For example, Birdie's experience in trying to fit in at the Nkrumah School is dominated by the way other students identify her racially. At first, the students do not like Birdie or her sister because they "think that they're white." Thus, the girls must prove to the students that they are indeed black by donning the essentialized aspects of blackness (like wearing their hair in braids and speaking in slang).

In New Hampshire, Senna creates another situation where racial literacy again becomes the central issue of Birdie's life. The way that her friends and neighbors "read" her is more nuanced and subtle because she is already perceived to be a part of the racial majority. For example, the Marshes romantically imagine what race Birdie could be and think that she might be Italian: "They spoke about me as if I weren't there, as if I were painted on a wall over their head, to be observed and studied, never touched" (Senna 166). The Marshes's reaction to Birdie is reminiscent of her maternal grandmother's fascination with the variations of whiteness that she could claim instead of blackness. Birdie's New Hampshire girlfriends also try to read Birdie's racial costume, wondering if she can be authentically Jewish even if her mother is not. And while with Nick, Birdie has to deflect his nickname for her, Pocahontas, as well as his jokes that she might be black.<sup>12</sup>

There are other instances in which Nick almost correctly reads Birdie's hidden black racial identity. Once as she is reading a comic book while with Nick, Birdie inadvertently counts herself among the caricatured black people in the comic book:

“They’ve made us look like animals,” she says. Nick replies, “Shit, maybe you could be colored in the right light. Better stay out of the sun” (Senna 173). Despite Nick’s ironic jokes that Birdie could be black, the Marshes are not racially literate enough to actually detect Birdie’s black identity. Though Birdie is constantly misread, her racial identity is most questioned by Samantha, who is black, and who finally reveals that she knows that Birdie is also black.

Samantha does not just serve as an in-group clairvoyant to Birdie; she also threatens Sandy’s disguise. Birdie is performing the most obvious form of passing—racial, but Sandy is passing as well. Birdie and Sandy’s dual passing underscores the performative nature of passing. For example, Sandy discards her bohemian Black Power persona and takes on the character of an upper-class intellectual—a shift that is not difficult for her to make. Sandy loses weight, dresses more “normal,” and connects on an “insider level” with the Marshes, the elitist landlords with whom they share a property. Sandy further dissociates herself from the black community and her black family by dating a white man, Jim. Furthermore, Sandy is passing as a white mother of a white child. The novel makes clear that this distinction is significant because Sandy was formerly consumed with mothering a black child. The text also describes how this act has put Sandy in a very different subject position. Sandy expresses how her relationship to black culture influenced her identity:

‘And the crazy thing is, your sister was the reason I did what I did. Having a black child made me see things differently. Made it all the more personal. It hurts to see your baby come into a world like this, so you want to change it.’

My mother did that sometimes, spoke of Cole as if she had been her only black child. It was as if my mother believed that Cole and I were so different. As if she believed I was white, believed I was Jesse. (Senna 233)

Because Birdie looks as if she could be white, it is almost effortless for Sandy to ignore that Birdie is black. But when Sandy sees Samantha with her mother by chance in the grocery store, Sandy's true identity (a mother of black children) and feelings come flooding to the surface. Birdie describes: "My mother stood before them, frozen and pallid, her hands by her sides in a helpless gesture as she watched Samantha and her mother strolling in our direction, lingering over the boxes of cereal" (Senna 201). During her shock, Sandy reverts to calling her daughter her original name, Birdie, in public, breaking their code of secrecy and silence. Samantha's presence disturbs the delicate passing situation for both Birdie and Sandy.

Birdie and Cole's aspirations to be fully accepted among their black peers, or Sandy's posing as a white mother of a white child, are indistinguishable from traditional forms of passing in which a black character passes from a minority to a majority subject position and receives privileges and benefits of the majority position. Given the text's explicit reliance on the passing narrative, a reading that fails to acknowledge these important deviations would be remiss. Caucasia presents alternative passing situations that highlight what is at stake when someone passes. These alternative passing situations represent a playful and irreverent take on passing. The novel does not take race as seriously as Autobiography or in The House Behind the Cedars, where passing is a humorless and dangerous act. The departure from the

traditional minority-to-majority passing paradigm illustrates the rationale behind passing as not simply a desire for black people to become white, but for people to enjoy privileges they cannot enjoy as a part of their present identity group. In this way, Caucasia explores the universality of passing not just as a behavior in which minorities engage, but as a performative activity that people engage in order to achieve a particular lifestyle.

## Part II: Reversing the Tragic Mulatto

The second major way that Senna extends the passing narrative is through revising the tragic mulatto convention. The text makes specific references to notable tragic mulatto characters and personages like Alexander Pushkin, Philippa Schuyler, Nella Larsen, and Jean Toomer<sup>13</sup> and then works to present its revision. White authors (like Harriet Beecher Stowe in Uncle Tom's Cabin) included mulatto characters for a variety of reasons; one was to appeal to the white readership who would display more sympathy for a character that looked as they did. African American authors like Charles W. Chesnutt used this form, and Judith R. Berzon argues that “in numerous works by abolitionist authors, in many novels of passing, and in many works that utilize the tragic mulatto theme, white authors have relied upon a greater sense of identification of their audience with the mulatto” (Berzon 53). We are taught to see this mulatto figure in terms of her tragic position—her inability

to become white. Berzon suggests that mulatto fiction plays a significant role because “the white reader is able to imagine how he himself would respond to such a ‘catastrophe.’”

Senna is fully aware of this convention and her protagonist has all of the makings of the traditional tragic characterization. To the contrary Birdie confesses that she does not want to be considered a tragic mulatto and pities Samantha and her uncomfortable sojourn in New Hampshire. Alienated and placed in an unusually difficult position, however, Birdie recognizes that passing for white is changing her:

The less I behaved like myself, the more I could believe that this was still a game. That my real self—Birdie Lee—was safely hidden beneath my beige flesh, and that when the right moment came, I would reveal her, preserved, frozen solid in the moment in which I had left her. (Senna 199)

But these circumstances do not lead to Birdie’s demise, nor does Senna create a tragedy because Birdie is not white. In fact, the opposite is true. Birdie’s misfortune is that she is not black enough and is thus separated from her sister. By means of this shift, Senna is marking a change from the historical contexts of passing invoked in these earlier texts.

Birdie’s revised tragic persona is illuminated by the characterization of Samantha, who is a tragic mulatto figure. She is portrayed as a melancholy character, who miserably is not accepted by the white community and is jeered because she is black and because she is biracial. The climax of the novel occurs during a rare,

intimate moment between the two at a house party. Tortured by the secret that she is passing for white, Birdie asks Samantha what race she thinks she is.

Samantha replies by acknowledging her own racial identity and by revealing that she also knows Birdie's concealed racial identity: "I'm black. Like you" (Senna 242).

Finally confronted with her own racial identity, the disclosure clarifies Birdie's rejection of the tragic mulatto convention:

Those words had made something clearer. Made it clear that I didn't want to be black like Samantha. A doomed, tragic shade of black. I wanted to be black like somebody else. (Senna 274).

Juda Bennett argues, and I agree, that tragic death is one of the hallmarks of passing narratives. However, Caucasia significantly revises that narrative. Birdie does not die a tragic death; instead she escapes from what has become a passing nightmare and runs away to Boston. The revision reflects the historical context of the novel—the Black Power Movement—in which the tragic mulatto and the danger of being found out seem obsolete.

Instead of giving Birdie Samantha's tragic fate, Senna allows Birdie a triumphant escape from New Hampshire, reunites her with the severed part of her family, and anticipates a happy and secure life for Birdie with Cole in California. Senna creates a biracial character whose life journey is traumatic but who is not a tragic mulatto. By ending her novel with her protagonist in Berkeley where biraciality is common, Senna compares the historic context of the passing narratives



with the circumstances of the late twentieth century, where interracial marriages are legally recognized and biracial and multiracial identities are accepted.

## Conclusion

Most studies of the passing novel end, appropriately, with the passing novels of the Harlem Renaissance. Werner Sollors accounts for the gap by arguing that “Passing was swept aside in social history by the civil rights movement, and in literature by the combined success of Zora Neale Hurston and Richard Wright, who no longer employed the theme” (Sollors 284). The reemergence of passing narratives prompts an analysis of the thematic continuities and discontinuities between the contemporary passing narratives and those of previous generations.<sup>14</sup> The contemporary passing narratives highlight the continued importance of race and categories in the post-integration era and underscore the continued and sustained emphasis of the passing narrative as a convention in African American literature to portray secrecy, fugitive identities, the bifurcation of identity, and the psychological exploration of character. I have shown how contemporary passing narratives also illuminate the roles of racial essentialism, racial literacy, and racial performance in maintaining racial difference.

Senna has written a lot about race and racial theories, has her own personal experiences to draw from, and clearly uses the text to examine these issues. Despite

all of this awareness, however, her novel continues to use the parameters of the existing racial paradigm. Therefore, her novel identifies a different chapter in racialization, revealing the oscillating nature of racial categories that is the hallmark of the contemporary era.

Despite the fact that the novel challenges the construction of race, portraying its performativity and constructedness, Caucasia continues to work within the essential categories of race. The textual reliance on essential characteristics of race contradicts the novel's racial project and reveals the inherent difficulties in trying to think outside of a U.S. racialized paradigm. The novel presents the inherent dynamic of racial essentialism by representing blackness as static while representing whiteness as more dynamic and varied. Contrary to the unitary black identity represented by the Black Power movement, the text presents a variety of white identities. The first variation on whiteness that is represented is the WASP identity, represented by Sandy Lodge and her family an old Cambridge family with ties to Harvard University and who chart their family lineage back to Cotton Mather. The WASP variation of whiteness appears again later in the novel when Sandy and Birdie settle down in New Hampshire. The novel also presents Judaism as another viable option of whiteness for Birdie. Birdie is passing as Jessie Goldman, the daughter of a Jewish father and WASP mother, offering this brand of whiteness as an option for Birdie.

The most nuanced description of white identity is of the locals of rural New Hampshire. The text offers the closest view of this group through Mona and her family. The diametrical opposite of Sandy's elite upbringing, they are poor,

uneducated, racist, and provincial—what Sandy would call “real, honest, working people” (Senna 157). In addition to her Jewish disguise, this version of white identity is also open to Birdie—it is the identity that she and her mother adopt in order to hide out from the real world. The text presents significantly more variations of white identity than it does for black identity. The effect is that blackness is represented in limited terms, and whiteness appears more varied. Whiteness encompasses many European cultures and classes while blackness does not seem to have these heightened possibilities. The novel’s failure to get beyond racial essentialism, especially the portrayal of blackness as static and whiteness as varied is mirrored by the discourse surrounding the new racial categories of the 2000 Census, and Senna’s other writings on the subject.

Though Senna sets her novel in the 1970s, the racial politics of the 1990s leading up to the 2000 Census and the discourse of federal racial categories shape the novel. The 1990s witnessed a crescendo of debates about maintaining historical racial categories and also the importance of recognizing what was seen as more accurate racial categories like “biracial” and “multiracial.” Senna comments on this issue, stating in an interview that she personally is not in favor of a multiracial census category: “I’m not so much interested in categorizing further, or adding new groups, so much as I am interested in deconstructing the premise of race itself” (Interview 448). Senna argues that one of the inherent concerns with the re-classification of race is that it creates the misperception that “race mixture somehow neutralizes the

problem of racism” and suggests the “end of blackness,” meaning the obsolescence of the category in the face of the multiracial category (Interview 448).

The multiracial category initiative argues that race is a fiction and is inaccurate, but offers as solution the formal recognition of biracial and multiracial identities. However, because biraciality depends upon the former fiction of race in general, the latter identity is necessarily a fiction as well. The text mirrors this sphere of invented identities by arguing that race is a construction and a performance, but then relying on the very racial categories that it refutes in order to make that argument—thus making the case that despite best intentions, novels are bound to racialization.

Though Senna revises the passing narrative by extending the candidates for passing and reversing the tragic portrayal of the protagonist, the novel fails to narrate outside of the racial hierarchy. The language of racial essentialism is so powerfully ingrained into representations of characters that even a writer like Senna, who aims to write outside of the hierarchy, continues to reproduce essential markers of racial identity.

## Notes to Chapter Two

1. Civil rights groups (like the NAACP) fought this lobbying effort because counting individuals who had previously been counted as African American would “reduce the political influence of the organizations claiming to represent these groups” (Jacoby 38). Jacoby argues that despite the perceived decrease in influence by civil rights organizations, racial classification will continue to be a significant part of identity politics.
2. See, for example, Clotel by William Wells Brown, 1853 and Our Nig by Harriet Wilson, 1859. Even Hannah Crafts’s The Bondwoman’s Narrative (circa 1855-59) delves into the issue of passing.
3. Senna is well aware of the passing narrative, evidenced by the fact that she completed her undergraduate thesis on the passing literature of Nella Larsen, James Weldon Johnson, and William Faulkner.
4. For a complete discussion of these characteristics, see Juda Bennett’s The Passing Figure: Racial Confusion in Modern American Literature.
5. For example, see Chesnut’s The House Behind the Cedars and Larsen’s Passing.
6. Loving v. the Commonwealth of Virginia, 1967
7. For more information about the Black Power movement, see Is it Nation Time?: Contemporary Essays on Black Power and Black Nationalism.

8. Acknowledged for its large black population, Brazil, as Melissa Noble argues in “Lessons from Brazil: The Ideational and Political Dimensions of Multiraciality,” is perceived as a multiracial society that works as a racial democracy; whereas in the United States “Americans are presumed to be forever racially distinct.” “Lessons from Brazil: The Ideational and Political Dimensions of Multiraciality” in The New Race Question.
9. Cheryl I. Harris points out in “Whiteness as Property” that during slavery, only blacks were property, and only whites could own property. Therefore the line between black and white became very important because blackness signified slave status and whiteness represented freedom. This essential distinction between slavery and freedom also created a situation in which people needed to protect their whiteness (or blood) as property.
10. For more evidence of this phenomenon, see Beyond Black and also Skin Deep.
11. See The House that Race Built for essays on racial essentialism and black identity.
12. When he calls her Pocahontas, Nick alludes to Birdie’s long dark hair and skin that tans easily. Pocahontas, the daughter of a Powhatan chief of the Algonquian tribe, was captured by English settlers and taken to Jamestown, Virginia, where she married John Rolfe. Their legendary union resulted in peace between the Europeans and Native Americans. The reference in Caucasia alludes to this continent’s long and varied history of interracialism and also introduces the history of the Native American into the racial paradigm that is customarily divided between blackness and whiteness.

13. Alexander Pushkin—noted Russian poet of African descent; Philippa Schuyler—child prodigy, pianist and writer, and daughter of Black no More author George Schuyler; Nella Larsen—Harlem Renaissance author of Passing and Quicksand; and Jean Toomer—Harlem Renaissance author of Cane.
  
- 14 . For examples of contemporary passing novels, see: The Human Stain, Philip Roth, 2000; Passing: When People Can't Be Who They Are, Brooke Kroeger; and Danzy Senna's second novel, Symptomatic, 2004.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Satire, Performance, and Race in The White Boy Shuffle

#### Introduction

Paul Beatty's first collection of poetry, Big Bank Take Little Bank, published in 1991 by the Nuyorican Poets Café, marked his entrance into the literary marketplace and set the tone and subject of his future work.<sup>1</sup> Beatty's choice to develop and publish his poetry with the self-described "multicultural and multigenerational center for the spoken arts" named for, though not solely comprised of, New York Puerto Ricans reflects what would become a theme in his subsequent collection, Joker, Joker, Deuce (1994), and his novels The White Boy Shuffle (1996) and Tuff (2000). All of these texts depict a multiracial mix of characters that challenge pre-existing racial and cultural categories. Beatty's rhythmic, postmodern poetry, like his fiction, vividly depicts the various pop-culture influences of the late 1980s and early 1990s.

This chapter takes up Beatty's first novel, The White Boy Shuffle (TWBS), because it explores the shifting significance of race—the perception that racial categories are changeable and are subsumed by more powerful systems of classification like class and cultural identities. The idea of the shifting significance of race links the chapters in this dissertation and refers to the way that racial categories



in the post-integration era often are regarded in fluid terms. TWBS operates as a lens on the shifting conception of racial identity during the late 1990s and uses satire to address the momentous issues of contemporary racial identity and the future of African American literature. By satirizing issues of race and racial oppression, Beatty disrupts the mainstream African American discourse and presents a break from more traditional ideas about race. Because the text constantly mocks the concept of race, racial categories, and racial stereotypes, it encourages readers to think beyond traditional understandings of race to consider the possibilities of racial fluidity that is the hallmark of the contemporary era.

Beatty describes his affection for satire as well as his perspective on its uses in an interview with journalist Michel Martin after the publication of his edited volume of African American humor, Hokum: An Anthology of African-American Humor (2006).<sup>2</sup> During the unscripted radio interview, Beatty tries to explain the significance of humor and the general tone of African American literature: “I don’t disagree [that humor should be celebratory] ... but I think humor can also be revelatory, I think it can also be derisive. It can be all those things. And I think, I don’t think that like, African-American literature is too heavy, I just, for my perspective, it’s ... we tend to, for me growing up, I was only exposed to the heaviness of it.”<sup>3</sup>

This quote about the “heaviness” of African American literature is taken from an interview with Martin on the National Public Radio show “Talk of the Nation,” so some of Beatty’s hesitance can be attributed to the fact that he was on live radio. But

Beatty's many breaks and pauses can also be explained by the subject of his remarks, which criticizes the serious tone of African American literature and speaks to the enormous influence of the idea of racial uplift. Beatty's commentary on African American literature's serious tone addresses the very root of his racial project, which is to interrogate racial categories and literary racial conventions, including the racial uplift theme.

The limitations that Beatty objects to are what literary theorist Claudia Tate calls "protocols of black textuality." Tate argues that African American literature works within a set of racial protocols that are primarily related to the tradition of protesting the degradation of African Americans. She describes her project as demonstrating "how the racial protocol for African American canon formation has marginalized desire as a critical category of black textuality by demanding manifest stories about racial politics" (5). The racial protocol Tate challenges assumes an audience that values homogeneous markers of experience and racial history. TWBS also confronts racial protocols, specifically the perception of an African American literary tradition that relies on a singular black experience and culture. In contrast to texts that maintain and reproduce racial protocols, Beatty's novel humorously undermines these standards. He uses satire to disrupt the habitual conception of African American literature as limited to the protest tradition, prescribed racial characteristics, and racial performativity. Satire is an effective tool in Beatty's project of debunking customary race writing because the objective of satire is to critique and to overthrow traditions. Also implied is that the object of the satire is has

fallen short in some way. Beatty takes on racial categories and the African American literary tradition in his novel, and by using satire, the groundwork is already directed toward exposing their limitations.

This chapter offers an analysis of Beatty's parodies of multiculturalism, racial categories, and by extension, race writing that depends on prescribed racial characteristics. I argue that Beatty's use of satire critiques the protocols of African American literary traditions by showing that racial identification depends on the performance of stereotyped behaviors and that race writing also requires the same type of performativity. In this way, Beatty calls attention to the crucial importance of audience—specifically, the readers of the African American literary tradition—to the maintenance of troublesome understandings of race. The novel offers an alternative identification paradigm that is based on culture rather than race. With this focus on culture, the novel is able to challenge the meaning of race in a way that the other three novels examined in this dissertation do not. Beatty's stance is in this sense distinctly radical in that he uses satire to disrupt all racial categories, not just to undermine biases against blackness, and because he so provocatively unsettles the sacrosanct status that racial categories and writing have had in African American literature. Beatty's use of satire to undermine racial categories is a threefold methodology—by invoking and parodying racial protocols of African American literature, historicizing and spoofing the origins of racial stereotypes, and introducing and satirizing a multiracial cast and multiculturalism, the novel points up the inadequacy of

dichotomous understandings of race and illuminates the performativity necessary in maintaining racial binaries.

### Synopsis of the Novel

Beatty creates in TWBS a postmodern, satirical tale of Gunnar Kaufman, a black youth growing up in Los Angeles at the height of the multicultural movement. By naming his protagonist after the Swedish race theorist, Gunnar Myrdal, Beatty is signaling both that he is aware of the history of racial construction and that the novel, though contemporary, consciously reflects on the history of race.<sup>4</sup> The protagonist's name is also the first of many witty features of the novel that play on assigning the cultural characteristics of one group to another to demonstrate the deep entrenchment of the association of race with cultural and behavioral characteristics.

The plot and the humor of this novel play on the irony of switching racial identities by performing racial stereotypes. For example, at the start of the novel Gunnar moves from an all-white neighborhood in Santa Monica, where he operates under a white cultural identity, to Hillside, a black ghetto in Los Angeles, where he is forced to develop a "black" cultural identity. The novel humorously illustrates categories that are thought to be innate are actually learned. TWBS presents an ironic reversal of the hierarchy of race that privileges whiteness by illustrating a protagonist who desires to prove his blackness.<sup>5</sup>

Through his paradoxical journey to “become black,” Gunnar befriends his basketball coach, Coach Shimimoto, and neighborhood kids Nicholas Scoby, who never misses a basketball shot; and Psycho Loco, the neighborhood gangster—all of whom help in Gunnar’s quest to fit into the black community. Gunnar learns much of his black behavior from people in his neighborhood who are not black, which signifies that race and culture are not always interchangeable.

While in high school, Gunnar becomes a celebrated basketball star and accomplished street poet, but he lacks social skills and is extremely shy around women. To remedy his lack of a romantic life, Psycho Loco presents Gunnar with a Japanese mail-order bride, Yoshiko, for his eighteenth birthday. Soon after, Gunnar, Yoshiko, and Nick Scoby move to Boston to attend Boston University. But Gunnar ends up attending only one class because his experience there represents the inherent dilemma of multiculturalism and its dependence on stereotypes of racialized behavior. Gunnar’s classmates treat him like he is a route to experiencing minority culture.

Though Gunnar doesn’t like college, he remains in Boston. Because of his relationship with the various campus clubs and his status as both a basketball star and published poet, Gunnar is asked to speak at a political rally and as a result ends up an impromptu leader of the black community. During this last section of the novel, the narrative turns from light-hearted and at times biting satire to strangely uncomfortable dark humor. In a bizarre ending, Gunnar tells the crowd that achieving racial equality is impossible and that instead the oppressed should give up on the dream of equality

and commit mass suicide. The image of suicide problematizes the novel's attempt at writing outside of the conventions of African American literature. This failure is amplified through the final representations of Nick, who after experiencing an extreme bout of homesickness commits suicide, prompting a suicide movement in the black community. After Nick's death, Gunnar and Yoshiko return to Los Angeles and Yoshiko gives birth to their half African American and half Japanese daughter, Naomi. The birth is an optimistic nod toward the potential of the future, but does not reduce the overwhelming image of the end of the black race through mass suicide.

While the beginning and middle of the novel critique the multicultural era and the performance of race humorously, by the end of the novel humor gives way to the disturbing idea of suicide. Though TWBS ends on a more somber note than when it began, the overwhelming tone of the novel is still a humorous one. I argue that satire allows Beatty to show that racial categories and race writing depend on customary performances and that cultural bonds are stronger than racial bonds.

## Part I: Parodying Racial Protocols

I now turn to showing how the novel parodies racial protocols of African American literature. Because racial categories have largely been established and reproduced through literary texts,<sup>6</sup> satirizing literary racial protocols is a crucial step in upsetting fixed notions of race. Standardizations about racial identity have been

reinforced from antebellum writings like the slave narratives by Harriet Wilson and Frederick Douglass, to postbellum writings by W. E. B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington, and modern texts like Richard Wright's Native Son, and even Ralph Ellison's humor-riddled Invisible Man. All of these novels in the African American literary canon have been largely serious, race-conscious texts that follow the racial protocols required of writings about social protest and racial uplift.<sup>7</sup> While the other novels analyzed in this dissertation, Sarah Phillips and Caucasia, at times allude to the irony of racial categories, they treat the concept of race seriously. TWBS, on the other hand, lampoons racial categories and the conventions of race writing.

African American literature has historically focused on black oppression and achieving racial equality, and in an exhaustive account of black satire, Darryl Dickson-Carr, author of African American Satire: The Sacredly Profane Novel, writes that the earliest purpose of African American satire “in both oral and written form was to lampoon the (il)logic of chattel slavery and racism itself” (3). For example, George Schuyler's Black No More (1931) takes on racial essentialism and the random hypocrisy of racial categories by featuring a black protagonist who undergoes a treatment that turns him into a white man. Dickson-Carr counts Schuyler's Black No More, Langston Hughes's Jesse B. Semple stories, and Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man as predecessors of The White Boy Shuffle—and authors Ishmael Reed, Derrick Bell, Trey Ellis, and Darius James as Beatty's contemporaries.<sup>8</sup>

Like his contemporaries, Beatty's fiction addresses the current, and often more subtle, forms of racism. Race is especially used by the authors of the new black

aesthetic and is often treated satirically, allowing Beatty (and others) the freedom to discuss race in ways previously unaccepted. But Beatty's novel stands out from other African American satires that have confronted racial categories because in challenging racial categories it also critiques sacred literary conventions. Unlike earlier satirists, who focused on exposing the illogic of slavery and racism, Beatty more broadly indicts the concept of race and pointedly confronts the textual protocols that uphold race. By invoking and parodying protocols of African American literature, his novel illuminates the significance of an audience with a shared knowledge, history, and experiences in maintaining a cohesive African American literary tradition. Deviating from pre-civil rights era texts that treat race sacredly, TWBS anticipates an audience that is well-versed in a variety of cultural references, instead of assuming an audience that is only ensconced in the protest tradition.

TWBS begins its interrogation of African American literary conventions in the first sentence of the novel, when the novel explains that Gunnar is not the typical "bluesy earthy folksy" protagonist, and that he is not "the seventh son of a seventh son of a seventh son" (5). The reference signifies the "seventh son" in W. E. B. Du Bois's explanation of the double consciousness of African Americans in The Souls of Black Folk. This reference to double consciousness takes on African American literary protocols at one of its most significant roots.

The image of Du Bois, represented through his scholarship, activism, writings, and especially through his theory of double consciousness, is one of the most powerful racial literary protocols in the African American literary tradition. Du Bois



has powerfully influenced the concept of blackness and the protest narrative. TWBS violates racial protocol by mocking the protest tradition, the standard narrative of racial uplift, and the racial protocols that valorize the civil rights movement by presenting a character who is aware of racial protocols and their literary references but does not identify with them.

From the novel's start, it aims to dispute the underpinnings of racial identification and to show that cultural allegiance is more functional. For example, instead of identifying with Du Bois' notion of a typical African American experience of double consciousness, Gunnar's reference to the mythology of the seventh son is more likely to signify British heavy metal band Iron Maiden's 1988 album, "Seventh Son of a Seventh Son."<sup>9</sup> Heavy metal has traditionally attracted a white male audience, and the genre is known for themes of rebellion against traditional society—which is not surprising given that the genre peaked during the 1960s and 1970s, alongside the civil disobedience and political unrest of the civil rights movement. The double entendre of the seventh son further illustrates the text's departure from the traditional narrative of racial uplift and Beatty's skill of layering historical and pop-cultural references. Instead of an audience bound by the protest tradition, Beatty tries to create a culturally diverse audience that can recognize the significance of both Du Bois's and Iron Maiden's seventh son references. Beatty's ideal audience would appreciate the nuances of various cultures and be able to make connections between them.

Another example of the novel's parody of African American literary protocols is its farcical representation of black leadership. By deflating the image of black leaders, and especially the civil rights movement, the novel challenges the protocol of strong black leaders as an important element of African American literature. In contrast to African American texts that hold black leadership in high esteem, the prologue of the novel sets the stage of the novel's critique of black leadership, introducing Gunnar as a "full-time svengali and foster parent to an abandoned people" (1). The representation of black leaders as capriciously selected confronts their elevated image, as does the hopeless description of the black race—Gunnar's pathetic relatives, the uncouth and violent neighborhood girls Betty and Veronica, and the "middle minorities caught between racial polarities" at college. The rest of the prologue details the hopelessness of the present struggle for racial inequality and is the antithesis of the courageous spirit of the protest movement.

The novel next picks up its satire of black leadership in the last quarter of the novel when Gunnar is in college. Gunnar, who is a well-known student on campus, basketball star, and published author, takes a leadership role when he is asked to speak at a political rally. The rally protesting the university's support of a puppet African government is held at the campus' Martin Luther King Jr. Plaza, a clear invocation of the legacy of the protest tradition and the civil rights movement. Instead of drawing on that tradition, however, Gunnar stumbles into a tirade about the protesters' lack of dedication and their unwillingness to die for freedom, which is influenced by his recent emersion in the suicide narratives of Yukio Mishima<sup>10</sup> and

Chikamatsu.<sup>11</sup> The novel compares its satiric representation of Black Nationalism to the image of Japanese nationalists Misihima and Chikamatsu, emphasizing the demise of both forms of cultural nationalism. Like the Japanese authors, Gunnar probes the meaning of life:

So I asked myself, what am I willing to die for? The day when white people treat me with respect and see my life as equally valuable to theirs? No, I ain't willing to die for that, because if they don't know that by now, then they ain't never going to know it. Matter of fact, I ain't ready to die for anything, so I guess I'm just not fit to live. In other words, I'm just ready to die. I'm just ready to die. (200)

Gunnar concludes his speech by asserting that the political progress of black people is stalled because of a lack of serious leadership. Taking his statement as an offer to fill the void, the crowd designates Gunnar as the leader of black America. As a result of Gunnar's speech, which is broadcast around the world, black people begin committing suicide, presumably in protest. Most notably, Gunnar's best friend, Scoby, who had been depressed for weeks, commits suicide by throwing himself off the roof of a building.

Introducing the concept of suicide into this narrative indicates Beatty's willingness to overstep traditional boundaries of African American literature that hold protest sacred. The mass suicide of the black race is obviously the opposite of racial uplift and suggests the end of the black racial category—gestures that might be

considered sacrilegiously in violation of the protocols of the African American literary tradition. The novel's attempt at de-signifying the concept of race, however, is not entirely successful. The image of suicide that envelops the end of the novel reduces the effect of the first three-quarters of the novel that treat race frivolously. Beatty ends his novel just as ominously as the texts that he criticizes in his interviews, falling into the trap of treating race gravely, proving that the racial protocols of textuality are hard to breach. By design, however, Beatty's text does not rely solely on defying the racial protocols of African American literature to undermine racial categories and to explore the limits of narrating out of racism. The novel also historicizes and spoofs the origins of racial stereotypes to challenge racial allegiances.

## Part 2: Historicizing Stereotypes

Part of Beatty's critique of racial categories is that they rely on the racist stereotypes that fueled Jim Crow era segregation.<sup>12</sup> The historical basis of the term "Jim Crow" originates from a minstrel performance of a popular song, "Jump Jim Crow." Segregation, therefore, depended on the perpetuation of racialized performances. Beatty uncovers the overlooked history of Jim Crow era stereotypes to show that the U.S. system of racialization is based on stereotypical images of black inferiority. Though other black writers have protested racial stereotypes, Beatty

reintroduces and exploits them to show their absurdity, but also to defy the image of uplift characters.

The novel begins as Gunnar describes his family tree, a genealogy that includes a sprinkling of “race traitors” and otherwise unsympathetic characters from the Jim Crow era. Their narratives are a lens through which to compare Gunnar’s own experiences with assimilation. The narratives also prompt a comparison between the racial stereotypes and assimilation enacted by Gunnar’s ancestors and his own role in perpetuating racialization and the performance of race in the contemporary moment.

Gunnar explains that his great-great uncle, Wolfgang Kaufman, was chief of the Department of Visual Segregation and in charge of painting the Jim Crow segregation signs meant to separate the races in public life. Beatty’s humorous portrayal of Wolfgang as complicit in his own segregation demonstrates Beatty’s non-compliance with the customary gravity with which race is treated. Wolfgang subsequently loses this job, however, when “a fit of absentmindedness caused him to lose the precious contract when he was spotted exiting from the men’s room after taking a satisfying early-morning number two in the whites-only toilet” (19). Wolfgang’s excuse for committing this affront was that there was no toilet paper in the colored restroom.

The effect of Beatty’s toilet humor is that it makes light of the Jim Crow era and its restrictions, especially parodying the separate but equal clause by taking an extremely literal example—because the colored bathroom did not have toilet paper,

the restrooms were not equal. In fact, most objections to the separate but equal logic stemmed not from the inferiority of public bathrooms, but from the inferiority of public education, transportation, voting disenfranchisement, and anti-miscegenation laws.

After Wolfgang is fired, he leaves town under the threat of lynching. Even the practice of lynching, another common occurrence during the Jim Crow era, is treated humorously in TWBS. Relocating to Chicago where he works cleaning floors in a radio station, Wolfgang ends up supplying material for the Amos 'n' Andy show. First a radio show (1928), and then a CBS television show (1951), Amos 'n' Andy was a comedy show that featured two white men acting in blackface who fed off of racial stereotypes of the time. The text's reference to the show reiterates the period's responsibility in creating and spreading stereotypes of racialized behavior.

Beatty presents Wolfgang as a character who makes his living by sustaining segregation policies and then by supplying material for long-lasting racial stereotypes. Though arguably, Wolfgang has no choice in his part in segregation, the novel does not show him struggling with the tension of maintaining a sense of humanity. He accepts and perpetuates the degradation of African Americans.

Wolfgang's complicity is duplicated by Gunnar's father, Rölf Kaufman, who mistakenly sidesteps the busing of black students to other schools and attends the white school nearest him. The principal allows him to remain in the school because of his meek demeanor. The text describes Rölf's humiliating experiences at the

school and features a horrifying episode in which Rölf is persuaded to reenact, with his white classmates, the 1964 murder of three civil rights activists:

My father fondly recalled the laughs and cold celebratory summer vacation Dixie beers he shared with the good ol' boy senior class after their macabre reenactment of the Schwerner, Goodman, and Chaney murders .... After the party, He came to naked, his entire body spray-painted white, his face drool-glued against the trunk of the swing-low tree. He ran home under the sinking Mississippi moon, his white skin tingling with assimilation. (Beatty 22)

Michael Schwerner, Andrew Goodman, and James Chaney were civil rights workers murdered during what is known as the “freedom summer” of 1964. The three were murdered while in Philadelphia, Mississippi on a trip to register black voters. This retelling of the freedom summer murders through a staged performance indicates the role of performance in maintaining racial distinctions and the racial hierarchy. The retelling also deflates the courageous image of the protest movement.

Rölf's experience integrating an all-white school prior to the 1954 Brown vs. Board of Education decision that federally mandated the integration of schools does not reveal a sentiment of courage and perseverance for human dignity, but instead suggests his lack of racial pride. Rölf's apathy serves as another example of TWBS's satirizing of the protocol of racial uplift in African American literature.

The nuances of racial identity and racial allegiance continue to bewilder Rölf even after the civil rights movement. While serving in Vietnam, he is perplexed and

angered by the shared confidences between the black U. S. soldiers and the members of the Vietnamese military. Gunnar relates that “The sight of the slant-eyed niggers and nigger niggers sharing K-rations and rice, enjoying a crackling fire and the quiet Southeast Asian night, flipped Pops the fuck out.” After being deserted by his company, Rölf’s moral for his son is “Son, don’t ever mess with no white women” (Beatty 22-23). Rölf’s maxim about white women acting as a genesis of trouble for black men is an example of the non sequitur nature of the text. This reference to preserving racial integrity is also an invocation of the ways that U.S. national identity has long been symbolized as white femininity, and the fact that, at least in part, Jim Crow segregation had to do with the putative need to “protect” racial purity by protecting white women. This reference also, inadvertently, helps to contextualize Gunnar’s later marriage to Yoshiko, who is a Japanese mail-order bride. Gunnar’s mother refers to Yoshiko as black, and she is accepted by the black community. This distinction shows that despite the atmosphere of multicultural inclusion, the politics prohibiting interracial relationships still apply.

Beatty’s Jim Crow genealogical vignettes function to establish the history of race and racial behavior as a social construct. Under segregation, the state creates and maintains the separation of the races and also of racialized spaces. Beatty’s descriptions of pre-integration public schooling and the politics of public space function as a sharp contrast to the rest of the novel set in the multicultural era. Wolfgang and Rölf appear unaware of the racial politics of their respective days, continuously contributing to their own subjugation. The novel highlights the Jim



Crow system of racialization by showing how Gunnar's ancestors define themselves by the binary of Jim Crow segregation and the characteristics prescribed to them. In addition to historicizing racial stereotypes and satirically commenting on racial uplift texts, the novel demonstrates the connection between Jim Crow ideology and the contemporary racial stereotypes that fuel the contemporary discourse of multiculturalism.

### Part 3: Caricaturing the Cast and Satirizing Multiculturalism

In the postmodern pastiche that characterizes TWBS, Beatty illustrates the multicultural era's hypersensitivity to racial categories. By introducing and caricaturing a multiracial cast of black, white, Korean, and Japanese characters, the novel shows the performativity necessary in maintaining dichotomous understandings of race and the inconsistent relationships between racial groups. The novel's diverse assemblage also complements its satiric representation of multiculturalism. The novel's caricatured cast of diverse races and satire of multiculturalism shows how cultural allegiances can be a more suitable basis for classification than racial allegiances.

The novel is dominated by performances of both blackness and whiteness that show the binary construction of race that is maintained by racial performances and illuminate the inherent dilemma of racial authenticity. For example, the novel

represents white identity as contingent on affection for surfing, skateboarding, and other stereotypically white activities rather than contingent on having two white parents. And similarly, being black has more to do with eating soul food and playing basketball than being counted black under the one-drop rule. Thus, the text introduces the contemporary substitution of race for culture by illustrating Gunnar constantly assuming different racial identities by performing racialized behaviors. To accentuate the performativity of race, Beatty shows Gunnar performing both whiteness and blackness.

In Santa Monica, Gunnar is a part of the white majority because he is able to perform racial whiteness. Beatty's descriptions of whiteness lyrically describe beautiful scenes like: "My earliest memories bodysurf the warm comforting timelessness of the Santa Ana winds, whipping me in and around the palm-tree-lined streets of Santa Monica. Me and white boys Steven Pierce, Ryan Fogerty, and David Shoenfeld sharing secrets and bubble gum" (Beatty 25). That David Shoenfeld is Jewish and Gunnar is black contributes to the understanding—in this particular context—that whiteness refers to cultural identity rather than a racial one.

For example, the text lists descriptions of races and stereotypes of racialized behavior. Under the white category, Gunnar describes his use of "white" language: "My language was three-foot swells that broke left to right. 'No waaaay, duuuuude. Tuuubular biiitchin' to the max. Tooootallyyy fucking raaad.'" Under the black category, Gunnar lists the stereotypical characteristics of black culture and then

underscores the fact that though he is black, he doesn't subscribe to the customs of blackness. The text describes Gunnar's thoughts:

Black was hating fried chicken even before I knew I was supposed to like it. Black was being a nigger who didn't know any other niggers. The only black folks whose names I knew were musicians and athletes: Jimi Hendrix, Slash from Guns n' Roses, Jackie Joyner-Kersey, the Beastie Boys, and Melody the drummer from Josie and the Pussycats. (Beatty 35)

Incidentally, none of the members of the hip-hop group, The Beastie Boys, is black, which further signifies the fact that Beatty has created a narrative in which cultural behavior has more significance than biological race or heritage.

In contrast, blackness is represented through Gunnar's molestation at age twelve, and "being a nigger who didn't know any other niggers" (35). Gunnar knows the racial codes and performs cultural whiteness flawlessly. These passages indicate that though Gunnar acknowledges his blackness, he still feels he is a part of the white community and white culture. These descriptions reinforce the text's assessment that racial identity is comprised of identifiable racial markers that can be performed. At this point in the novel, Gunnar has effectively chosen to be white, and his immediate white community has accepted him as one of their own.

As a result of their Santa Monica upbringing and assimilation to white culture, the Kaufman children begin to see themselves as different from other black people. When Gunnar's sister Christina tells her mother that she is being racially taunted at

summer camp, her mother asks if they want to go to a black summer camp instead. The children reply negatively, and she asks why. To her disgust, their response is: “Because they’re different from us” (Beatty 37). Gunnar and Christina are voicing not a racial difference, but a cultural difference between themselves and other black people. Gunnar and Christina’s mother wants them to identify socially and culturally with other black people, so the next week she moves them from suburban Santa Monica to Hillside, an all-black neighborhood in West Los Angeles.

When Gunnar moves to Hillside, he reflects on his racial identification and his attempt at analyzing the meaning of race, color, and culture only highlights his disconnection from the black community and black shared experiences. In a goodbye letter to his best friend David, Gunnar writes: “David, somehow through being with you I learned I was black and that being black meant something, though I’ve never learned exactly what” (Beatty 40). However, after Gunnar’s family moves to Hillside and the police show up at Gunnar’s house to find out his gang affiliation and “scare him straight,” he begins to understand that he is indeed identified as a part of the black race and to understand what is meant by the “authentic black experience.” Through this scene in which Gunnar is criminalized simply by his racial identification, Beatty illustrates the dangers of espousing a form of multiculturalism that does not recognize past and present power relations and the history of racism. In this case, it is state power that interrupts the possibility of connecting through cultural community and compels identity through race and class. Thus, Gunnar experiences blackness by default because the state persecutes black men living in Hillside. In

showing that African Americans continue to be wrongfully criminalized, Beatty historicizes the current racial violence, discrimination, and subsequent racialization with the injustices of the segregation era.

When Gunnar first moves into the black community, he finds that he does not fit into his new surroundings because of cultural and language barriers. As it does for Birdie and Cole in Caucasia, language represents authentic black culture. Gunnar reflects that “[l]anguage was everywhere” (48) and “[i]n a world where body and spoken language were currency, I was broke as hell. Corporeally mute, I couldn’t saunter or bojangle my limbs with rubbery nonchalance” (52). Like Birdie and Cole’s experience in Caucasia, Gunnar discovers that blackness requires an intellectual knowledge of blackness as well as a physical knowledge. As Robert Reid-Pharr, writing about antebellum subjectivity, explains in Conjugal Union: The Body, the House, and the Black American, the black body has been viewed as a site indicating the stability or instability of blackness as a racial category. The text depicts Gunnar as a black person whose body does not perform the characteristics of blackness—being able to dance. In this instance, his body resists the stereotypical characteristic of blackness, thereby revealing the text’s contention that stereotypical characteristics of race have no biological basis.

Revealing his frustration with not knowing black cultural codes, Gunnar thinks that he “couldn’t just roll up on some folks and say, ‘I know the Black National Anthem, a killer sweet-potato pie recipe, and how to double-dutch blindfolded. Will you be my nigger?’ Dues had to be paid, or you wasn’t joining the

union” (Beatty 53). Gunnar has not been educated in cultural blackness because he spends his free time reading Kant, Hegel, and Greek tragedies instead of reading Ebony and Jet.<sup>13</sup> Beatty is questioning these divisions, and if considered along with his statements about his own reading tastes, Beatty suggests that blackness should not be limited to these characteristics.

In Santa Monica, Gunnar is the “funny, cool black guy,” but in Hillside he is a bourgeois outsider who does not know the racial cues.<sup>14</sup> Ignorance of this particular form of cultural blackness proves detrimental. Even playing outside is a nightmare for Gunnar and his two sisters because they are beaten up daily for not fitting in. Unlike Birdie and Cole in Caucasia, who are primarily preyed upon because they look half white, Gunnar and his sisters are identifiably African American, but because they are behaviorally unlike the rest of their black peers, they are suspect.

Gunnar is a social misfit but eventually, through his relationships with other black people, he becomes familiar with the particulars of black culture. He befriends Nick Scoby, a student in his drama class. The first time Nick calls him “nigger,” Gunnar is elated: “My euphoria was as palpable as the loud clap of our hands colliding in my first soul shake. My transitional slide into step two was a little stiff, but I made up for it with a loud finger snap as our hands parted” (Beatty 67). Again, language—the appropriation of it and the camaraderie implied with certain phrases—bridges Gunnar’s black cultural gap. But language is not the only cultural identifier that Gunnar masters. Nick initiates Gunnar into blackness by instructing him on how to wear shoes (89), get his hair cut (90), and play basketball (92). Scoby forces him

to play basketball, even though he has never played the game before. Gunnar slam dunks on his first try and begins his life as a basketball legend. At this time Gunnar begins to gain popularity and widespread acceptance throughout the neighborhood.

Soon Gunnar is consistently acting “authentically” black which, unfortunately for him, also means getting into trouble. In response to his reckless behavior, Gunnar agrees (at the request of his parents) to transfer to a high school in an elite, white neighborhood in the San Fernando Valley. At the start of the narrative, Gunnar identifies with white people, and he and his sister are alarmed at the idea of attending an all-black camp. But by this point in the text he identifies himself as an “inner-city colored child,” so his attendance at a majority white school represents yet another shift that challenges his racial identity. As with all of his transitions, Gunnar is conscious of this one as well. He reflects: “I meshed in well. It was like swimming; you never forget how to raise your voice a couple of octaves, harden your r’s, and diphthong the vowels” (Beatty 153). Unlike his musings on life in Santa Monica where he fails to articulate the construction of race and racial behavior, Gunnar is now conscious of the shift between black and white cultural behavior and its significance. Gunnar has successfully mastered the ability to code switch between his black and white worlds.

While attending school in the San Fernando Valley, Gunnar is even more aware of the performance of race. He states: “I was envious. When no one was looking, I found myself trying to blow puffs of air past my wrinkled brow or emulating that quivering headshake freeing imaginary blond locks from my eyes”

(Beatty 154). This passage illustrates the influence of whiteness—he automatically and apparently involuntarily tries to take on the characteristics of the dominant culture. Gunnar is not the only black student at his school to fall prey to assimilation. The text describes the other black students in their quest to fit in:

It was sad to watch us troll through the halls, a conga line of burlesque self-parody, all of us affecting our white-society persona of the day. Most days we morphed into waxen African-Americans. Perpetually smiling scholastic lawn jockeys, repeating verbatim the prosaic commandments of domesticity ... [which begins] Though shalt worship no god other than whiteness. (Beatty 154)

This passage reinforces Beatty's impulse to redefine race into a construct based on perceived cultural behavior. Gunnar's reflection on what he describes as "waxen African-Americans" serves as another instance of the effect that multiculturalism and whiteness have on black identity. These students experience racial choice because they choose white racialized behavior—and they are rewarded for it by successful assimilation into white culture. George Lipsitz explains in The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics (1998) how people of color benefit from whiteness by choosing to become racialized insiders. He also argues that "the investment in whiteness always affects individual and group life chances and opportunities" (22). In TWBS, black characters who assimilate to white culture are rewarded with opportunities in elite industries and



institutions. Gunnar, and his assimilating classmates, for example, presumably will have an advantage in being admitted to Ivy League universities. Gunnar does end up attending an elite university, and the novel continues to interrogate race, culture, and authenticity.

The novel's caricatured representations, however, only begin with Gunnar. The novel also hosts a cast of other racialized characters to locate U. S. race in a global context and to show the inconsistent relationships between racial groups. For example, the multifaceted relationship and political tensions between blacks and Koreans in the 1980s are represented through the presence of Ms. Kim, the half black and half Korean neighborhood store owner in Hillside. The text illustrates the complex relationship between the two racial groups and uses humor as a racial equalizer when it describes Ms. Kim: "To us, when she was behind the counter in her store, Ms. Kim was Korean. When she was out on the streets walking her dogs, she was black. Ms. Kim and I used to kid each other as to who had the flattest rear end" (99). The joke about Ms. Kim's flat behind makes her both an insider and outsider while simultaneously joking that Gunnar, who is also described as having a flat behind, is also an outsider.

The novel signifies the economic tension between African Americans and Koreans through the characterization of Ms. Kim.<sup>15</sup> Vijay Prashad, author of Everybody Was Kung Fu Fighting: Afro-Asian Connections and the Myth of Cultural Purity, discusses the interconnectedness—political and ideological—between blacks and Asians. He argues that the current tensions and connections between African

Americans and Asian Americans have a long and complex history, making connections among the political ideas of contemporaries W. E. B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, and Gandhi; between Jamaican Rastafarianism and its Indian and Chinese origins; between black nationalism's leftist politics and its support for Vietnam; and between the image of Bruce Lee and the idea of karate and kung fu as a symbol of minority power against white racism and white capitalism, including the appropriation of martial arts forms by African Americans.

The fluctuating representation of Ms. Kim—at times friendly insider, at other times outsider—signals Beatty's larger comment on the contemporary significance of race. Beatty depicts different races alternating between sharing allegiance and not to show that in the contemporary moment race matters in some instances, but that in other instances characteristics like class and access to capital continue to dominate and separate the races. Beatty's representations of diverse races, and especially his references to racial groups (like Koreans) who have developed complex modern relationships with the African American community, reinforces Beatty's larger claim that the significance of race fluctuates.

In addition to the numerous representations of black, white, and Korean characters, Beatty's text is rich with references to Japanese characters, which also serves to locate U.S. race in a global context. For example, the political history of Japanese Americans is suggested through Coach Shimimoto, who learned to play basketball while in an internment camp. Beatty constantly infuses his novel with racial policies from the nadir through the Jim Crow era to illustrate that the

contemporary racial atmosphere is connected to a complex history of racial discrimination. Coach Shimimoto was held in the Japanese American Internment where over 100,000 people of Japanese ancestry were detained in War Relocation Centers during World War II because they were considered enemy aliens and security risks. By drawing attention to Coach Shimimoto's internment, the novel links the racial discrimination of African Americans and the discrimination enacted upon other racial minorities. In doing so, the novel locates U.S. race in a wider context and illustrates the limitations of dichotomous understandings of race.

The novel's many representations of Japanese characters and culture, however, are not bound to caricaturing Coach Shimimoto, historicizing internment, and globalizing race. References to Japan, along with the novel's satire of multiculturalism, also encapsulates this chapter's argument that racial categories are dependent on stereotyped racial performances and that the novel offers an alternative identification paradigm that is based on culture rather than race. The novel presents a multiracial array of characters and satirizes the multicultural ideal in public schools and then imbues the end of the novel with Japanese references to relate the racial performativity necessary to maintain both the racial binary and the multicultural ideal. I turn now to analyzing the novel's satiric representation of multiculturalism and its concluding shift toward the overrepresented references to Japanese characters and culture.

The novel's satiric representation of multiculturalism illuminates the reduction of race to racial performances and the absurdity of a "color blind society" because it

abstractly reduces racial difference to racelessness.<sup>16</sup> A common critique of multicultural education is that too often it relies on the contributions approach, focusing on informing students about singular cultural characteristics of racial groups without holistically investigating that culture's historical and political experiences. Another common critique is that despite its affirmative ambition, the objective of multiculturalism has been undermined by the fact that historical racism has been left out of the discussion.

For example, before Gunnar moves to Hillside he attends Santa Monica's "all-white" multicultural school. In Santa Monica, "Everything was multicultural, but nothing was multicultural," pointing out the irony that though many schools espouse multicultural rhetoric, they remain racially homogeneous (Beatty 29). Even though Gunnar is one of the few minority students in the school district, the rhetoric of multiculturalism is constantly invoked. In this case, multiculturalism does nothing to encourage genuine racial equality—instead reducing multiculturalism to abstractly promoting racelessness.

Later, when Gunnar's teacher asks the class for examples of what could be considered colorblind, Gunnar answers, "Dogs." The humor of this exchange is that dogs are colorblind, but this is not the answer that Gunnar's teacher (who is white) is looking for. She intends to illustrate that human beings should aim to be color-blind, meaning that they do not see race. Later during a school physical, the nurse discovers that Gunnar actually is colorblind. In this exchange, Beatty ridicules the concept of colorblindness and the ideal of racelessness by critiquing the brand of

multiculturalism that simultaneously creates a hypersensitivity to racial categories while also suggesting a sense of racelessness through the idea of colorblindness.<sup>17</sup>

Beatty shows through this novel that part of the contradiction of the multicultural ideal is that race continues to operate on a hierarchy that privileges whiteness and that also reduces the spectrum of race and ethnicity to the binary of blackness and whiteness.<sup>18</sup> He emphasizes Gunnar's journey between his black and white worlds and the illusion of racial choice. Throughout the narrative, the text parodies a variety of racialized performances and satirizes the practice of multiculturalism in the public school system, like the inattention to power relationships. But in the last section of the novel, the image of Japan overshadows the text, serving as a model for meaningful multicultural experiences and disrupting the racial binary and African American literary protocols.

Until this point in the narrative, the novel has only casually invested in the image of Asian American characters like Ms. Kim and Coach Shimimoto. But the last section of the novel more significantly features Japanese culture, placing this novel in a continuum of other African American authors who prominently feature Asia and Asian characters.<sup>19</sup> Gunnar and Scoby's preoccupation with Japanese writers signals the shift in this novel from one focused on exposing the performance of blackness and whiteness to one registering a truer sense of multicultural inclusion.

While they are on the road during the basketball season, the only comfort that Gunnar and Scoby have is the novels of Mishima and the plays of Chikamatsu that Yoshiko sends them, which are filled with narratives of unrequited love and suicide.

Through their interaction with Yoshiko, Gunnar and Scoby experience a form of multiculturalism devoid of stereotypes and racial reductions. Their study of Japanese culture is not punctuated by the performance of Japanese stereotypes, as is Gunnar's cultural study of race at the start of the novel that results in performances of blackness and whiteness. Instead, Yoshiko teaches Gunnar and Scoby Japanese language, history, and culture. They debate the philosophies of Mishima and the purpose of life and death, employing the highest levels of multicultural implementation outlined by education scholar James A. Banks. Banks writes that the highest form of multicultural education takes place when students advance past learning about cultures' foods and holidays and start to make decisions based on their knowledge of diverse perspectives.<sup>20</sup> Following this model, Gunnar and Yoshiko consider various perspectives when making decisions about personal and social issues, like the future of black leadership and how they will flourish in Boston.

TWBS disrupts the binary nature of the racial hierarchy by infusing Asian references and characters into the binary of blackness and whiteness. The Asian cultural and literary references in this narrative of an African American character who is literally engaged with the protest tradition signifies Beatty's belief that cross-cultural narratives are more valuable. The novel also uses Japanese references to seppuku, ritual suicide, to indicate the depressing and stifling effect of racial categories.

## Conclusion: Unsettling Race

Beatty's text uses satire to show how audience and performance are necessary in maintaining both racial categories and race writing. By infusing the text with Japanese literary references and uncomfortable images of suicide, the novel unsettles our notions of race, suggesting that identities instead should be based on shared cultural allegiances.

Because of Beatty's condemnation of the racial dichotomy and his disparaging critique of a sacrosanct African American literary tradition, this novel confronts the meaning of race more radically than the other novels examined in this dissertation. Beatty mocks time-honored African American literary protocols, like the trope of double consciousness and the representation of the protest movement. The novel challenges the authenticity of the African American literature, arguing that it suffers from maintaining boundaries that have been long upheld in the name of tradition and that its protocols are akin to multicultural stereotypes. As such, the novel conveys a broader conception of the African American literary tradition, one that includes a wide range of historical, cultural, and literary references.

In critiquing multiculturalism, TWBS advances this dissertation's discussion of the shifting racial categories addressed in works by Andrea Lee and Danzy Senna. I argued in Chapter One that Lee's Sarah Phillips (1984) documents the shift in racial identity that is the result of integration, and I argued in Chapter Two that Senna's Caucasia (1998) critiques the shift in racial identity that is the result of multiracial

politics. Both Sarah Phillips and Caucasia represent a chronological and ideological development in the cultural atmosphere that leads up to the multicultural ideal. For example, Sarah Phillips, examining the integrationist era, demonstrates that attitudes about race are changing in terms of class allegiance, and Caucasia, examining the 1970s, shows how the contemporary politics of color and white-skin privilege change the discussion of race from the concept of biological race that is implied in the “one-drop” rule to a more flexible conception of race that relies more on the visual perception of race.

Sarah Phillips and Caucasia critique racial categories and racial essentialism; they work within racial categories in a way that TWBS does not. Caucasia and Sarah Phillips critique the inequalities of certain deployments of racial categories, but on the whole they accept racial categories as a necessary evil, and their characters attempt to define themselves within the concepts of race that are available. TWBS goes one step further by more radically critiquing the whole system of racial classification and at the same time challenging the static, sacrosanct tradition of race writing.



## Notes to Chapter Three

1. The New York landmark, the Nuyorican Poets Café, achieved explosive popularity in the 1980s mostly for making visible slam poetry, which is a genre of spoken-word poetry performed in a competitive venue.
2. The title of Beatty's edited anthology signifies novelist George S. Schuyler's 1926 essay, "The Negro-Art Hokum," which appeared in The Nation and argues that there is no black sensibility and that black artists are as diverse as white artists. Also publishing his article in The Nation, Langston Hughes responded to Schuyler's essay with "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," which argues that there is a perceptible black identity and that black authors disservice their art by trying to disregard it. By referencing Schuyler's essay, Beatty revisits the dialogue between Schuyler and Langston Hughes about the characteristics of black art. Beatty's reference to Schuyler's essay and the issue of the diversity of African American literature reflects his interest in exploring the pluralism of black culture and his unease with the representation of singular blackness.
3. Talk of the Nation, "Finding the Lighter Side of African-American Lit," February 6, 2006.
4. The protagonist's Swedish name is a reference to the work of social economist and race theorist Gunnar Myrdal, and his 1954 report, An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy. The two-volume work contains chapters on social injustice, race stratification, and black leadership and is significant to the TWBS's project of linking the racial reality of the Jim Crow era with the racial stereotypes of the multicultural era.

5. Earlier explorations of racial identity, like Frances Harper's Iola Leroy (1892) and James Weldon Johnson's The Autobiography of An Ex-Colored Man (1912), were invested in and dependent on disrupting the ideology of the one-drop rule. These narratives worked toward proving that a person legally considered black could just as easily be considered white, highlighting the irrationality of legislating race by claiming whiteness.
6. See, for example, Playing in the Dark and Authentic Blackness for arguments on how race gets reproduced through literature.
7. For more information about the history of African American protest writing, see Black American Writing from the Nadir, where Dickson D. Bruce, Jr. argues that "the virulence of white racism was a powerful spur to literary activity, as black writers sought to use their pens to fight against racist practices and ideas" (1).
8. See, for example: Ishmael Reed's Mumbo Jumbo (1972) and Japanese by Spring (1993), Derrick Bell's Gospel Choirs: Psalms of Survival for an Alien Land Called Home (1996), Trey Ellis' Right Here, Right Now (1999), or Darius James' Negrophobia: An Urban Parable (1992).
9. The album was named after Orson Scott Card's novel, Seventh Son.
10. Many of Mishima's works featured seppuku, ritual suicide. Mishima was a nationalist, and in 1970 he committed suicide after a political rally.
11. Chikamatsu is a well-known Japanese playwright who produced works for the Kabuki and puppet theater in the seventeenth century. Like Mishima, many of Chikamatsu's plays depicted double suicide.

12. The Jim Crow, or segregation era, begins with the post-reconstruction period and ends with the civil rights movement. In 1883, the Supreme Court ruled unconstitutional the Civil Rights Act of 1875, which granted equal enjoyment of public accommodations. The popular conception of “separate but equal” became law in 1896 with the *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling. As a result, the racial caste system heightened in the 1890s in what is known as the post-reconstruction era. This period was marked by the widespread separation of the races, but also anti-miscegenation laws, race riots, lynchings, and disenfranchisement.
13. Ebony and Jet are the flagship products of Johnson Publishing Company and are best-selling weekly and monthly magazines. In print since 1945, Ebony (and its sister publication, Jet) features news and entertainment relevant to the black community.
14. See the narrator in The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man, and more recently Birdie in Caucasia for other examples of black protagonists who fail to understand racial cues.
15. For further reading on tensions between African Americans and Korean Americans, see: Socio-Cultural Conflict Between African American and Korean American by Molefi Kete Asante, 2000 and Koreans in the Hood: Conflict with African Americans by Kwang Chung Kim, 1999. Also see Everybody was Kung Fu Fighting: Afro Asian Connections and the Myth of Cultural Purity by Vijay Prashad for a discussion of the interconnectedness—political and ideological—between blacks and Asians.
16. At the end of the twentieth century, multiculturalism became an accepted concept and its ideals were practiced widely, especially in public school

systems newly adjusting to integrated populations. The U.S. form of multiculturalism stems from the modern conception of social and racial equality and has come to signify not a federal or state legal regulation, but rather a philosophy and educational approach. Education scholar James A. Banks reasons that within the scope of multicultural education, the field does not have a singular set of criteria. Multicultural education instead refers to a range of approaches that were developed and adopted by education organizations and that influenced state policies.

17. For a full discussion of the political implications of the contemporary notion of “color blindness,” see Seeing a Color-Blind Future: The Paradox of Race by Patricia J. Williams and Color-Blind: Seeing Beyond Race in a Race-Obsessed World by Ellis Cose, 1997.
18. In her article, “Gender, Class, and Multiculturalism: Rethinking Race Politics,” social critic, activist, and scholar Angela Davis addresses the failure to acknowledge unequal power relationships in multicultural doctrine. Pointing out the failures of multiculturalism to challenge racism and other unequal power relations, Davis writes: “multiculturalism can become a polite and euphemistic way of affirming persisting, unequal power relationships by representing them as equal differences” (Davis 45).
19. For further reading on the discourse between African Americans and Asians, see Bill Mullen’s Afro-Orientalism, 2004.
20. Banks outlines four levels of implementation for multicultural curriculum reform. At the lowest level, the contributions approach, teachers incorporate the contributions of heroes, holidays, foods, and cultural elements of various ethnic groups. The additive approach adds more substantive content, concepts, and lessons about various ethnic groups to the existing curriculum

without changing its structure. In the transformation approach, the structure of the curriculum is changed to value perspectives from diverse groups. At the most advanced level, teachers promote the social action approach, in which students learn to participate in social change (Banks 13).

## CONCLUSION

### The Future of Racial Identity and African American Literature

I introduced this dissertation by illustrating cultural examples of a shift in the significance of racial categories that has occurred in the last quarter of the twentieth century. The cultural context, including the changes to the 2000 Census that allowed individuals to choose more than one racial category, for example, shows that the significance of race is changing and that individuals, in certain situations, can determine the influence of racial categories on their overall identity. In the introduction to this dissertation, I defined the term racial choice, which is a reflection of the contemporary sentiment that racial meaning has changed and that certain segments of the population have the ability to choose their racial identity. Racial choice is dependent on the post-integration cultural landscape that promotes colorblindness, racial fluidity, and fractures the once-strict binary system of race. However, racial choice is always fraught with contradictions between racial fluidity and maintaining traditional racial categories.

Recent Pew Research Center data about racial attitudes bolsters my argument that the meaning and significance of racial categories has shifted and that the contemporary cultural landscape reflects a sense of choice about identity. The survey, conducted in 2007, finds that a significant number of blacks, 37 percent, feel that “blacks today can no longer be thought of as a single race because the black community is so diverse.” The survey on racial attitudes, which relied on a national

representative sample, asked about values. Sixty-one percent of blacks said that the values held by middle class black people and the values held by poor black people have become less similar over the past ten years. In a related question, Pew Research Center data indicates that a majority of both blacks and whites believe that the values held by the two races have become more similar over the past ten years.<sup>1</sup> These statistics illustrate that for a segment of the population, value and class distinctions appear to divide the black racial group while simultaneously cultivating a convergence between middle class blacks and whites.

The Pew Research Center data focusing on class and value distinctions within the black community complements my earlier contention that the shifting historical, cultural, and social discussions of race we have witnessed in the late twentieth century have challenged the pre-existing understanding of race that was predicated by the one-drop rule.<sup>2</sup> The one-drop rule's exacting approach to racial difference, however, has given way to a more fluid, postmodern sense of racial categories—one in which the idea of racial fluidity and racial choice is increasingly explored. The idea of racial choice challenges the one-drop rule by allowing individuals to determine their own racial identity based on such factors as color, class, and cultural identity. Racial choice is at work in the contemporary cultural environment that generated the data reporting that over one-third of African Americans believe that blackness cannot be thought of as a singular race because of the differences in values and life experiences.

The underlying sentiment is that the meaning and significance of racial difference is changing. Increased class stratification contributes to the idea that race is no longer central to identity and that the effect of racism is no longer a crisis. Though it is a much more complex example, the image presidential candidate Senator Barack Obama also contributes to a perception that racial categories, and the inherent racism needed to maintain them, are no longer a threat.

Obama embodies the hallmark of the postmodern era, racial choice, and is making history in his campaign to be the Democratic nominee for the 2008 presidential election, garnering significant support from liberal, educated, middle class, and urban demographic groups.<sup>3</sup> What is significant about the early stages of Obama's campaign in terms of a racial discourse is that he has been able to identify as a black man, but also present himself as a candidate who transcends race.

Obama, whose father is Kenyan and mother is white American, grew up in Hawaii and in Indonesia with his mother and Indonesian stepfather.<sup>4</sup> As he formally entered the campaign, some early questions from the black community argued that Obama was not "black enough," even though he has always maintained that he is "rooted in the black community." He was interrogated about his racial authenticity and ability to represent the values and issues of the black community because he is biracial, an immigrant, and because of his Ivy League education.<sup>5</sup> This appraisal of black authenticity echoes the sentiments explored in the chapters of this dissertation, through the characters Sarah, Birdie, and Gunnar, all of whom are at one point are deemed not black enough because of their class, color, or cultural experiences.



Despite the public's initial anxiety surrounding Obama's racial authenticity and the conflicting attempts at racializing him, Obama's campaign has attempted to frame him as a presidential candidate who transcends race—who happens to be black, instead of a black presidential candidate. Obama's ability to prove his racial authenticity on one hand and on the other hand establish that he is race neutral indicates the shifting significance of racial categories and the racial choice concept. Obama's racial choice is apparent in his decision to use racial identity as he sees fit, or in other cases to not address it at all. Obama claims blackness, but does not restrict his rhetoric to the racial uplift protocols.

Paradoxically, Obama has been racialized by some even as his racial authenticity is challenged by others, which is the inherent conflict of racial choice. Though urban liberals find racial identity insignificant or an asset to Obama's campaign, working class, poor, rural, and Midwest voters find his race a detriment to his candidacy. Additionally, the members of the media and other politicians and pundits emphasize his race even as he attempts to move beyond it. For example, Senator Joe Biden, one of Obama's early competitors in the campaign to be the Democratic presidential nominee, remarked that Obama is "the first mainstream African American who is articulate and bright and clean and a nice-looking guy." The significance of Biden's use of the word "articulate" is that it functions as a racial cue. It is taken as an implication to the black race, as if to say that it is surprising that this particular black person is articulate because most black people are not.<sup>6</sup>

As Obama's campaign continues, he has been increasingly racialized and disparaged for his relationships with prominent black leaders, like Rev. Jeremiah Wright, who are labeled as black militants who spread un-American messages. For twenty years, Obama has been a member of Chicago's Trinity United Church of Christ, which was led by Wright. Wright has expressed radical political views that are critical of white racism. For example, the motto of the church he once led: "We are a congregation which is Unashamedly Black and Unapologetically Christian ... Our roots in the Black religious experience and tradition are deep, lasting and permanent."<sup>7</sup>

In addition to attempts to portray Obama as a black militant, he has also been depicted as a foreigner with "dangerous" Muslim ties. In a rally for senator and presidential hopeful John McCain, conservative program host Bill Cunningham publicly disparaged Obama by emphasizing his middle name, Hussein. Obama, who is a Christian, was named after his Kenyan (Muslim) father, Barack Hussein Obama, Sr. Obama has also been linked to the Muslim faith by publication of photos of him in Muslim garb that were taken while he visited Kenya in 2006. This reversal of perception—from raceless to race militant—is another example of the vacillating nature of contemporary race and the failure of racial choice.

What we see in the contemporary moment is distinctive from the pre-integration era because it takes advantage of the comparatively liberal moment that seeks to flatten the effect of racial categories. But the American public's apparent willingness to elect a black man to the highest elected office in the land does not

indicate an end to racism; the political and economic hierarchy that privileges whiteness remains largely the same. This tension is indicated by the reality that in the same period in which America seems to be moving past racism by considering electing this country's first black president, there have also been increased instances and references to lynching, a throwback to this country's Jim Crow past.

The image of lynching resurfaced in the American consciousness in 2006 as a group of black high school students in Jena, Louisiana were charged with attempted murder for beating a white classmate. The beating followed several racially charged incidents, including the hanging of a noose from a tree on school grounds. The ensuing political activities focused on the discrepancy between the comparatively light charges for the white students who hung the noose and the excessive charges of attempted murder for the black students. Soon after the Jena 6 incident, several other nooses appeared in other public spaces (e.g., schools and workplaces), functioning as a backlash to the shifting significance of race.<sup>8</sup>

These racially charged incidents replicate past methods of maintaining racial apartheid. The rebirth of lynching in a cultural climate that promotes the idea that racial categories are not important proves that the contemporary perception of peaceful race relations is false. Despite Barack Obama's unprecedented popularity among whites and the Pew Research Center data showing that both blacks and whites view racial categories differently, racism is still a serious factor.

The perception of racial choice, along with the inherent conundrum that racism is still at work, also operates in representative novels of the late twentieth

century discussed in this dissertation. That is why racial choice is such an important phenomenon and why this dissertation is so important—it recognizes and gives language to the contradictory forces that are the hallmark of the contemporary moment: that race does not matter, and that racism still exists.

I have shown how the novels analyzed in this dissertation illustrate the tension between the postmodern representation of racial fluidity and the historical legacy of racism and racial categories, thereby contributing to the theoretical discourse on the new-black and post-soul aesthetics and theories of the future of race. Each novel uses the trope of racial choice and the shifting meaning of racial categories, especially the “African American” racial category, to challenge the traditional limits of African American literature. These texts register the postmodern milieu that embraces a sense of racelessness, but they reveal that the concept of racelessness masks the racism that is still at work. They insist on historical grounding, juxtaposing the historical legacy and contemporary examples of racism with the postmodern perception of racelessness.

This dissertation offers an analysis of the contemporary tensions of racialization and racial identity in Sarah Phillips, Caucasia, and The White Boy Shuffle. The novels highlight the angst of contemporary representations of race and racial identity that suggest alternative identification paradigms that are based on class, color, and culture instead of race. These alternatives to racial identity are examples of racial choice, or the ability to choose how and when to apply traditional race boundaries.

In the order of their analyses in this dissertation, the novels more progressively challenge the meaning of race. Sarah Phillips employs the narrative form of white flight to offer class as an alibi for race and to reject the confines of the black racial category; Caucasia reconsiders the passing narrative to suggest color as a stand-in for race and to challenge the binary between blackness and whiteness; and The White Boy Shuffle uses satire to disrupt all racial categories and to recommend culture as an alternative to racial allegiances. Sarah Phillips and Caucasia challenge the meaning of race by rejecting select aspects of the racial paradigm—blackness in the former and binary constructions of race in the latter. The White Boy Shuffle, however, more forcefully confronts the idea of race and provocatively unsettles the ingrained instinct of sacrosanct race categories. In contrast, Sarah Phillips and Caucasia operate within the tradition of African American literature by adhering to customary traditions like valorizing the civil rights movement and using the time-honored passing paradigm.

Though they challenge racial categories—and by extension race writing—to different degrees, all three of the novels analyzed in this dissertation use similar methods to point up the shifting significance of race, racial categories, and racial identity. By historicizing attitudes about racial categories, challenging the dichotomous understanding of race, representing the tensions of racial authenticity, and showing the performativity necessary to maintain racial categories, these novels illustrate the boundaries of racial choice and stretch the limits of the African American literary tradition.

The contemporary, postmodern fragmentation of African American identities along the lines of class, color, and culture emphasizes the dilemma of who represents blackness, which in turn confronts the foundation of African American literature. These texts' use of racial choice demonstrates that the distinction of contemporary African American racial identity affects contemporary African American literature as well. Both racial identity and race writing are stretching to respond to the cultural and political climate that dangles the idea of racelessness and racial choice, yet still operates on the traditional racial hierarchy that privileges whiteness.

## Notes to Conclusion

1. Fifty-four percent of blacks and seventy-two percent of whites stated that the values of the two races have become more similar over the past ten years.
2. The one-drop rule, which established that individuals with any amount of “black blood” could not claim whiteness, previously governed policies of racial difference. Codified into law with the 1896 Plessy v. Ferguson Supreme Court decision, the one-drop rule determined that racial categories were biological, dictated by the state, and contingent on the rule of hypodescent. Hypodescent refers to assigning the racial lineage of a mixed-race person the racial category of the socially subordinate parent or ancestor.
3. Other black politicians, of course, have garnered support that goes beyond the black community. Obama, however, is the first to gain support from all demographic groups nationwide and to actually be the frontrunner for the Democratic nomination.
4. Obama attended Occidental College, Columbia University, and Harvard Law School. Before and after attending law school, Obama worked in Chicago as a community organizer. He went on to become a state legislator and U.S. Senator before making a bid to become the democratic presidential nominee.
5. Many media outlets have addressed the authenticity of Obama’s blackness. See, for example, “Obama, Blackness, and Postethnic America,” The Chronicle Review, February 29, 2008. Accessed March 3, 2008. <http://chronicle.com/free/v54/i25/25b00701.htm> , and “Decoding the Debate Over the Blackness of Barack Obama,” Brent Staples, The Washington Post, February 11, 2007.

6. For further reading on this perspective, read “An Inarticulate Kickoff,” Eugene Robinson, The Washington Post, February 2, 2007, A15.
  
7. From the Trinity United Church of Christ’s Web site:  
<http://www.tucc.org/about.htm>.
  
8. Nooses have been found at the University of Maryland, Columbia University’s Teachers College and at a host of other middle and high schools across the nation.



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