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IN PLAIN SIGHT: CHANGING REPRESENTATIONS OF “BIRACIAL” PEOPLE IN FILM 1903-2015

by

Charles L. Gray, B.F.A., M.A.

A Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School,
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ABSTRACT

IN PLAIN SIGHT: CHANGING REPRESENTATIONS OF “BIRACIAL” PEOPLE IN FILM 1903-2015

Charles L. Gray, B.F.A., M.A.

Marquette University, 2016

Rooted in slavery, the United States in both law and custom has a long history of adhering to the one drop rule–the stipulation that any amount of African ancestry constitutes an individual as black. Given this history, decidedly mixed race people have been subjected to a number of degrading stereotypes. In examining the three broad themes of the tragic mulatto, racial passing, and racelessness in cinema, this dissertation asks to what extent film representations of mixed race characters have had the capacity to educate audiences beyond stereotypes. Although a number of film scholars and critics have analyzed mixed race characters in American cinema, there is no treatment spanning the last century that comprehensively analyzes each film’s capacity to diminish racism.

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Charles L. Gray, B.F.A., M.A.

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For my brother Michael

CHAPTER ONE

BEGINNINGS AND BRIDGES

> "Going to the show" for thousands of young people in every industrial city is the only possible road to the realms of mystery and romance; the theater is the only place where they can satisfy that craving for a conception of life higher than that which the actual world offers them. In a very real sense the drama and the drama alone performs for them the office of art as is clearly revealed in their blundering demand stated in many forms for "a play unlike life." The theater becomes to them a "veritable house of dreams" infinitely more real than the noisy streets and the crowded factories.
>
> Jane Addams, *The Spirit of Youth and the City Streets,* 1909

When I was two or three years old, my Mom, Dad, and I went to see *A Man Called Horse* (1970) and *Little Big Man* (1970) at the Starlite Outdoor Theater, a two-screen drive-in venue once located on the northwestern outskirts of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Although this particular double feature might not have been the best choice for such a young person, it was my first experience with the power of cinema. I don't remember much about the films and wouldn't be able to sort the memories of those images from the times I've seen those same films since that night so long ago. Yet, I do remember the sheer size of the screen, the warm summer night air, our old light blue station wagon, the intermission cartoons, the concessions, and the general sense of wonder about being there with lots of other people to watch movies. Over the next few years, I saw *Sounder* (1972), *The Golden Voyage of Sinbad* (1973), *Herbie Rides Again* (1974), *Cornbread, Earl, and Me* (1975), and *Cooley High* (1975). But, one of the films that left the most lasting impression was *Star Wars: Episode IV-A New Hope* (1977).

As an eight year old, *Star Wars* completely changed the way I thought about movies. An amazing spectacle of good versus evil playing out across a galaxy, it introduced an entire world of characters and faraway places that fed my burgeoning appetite for science fiction and fantasy. While any direct reading of the film's racial allegory was lost on me at the time, I understood the

symbolic associations of white and black with good and evil subconsciously.[1] On some level, I could relate to the main character and his desire to find himself, the need to know his father, and his longing to explore. Due in part to its groundbreaking special effects, *Star Wars* was especially impressive on the big screen. However, there were also equally impressive shows on television.

Alex Haley's *Roots* first aired in early 1977. Like *Star Wars*, this story also introduced me to a world of characters and faraway places. The difference being that these characters and places had actually existed at one point in time. *Roots* exposed me to a history that I had no knowledge of before then. Granted, it was a small segment of a much broader story; nevertheless, I learned new things about the world through this television miniseries. Perhaps I even learned things about myself. Like many families in America, mine is multiracial. My white mother and black father met in the late 1960s just after the landmark *Loving v. Virginia* Supreme Court decision made interracial marriage legal in the United States. Many of the films produced during the 1960s and 1970s were shaped by the emergence of the Civil Rights Movement and featured black subjects. By contrast, mixed race themes and stories were less prominent. As a child, I was aware of racial topics in film, but I never saw any that explored mixed race issues. However, that changed after seeing *Imitation of Life* (1934) during my first semester as an undergraduate in the early 1990s. Though I had questions regarding racial identity for nearly my entire life, it wasn't until I saw this classic film that I began to grasp the historical significance of these questions. As it turns out, I wasn't alone in this lifelong enterprise. I was just one of thousands of mixed race kids born in the post-Civil Rights era that grew up with questions regarding their place in society. Going to the show, perhaps, was one way to find answers.

---

[1] Especially haunting is the climactic lightsaber battle in *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980). Darth Vader, an imposing figure completely dressed in black, has just cut off the hand of white Luke Skywalker. He then tells Luke, "I am your father." Luke chooses to fall to his death instead of facing a life knowing he is Vader's son. The scene is eerily reminiscent of the mixed race film trope in which a "white" character discovers they have black blood. For more analysis of racial allegory in *Star Wars* see Guerrero (1993), Nama (2008), Heise (2011), and King (2013).

Children have been enthralled by movies for over a century. The Jane Addams epigraph that opens this chapter describes the prominence and influence of film in the lives of children in her time despite the fact that the medium was still in its infancy (Black, 1994; Jowett, 1996; Romanowski, 2012). Addams was one of the first to raise concerns regarding the effects of movies on kids and believing in the educational power of films, she set up an “uplift theater” within Hull House for the children and immigrants who lived there (Grieveson, 2004; Ashby, 2012). In the years leading up to the 1934 Motion Picture Production Code, several studies citing the negative influences of movies on children were conducted and published (Jowett, 1996). In 1916, Harvard psychology professor Hugo Münsterberg published *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study.* He wrote, “The subtle sensitivities of the young mind may suffer from the rude contrasts between the farces and the passionate romances which follow with benumbing speed in the darkened house. The possibilities of psychical infection and destruction cannot be overlooked” (p. 222). Likewise, Alice Miller Mitchell’s extensive study *Children and Movies* (1929) found that the majority of movie patrons were children. In her epilogue she cautioned, “As life’s experiences unfold to the children in proportion to their years and understanding, so should movie life, which is a dream world painted in shadows, be unfolded to the children according to their ages and understanding” (p. 148). These findings echo the anxieties of Addams, W. E. B. Du Bois, and others who were grappling with the influential power of the new medium. Yet, perhaps the most notable study to take a truly rigorous look at the impact of film on American society was the twelve-volume series entitled *Motion Pictures and Youth*, also known as the Payne Fund Studies. The first of its kind, the project continues to represent one of the most extensive evaluations ever conducted to examine the role of the motion picture in American society as well as its effect on children (Jowett, 1996). Through an endowment provided by Frances Payne Bingham Bolton, the study’s contributors hailed predominantly from the University of Chicago, including Herbert Blumer, Werret Wallace Charters, Robert E. Park, and William Harrison Short

with assistance from John Dewey. While a few of the studies focused on moral standards and racial tolerance, some of the conclusions were problematic due to a misreading of societal norms and film representation.

The concern over the impact of film and other media on the way people develop perceptions and beliefs about others has persisted for decades and continues even today. As a society we are influenced by the depictions of people we see on the screen. Many even argue that we *learn* from film. Unfortunately part of what we learn is often based on erroneous representations of people. Writing in *The Howard Journal of Communications,* Bradley Gorham (1999) found that repeated exposure to racial stereotypes in the media can influence the way individuals form interpretations of people and thereby perpetuate dominant stereotypical beliefs. This repeated exposure results in the stereotype becoming accepted as normal and primes these beliefs. He argues that "racial stereotypes are manifestations of racial myths" (p. 233). Largely a subconscious process, this aspect is an essential part of how stereotypical characters, biracial or otherwise, become a social belief. Gorham illustrates the link between social reality and myth by emphasizing power relations in society. Since dominant social groups have the power to define racial understandings, they have the ability to make those definitions appear natural and unarguable. The psychic costs associated with these stereotypes are also unarguable. For example, in "Counseling Biracial Students: A Review of Interventions," Rochelle C. Moss and Deena Davis (2008) suggest that "Race and gender oppression interact to create unique challenges for biracial girls. Society's ideals of beauty can underlie painful events that shape acceptance or denial of the mixed-race heritage. Biracial girls can experience an identity distortion when they do not see images of themselves represented in popular culture and in the media" (p. 221). American film and television have, in fact, traditionally been saturated by images of white, often blonde, Barbie-like characters. This can have an even more profound effect when biracial girls *do* see stereotypical mixed race characters and themes on television and

in film. These characters and themes of mixed race people are rooted in American racial prejudice and date back to the seventeenth century.

While it would be valuable to conduct interviews and surveys asking people what they learn about certain films or mixed race characters, it is largely impossible for this project. In *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812*, Winthrop D. Jordan writes:

> If it were possible to poll the inhabitants of Jamestown, Virginia, concerning their reaction to those famous first "twenty Negars" who arrived in 1619 I would be among the first at the foot of the gangplank, questionnaire in hand. Lacking this opportunity, I have operated with certain working assumptions which some readers will detect as drawing upon some "psychologies"—the assumptions about how people operate—of the twentieth century and upon some of the psychological imagery of the eighteenth. I have taken "attitudes" to be discrete entities susceptible of historical analysis. (p. viii)

Given the impossibility of knowing how film viewers responded to most of the films in this project, my effort here is to demonstrate plausible readings of mixed race characters. In any case, understanding racial representations in film matters. This interpretive history traces mixed race characters in film over time and enquires into the extent to which mixed race stereotypes changed and had the capacity to diminish racism. Despite the recent surge in the study of mixed race identity among scholars, the larger society is likely to be uninfluenced by such work. Yet it is inarguable that some of what society understands about mixed race people comes from film. Unlike obscure research articles or lectures, films have the capacity to reach a much wider audience. We are surrounded by moving pictures. Ever since its creation, film has been a powerful medium for entertainment, documentation, and learning. Film brings people together for a communal experience and allows for conversation about topics that otherwise might be difficult to broach. bell hooks (1996) captures this idea best in her introduction of *Reel to Real: Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies*. She writes:

> Whether we like it or not, cinema assumes a pedagogical role in the lives of many people. It may not be the intent of a film maker to teach audiences anything, but that does not mean that lessons are not learned. It has only been in the last ten years or so that I began

> to realize that my students learned more about race, sex, and class from movies than from all the theoretical literature I was urging them to read. Movies not only provide a narrative for specific discourses of race, sex, and class, they provide a shared experience, a common starting point from which diverse audiences can dialogue about these charged issues. (p. 2)

The idea that film plays a pedagogical role in society is not new. Indeed, it can be traced back to cinema's very beginnings. As one of the first inventors and innovators of movie technology, Thomas Alva Edison was poised to make defining decisions that would shape the nature of film for years to come. By today's standards, some of what he produced would be considered abhorrent. A few of his early films illustrate the fact that the social status of black Americans wasn't far from its lowest point in American history. He also understood that film could be educational (Gaycken, 2012). Appearing as a witness in a 1923 Federal Trade Commission hearing regarding anti-trust charges against the Famous Players-Lasky Corporation, Edison provided remarkable testimony about what he saw as the power of film as a teaching tool as well as its ability to influence public opinion. When asked about the relative value of using movies for teaching, Edison replied this way:

> Well, I got it in my head that it would be a fine thing to teach children by that method, teach them by pictures, because they resent books, they do not like them, and they will look all day at moving pictures, so I started in a number of years age, put in a department and I had a visionary scheme of putting it all over among the schools of the United States, and I made a lot of pictures to teach chemistry and physics, and things like that, these complex things, to children from six, eight and ten years of age. (p. 1891)

Edison goes on to describe the details of these experiments and argues that moving pictures are ideal for "teaching anything" (p. 1893). Even more fascinating is the inventor's opinion of the power of film to influence people. After being asked whether he believed that movies could affect the "conduct and the taste and the manner of the people" (p. 1894), Edison answered by suggesting that since people are extremely impressionable, that film is capable of great persuasion in the dissemination of social and cultural norms. Even though the mass consumption of cinema was barely two decades old, it is fascinating to juxtapose Edison's

comments alongside those of bell hooks, Henry Giroux, Roger Ebert, or a host of other observers who point to the potential of film as a teaching tool and to its capacity to influence culture. hooks (1996) argues that although most of us claim to go to the movies merely to be entertained, we also go “to learn stuff. Often what we learn is life-transforming in some way” (p. 2). Henry Giroux (2001) points out, “The ubiquity and importance of film as a mode of public pedagogy offers educators both an opportunity and a challenge to connect film as a cultural practice to broader public issues, social relations and institutional formations” (p. 593). In 2005, Roger Ebert said the following to a crowd of admirers: “If it's a great movie, it lets you understand a little bit more what it's like to be a different gender, a different race, a different age, a different economic class. It helps us to identify with the people who are sharing this journey with us.” That Edison recognized film as a pedagogical tool in the earliest days of cinema is a testament to the permanence of the medium as reflected by the later observers mentioned above.

This dissertation is an interpretive history that considers the pedagogical role of film through focusing on representations of mixed race people between 1903 and 2015. It examines the arc of mixed race film characters over time by reading them as potential instruments for destabilizing racist representations. How these characters might do so, and what society might learn from these films are central considerations. This project evaluates films that are integral to understanding the various iterations of mixed race character themes. It is informed by the historical body of scholarship on not only biracialism in film but also the emerging field of critical mixed race studies. The latter borrows from critical race theory as well as critical legal studies. Each came about in the 1970s to examine the role society and culture play in supporting racialized inequalities and a race-driven legal system. In the inaugural issue of the *Journal of Critical Mixed Race Studies,* authors G. Reginald Daniel, Laura Kina, Wei Ming Dariotis, and Camilla Fojas define critical mixed race studies as “renderings and studies of racial mixing, interraciality, multiraciality, transracial adoption, and interethnic alliances, among others. Ethnic

studies and critical race studies are key components of critical mixed race studies and continue to advance similar inquiries and scholarly discourses about race, culture, and society" (p. 7).

Changing Representations of "Biracial" People in Film brings together the concepts of the tragic mulatto, passing, and racelessness, through the lens of critical mixed race studies to present a broad view of mixed race representations in cinema. While there is existing scholarship on mixed race cinema, no study has covered the last hundred years in an effort to comprehensively analyze each film's capacity to diminish racism. This project is also mindful of the current sociopolitical background regarding mixed race identity and the terminology used to describe mixed race people.[2]

Literature Review

Film is a powerful medium. Mixed race characters have fascinated filmmakers and audiences for over a century. Those who examine these characters have chronicled their historical and continued popularity. Bogle (2004) noted the tragic mulatto "proved itself a movie makers darling" (p. 9). Locating its emergence in 1912, he charts the character from there to the melodramas of the 30s, 40s, and 50s, and essentially ending with a group of music films in the late 70s and 80s. Lupack (2010) argues that "Mulatto characters were to be embraced—at least by filmmakers, who recognized their box office appeal" (p. 33). Citing its beginning in 1911, Lupack's trajectory for the tragic mulatto ends in the 1950s and early 1960s. Beltrán and Fojas (2008) contend that currently, "biracial and multiracial models, actors, and film and television

[2] The term *biracial* as it is used to describe an individual with parents from two races is both recent and flawed. Its problematic aspects are why it appears within quotation marks in the title of this study. While it is fine and acceptable for an individual to choose this descriptor to self-identify, it doesn't hold up to strict scrutiny when looking at one's actual lineage. If most "biracial" people have parents who are multiethnic, it stands to reason that a label that connotes two distinct races or ethnicities isn't very useful. As such, this project will adhere to the phrase "mixed race" to describe film characters unless it is otherwise more suitable to use the historical pejoratives *mulatto/a*, *quadroon*, or *octoroon*. In all cases, the characters examined in this project were conceived as some admixture of black and white.

characters seem to be everywhere" (p. 1). The authors posit that while mixed race characters have garnered a more favorable position in Hollywood films, "the status of racial mixing is continually changing, and each new cultural representation and media event adds another angle and another level of meaning to the complex history of race and ethnicity in the United States" (p. 18). Carter (2008) suggests mixed race Americans have gained greater visibility that exceeds prior generations and that this population "is the commodity the producers use to tap into young, diverse markets" (p. 207). Elam (2011) notes that as a result, the "dramatic increase in the public visibility and popularity of mixed race has also drawn academic attention" (p. xiii).

Most scholars and film critics who have studied mixed race film characters (Noble, 1948; Mapp, 1972; Cripps, 1977; Guerrero, 1993; Reid, 1993; Lupack, 2002; Bogle, 2004) have done so by including an examination of these roles in a larger analysis of African American stereotypes in film. Others however (Courtney, 2005; Smith, 2006; Beltrán, 2008; Carter, 2008) have focused specifically on mixed race portrayals. Regarding the former, one of the first significant efforts of this kind is Peter Noble's *The Negro in American Film* (1948). He argues that years of negative portrayals in film supported actual racism and discrimination toward blacks in America. Noble's work covers the time span 1902-1947. The bookend films in his study are *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1903) and *Song of the South* (1947). While Noble focuses on black representation in general, his reading of *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Imitation of Life* (1934) provides an important perspective regarding mulatto characters during that period. He notes that the depiction of mulattoes in *The Birth of a Nation* was "interesting in its vehemence" and that they get "even worse treatment, it would appear, than full-blooded Negroes" (p. 35). On *Imitation of Life*, the reader gets a strong sense of how recent the film was for Noble writing in the late 1940s. He describes the tragedy of the mixed race character Peola and how the "delicate subject" of racial passing had not been engaged as fully as it was in *Imitation of Life*. Noble observed that, as Peola, the actress Fredi Washington "brought sympathy, understanding and attention to what was

originally quite a minor character in the film" (p. 62). "She is light-skinned, sensitive, tempestuous; and grows bitterly indignant when she sees that the white girl with whom she has been reared is getting all the fine things of life while she is subjected to humiliation and unhappiness" (p. 62). Noble demonstrates that compared to *The Birth of a Nation,* the mulatto depicted in *Imitation of Life* is much more positive.

One wonders why this work appeared when it did. Noble lived in England. In general, American films were seen as the standard bearer for the rest of the world, but why was Noble interested in Negroes during the 1940s? Perhaps the events surrounding World War II created a greater awareness of American race relations throughout the world, and as a result, the plight of blacks in this country was brought into greater relief. The widely publicized work of the NAACP and its 1942 agreement with Hollywood studio heads to liberalize depictions of black people on screen was led by Walter White. While only a small number of films actually adhered to this agreement, it was seen as a set of new conditions that Hollywood was expected to follow (Cripps, 1977). All of these activities may have also contributed to Noble's attention to blacks in film. Surprisingly, it would be almost 25 years before an American author would take up the subject. Edward Mapp's *Black's in American Film: Today and Yesterday* (1972) was the first of many books that emerged in the early 1970s. Mapp builds on Lawrence Reddick's 1944 list of common stereotypes of the "Negro in the American mind." Among others, these include the savage African, the petty thief, the devoted servant, the chicken and watermelon eater, the happy slave, the corrupt politician, and the unhappy non-white. While Mapp covers a period of nearly seventy years, his analysis is somewhat thin and rather informal. Yet, it is interesting to note the genesis and evolution of these stereotypes. The 1970s would also see these stereotypes appear in the work of Daniel Leab, Thomas Cripps, and Donald Bogle. Why the 1970s? Was it the Civil Rights movement and its wide-reaching effects on some parts of American life? Did the efforts to

desegregate schools and establish both political and economic freedom create an environment in which the study of black films could flourish?

Another example of black film criticism is Donald Bogle's landmark *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in Films* which first appeared in 1973. Bogle's work is largely concerned with what actors bring to a given role despite its negative aspects. He sums it up thusly:

> From my point of view, the history of blacks in American films is one in which actors have elevated *kitsch* or trash and brought to it arty qualities if not pure art itself. Indeed, the thesis of my book is that many black actors-from Stepin Fetchit to Louise Beavers to Sidney Poitier to Jim Brown and Whoopi Goldberg-have played-at some time or another-stereotyped roles. But the essence of black film history is not found in the stereotyped role but in what certain talented actors have done with the stereotype. (p. xxii)

In his wider examination of black cinema, Bogle (2004) highlights some mixed race actors and actresses who were able to breathe new life into mulatto stereotypes that had previously been one dimensional and lifeless. Most notably, Fredi Washington and Dorothy Dandridge are cited as bringing a certain authentic quality to their performances. Bogle looks at the overall contribution of black actors in film, yet, he also tracks the evolution of mixed race characters through the analysis of several movies that appeared over the course of the last century including *The Octoroon* (1913), *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), *Imitation of Life* (1934), *God's Stepchildren* (1937), *Lost Boundaries* (1949), *Pinky* (1949), *Carmen Jones,* (1954), *Sparkle* (1976), *Flashdance* (1983), *The Cotton Club* (1984) *Purple Rain* (1984), and *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1995). Bogle observed that the tragic mulatto was popular in terms of its appeal to a wide range of audiences. Appearing in the early twentieth century, the first representations of mulatto characters were created to draw sympathy from the spectator. Characters were often portrayed as passing for white and befalling a series of events that destined them to a life of loneliness, isolation, or worse. Bogle writes, "Usually the mulatto is made likeable—even sympathetic (because of her white blood, no doubt)—and the audience believes that the girl's life could have

been productive and happy had she not been a “victim of divided racial inheritance” (p. 9). Much like the characters that were employed in literature by abolitionists to gather support for emancipation, some early film characters functioned the same way in as much as they symbolized an appeal for civil and social acceptance.

However, Bogle also points out the negative depictions of mulattoes in *The Birth of a Nation*. These “dark, sinister” and power hungry portrayals of mulattoes were employed to warn against the growing political power of blacks. It also, of course, was a warning against racial mixing. Yet, in the decades that followed, mulatto characters shed some of the negative characteristics of the stereotype in favor of the more positive attributes mentioned earlier. Some characters exhibited increased maturity and stature with a few even portrayed as doctors or nurses. While a number of films attempted to move beyond traditional depictions with slight variations to the tragic mulatto trope, in the end, most characters suffered the same unfortunate demise of unrequited love and/or death.

Bogle (2004) identifies other modern variants of the stereotype that emerged toward the end of the twentieth century. One in particular is the “raceless” character frequently portrayed ambiguously without any cultural references or cues to the individual’s background. With a few exceptions, the majority of mixed race characters were played by white actors and actresses but it’s notable that raceless films feature the practice of casting mixed race actors and actresses. Bogle adds that although this was a step in the right direction, many failed to sufficiently challenge tenets of the old stereotype. For instance, while these characters nearly transcend race, they remain constrained, socially awkward outsiders who attempt to escape their circumstance through, success, fame, and fortune. And yet, some of the actors who played these characters found ways to elevate the role and inject a degree of humanity.

While Bogle doesn't focus on mixed race characters exclusively, his arc of films provides an index of representation that evolves in both content and scope. It begins with moderately positive images then collapses under the defining power of *The Birth of Nation*, recovering somewhat with *Imitation of Life,* and *Lost Boundaries*, before flattening out with films in the 1970s and 1980s. Other authors too, though different in style, analyze mulatto characters within the larger framework of black cinema and as a result, track the development of mixed race characters.

In *From Sambo to Superspade: The Black Experience in Motion Pictures,* Daniel Leab (1975) examines many of the same negative stereotypes as Bogle. Leab tracks these characters from their early beginnings up to the Blaxploitation period of the 1970s. Overall Leab argues that the more things change, the more they remain the same with regard to blacks in film. Stereotypes never really fade or disappear and certainly don't reflect the reality of black life. Leab concludes that despite the social changes that occurred toward the end of World War II, Hollywood's portrayal of black Americans did not adequately reflect those changes. He criticizes the "problem" films that emerged after the war as presenting no real solution to the issues raised in those pictures. Beyond their work on screen, Leab sheds light on actors who refused to play demeaning characters, segregation on film locations, as well as early efforts by black independents to start their own companies. At times *From Sambo to Superspade* reads like Bogle's work in which the reader is led through a series of movie reviews. This style is less pronounced in subsequent work by others.

Regarding Leab's assessment of mixed race characters, one can only surmise that he viewed little improvement with their portrayal between 1915 and 1960. His references and analysis range from the films *Drawing the Color Line* (1909), *In Humanity's Cause* (1911), *Mixed Colors* (1913), *The Nigger* (1915), *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), *The Bar Sinister* (1917),

Within Our Gates (1920), and *The Symbol of the Unconquered* (1920), to *Imitation of Life* (1934), *Pinky* (1949), *Island in the Sun* (1957), *Kings Go Forth* (1958), *Night of the Quarter Moon* (1959), *Shadows* (1959), and *I Passed for White* (1960). Despite some brief praise for *Shadows*, calling it "an intense, thoughtful, and provocative glimpse of black-white relations" (p. 214), Leab's overall conclusion is "the film image of the black is as condescending and defamatory as it has ever been" (p. 263).

In *Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film 1900-1942*, Thomas Cripps (1977) examines many of the same films as Bogle and Leab, but does so through more of a scholarly lens. It is interesting to note that Cripps acknowledges Bogle's work in the preface of his book stating "although lacking detailed citations," *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks* "provides a witty portrait of black actors at work in Hollywood" (p. viii). Cripps' rigorous historical analysis is chiefly concerned with the struggles of black actors, the many protests that accompanied the release of certain films, the emergence of black filmmakers, and the eventual agreement that sought to improve the depiction of blacks on screen. He seems to argue that early on, there was the possibility that blacks might be portrayed more positively. One might assume that if there were more black filmmakers that there would have been more films with more accurate portrayals of people of color. According to Cripps, several factors played a role in hindering black actors and filmmakers from full participation in the movie business.

First he describes a general indifference amongst black intellectuals and the urban masses. Black churches dismissed movies as a passing fad and newly formed organizations like the NAACP had failed to adequately address racist depictions in film until 1915 prompted by the release of *The Nigger* and *The Birth of a Nation*. Second, blacks suffered from what Cripps calls "an apparent lack of a usable past" (p. 11). The majority of black entertainment relied heavily on music, sound, and audience participation – all of which did not translate to the silent screen.

Third, most black filmmakers did not have the same budgets as their white counterparts, and the larger black community found it difficult to apply enough political pressure to force white filmmakers to abandon cruel imagery based on old Southern stereotypes. Almost thirty years would pass before the NAACP would be able to broker an understanding with Hollywood that would begin to replace old stereotypes with more positive representations as well as include more blacks in technical roles.

Embedded in Cripps' work is a brief trajectory of mixed race representation that includes *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1903), *The Octoroon* (1911), *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), *The Homesteader* (1919), *The House Behind the Cedars* (1924), *The Conjure Woman* (1926), *Imitation of Life* (1934), and *God's Stepchildren* (1938). While he notes that while *The Birth of a Nation* "was a rough and cruel racist slander upon Afro-Americans during Reconstruction" (p. 52), *Imitation of Life* "offered signs that depression attitudes were producing changes" and "added up to a minor revolution in moviegoers' tastes" (p. 303). Somewhere in between, Cripps locates the work of Oscar Micheaux, the pioneering filmmaker whose "tales and movies centered on the strain of color caste in America" (p. 184). Complicating Micheaux's efforts to present his work was the opposition to exhibit his films which came from whites and blacks alike.

In *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film*, Ed Guerrero (1993) examines black images in film from 1915 to 1992. While it is not a "complete or linear history" (p. 4), his focus is on the construction of blackness in popular movies. He argues that the studio system's most successful films have the greatest influence in terms of their ability to define cinematic language and formal conventions. Furthermore, he posits that these Hollywood hits possess the "ideological power to shape the audience's conceptions of race" (p. 5). Guerrero also highlights the work of recent independent filmmakers who confront the artistic challenges and limitations that accompany working within the Hollywood system. He notes that from the

beginning, black cinema was at a steep disadvantage in relation to the profit motive paradigm in Hollywood. High budget productions with the accompanying grandeur and elite aesthetic restricted the ability of black filmmakers to achieve the same level of technical prowess as well as limited their ability to distribute their films. Guerrero's nuanced analysis of black films with higher budgets describes the tension that can arise between the need to make an authentic film, and the surrounding specter of big-budget production impinging on that authenticity, sheds light on some of the challenges specific to black filmmakers.

Just as Ed Guerrero cites different resources available to black and white filmmakers, so too does Mark Reid. In *Redefining Black Film* (1993), Reid makes a distinction between white-controlled black commercial films and black independent filmmaking, arguing that the two forms have important differences and should be treated as such in their analysis. He critiques the majority of prior black film study citing the fact that many authors hadn't emphasized this difference. Reid sorts commercial films into three genres – comedy, family films, and black action movies. Noting that these genres originated from various forms of minstrelsy, he delineates three distinct historical periods. Specifically, *blackface minstrelsy* in which whites mocked black life through dance and song, *hybrid minstrelsy* involving some black performers who sought to appease white audiences, and *satiric hybrid minstrelsy* which rejected racial injustice. Reid also applies the categories of comedy, family, and action film to the independents arguing that it also has its origins in minstrelsy. He cites the resurgence of black independent film in the 1970s as a way for these filmmakers to present alternative images to contrast those of mainstream filmmakers. This resurgence was deeply intertwined with the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. Of course this meant that far fewer films with mixed race characters and themes would make it to the big screen. Those that did presented mixed race characters and themes that were outside of the norm of black film topics of the time – a light-complexioned, male con artist in *Trick Baby* (1972) – a strong, independently-minded mixed race boy who rebels as his white

mother dates a naval officer on leave in *Cinderella Liberty* (1973) – and the eldest of three sisters whose light skin and moxie catapults her to semi-stardom in *Sparkle* (1976).

Likewise in *Literary Adaptations of Black American Cinema: from Micheaux to Morrison*, Barbara Tepa Lupack (2010) makes an observation regarding differences in the portrayal of mixed race characters between black and white filmmakers. She states that in the beginning, the mulatto stereotype was understood to be lucrative in terms of box office appeal. According to Lupack, white filmmakers' portrayal of mulatto characters tended to be "malicious, duplicitous, and conniving" (p. 34). She argues that the character played on fears of racial annihilation since mulattoes were often seen as troublesome symbols of interracial sexuality. In addition, she points out that many early characters were often more villainous than their darker, "black" counterparts. In time, studios and audiences became more sophisticated prompting harrowing and moving depictions of mixed race people. Many possessed emotive qualities designed to elicit empathy or pity. Conversely, some black filmmakers used the mulatto to subvert white conceptions of black characteristics. Lupack notes that some films produced by black studios often used the passing narrative to emphasize racial pride. Characters were initially white, yet later discovered their black heritage and embraced it rather than attempt to escape it. In tracking the evolution of the tragic mulatto from its early beginnings in 1911 through the1960s, she notes how depictions moved from "tragic to unfortunate." However she states that while these characters began to lose some of the most tragic elements, others still remained.

Lupack also emphasizes the importance of casting in this analysis. She notes that most early roles were played by white actresses. This suggests that murky racial topics like interracial romance were best approached through a familiar point of departure. What was then considered highly taboo could comfortably be explored within the confines of white actors and actresses. She argues that casting white actresses in mulatto roles diminished the character's authenticity.

Although earlier characters were mostly portrayed by white actors, casting practices have changed in recent years. While other questions have arisen regarding the types of characters that many mixed race actors and actresses play, it is no longer an issue to see the kind of racial intermingling on screen that was once forbidden.

So far, the mixed race film criticism and scholarship discussed in this review has only been part of a larger whole that focused primarily on black film and filmmaking. As the twentieth century came to a close, more scholarship emerged that sought to examine mixed race characters and filmic identities. Susan Courtney (2005) explored the impact of casting and censorship on mixed race characters in her book *Hollywood Fantasies of Miscegenation: Spectacular Narratives of Gender and Race, 1903-1967*. She argues that “Hollywood Cinema has contributed to the cultural production and dissemination not only of particular racial fictions – the wide array of types and stereotypes – but of an entire racial epistemology, a system of knowledge that deems “race” to be a visible fact” (p. 142). Linking casting to this idea, Courtney writes that the complex mix of early 20th century race relations and censorship guidelines had a profound influence on casting and ultimately the audiences who viewed them. The influence of the censors as well as makeup and other production techniques were used to construct race. Unlike black stereotypes, mulatto depictions were often innately ambiguous in terms of the visual cues that signify race. As Courtney points out:

> Racial identity is conjured by directing the viewer to interpret sets, props, atmosphere and narrative, out of which emerge a position within which the racial subject can be seen. What becomes uniquely visible here is that this cinematic process produces not only a black subject situated deeply within the narrated space but also a white one guided to see her as if from a point beyond or outside it. (p. 186)

In addition to casting, Courtney spends considerable time examining the impact of the censorship authority known as the Production Code Administration on films from the 1930s through the 1950s. Specifically, she looks at the initial introduction and gradual erosion of the

miscegenation clause. The basic intent of the clause was to prevent the presence or even suggestion of interracial sex on screen. Ironically, the acute focus on suppressing miscegenation actually forced it to the surface in other ways. American films that didn't feature portrayals of interracial fantasies between blacks and whites often resorted to exotic fantasies on beaches, in jungles or opium dens. In the absence of these fantasies, films with black/white mixed race characters were groomed and molded to suit societal expectations as well as satisfy the censors in the PCA. Put in another way, "producing racial visibility is by no means an easy or simple matter, as various subjects are made to appear more and less raced than others to meet a range of historical, ideological, and fantasmatic demands" (p. 104). In her analysis of the PCA, Courtney draws a parallel between the Freudian ego that represses painful memories and the miscegenation clause as a tool for cultural repression. In some sense, The Code sought to erase or revise the actual history in which white slave owners took advantage of black women who then gave birth to mulatto children. Courtney argues that "perhaps the most radical knowledge miscegenation threatens to portend is not simply that racial "lines" have been sexually transgressed , and thus might disappear, but that the original categories they were assumed to delimit were only, necessarily, imagined" (p. 106).

Casting often overlaps with discussions of passing. In "Race as Fiction: How Film and Literary Fictions of 'Mulatto' Identity have both Fostered and Challenged Social and Legal Fictions Regarding Race in America," Bridget K. Smith (2006) outlines the ways in which mixed race film characters augment society's conception of racial stereotypes. She argues that film depictions of these characters became "a cultural site for the performance of anxieties about blackness and whiteness and their relationships to one another—anxieties that change from one decade to the next and may be different for white audiences and black audiences" (p. 47). One aspect of this anxiety arises with the issue of passing. Even though the one-drop rule was designed to ensure a clear distinction between individuals who were *visibly* black and whites,

there were a number of mulattoes who could pass for white and avoid laws designed to enforce segregation. In early white produced films, passers were vilified and seen as disloyal by blacks and a threat to racial purity by whites. Yet, by the end of World War II, Smith argues that the passer began to be viewed as more a victim of institutions and less the opportunistic and subversive threat that they once were.

Beyond passing narratives, Smith highlights two variations on mixed race characters that emerged in the 1980s and the 1990s. The first involves a character in which racial representation is almost completely absent. No overt references to race are made in the storyline or script. Other production elements like makeup and lighting are used to underemphasize a character's already racially ambiguous features. Smith points out that these "raceless" roles were played by both males and females. She notes that because of these circumstances, the actors were able to focus more on developing other aspects of the character without being viewed solely through the lens of race. A second variation that Smith highlights is the character inhabiting a dual black-white identity. Films like *Purple Rain* (1984) and *Mixing Nia* (1998) have strong cultural references that cue the viewer in to the character's racial identity however the characters themselves do not appear to struggle with their dual ancestry. Smith believes these new variations "provide a rare presentation of a possible existence of a dual black-white identity in the post-civil rights era" (p. 126). She suggests new films featuring mixed race characters have the "room for a "nonracial" or "ambiguous" racial identity for visibly non-white characters" (p. 47). Although the following authors do not identify the dual black-white character mentioned above they do allude to raceless portrayals.

In *Mixed Race Hollywood* (2008), Mary Beltrán and Camilla Fojas assemble a collection of essays that looks at various periods and iterations of mixed race film characters. In early film, some mulattoes were conceived in order to frighten and dissuade social acceptance while others

were tragic figures who played on the sympathies of the theatergoer. The text notes two early yet divergent examples of this trope. Beltrán and Fojas point to the rapacious Silas Lynch and the deceitful Lydia Brown in *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) as reflecting contemporary pseudoscience and racist social attitudes of the time toward mixed race individuals. Both are a threat to white society and “must be eliminated or marginalized” (p.10). Contributing author J. E. Smyth cites the contrasting example of Cora Munro in *The Last of the Mohicans* (1920). Whereas Silas and Lydia are portrayed as untrustworthy and wicked, Cora is refined and non-threatening. Although it was one of many film adaptations of James Fennimore Cooper’s famous novel, it was the only version to hint at Cora’s racial ancestry. Toward the middle of the twentieth century, mixed race portrayals became slightly more progressive in terms of offering more in-depth characters but retained some aspects of mental instability and deceptiveness. Beltrán and Fojas argue that the progressive traits can be attributed to several factors. First, the relaxation of the Production Code in the 1950s allowed the studios a degree of flexibility in their portrayal of interracial relationships. Second as a result of *Brown v. Board of Education*, efforts to improve race relations through desegregation in the schools began to have an effect on the nation’s views of race. Finally, the Civil Rights Movement along with the *Loving v. Virginia* decision began to further erode the most disturbing aspects of the stereotype.

Mixed Race Hollywood includes Greg Carter’s “From Blaxploitation to Mixploitation: Male Leads and Changing Mixed Race Identities.” In it he links the mixed race action hero from the late 1970s black action films to the current crop of “multiculti” action films starring mixed race actors. Carter cites the difficulty some mixed actors faced in the 1970s getting certain roles and while this continued through most of the 1990s, there has been a recent shift in which studios have changed casting practices to meet a changing urban demographic. He argues that this latter group of actors tends to deemphasize their racial background, thus complementing Hollywood’s move toward racelessness.

This literature review covers the varied history of mixed race character analysis in film. It tracks their evolution from early "mulatto" characters, to tragic figures passing for white, to so-called raceless figures. While, much of the early work in this review focuses predominantly on black films and characters, early scholars and critics also examined mixed race characters. These authors are included here because together they constitute the foundation of black film history and are essential to understanding how stereotypes in film have changed overtime. This review considers mixed race scholarship that has, tellingly enough, only emerged during the last fifteen to twenty years – a time in which mixed race studies have increased dramatically.

Due to the specific scope of each work there are areas which haven't been explored enough or at all. It is clear that many have examined the lineage of change in mixed race representation, yet it is only recently that scholars have dedicated research solely to mixed race characters in film. Courtney (2005) focused her entire book on the study of race black/white mixing on screen from 1903-1967. Courtney's nuanced tracing of race as a "visible fact" (p. 142) in early film to a conception of race that is created through the "attributes of cinema" (p. 190), hints at the ways in which later filmmakers would toy with perception to conjure or diminish race on screen through mixed race figures. Likewise, Smith's (2006) work centers on "mulatto identity" in film. Notably, she identifies the mulatto who inhabits a dual black-white identity. Smith suggests that this late twentieth century character is the result of post-civil rights relationships in which children had a direct connection between one black and one white parent. In the majority of mixed race representations, there is always an "either-or" proposition. Characters are caught between worlds. The dual black-white role doesn't adhere to these rules and therefore isn't consumed with the dilemma of having to choose one side of their heritage of the other. While Smith's examples of these characters – The Kid in *Purple Rain* (1984) and Nia in *Mixing Nia* (1998), are representative of mixed race individuals who are at home with life in the margins – Bogle (2004) saw The Kid as merely a retread of the old tragic mulatto tale without

acknowledging clear differences such as how the mere presence of parents might denote the evolution of this character.

Beyond the dual black-white depictions, Smith (2006) and Bogle (2004) have identified the "raceless" character in mixed race cinema. While many roles have been played by females – Jennifer Beals (*Flashdance*, *Wishful Thinking*) and Maya Rudolph (*Away We* Go, *Bridesmaids*) – Smith notes that "there are also male corollaries to this phenomenon" (p. 119). Beltrán (2005) cites shifts in urban demographics allowing filmmakers to create lucrative films with racially ambiguous male action heroes that appeal to non-white audiences without upsetting white sensibilities. Although Bogle discusses a few male mulatto characters, it isn't within the context of raceless or non-racial analysis that he seems to apply to their female counterparts. For example he mentions Ron O'Neal in the context of *Super Fly* (1972), yet he doesn't address the casting challenges that O'Neal faced precisely because of his ambiguous looks. To be fair, at the time that Bogle wrote the majority of his book, many of the more recent films with "raceless" males had not yet been created.

On the concept of racial passing, Beltrán's *The New Hollywood Racelessness: Only the Fast, Furious, (and Multiracial) Will Survive* (2005), makes the argument that passing as white essentially allows a person to become raceless. This wasn't articulated by Smith, and while her analysis of passing is meant to highlight it as a persistent fascination among recent filmmakers, she does not link it to her examination of raceless characters. Perhaps Smith would argue that raceless characters exist somewhere on a continuum between those who are passing and those who have embraced their dual ancestry, whereas Beltrán would argue that racelessness is a response by filmmakers to demographic shifts as well as sociopolitical changes. The fact that passing is a step to becoming raceless or white shouldn't be conflated with characters whose race is simply ambiguous. One who passes might be seen as raceless, but the raceless characters Smith

describes made no conscious choice to pass. Beltrán cites the role of casting young mixed race men in contemporary films as an example of Hollywood's effort to "sooth white sensibilities even while attempting simultaneously to appeal to young viewers with urban media-savvy tastes" (p. 63). This style of film subtly promotes racelessness. She notes that light-skinned actors are likely to be read as white and by extension read as passing. However she only alludes to it for future research.

Mixed race stereotypes in film change over time, but the extent to which they actually lessen is contested by film scholars. This dissertation looks anew at the arc of mixed-race representations to discern to what degree they may undermine racist categories.

Methodology

While the study of mixed race people has a long history, it is only recently that scholars and critics have attempted to be more critical due in part to the fact that mixed race studies is being more formally accepted and defined. In *Emerging Paradigms in Critical Mixed Race Studies* (2014), G. Reginald Daniel argues that with mixed race as the critical center of focus, multiracial people become the "subjects of historical, social, and cultural processes rather than simply objects of analysis" (p. 8). Moreover, he stresses that critical mixed race studies recognizes that "racial categories and racial designations are "unstable" and "decentered" complexes of sociocultural meanings that are continuously being created, inhabited, contested, transformed, and destroyed" (p. 8). In other words, mixed race stereotypes are changing over time. This plays out in cinema and the mixed race characters in each film will evidence this rather bumpy and tenuous trajectory of portrayals. Despite some attempts over the years to appear otherwise, many depictions are simply racist in that they highlight the worst fictions of mixed race people – venal, predacious, and gripped by an incurable pathology. Like its predecessor Critical Race Studies, Critical *Mixed* Race Studies seeks to change racial formations that have left

lasting negative perceptions of mixed race individuals by questioning the "imposition of as well as resist traditional monoracial categories and boundaries by expanding them to include more multidimensional configurations" (p. 8).

Keeping within the framework of critical mixed race studies, each film in this study will be analyzed through several distinct lenses. One lens examines characters as individuals in relation to family and the greater community. In addition, mixed race characters have an uneasy coexistence with their darker counterparts due to being depicted in a more favorable manner. As such, mixed race characters in this study will be analyzed against this backdrop. The use of language can also define racial identity. In some films, the speech of mixed race characters is often qualitatively different than that of the character's parents and unequivocally black counterparts, presenting a sort of dissonance for the viewer. This is especially true when mixed race actors play white or raceless characters. Typically, the same sort of dissonance does not arise when mixed race actors play black characters who speak with black colloquialisms. Language will be observed in that it may signify race. Vocabulary, style, use of slang as well as rhetorical shifts will be considered. Another focus will be on the overall narrative in order to understand how the story impacts each mixed race representation. For instance, aspects of Southern life were more prominent in some earlier films and played a role in the outcomes of each mixed race figure. Another line of inquiry will look at formal techniques that include camera angles, editing choices, lighting, framing, and the depth and spatial arrangement of interior décor and exterior presentation or mise-en-scène.

Using these methods, this study will explore three broad themes in the historical arc of mixed race representation – the tragic mulatto trope, racial passing, and racelessness. Filmmakers in different eras use the viewer's interpretation of these contexts to racialize characters on screen. A character's initial identity may shift, or morph, into others as the story unfolds. Beyond the

boundaries of individual films, this project examines characters within the context of broad themes related to a given period. Through the observation of racial stereotypes in film, this project will argue that mixed race characters often destabilize stereotypes and have the capacity to educate viewers beyond these negative conceptions. Possible connections to whiteness, passing, and raceless portrayals will be examined.

Mixed race characters have been a part of moving pictures for nearly the entire span of the medium itself. Although there have been many studies of racial representation in film, few have attempted to systematically catalogue and analyze the history and evolution of representation that is specific to mixed race characters. This dissertation does a close reading of a series of films made over the course of one hundred and thirteen years. It attempts to unpack the ways in which mixed race representation has changed over time. These changes have followed specific epochs in American history which, in turn, influenced distinct periods of mixed-race representation in film. The first period I examine runs from approximately 1903 to 1920. It will focus on films that best exemplify mulatto characters ranging from tragic to shameful in their depiction. It came about in the aftermath of the activities to abolish slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction. During the early part of the twentieth century, mixed race characters in movies reflected the past from which they emerged – a past in which mixed race individuals ranged from runaway slaves to free people of color attempting to carve out a life in the American landscape. I then turn my attention to films made between 1920 and 1960 when the theme of racial passing was dominant in filmic mixed race representation. Beginning during the First World War, millions of black people left the South and headed for better opportunity in the North in what has come to be known as The Great Migration. Many of the movies made during this time reflect the social upheaval that accompanied this mass movement of people. In addition to the anxiety over bulging urban centers, battles over jobs, housing, and schools, was the fact that many black Americans, by fortune of their light complexions, could leave their communities and passed as

white people. The variety of passing films made during this time portray the murky ways in which visual identity can betray what we think we know about race as an immediately discernible quality in people. Finally, this project turns to the period between 1983 and 2012 in order to focus on the theme in mixed race cinema known as racelessness. During the 1960s and 1970s, movies with mixed race themes virtually disappeared. The Black Power Movement increased solidarity amongst black people and left no room for mixed race individuals who espoused an identity that diminished blackness. In the decades following the Civil Rights Movement and the *Loving v. Virginia* decision, the sociopolitical presence of mixed race people increased as children of interracial unions grew in number. The characters that appeared in films were often so racially ambiguous that viewers were either confused or simply mistook them for white. Without obvious cues or prompting by filmmakers, one was left to question the racial background of these characters.

Any history of mixed race cinema would be remiss without addressing how these themes have evolved over time in films. Besides the general analysis of mixed race characters, passing presents additional challenges to traditional mixed race stereotypes. On screen, a light face often becomes a white face until the viewer is given a reason to see it differently. Interrogating this shift can reveal insights into the socially constructed nature of race and assist in understanding the ways in which race would be deemphasized in future films. Possible motivations behind a character's attempt to pass as well as situating generational elements will be considered in this project. The role of casting and the degree to which it makes race visible or invisible will be analyzed. In addition, looking at techniques that assist a filmmaker in manipulating an audience's perspective will be examined. There have been a number of movies in which mixed race actors play what appear to be monoracial characters. These characters are often racially invisible in the context of the films. Race is muted through the use of lighting, makeup and dialogue written to avoid obvious racial cues. How these techniques are used to imply racelessness will be surveyed

in order to unearth findings with regard to whether these portrayals amount to representations of whiteness or something closer to *aracial* wherein the significance of race is greatly diminished.

Regarding the selection of movies for this project, films were chosen based primarily on two factors – most contain character dilemmas and storylines that signify mixed race themes. While this is true of many early films, those in the raceless genre largely omit them. In doing so, they evoke important questions about the significance of race through its absence and ambiguity. Moreover, the lead roles are played by very popular mixed race actresses who are in many cases household names. Selections were also made due to each film's relative popularity based on sales at the box office. With the exception of Oscar Micheaux's work, the movies in this study have been widely viewed. Moreover, it will be argued that many are culturally significant in that they have left their imprint on generations of American moviegoers and filmmakers alike. To this end, the films in each chapter will be grouped together by theme and follow an approximate chronological order. "Early Films Representing Mixed Race Characters" (chapter two) examines early depictions of the mulatto by tracing its origins from literature to film. Specifically, this chapter is primarily concerned with mixed race characters in films that were made between the years 1903 and 1920. The trajectory begins with sympathetic yet stereotypical representations of mixed race people in early films but then descends into portrayals of gross characterizations and hallucinatory work. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1903, dir. Edwin S. Porter) was the first film to depict mixed race characters. The success of Harriet Beecher Stowe's book ensured the film's success. Musser (1991) argues that in 1903, "the story was part of American folklore" (p. 243). By today's standards, its running time of just over nineteen minutes seems miniscule, but at the time it was the longest and most expensive film made. Two other Tom films, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1910, dir. J. Stuart Blackton) and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1914, dir. William Robert Daly), highlight mixed race characters which are less prominently featured in this oft retold and reworked tale of slavery in the South. Also notable are the ways in which these pictures draw a clearer line from the ultra-

sentimental brand of mixed race representations in Porter's film, to the decidedly un-tragic and dark behavior of mulattoes in *The Birth of a Nation* (1915).

Directed by D.W. Griffith, *The Birth of a Nation* is credited for its box office success as well as its epic depiction of the events surrounding the Civil War and Reconstruction. With a budget of $110,000 it earned 10 million dollars during its first run and held the record for highest grossing film until *Gone with the Wind* was released in 1939. Made during the film industry's early years, *The Birth of a Nation* was uniquely positioned to reinforce the racial hierarchy that undergirded much of American life. Much of its popularity (or infamy) is due to its racial stereotypes. The mulatto characters Silas Lynch and Lydia Brown are widely credited as being some of the first mulatto characters in film. *The Birth of a Nation* also received national attention due to protests which were largely driven by the NAACP. In many ways *The Birth of a Nation* set the standard by which films would be measured but it also set a disturbing precedent for racially stereotypical content.

For several reasons, Oscar Micheaux's *Within Our Gates* (1920) marks one of the few films directed by black filmmakers that will be examined in this project. Historically there were few black directors who had the resources and opportunity to produce films, and much of their work has been lost or did not survive before it could be preserved and archived. In addition, most black directors did not create movies with mulatto characters and themes. Micheaux is one of the exceptions. A survey of his movies reveals a different treatment of mixed race narratives than that of white directors. In addition, while it is somewhat contested, *Within Our Gates* marks one of the only films that is seen as a response to *The Birth of a Nation* by a black filmmaker. Despite the marginalized efforts of Oscar Micheaux, *The Birth of a Nation* redefined mixed race characters as undesirable. Nevertheless, three versions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin, The Birth of a Nation,* and *Within Our Gates* represent a kind debate over how mixed race characters were to be portrayed

and regarded. For over sixty years between 1852 and 1915, the *Uncle Tom's Cabin* novel, plays, and films, held sway with many Americans regarding popular interpretations of Southern life during slavery. *The Birth of a Nation,* and peripherally, the writings of Thomas Dixon, Woodrow Wilson and others constituted an effort to push back on these popularized notions. While some of these films had their own way of eroding racial stereotypes, others tended to reinforce old cautions against intermarriage. This period represents a time when the social status of black people was close to its nadir. Chapter two demonstrates the somewhat contentious efforts to define people of color through this small but influential group of films and documents the activities of the N.A.A.C.P., Booker T. Washington, and Oscar Micheaux to counter the racist imagery conjured by Griffith and his contemporaries.

"In Plain Sight: Racial Passing in Cinema" (chapter three) examines the passing narrative in movies between 1920 and 1959. It begins by considering this phenomenon through the analysis of two films that mark not only a transition from silent to sound but also one of rural to urban - Oscar Micheaux's *The Symbol of the Unconquered* (1920) and *Veiled Aristocrats* (1932) were selected since they are two of the few films in this genre made by a black filmmaker and feature different treatments of passing. Following that will be a close look at the film that has come to define the tragedy of racial passing, 1934's *Imitation of Life*. The film succeeds in asking difficult questions about race where most prior mainstream films hadn't. Peola*,* as played by Fredi Washington in the 1934 version, may be the quintessential figure in the passing/tragic mulatto genre. Her character's odyssey of life-long passing reveals not only a look into a mixed race individual's personal struggles with this issue, but also compels one to consider society's deep rooted contradictions regarding race and identity. Universal Pictures had difficulty getting the film approved by the Production Code Administration because of its strong interracial undercurrents. Nevertheless, when *Imitation of Life* was released, it was widely successful at the box office, garnering three Academy Award nominations including Best Picture. It is a

benchmark of the classic tragic mulatto tale and continues to be a film that critics and scholars devote some of the most attention to in mixed race literature. Its remake in 1959 is a testament not only to its enduring popularity, but also to the nation's continued struggle and fascination with mixed race people. The remainder of the chapter is dedicated to four films. 1949's *Pinky* and *Lost Boundaries* highlight mixed race passing struggles that are distinctly post-war in nature. Each is representative of the profound societal changes that further enabled racial passing. Each was widely seen by the public. *Pinky* is also notable for Elia Kazan, an accomplished director who would go on to produce classics like *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951), *On the Waterfront* (1954), and *East of Eden* (1955).

Ten years later, *Night of the Quarter Moon* (1959) deals with passing and the anxieties of intermarriage and integration in the post Brown vs. Board of Education era. It offers a more negative and sensationalized view of racial passing. With a star-studded cast including Julie London, John Drew Barrymore, Nat King Cole, Agnes Moorehead, Dean Jones, and Jackie Coogan, the film examines what happens to one "quadroon" when she attempts to marry into a wealthy family. Finally, *Imitation of Life* (1959) revisits the original 1934 story through the lens of the late 1950s. It should be noted that there is a dearth of films with mixed race themes during the period between 1959 and 1983. This is primarily due to the rise of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. Since the social focus was almost entirely the black community, it was an unfruitful time for exploring mixed race or mixed race characters in film. This in no way should be taken to mean that films like *I Passed for White* (1960), *High Yellow* (1965), *The Black Klansman* (1966), *To Sir With Love* (1967), and *Cinderella Liberty* (1973), aren't valuable in the wide-ranging lineage of mixed race cinema, but they were also made during a time when few cared about mixed race issues.

While racial passing isn't the subject of this next spate of films, it is a close cousin of what has come to be known as racelessness. "Ordinary People" (chapter four) takes stock of the recent trend in mixed race representation marked by the un-racing of mixed race characters. Several films that were produced between 1983 and 2012 will be observed to examine these so-called raceless characters. Beginning with *Flashdance* (1983), films in this genre feature racially ambiguous characters whose absence of racial identity presents viewers with the quandary of assigning race to someone who apparently has none. *Wishful Thinking* (1997) is a romantic comedy featuring Jennifer Beals, an actress whose racially ambiguous looks have long been noted by film critics. Likewise, Maya Rudolph's work in *Away We Go* (2009) and *Bridesmaids* (2011) will be read against the seemingly cultureless nature of this genre of films. Lastly, *Celeste & Jesse Forever* (2012) rounds out this most recent period in mixed race cinema. The portrayal of fluid identities like these has accompanied demographic shifts in society, motivating filmmakers to appeal to emerging audiences. This chapter will attempt to discern these *auteur* motives as well as understand the extent to which this type of character challenges traditional mixed race stereotypes. Intersections with passing and whiteness will be examined in order to differentiate them from the idea that one might transcend race. Yet there remain important questions to ponder. Are these characters truly raceless? Is racelessness post-racial or post-ethnic? Is racelessness equivalent to whiteness? Is racelessness colorblindness? Is racelessness racist? What do these characters mean in relation to their dark-skinned counterparts?

The final chapter, "Present, Past, and Future" will summarize the findings about representations of mixed race characters over time and consider the following questions: Did representations become more positive in a linear way? Did changes in representation mirror changes in public views of race? At what point and why did representations have the capacity to educate audiences to be less racist? This chapter will also note the study's limitations and make suggestions for further research.

CHAPTER TWO

EARLY FILMS REPRESENTING MIXED RACE CHARACTERS

> One morning, when the hands were mustered for the field, Tom noticed with surprise a new comer among them, whose appearance excited his attention. It was a woman, tall and slenderly formed, with remarkably delicate hands and feet, and dressed in neat and respectable garments. By the appearance of her face, she might have been between thirty-five and forty; and it was a face that, once seen, could never be forgotten—one of those that at a glance seem to convey to us an idea of a wild, painful, and romantic story.
>
> Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 1852

The above passage refers to Cassy, a mixed race figure who embodies many of the tragic mulatto's characteristics. She is raised in her master's luxurious house. She attends convent, studies music, and learns embroidery. When her master dies, she is sold to a man that she falls in love with. They have children. However, he eventually sells Cassy and the children to different buyers in order to settle gambling debts. She has another baby with a different plantation owner but this time she resigns to take its young life rather than subject it to the horrors of slavery. She is sold several more times before she finds herself in the company of Uncle Tom. Cassy's odyssey exemplifies the tragic mulatto's plight – she has experienced enormous wealth and privilege as well as the rocky bottom of servitude and misfortune. It is easy to see how one might sympathize with her circumstances and yet she's also brave and heroic in spite of her situation. On screen, these elements of Cassy's persona become even more apparent.

Tragic mulattoes are generally considered to share the same characteristics; however, there are important differences in representation in early film. Many of the first mixed race characters didn't fit the now well-worn archetype of the tragic *mulatta.* Indeed, many were male

or portrayed with family members.[3] Following mostly positive portrayals, D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a* Nation started a profound backlash against the sentimental and melodramatic characters from antebellum literary fiction that so dominated the genre. This chapter illustrates the downward trajectory that began with sympathetic stereotypes before giving way to ugly and hallucinatory depictions of mixed race people. By 1919, the films of Oscar Micheaux began to provide a vision that ran counter to those mentioned above. Unfortunately, much of this work was rarely seen outside of the black community. In literature, mixed race characters were employed to gain support for the abolition of slavery. It is argued that readers of antislavery fiction could identify with the mulatto, quadroon, and octoroon characters that faced the dilemma of being caught between two worlds. The Tragic Mulatto, then, became an effective device for countless writers who sought to end the institution. This particular convention continued with the introduction of film. Though its antislavery purpose faded during Reconstruction, filmmakers and authors alike never really let go, utilizing the trope to highlight civil rights issues. Conversely, writers like Thomas Dixon turned the trope on its head with mulatto figures who revealed their inferiority through violence, sexually immodest desire for white women, and deficient character (Squires, 2007). While this project is concerned primarily with early representations of mixed race people in film, it considers representations in literature as an important counterpart in the

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[3] Uncommon in later films, early works tended to feature male or sibling characters. Others climaxed with the death of their protagonists. In *The Octoroon* (1911), the movie's namesake poisons herself after she is unable to marry her white lover. In *The Debt* (1912), a white man has children with his white wife and his octoroon concubine. The boy and girl grow up separately, meet, and fall in love. Just before they are married, they discover that they are brother and sister. In *The Nigger* (1915), or as it would later be retitled, *The New Governor*, the protagonist learns that he has black blood from a political rival. He decides to leave office as well as his relationship with a white woman. Other portrayals were less sympathetic. The film *In Humanity's Cause* (1912) depicts a white civil war soldier whose life is saved through a transfusion of a black man's blood. Transformed into a beastly outcast, he seeks out his donor. After a brief struggle, the two fall from the edge of a cliff to their deaths. With a plot lifted from Mark Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894), *In Slavery Days* (1913) tells the switched at birth story of Carlotta. She becomes obsessively jealous over a suitor who is only interested in her counterpart named Tennessee. After an attempt to sell Tennessee fails, both Carlotta and her mother die in a house fire.

universe of filmic mixed race representation. The following is a survey of abolitionist fiction and mixed race literature written approximately between 1826 and 1901.

Tragic Beginnings in Literature

Stories featuring mixed race characters grew out of a set of beliefs and stereotypes that took hold early in American history. Theories of hybrid degeneracy, polygenesis, and eugenics, placed mixed race people in an unhappy world of sterility and other undesirable conditions. Mulattoes, as they came to be known, faced the dilemma of not fitting in either of the worlds they inherited. This shadowy figure was associated with notions of the forbidden and misfortune. While it is assumed that others faced crises in their lifetimes, a mulatto's crisis was relatively permanent (Park, 1928; Stonequist, 1935). So, while the tragic mulatto has origins that are rooted in reality, the idea of this "marginal man" would also come to be associated with popular literature. In *The Black Image in the White Mind* (1971) George Fredrickson argues that racial prejudice arose as a direct result of slavery "as a pseudoscientific theory positing the innate and permanent inferiority of nonwhites" (p. xi). These beliefs were widely held in the South and the North – a reality that often led to friction and conflict among many in the antislavery camp. To counter these racial biases, abolitionist writers created refined and heroic characters as a way to refute the ideology supporting slavery. Considering the fluid nature of the tragic mulatto, it is instructive to consider some definitions.

This character became a popular foil for authors in antebellum America. In a way, early depictions of tragic mulattoes in literature represent the first examples of a challenge to racial stereotypes. The strategic goal behind the use of mulattoes was to represent characters who personified the tensions inherent in the institution of slavery. This was achieved by casting them as both heroic and nearly white giving white readers a figure they could admire not only for their bravery, but for their shared whiteness as well. This last element tends to have a destabilizing

effect on racial stereotypes. Characters with white complexions who are also slaves leave readers and audiences with an incongruity they must somehow reconcile. While they are often fair-skinned, beautiful, educated, and cultured, they could be thrown into the horrors of slavery because of one drop of black blood. To avoid this danger altogether, some characters attempted to flee from blackness by passing as white.

Scholars and critics have noted particular traits that have come to be associated with this old character. Sterling Brown (1937) credits antislavery fiction for giving rise to the "tragic octoroon." Favoring realism over stereotype, he impugned abolitionist authors for avoiding more serious social issues through the character. Miscegenation was emphasized to a greater degree than other problems facing blacks. Additionally, Brown cites gender divisions where the nearly-white status of men made them more intelligent and tragic in their enslavement. In contrast, women were beautiful yet doomed, adding that in 1920s and 1930s literature, "octoroon" becomes a feminine noun. Brown argues that a biological conflict arises between the warring mixed-blood of tragic mulattoes – the idea that the character's white blood provides the intellect and reason while base emotions and brutishness are represented by black blood.

Jules Zanger (1966) delineates the "tragic octoroon" as an alluring and refined young mixed race girl who appears nearly white. Thusly raised and educated as a white child, her speech is free of black dialect. Her downfall usually comes with the death of her father and the inevitable sale into slavery destined to be sexually violated. For Zanger, the octoroon is defined by more than the simple pathos of white blood - it was a tool used by abolitionists in the propaganda war with proslavery advocates to expose the perpetual sin of slaveholders. Additionally, Zanger argues that antislavery authors skillfully involved the audience. Since the typical nineteenth century reader's own family history might not be fully known to them, the riches to rags theme's implicit suggestion was that it could happen to *them*. Barbara Christian (1980) highlights black

writers and their interpretation of the mulatta between 1861 with the publication of William Wells Brown's *Clotel* and 1966 with Margaret Walker's *Jubilee*. In an attempt create images of positive black women, Christian argues that these writers utilized qualities that were associated with white women – "helplessness, chastity, and refinement rather than, say, strength, endurance, and intelligence" (p. 22). Another of these qualities was the mulatta's Christian morals. This spiritual element was employed to shine light on the un-Christian practice of slavery and combat the myth of the sexually promiscuous mixed race woman. On the other hand, Alice Walker (1983) defined the mulatta as much by the presence of light-skinned heroines as the absence of darker ones. The mulatta is beautiful only because the "black black woman" (pp. 290-291) is not. She chastises William Wells Brown for catering to white male fantasies. Walker is also scornful of Frances E. W. Harper, Emma Dunham Kelly, and Pauline E. Hopkins for turning away "from their own *selves* in depicting black womanhood." Although they were visibly darker, they still chose to create lighter skinned characters. This idea of contrasting fictional characters with the real people who created them is a focal point which Walker uses to underscore one of the central tensions of mulattoes – they are often portrayed more favorably than their black counterparts. In her view, these writers were complicit in supporting a racist taxonomy.

Jean Fagan Yellin's (1989) interpretation of the trope emphasizes sisterhood and the appeal to white women who were grappling with their duty to their female slaves while being pushed aside by their husbands who preferred their helpless concubines. Although slave women and their mistresses were rivals, this context illustrates that there were no truly free women in a society which held slaves. In other words, Yellin's tragic mulatto represents the union between white women and their black female slaves – they were women and sisters. Eve Allegra Raimon (2004) denotes the mulatta as "quintessentially American, a precursor to contemporary motifs of 'hybrid.'" Like Walker, Christian, and Yellin, Raimon suggests that the mulatta's gender was essential to the plot's ability to generate melodrama and sympathy among readers of abolitionist

fiction. In fact, she argues that the masculine expression of the noun is actually a misnomer since most characters were female, and ultimately much more persuasive as a literary device than their male counterparts. Writ large, Raimon's mulatta can be viewed as a way abolitionist writers could wrestle with the complex issue of mixed race Americans.

In early abolitionist literature, interracial couples, mixed race individuals, and their descendants were often central in a story meant to convey the horrors of slavery. As abolitionist writers began to rely on a single figure that would come to personify those who lived life in the margins during the antebellum, Lydia Maria Child's *The Quadroons* (1842) became most identified with the origins of tragic mulatto characters. With this story, Child pivoted from the nonfiction of *An Appeal of That Class of Americans Called Africans* (1833), a scholarly work intended to provide the movement with a full scale analysis of the slavery question, to fictional accounts that would implore even the most hardened readers to sympathize with the plight of her characters. Child had been particularly impressed with the then anonymously published *The Slave; or, Memoirs of Archy Moore* (1836) whose characters illustrated the perils of slavery at the margins of the color line. In a letter to William Lloyd Garrison, editor of *The Liberator*, Child writes that the story had a profound effect on "the dullest minds and the coldest sympathies" of the period. Child aimed to strike the same chord with her own narrative.

The Quadroons is the short tale of Rosalie, the daughter of a wealthy New Orleans merchant who falls in love with Edward, a rich white "Georgian." They want to marry but since she is a quadroon, the "wall of separation" prevents them from doing so. They nevertheless spend ten years together and have a daughter whom they name Xarifa. Eventually his interest in a political career pulls him away from his "family" and into the arms of Charlotte, the daughter of a wealthy politician. After Edward's marriage to Charlotte, Rosalie dies of a broken heart. Meanwhile, Edward drowns his sorrows in wine and dies after falling off his horse. Xarifa finds

solace in her harp teacher George but loses her freedom when it's revealed that her grandmother's master never submitted her papers of manumission. She is arrested by the sheriff and sold to the highest bidder. George tries to help Xarifa escape, but he is shot before he can reach her. The story ends with the devastated Xarifa falling into a deep depression and killing herself in a "frenzy of despair" (p. 141).

While Child's story deserves some criticism for portraying its heroines as preferring white lovers and their clinging dependency, the story did convey the often hidden misogyny of slavery in which slave women could be raped and white women were silent witnesses to their husbands' philandering (Karcher, 1994). Moreover, Child solidifies the idea of uniquely doomed and isolated figure that formed the basis of the character for all time. The following passage captures the melancholy, despair, and heartbreak that came to be associated with the tragic mulatto. Child writes:

> Happy as Rosalie was in Edward's love, and surrounded by an outward environment of beauty, so well adapted to her poetic spirit, she felt these incidents with inexpressible pain. For herself, she cared but little; for she had found a sheltered home in Edward's heart, which the world might ridicule, but had no power to profane. But when she looked at her beloved Xarifa, and reflected upon the unavoidable and dangerous position which the tyranny of society had awarded her, her soul was filled with anguish. The rare loveliness of the child increased daily, and was evidently ripening into most marvelous beauty. The father rejoiced in it with unmingled pride; but in the deep tenderness of the mother's eye there was an indwelling sadness, that spoke of anxious thoughts and fearful foreboding. (pp. 119-120)

It could be argued that these words among others written by earlier authors (Cooper, 1826; Hildreth, 1836; Séjour, 1837) represent the literary birth of the tragic mulatto character. They capture the despair and helplessness of the classic mulatto who has nearly everything only to have it snatched away because of her black blood. Few other tropes would equal its symbolism and pathos in American literature. Child, a staunch abolitionist, was the first to focus this character's conflicts on ancestry, marriage, and the rights of slaves. Themes of sexual violation and its destructive effects on family life as well as the oft used device of the "slave auction" were

employed in an attempt to illustrate the character's humanity. Child's image of the refined mulatto servant provided a literary avenue for her to solicit support for emancipation as well as the civil and social acceptance of black people. She also used this character to expose the moral problems associated with white men having two families – one mixed and illegitimate, the other, white and legitimate. Though she is widely credited for its reach into the national psyche, Child certainly wasn't first in the creation and use of this character. Other works featured mulatto characters in various iterations. James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans: A Narrative of 1757* (1826), features Cora Munro, whose mother "descended, remotely, from that unfortunate class who are so basely enslaved to administer to the wants of a luxurious people" (p. 161). Much like Rosalie and Xarifa, Cora is deemed, by her own father nonetheless, unfit for marriage because of her racial background. Cooper's initial description of Cora appears to establish the now well-worn template that exoticizes mixed race people. He writes:

> Her complexion was not brown, but it rather appeared charged with the color of the rich blood, that seemed ready to burst its bounds. And yet, there was neither coarseness nor want of shadowing in a countenance that was exquisitely regular and dignified, and surpassingly beautiful. She smiled, as if in pity at her own momentary forgetfulness, discovering by the act a row of teeth that would have shamed the purest ivory; when, replacing the veil, she bowed her face, and rode in silence, like one whose thoughts were abstracted from the scene around her. (p. 11)

Cooper conveys an image of a woman who is distinguished and refined but also an image of otherness and ambiguity. Cora is cool, unflappable even aloof. Ultimately, Cora is murdered. Although *The Last of the Mohicans* is far from an example of abolitionist literature, one can imagine Child reading it and other works like them. We do know that she read Richard Hildreth's *The Slave: or, Memoirs of Archy Moore* (1836). In the previously mentioned letter to William Lloyd Garrison Child writes, "If I were a man, I would rather be the author of that work, than of anything ever published in America" (p. 47). *Archy Moore* was controversial beyond its abolitionist underpinnings. Narrated by its protagonist, the nearly white Archy is legally still a slave. His father was Colonel Moore, a member of the nobles of Virginia, his mother was a slave.

Her “one drop of blood imported from Africa-though that too, might be the blood of kings and chieftains,-would be enough to taint the whole pedigree” (p. 18). Archy is designated as house servant to his all-white half-brother who was born at the same time. However, the half-brother eventually dies and Archy goes to work in the fields where he meets his romantic interest Cassy. Cassy, it turns out, is Archy’s half-sister – a fact that Archy withholds because he wishes to marry her. What’s more, despite being his daughter, it is revealed that Col. Moore has attempted to gain sexual favors from Cassy. The two escape. While on the run they encounter a poor, alcoholic white man whose life had once been saved by Archy. He betrays Archy and Cassy, and they are sold at auction and separated for some time. After they are reunited, Archy learns that Cassy is pregnant. At first Archy plans to kill his son to spare him from a life of slavery but eventually gives up on the idea. Archy and Cassy are separated again. The remainder of the novel involves Archy going from plantation captive, to passing-as-white freeman, to a sailor battling old rivals on his way to France. The story ends with Archy returning to America to search for his wife-half-sister and son.

Hildreth’s work was pioneering and influential. Through Archy and Cassy, Hildreth created an empowered black identity (Salenius, 2010). This heroic persona would become the template with which future mixed race characters would be fashioned. Furthermore, as Hildreth’s 1856 revised title *The White Slave* suggests, Archy underscores the many difficulties with racial definitions. His light skin would go unnoticed if he were away from his family and those who know him. However, on the plantation he remains a slave tainted by blackness. Despite being the favorite son of a wealthy aristocrat, Archy is nevertheless considered nothing more than property.

In the same heroic vein as Archy Moore, Victor Séjour’s *Le Mulâtre* (1837), tells the story of Georges, a mulatto slave whose mother Laïsa was raped by her master, Alfred. Although he is the son of Laïsa and Alfred, Georges does not know who his father is. After Laïsa dies,

Alfred is convinced that his secret died along with her. Later, Georges saves Alfred's life during a slave revolt. However, Alfred doubts Georges' loyalties and thinks that he was a co-conspirator in the revolt. Later, Georges' mulatta wife Zélie is killed for resisting Alfred's attempts to rape her. Promising to get revenge someday, Georges flees to the mountains of Saint-Domingue with his two-year-old son. Years later, Georges returns and kills Alfred's wife and son. Alfred tells Georges that he is his father. Unable to quell his rage, Georges decapitates Alfred before committing suicide. While Georges' actions – saving Alfred during the revolt and avenging the death of his wife – are heroic, his life is also tragic. He is the product of a violent rape, his father kills his wife, and he ultimately takes his own life. As the tragic mulatto trope developed, most of its early themes were some combination of rebellion, heroism and death.[4]

While it is clear that Lydia Maria Child was impressed by Hildreth's *The Slave*, Harriet Beecher Stowe seems to have used parts of the book as a model for *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). Brandstadter (1974) argues that Garrisonian abolitionists would have been acquainted with the tale of Archy Moore. Hildreth himself suggested that Stowe derived her story from *The Slave*.[5] Indeed, the comparisons are many. Both novels are critical of slavery's destructive effects on family. Both feature light-colored, educated, and rebellious males in George Harris and Archy whose hatred of slavery intensifies after the birth of their sons. Each book has a mulatta servant

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[4] For extensive history and analysis of the tragic mulatto in literature see Werner Sollors' *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both; Thematic Explorations of Interracial Literature*. Some examples are John Stedman's *Narrative of Joanna: An Emancipated Slave, of Surinam* (1838), in which Joanna is heartbroken and dies after John leaves for Holland. In William Wells Brown's *Clotel* (1853), the title character commits suicide by leaping into the Potomac rather than continue with a life in bondage. Clotel's mother Currer dies from yellow fever after being auctioned and separated from Clotel. The character was also adapted for live theater and maintained its tragic themes. Hans Christian Andersen's *Mulatten* (1839) climaxes in an auction scene. Dion Boucicault's *The Octoroon* (1859) includes the death of a plantation owner and the subsequent sale of slaves. Though in contrast to the American version, its performance in England contained a happy ending with the marriage of George and Zoe.

[5] Hildreth's comparison and comments can be found in the Boston *Evening Telegraph*, November 13, 1854.

assigned to the plantation mistress. Both present an economic calamity that devastates the masters resulting in the sale of slaves. Despite the similarities, Stowe's landmark work represents the pinnacle of abolitionist fiction. Published near the height of the movement, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was both heralded as the most important book of the time and attacked by proslavery advocates for its depiction of Southern life and its institutions. Its impact on culture and history appears even to contribute to a popular belief that the mere publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* started the Civil War. This notion stems from the legend that when Stowe met Abraham Lincoln, he greeted her with some variation of "So this is the little lady who made this big war" (Vollaro, 2009). Though most certainly apocryphal in origin, the persistence of this quote among Stowe and some Lincoln biographers demonstrates just how moved Americans were by Stowe's book.

Uncle Tom's Cabin; or, Life Among the Lowly begins with a meeting between the planter Arthur Shelby and Mr. Haley a slave trader. The two are discussing the details of selling some of Mr. Shelby's slaves to help pay debts on the Shelby farm. The two agree on the sale of Uncle Tom, one of Shelby's most reliable and loyal slaves, and Harry, the son of Mrs. Shelby's maid, Eliza (Interestingly, both Harry and his mother are described as quadroons. Somehow Stowe doesn't get the math correct. Child was guilty of this as well). When Eliza overhears Mr. Shelby's plans, she decides to run away with Harry. Harry's father, George Harris, also escapes and makes plans to buy his family's freedom once he reaches Canada. Eliza escapes one night after the Shelbys have gone to sleep. When they discover her missing the next day, Haley gathers a posse to find her. In one of the most dramatic and frequently referenced scenes, Eliza evades her pursuers by crossing the frozen Ohio River where she is assisted by an old neighbor, Mr. Symmes. Eventually, Eliza, Harry, and George are reunited at the home of a Quaker family who give them safe harbor on their way to Canada. While there, they are introduced to Phineas Fletcher, who agrees to assist them in their flight across the border. Not long after they depart the Quaker home, they are cornered by Haley and the posse. After George shoots one of the slave

hunters named Tom Loker, he and Phineas push him down a ravine. Seeing that their comrade has been critically wounded, Haley and the others flee to get reinforcements. After they leave, George and Phineas take Loker to the Quakers for help.[6]

Meanwhile, Haley takes Uncle Tom down the Mississippi to New Orleans where he intends to sell him. While on the riverboat, Tom befriends Evangeline, the young daughter of Augustine St. Clare. When Little Eva falls overboard during a stop, Tom jumps in and rescues her. Eva convinces her father to purchase Tom when they arrive in New Orleans. St. Clare turns out to be a relatively benevolent planter. Tom spends a great deal of his time looking after Little Eva and for a while Tom's life is happy. This ends when Eva falls ill and dies. St. Clare vows to give Tom his freedom. However, St. Clare is murdered before he can make good on his promise. Consequently, Tom is sold to a brutal plantation owner, Simon Legree. Intending to eventually make Tom an overseer, Legree is shocked when Tom refuses to beat another slave named Cassy. Legree, along with two of his drivers, beat him to within an inch of his life. It takes Tom two days to succumb from his injuries but he finally dies in an old abandoned room of Legree's gin house. Cassy, posing as a Creole woman, and another slave, Emmeline, escape Legree and meet George Shelby on a steamboat north. Shelby who had come to bring Tom's body to Kentucky, recognized Cassy. After some brief conversation between Cassy and Shelby, another passenger, a French woman named Madame de Thoux, realizes that George Harris is her long lost brother. Cassy as well discovers that Eliza is her daughter. In the end, Cassy, Emmeline, and Madame de Thoux are reunited with George and Eliza where they all live as free people.

Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* resonated profoundly with thousands of Americans. Only the Bible sold more books in the nineteenth century. Her characters were not only designed to

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[6] This is one of many instances in which Stowe emphasizes attributes like sympathy, forgiveness, and piety to underscore a given character's Christian nature.

uncover problems of morality but also to challenge the South *and* the North on the issue of slavery. Stowe's novel engaged central questions around race and social justice that continue to be relevant. Cassy, Emmeline, Eliza, George, and Harry present fascinating questions regarding mixed race representation. What were Stowe's actual feelings about race? While it's clear that Stowe believed in total abolition of slavery, her light-skinned protagonists were written in a more favorable manner. For instance, why are Cassy et al. the only slaves to actively resist and run? Uncle Tom resists but only passively (Fredrickson, 1971). Furthermore, why does Stowe choose to highlight the family separation stories of Cassy, Eliza, and Emmeline? Uncle Tom, Aunt Chloe, and Topsy are largely omitted. Cassy is also delineated in terms of sexuality from the conventional mammy figure as seen in Aunt Chloe despite being roughly the same age (Williams, 2001). Lastly, one wonders to what degree Stowe's characters are tragic mulattoes? Although the tragedy is inherent within their tainted blood, none suffer a tragic ending. Each of them are ultimately rescued by Stowe (Williams, 2001). It's no wonder that it would not only spur countless theatrical productions, but it would go on to be the subject of some of the earliest films at the start of the 20th century.

Uncle Tom's Cabin – the Films

The practice of retelling and recycling of Stowe's landmark book continued in early film. The first of these appeared in 1903. Directed by Thomas Edison protégé Edwin S. Porter, the film became a template of sorts for later versions. Porter was sure to include most of the major events – Eliza's escape across the river, the confrontation between George Harris and Tom Loker, and the deaths of Little Eva and Uncle Tom. That same year, Sigmund Lubin remade the film in direct competition with Porter. In fact, Lubin nearly copied or "duped" the entire Porter film and lifted the descriptions from his competitor's catalog for use in his own (Musser, 1991). The shorts *Confederate Spy* (c. 1910) and *For Massa's Sake* (1911) both featured Tom characters vaguely

reminiscent of Stowe's Uncle Tom. Additionally in 1910, the American Vitagraph Company released a much longer version that allowed more room for interpretation of the original story. This film was re-released in 1927 by the Empire Safety Film Company; however, only half of the footage from the original version was used. Four years later, William Robert Daly directed black actor Sam Lucas in the starring role. Lucas is credited for opening the door for future generations of black actors by being the first to appear on screen in a starring role. This version was also re-released in the late 1920s ostensibly to take advantage of the larger Universal Pictures production in 1927 (Railton, 2007). Universal's remake of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* starred another black actor, James B. Lowe, who replaced Charles Gilpin after Gilpin refused to play Tom with the exaggerated sentimentalism desired by the studio. Universal promoted Lowe vigorously, the first time a major studio had done so. Interestingly enough, it was Margarita Fischer as Eliza who received top billing, not Lowe.

Some scholars (Bogle, 2004; Smith, 2006; Lupack, 2010) trace the cinematic origins of mulatto characters to early films like *The Octoroon* (all ca. 1911-1913) and *The Debt* (1912). Unfortunately these films have been lost. Porter's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1903) predates the others. Although the characters Eliza and George are not portrayed as tragic figures, they are described by Stowe as an octoroon and a mulatto respectively. They are also brave and committed to one another. In the film, their portrayal captures the heroism and piety. It's likely that most audiences had read the book and would be familiar with these characters and if not, Eliza and George's light skin still served its purpose of eliciting sympathy among first time viewers. In *Before the Nickelodeon: Edwin S. Porter and the Edison Manufacturing Company*, Charles Musser (1991) asserts, "*Uncle Tom's Cabin* was a ritual reiteration of common heritage and could trigger deeply felt emotions that audiences already associated with the narrative" (p. 244). At the time, Porter's version was the longest and most expensive movie made. An early example of the filmed theater

genre, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is a stunning, and innovative piece of filmmaking when put into its 1903 context.

As written by Stowe, one could make the case that the characters Eliza and George represent a more progressive view of mixed race people than say, Lydia Maria Child's Rosalie and Xarifa. Eliza, George, and Harry constitute a definite family unit whereas Rosalie and Xarifa must rely on their white benefactors for stability of family. Eliza and George exhibit a degree of individualism and a willingness to escape slavery. It has been widely reported that Stowe's inspiration for Eliza was the story of a runaway slave woman who crossed the frozen Ohio River finding protection with John Rankin, whose home was a part of the Underground Railroad. However, this woman was dark and heavy. For Eliza, Stowe realized that she needed a character who would elicit more sympathy amongst her readers. She created her with the almost obsessive attention to facial features and skin tone found in many writers of abolitionist fiction. Eliza's heroic attempt to save her child from further bondage was yet another way to provide readers with a reason to identify with Eliza. Likewise with George, Stowe was keen to emphasize his "adroitness and ingenuity" (p. 22) in order to give readers a reason to like and admire his efforts. He is presented in the text as skilled and professional. Between the two of them, Eliza and George were monogamous, sincere, and religious. Aside from their Negro status, Stowe's readers could relate to their plight.

Applied to the Porter film, the question of interpretation becomes more intriguing since the reader's imagination becomes the viewer's observation. Although Stowe's book was illustrated, readers most likely created their own images of Eliza and George as they read. In the film, the viewer wasn't required to come up with their own image of the characters, one is provided for them. For the most part, Porter reproduced the original illustrations created by Hammatt Billings. Unfortunately, none of the lead roles were played by mixed race actors. This

seems especially important since the actors were white actors in blackface (or beigeface) made painfully obvious with the actor playing Uncle Tom. His odd and exaggerated mannerisms can't simply be chalked up to the passage of time or the issues that accompany translating a stage play to the screen. This is a white man trying to act black. It's good old minstrelsy minus the song and dance.

Eliza, on the other hand, is a different story. She actively resists her bondage and is less submissive than Uncle Tom. And yet, she is a lady. She's the refined servant found in the original text. Even in the few minutes of Porter's film she appears educated, cultured, and stands in contrast to characters like Uncle Tom, Aunt Chloe, and Topsy. In the very first scene she enters with her son Harry in tow. Eliza knocks on Uncle Tom's door. When he and Aunt Chloe come out, she pleads with Tom to join her but he refuses. They say their goodbyes and Eliza leaves with Harry. Against a backdrop of new fallen snow, Eliza appears white, almost ghostly, especially when compared to Uncle Tom. Aside from some minor details with Eliza's wardrobe (she's wearing a handkerchief for a head wrap) it's difficult to assume or discern "the brown of her complexion" (p. 9) as written by Stowe. Perhaps Porter's Eliza had her skin darkened but it's tough to observe in this ancient 1903 film. There is only single wide camera angle throughout the entire film. In the absence of close-up reaction shots it is difficult to see facial expressions. Out of the fourteen "Tableaus" that compose Porter's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Eliza only appears in the first four. One might be led to believe that this is an indicator that she was a secondary character. However, a quick survey of the Tom universe reveals that Eliza and her escape were routinely featured as a central attraction in most of the Uncle Tom works. Moreover, the film only runs just over nineteen minutes. One could argue that she occupies one of the most important parts of the film (the beginning), and appears in nearly a quarter of the entire work. In one of the most famous scenes from Stowe's novel and oft repeated in the Tom universe, Eliza escapes across the semi-frozen Ohio River in order to prevent her son Harry from being sold. In Porter's film, Eliza enters

against a moving canvas backdrop simulating an ice flow. As it slides across the screen Eliza bends down to talk to Harry before they attempt to cross. She then stands up, and somewhat defiantly, pulls the handkerchief from her head and throws it to the ground in protest. This gesture could be read as symbolic of Eliza throwing off the chains of her oppressor. While head wraps and scarves were traditional forms of dress in many African cultures, in America, plantation owners used them as a sign of subordination as well as a way to minimize the degree to which she may be viewed as a threat to the white women living in the big house (Wish, 1968; Jewell, 1993). As she moves off screen, the handkerchief disappears when her pursuant dogs show up. That is to say, the same dog filmed four times in succession. After the fourth dog exits, the handkerchief reappears in a slightly different position conveniently placed for one of the traders to find. This may be one of the first examples of a continuity error in film and for the repeat viewer, one that's difficult to miss.

Eliza's husband George only appears in the fourth tableau titled "Reunion of Eliza and George Harris." Eliza and Harry are being sheltered by a Quaker family while they wait for George to take them to Canada. Eliza looks like a lady with a long, dark, ankle-length dress complete with a lace collar and belt. When George arrives, he is seen dressed like a gentleman with proper looking hat, suit, and tie. What stands out in this scene is the pure symbolic value of the family unit expressed by Harry running to his father's awaiting arms and the shared embrace by all three. They leave with the help of Phineas who guides them away from the slave traders. Later in the same shot, they are seen looking down from the top of a cliff. George pulls a pistol and fires at the lawyer Marks and the slave hunter Tom Loker, injuring them. The scene ends with an image of Marks standing with an open umbrella so tattered and torn that it gives him the appearance of a winged demon.

Keeping in tradition with abolitionist depictions, most observers might conclude that Porter's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is largely sympathetic in its portrayal of mixed race people. This is somewhat surprising given the times. America was at the height of the Jim Crow period. It would have been easy and perfectly acceptable for Porter to put an ugly spin on Eliza, George, and Harry. What's more, his boss, Thomas Edison, sanctioned the production of a few films with racist imagery just years earlier. That being said, there are some negative aspects of these characters that should be noted. Eliza, George, and Harry's skin has been slightly darkened which associates them with the peculiar tradition of blackface minstrelsy. There is also the fact that the actors and actresses were not mixed race or biracial. This projects an air of mockery and cheapens the performance. This is more pronounced with their darker counterparts in the film. The fact that Eliza and George are depicted in a more positive light makes Uncle Tom, Aunt Chloe, and Topsy look terrible in comparison. This is the same essential problem with most mixed race figures in literature and film. Just as Alice Walker indicated, there is always an underlying implication that light skinned individuals are more desirable than black people. While Eliza and George don't project a desire to be white or to marry white people, they do receive preferential treatment to a degree in as much as being a maid or tradesman instead of a field worker would indicate. This would hold true for later versions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, one of which was produced by the American Vitagraph Company in 1910.

Vitagraph began with the partnership of J. Stuart Blackton and Albert E. Smith in the late 1890s. Before he worked in cinema, Blackton was a satirical cartoonist and Smith was a magician (Musser, 1983). It is significant that this duo had extensive dealings with Thomas Edison and Edwin S. Porter. As a young journalist, Blackton interviewed Thomas Edison and had the opportunity to see and perform in the inventor's film studio known as the Black Maria. The formation of their partnership in 1897 put Blackton and Smith in direct competition with Edison. They started with projecting commercial images for various advertisements and then began

showing war films on the Vaudeville circuit. They later found themselves in financial straits and embarked on a scheme involving the duplication and sale of Edison films. Edison sued and they settled by arriving at a licensing agreement which lasted through 1900.

In their particular milieu, Blackton and Smith would have seen Porter's *Life of an American Fireman* (1903)*, The Great Train Robbery* (1903)*,* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin.* In comparison to Porter's film, Vitagraph's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1910) was a gargantuan three-reel picture approximately forty-five minutes in length. This format parallels the organization of Stowe's novel with its tripartite structure: Kentucky, New Orleans, and Legree's plantation (Railton, 2007). The version examined in this study is the Empire Safety Film Company's 1927 "re-release" of Vitagraph's 1910 production. However, the company only used about half of the original footage. The only existing print of the 1910 film is housed in The National Film and Television Archive in London. Nevertheless, the re-release provides a glimpse into what the original may have looked like. Divided into six sections, Eliza and Harry appear in the first two titled "On the Plantation" and "Eliza's Flight." Her husband George Harris does not appear at all.

The film begins with a wide shot of the Shelby plantation and cuts to the front of the big house where Mr. Shelby (Carlyle Blackwell), Mrs. Shelby (Julia Arthur) as well as Eliza (Mary Fuller) are standing. Haley the slave trader rides into the frame on horseback as Mrs. Shelby and Eliza are entering the front door. They turn to see Haley and Mr. Shelby talking as they walk out of frame. Mrs. Shelby and Eliza appear concerned by the trader's presence, Eliza especially so. The scene cuts to the parlour where Eliza is holding her son Harry (Matty Roubert) and acting as if she has heard someone in another room, prompting her to clutch her son even closer. She is surrounded by ornate appointments and luxurious furnishings. Next we see Aunt Chloe tending to little black children outside of Uncle Tom's Cabin. The contrast between these environments is startling. It highlights the issues of preference and privilege that separate Eliza from the darker-

skinned characters in the story. Aunt Chloe notices Mr. Shelby and Haley approaching from off screen. She quickly shuttles the children inside. Uncle Tom (Edwin R. Philips) greets the pair, and Haley immediately begins to trying to convince Shelby that he should sell Tom to settle his debts. Shelby appears to refuse. Eventually the two end up in the parlor where they are joined briefly by Uncle Tom. While Haley inspects Uncle Tom, Eliza listens to Haley's propositions from the shadowy recesses of the other room. After she determines that Shelby is going to sell Uncle Tom and Harry, she takes her son over to Uncle Tom's Cabin and tries to convince him to come along. Of course, Tom remains behind. As Eliza flees the Shelby plantation, the film takes on a bluish hue as if to connote an evening landscape. This heightens the sense of desperation that surrounds Eliza. She leads Harry down road and trail while Haley and his posse pursue close behind. When she reaches the river, she leaps from the bank and makes her way across by leaping from one mass of ice to the next until she is rescued by Phineas Fletcher on the other side. The last two-thirds of the film is dedicated to Uncle Tom and his time on the St. Clare plantation, particularly, his time with Little Eva (Genevieve Tobin) and his time on Simon Legree's plantation in New Orleans.

Returning to Eliza, it is interesting to note the absence of George Harris. Eliza is depicted as a single, desperate mother without any destination or plan in her escape. When she overhears Shelby agree to the sale of Harry, her eyes widen and she's agape. As she continues to eavesdrop, her face contorts with fear while clenching her fist over her heart. Without the image of a traditional family unit, this version of Eliza drifts closer to the tragic mulatto associated with Hildreth's and Child's conceptions. The image of the fair-skinned mother with a young child attempting to flee from bondage is iconic and one that resonates with the classic trope. One might assume that Vitagraph's original release possibly contained the character George Harris; however, there is no evidence for it in reviews of the time. One unknown reviewer describes the film from beginning to end in an issue of *The Moving Picture World* (1910). There is no mention

of George Harris. In fact, there is very little that is described in this passage that isn't found in the film – only two scenes are referred to that don't appear in the re-release of the movie. One is Uncle Tom's departure from the Shelby plantation where after bidding farewell to Aunt Chloe and young George Shelby, he "gets into Haley's wagon, shackled hand and foot" (p. 313). The other scenes involve the light skinned slaves Cassy and Emmeline. The review gives an account of their escape with Legree's bloodhounds in pursuit. However, "the women retrace their steps after passing through the swamp to throw the dogs off the trail, and return to the garret, where they remain for three days and make good their escape when favorable opportunity presents itself after Legree has given them up as gone" (p. 313). It is unfortunate that the scenes with Cassy and Emmeline were not included in the 1927 re-release, and yet what remains is largely the same film that moviegoers saw in 1910.

While Eliza has always been one of the most popular characters in the world of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the other prominent mixed race characters Cassy and Emmeline haven't received the same attention by critics and scholars. In the Vitagraph film, we do see Emmeline and her mother Susan at the slave auction. However, the scene is brief and does not convey their entire story. Stowe originally described Susan as "a respectably-dressed mulatto woman between forty and fifty, with soft eyes and a gentle and a pleasing physiognomy" (p. 382). Yet in the film, Susan is closer in resemblance to Aunt Chole with skin closer in hue to Uncle Tom's. Emmeline is closer to Stowe's written representation. "She is a quadroon, as may be seen from her fairer complexion, though her likeness to her mother is quite discernible. She has the same soft, dark eye, with longer lashes, and her curling hair is of a luxuriant brown" (p. 382).

Returning to the film, mother and daughter are separated when Susan is sold to a planter other than Legree who has purchased the meek and cowering Emmeline. Cassy, on the other hand is bold and rebellious. She symbolizes what would have become of Eliza had she not escaped

across the ice and suffered the same tragic history that Cassy endured - unrequited love with a white man and the sale of her children. The film depicts two of Cassy's scenes from the final chapters of Stowe's novel, and although they did not capture the entirety of her character, they provided a good visual representation for those familiar with the book. The first scene takes place in the fields. Uncle Tom, Cassy, and Lucy are shown shoulder-to-shoulder picking cotton when Lucy begins to faint. When Tom sees that she won't be able to keep up the pace, he gives her several handfuls from his basket so she doesn't run afoul of Legree when the time comes to weigh their pickings. Cassy in turn gives Tom some from her basket. A slave driver named Sambo witnesses the entire exchange. He tries to intimidate Cassy, but she stands up to him and he slinks away. In the next scene all of the slaves are weighing the cotton at the end of the day under the supervision of Sambo and Legree. Cassy sets her basket on the scale and exchanges scowls with Legree. When Lucy and Uncle Tom set their baskets down, Legree demands that Tom flog Lucy, but he refuses. Two slave drivers drag Uncle Tom away to be flogged. Cassy, with arms folded, has a few words with Legree, who is visibly unnerved by her. The film ends with the arrival of young George Shelby who has come looking for his old caretaker. Unfortunately, Uncle Tom dies in his arms. While Cassy is heroic in some respects, she is also tragic. Having near-white skin failed to free her from the horrors of slavery. Moreover, the loss of her children added an additional layer of misfortune to an already downtrodden and victimized figure. That she is featured prominently in this film and future versions is a testament to her importance in the Uncle Tom tradition.

Four years later, the World Film Corporation released its own adaptation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1914). This picture was distinctive for several reasons. Most notably, it was the first white feature film to cast a black actor in a starring role. At age seventy-two, Sam Lucas was a respected veteran of the stage who paved the way for countless other black performers. In addition to Lucas, several other black actors had small roles. Directed by William Robert Daly,

this version was, in some ways, the most authentic interpretation at the time. It is apparent that Daly attempted to mirror Stowe's original book. It contains the same three-part structure that came to define the template for Uncle Tom films. It begins on the Shelby plantation; however, Eliza, her son Harry, and her husband George are featured more prominently than in the preceding films. Eliza is introduced by a title card that reads "Eliza and her baby son… great favorites on the plantation." She is shown sitting on a bench in the yard while Harry marches around her playing soldier. She receives a note from George explaining that he plans to run away. In the next scene we see George described as "Eliza's husband, George Harris, a Mulatto." Before he escapes, he says a final goodbye to Eliza and Harry. Soon after, Eliza escapes with Harry. After she bids farewell to Uncle Tom and Aunt Chloe, she is shown at various points along her journey. She crosses a narrow bridge over a waterfall. She huddles near a fire in the woods. She passes by Loker and Marks but they don't recognize her. When she reaches the river, she begs a ferryman to take her to the other side. He refuses, and she runs across on foot where she is helped by Phineas Fletcher. Eventually, she is reunited with George on the road while riding with Fletcher. The group is cornered at a rocky outcropping by Loker and Marks and a gun battle ensues. The remainder of the film covers the events at the St. Clare's and ends at the Legree plantation.

Daly's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* has an authenticity that was unmatched at the time. In addition to casting Sam Lucas, many of the film's locations and shot selections contribute to its realism. The opening scene effectively conveys a sense of space through the use of action in the foreground, middle ground, and background. Here, the shot is framed by a slave woman standing near the camera on the right side. In the distance there is a group of slaves dancing on the left side of the screen. An old male slave walks up a diagonal path that intersects the foreground and background, guiding the viewer's eye through the depth of field. Later, in the famous scene in which Eliza crosses the ice, the camera has several deep field shots in which the viewer can see

Eliza in the foreground on shore with the Ohio landscape in the distance framing the frozen river in between. Jagged chunks of ice are floating in the river and the water is moving in waves toward the shore. Each of these examples foreshadows the style of filmmaking that would become the blueprint for future epic tales. They also enhance the authenticity of this particular interpretation of Stowe's novel.

In an August 1914 issue of *The Moving Picture World*, reviewer George Blaisdell observed that it "is fitting that we should have a screen portrayal that treats this famous story seriously, one which reflects the atmosphere of the South and the spirit of the author of the book" (p. 1077). Still, a closer examination reveals that this wasn't entirely true. The picture does diverge from Stowe's novel in ways that could be interpreted as tainting the image of the innocent slave. In particular, there are two scenes depicting violence committed by blacks against whites. For instance, before trying to escape with Emmeline, Cassy finds Legree passed out in bed. She looms over him, pulls a revolver from her shawl and points it at the slumbering tyrant's head. Unable to follow through with her intention to kill Legree, she leaves the house to find Emmeline and they flee the plantation. A short while later, a young male slave who Uncle Tom had once refused to whip, finds the gun that Cassy had earlier. He decides to avenge Tom's beating and goes in search of Legree who left in pursuit of Cassy and Emmeline. The young slave takes cover in a line of trees. As Legree rides by he is shot and killed by the young man.

These two scenes were unprecedented in the Uncle Tom tradition and could be viewed as adding to the growing sense of white terror in the South that D.W. Griffith would exploit in *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) just a short year later (Williams, 2001; Lupack, 2010). While it is true that George Harris has a gun battle with Loker and Marks in Stowe's novel as well as in both 1903 and 1914 versions of the film, the element of self-defense gives George's actions an aura of heroism and legitimacy. In Stowe, one night Cassy pleads with Uncle Tom to kill Legree with an

axe that she left by the back door but Tom refuses. There is no gun. One wonders if many viewers approved of these alternative embellishments. Legree couldn't have had many fans. And yet, he was white, further complicating the landscape of sympathies for viewers. Although the contemporaneous viewer of the 1914 film may have sympathized with Cassy and the young slave, they may have also viewed their acts of violence as far less heroic that those of George Harris. The actions of Cassy and the young male slave seem to signal both a break from literal interpretations of Stowe's original work and the dark reality that overt racism against people of color was at its peak during this era. It is well known that Stowe didn't like the idea of black retaliation against whites (Fredrickson, 1971). The fact that in making this film Daly chose to diverge from the text and include these relatively negative and emotionally charged images might signal a subtle change in the depictions of mixed race and black characters, foreshadowing the flood of racist images and rejection of Stowe in *The Birth of a Nation.* While the three previously mentioned *Uncle Tom's Cabin* films carryover much of the sentiment and pathos from their origins in abolitionist literature, their largely positive images would be eclipsed by Griffith's film. And yet, they could also viewed as closer to human beings who are willing to fight back in order to obtain freedom.

For the most part, the mixed race figures in the *Uncle Tom's Cabin* films retain much of the dignity and honorable characteristics that Stowe intended. Some are depicted in family units who are trying to stay together despite being chased and persecuted. While they are tragic, they also triumph in their escape and in retaining their unity. This portrayal destabilizes the notion of the lone mulatto who is does not fare well in the abolitionist fiction of Richard Hildreth, Lydia Maria Child, or William Wells Brown. But what does it teach us about mixed race people? Stowe, and by extension Porter, Blackton, and Daly, drew the line here. And yet it is clear in these works that there is a romantic conception of mixed race people (Fredrickson, 1971). In contrast to Uncle Tom, George Harris has a more refined pedigree and educated persona. This

can be said of all the mulatto characters. Unfortunately, even if they destabilize some stereotypes, they often reinforce others by conveying the message that light skin is preferable to dark skin. This is not quite the case with Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* whose mixed race characters have no redeeming qualities whatsoever. Despite the fact that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* contains mostly positive images of mixed race people, one might argue that the subsequent negative images contained in *The Birth of a Nation* trump any previous positive portrayals. While there is no doubt that Stowe's book had a profound impact on American culture, Thomas Dixon, D.W. Griffith and others would begin to push back on *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as the definitive interpretation of life in the South during slavery.

The Birth of a Nation

Five years after *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was released, Edwin S. Porter co-directed the short *Rescued from an Eagle's Nest* (1908) with J. Searle Dawley. What's notable about this film is its star, D. W. Griffith, who plays the part of a father who rescues his child from a giant eagle. Griffith met Porter while pitching a script to Edison studios before eventually moving on to Biograph. Between 1908 and 1931 he directed a staggering 535 films. The most famous of which would influence the way people regarded and made motion pictures for years. Taken in the context of its initial 1915 exhibition, *The Birth of a Nation* is a breathtaking epic that attempts to depict the events surrounding the Civil War and Reconstruction. Despite the use of what Griffith calls "historical facsimile," the film is littered with fabrication, myth, and some of the most profane and vulgar stereotypes to ever appear in film. Clocking in at just over three hours, it's nearly impossible to fathom how 1915 audiences were able to hold their attention (let alone their bladders) for that length of time. However, the most unfortunate consequence of the film's length is the fact that viewers were repeatedly exposed to the indelible images that would come to define the cinematic image of mixed race and black Americans for years after.

Based on Thomas Dixon's books *The Leopard's Spots: A Romance of the White Man's Burden-1865-1900* (1902), and *The Clansman* (1905), as well as Woodrow Wilson's *History of the American People* (1901), the film must have been seen as a validation for bigoted and racist ideology as well as a justification for the continued systematic discrimination of people of color in the United States. Dixon wrote *The Leopard's Spots* and *The Clansman* in response to the revival of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1901. While the *Uncle Tom's Cabin* film and *The Birth of a Nation* share a common melodramatic formula (Williams, 2002), they diverge significantly regarding how the formula is executed. Whereas Eliza, George, and Harry function as sympathetic figures in Porter's film, mixed race characters in *The Birth of a Nation* were intended to do the exact opposite—engender fear, hatred, and disgust. What's more, it is evident that Griffith took some liberties in his adaptation of Dixon's work. To be sure, Dixon's mulattoes were presented in an extremely unflattering light and yet they are not the promiscuous and menacing figures seen in Griffith's film. That being said, Dixon hated Stowe's book because in his mind it was full of lies about the antebellum South. In many ways Dixon's book was anathema for black Americans as well as decidedly mixed race individuals. In an early exchange between President Abraham Lincoln and Representative Austin Stoneman, Dixon's Lincoln warns against assimilation. Dixon writes:

> There is no room for two distinct races of white men in America, much less for two distinct races of whites and blacks. We can have no inferior servile class, peon or peasant. We must assimilate or expel. The American is a citizen king or nothing. I can conceive of no greater calamity than the assimilation of the negro into our social and political life as our equal. A mulatto citizenship would be too dear a price to pay even for emancipation. (p. 46)

While Lincoln said many things that could be considered largely unsympathetic to black people, he never uttered the above quote (Gallagher 1982; Eby 2001). And yet it has joined a long list of quotes misattributed to the sixteenth President. It is clear that Dixon used Lincoln as a figure who understood what the South had endured and lost as a result of the war. Griffith, who

incidentally would go on to direct *Abraham Lincoln* (1930), maintains this idea in *The Birth of a Nation* in order to convey the two-dimensional and opposing relationship between characters of color and whites. Although Griffith/Dixon used Lincoln's real name, they use fictional names for other characters ostensibly due to being portrayed in a less than flattering light. Many observers (Du Bois, 1915; Rogin, 1985) have noted that Austin Stoneman (Ralph Lewis) was modeled after the famous abolitionist Thaddeus Stevens while Lydia Brown (Mary Alden) was meant to depict his housekeeper Lydia Hamilton Smith. Silas Lynch (George Siegmann) appears to be Griffith's (via Dixon) ugly approximation of Alonzo J. Ransier or Richard Howell Gleaves, the 54th and 55th Lieutenant Governors of South Carolina. He may have also been thinking of Pinckney Benton Stewart Pinchback, the 24th Governor of Louisiana who first served as Lieutenant Governor in 1871. Incidentally, Pinchback is the maternal grandfather of modernist and Harlem Renaissance writer Jean Toomer.

As Austin Stoneman's housekeeper, Lydia is first seen apparently fantasizing about being asked to dance. She is facing the camera while Senator Charles Sumner (Sam De Grasse) walks into the room from behind. After he calls to her, she is "aroused from ambitious dreamings by Sumner's curt orders." She bows to Sumner and leaves the room to retrieve his hat. When she returns, she holds it out to him and looks away but it falls to the floor. Incensed, Sumner leaves in a huff. When he is well out of range, Lydia spits at him in disgust, eventually falling to the floor in a fit of frustration. She rips her blouse so as to appear that she's been accosted by Sumner. When Stoneman enters the room, she feigns distress in an attempt to gain his sympathy if not a place in his bed. It's a disturbing scene on many levels. Perhaps it was designed to paint mixed race females in an unfavorable light of opportunism and promiscuity. Lydia is an early prototype of the classic Jezebel character first introduced in the film *The Moral Law* (1918), also known as *Jezebel's Daughter* and later immortalized by Bette Davis in *Jezebel* (1938). Like her later counterparts, Lydia seems wanton and exudes contempt for others when she doesn't get what she

wants from them. In any case, her portrayal doesn't square with what we know of Lydia Hamilton Smith. When she is alone with Stoneman, we see another side of her persona. She nearly assumes the role of his wife. She is a puppet master who manipulates the congressman from behind the curtain. In this way she conceals her desire for power. After Lincoln's assassination, Stoneman gains greater influence in the House. By way of her close proximity, Lydia assumes a degree of political control. She is his advisor of sorts. She eventually trades in the servant clothes for proper lady-like attire. Although one of the film's central themes is to warn against the problems associated with black men and their attempts to "marry" white women, the Stoneman character turns the idea on its head. He is portrayed as succumbing to "the weakness that is to blight a nation." The viewer's only choice is to conclude that Lydia is nothing more than a scheming and conniving opportunist who wants nothing more than to climb to the top of the social ladder on the back of Stoneman.

Lydia's mulatto counterpart, Silas Lynch, has even fewer redeeming qualities. He first appears in the second half of the film titled *Reconstruction*. Lydia introduces him to Austin Stoneman, and Lynch eventually becomes his "protégé." Shortly after his first meeting with Stoneman, Lynch goes to see him again where he briefly meets the congressman's daughter Elsie (Lillian Gish). He bows and smiles. When she turns her attention from Lynch, his smile fades and his eyes widen. He stares at her like an animal stalking its prey and becomes immediately obsessed. The congressman nods off and remains oblivious to Lynch's new fixation. This initial encounter is rather subdued compared to their later interactions. Lynch is sent to the Piedmont to "assist the carpetbaggers in organizing and wielding the power of the negro vote." Later he discovers that Elsie is in love with Ben Cameron (Henry B. Walthall) after spotting them in the woods. The two kiss and Ben walks Elsie home. Once inside, Elsie goes to her bedroom and flits around excitedly before landing on her bed and embracing the bedpost. In tears, she repeatedly kisses it and rests her cheek on its side. She seems to role play with this dark and obviously

phallic object. One wonders whether Griffith consciously meant to say something sexual here or was it a subconscious slip up that made its way into the film. Most of this scene takes place in extreme close up shots. Despite what he's seen of Elsie's love for Ben, Lynch asks Elsie to marry him, but she refuses. Lynch persists to no avail. Elsie faints under the weight of his advances, but she is eventually rescued by Ben and the Ku Klux Klan.

In *The Sword Became a Flashing Vision: D. W. Griffith's The Birth of a Nation* (1985) Michael Rogin points out that phenotypically speaking, Stoneman's appearance resembles that of a negro more than his brown and black-faced counterparts. "By making Stoneman northern and negroid, Griffith wanted to distance him from the southern white man, who was actually the male bearer of historically significant interracial sexuality" (p. 167). Rogin likens Stoneman, Brown, and Lynch to an illicit family, thus demonstrating another way in which Griffith inverted ideas traditionally associated with the South. One might even go further to say he resembles a pimp. With his long cape-like coat, one elevated shoe, and a cane, he's almost a precursor to Iceberg Slim. In this configuration, Brown and Lynch would play the part of his prostitutes who do his bidding and yet not being allowed to fully ascend in status.

One scene toward the end of the film demonstrates one of the great absurdities of racial stereotyping. Two blacked-up men on horseback described as "White spies disguised" are virtually indistinguishable from the other actors who are intended to portray actual negroes. That it's possible for these actors to be both black and white is tied to the way viewers process imagery and suspend judgment. This is much like later examples of mixed race actresses being darkened in an effort to look black. However, in those instances there are no mixed race actresses that were darkened in order to disguise their character's whiteness. Notwithstanding racial representations that cancel each other out, Silas Lynch and Lydia Brown have portrayals that are problematic. In contrast to mulatto characters in earlier films and literature, Lynch and Brown possess a certain

degree of political power. Lynch rises to power after being elected lieutenant governor. Although indirect, Lydia Brown derives her power by quietly influencing Stoneman from the shadows by convincing him to meet with Lynch as well as conspiring with Lynch to take further political control. This was Griffith's way of dismantling the image of the docile and nonthreatening mulatto. Another element of these characters that broke with prior depictions is their monstrous quality. Lynch oscillates between a well-mannered gentleman and seething madman. In the presence of Stoneman he is respectful and courteous, but when he is alone with Elsie, he transforms into a brutish menace. Near the end of the film, Lynch asks Elsie to marry him, when she refuses he raves around the room trying to convince her to be the Queen in his "Black Empire." His pleas escalate into physical overtures. Lynch locks her in the room and pulls the hem of her dress to his nose, inhaling deeply. He toys with her helplessness to escape. His face takes on a wild affect. His brow falls and he pushes out his jaw. He boils over. Even when he isn't actively pursuing Elsie, Lynch is an imposing figure who towers over everyone else in the picture. His protruding brow and devious countenance differentiate him from his largely incompetent darker counterparts. Lynch evokes the nightmarish metamorphoses in later films like 1931's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* as well as *The Wolf Man* (1941). His counterpart Lydia Brown is lustful and animal like. In *The Clansman*, Dixon describes her as a "woman of extraordinary animal beauty and the fiery temper of a leopardess" (p. 57). The animalistic qualities of both characters were Griffith's deliberate attempt to incite fear and anxiety among viewers regarding intermarriage. By dehumanizing them into beasts, Griffith inverts the fact of the white oppressor. Even Lynch's name associates him with the atrocities of lynching and subtly implies that the hanging of black people was not only legitimate but necessary. Likewise, the character Gus (Walter Long) is the embodiment of the black brute whose only ambitions are belligerence and lusting after white women. As a captain for the Union, Gus becomes emboldened enough to ask Flora Cameron (Mae Marsh) for her hand in marriage. When she refuses, he chases her through

the woods to the edge of a cliff. After Gus inches too close, Flora leaps and dashes her body on the rocks below. Gus is ultimately tracked down and murdered by the Klan. While Gus isn't mixed race, his character underscores the way Griffith used stereotypes to instill fear and hatred based on myths. Indeed, throughout the film one can find examples of the director attempting to invert central truths regarding slavery, the war and reconstruction.

In the end, *The Birth of a Nation* would not only spark intense criticism and grievance, but it would also become a template of sorts from which subsequent movies were modeled. Its style and method of filmmaking was hugely influential on several films made in the ensuing years. For example, in *The Last of the Mohicans* (1920) there are a number of scenes that echo Griffith's work in his landmark film. Directed by Clarence Brown and Maurice Tourneur, *The Last of the Mohicans* borrows a number of key scenes from *The Birth of a Nation*. Being that the story is set during the French and Indian War, the template for vast epic battle scenes as created by Griffith was easily adaptable to the plot of James Fennimore Cooper's original 1826 saga. During one of the major conflicts, images depicting hordes of Native Americans attacking a group of English soldiers and their families closely mirror those of black Union soldiers menacing seemingly helpless white citizens in *The Birth of a Nation.* Just as *The Birth of a Nation* was deplorable for its representations of black people, *The Last of the Mohicans* was equally offensive in its depiction of Native Americans during the colonial era. While there are few black people seen in the film, *The Last of the Mohicans* prominently features the earliest example of the tragic mulatto in literature, the character Cora Munro (Barbara Bedford). Her racial identity is only obliquely acknowledged in the film. In contrast to the exaggerated personalities of Lydia Brown and Silas Lynch, Cora is subdued, pensive, and melancholy in her demeanor.

Despite being subtly identified as a mulatto in Cooper's novel, it is a detail that barely surfaces in the 1920 film or any of the other versions made in 1909, 1936, or 1992 (Smyth, 2008). The text references her complexion appearing to be "charged with the color of the rich blood" (p. 11). Later, she is described as being "descended, remotely, from that unfortunate class who are so basely enslaved to administer to the wants of a luxurious people" (p. 161). The film's allusion to Cora's ancestry is much more subtle and understated. While she is the daughter of a powerful military figure, she is confined to the margins of the family. She is seen playing the harp for a gathering of British soldiers, but she is set apart from the others and aloof. Later, she develops a romantic attachment to one of the Indian runners named Uncas (Alan Roscoe), an act that would have been intolerable for a white woman of the time. Eventually she dies at the hand of Magua (Wallace Beery), a rival of Uncas, thus fulfilling that ultimate demise so common to her ilk. The scene of her death harkens back to Flora's dramatic end in *The Birth of a Nation* when she leaps from a cliff while being pursued by the rapacious Gus. Likewise after being claimed by Magua, Cora escapes up a steep rock face with her captor following close behind. When she reaches the summit, like Flora, she ends her life by jumping from the cliff rather than face a life with the ill-willed Magua. Undoubtedly, Cora's death is tragic, but so is her life. Consigned to social isolation, she is unable to marry as she pleases and must yield to the whims of those that surround her.

The Last of the Mohicans and its rather covert portrayal of Cora Munro doesn't compare to the outrageous figures of Lydia and Silas. There is evidence to suggest that as written by Cooper, Cora was meant to be a model of fortitude, adaptability, and decency. These qualities are nowhere to be found in Griffith's mulatto characters. *Mohicans* takes place largely in the American frontier of the 1750s and despite slavery being a prominent feature of American society at this time the institution is hardly part of the book or film's landscape. Nevertheless, it provides an interesting contrast in its depiction of mixed race characters to those in *The Birth of a Nation*.

In addition to influencing the medium itself, *The Birth of a Nation* was also incredibly successful at selling racial myth during a time when the standing of black Americans was at its lowest. Dixon and Griffith were not alone in the effort to reshape the minds of white Americans (Rylance, 2005). The fiftieth anniversary of the end of the Civil War brought with it an intense push for reconciliation and healing among white Americans who fought against each other some fifty years earlier. While blacks were a part of this history, they were left out of this process. Running parallel to the reconciliation efforts, were racist books like *The Negro a Beast* (1900) by Charles Carol as well as Robert W. Shufeldt's *The Negro: A Menace to American Civilization* (1907), each of which would expound on the inferiority and immorality of black people. By 1915, most black representation in films was dominated by negative and racist imagery. Some Edison films like *Watermelon Eating Contest* (1896) and *A Morning Bath* (1896) were widely publicized and contributed to the country's changing tastes regarding entertainment. Exhibited at the World's Fair in 1893, Edison's films were seen by thousands of people. The first black independent films were still a few years away and *The Birth of a Nation* became a flashpoint that would fuel intense protest for the better part of fifteen years.

The Response

While there was widespread objection to *The Birth of a Nation* through the black community, the epicenter of the protest came from the NAACP led, in part, by W. E. B. Du Bois. To be sure, Griffith's film wasn't the first to be seen as objectionable. *The Octoroon, The Debt*, and *In Slavery Days* contained images that left some viewers angered. Each was part of a larger group of films with mixed race stereotypes. Like *The Birth of a Nation*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* held out an interpretation of America's long history of racial animosity. In the introduction of *American Cinema and the Southern Imaginary*, Barker and McKee emphasize the role of the South in shaping much of early American cinema. They write:

> In 1903 W. E. B. Du Bois famously pronounced, “The problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line.” That Du Bois’s insight appeared the same year as the first cinematic *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1903) suggests its applicability to cinema, one of the most influential media of the twentieth century; moreover, in the history of the American cinema, the color line has been conspicuously placed below the Mason-Dixon line. (p. 4)

That race (especially negative representations of blacks) features heavily in early cinema is an indication that it had a polarizing effect among viewers and inspired protests among the first organized groups in the black community. It is not clear whether Du Bois was concerned about the black image in films before *The Birth of a Nation*, yet, we do know that he was keenly interested in the power of photographs to define or redefine black identity and black life in America. His work on the Exhibit for American Negroes at the 1900 Paris Exposition is a testament to this. In a fascinating coincidence, the first projected “talkies” or sound films were shown at the Exposition. One can’t help but conclude that Du Bois was aware of this exhibit. Did he actually see it himself? What did he think of these short scenes of ballet, theater, and opera? His thoughts must have turned to American Negroes and how they might appear in the new medium. Moreover, it seems that Du Bois thought about biracialism in as much as photos of mixed race individuals were chosen for his exhibit of “Negroes” in America. Perhaps Du Bois saw light skinned blacks as a way to destabilize prevailing stereotypes. In her study of the exhibition, Shawn Michelle Smith argues that “Du Bois’s images of white-looking African Americans resonate powerfully with the literary image of the “tragic mulatto” at the turn of the century. However, Du Bois’s photographs of biracial individuals “hardly square” with the conventional *figure* of “*the* mulatto” (p. 590). The image of an ostensibly real mixed race person demands that the viewer resolve the dissonance between reality and myth – a myth that would be exploited to the fullest sense in Griffith’s film fifteen years later.

Regarding *The Birth of a Nation*, it is not surprising that Du Bois and other members of the NAACP mounted vigorous protests. Although their objections were based on the overall perpetual stream of negative imagery, these early viewers also saw the film before some of the

most abhorrent scenes were cut (Rogin, 1985; Stokes, 2007). Among the primary individuals who accompanied Du Bois in their opposition were Jane Addams, Mary Childs Nerney and Elaine Sterne. In March of 1915, the New York *Post* published an interview with Jane Addams in which she chastised the film's "pernicious caricature" of black people. In her words, "The producer seems to have followed the principle of gathering the most vicious and grotesque individuals he could find among colored people, and showing them as representatives of the truth about the entire race" (Everett, 2001; Stokes, 2007). By contrast, Addams approved of film adaptations of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* which contained imagery and narratives of blacks that were largely positive (Joslin, 2004). Addams possessed a keen understanding of the power of movies to "distort social relations." Years before it became a film, she organized a protest against Dixon's play *The Clansman* when it came to Chicago in 1906 (Deegan, 2010). According to a letter written by Mary Childs Nerney to a member of the Chicago censor board, Addams saw the film "in its worst form" (Stokes, 2007) while in New York which ostensibly contained the scene in which Gus is castrated by the Klan.

For his part, Du Bois utilized the NAACP's magazine *The Crisis* to bring attention to the film's incendiary nature. In the May 15, 1915 issue, he praised the "marvelously good war pictures" in the first half of the film, and yet, this was not enough to counteract images of "the Negro represented as an ignorant fool, a vicious rapist, a venal and unscrupulous politician or a faithful but doddering idiot" (p. 33) in the second half. What seems to guile Du Bois even more is the fact that the film "turns on a thinly veiled charge that Thaddeus Stephens, the great abolition statesman, was induced to give the Negroes the right to vote and secretly rejoice in Lincoln's assassination because of his infatuation for a mulatto mistress" (p. 33). Du Bois also accompanied an NAACP-organized group of speakers to meet with New York Mayor John Purroy Mitchel in an attempt to have the film banned. In addition to Du Bois, the group included the chair of the National Board of Censorship Frederic Howe; the editor of the New York *Age*, Fred R. Moore;

and Oswald Garrison Villard, editor of the New York *Evening Post*. Working with Mayor Mitchel, the delegation managed to get some minor changes made to the film. However, they ultimately failed in getting the film banned outright.

Complicating matters more were tensions within the NAACP itself. Some doubted that the film was doing the harm that others claimed. Some feared that giving the film any publicity, positive or otherwise, would only aid in its growing popularity. Another issue was the legal framework for censorship that arose out of the *Mutual Film Corporation v. Industrial Commission of Ohio* decision. In it, the U.S. Supreme Court refused to extend free speech protections to films (Stokes, 2007). Even in the top leadership of the NAACP it was apparent that some were torn between their disdain for *The Birth of a Nation* on one hand, and their contempt for censorship on the other. In the end, some in the NAACP seem to have concluded that a protest against this film was a bit too close to protesting the freedom of expression (Levering Lewis, 2000; Stokes, 2007). Nevertheless, the battle raged on albeit on different fronts.

As NAACP secretary, Nerney mailed thousands of packets to branch offices across the country detailing state censor bills, some reviews of the movie, as well as citing the danger the film posed for inciting riots and unrest. Eventually, she and others would opt for a cinematic response to Griffith’s film. Along with a scenario committee she began work on a film that would attempt to rebut *The Birth of a Nation*. The group enlisted the help of Elaine Sterne, who would write the screenplay for *Lincoln’s Dream*, a film that intended to highlight negro progress. Curiously, Sterne was unable to garner sufficient financial support within the ranks of the NAACP and though she turned to the “Tuskegee Machine” for help, she ultimately abandoned the project. Emmett J. Scott, with the blessing of his boss Booker T. Washington, expressed interest in assisting with the production of *Lincoln’s Dream*. However, as it became clear that the project was doomed, they decided to make their own film based on Washington’s autobiography

Up From Slavery. A short while later, Washington died and took any momentum the project had with him. Scott remained committed to making a black-controlled film and quickly entered into an agreement on a different project more in line with *Lincoln's Dream*. This new project was meant to be a direct answer to Griffith's film. However, *The Birth of Race* (1919), by all accounts, was a dismal failure. Marred by a budget financed through semi-fraudulent stock sales and a revolving door of film companies who promised, then failed to make the film, *The Birth of a Race* was a catastrophe that failed to live up to its lofty expectations. By the time of its initial 1918 screening at the prestigious Blackstone Theater in Chicago, it had been modified far beyond its original intent. Unfortunately, it seems that nothing could stop the paradigm-shifting zeal of *The Birth of a Nation*.

While *Uncle Tom's Cabin* influenced generations of readers and storytellers, Griffith's film had an implicit effect on the many reinterpretations of Stowe's book. Writing in *African American Performance and Theater History: A Critical Reader*, Judith Williams states, "Although Stowe's novel was immensely popular, the proliferation of the "Tom Shows" that followed the novel increased the potency and size of its stereotypes. Tom Shows changed the landscape of American theater, increased its audience base, and spawned a long-lasting genre of their own" (p. 21). Over the years, several contrasting tributaries would flow out of *Uncle Tom's Cabin.* Likewise, the gravitational force of *The Birth of a Nation* had a tremendously negative influence on much of what was produced in the years after its release in 1915 including the seemingly infinite varieties of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

While plays were the most common adaptation in the beginning, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* metamorphosed into Tom circus shows, Tom parades, and Tom Drum & Bugle Corps. Other variations included "Double Mammoth" Tom Shows that presented a kind of Noah's Ark parade of the main characters – two Uncle Toms, two Elizas, two Topsys, and so on (Frick, 2012). Still

other examples include ethnic spinoffs such as the book *Uncle Pat's Cabin* (1914) and a host of minstrel show variations. Among the filmic representations of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* are the Hal Roach Studios silent short *Uncle Tom's Uncle* (1926) which featured the Our Gang troupe otherwise known as "The Little Rascals," staging their own version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* for the kids in the neighborhood. They re-enact several key scenes including Eliza's escape across the frozen river and Legree's beating of Uncle Tom. After the introduction of sound in film, Hal Roach remade the short under the title *Spanky* (1932). Even further downstream in the Uncle Tom timeline are cartoon adaptations. Walt Disney's animated *Mickey's Mellerdrammer* (1933) is depicted as a stage play consisting of three sections. Part one shows some of the characters in their dressing rooms applying makeup in various detestably racist ways. In order to become Topsy, Mickey Mouse puts a firecracker in his mouth and lights it. The resulting explosion leaves him in blackface. As Little Eva, Minnie Mouse powders her face into a lily-white countenance while Clarabelle Cow wipes the scorched insides of a candle shade and applies it to her face, giving her the appearance of Eliza. Part two shows Simon Legree (Horace Horsecollar) confronting and whipping Uncle Tom (Mickey Mouse). Unlike Stowe's version of a strong and robust man, Disney's Tom is portrayed as elderly and weak. The last part shows Eliza's escape across the ice carrying Little Harry (a pickaninny doll more reminiscent of Topsy) who is darker than Eliza.

In 1937, Warner Brothers followed suit with *Uncle Tom's Bungalow.* Filled with beastly and grotesque caricatures of lazy, apathetic slaves, *Bungalow's* plot centers around Simon Legree's search for Uncle Tom. Again Tom is portrayed as old and frail. In one scene in which Legree is seen threatening Tom with the whip, Tom declares "My body might belong to you, but my soul belongs to Warner Brothers!" The line was a not so subtle twist on one of Tom's lines from Stowe's text in which he exclaims "No! no! no! my soul an't yours, Mas'r! You haven't bought it,—ye can't buy it! It's been bought and paid for, by one that is able to keep it; —no

matter, no matter, you can't harm me!" (Stowe, p. 415). Typical of racist imagery in cartoons of this period, there are many stock slapstick pranks and antics. One scene shows Legree tormenting Topsy and Little Eva to the point where Topsy turns white with fear and Eva turns black. In this adaptation Eliza escapes with Topsy and Little Eva with Legree in close pursuit. The sequence is narrated by a horse race announcer. Eliza carries Little Eva and Topsy across the river with ice provided by an ice machine. When Legree catches up with them on the other side, Uncle Tom rescues the group by purchasing their freedom with money he won shooting craps.

Paul Terry of Terry Tunes also produced an Uncle Tom cartoon featuring Mighty Mouse. Interestingly, *Eliza on the Ice* (1944) features many of the same gags as the Warner Brothers version, including the horse race motif as well as the ice/slot machine. Although most of the jokes are identical, there are some differences. Topsy and Little Eva are nowhere to be found. Uncle Tom is again depicted as feeble and shaky yet he is allowed to start the race by firing a pistol into the air. Legree pursues Eliza and Little Harry down river toward a waterfall. Legree's boat goes over the precipice and explodes while Eliza and Little Harry are rescued by Mighty Mouse.

It did not end here. Indeed, filmic adaptations would persist well into the twenty-first century. While each pay only glancing attention to the mixed race characters, they are a testament to the indelible imprint left by the original story.[7] Although the association between the racist progeny of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *The Birth of a Nation* is rather subliminal, it is clear that Griffith's film left an imprint on these works and normalized mixed race stereotypes in film. Its influence continued throughout the twentieth century spawning at least one attempt at a remake.[8]

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[7] *Slaves* (1969), *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1976), the made for television movie *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1987), and *Django Unchained* (2012), all adapt, incorporate, or pay tribute to Stowe's work in some fashion.

[8] *The Klansman* (1974) could be viewed as a retelling of either Griffith's film, the Dixon novel, or both. While it is attributed to a 1967 book written by William Bradford Huie, parallels to *The Birth of a Nation*

Despite it being a rather futile exercise, some filmmakers attempted to respond to the tidal shift created by *The Birth of a Nation*.

Within Our Gates

The most important black cinematic response to the wretched interpretations of both history and race in Griffith's *Birth* was Oscar Micheaux's *Within Our Gates* (1920). While there is no clear evidence that Micheaux intended *Within Our Gates* to be a direct response to *The Birth of a Nation,* many scholars argue that Micheaux challenges much of the myth and ideology in Griffith's film (Gaines, 2001). Micheaux, the former shoeshine boy, homesteader, and Pullman porter became one of the first and most important black filmmakers in history. A truly transitional figure, he was the only black filmmaker to produce films in both the silent and sound eras. Never afraid to take chances, Micheaux's films share a common theme of engaging controversial subject matter like lynching and miscegenation. His films often challenged many of the myths about blacks that grew out of Reconstruction, i.e. the black rapist or conniving mulatto. Yet, he was also critical of his own people with regard to religion, politics, and variation in skin color. Although Micheaux has been criticized by scholars for favoring light-skinned blacks in lead roles (Gehr, 1991; Sampson, 1995), Green (1998) and Lupack (2010) argue that he was committed to casting against type and stereotype. Though Micheaux's racial politics may have been complicated, *Within Our Gates'* value as counter narrative to the racist depictions in *The Birth of a Nation* shouldn't be underestimated.

Within Our Gates is the story of mulatto school teacher Sylvia Landry (Evelyn Preer). When her engagement to a world traveler is broken up by her jealous cousin, she leaves to take a

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abound. The liberal Breck Stacill (Richard Burton) echoes Austin Stoneman (He even has a limp). He is close with quasi-mistress Loretta Sykes (Lola Falana) who resembles some aspects of Lydia Brown. Garth (O. J. Simpson) is the militant black buck whose lineage traces back to Gus in Griffith's film.

job at Piney Woods School for Negroes. Reverend Wilson Jacobs, the school's founder, is modeled after Booker T. Washington. The school falls into financial trouble, and Sylvia vows to help raise the money to keep the school afloat. When she returns to Boston, her purse gets stolen by a man. The thief is apprehended by the mulatto Dr. V. Vivian (Charles D. Lucas), a Boston physician who tries to court Sylvia. However, she resists because she is ashamed of her past. A short while later she is hit by a car while attempting to save a child who wandered in front of the vehicle. In a twist of fate, the owner of the car is a white philanthropist who decides to pledge $50,000 in order to save the school. Eventually, Sylvia's jealous cousin Alma (Flo Clements) begins to feel guilty about what she has done and tells Dr. Vivian about Sylvia's family.

The film then flashes back to Sylvia's life with her adopted parents. Her father is wrongly accused of murdering the landlord Philip Gridlestone (Ralph Johnson), and the Landry family flees into the swamp. An angry white mob tracks them down and lynches Sylvia's mother and father. Her little brother manages to run a short distance before being fired upon by the mob. Feigning death, he gets up and manages to escape on horseback. Sylvia, who had returned home to get food, was surprised by Gridlestone's brother Armand (Grant Gorman). He chases her around the room attempting to rape her. After a brief struggle he notices a scar above Sylvia's breast and realizes that she is his own daughter from a prior union with a black woman. Here Micheaux pushes back on the myth of the black rapist by evoking images of slavery and concubinage. The scene is rather violent and reinstates the true history of rape and domination during the antebellum. Whereas Griffith used *The Birth of a Nation* to spread interracial propaganda, Micheaux's response, whether intended or otherwise, effectively rebuts Griffith's assertions of the perils of racial mixing. In the end, the film returns to the present and Sylvia and Dr. Vivian are married.

Micheaux represents an important milestone for independent filmmaking. Working outside the establishment, Micheaux produced this film on a fraction of what most Hollywood film budgets were at the time. *Within Our Gates* was a representation that ran counter to dominant views of mixed race people. The main characters project an image of professionalism and dignity. Sylvia's first image in the film shows her seated at a desk writing a letter. Educated and ladylike, she is concerned with helping her community. She dresses in respectable attire. When she meets with others, there is a business-like atmosphere. She epitomizes the image of racial uplift. Likewise, Dr. Vivian and Reverend Wilson Jacobs are represented as distinguished gentlemen. They are the antithesis of blacks depicted in contemporaneous films produced in white studios (Bowser & Spence, 2000). Unfortunately, only a fraction of viewers saw it compared to *The Birth of a Nation.* Nevertheless is constitutes a powerful response to the acute racism of the period. Despite what it achieved, the film also had its share of critics and troubles. Many observers were dismayed by Micheaux's apparent preference for light-skinned actors and actresses who occupied all of the starring roles, while most of the lesser parts went to darker artists. In addition, Micheaux found it difficult to get *Within Our Gates* past the board of censors. Though it's difficult to know how much of the original cut survives, the censors objected to both the lynching scene and the near rape of Sylvia along with its allusions to incest. It is likely that 1920 audiences saw more of the original cut than survives today. Micheaux would often go directly to exhibitors in different states and show a film before submitting it to the local censor boards. Having already shown the film, he could go to the censors and then leave town without making any edits based on their direction (Bowser & Spence, 2000). Themes of miscegenation and racial mixing were central to the objections and angst surrounding Micheaux's films. However, these themes were also central to the plots of his pictures. Cutting the objectionable scenes would have resulted in movies that made no rhetorical sense. His depictions of mixed race characters were much more human and realistic than earlier films made by white filmmakers.

Without explicitly identifying the characters as mulattoes like D.W. Griffith did in *The Birth of a Nation*, Micheaux effectively refutes Griffith's negative portrayals of mulattoes as conniving, opportunistic, and promiscuous. With some exceptions, Micheaux's interpretation of this character was often professional and dignified. Two of the major roles in *Within Our Gates* are played by light-skinned actors who could be read as polar opposites to Griffith's Lydia Brown and Silas Lynch. Sylvia as played by Preer comes across as a normal, ordinary young teacher who is motivated by her drive to help educate her people. She appears independent and free to move about from Boston to Piney Woods and back. Dr. V. Vivian is equally "engaged in social questions." One could argue that Sylvia's story is peppered with pain and sorrow, yet she has no struggle with identity like the tragic mulatto of abolitionist fiction. She is adopted and lighter than her parents, yet she shows no evidence of confusion or angst. However, she does experience exile, alienation, and sexual predation all of which are closely aligned with the tragic mulatto tradition. Indeed, the images of forced sexual relations in *Within Our Gates* are disturbing reminders of the real-life history that inspired these characters. This combination of the refined professional and victim of violent crime suggests that Micheaux understood that mixed race representation was often nuanced and contradictory (Wallace, 2001; Stewart, 2005).

Aspects of Micheaux's films are haunting. There's a sense of desolation, mysteriousness, and a familiarity with the grotesque. His work has an almost gothic atmosphere. The theme of unexplainable intuitive knowledge contributes to this sense of foreboding. In *Within Our Gates,* during a nightmare Sylvia "sees" Alma's stepbrother, Larry, murder a man. In *God's Step Children* Eva dreams "of Naomi while under the ether." She thinks that Naomi has left her husband but it isn't confirmed until Jimmie calls Naomi's husband from Eva's bedside. *Body and Soul* (1925) features Martha Jane's extended dream sequence in which she divines Reverend Jenkins' (Paul Robeson) true corrupt nature. Lastly, Eve's dream in *Symbol of the Unconquered* confirms Hugh's honor and trustworthiness. The use of dream sequences and long flashbacks

allowed Micheaux to displace sensitive topics such as lynching and rape. In *Within Our Gates*, Alma recounts Sylvia's history through an extended flashback detailing her mixed race lineage and allusions to incest.

Another typical Micheaux theme was his apparent reverence for Booker T. Washington. Washington undoubtedly identified as a black man, and yet his father was white. In *Up From Slavery* (1901), he writes, "Of my father I know even less than of my mother. I do not even know his name. I have heard reports to the effect that he was a white man who lived on one of the near-by plantations" (p. 2). To be sure this was not uncommon in the slave states but for Washington it informs his sense of identity. In his youth, he struggled with the fact that white boys had no impediments to success that he had as a black man. He writes:

> In those days, and later as a young man, I used to try to picture in my imagination the feelings and ambitions of a white boy with absolutely no limit placed upon his aspirations and activities. I used to envy the white boy who had no obstacles placed in the way of his becoming a Congressman, Governor, Bishop, or President by reason of the accident of his birth or race. (p. 39)

In a sense, Washington appears to be reflecting on his own racial composition here. He shares a common ancestry with white boys and yet he is unable to enjoy the same benefits that accompany whiteness. Moreover, Washington's recounting of his experiences in the salt and coal mines could be read as an allegory for his journey to find racial identity. While the thrust of his quest deals primarily with a thirst for education, his odyssey often leaves him contemplating his ancestry and what his world might be like if he was born a "member of a more popular race" (p. 35). Might the salt and coal mines represent the two racial worlds he found himself in conflict with? With a white father and an appearance that betrayed full Negro status, Washington must have tangled with this to some degree but resolves to eschew any adherence to a mulatto identity as evidence with the following passage. He writes:

> From any point of view, I had rather be what I am, a member of the Negro race, than be able to claim membership with the most favoured of any other race. I have always been made sad when I have heard members of any race claiming rights and privileges, or certain badges of distinction, on the ground simply that they were members of this or that race, regardless of their own individual worth or attainments. I have been made to feel sad for such persons because I am conscious of the fact that mere connection of what is known as a superior race will not permanently carry an individual forward unless he has individual worth, and mere connection with what is regarded as an inferior race will not finally hold an individual back if he possesses intrinsic, individual merit. (p. 40)

Oscar Micheaux's interpretation of Washington's racial makeup is deeply ingrained in his first novel *The Conquest: The Story of a Negro Pioneer* (1913). Bearing a dedication to Booker T. Washington, it contains mixed race themes that Micheaux would return to repeatedly. Micheaux rewrote *The Conquest* as *The Homesteader* in 1918 before producing its cinematic namesake in 1919. His tendency to depict light skinned mulattoes as educated professionals is also tied to Washington's notion of racial uplift. Although some mixed race characters are nefarious and ill-intentioned, the majority of Micheaux's light skinned characters are upwardly mobile, community oriented figures that could have been modeled directly after Hampton students.

In addition to subscribing to Washington's model of uplift as evidenced by films like *The Homesteader* (1919)*, The Symbol of the Unconquered,* and, *Within Our Gates*, some of Micheaux's interior shots feature strategically placed portraits of the Wizard of Tuskegee. In *Symbol*, Hugh and Eve arrive at her grandfather's cabin and discover one such stately portrait. Hugh acknowledges it and then proceeds to kick up dust by sweeping the floor vigorously. Micheaux may have been poking fun at Washington's obsession with cleanliness in *Up From Slavery.* In *Body and Soul*, Washington's image appears in the home of Martha Jane (Mercedes Gilbert) and Isabelle (Julia Theresa Russell). There are actually two images of Washington in the same shot, one of himself, the other in a grouping with Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln. Washington's face shows up so often in the background that he takes on the role of a sentinel guard watching over and protecting the women. These and other set design features would

become staples in Micheaux's mise-en-scène. *Within Our Gates* contains the character Reverend Wilson Jacobs who is an obvious reference to Booker T. Washington. Though we only see the small office of Reverend Jacobs, it is meant to be an approximation of what one might see at the Hampton Institute. Micheaux's homage to Booker T. Washington presages a non-sentimental view of the mulatto figure. It suggests what mixed race representation might be – an alternative to the dominant configuration of mixed race characters.

CHAPTER THREE

IN PLAIN SIGHT: RACIAL PASSING IN CINEMA 1920-1959

> I sit watching—though I pretend not to notice—the dark maids ambling by with their white charges. Do I deceive anyone? Were they to see my hands, brown as your dear face, they'd know I'm not quite what I pretend to be. I walk these streets a white woman, or so I think, until I catch the eyes of some stranger upon me, and I must lower mine, a *negress* again.
>
> Natasha Trethewey, *Bellocq's Ophelia*, 2002

Racial passing is a relatively new phenomenon. Emerging in the early nineteenth century, it flourished in conditions in which social and geographic mobility provided relative anonymity to individuals who sought to conceal their racial ancestry (Sollors, 1997). While passing can be intentional or unintentional, it underscores the elusive nature of racial identity. Since race is understood to be visually knowable, racial passing challenges essentialist notions of blackness and whiteness. Passers break down stereotypes through the process of rendering race invisible. Since they are unseen, it is impossible for mixed race stereotypes to be applied. However, there are costs associated with passing. Whether in life, literature, or film, the tension between escaping oppression and solidarity with the black community is ever present. The fundamental perception is that passing lacks loyalty. Ironically, it is loyalty that motivated many who could not (or chose not to) pass, who protected the identities of those who did. Passing conveys messages regarding the implied desirability of whiteness and undesirability of blackness. In moving pictures, passing characters were largely intended to generate sympathy among viewers. Unlike the non-passing mulattoes from the last chapter, passers escape blackness. Unfortunately, passers lose communal and family ties. Indeed, passers often experience a social death when they adopt new identities (Sollors, 1997; Hobbs, 2014). This chapter traces the lineage and trajectory of racial passing in cinema while examining changes in representation. It argues that while racial passing in some

films diminish mixed race stereotypes, in other films it can perpetuate old ideas regarding mixed race people.

The above Trethewey epigraph captures the inner dialogue of the classic light-skinned mulatta who intends to pass in order to enjoy the benefits of white privilege. Indeed, passing characters have their genesis in abolitionist literature whose aim, in part, was to challenge race as a visible fact. In her discussion of Lydia Maria Child's *A Romance of the Republic* (1994), Carolyn Karcher describes the passing mixed blood characters as embodying "the dissolution of the ethnic categories to which Child attributed the antagonisms that divided humankind. Through intermarriage, she imagined, race itself could be erased, and with it racial prejudice. Sharp distinctions would blur into imperceptible gradations, and the monotony of fixed types would give way to an infinite variety no longer reducible to classification" (p. 512). Gayle Wald (2000) argues the significance of "racial passing lies precisely in their ability to demonstrate the failure of race to impose stable definitions of identity, or to manifest itself in a reliable, permanent, and/or visible manner" (p. ix). In some ways, Alex Johnson (1996) echoes Karcher when he stipulates that racial classification is equivalent to whites owning the trademark for an individual's color and compares it to the question of "shade confusion" that arose with *In re Owens Corning Fiberglas Corp.* In this case, Owens-Corning was seeking to protect the color pink as a trademark arguing that it had gained a secondary meaning that was inseparable from the product itself. Owens-Corning won; nevertheless, the question of shade confusion is an important one when it comes to race. Johnson writes:

> What I hope to accomplish with the destabilization of racial categories is the equivalent of shade confusion. Shade confusion is, of course, to be avoided in the world of trademark law. However, when, as in the case of race, categories have been created that serve no real purpose in identifying the characteristics of individual products, shade confusion is an appropriate tool for rendering these categories useless to the consumer. In a world with an infinite number of colors or racial classifications, shade confusion is easily attainable. (p. 892)

This excerpt highlights the illusory nature of the color line. It is often a moving target and demonstrates how racial categories can be easily uncoupled from any sense of finite and concrete quantification. Indeed, shade confusion has long accompanied mixed race people in America. In *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States* (1856), Frederick Law Olmstead wrote skeptically of the myriad gradations of mulattoes in Louisiana saying "I believe experts pretend to be able to distinguish" (p. 583).

The successful passer evades visual detection by hiding in plain sight and in doing so renders the tools of categorization null and void. The types and motivations for passing, it will be shown, are the means with which notions of racial identification are destabilized. Firstly, passing can fall under the two categories of *voluntary* and *involuntary*. One who passes voluntarily might be doing it as means for survival perhaps to escape from slavery, get a job, or to intermarry. Individuals may have chosen to pass in silent protest of discrimination and segregation. Others still may have passed based on a desire to dupe white society. Involuntary or accidental passing happens when an individual is believed to be white and refuses to acknowledge the mistaken identity. One also might pass inadvertently by way of not knowing their ancestry.

Passing in Early Film

While Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* contains several occurrences of passing, the Porter film largely omits these. In Stowe, Eliza's white appearance and the mannerisms learned though her close proximity to the Shelby family allows her and her son to pass during their escape. Likewise, her husband George is able to blend in with the white men in bar-rooms during his journey to Canada. Viewers of Porter's film would have, on some level, learned about the dilemma facing individuals who were white enough to pass. While themes of racial passing in film would become popular, they were not emphasized in the *Uncle Tom's Cabin* pictures despite there being significant portions of Stowe's text dedicated to it. It may well be that Porter

encountered technical limitations that prevented this from being done on screen. While the first close-up shots had been done by other filmmakers (Porter used this technique as well) it wasn't utilized in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* possibly due to the "filmed theater" aspect of the production in which nearly every shot is wide, capturing the action of multiple actors and scenes simultaneously. This deemphasized the character's impact on the viewer's emotions. Acts of passing would be more difficult to convey in the absence of extreme close up shots. Porter also had limitations on the total length of the film and may have decided to omit some aspects of Stowe's text. At just over fourteen minutes, there are several characters and subplots that do not get enough time to do justice to the story. Perhaps viewers knew the story enough to fill in the gaps that arose in the film and Porter took full advantage. In any case, since the act of passing would have been seen as an extreme and emotionally charged decision in the early twentieth century, it would have served as a vehicle to educate viewers who had not considered it from the perspective of the passer. In this sense, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* could have served as an even greater pedagogical tool. Giroux (2001) writes that "Film both shapes and bears witness to the ethical and political dilemmas that animate the broader social landscape, and it often raises fundamental questions about how we think about politics and political agency in light of such a recognition" (p. 594). Although viewers were not treated to the entire story, they did see each of the film's mixed race characters struggling to keep their family together under the constant threat of danger and death.

In other films, the passing narrative began appearing with movies that were largely of the "passing as accident" variety in which characters face sudden racial dilemmas after living as white. The following examples were drawn from secondary sources since each of these films are presumed to be lost. *In Slavery Days* (1913) utilized the "switched at birth" device to dramatize the fears surrounding racial identity and enslavement. Here, the octoroon Carlotta is substituted for the white daughter named Tennessee. As adults, the two tangle over a suitor and Carlotta sells

Tennessee into slavery. When Carlotta's true identity is revealed, she and her mother are burned alive while Tennessee is rescued. 1915's *The Nigger* was later retitled by some exhibitors to *The New Governor* in an attempt to avoid criticism of both the title and subject matter that included a rape and a lynching. Interestingly, a 1915 *Milwaukee Journal* article reports "The New Governor, a negro problem film, was passed by the Milwaukee citizens' censorship board on Saturday, and will be seen in Milwaukee shortly" (May 2, 1915 p.7). Apparently, the board had no issue with the film's content or former title. The plot surrounds a Southern Governor who discovers he has black blood when a rival reveals it. He then resigns from office and ends his relationship with a white woman.

Mark Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson* was made into a film in 1916. Upon arriving in Dawson's Landing, David Wilson makes a wry remark about an unseen, barking dog. Wilson says, "I wish I owned half of that dog." "Why?" somebody asked. "Because I would kill my half" (p. 920). After that incident, David became known as Pudd'nhead Wilson. Wilson also had a hobby of fingerprinting: a practice that was still in its infancy during Twain's time. Roxy, one of Judge Driscoll's slaves, provided her own prints as well as her baby's (Chambers) and that of Driscoll's baby Tom. One day, Mr. Driscoll notices that he is missing a small amount of money. After confronting Roxy and three other slaves, he announces that he will sell them to other masters. Fearing what might become of Chambers, she switches the two infants clothes and as a result, their identities. Chambers grows up in privilege as Tom Driscoll, while Tom grows up in slavery as Chambers. Chambers as Tom murders Judge Driscoll during a botched robbery attempt and the crime is blamed on Italian twins. In court, Wilson uses his finger print slides to clear the twins and convict "Tom." Wilson then reveals Tom's and Chambers' true identities. In the end, although he is free, wealthy, and white, Tom is a fish out of water in his new surroundings and yearns for the familiarity of the slave quarters.

These early films illustrate the popularity of passing as a plot device. The visual nature of film allowed filmmakers to prime the viewer with imagery designed to present questions of the character's identity. While several filmmakers took up the subject of racial passing in their films, none would equal the commitment and nuance of Oscar Micheaux. His early life on the South Dakota frontier and his love affair with a white woman had a tremendous influence on his novels and films. Each of Micheaux's books and movies that hint at interracial relationships do so through the shrewd use of white-looking characters which are ultimately revealed as Negroes. Micheaux was intrigued by themes of passing and used it as a plot device in several films. *The Exile* (1931), *Veiled Aristocrats* (1932), *God's Step Children* (1938), and *Birthright* (1939) are three such examples. The director would challenge popular misconceptions of passers and social status with nuanced representations of black life. Incidentally, all three of the film's titles were "borrowed" from popular books written by white authors. Micheaux's films portrayed mixed race and black characters in a more positive light. Whereas white directors tended to use white actors in blackface, Oscar Micheaux utilized black actors as well as whites in his casts.

Between 1919 and 1947, Micheaux produced at least seven films which explored this theme and challenged widely held notions of racial identity amongst black people. Based on his novel by the same name, Micheaux's first film, *The Homesteader* (1919) is the story of Jean Baptiste (Charles Lucas). Baptiste falls in love with Agnes (Iris Hall). Neither of them is aware that she has black ancestry. Believing that Agnes is white, Baptiste stays within his race and marries the daughter of a preacher, Orlean (Evelyn Preer). She goes insane from the constant meddling of her father and sister. Baptiste eventually leaves Orlean and returns to discover that Agnes is a light-skinned negro. *The Homesteader* has not been seen in decades and is presumed to be lost. However, the modern viewer can ostensibly get a good approximation for what the film was like by reading the novel or watching *The Symbol of the Unconquered*. Micheaux continually recycled themes and plots from novels and early films in later films. Micheaux's reliance on the

semi-autobiographical theme of homesteading appears in his first novel *The Conquest: The Story of a Negro Pioneer* (1913) which follows the story of "Oscar Devereaux" and his attempt to cultivate the land in South Dakota. Moreover, this image of the mixed race pioneer is a fitting one. It captures the essence of what is required to pass in the first place – the act of leaving one's community of origin and venturing off into unknown territory. Although the cowboy hats and spurs would be left behind, the racially passing characters of the next four decades share the same peripatetic life.

The Symbol of the Unconquered

The Symbol of the Unconquered contains two different kinds of passers: one intentional and one accidental. The story follows "white-skinned" Eve Mason (Iris Hall) who leaves her home in Selma, Alabama to locate the land she has just inherited from her grandfather, Dick Mason (George Catlin). On her way, she encounters hotel proprietor Jefferson Driscoll (Lawrence Chenault). At the front desk, the two are, at first, pleasant. Then when she tries to sign the guestbook, Driscoll becomes grim and cold. An intertitle reads, "But if skin is white, her eyes betray her origins." While Eve is not intentionally trying to pass for white in front of Driscoll, she does so nevertheless. Although her skin is nearly white, she doesn't show any need to conceal her background. That Driscoll "discovers" Eve's race is due only to the failings of his own perception. Believing Eve is white he smiles and removes his hat. However, when Eve takes off her gloves to sign the guestbook, Driscoll's smile transforms into a scowl. He recognizes something in Eve's hands or face that reveals her ancestry. Disdainful and angry at the prospect of being duped, he slams the guestbook shut and offers to let her sleep in the barn. She accepts. Before she follows Driscoll out the door, a close-up shot of Eve's face reveals tears rolling down her cheeks. She then looks directly into the camera as if appealing to the viewer for sympathy. This doesn't seem like an acting or directing mistake. Micheaux, who often attempted these

“communicative connections” in his films, was most likely making a point with Eve’s glance (Green, 2004).

What sets this scene apart from the garden-variety discrimination depicted in film is the fact that Jefferson Driscoll is mixed race. An intertitle describes him as being “one of the many mulattos who conceal their origins.” Before Eve arrived at Driscoll’s, Abraham (E. G. Tatum) entered the lobby looking for a room. Driscoll glared at this black customer from behind the desk. He then had a flashback memory to a time he was courting a young white girl. The two are sitting next to each other in his yard holding hands. He looks as if he is about to propose. Then, an older black woman walks up and hugs him. It’s Driscoll’s mother (Mattie Wilkes) and she has just “outed” her son in front of his white girlfriend. Shocked, the girlfriend walks away. Driscoll, infuriated with his mother, chokes and throws her to the ground. There are many layers to this scene. It may be the first surviving instance of a passer being exposed by one of their parents on film. A variation on this scene shows up in 1934’s *Imitation of Life* when Delilah exposes Peola’s race to others at different points in the film. Incidentally, Driscoll’s white girlfriend isn’t really white. She appears to be a light-skinned black actress whom Micheaux cast for the part. This is also true of other actresses appearing later in the film. Micheaux seems to be doing the opposite of white directors who insisted on using white actresses in these types of roles. Micheaux’s attention to nuance and subtlety is also evidenced by his very non-stereotypical depiction of Jefferson Driscoll. The idea of a racist mulatto presents conundrums of all kinds. It suggests that in-group members can embrace racist attitudes and beliefs. Driscoll prefigures characters like the self-loathing Sgt. Waters (Adolph Caesar) in *A Soldier’s Story* (1984). Waters repeatedly abused his subordinates on account of their darker skin and “Geechee” ways. Perhaps Driscoll is so afraid of being exposed that he engages in open oppression in order to prove his whiteness. Any doubts about his ancestry are allayed as long as his racism is observed by others.

Eve tries to spend the night in the barn across the room from Abraham. During the night it begins to rain and the roof leaks on Abraham, making him grimace and frightening Eve. She backs away and falls from the hay loft into the stormy elements outside. Driscoll hears the commotion and looks out of the window. Seeing Eve in distress, he laughs and delights in her suffering. Eve spends the rest of the night in the woods. The next day she meets Hugh Van Allen on the road. When Hugh discovers that they will be neighbors, he offers to give her a ride to her new homestead. Exhausted, she sleeps most of the journey. Van Allen is smitten with her but does not pursue her because he believes she is white. At the same time, Abraham is making his way on another part of the road. Riding in a wagon being pulled by what appears to be a black mule, the mule suddenly stops and refuses to move again. Abraham climbs down and confronts the mule by hitting and even biting the animal. After Hugh and Eve arrive at their destination, Hugh offers to protect her.

The film then introduces a number of other characters. A few miles away from Eve and Van Allen lives August Barr (Louis Déan), a former clergyman turned swindler. His wife Mary (uncredited) is described as an "innocent victim." Barr goes to the Smith Bros. Saloon to meet his associate Tugi (Leigh Whipper) an Indian Fakir. The two go to meet Peter Kaden (Edward Fraction) at a hideout where they begin scheming ways to steal Van Allen's land. Peter, also described as a victim, is ordered by Barr to go to the Mason property and retrieve some documents that prove the existence of oil on Eve's land. When Kaden arrives at Eve's cabin, he peers in through a window frightening Eve. Kaden runs off empty handed while Van Allen rescues Eve. Meanwhile, the "half-breed" Philip Clark (James Henry Burris) and Bill Stanton meet and plan to steal two horses. Driscoll, having sold his hotel, starts a new business as a land speculator. When Van Allen shows up at Driscoll's office looking to buy two horses, Driscoll sells him stolen horses he has just acquired from Clark and Stanton. After discovering that the horses were stolen, Van Allen confronts Driscoll at the saloon. Driscoll is beaten by Van Allen in

a fist fight. After his defeat, Driscoll and his partners in crime decide to form a Klan and begin leaving letters for Van Allen threatening violence if he and Eve don't leave the land. Calling themselves the Knights of the Black Cross, the group plans to run Eve off the land while Van Allen is away. However, Eve has been joined by Driscoll's mother and Mary Barr who tell Eve of her husband's plan to steal the land. Eve rides off in full cowgirl attire to warn Van Allen. The climax of the film isn't clear since a substantial amount of this portion of the film has been lost. Driscoll is killed and the Klan is defeated but the viewer is left to guess how. An intertitle does note a review by the *New York Age.* It reads, "The biggest moments of the photoplay are when the nightriders are annihilated, a colored man with bricks being a big factor." In the end, Van Allen has become a wealthy oil man and Abraham seems to be working with him. Eve goes to visit Van Allen with a letter from The Committee for the Defense of the Colored Race. The letter reads in part, "we send you Miss Eve Mason, who has rendered a great service to the cause of the black race; despite her white skin, Miss Eve is born of black parents." Relieved, Van Allen embraces Eve and the movie ends.

Before leaving *Symbol,* a number of points are worthy to consider. Micheaux doesn't present a monolithic black culture. His characters are often at odds with each other in ways that don't occur in work by other filmmakers. Whereas the mulattoes in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *The Birth of a Nation* largely stick together through the common goal of family or profession, Micheaux's Driscoll is a mixed race figure who turns on his blackness and the blackness of others. He especially disdains those who are light enough to pass like he does. Like Griffith, Micheaux's mulattoes can hate, lie, and cheat. Driscoll's fight with Van Allen over the stolen horses is evidence of his dishonesty and yet this scene also illustrates that despite some criticism over regarding Micheaux's use of light-skinned blacks in lead roles, the characters were not all law-abiding citizens. While both are light-skinned, Van Allen is slightly darker and plays an honest and upstanding role. The same is true for the very dark-skinned Abraham. He is nice and

pleasant although when Eve sees him in the barn, she flees, a scene which conjures the image of a white woman fearing the mere sight of a nearby black man.

Indeed, Micheaux always seems to be tinkering with the illusory nature of race on screen. Two characters are depicted as white women, yet in actuality they are light-skinned black actresses (Bowser & Spence, 2001). The first appears early in the film as Driscoll's potential fiancé. However, as discussed earlier, his proposal is thwarted by the entrance of his mother. The second character is Mary Barr. Although her race isn't referred to specifically, she is described as the "wife" of August Barr. One can assume that Micheaux intended for her to be taken as white by viewers. There is some evidence that Micheaux tried to appease censors and distributors by claiming that there would be zero physical contact between black males and ostensibly white females in the production. For example, in the preface to the script for *God's Stepchildren*, Micheaux states, "All the characters appearing herein, regardless of how bright in color they may seem, are members of the Negro Race." Albeit eighteen years earlier, we can be sure that Micheaux was sensitive to issues of racial perception and decorum of the 1920s when *Symbol* was released. There is also a sleight of hand aspect to Micheaux's racial presentation. Because he understands that the observation of race depends on being visually knowable, he tricks the casual viewer into thinking a particular character is someone other than who they really are. Micheaux is *passing* these characters off on the audience as white despite the racial identity of the actresses. It should be noted that the existing print of the film does not credit these actresses. The original may have identified them and essentially brought the audience in on the ruse. Conversely, this is the same type of casting practice that white filmmakers engaged in from the beginning and would continue well into the twentieth century and beyond. As we will see in films like *Show Boat* (1936), *Pinky* (1949), and *Lost Boundaries* (1949), white actresses would continue to play characters passing for white.

Micheaux's *The House Behind the Cedars* (1924) was an adaptation of Charles W. Chesnutt's 1900 novel. Despite being one of the most notable works on passing, Chesnutt was unable to garner Hollywood interest for the film rights to his book. While some white authors were getting paid well over $100,000 for the rights to their work, Chesnutt would have to settle for Micheaux's offer of $500 with a down payment of $25 (Crisler, Leitz, & McElrath, 2002). Citing production costs, Micheaux would avoid paying the author for years. After several years of starts and stops accompanied by perpetual financial trouble, the film was completed. Like the book, the movie's main characters live as white people after moving away from their home town. Unfortunately the film has been lost. In another lost film *Thirty Years Later* (1928), a wealthy white man poses as a mulatto in order to marry a black woman. In a twist, he learns that a different black woman, the housekeeper, is birth mother who he always looked upon with scorn because of her color (Regester, 1998; Bowser, Gaines, & Musser, 2001; Lupack, 2010). The film is loosely based on the well-known *Alice-Kip Rhinelander* case – white socialite Kip Rhinelander sought a divorce from his wife Alice on the basis that she led him to believe that she was white and not mixed race. Micheaux recycled the characters and plot from *The Homesteader* in *The Exile* (1931) in which Baptiste believes that Agnes is white and cannot marry her. Though she appears to know her racial heritage (there are references to the one drop rule) she doesn't share that knowledge with Baptiste. In the end, they marry and move to South Dakota. Micheaux intended for *Veiled Aristocrats* (1932) to be a talking remake of *The House Behind the Cedars*. However, because of the fact that Micheaux cheated Chesnutt, the famous author would not give his blessing for the director's latest project. Micheaux instead borrowed the title from the 1923 novel written by Milwaukee author Gertrude Sanborn.

Veiled Aristocrats

Micheaux's *Veiled Aristocrats* has not fared well from the hands of censors and the passage of time. Abrupt edits are common and there are problems with sound syncing. The current viewer is left with a badly mangled series of images that struggle to come together as a cohesive unit. In addition, it's the second time Micheaux has told this particular story in film. One wonders why Micheaux, a director who otherwise had no qualms about borrowing book titles and plots, never produced a film adaptation of Nella Larson's *Quicksand*, Jean Toomer's *Cane*, Walter White's *Flight* or Sanborn's book.

Veiled Aristocrats follows the story of John Walden (Lorenzo Tucker) and his sister Rena Walden (Lucille Lewis). John, who has spent the last twenty years in another town passing as white, returns home to Fayetteville to convince Rena to leave her dark-skinned lover Frank Fowler (Carl Mahon) and return with him where she can begin a new life as a white woman. Racial pride and uplift are central themes in the picture. In addition to images of black life that emphasize middle and upper class values – three piece suits, elegant parties, and large homes – racial loyalty is demonstrated through the actions of Rena and Frank.

The film opens with John walking a few yards behind Rena down a sidewalk. Later that night, John shows up at the Walden home. There he is reunited with his mother Molly Walden who reintroduces John to Rena. When Rena meets John the two embrace and kiss each other on the lips in a way that seems unnatural for a brother and sister (Greene, 2004). Being that it's late, Rena is dressed for bed. John asks Rena if she is married or has a beau. She smiles bashfully and looks away. John concludes that Rena has been seeing Fowler and commits to getting her out of Fayetteville. Before leaving, Rena meets with Frank to tell him of her brother's plans to take her away. Banking on the hope that she will change her mind and return, Frank decides to encourage her to go. He tells Rena that while she is away he will become one of the leading builders and

contractors of Fayetteville. Frank says, “We’ve made the most wonderful progress of any race in the world in the years since we’ve been free.” It’s clear that Micheaux sees Frank as a model of uplift. We can almost hear the director’s voice pleading through the following call to action when Frank declares, “Times have changed and it’s up to the Negro race now to individualize his efforts. By which I mean that each and every one of us make concerted drive toward success along the many individual lanes.” Rena is inspired by Frank’s oratory and wants to stay by his side. However, Rena decides to go away with John to assume a new identity. In her new life, Rena lives in a mansion and has servants that perform several musical numbers throughout the film. She is courted by George Tryon (Barrington Guy), a wealthy “white” man. Yet, she soon finds that she is unable to keep up the charade. Unlike her brother, she believes she should remain loyal to her race. Rena misses her mother dearly and her anguish about passing as white comes out while she and John are seated at breakfast. After much back and forth Rena exclaims, “I only know that I am not a white girl but a negress and happy and sorry as only I know they could be. I know I could go on sharing their joys, their sorrows, their poverty, their, their everything.” Instead of choosing to marry an ostensibly wealthier white man, Rena decides against it and telephones Frank to arrange for him to pick her up. When he does, the two drive off to get married.

Through Rena and Frank, Micheaux advocates racial loyalty and unity. Of course, it is impossible for Frank to pass. He has no choice but to be black. Yet, Micheaux presents the couple as a model for uplift. Earlier in the film, Frank and Rena are seated together talking. Frank elucidates the ways in which black people should improve themselves. He says, “Each and every one of us must make a concerted drive toward success along the many individual lines….” In exalting Frank, Micheaux indicts John who ends up an alone race traitor. Clearly Micheaux was not in favor of passing as a means to economic uplift. He may have been sympathetic to those who chose to but it is overwhelmingly apparent that he believed in other means for seeking

opportunity. To be sure, Micheaux's films are replete with allusions to racial uplift. Field (2015) argues that Micheaux used several avenues within a given picture to represent progress among blacks. His emphasis on economic self-sufficiency, education, and racial pride are prominent themes in *Veiled Aristocrats* as well as *Within Our Gates*, *The Symbol of the Unconquered*, and *Body and Soul*. Strategies such as using documentary footage of black people in formal dress and scenes in which characters gaze directly into the camera, allowed Micheaux to appeal to viewers' sense of pride and unity.

Racial pride and uplift are also themes in *God's Step Children* (1938). It is the story of Naomi, a light-skinned child who wants to be white. She gets into trouble after she is forced to go to a black school instead of a white one. She has fights with other children and disrespects the teacher, who spanks her. Naomi starts a rumor about the teacher having an affair that plunges the town into chaos. After the truth is discovered, Naomi is sent to live in a convent. Years later she returns and professes her love for her step brother, Jimmie. When Jimmie refuses to marry her, Naomi drowns herself in a river.

While it is pointless to try to situate Micheaux in relation to Hollywood, it is helpful from the standpoint of understanding both his financial constraints and his racial politics. Working outside of the establishment, Micheaux couldn't hope to utilize the funding that big budget studios had at their disposal. He was notorious for using techniques that allowed him to take short cuts and save money. For example, Micheaux used mirrors to strategically reflect daylight instead of expensive electrical lights. He often refused to reshoot scenes in order to save film stock. Micheaux would also use locations like the exterior of an elegant house in a white neighborhood during the early hours of the day before residents noticed (Bowser & Spence, 2000). Working outside of the Hollywood system also allowed Micheaux to express unpopular ideological and political views regarding racial identity. *Veiled Aristocrats* and *God's Stepchildren* in particular

depict the filmmaker's belief that black people needed to take responsibility for their future and shunned attempts to escape blackness. Moreover, by depicting self-hatred through some of his characters Micheaux illustrates the effects of racism on black people (Manchel, 2007). Indeed, the act of passing for white is perhaps the most extreme example of how racism drove some light-skinned blacks to pass for white. However, people passed for many reasons. Some viewed passing as a practical or strategic choice like Ellen Craft temporarily passing to escape from slavery. Others left the black community permanently as we will see with the Carter family in *Lost Boundaries*. In *Veiled Aristocrats*, John Warwick permanently leaves his identity behind. Still others rejected racialized identities altogether. Jean Toomer argued futilely for an American identity that wasn't based on race (Hobbs, 2014).

On the surface, it is not entirely clear if Micheaux intended to project a disdain for John Warwick's behavior until he describes Frank as a "coal black negro" and that he, not Frank, knows what is best for Rena. Audiences must have understood John's view of the situation to be arrogance (Green, 2004). Micheaux broke down mixed race stereotypes by presenting characters that ran counter to prevailing representations. From the racial loyalist to the racist mulatto, Oscar Micheaux's nuanced characters reflect the variation of people found in the real world. Undoubtedly, there were conflicts among black people over passing. In addition to the loss of family ties, Micheaux attempted to use films like *Veiled Aristocrats* to enter the wider conversation in the black community concerning the best way to enter the American middle class – through loyalty to the race and building from within or abandon it altogether. This theme of uplift also plays out in 1934's *Imitation of Life*.

Fredi Washington

Imitation of Life's Peola (Fredi Washington), and her mother Delilah (Louise Beavers) trouble the question of uplift in ways that are both complex and difficult to judge in their own

right. Delilah is the reluctant business woman who is unwilling to assume her rightful place as a partner rather than a subordinate. Peola, on the other hand, is assertive and yearns for the opportunity to enter the workforce as a seemingly white female. As tragic mulattoes go, Peola as played by Washington in 1934's *Imitation of Life* is one of the most recognizable. She appears fluid, edgy, and amorphous. She lives on the margins, always presenting a painfully vulnerable disposition. She is devoid of joy and filled with melancholy. A brooding teenager to her white benefactor Mrs. Pullman, and yet for others she is much more. She is certainly a girl born in the wrong era to satisfy her desire to be free to pass. She looks white and wants to be white.

Fredi Washington, the daughter of mixed race parents, began her acting career on stage. Hired first by Josephine Baker, a member of the *Happy Honeysuckles,* she later appeared in theater productions like the all-black *Shuffle Along* (1921) and opposite Paul Robeson in *Black Boy* (1926). Though some criticized her acting, calling it "mechanical," she persisted. Her first film *Square Joe* (1922) didn't earn her much recognition in the way of a review that survives. According to the American Film Institute, *Square Joe* is about an innocent boxer who is convicted of shooting a policeman during a gambling raid. A beautiful woman provides evidence that exonerates the boxer and the real criminal is convicted. Washington was credited in a June 17, 1922 issue of the *New York Age* as "Frederica Washington" (Sampson, 1995; Gevinson, 1997; Richards, 1998). Shortening her name to Fredi, Washington made a grand entrance in *Black and Tan* (1929). Starring opposite the great Duke Ellington, she truly emerges as an actress, although at times one is able to see straight through her. She does not play a tragic mulatto, she plays herself.

Black and Tan

Despite some corny acting and a brief buffoon sequence, *Black and Tan* is a beautiful film. A near miracle that it survived, it was made prior to the Production Code's institution.

Interestingly, Washington's trouble with casting cut both ways. Her light skin betrayed her ability to win parts in black films just as it would in white films. A brief analysis of *Black and Tan* is included here to illustrate the ways in which Washington's light skin complicated her work on both sides of the color line. With a runtime of just nineteen minutes, it's full of some the best music ever produced by an American. Composed of three sections, the film opens with Ellington at home playing the title track on the piano. Sitting beside him is trumpet player Arthur Whetsol. The slow dirge-like introduction of Ellington's *Black and Tan Fantasy* sounds dark and melancholy, perhaps foreshadowing the film's rather sad ending. It even contains a quote from Frédéric Chopin's *Funeral March*. Ellington's brilliant combination of piano and muted trumpet presents a stark and yearning vibe as the tune swings back and forth with moods from dread to hope. It's rather unfortunate that Ellington is seated with his back to the camera thereby preventing the viewer from seeing his face or his hands. As the duo plays, the scene shifts to an exterior shot (the only one in the film) of two men entering the building. These two piano moving buffoons (played by Edgar Connor and Alec Lovejoy) walk the halls exchanging ignorant banter and are unable to find the apartment because they can't read. After hearing the muffled piano, they burst in and attempt to repossess Ellington's piano. At this point, Fredi Washington enters and tells Ellington that they just got a job. When she notices the movers, she attempts to bribe them with a little money. However it fails. She then tries offering them a drink of gin. Interestingly, the film was made during Prohibition. This somehow appeals to the movers more than cash. They take the gin and agree to leave the piano behind. Ellington tells Fredi that they shouldn't take the job because she has a heart condition. Fredi changes the subject by asking about the new piece he is writing. Ellington and Whetsol then play *Black and Tan Fantasy* for Fredi.

In the next section, the setting is an approximation of the famous Cotton Club. Now Ellington appears with his Cotton Club Orchestra. They play "The Duke Steps Out," "Black

Beauty," and "Cotton Club Stomp." This section features routines by The Five Blazers, an all-male precision tap team known for its "one-man dance" in which they dance as one in extremely close proximity to each other rather like a human train. Fredi is seen just off stage scantily dressed in her dance costume. Apparently not feeling well, she is holding her head while leaning on the wall. After the tap routine comes to a close, she performs a solo dance while Ellington plays "Hot Feet." The music is absolutely frenetic and a perfect complement to Washington's interpretation of "eccentric dance," a popular style in the 1920s. This sequence has been analyzed extensively by Cripps (1993) and Friedman (2011). Washington's wild dance culminates when she steps out onto a mirrored floor, providing the viewer with an intimate if not voyeuristic look beneath her skirt. The dance ends with Fredi collapsing on stage and being carried off by the club's staff.

The final sequence returns to Ellington's apartment. Fredi is on her deathbed surrounded by the entire Ellington Orchestra and the Hall Johnson Choir. She requests that they perform "Black and Tan Fantasy." As she dies, the viewer sees a close up of Ellington's face slowly going out of focus. As the song ends, his face goes into a complete blur and the screen fades to black. To some degree, this scene parallels the death of Delilah in Washington's most famous film *Imitation of Life*.

Rare for an American film, *Black and Tan*'s ending is fairly morose. Fredi's death nearly leaves the viewer feeling as though they have died along with the protagonist. Though this event is tragic, she has not died after being rejected for passing. While she is ostensibly a mulatto and suffers a tragic death, there is no struggle with identity here. Rather, she dies as a result of her commitment to her man. She sacrifices her life for the job. As an actress, Fredi Washington appears genuinely happy in this film, revealing a peaceful familiarity that pokes through the surface of her "character." Was she truly playing herself? In various shots throughout *Black and*

Tan, it seems that one can catch a glimpse of Fredi being *Fredi*. Perhaps this is due to working with Ellington. It is widely known that the two were involved in a brief affair that ended after Ellington refused to divorce his wife Edna. Washington moved on and married Lawrence Brown, a trombone player in Ellington's orchestra.

Made for mainstream audiences who would have seen it as a preview to a feature length film, white viewers must have been perplexed about the picture's female star. Ryan Freidman's *Hollywood's African American Films* (2011) contains an excellent analysis of *Black and Tan* and highlights some of the reasons why it remains an important film. He points out that being a pre-Production Code film, it largely ignores "the Hollywood studios' growing anxieties about representations of interracial desire" (p. 90). The presence of Fredi Washington is in and of itself an extension of this desire especially since she looks white in the film. This would have been a familiar issue for Washington as theatergoers often mistook her for a white actress in the Broadway production of *Black Boy* in 1926. Moreover, the censors would almost certainly have objected to the fact that Fredi as Duke's girlfriend lived with him. These scenes were likely inspired by the film's auteur Dudley Murphy and his associate Carl Van Vechten's several "slumming" trips through Harlem to get a view of black life. Friedman argues that Murphy viewed African American culture as "simultaneously primitive and modern but always exotic and spectacular" (p. 105). His background in avant-garde film allowed him to exploit and fetishize the bodies of light-skinned African American women making them the objects for "(white) erotic gazes" (p. 106). Though there is no explanation of Fredi's heart condition in the film, Friedman articulates an alternative reason for her eventual death, asserting that she collapses under the weight of the erotic gaze. While this reading may sound stretched, Murphy pushed against the boundaries of mainstream visual culture. His picture combines a sentimental story with a myriad of sexually abstract images designed to enhance the pleasure of looking at the screen (Delson, 2006).

After *Black and Tan*, Fredi Washington went on to appear in several films. One might imagine that 1933 was a busy year for the thirty year old. She took the role of Jenny in *Mills Blue Rhythm Band* (1934). Filmed in August of 1933, her character is credited as a dancer despite the fact that she does very little dancing at all in the picture. When her cousin introduces her to one of the musicians, he greets her by saying “Well looky here. Hello high yellow!” The next month, *The Emperor Jones* was released. In it, she plays the part of Undine, the wife of a Pullman Porter. Notably, Washington’s light skin was darkened over worries that she would appear too white. In August of 1934, *Cab Calloway’s Hi-De-Ho* was released. Though she is not credited, she gets a fair amount of screen time. In these last two films she essentially plays the same character - an unfaithful floozy. Throwing herself at men at nearly every chance, she is rather one dimensional in *Emperor.* In *Hi-De-Ho* she’s loose and shows a slight penchant for comedy. It is clear that her talent improved over the five years since *Black and Tan*. By the time *Imitation of Life* was released in November, she had developed the skill to convey some of the most difficult human emotions imaginable.

Imitation of Life (1934)

Racial passing could be a stressful endeavor. For those who chose to engage in this practice, the risks were dire and the emotional costs registered on the individuals as well as the families they left behind were great. Part of *Imitation of Life*’s massive success was due to the black characters in the story. Unlike previous films that portrayed blacks in largely monolithic terms, *Imitation of Life* tells individual stories. In *Imitation of Life*, Peola (Fredi Washington), passes as a white girl in order to avoid the restrictions of segregation. She loves her black mother Delilah (Louise Beavers), but hates the fact that she cannot enjoy the benefits that her white-looking skin should provide. The film will always be remembered for this part of the story as opposed to the white plot line. Fredi Washington’s performance is iconic. Like the instant

recognition of Lincoln's head on the face of a penny, so too is Fredi Washington as Peola for mixed race characters. She symbolized the dilemma of thousands of mixed race Americans who were light enough to pass during the Jim Crow era. Washington's portrayal of Peola is easily the most notable depiction of the tragic mulatto trope, and along with Delilah it also marks the first meaningful attempt at exploring the emotional life of blacks on the big screen.

Imitation of Life is the story of two single women struggling to make ends meet during the Great Depression. Bea Pullman (Claudette Colbert) is a white, newly widowed mother who takes over her husband's maple syrup business while trying to raise her three-year-old daughter Jessie (played in the beginning by Juanita Quigley). The other woman in the story is Delilah Johnson (Louise Beavers), a black live-in domestic who is struggling to care for her daughter Peola (initially played by Sebie Hendricks). The two meet after Delilah mistakenly knocks on Bea's door looking to answer an ad for a maid. After Bea lets her in, she hears Jessie fall in the bathtub upstairs. Bea rushes up to rescue her and Delilah seeing that there is breakfast about to burn on the stove, takes over the meal preparation without missing a beat. When Bea returns, she is pleasantly surprised that Delilah has lent a hand. Delilah then asks Bea if she can stay on to work for room and board citing the difficulty in finding work with a child: "Folks just don't want Peola." At this point, Delilah summons Peola who has been hiding outside. Peola enters and greets Bea. Seeking to satisfy Bea's curiosity, Delilah goes on to say, "She's very light. Her Pappy was a very very light colored man." Bea allows them to stay.

The next day, Delilah makes pancakes for breakfast. Bea, bowled-over by the taste, asks Delilah for the recipe to which Delilah replies "It's a secret." In a rather perplexing gesture, Delilah whispers the secret into Bea's ear. Perhaps she hoped to gain Bea's trust by revealing the recipe. Nevertheless, with Delilah's pancakes and Bea's maple syrup, the two would build a business that would eventually become extremely successful. Much of the film is dedicated to

this plot. Yet, the real story and draw of the film is the story of Peola and the act of passing. In a film with a total length of approximately one hour and fifty minutes, Peola is only on screen for just over fifteen minutes. Between 1915 and 1934, few pictures with mixed race characters contained meaningful portrayals of an individual's struggle with the issue of racial identity. Complicating this further was the absence of sound in movies until the late 1920s. Without spoken dialogue, audiences were prevented from forming deeper connections with characters. Peola, on the other hand, had a voice. She spoke to viewers in ways that made them consider what it meant to be black with white skin. She challenged the assumption that identities are linked to discreet categories. Peola compels us to rethink the logic that points to physical bodies as the sites of identity (Black, 2004). Perhaps most importantly, Peola's struggle to leave her black identity behind and by association, her mother, profoundly demonstrates the heartbreaking pain and loss that is visited on the families of those who pass (Hobbs, 2014).

Without a doubt, *Imitation of Life* had an incredible impact on people and the film continues to fascinate critics, scholars, and fans alike eighty years after its release. It could be argued that Peola and Delilah carried the most emotional weight based on contemporaneous reviews. A review in the November 27, 1934 issue of *Variety* perhaps provides a glimpse into how discussions of Peola reveal the degree to which viewers and critics were engaged with issues of racial identity. The Reviewer writes:

> Most arresting part of the picture and overshadowing the conventional romance between the late thirtyish white widow and Warren William is the tragedy of Aunt Delilah's girl born to a white skin and Negro blood. This subject has never been treated upon the screen before. Girl is miserable being unable to adjust herself to the lot or her race and unable to take her place among the whites. This is, of course, very grim and harsh stuff.
>
> It seems very probable the picture may make some slight contribution to the cause of greater tolerance and humanity in the racial question. Its reception in the South, of course, cannot be guessed or judged by a northerner. Exhibs below the Mason-Dixon will have to make their own decision. (p. 15)

Other white publications acknowledged the gravity of the passing narrative in the film. *Liberty* magazine called Washington's performance "so daring and pathetic that it is unforgettable" while *Literary Digest* contended that "The real story, the narrative which is merely hinted at, never really contemplated, is that of the beautiful and rebellious daughter of the loyal Negro friend." While there were some significant differences in black newspapers, the attention paid to Peola's story emerges as a common thread. More importantly, the black press delved deeper into the analysis of this aspect of the picture. Writing in the Atlanta *Daily World*, A. Randall Jr. questioned Peola's apparent motive for running away. He argued, "It is incredible that any colored girl who is possessed of as much money as Peola had, and who enjoyed as many social advantages as she did, should attempt to run away from her home and sacrifice her inheritance to pass for white; yet it is subtly flattering to white people that she should do so" (p. 2). Another *Daily World* reviewer sympathized with Peola writing that "It is ridiculous to force a man or woman whose father is white and mother black to live with colored people" (p. 6). Perhaps the most notable black response was the well-publicized exchange between Sterling A. Brown and Fannie Hurst in the pages of *Opportunity*. He criticized both book and film for lacking realism associated with the tragic mulatto and engaging "ancient ideas about the mixture of races" (p. 88). He applauded the acting performance of Beavers and Washington yet argued that their roles only reinforced mammy and tragic mulatto stereotypes (Everett, 1996; Simmons, 1997; Bernstein & White, 2007). Brown is especially critical of Delilah and "her unintelligible character, now infantile, now mature, now cataloguing folk beliefs of the Southern Negro, and now cracking contemporary witticisms" (p. 87). He cites the fact that Delilah seems more concerned with Jessie's welfare than that of Peola's.

Brown infuriated Hurst. Her reply the next month reveals just how much her liberal sensibilities were offended. She scolded him for not being grateful. Hurst said his review lacked intelligence and amounted to mere "carping, petty angles of criticism" (p. 121). She argued that

"The important social value of this picture is that it practically inaugurates into the important medium of the motion picture, a consideration of the Negro as part of the social pattern of American life" (p. 121). Brown didn't pull many punches in his lengthy response. He writes:

> Pity is not enough; sentimentality is not enough. The picture breaks no new ground. The beloved mammy is a long familiar darling in the American consciousness…. moving pictures and novels have placed her there. The tragic mulatto… is likewise a fixture. She is so woebegone that she is a walking argument against miscegenation…. Like her mammy, she contributes to Anglo-Saxon self esteem. It is not easy to see any 'social value" in perpetuating these stock characters…. To me the social value is still suggested by the subtitle of the review: "Once a pancake, always a pancake." (p. 122)

Brown's retort to Hurst's jab regarding his intelligence was simply "Far be it from me to dispute such a trivial point with a lady" (p. 122). Regarding his being ungrateful Brown writes, "Concerning my ungratefulness, let me cheerfully acknowledge this degree of unintelligence: that I cannot imagine what in the world I would have to be ungrateful for, either to Universal Pictures or to Miss Hurst" (p. 122). Although this rhetorical knife fight was relatively short-lived, Brown's criticisms provided a prominent counterpoint to the gushing praise. Letters to the editor poured in from both camps. Following months of back and forth between each side, the editorial staff of *Opportunity* announced it would stop publishing responses to Brown's review (Itzkovitz, 2004).

In terms of box office success, *Imitation of Life* broke ticket sales records at the Roxy Theater in New York and was held over for a second week to accommodate standing room only crowds at Chicago's Metropolitan Theater (Everett, 2001). In Atlanta's black theaters the movie was such a hit that many patrons were repeat viewers who saw it upwards of seven times. Indeed, the combination of heavy promotion by the theaters and columnists turned the screening of the picture into a cultural event (Bernstein & White, 2007). In many ways, *Imitation of Life* gave birth to the modern blockbuster. It garnered three Academy Award nominations, most notably for Best Picture, losing to *It Happened One Night* in the 1935 Oscar season. Incredibly, *Imitation of Life* might have enjoyed even more success had it not been banned in communities like Memphis

and Atlanta. Whereas small scenes ostensibly depicting Bea and Delilah as equals were cut in its initial run in 1935 by then Atlanta film censor Zella Richardson, it was banned after its re-release in 1945 by Richardson's successor Christine Smith citing the favorable light in which racial passing was presented (Weales, 1952). Four years later she would ban *Lost Boundaries* in 1949 for the same reason (McGehee, 2006; Hobbs, 2014). Though it's regrettable that some may have been prevented from seeing the *Imitation of Life*, these incidents illustrate its early popularity due in no small part to its not entirely tragic mulatto.

It is safe to say that the subplot of Peola's plight was the most interesting aspect of the picture. She is profoundly unhappy because she is unable to enjoy the boundless life that she feels she is entitled to. She looks white but knowledge of her tainted lineage prevents access to a life of her choosing. Peola's struggle stands out against the backdrop of her white counterparts. Without her, it would be adrift in the triangle of Jessie, Bea, and her love interest Stephen Archer (Warren William). The contrast of these three with the morose and sullen Peola is remarkable and lays bare the ignorance that accompanied the mistreatment of blacks in Jim Crow America. In the film this is evidenced by how little Jessie and Bea seem to be effected by Peola and Delilah's problems. Not only are they physically separated from them (they live in separate quarters and aren't allowed to attend Bea's parties), but they are also emotionally distant.

Yet, from Peola's perspective, it is precisely the physical space that she needs to occupy. For her, white skin cannot be uncoupled from the privilege it is supposed to carry. This defines nearly every appearance that Peola makes. Early in the picture, Jessie (Marilyn Knowlden) and Peola (Dorothy Black), now eight years old, are getting ready for school. They are at one of the tables toward the rear of Aunt Delilah's Pancake Shop. Jessie is seated eating breakfast while Peola is standing behind one of the chairs reading a book. She looks like a white girl. She has brown hair held back with an enormous ribbon. She's wearing a dress with shoes that buckle. The

wall has a vertical beam that runs from the floor to the ceiling visually separating the girls. Peola is framed in angled shadows. The only dishes are in front of Jessie. One assumes that Peola ate breakfast in her own quarters. This brief shot is one of many that Stahl uses to convey a sense of segregated space and customs. Here, the viewer is reminded that although Peola and Jessie live under the same roof, they still adhere to the racial etiquette of the time. Jessie rises from the table and they begin to quiz each other on the capitols of European countries as they walk out onto the boardwalk and off camera. Delilah and Bea watch as they leave. Delilah says, “They sure liked each other them two.” Bea replies, “Peola’s smarter than Jessie.” Delilah agrees but adds a cringe-worthy qualification, “Yessum. We all starts out that way. We don’t get dumb till later on.”

A moment later, Peola runs back through the door in tears and heads into the living area. Apparently Jessie has just called her “black.” Peola sobs “I’m not black! I won’t be black.” Gosselin (1998) argues “what Peola resists is not the naming—“I’m not black!”—but rather the behavior—“I won’t be black,” which is quite another matter, particularly when one considers that the only model for “blackness” in the film is Delilah’s accommodationism” (p. 54). Gosselin’s reading here is certainly plausible despite Peola’s age. After all, Peola doesn’t speak with the minstrelesque dialect of her mother. This scene was softened quite a bit from its original form in the Hurst novel where Jessie calls Peola a nigger while playing in the house. This change was due in part to Louise Beaver’s and the NAACP’s insistence that it be removed from the script (Bernstein & White, 2007). In the film, Peola is in crisis. She cries in her mother’s black arms while Bea and Jesse look on. Delilah tries to comfort her, “Calm yourself baby. You gotta learn to take it. It might just as well begin now.” Bea scolds Jessie, “You apologize to Peola this minute.” Delilah says, “No, no Miss Bea. Don’t make her pologize. Ain’t no good in that.” Muffled by Delilah’s bosom, Peola concludes, “You. It’s ‘cause your black. You make me black. I won’t, I won’t, I won’t be black.” Peola’s excruciating experience is made worse by the reactions of the

others in the room. Delilah's refusal of Jessie's apology underscores what Peola hates about blackness. She can't help but link being black with subservience. At a time when she needs her mother's support the most, Delilah lets her down. Indifferent, Jessie looks on as if she had only stated a fact. She is unable to grasp why Peola is so upset. While Bea admonishes Jessie, she keeps her distance and does little else to comfort Peola. It's like she's just witnessed a car wreck and is unable to avert her eyes. One can imagine this to be a turning point for Peola because it is after this experience that she begins passing.

Days later, Peola is exposed while passing for white by Delilah when she unexpectedly shows up at school with Peola's rain coat and boots. When Delilah arrives at the school, she finds Peola's classroom and knocks at the door. Horrified, Peola attempts to hide behind a book. After the teacher answers the door, the two women have the following exchange in front of the now quiet room full of students.

> Delilah: Good afternoon ma'am. It's raining so hard, I brought rubbers and coat to fetch my little girl home.
>
> Teacher: I'm afraid you've made some mistake.
>
> Delialah: Ain't this the 3B?
>
> Teacher: Yes?
>
> Delialah: Well this is it?
>
> Teacher: It can't be it. I have no little colored children in my class.
>
> Delilah: Oh. Thank you… There's my little girl. Peola.
>
> Teacher: Oh.
>
> Delilah: My poor baby. Teacher, has she been passin?
>
> Teacher: Passin? Why, yes. Peola, you may go home.

Peola slowly rises from her desk surrounded by the silent stares of her classmates. With her head down, she walks past rows of students who whisper things like, "Gee, I didn't know she was colored" and "Neither did I" and "She can't be." Peola bolts past her mother screaming "I hate you" before storming out the door and running home in the rain. At home, Peola comes in soaked from head to toe, scowling over her shoulder at her mother. When Delilah tries to get her into some dry clothes, Peola yells "Go away! Leave me alone!" This gets Bea's attention who asks, "What's the matter?" Peola says, "Don't tell her." Bea again, "Don't tell me what?" Delilah says, "Oh she was passing Miss Bea. And I give her away. She know I wouldn't of done on purpose." Peola walks over to Bea who says, "Now Peola, you mustn't feel that way." Delilah says, "She can't help herself just now Miss Bea. It's like her pappy was. He beat his fists against life all his days. Just eat him through and through." Finally, Peola goes to change out of her wet clothes.

Another exposure scene occurs later in the film when an older Peola (Fredi Washington) leaves her "colored" college. Delilah finds out when the school sends a letter asking why Peola left so suddenly and that she "was an excellent student." Bea and Delilah begin searching and find her working as a cashier at a white restaurant. It is the second of only two times that she is seen smiling in the film. However, it quickly fades when she notices her mother hovering in the doorway. For a moment, they say nothing to each other but Peola's eyes make clear that she wants her mother to leave. She attempts to continue the ruse even under the pressure of questions from the manager. He asks, "What's the meaning of this?" She says, "This woman doesn't know what she is talking about. Do I look like her daughter? Do I look like I could be her daughter? Why she must be crazy!" Crushed, Delilah's head sinks to the counter as if an invisible boxer has just delivered a devastating body blow. Peola's front falls apart when Bea appears and says, "Peola! How can you talk to your mother that way?" Again, Peola flees after her cover is blown. When Bea and Delilah return home, they see Peola looking out of her window in the lower level

of the house. She peers through the panes of glass. Framed in white, the small rectangular windows resemble the spaces between the bars in a jail cell. When Delilah and Bea get inside, Peola announces that she wants to go away and sever ties with her mother.

> Peola: I want to go away.
>
> Delilah: Go away? Go where Peola?
>
> Peola: I mean, by that I mean, I want to go away. And you mustn't see me, own me, or claim me, or anything. I mean, even if you pass me on the street, you'll have to pass me by.
>
> Bea: Oh no Peola.
>
> Peola: Oh I know it's terrible of me Miss Bea, but you don't know what it is to look white and be black. You don't know! I can't go on this way any longer.

She leaves in tears. Although she doesn't know it, it is the last time that she will see her mother alive. Delilah dies from grief. While death often befalls passing mulattoes, here it is transferred to the "mammy" symbolizing the death of Peola's anchor to blackness. Nevertheless, she is punished through the death of her mother and any question of future passing is resolved by Peola's decision to return to the Negro school. By abandoning her race, she pays with the price of her mother's life. Nearly all mulatto characters had to pay a heavy price for transgressing racial boundaries. Stahl's Peola was no exception. Yet, it is interesting that Peola is blamed for the death of Delilah when it was Bea who built the pancake empire on Delilah's black body.

Why Peola chooses to pass at all is a bit of a mystery. After all, she was wealthy. Passing would not have yielded much more an advantage in terms of financial freedom. Yet, she certainly stood to gain greater privilege and respect that white skin provides. Peola didn't hate blackness in and of itself; she hated the barriers that blackness created. It is clear that Peola loves her mother. In the above exchange, she is upset not because she hates blackness, but because she cannot leave blackness without leaving her mother as well. Turning briefly to Hurst's novel, we see indications

that she didn't hate blackness. Rather, she hated the world that created it. In the book, Peola returns home to tell Delilah and Bea that for the last four years, she has been passing as a white librarian in Seattle. She says, "There's nothing wrong in passing. The wrong is the world that makes it necessary" (p. 244). The next passage illustrates the dichotomy that exists between this mother and daughter when Peola begs for Delilah's blessing to pass:

> Delilah: Lord Gawd Almighty, I'm breakin' in two! I cain't hear it no more. Lovin' de Lawd dat made me black, I bring mah baby-chile into a race dat I'm proud to be one of. A low-down, good-for-nothin' race of loafers. Lots of 'em, but no worser dan loafers of any other color. Lovers of de Lawd and willin' servers is mah race, filled wid de blessin's of humility—a singin', happy, God-lovin', servin' race dat I loves an' is proud of, an' wants mah chile to love—
>
> Peola: I can't! I've nothing against them, but I—I can't be what you want. I'm not the stuff. Not in a white world. If your skin is white like mine and your soul is white—like mine, there is no point to the needless suffering. I've got to be helped. You two can do it. And I need to terribly—now—now!—to pass completely. (p. 246)

By definition, passing is an escape from blackness. Perhaps it is more accurate to say Peola wanted to flee from discrimination. An escape from Jim Crow necessitates an escape from blackness. Affluence isn't enough to get her into the spaces that are all but walled off by whiteness. Indeed, when we first see the adult Peola, she is standing outside of the Pullman mansion with her mother. Inside, Bea is entertaining a grand party. Arms folded, it is clear that she would like to join the fun but can't. Technically, she is no longer the daughter of the maid. Delilah is a twenty percent owner in the Aunt Delilah Pancake Company. They dress in fine clothes and live in luxury, but they are still not allowed to attend the gathering because they are still segregated from white life. Ultimately, economic advantages are not enough to shield Peola from racial inequality (Smith, 1994).

Ironically, Fredi Washington had to contend with society's racial perception just as Peola did. Her racial identity was often examined in the black press. During the tour for *Black Boy*, she

was accused of passing at a white hotel in Wilmington, Delaware. The issues with Washington's light skin and the scrutiny that accompanied it followed her throughout her film career. Within months after the release of *Imitation of Life*, the *Chicago Defender* ran an article publicizing the film. In it, Washington responds to theatergoers who wondered if her screen persona mirrored that of her private life. She states, "I am proud of my race" and "I have never tried to pass for white" (p. 9). Likewise, the Atlanta *Daily World* ran an article in which she was asked about her racial identity. Here she replies, "I don't want to 'pass' because I can't stand insincerities and shams. I am just as much 'Negro' as any of the others without presuming to average my ability" (p. 2). This stance sounds identical to some of Peola's protestations throughout the film if you replace the word Negro with white. Especially the one in which she confronts herself in the mirror. With Bea's party upstairs, her mother tries to comfort her morose daughter. Peola rises from the couch where she has been reading and approaches a wall mirror with a look of sad curiosity. This scene echoes the old Brothers Grimm fairy tale *Snow White* (1812) made immortal on screen by Walt Disney in 1937. We almost expect Peola's next words to be "Mirror, mirror on the wall." Gazing into the looking glass she asks "Am I not white? Isn't that a white girl there?" Like an apparition, her snow white skin torments her from beyond just as the evil queen was tormented by the slave in the magic mirror. The scene inverts Washington's dilemma with racial identity who continued to answer the same questions for the rest of her life.

Following *Imitation of Life*, Washington appeared in *One Mile from Heaven* (1937) as black seamstress Flora Jackson. Some residents in her neighborhood become increasingly skeptical about whether the white Sunny (Joan Carroll) is really her biological daughter. Reporter Lucy 'Tex' Warren (Clair Trevor) gets wind of the story and investigates with guarded assistance from police officer Joe Dudley (Bill Robinson). The case eventually ends up in court where it is revealed that Sunny was given to Flora by the child's convict father after pulling her from a car crash that she and her mother Barbara Harrison (Sally Blane) were in. The court decides to return

Sunny to her mother who survived the crash. In the end, Barbara asks Flora to come and live with them as a nurse maid. Flora and Joe marry.

Washington's last film was *Ouanga* (1936). Set in Haiti, Washington plays the part of Klili Gordon, a wealthy plantation owner. She meets the white Adam Maynard (Philip Brandon) and they have a two year love affair. Adam casts her aside and proposes to the white Eve Langley (Marie Paxton). Furious, Klili uses voodoo to prevent the marriage and attempts to sacrifice Eve by decapitation. She is stopped at the last moment by LeStrange the Overseer (Sheldon Leonard). He chases her into the jungle and chokes her to death.

In contrast to Louise Beavers who continued to work in film and television into the 1950s, Washington struggled to land roles. Her white-looking skin complicated her viability to perform alongside black or white actors. Indeed, she would have been perfect as Julie Laverne in *Showboat* (1936) and was rumored to be under consideration for the lead in *Pinky* but it never materialized (Bogle, 2004). While her screen acting career ended in the late 1930s, she remained active in the film industry. Washington was one of the founding members of the *Negro Actors Guild of America* and worked with Walter White of the NAACP to improve black representation in Hollywood (Cripps, 1993, Rodriquez-Estrada, 1997, & Furia, 2003). She was the Entertainment Editor for Adam Clayton Powell Jr.'s publication *People's Voice* and later, casting consultant for the films *Carmen Jones* (1954) and *Porgy and Bess* (1959). Through it all, she will always be remembered most for the authenticity and lived experience she brought to her role in *Imitation of Life*.

It should be noted that part of the success of this film is due to its director, John M. Stahl. In choosing to direct a film so steeped in racial questions, Stahl risked tarnishing a successful career. Yet, *Imitation of Life* provided Stahl with the opportunity to stretch his melodramatic chops and delve into critical issues surrounding racial identity in America. Of particular interest

are the ways in which Stahl would play with the multiple layers and ideas behind the word "imitation." Across the entire film, nothing is what it seems. From the first shot, a close-up of a rubber duck floating in bath water, the viewer is asked some version of "is it real or not?" The shot evokes the phrase "If it looks like a duck, swims like a duck, and quacks like a duck, then it probably is a duck." This idea is extended through Peola and her life-long quest to pass for white. Before she even utters a word the viewer is confronted with the contradiction of her light-skin and the knowledge that she is black. The very act of passing is a form of imitation and yet in Peola's case, the viewer is shown what lies behind the curtain. Is it life that lies behind Peola's curtain? If so, what do we make of Bea or of whiteness? Peola's inner life seems more authentic than her white counterparts. She is tormented by questions of race and identity in ways that neither Bea nor Jessie has to deal with in any sort of prolonged manner. They see Peola's problems from afar. They are able to disengage and return to a race-free life. It's difficult to see any authenticity in the Mid-Atlantic accents, extravagant parties, and milk-toast romantic triangle between Bea, Jessie, and Stephen. Pushing this idea a bit further, Aunt Delilah's pancake mix is an imitation of Aunt Jemima's which in turn, is a grotesque imitation of maternal slaves conjured to romanticize plantation life. Some sections of the film almost function as a proxy for the actual product. One scene is like watching an early Aunt Jemima commercial. Bea is seated at the table eating breakfast while Delilah stands over the stove with her back to the camera.

> Bea: Delilah you'll be the death of me with these pancakes.
>
> Delilah: I'm glad you finds em to yo taste maam.
>
> Bea: I've never tasted anything so good in all my life. How do you make them?
>
> Delilah: It's a secret. Yessum dem pancakes is my granny's secret. She passed it down to my mammy and my mammy told me. But I ain't telling anybody. No sir.
>
> Bea: I don't blame you. I wouldn't either.

Within seconds, Delilah leans in and whispers her family secret in Bea's ear. This scene anticipates the idealized and sterile commercials that would flood the airways during the 1950s. The women are imitating life as it is imagined in the household of white working class women. One expects a stately narrator to chime in with "How about having Aunt Jemima pancakes tomorrow?" One wonders if the brand saw a bump in sales after the release of the film. Other motifs and symbols linked with Aunt Jemima appear throughout the first half of the picture. Thankfully Delilah doesn't wear a headscarf although she is shown wearing a puffy chef's toque while she flips griddle cakes. Later, when Bea first meets Elmer Smith (Ned Sparks), he suggests that she take Delilah's pancake flour and "box it" in order to bring it to the mass market. In a pivotal scene, Elmer who has become Bea's business manager has come to tell Bea and Delilah that they are going to be rich. When Delilah nearly refuses a twenty percent share in the company built on her own product, name, and likeness, Elmer says "Once a pancake, always a pancake." This phrase can be read as a racial slur as well as another example of comparing the real against the imitation.

While Peola may make us cringe from time to time, she does represent an improvement in terms of mixed race characters. If we compare her to Lydia Brown in *The Birth of a Nation*, we see a much more fully-formed human being with thoughts, feelings, needs, and desires. Undergirding this idea is the fact that Peola was played by a mixed race actress. She challenged racist assumptions regarding the abilities of black performers and essential racial differences (Black, 2004). Lydia Brown as played by the white Mary Alden could not challenge race and its visual representation nor demand an identity untethered from the color of her skin. Where Lydia is one dimensional, Peola is multifaceted. In passing, she code switches but is unable to openly embrace the white portion of her heritage. Her mixed identity has a lineage that connects her white skin to her light-skinned father who "beat his fists against life all his days" as he struggled with passing. We see Peola as a young child being brought up as a black child with white skin.

She tries to marry her white-looking skin with an imposed black identity and fails to reconcile the two. Ultimately, Peola's tragedy lies with the death of her mother as well as the remorse and guilt associated with leaving the race. She bears the blame for Delilah's broken heart and is sent back to the Negro school and must resign herself to never pass again. Comparing Peola to Lydia Brown might seem extreme; however, *The Birth of a Nation* was widely seen and established a mulatto stereotype that, for a time, became the standard. The few Micheaux films that featured mixed race characters were not viewed outside of the black community. Prior to *The Birth of a Nation*, we have Cassy, Eliza, and Emmeline from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. While Peola lacks the militancy of Cassy, she does share a desire for freedom like each of Stowe's mixed race women.

Peola and later, Sarah Jane in the second *Imitation of Life* (1959) represent the prototype for passers in the 20th century. However, the degree to which their characters pathologized mixed race and exhibit damaged psyches gives one pause. Simply by being the product of a mixed race union, characters symbolized the racial strife and anxiety that haunt the American psyche. This was muted in Peola's case due to her de-sexualization whereas Sarah Jane, as we will see, leans closer to a jezebel-like figure that slowly falls apart over the course of the picture. Inwardly, Peola struggles to resolve her physical appearance with an imposed identity. Her "Am I not white?" moment in front of the mirror evokes notions of personality disorder and psychosis. Faced with the impossible dilemma of being forced to embrace blackness within a white skin, Peola ultimately chooses to sever family ties in favor of a life free from racial proscription. Ironically, the mirror scene also underscores Peola's inability to escape whiteness when forced to live life as a black woman. Indeed, these roles exemplified the prevailing ideology regarding mixed race individuals in the early twentieth century. Writing in *Contempt &Pity: Social Policy and the Image of the Damaged Black Psyche, 1880-1996*, Daryl Michael Scott argues, "Many leading experts clung to and built upon the Progressive Era belief that the light-skinned Negro elite represented the truly damaged element of the black population" (p. 21). Regardless of a

character's problems with their inner racial reality, there was a set of negative beliefs about mixed race people. Depicting any deviant behavior was more than enough to prime these beliefs. For example, *Show Boat* (1936) features the character Julie LaVerne (Helen Morgan) who is caught passing. When she and her husband Steve get word that the Sheriff is coming to arrest her for being married to a white man, Steve cuts Julie's fingers and sucks her blood. He insists that he has Negro blood and therefore his wife cannot be arrested for the "crime." The scene is both disturbing and erotic, yet, it also demonstrates the absurd nature of race as a purely visible phenomenon. Regardless, Julie and Steve are asked to leave the boat. Julie shows up much later in the film working as a show girl. Still passing, Steve is gone and she is a heavy drinker. Although she doesn't die, the image of the tragic mulatto emerges through her persona.

Two films released in 1949 nearly redefine passers from the image of the disaffected teenager who is unable to fully escape the shadow of her black mother, to the mainstream imagery of the nuclear family. *Pinky* and *Lost Boundaries* exemplify post World War II optimism while unpacking the often contentious issues surrounding American identity. Between the late 1950s and mid-1960s, a number of passing films emerged that simultaneously reflected the times in which they were made as well as mine the sensationalism of the past. The nearly identical *Night of the Quarter Moon* (1959) and *I Passed for White* (1960) feature a twist on the legal case *Rhinelander v. Rhinelander*. In each, the female protagonist doesn't reveal her ancestry in order to preserve the promise of marriage into an upper class family. Lastly, *The Black Klansman* (1966), *Trick Baby* (1972), and *The Human Stain* (2003), present three of the rare instances of male passers in film. With the exception of the father and son from *Lost Boundaries* and Jefferson Driscoll in *The Symbol of the Unconquered,* passing characters are primarily female. These later films are interesting in their own right; however, their social significance is less meaningful when weighed against their predecessors largely because the Civil Rights movement focused on

African Americans as a whole. Therefore this chapter's focus on racial passing ends with pictures made in the late 1950s.

Just as the abolitionist image of the mulatta garnered support for ending slavery, racial passing in books and films provided additional rationales for social acceptance in the larger struggle for civil rights. The popularity of some these movies signaled increasing objections to the Jim Crow system on the part of many whites, including those in leadership positions of the Hollywood studios (McGehee, 2006). Each filmmaker took a degree of risk in making their films. Challenges came from various corners regarding the inclusion of mixed race subject matter. Earlier, we saw the obstacles John Stahl had to navigate with getting *Imitation of Life* to the screen. Director James Whale restored the racial content in the 1936 version of *Show Boat* after Harry A. Pollard removed it from his 1929 adaptation of the famous Edna Ferber novel. Alfred L. Werker and Elia Kazan faced problems with *Lost Boundaries* and *Pinky*. MGM was initially interested in supporting *Lost Boundaries* but withdrew funding citing the director's handling of the racial theme. Upon seeing the script, members of the black press objected to its ability to portray protest against discrimination. Others were upset with the way the film was portrayed as a true story despite some creative liberties taken by the filmmakers (Smith, 2004). Once the film was released, censors in Southern localities demanded cuts to the films or banned them outright. While *Pinky* experienced less resistance from Twentieth Century Fox, it also suffered at the hands of censors who objected to some of its racial content. In Atlanta, censors allowed it to be shown only after three inflammatory scenes were cut—a white police officer slapping a black woman, a white male kissing a mixed race female, and an attempted rape of a mixed race female by two white males (McGehee, 2006). In many ways, these films acted as social commentary on racial issues and provided a platform for discussion and debate. Being that Fredi Washington was a mixed race actress, *Imitation of Life* brought an element of authenticity to the characters

represented in passing films, and as the coming decades would demonstrate there would no shortage of mixed race cinema presented to the American public.

Passing and Post World War II

After the nation emerged from the Great Depression and entered the Second World War, millions of African Americans continued to migrate out of the South and into northern and western cities. In urban centers like Chicago and Milwaukee, the population of African Americans grew rapidly. Between 1940 and 1944 the number of African Americans living in Chicago grew from 277,731 to 337,000 (Drake & Cayton, 1945). In Milwaukee, the population went from 8,821 in 1940 to 21,772 in 1950 (Geib, 1998). This massive movement of people enabled thousands to redefine their lives and enjoy increased employment opportunities in the North. Indeed, this chapter in The Great Migration when coupled with a post-war industrial boom would give those lured out of the South a chance at a better life (Wilkerson, 2010; Hobbs, 2014). It also provided some with a way to assume new identities while leaving old ones behind. While whites suspected, blacks knew that many light-skinned African Americans passed to varying degrees. Racial passing along with the massive influx of black people contributed to heightened anxieties about racial mixing. St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton's seminal study, *Black Metropolis* (1945), documents the progress of blacks in employment, housing, and social integration in early post war Chicago. In chapter seven, "Crossing the Color Line," Drake and Cayton examine several aspects of interracial relations including sexual encounters, intermarriage, mixed race children, and racial passing. Of this last point the authors write:

> "Passing" is one of the most prevalent practices that has arisen out of the American pattern of race relations. It grows from the fact that one known drop of "colored" blood is sufficient to make an otherwise completely white person a Negro. As there are thousands of Negroes whom neither colored nor white people can distinguish from full-blooded whites, it is understandable that in the anonymity of the city many Negroes "pass for white" daily, both intentionally and unintentionally. But, should white people become

> aware of their remote colored ancestors they would, in all probability, treat them as Negroes. (p. 159)

In a secondary migration of sorts, Drake and Cayton estimated that between 25,000 and 300,000 people permanently left the black community and entered white society every year. While the authors admit there was an absence of conclusive statistical data, they do cite the fact that every Negro family in the study knew of at least one instance of passing among relatives, friends, or acquaintances (Hobbs, 2014). Returning to cinema, two films that most exemplify the post war passer are *Lost Boundaries* (1949) and *Pinky* (1949). These works are examples of the "problem" or "message film" genre in which a social conflict is incorporated into the conflict between individual characters. *Lost Boundaries* is based on the book *Lost Boundaries* (1948) by William Lindsay White. The book recounts the true story of Albert Johnston, a native of Chicago, and Thyra Baumann from New Orleans. The light-complexioned couple had always considered themselves Negroes when they married in 1924, but things changed when Johnston, despite being a pre-medical student at the University of Chicago, was unable to find work as a black intern at any of the white hospitals. Eventually he secured an internship at Maine General Hospital in Portland, and they decided to pass for white. In 1929 he moved his family to Gorham, New Hampshire and began a successful private practice. They moved to Boston for a year, enabling Johnston to study radiology at Harvard Medical School. The family moved back to Gorham and then Keene New Hampshire in 1939. In 1941, Johnston joined the Navy as a lieutenant. However, before he began his service, he was interviewed by a naval intelligence officer who discovered Johnston's black blood. A few weeks later his commission was voided. He then told his children who had no knowledge of their true ancestry. The truth about the Johnstons made little difference to the town's residents.

Lost Boundaries

The film adaptation of *Lost Boundaries* tells the story of mixed race Scott Carter (Mel Ferrer) and his mixed race wife Marcia Carter (Beatrice Pearson). The picture begins with a series of wide-angle shots of the town of "Keenham" (a combination of Keene and Gorham). Everything is draped in white freshly fallen snow. At the end of a street, we see the town's church framed by dormant trees. We see stately white homes with its residents being pulled in horse drawn sleds and others shoveling snow. A few early scenes establish for viewers the kind of racially complex and ambiguous world that the Carters live in. The first is a graduation ceremony at the Chase Medical School just outside of Chicago. There are whites, blacks, an Asian, and the Carters who are mixed race. An honorary Doctor of Science degree was given to an experienced physician, Dr. Charles Frederick Howard (Emory Richardson). Two hours later, Scott and Marcia are married in the Kappa Alpha Psi fraternity house. During the reception, Dr. Howard gives Scott a telegram announcing that he has secured an internship at the black hospital, Garrison Memorial in Georgia. The reception is less racially diverse than the graduation ceremony as mostly black people are there. Interestingly, Scott's parents are not in attendance. In contrast, Marcia's mother, Mrs. Mitchell (Grace Coppin), is present at both events. At the wedding reception, Dr. Howard sits down next to Marcia's mother and says, "Too bad Mr. Mitchell wouldn't come to the wedding." She replies, "Dr. Howard, nowadays Morris won't admit even to himself that we're Negroes."

When Dr. Carter reports to Garrison Memorial to begin his internship, he is told in no uncertain terms that he cannot work there. Despite being a black hospital, he is rejected because of his white-looking skin. When he checks in at the front desk, the black nurse is surprised by his appearance. While Dr. Carter takes a seat in the waiting room, the nurses behind the desk comment on his looks. One sarcastically asks, "Since when are we having white doctors here?"

Sitting in the waiting room, Dr. Carter has a brief encounter with a little girl who has a bandaged hand. He quickly develops a rapport with her by asking, “What’d you do to your hand?” She answers, “I burnt.” He asks, “You burned it? When did that happen?” She says, “Last week.” Dr. Carter replies, “Oh that’s too bad. But the bandage is gonna make it feel better.” He is called in to a brief interview with a Dr. Cashman who quickly informs him that he cannot accept his internship. The pleasantries soon give way to the frank exchange below:

> Dr. Cashman: It’s too bad you came south so quickly.
>
> Dr. Carter: But your wire to Dr. Howard said report immediately, so we didn’t waste any time.
>
> Dr. Cashman: Dr. Carter, I’m in a most embarrassing position. Now of course we admire Dr. Howard very much, and when he recommends an intern we go out of our way to place him.
>
> Dr. Carter: He said you’d taken several men he suggested.
>
> Dr. Cashman: Yes. But, you see we’re a Southern hospital with very few positions open and only last week our trustees decided that from now on we’d have to give preference in our internships to uh, Southern applicants.
>
> Dr. Carter: You mean because I’m a Northern Negro I’m not wanted here?
>
> Dr. Cashman: Well now Carter I don’t know that I’d put it that way.
>
> Dr. Carter: But you accepted me. I brought my wife here. Rented a place to live!
>
> Dr. Cashman: I’m very sorry young man there’s nothing further I can do. But, I don’t think you’ll have any trouble getting into a Northern hospital. And now if you’ll excuse me Dr. Carter, I have a lot of work to do.

After this rejection, The Carters return to Boston to live with Marcia’s parents. However, it isn’t long before the couple’s social activities run afoul of Marcia’s father. One morning at breakfast, sentiments boil over at the prospect of Scott and Marcia going to Dr. Howard’s for dinner. The ensuing dialogue demonstrates just how contentious and at odds issues of racial passing could be for families of mixed race people. Scott comes to breakfast after hanging up the telephone.

Scott: That was Dr. Howard. He wants you and me to come to dinner tonight.

Marcia: Oh that's nice and you'll have a wonderful chance to talk with him.

Mr. Mitchell: You know how I feel about your going Marcia.

Scott: What do you mean Mr. Mitchell?

Mr. Mitchell: Marcia's never been identified with colored people. Luckily there's no need for you to be either. Being turned down by that Negro hospital was the best thing that could've happened to you.

Marcia: You don't understand, seeing Dr. Howard is very important to Scott.

Mr. Mitchell: It happens to be very important to me too. I won't have my daughter seen in the company of Negroes.

Scott: Look Mr. Mitchell, when Marcia married me she decided for herself to be a Negro.

Mrs. Mitchell: We did agree to let Marcia make up her own mind about this Morris.

Mr. Mitchell: You agreed. Scott, we have built a new life up here. When we left the South, Marcia was a little girl. Down there as Negroes we had nothing, absolutely nothing. Now I've got a good job, a white man's job. We live in a white neighborhood. Our friends are white we don't know any Negroes. Even my own sister has never set foot in this house. Are you going to risk all that we've gained by being seen with blacks?!

Scott: Who I see and where I see them is my business Mr. Mitchell!

Before the situation gets out of hand, Mrs. Mitchell steps in and calms everyone down. The scene fades to Dr. Howard's home. Six men are all seated at the table after dinner while the women are in the living area. Like Scott, another man, who looks white, goes unidentified. He sits peeling an apple. Finally he says, "Carter, until you establish a practice, you should at least consider passing." Scott replies, "I have. And I've also considered what happens when the truth comes out." The man says, "It needn't, if you watch your step." Taken aback, Scott replies, "Watch your step… no thanks." Dr. Howard concludes the scene with, "After all this has been a big problem with our people for generations. Each man has to work it out in his own way."

Each of these scenes captures one of the central tensions with racial passing—that it often represents a double-edge sword for passers. Since passing is seen as a deception of unsuspecting whites and a betrayal of fellow blacks who are proud of their racial identity, a passer's

condemnation is severe (McGehee, 2006). On one hand, Dr. Carter wanted to identify as a Negro and yet was denied the internship at the black hospital because he looked too white. Likewise Marcia's father insists that he pass as a white man. On the other hand, he is also rejected by white hospitals. He applies to dozens of postings and is turned down every time because of his race. At a certain point, passing becomes the only viable alternative. The scenes above also exemplify the sense of being marginalized. Marcia also gets cut both ways. She loves Scott and wants to live as a Negro although it goes against her father's wishes. Had Mrs. Mitchell not intervened at the breakfast table, one gets the sense that the two men might have come to blows. Here, Mr. Mitchell's character leans toward the racist mulatto akin to Jefferson Driscoll from Oscar Micheaux's *The Symbol of the Unconquered*. Even his daughter isn't immune from the rules that govern the performance of whiteness.

After moving to New Hampshire, Dr. Carter is called to a medical emergency and operates to treat an ulcer. Serendipitously, the sick person turns out to be Dr. Walter Bracket (Morton Stevens), who suggests that Dr. Carter take over his father's private practice in Keenham. When Dr. Carter confesses that he is a Negro, Dr. Brackett is somewhat taken aback but convinces him to take the position without revealing his racial background. The Carters spend the next twenty years earning the town's trust through hard work and a commitment to the town's residents. The Carter family secret comes out after Dr. Carter joins the Navy but has his commission revoked. Looking for guidance, Mrs. Carter confides in the Reverend John Taylor (Robert A. Dunn). When the children are told of their ancestral lineage, they are crushed. Dr. Carter's son Howard (Richard Hylton) breaks up with his girlfriend and runs away to Harlem, while his sister Shelly (Susan Douglass) withdraws from her boyfriend despite his acceptance of the revelation. Many of the town's residents reject the family. The film ends with the family attending mass led by Rev. Taylor whose message of inclusion seems to inspire the town to accept the Carter family.

Lost Boundaries distinguishes itself from its predecessors and the films that followed in a number of ways. Most significantly, it presents the image of an extended family that is truly unprecedented in passing films. While *Veiled Aristocrats* depicted smaller family units, it doesn't fully address the impact on the people that are left behind when one decides to pass. After John and Rena leave Fayetteville, we have no idea how their mother copes with the absence of her daughter. To some degree, *Lost Boundaries* was guilty of this as well. We never hear about Dr. Carter's family. Nor do we hear if Marcia's parents were affected by the revelation of the Carter family secret. Moreover, *Lost Boundaries* presents two kinds of passing – intentional and non-intentional. Dr. Carter decides to pass as a white man after finding it impossible to find work as a Negro. Ironically, he is even turned away from a black hospital in Georgia because he looks like a white man. The Mitchells, Marcia's parents, also pass. Mr. Mitchell is particularly opposed to associating with blacks and objects to Dr. Carter taking Marcia to meet with black friends. On the other hand, Howard and Shelly spend most of the film oblivious to the secret in their skin and pass unintentionally.

Despite the film having a documentary feel, there are many points where it becomes melodramatic, especially during scenes in which the Carters' identity presents a problem. After being rejected by the black hospital, Dr. Carter returns to his apartment to break the news to Marcia. As he summits the dark interior stairwell, the sense of having one's life upended is emphasized by camera angles, the lines of door frames, and shadows. The wallpaper in the apartment has faint vertical lines that loom around everything in the scene implying a kind of invisible prison which the Carters are unable to escape. Marcia is hanging white drapery which could be read as symbolic of the white skin they use as a veil to conceal the truth. The window leans into the room from a dormered wall, adding to the sense that everything is askew. Indeed, many scenes throughout the film convey both obvious and subtle messages reminding viewers of the Carters' racial identity. In one sequence, Marcia openly worries about what color Howard will

be when he is born. Her father, Morris Mitchell (Wendell Holmes), warned her to stay away from hospitals in order to keep the family secret, but her husband assured her that there was no need to worry. When Howard is born, he is as light as his parents, prompting Dr. Carter to say "He kinda looks like anyone's baby." This exchange plays out like a battle between an older generation of mulattoes that shun their past and embrace superstition and a younger one that yearns to be more cosmopolitan. Whereas Mr. Mitchell believes that his family should sever all ties to the black community, the Carters commit to keep those ties in place. To be sure, each generation engages in racial passing but the Carters are more progressive in that they retain their connections.

The film also exhibits a real commitment to present a kind of cosmopolitanism as with the graduation and wedding ceremonies where along with Dr. Carter, Dr. Ping, an Asian man, and Dr. Pridham, a black man, are featured prominently. Also, there is an emphasis on the social life of the black community evident in scenes like the gathering of black physicians at the home of Dr. Howard, the nurses and patients at the black Garrison Memorial Hospital, and during Howard's time in Harlem. Each of these scenes telegraphs the emerging Civil Rights movement and change in national sentiment toward black people. Certainly, the images of professional and educated mixed race characters are reminiscent of Oscar Micheaux's characters in *Within Our Gates*, *The Symbol of the Unconquered*, and *Veiled Aristocrats*. While Micheaux tended to depict teachers and lawyers, *Lost Boundaries* and as we will see, *Pinky,* features doctors and nurses. To be sure, Micheaux's films were directed at black audiences and used mixed race actors whereas the others were meant for mainstream viewers.

As to the degree to which *Lost Boundaries* diminishes mixed race stereotypes is a matter of some debate. On the surface, the Carter family is largely depicted in a positive manner. They remain courageous in the face of grave problems. One might conclude that one of the messages here is that mixed families are free to participate in the American Dream so long as they remain

invisible. Their issues are resolved only at the pleasure of white society as with the Carter family absolution by Reverend Taylor and the rest of the congregation. Although they were forgiven for their deception, their previous racial status is not reinstated. Instead, they take on the status as *other* and while they retain their class status in the town's community, it is only by way of the congregation's benevolent charity and not an acknowledgement of having racist attitudes. This demonization of the passer is also at work in the next picture.

Pinky

Based on the novel *Quality* (1946) by Cid Ricketts Sumner, *Pinky* (1949) is the tale of a light-skinned black girl who returns to her home in the South after studying to be a nurse up north. It isn't long before she realizes that all of the privileges she enjoyed while passing for white in the north are now beyond her reach. The film begins with a wide shot of a passenger train moving across the screen from left to right. We then see the title character Pinky (Jeanne Crain) as she's walking down a road with suitcase in hand. She moves from bright, sunlit areas to darker, shaded enclaves near a plantation mansion. She eventually arrives at the home of her grandmother, Aunt Dicey (Ethel Waters). There is a moment where Dicey doesn't recognize her and Pinky briefly passes as a white woman coming to retrieve her laundry. Dicey finally figures out who she is and further deduces that she has been passing for white up north. Pinky (short for Patricia) confesses to her deed in the following exchange:

> Pinky: I didn't mean to granny. It just happened.
>
> Aunt Dicey: But that's a sin before god and you know it!
>
> Pinky: It… was a conductor on the train. He put me back in another car. The white one.
>
> Aunt Dicey: Well he know'd who you was I put ya were ya belong myself.
>
> Pinky: No… no, no it was after that. When they changed conductors.
>
> Aunt Dicey: Then why you ain't tell the new conductor?
>
> Pinky: Oh Granny I don't know. I was only a child.

Dicey's indictment of passing as sinful has some history in film and literature. The conclusion of *Lost Boundaries* depicts the Carter's actions as sinful (Weisenfeld, 2007). In *Imitation of Life*, Delilah reminds Peola that being black is God's decision. She says, "He made you black honey. Don't be tellin' him his business." Believing it to be "a sort of sin" (p. 82), Rena Walden in Chesnutt's *The House Behind the Cedars* agonizes over her decision to keep silent about her racial origins to a white suitor. Not all filmmakers presented passing as sinful. In some Micheaux films, religion and corrupt preachers become tools of control rather than paths to salvation. For Micheaux, passing becomes a social transgression as opposed to a spiritual one.

A short while after the above exchange, Pinky learns that Dicey has been sending money north without fail, but over the last few years it has been intercepted by Jake Walters (Frederick O'Neal). Dicey earned the money by doing the laundry of Miss Em (Ethel Barrymore), the plantation owner. As a child, Pinky had a contentious relationship with Miss Em and still harbors resentment for being kicked out of her garden. But now Miss Em has grown old and requires the assistance of a nurse. When Dicey leaves to look in on Miss Em, Pinky follows slowly behind in an apparent day dream. As she walks, a train sounds its whistle in the distance. A man pulling a mule passes behind her. She turns as if looking for the train, but it has gone silent. As she resumes her walk toward the big house, the viewer hears her internal monologue describe how she wants to send her boyfriend Tom (William Lundigan) a telegram asking him to meet her at the train station. Her walk is interrupted by the wrought iron fence surrounding the garden. She stares through the bars as if recalling an old, painful memory. As she turns to walk away from the fence, she looks down and notices a little black girl standing at the gate, gazing past its old iron bars. When she sees Pinky, she cowers while Pinky sees a reminder of her past embodied in the youngster.

Pinky then goes in search of Jake's house and catches the attention of Jake's girlfriend Rozelia (Nina Mae McKinney), who follows her. When Pinky finds Jake, she confronts him about Aunt Dicey's money. Jake says that he keeps his money in the bank and since it is Saturday, the bank is closed. Pinky presses him into giving her what he has available and pay her the rest when the bank opens. Jake goes into the other room and pulls a woman's purse from a dresser drawer, removes the money, and gives it to Pinky. As Jake and Pinky exit the house, Rozelia walks up demanding to know why Pinky has her money. The two women get into an altercation as a police car pulls up. Not surprisingly, they think Pinky is white and treat her with considerable deference until Rozelia asks "Why you two white men maamin' her? She's nothin' but a low-down colored gal." The police haul the three of them down to see Judge Walker (Basil Ruysdael), who lets them all off with a warning. That evening Pinky goes for a stroll and is nearly raped by two drunken white men prowling through the neighborhood. She escapes and runs home to find Dicey, who is distraught because Miss Em has taken a turn for the worse. Although she protests and wants to return north, Pinky is recruited to take care of the ailing Miss Em.

Donning her traditional nurse's uniform, Pinky initially approaches the house along the path to the back door but changes her mind and enters the front of the house. Upstairs she finds Dr. Joe McGill (Griff Barnett) tending to an unconscious Miss Em. The doctor turns over care for Miss Em for the night. When Miss Em wakes up, she recognizes Pinky as Dicey's granddaughter. She is bossy, cantankerous, and locks horns with Pinky until she passes out. When she comes to, they are slightly more amicable yet continue to tangle. Pinky's desire to pass again is raised in the following exchange:

> Miss Em: Don't be so upset. I'll be dead soon and you'll be free to go back north again. Going to give up your nursing when you get back up yonder?
>
> Pinky: Nursing's my profession. In certain places, a nurse is treated with respect.
>
> Miss Em: Nobody deserves respect as long as she pretends to be something she isn't.

Pinky: How I live my life is my own business Miss Em.

Miss Em: Course it is. It isn't your husband's business or your children's.

Miss Em is being facetious but she is also trying to get Pinky to think about the personal and familial costs of passing. She advises, "Wherever you are, be yourself." For some reason this enrages Pinky. She launches into brief tirade in which she criticizes whites for embracing a system of racial rules that defy logic. She shouts, "You're the ones that judge people by the color of their skins. Well by your own standards, by the only ones that matter to you, I'm as white as you are! That's why you all hate me." Softly, Miss Em replies, "Nobody hates you Pinky." It isn't before long that Pinky and Miss Em develop a bond. Later, Dr. Canady (Kenny Washington), a black physician from a nearby town, pays Pinky a visit and proposes that they start a nursing school, but she politely refuses. While she doesn't say so, it is clear that she doesn't like the idea of working with a black doctor. Perhaps this reticence is due to her intention to resume passing. To complicate matters further, her boyfriend Tom shows up and attempts to bring her back north. Meanwhile, Miss Em makes out her will and asks Dr. McGill to witness it. One of Miss Em's relatives, Melba Wooley (Evelyn Varden) has designs on inheriting some property and is suspicious of Pinky's intentions. After Miss Em dies, the town discovers that Pinky has inherited the house and surrounding land. Mrs. Wooley brings suit against Pinky, but Judge Walker decides in Pinky's favor. Pinky's boyfriend returns north for good and with the help of Dr. Canady, Pinky opens a clinic and nursery school in her newly inherited mansion.

Since *Lost Boundaries'* message was heavily integrationist in nature, the Carters are essentially forgiven for their deception. *Pinky*'s ultimate point is murkier. In deciding to remain on the old plantation where she grew up, the film implies that it is better for blacks and whites to be separate regardless of near-white skin. This segregationist tone can be observed from the very

beginning of the film. Indeed, the train is symbolic of migration and Pinky's experience on her trip north is meant to invoke images of *Plessy v. Ferguson*. Also striking are the clear boundaries that exist between the black quarters where Aunt Dicey lives and the lavish mansion of Miss Em. The iron gate baring entry to Miss Em's garden, the higher price Pinky is charged for a veil, and the absence of black people in the gallery during the courtroom scene all convey a pervasive discrimination that culminates with Pinky staying with her own people. However, she does push back on these boundaries at various points in the film. When she first approaches Miss. Em's home as a nurse, she takes the path toward the servant's entrance before turning around and going through the main entrance. Resolving to follow through with the trial despite a challenge by Mrs. Wooley is a not so subtle way of flouting the white establishment.

There are also a few subtle symbols of passing in the picture. A fire screen in Miss Em's bedroom gets a lot of attention in a number of scenes. When Pinky first encounters Miss Em, the screen sits in the background almost functioning like an imaginary barrier between the two women. Later when Pinky is dusting, Miss Em says "You forgot that fire screen." This signals the above exchange regarding passing. We see the screen again during Mrs. Wooley's visit. While Mrs. Wooley and Miss Em talk, Pinky sits on a chair in profile with the screen behind framing her head and shoulders. Near the end of the film, Pinky and Tom go to Miss Em's mansion. Tom comments, "Oh say isn't this a beautiful fire screen. Pinky replies, "Miss Em was proud of that. Martha Washington is supposed to have done the embroidery." Tom says, "Oh we can't let this get away from us. We'll have it sent out to Denver." The implication here is that Pinky will need to continue hiding her racial identity in plain sight if they are to marry. Obviously, Pinky remains behind. Another symbol turns up when Pinky attempts to purchase a mourning veil at Goolby's Drygoods. As Pinky is paying the $2.98 for the veil, Mrs. Wooley walks in and loudly asks "Since when has it been your policy to wait on nigres before white folks?" After Mrs. Wooley storms out Pinky asks, "Do you wish to sell me the veil?" Conscious of a throng of onlookers,

Mr. Goolby says tersely, “$4.98.” More disturbing are the number of shots that pair Pinky with mules. The start of the film shows Pinky walking toward Aunt Dicey’s with a mule-drawn cart going in the opposite direction. Again when she goes to Jake’s, a black man is riding one past her. You can hear the rider say, “Come on you lazy devil!” We see mules walking behind Pinky before she enters Goolby’s store. Like the fire screen and veil, the mules are deliberately placed objects meant to symbolize the mythology around passing and miscegenation. In literature and film alike, the veil functioned as a rhetorical device used to conceal one’s racial ancestry. Likewise, mules are linked to the derogatory *mulatto*. Its etymology derives from the word “mule” the mostly sterile offspring of a male donkey and a female horse.

This film’s contribution to the growing lineage of mixed race stereotypes is substantial. It is also rather complex and difficult to parse. On one hand, *Pinky* presents images of uplift. Pinky gets a college education and becomes a nurse. She is intelligent, assertive, and ultimately, loyal to blackness. She opens her own clinic and nursery school. And yet, this reading can only be taken so far. Shouldn’t uplift include the right to choose an identity for one’s self? Pinky’s identity is contested throughout the picture. Her passing as white is frowned upon by the black/white matriarchs Dicey and Miss Em. Likewise, her black identity is also a matter of contention. When Mrs. Wooley first encounters Pinky at Miss Em’s house she can’t help but comment “I heard you were light but I had no idea you were… well you’re practically white.” Even her name becomes an issue after Tom suggests, “There’ll be no Pinky Johnson after we’re married. You’ll be Mrs. Thomas Adams for the rest of your life.” While her name isn’t necessarily tied to race, it does speak to her own ability to define herself. This scene also recalls notions of slavery and the erasure of one’s name.

In addition to images of uplift and contested racial territory, with *Pinky* we begin to see an increased focus among critics and scholars on casting. Like most prior mixed race characters,

most have been played by white actors and actresses. Bogle (2004) suggests that casting Jeanne Crain in the title role was one of the film's biggest weaknesses. He writes, "Jeanne Crain as Pinky made a far more successful movie but a far less honest one, too" (p. 137). After all, both Lena Horne and Dorothy Dandridge were considered for the role. Yet, had the role been given to either of these two, Kazan would have been confronted with the visual dilemma that racial passing presents for filmmakers (Jones, 1981; Kydd, 2000; Doniger, 2004). This dilemma is absent in literature with passing characters but film requires the visual presentation of the character. As Mary Ann Doane (1991) has argued, while the practice of casting white actresses has been interpreted as a way to garner sympathetic identification with white audiences and yet, an alternative reading moves beyond the criticism of casting whites in black roles. She writes that it "Also tends to demonstrate inadvertently the quiescent discordance between ideologies of racial identity (defined by blood) and cinematic ideologies of the real (as defined by the visible)… In this case, who could better represent a black attempting to 'look white,' or a black who is 'white enough' to pass than a white herself? The success of typecasting hinges upon assumptions based on visual certainty or the immediate un-thought knowledge one gains from looking" (p. 235).

Both *Pinky* and *Lost Boundaries* are illustrative of a period in which the migration of blacks, especially light-skinned blacks, forced new questions regarding race in America to the surface. Cities, neighborhoods, the work place, and schools were all changing due to decades of black people migrating out of the South. Various forms of activism began to push for legislation to put an end to segregation in all forms.

The 1950s

In the years following *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Supreme Court decision deeming race-based segregation in schools to be unconstitutional, films in the passing genre moved from focusing on questions of racial identity among mixed race individuals to questions

surrounding interracial marriage and its relationship to desegregation (Courtney, 2005; Ardizzone, 2008). While films like Micheaux's *Thirty Years Later* (1928), *Show Boat*, and *Pinky* may have been first to engage the subject, the following group of films take it on a bit more forcefully. The real prospect of desegregated schools and neighborhoods must have been part of the inspiration behind pictures like *Island in the Sun* (1957), *Night of the Quarter Moon* (1959), *Imitation of Life* (1959), *Shadows* (1959), and *I Passed for White* (1960).

Many neighborhoods experienced biblical depopulation as they shifted from mostly white to mostly black. In Chicago alone, thousands of whites fled neighborhoods like Douglas, Washington Park, and Grand Boulevard for outlying suburbs. According to William Julius Wilson, "between 1950 and 1960, Greater Grand Crossing underwent a drastic change from being 94 percent white to being 86 percent black" (p. 43). It's difficult to imagine that these films were not influenced by *Brown* at some level. This landmark case was one aspect of a wide range of efforts to achieve a more fully integrated society. Not every film in this era embraced the then modern specter of integration and all that it might portend. While they contain themes of racial passing, some pictures were more escapist – exhibiting a longing to return to an older societal order.[9] Although these next films, *Imitation of Life* (1959) and *Night of the Quarter Moon* (1959)

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[9] Based on the book by Edna Ferber, *Saratoga Trunk* (1945) is set in the post-Civil War era in Louisiana and New York. It features the Creole, Clio Dulaine (Ingrid Bergman) who passes as a French Aristocrat in order to exploit wealthy robber barons at an exclusive hotel in Saratoga Springs. She teams up with Clint Maroon (Gary Cooper) and the two manage to take ownership of an important railroad line connecting Albany and Binghamton. Although much more muted in their allusions to mixed racial identity, *Jezebel* (1938) and *Gone with the Wind* (1939) are also members of this group of films steeped in themes surrounding the Civil War and romanticized imagery of the South (Smyth, 2008, 2010). *The Foxes of Harrow* (1947) presents antebellum New Orleans with exaggerated nostalgia and prestige. While its Creole protagonist Odalie D'Arceneaux (Maureen O'Hara) doesn't actively pass for white, she performs whiteness in order to adhere to social protocols (Leo & Payrz, 2011; Watson, 2015). In *Raintree County* (1957), Susanna (Elizabeth Taylor) is petrified by the possibility that she might have black ancestry. Her parents as well as the slave woman/surrogate mother died in a fire making it impossible to know who her real mother actually was. *Band of Angels* (1957) portrays the story of Amantha Starr (Yvonne De Carlo) who inadvertently passes for white until her tainted blood line is discovered. She is then sold to the planter Hamish Bond (Clark Gable). While Monique Blair (Natalie Wood) doesn't broadcast her ancestry in racially liberal France, she delays revealing it to the American soldiers in *Kings Go Forth* (1958).

do not focus on integration per se, they do reflect some of the anxiety related to integration and the possibility of racial mixing.

Imitation of Life (1959)

The original1934 version of *Imitation of Life* was a tremendous hit. So popular that Universal Pictures decided to remake it in 1959, which in turn, also proved to be highly successful at the box office. Juanita Moore (Annie) and Susan Kohner (Sarah Jane) both received Academy Award nominations for their roles in the film. While critics at the time largely dismissed the film as soap opera because of its attention to feminine and domestic issues, in the decades following its release, film critics and scholars have recognized its importance in the history of melodrama as well as mixed race cinema. As directed by Douglass Sirk, the film is filled with symbolism, signs, and mise-en-scène that constantly bombard the viewer with subversive messages about its characters and their relationship to one another and to the society in which they inhabit.

Imitation of Life (1959) tells the story of Lora Meredith (Lana Turner), an aspiring white actress, her daughter Susie (Sandra Dee), Annie Johnson (Juanita Moore), a black domestic worker, and her light-skinned daughter Sarah Jane (Susan Kohner). The film begins with an extreme wide shot of thousands of mostly white people on the beach at Coney Island. It's interesting to note that while many are sunbathing in a film in which one of the central themes involves a young woman who wants to escape her brown-ness, the sunbathers are embracing theirs. This opening scene is Sirk's opening salvo meant to expose the hypocrisy of white racism. The wide shots of the beach eventually narrow and all the main characters are introduced within the first few minutes. Lora has lost her six-year-old daughter Susie (Terry Burnham) in the crowd. She enlists the help of photographer Steve Archer (John Gavin), and they eventually find Susie sitting under the boardwalk with Annie and her eight-year-old daughter Sarah Jane (Karin

Dicker). Lora picks up Susie and hugs her tightly. Sarah Jane looks over at her mother with a look that says “You never hug me that way.” Moments later, Steve takes a photo of the two girls playing a prank on man snoozing on the beach. Susie gives him her address so he will send her the photo. She says, “Send her one too. Where do you live Sarah Jane?” Sarah Jane replies, “No place.” She begins to cry in her mother’s arms.

Seeing this, Lora invites them home where Annie becomes the live-in maid and Lora’s confidant. Sarah Jane and Susie play well together, but there are some areas of conflict throughout the film. In one early scene, the two girls are playing with Susie’s dolls. One doll is white, the other is black. Susie offers the black one and says, “Here Sarah Jane, you can have Nancy. It’s a present. Mommy just got it for me.” Sarah Jane says, “I want that one” and takes Susie’s white doll. The adults intervene, and Sarah Jane is given the black doll to which she says “I don’t want the black one.” This exchange is remarkable not only because it demonstrates that Sarah Jane’s racial angst started early in life, but it’s also Sirk’s way of referencing the famous doll experiments conducted by Kenneth Bancroft Clark and his wife Mamie Phipps Clark. The experiments were designed to test the effects of segregation on black children. It was also key element in the *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision in 1954 (Levander, 2006). As Sarah Jane and her mom head to their room for the night, Sarah Jane says, “I don’t wanna live in the back. Why do we always have to live in the back?” She drops the black doll in the doorway. The scene fades to black and signals Sarah Jane’s coming struggles with racial identity.

As an aspiring actress, Lora begins looking for work and visits the office of Alan Loomis (Robert Alda) on the pretense that she was sent by a Hollywood studio executive. Loomis hits on her and lavishes her with furs, but Lora finds his forward behavior repulsive and retreats home to Annie, collapsing in her lap. When she recovers, she goes to check on Susie, who has gone to bed. Lora discovers a gauze bandage wrapped around her wrist. Upon asking what happened,

Annie replies, "Oh nothin' serious. Just a…a little experiment. Sarah Jane's fault. After class one of the kids said that Negro blood was different. So later this evening Sarah Jane wanted to compare her blood with Susie's. Well I spanked her good." In the next scene we see Annie going up the stairs to "Public School No. 1" as snow falls heavily. The shot is foregrounded by a large, bright red fire hydrant that takes up nearly one third of the frame. The hydrant is part of a continuous leitmotif in which Sirk uses the color red to add a somewhat subconscious and emotional weight to various scenes. Framed in the manner that it is, the hydrant signals that someone has an enormous problem or an emergency and requires help. We soon discover that the person in need of assistance is Sarah Jane. It's ironic that the one person she would normally go to for support, her mother, is unable to aid her. In fact, she does the opposite. Inside the school, Sarah Jane is sitting in class listening to the teacher give a lesson on the different names for Santa Claus around the world, when there is a knock at the door. When she discovers that the visitor is her mother, she sinks in her seat and attempts to hide behind a book. Annie has brought Sarah Jane's red snow boots and spots her peeking out from behind the book. When Annie walks over to her, Sarah Jane slams the book down and runs outside. Annie catches up with her in front of a bright red Christmas tree sign. Sarah Jane screams, "Why do you have to be my mother? Why?" Next we see Lora taking Susie's temperature while she sits up in bed. The two are giggling and happy. The contrast between the two mothers and daughters is stark – Lora and Susie are generally happy and oblivious while Annie and Sarah Jane are surrounded by pain and uncertainty. Sirk's intention here is to illustrate the difference between the authentic lives of Annie and Sarah Jane with the imitation lives of Lora and Susie. Much like the 1934 version painted a stark contrast between the two storylines, Sirk points up the struggles of Sarah Jane to highlight the shallowness of Lora and Susie. After Annie and Sarah Jane return home, it becomes obvious that something has happened. Lora asks, "What's wrong?" Annie says, "Sarah Jane's

been passing at school. Pretending she's white." Sarah Jane interjects, "I am white! I'm as white as Susie!"

As the two parallel story lines progress, we see Lora refusing a marriage proposal from Steve just before she gets an audition for famous playwright David Edwards (Dan O'Herlihy). David realizes he has found a new muse when Lora suggests changes to a scene in the play. The two get married, and this becomes a crucial turning point in her acting career. Over a period of ten years she becomes a famous Broadway actress. Along the way, she has largely ignored her daughter and seems to care even less about Annie and Sarah Jane. It's as if she doesn't even see them. In one scene, Lora reveals just how much she's been paying attention to her "family." Annie is describing to Lora the funeral she has been planning for herself and the friends she'd like to have there.

> Lora: It never occurred to me that you had many friends. You never have any visit you.
> Annie: I know lots of people. Oh, hundreds.
> Lora: Really?
> Annie: I belong to the Baptist church and I belong to several lodges too.
> Lora: I didn't know.
> Annie: Miss Lora, you never asked.

This is one of many scenes in which Sirk pulls the audience back down from the stratospheric luxury and privilege of Lora's life by presenting the more authentic lives of Annie and Sarah Jane. Lora and Susie have it too easy. There is no loss, hardship, or pain. They are cardboard cut outs. Whereas Lora's life is largely an *imitation*, Annie's is real and genuine. This scene also contains one of many "mirror shots" in which the camera catches a character's reflection at an angle. Here, Lora is facing away from the camera, but her face is captured in the mirror when Annie delivers her last line. The use of the mirror is also a symbol that Sirk uses to

extend the idea of imitation with Lora. Indeed, there is a sense that she is always acting. She never really leaves the stage. The mirror might also symbolize the difference between what Lora wants people to see of her and what she sees of herself. At its core, the mirror is a symbol of vanity, and when it beholds Lora, it reminds the viewer of just how self-absorbed and narcissistic she is. She evokes the image of Norma Desmond (Gloria Swanson) in *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) as she says "All right Mr. DeMille, I'm ready for my close-up." With Lora, everything is about her and only her.

She is indifferent toward Sarah Jane's struggles with racial identity. When Sarah Jane and Susie skirmished over the dolls, Lora dismissed it by saying the girls were just "tired and cranky." The next morning she greets Susie with a kiss on the lips but appears uncomfortable when Sarah Jane says "I want a kiss too." At last Sarah Jane only offers her cheek. Lora does seem sincere at times. When Annie tells the Christmas story of Jesus to the girls Sarah Jane (wearing a red bathrobe) interrupts and asks "Was Jesus white or black?" Lora answers, "Well, it doesn't matter. He's the way you imagine him." Susie presses the issue, "He's not a pretend man… Then what color was he?" Sarah Jane reveals how she imagines him by answering, "He was like me, white."

As Sarah Jane (Susan Kohner) gets older, her isolation only gets worse. When Lora celebrates another successful performance at home with friends, she is unable to join the party like Susie (Sandra Dee) because she isn't white. She begins seeing a boy while passing and neither Annie nor Lora notices. During the following exchange, Sarah Jane tells Susie about her date and Susie assumes he is black.

> Susie: Is he a colored boy?
>
> Sarah Jane: Why did you ask that?
>
> Susie: I don't know. It just slipped out.

Sarah Jane: It was the first thing you thought of.

Susie: I told you it just slipped out.

Sarah Jane: Well he's white and if he ever finds out about me, I'll kill myself.

Susie: But why?

Sarah Jane: Because I'm white too and if I have to be colored then I want to die.

Susie: Sarah Jane what are you saying?

Sarah Jane: I want to have a chance in life. I don't want to have to come through back doors or feel lower than other people or apologize for my mother's color.

Susie: Don't say that.

Sarah Jane: She can't help her color, but I can and I will.

Later, Lora sees Sarah Jane at the top of the stairs and asks if she can help her mother with a dinner party later that evening. Sarah Jane confesses that she has a date, but Lora assumes it's with a "colored" boy like Susie did; however, Sarah Jane doesn't say. She is partially framed by a black and white bannister rail that seems to symbolize her social immobility. It's like a bar holding her back from freedom. Her yellow dress is also symbolic of her immobility. At that time, the phrase "high yellow" was often used to describe light-skinned blacks. Later when she meets her boyfriend Frankie (Troy Donahue), he beats her after finding out that her mom is "a nigger." Disturbing to say the least, this scene is filled with messaging and imagery. One store front sign that reads "For Rent" seems to allude to Sarah Jane's emptiness. Another reads "Liberty." While Sirk uses mirrors in several shots, we never see one used in conjunction with Sarah Jane until her dark and shadowy reflection appears behind Frankie in a tavern window. The word "Bar" hovers above her head as if to underscore the fact that she will never be permitted to enter the world of white privilege. Sarah Jane may well be the main "imitation" in the film but she lacks the mannequin-like artificiality that Lora possesses. Where Lora pretends to feel and be engaged in life, Sarah Jane never has to. Her beating is violent enough that she is knocked to the ground and collapses into a puddle of water.

The very next scene cuts to Lora's living room, and Annie is rubbing her feet. This scene also appears in the 1934 version, but what makes this one remarkable is the abrupt way it goes from Sarah Jane's horrible encounter with Frankie to a scene of absolute decadence, comfort, and luxury. When Sarah Jane returns home, she angrily blames her mother in front of Lora and Susie. Again, the black and white bannister railing is shown separating Sarah Jane from the others before she stomps off to her room and slams the door. While the dominant role that she portrays is that of a passing for white, tragic mulatto, Sarah Jane also begins to transform into a Jezebel. She is a stereotype and consequently an imitation of life. She begins working as a burlesque dancer. Of course, Annie goes in search of her daughter and finds her working at a place called Harry's Club. When Annie walks in, she descends a flight of stairs that are surrounded by red walls, and red candles are abundant. Sarah Jane is on stage doing one of her routines when her mother enters. Although Sarah Jane does not remove any clothing, she is scantily dressed and dances suggestively. Hanging on the wall behind her are white, grotesquely styled, comedy/tragedy masks. During this scene a red and very phallic candle enters the frame much like the red fire hydrant from earlier in the film, but now the emergency is even greater; Sarah Jane's life really is on fire. Her mother confronts her back stage, and she loses her job. She then gets a job in the chorus line at the Moulin Rouge in Hollywood. Annie finds her again but this time hangs back in the shadows and decides to confront her at her apartment. When she arrives at Sarah Jane's apartment, she finds her getting ready to go out. In fact, a friend shows up just minutes later. Even though they are speaking in code, Sarah Jane and her mother finally agree to go their separate ways. Just before they part, Sarah Jane says "Goodbye" and then whispers "Mama" just out of earshot of her friend. Annie catches her flight home, falls ill, and dies with Lora at her side and a photo of a smiling Sarah Jane looking on from a bedside table. Unlike the 1934 version, the movie concludes with Annie's somber funeral procession complete with

Mahalia Jackson sending her off and Sarah Jane weeping over the casket. This kind of morose ending was a rare ending in American cinema.

Sirk's *Imitation of Life* represents a level of sophistication in filmmaking that isn't present in the previous films examined in this project. His use of signs and symbols to emphasize emotional weight is one of the reasons it was such a success. As pointed out earlier, the color red is abundant and multi-purposed. Not only does Sirk use it to signify a sense of foreboding, red symbolizes blood in this film. He's commenting on the problem of mixed blood as exemplified by Sarah Jane. Annie's blood is also implicated here too. It is her blood that gives rise to her daughter's travails. Although Sarah Jane's blood is not fully black, it is nevertheless authentic. It is what prevents her from being accepted by whites or blacks unless she passes. Her blood is also emblematic of America's very real history of slavery. Indeed, the question of authenticity is raised time and time again in the film. Whereas Annie and Sarah Jane's blood is symbolized by the deep red hues of various objects, Lora and Susie's are characterized by mauve and pink. These watered down shades of red boost the artificial and plastic aura that surrounds their privileged lives. Authenticity plays out in other ways as well. The viewer is told many times that Lora is acting even when not performing on stage and yet there are a few moments when we're expected to believe what Lora is saying. Sarah Jane imitates Lora through her burlesque stage shows. Even when she said goodbye to her mother in the apartment, she was acting in order to keep their relationship concealed from her friend. When Sarah Jane serves shrimp to Lora's guests with an exaggerated black Southern dialect, she is scolded in the other room. Lora asks, "Have I ever treated you as if you were different? Has Susie? Has anyone here?" Sarah Jane only offers a meek "No." Yet, we've seen Sarah Jane using the back stairs, attending the local school instead of boarding school like Susie, and Lora expects her to help her black servant mother (Dyer, 1991). Sarah Jane has been treated differently, but in Lora's mind her discrimination never registers.

To push this notion of authenticity further, Sirk appears to associate the idea that race is a myth with other aspects American culture that can be interpreted in the same way. Early in the film Sarah Jane's class gets a lesson on the various names for Santa Claus around the world. Indeed, there are several references to Santa and Christmas. Later, Sarah Jane asks her mom about Jesus which intersects with both Christmas and racial identity. Is Sirk saying that Santa, Jesus, and race are the same in that they're not real? Is he saying that they are fiction? Is he saying the same about the institution of marriage? Lora's marriage to David seems like nothing more than window dressing. She even admits to Annie that she doesn't love him. For her part, Annie wears a wedding band and yet her husband is nowhere to be seen. The same can be said for Delilah in the first version of the movie as directed by John Stahl. Although she wears a ring, there is no husband in the picture. Perhaps here it is worth noting the ways in which the 1934 film is more progressive than its remake.

Some observers have pointed out that Sarah Jane's choice of occupation is an imitation of Lora's, a fun-house mirror image of champagne and parties that characterize the lives of white women (Stern, 1991). It's also a rather unflattering alternative to Peola's more respectable cashier job in the restaurant. The type of dancing Sarah Jane does is demeaning and suggests that it is the only way for her to get a man. It's a step away from prostitution and underscores her Jezebel-like persona. The casting of Fredi Washington as Peola in Stahl's film brings a certain authenticity that is missing in the remake. Being a mixed race woman, she knew how society treated someone who was black but looked white. As a result, she brought a set of experiences and knowledge of that life to the role of Peola (Handzo, 1977). Susan Kohner is mixed (Czechoslovakian and Mexican) and her performance in the film is brilliant, but it doesn't carry the same gravitas as casting a mixed black/white actress. Annie regresses from Delilah in some ways as well. While Delilah's mammy affect was much more pronounced in Stahl's film, she (somewhat reluctantly) became part owner in the pancake business. Annie still has the residue of the mammy stereotype,

but she remains nothing more than a live-in domestic despite Lora's success on Broadway. Whereas the Sirk's *Imitation of Life* is notable for its pure melodrama, *Night of the Quarter Moon* is known for its campy melodrama.

Night of the Quarter Moon

Set in San Francisco, *Night of the Quarter Moon* tells the story of the mixed race Ginny O'Sullivan Nelson (Julie London) and her victimized love affair with Chuck Nelson (John Drew Barrymore). Ginny's father is an Irish fisherman and her mother a wealthy black aristocrat. Despite being played by a white actress, Ginny's presence on screen presents questions of racial identity to the viewer. The film reappraises the one drop rule by implicitly asking *How much black ancestry makes one black?* Ginny dismantles the supposition that race is always reduced to visual cues. She moves beyond the tragic mulatto stereotype by openly admitting the she is "one quarter" (Ardizzone, 2008). Moreover, she pushes back on the stereotype further by getting her man in the end. *Night of the Quarter Moon* briefly deals with passing but it is a transitional film in that it moves from plots focused on passing to ones on interracial marriage. The film opens with Ginny hanging pictures on the wall of her new home. A rock sails through the front window, and she sees three teenagers vandalizing her property. She telephones her husband Chuck, and he races home to rescue her. When he arrives, he punches one of the assailants and is arrested. At the police station Chuck and Ginny are questioned in separate rooms. Some reporters burst into the room with Ginny in it and begin asking her to pose for the camera. When she resists, one of the reporters suggests the she should "go back to Mexico." At this point the film flashes back to her time living in Mexico with her father. Her racial identity remains somewhat of a mystery to the viewer. However, there are several hints during this first part of the film. After meeting each other for the first time, Chuck notices Ginny swimming in the nude. When she gets out of the water and dresses, she asks Chuck "Anything wrong?" To which he replies, "No. No. Everything

is alright." It almost as if she is asking if he'd noticed that she was black and seems to foreshadow a later scene in which Ginny is asked to disrobe during the annulment trial. Chuck then asks "Were you born here?" Ginny answers "No. After my mother died, the captain (her father) retired and we came down here. It's been wonderful for him. Wonderful for me too. I love it." A while later the couple is seen lying on the floor of the house playing a game of chess. Ginny has the white pieces while Chuck's are mostly black but have some white accents. Ginny chooses this moment to tell Chuck about her ancestry. Chuck enquires about the set:

> Chuck: This is a nice set. Is it Mexican?
>
> Ginny: No it's Spanish. Captain got it in Spain. You know my grandfather's Spanish on my mother's side.
>
> Chuck: Oh now surely I thought you were a solid Irish lass.
>
> Ginny: Did you really?
>
> Chuck: Oh sure. Now you're ringing a Spanish grandfather in on me.
>
> Ginny: Well that's not all. His wife was pure Portuguese Angolian (Chuck leans over to kiss her). You haven't heard a word I said. You know Chuck, Portuguese Angolia isn't in outer space. It's on the west coast of Africa. Population over four million. Ninety percent black.
>
> Chuck: Statistics bore me.
>
> Ginny: We lived there 'till my mother died. She was much darker than I am.
>
> Chuck: Not more beautiful.
>
> Ginny: Chuck, I'm one quarter.
>
> Chuck: So you're one quarter. Like the moon was the first night I kissed you.

They leave Mexico, get married, and move to San Francisco, where Chuck grew up. When he introduces Ginny to his mother Cornelia (Agnes Moorehead), she's so happy that her son is married that she initially overlooks Ginny's obvious racial ambiguity. She gushes over Ginny, but it isn't long before her racist attitudes overwhelm her initial euphoria. When she learns

that Ginny's cousin Maria (Anna Kashfi) owns a night club called the "Upbeat," Cornelia declares "Oh, that's splendid! It's time we had a little upbeat in this family." Chuck's brother Lexington (Dean Jones) can't believe his ears. He half-jokingly recounts how his mother wouldn't let her boys date anyone who wasn't an "18 carat socialite." To which she responds "Well I gave that idea up a long time ago. You just bring me home a girl like this one Mr. Lexington Nelson. Any girl for that matter, I don't care whether she has two heads or comes from Ubangi." Cornelia's line is punctuated by a low tympani roll accompanied by a plaintive saxophone line. This incidental sound emerges later in the film to emphasize moments in which race becomes socially awkward. Cornelia suggests that Chuck and Ginny go to the club and enjoy themselves. Ginny even wears Cornelia's fur stole. When they arrive at the Upbeat, Chuck meets Maria and her husband Cy Robbin (Nat King Cole). Between Maria's accent and brown skin and Cy's black skin, Ginny's lineage is laid bare. Members of the press are there and take pictures of the couple. They make the front page of the next day's newspaper with a headline that reads "Social Leader's Bride Revealed as Quadroon." This changes everything for Cornelia and much of San Francisco's social milieu. After the story breaks, they are evicted from their hotel suite, their new home gets vandalized, and neighbors demand that they move. At this point the flashback ends, and the viewer is returned to the present at the police station.

After they are released from custody, Cornelia manages to keep her son drugged and away from Ginny. Despite repeated attempts to see Chuck, she is unable to and decides to hire a lawyer in order to force Cornelia out of the way. Instead, Ginny receives a summons. With his mother pulling the strings, Chuck is suing for an annulment. The remainder of the film centers on the court trial which culminates in one of the most symbolically violent scenes in which Ginny's black lawyer, Asa Tully (James Edwards), rips the back of her dress off in a dramatic homage to *Rhinelander v. Rhinelander*. This scene is eerily foreshadowed in the beginning of the film when Chuck fights one of the racist vandals (Charlie Chaplin Jr.) and tears the vandal's shirt. His bare

back is in full view when he is being loaded into the back of the police car. As dramatic as the courtroom climax is, it confused contemporary viewers who failed to grasp the director's reference to the Rhinelander case. Perhaps it was only an attempt to emphasize a cloudy point about skin pigmentation and tan lines (Onwuachi-Willig, 2007; Ardizzone, 2008; Smith-Pryor, 2009). Yet, counselor Tully also primes images of the black rapist immortalized by Gus in *The Birth of a Nation*. While Ginny isn't comparable to the lily-white Flora Cameron, it's difficult for the viewer to separate the white Julie London from the mixed race Ginny. Asa's intentions were to force a response from Chuck, which he obliged, fulfilling his role as the great white savior. When Ginny's dress is ripped, Chuck leaps to his feet and drapes his coat over her shoulders. The judge dismisses the case and the couple ride off in a cab presumably to live out their days together.

Night of the Quarter Moon is a fascinating display of racial angst during the late 1950s. After Chuck and Ginny buy a new house, they get a visit from three neighbors. The men are upset about the Ginny moving in and bringing down real estate values. One says, "No offense Mr. Nelson, but it happens to be our business if Honey Suckle Hills becomes a colored neighborhood." Cornelia's overt racist comments toward Ginny reveal the blunt and ugly nature of these types of confrontations. At one point in the film, Ginny attempts to see Chuck but she ends up exchanging words with Cornelia at the front door. Cornelia asks, "Where did he propose to you? On a beach or in a cotton field?" The police arrive and take Ginny away. Indeed, the police play a large role in the film. Not only do they arrest trespassers, break up fights, and chase speeding cars, but in a larger sense they are symbolic of the policing of race and racial lines. The court case hinges on race. The neighbors, Cornelia, and the police paint a vivid picture of the racial paranoia and violence of the period. The movie is also a prime example of the direction miscegenation films took in the wake of restrictive censorship and the waning power of the production code. It is indicative of the effect civil rights activism and the *Brown* decision was

having on the country. Although they don't have mixed race characters per se *The World the Flesh, and the Flame* (1959), *The Intruder* (1962), *One Potato, Two Potato* (1964), and *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967) also signaled the nation's growing awareness of social changes through the depiction of mixed race relationships.

The overall campy aspect of *Night of the Quarter Moon* enhances the absurdity of the idea of blood quantum and the visibility of race. Camp inverts conventional criteria. The bad becomes good and the worse it is the better (Nissen, 2013). Many of Julie London's lines are exaggerated to the point of being schmaltzy. After returning home to her lonely house, she gets a call from a very groggy Chuck. Lexington grabs the phone from his brother and hangs up before he and Ginny can finish their conversation. Ginny is overcome with grief, but the delivery of her emotions reminds one of a middle school girl rather than a woman in her late twenties. She gasps his name repeatedly as if he's her first love. Later, she seeks Cy's help in finding a lawyer. He accuses her of only wanting a payday by settling with the Nelsons. Cy says, "I won't get a lawyer for anyone who wants to exploit color. There's been enough of that!" To which Ginny responds, "I don't want to exploit color! I'm not Negro. I'm white! Mostly white. All I want is my husband because I love him." It would be interesting to see some of the outtakes for this film because it certainly appeared that Julie London and Nat King Cole were trying not to laugh in this scene.

Night of the Quarter Moon anticipates racelessness in film by placing Ginny in a largely white environment. While she doesn't ignore her black ancestry, she presents herself as a mixed race white woman. In self-identifying as "one quarter" and "mostly white" she self-passes. While Chuck, Lexington, Cornelia, Maria, and Cy all regard her as a black person, Ginny refuses that proscription.

Films in which racial passing was central to the plot were popular for decades. However, they appear less frequently beginning in the early 1960s (Hobbs, 2014). Some of the following

films are solidly in the "B Movie" genre and were not widely viewed. They are included here to provide connective tissue in this examination of the trajectory of mixed race cinema. They are also a testament to the fact that it became much less fruitful to feature mixed race character dramas due to the heightened focus of the Black Power and Civil Rights movements. While not necessarily a B movie, John Cassavete's *Shadows* (1959) was independently produced outside of the Hollywood system and improvised what might happen to a black girl who looks white. *I Passed for White* (1960) is nearly identical in plot to *Night of the Quarter Moon* minus the big marquee stars. Films like *High Yellow* (1965), *The Black Klansman* (1966), and *Trick Baby* (1972) feature protagonists who use their light skin to gain access to employment, the KKK, and the world of con men and grifting respectively. In *The Landlord* (1970), Elgar Enders (Beau Bridges) mistakes Lanie (Marki Bey) for a white girl while dancing in a night club. While these pictures were not widely viewed, they do signal the demise of racial passing in cinema. With the exception of the following films that return to themes of racial passing in historical pieces where characters bend their racial identity in order to navigate various stations of white society, the contemporaneous passing film became extinct. In *Illusions* (1982), Mignon Duprée (Lonette McKee) passes for white while working as a movie producer in early 1940s Hollywood. McKee appears again in *The Cotton Club* (1984). In her role as Lila Rose Oliver, she passes for white in order to be able to sing in an all-white nightclub. Set in the summer of 1948, *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1995) character Daphne Monet (Jennifer Beals) passes for white in order to marry the wealthy Todd Carter (Terry Kinney). *The Feast of All Saints* (2001) takes place in 1840s Louisiana and contains the portrayal of Marie Ste. Marie who passes for white in the hopes of marrying a white man. One of the few male passers appears in *The Human Stain* (2003). Set partially in the 1940s and then the 1990s, the film tells the story of Coleman Silk (Anthony Hopkins & Wentworth Miller) who begins passing for white as a teenager in order to further his boxing career and later as a college professor.

As we have seen, racial passing in film has the capacity to diminish mixed race stereotypes, but each picture does so in different ways. In *The Symbol of the Unconquered*, Eve Mason reminds us that passing wasn't always done intentionally by those seeking opportunities in a white world. She simply sought a place of her own out in the South Dakota prairie. Furthermore, she didn't possess any of the parasitic qualities of her Jezebel predecessors. She is lady-like, strong and largely independent. Likewise, Rena Walden (*Veiled Aristocrats*) is depicted in a positive manner. Although she makes a conscious decision to pass, she ultimately rejects a life as a white woman in order to remain loyal to the black community. In doing so, her portrayal works against the prevailing idea that defined passers as opportunistic and nothing more. With *Imitation of Life*, Peola presents a contrasting view of loyalty and opportunity. She only wants a chance to live a normal life outside of the confines of Jim Crow. Peola also forces us to consider her race from an almost Cartesian point of view. Like the cogito she asks "Am I not white." *Lost Boundaries* demonstrates that mixed race people were not always isolated loners. Not only were the Carters a loving family, they were connected with the greater community on both sides of the color line. Just as Rena Walden persisted in her allegiance to her people, *Pinky* illustrates to a much wider audience that one could have opportunities while remaining loyal to the black community. Each of these portrayals pushes back on the stereotypical conception of the mulatto passing for white.

On the other hand, some portrayals appeared to do little in the way of diminishing stereotypes and leaned closer to perpetuating them. The racist hypocrisy of Jefferson Driscoll in *The Symbol of the Unconquered* didn't engender sympathy among viewers and only reinforced the notion that passers were deceptive and conniving. Peola's pathological unhappiness led some to conclude that mulattoes lived a life of perpetual inner racial turmoil. Nevertheless, we know from fan mail and newspaper accounts that both black and white viewers largely approved of Peola's actions. In contrast, Jefferson Driscoll goes beyond the deception of passing. He preys on

fellow blacks. He made Abraham and Eve sleep in the barn and sells stolen horses to Van Allen. Surely most black viewers disapproved of Driscoll's villainy. While Ginny is depicted in a largely positive manner in *Night of the Quarter Moon*, her campy performance renders the character inauthentic. Lastly, Sarah Jane's slide toward seediness in *Imitation of Life* (1959) was part homage to the Jezebel and tragic mulatto stereotypes.

In the end, racial passing in film does limit the capacity for stereotypes to sufficiently categorize mixed race people. Because race is most often determined through visual means, it is difficult for viewers to reconcile a black identity with white-looking skin. This is especially problematic when a white actress portrays a character identified with having mixed ancestry. However, since some characteristics of descent are considered more important than physical traits, characters can be visibly white but categorized as black. It doesn't make much sense and yet it remains the primary way in which we define those with mixed ancestry.

The range of passing in real life certainly influenced the creation of the films in this chapter. Slavery served as the original impetus that forced many light skinned slaves to flee racial bondage. The promise of better economic opportunity as well as escaping Jim Crow continued the appeal for passing well into the twentieth century. Yet, as we have seen, racial passing is not always a conscious choice. Throughout history, racially mixed people with light skin were often mistaken as white through no fault of their own. This accidental passing arises when racially mixed people are mistaken for white by others. When it does involve a conscious choice, it may be only temporary. These racial furloughs would have occurred when the passer sought better hotel or restaurant accommodations or while working in a white part of town (Davis, 1994; Black, 2004; Hobbs, 2014). We know that thousands of racially mixed people permanently left the black community over time. As to the degree to which passing still occurs is difficult to determine. However, as long as racism and white privilege exists, we can be sure that passing will

too. Some recent examples of passing include the story of Lacy Schwartz who grew up believing she was white. She describes her tale in the documentary *Little White Lie* (2014). In the film Lacy says, I wasn't pretending to be something I wasn't. I actually grew up believing I was white." The writer Koa Beck confessed in a piece in *The Guardian* that she lives "daily with an array of privileges" that accompany the assumption that she is white. Lastly, racially mixed actress Rashida Jones recounts how growing up with light skin provided camouflage while in the company of white folks. In a 2005 interview for *Glamour* magazine she states, "If you're obviously black, white people watch their tongues, but with me they think they can say anything. When people don't know 'what' you are, you get your heart broken daily."

As we will see in the next chapter, racial passing in cinema has a younger cousin called racelessness. The films are less about active passing and more about whiteness and invisibility.

CHAPTER FOUR

"ORDINARY PEOPLE:" RACELESSNESS IN CINEMA

> I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they only see my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me.
>
> Ralph Ellison, *The Invisible Man*, 1947

At times the term *racelessness* can seem like an oxymoron. It describes the absence of something that never existed in the first place. It is a paradox. It is also next to impossible to imagine an America absent of our current preoccupation with race. A preoccupation that hangs like a shadow over nearly every transaction in society be it cultural, economic, or communal. The idea that anything could be raceless is almost naïvely utopian. And yet, it seems that it expresses the idea that a person, character, or plot can be void of race, to be simply ordinary. Some scholars and critics have made the observation that certain mixed race film characters are raceless. However, few have fully interrogated what it truly means for these characters, or plots for that matter, to be raceless. In light of the emergence of raceless cinema, the above Ellison passage calls to mind the ways in which race is rendered invisible while in plain sight. Indeed, the title of this chapter hints at a double entendre of sorts. On one hand, it is a reference to the Academy Award winning film *Ordinary People* (1980). Directed by Robert Redford, the film tells the story of a family attempting to cope with the death of a son. As the family moves through the pains of coming to grips with their new reality, the audience is asked to come to terms with their own definition of ordinary. On the other hand, this title refers to the conundrum that one is faced with when assessing so called raceless characters in films – are these characters simply acting white? Or, are they being ordinary people? To what extent is racelessness a function of the audience not

imposing race onto subjects? Can it be imposed by filmmakers? Are raceless characters passing? While films with themes of passing have largely gone the way of the dodo, passing seems to become a function of both casting and context in raceless films. Is it possible for films with "diverse" casts to be considered raceless? To what extant is the raceless character/film depicting whiteness? This chapter will contend that acting white is not ordinary and, therefore, whiteness is not essentially normative. Furthermore it will be argued that the so called raceless characters are not raceless because they are acting white, they are raceless due to an absence of any emphasis or reference to the character's race. The films in this section are mostly organized around the mixed race actors and actresses who appear in them. Not only are they current major celebrities, but to varying degrees, each has had their racial identity probed and challenged by the press and fans alike.

In some ways, this next group of films reminds one of the plantation-themed movies which walked along the color line without ever crossing it. While each feature mixed race actresses, they share an allusory aesthetic with *Jezebel* (1938), *Gone with the Wind* (1939), and *Raintree County* (1957). One distinction that separates these latest pictures from their predecessors is the recent sociopolitical movements and attitudes that go along with them. Twice electing Barack Obama to the presidency and the celebrity that accompanies his persona prompted many to declare that racism had ended. For some white Americans, this event seemed to act as a vehicle for shedding racial guilt. For a brief time, Obama became a post-racial poster boy. Yet at the time of this writing, the extreme right's palpable hatred of the president, the well-publicized trouble between police departments and black communities as well as a host of other issues would indicate that America is far from becoming post-racial.

Is there a relationship between racelessness and post-racialism? Are they simply ideals some of us aspire to? Or are they just trendy terms we throw around while we ignore what's

really happening? Are these just new ways of saying we live in a colorblind society? Since the 1960s, the enforcement of the racial order has been institutionalized in such a way that enables individual whites to be detached from the ways in which these agencies operate. In the raceless film genre, this detachment is evident in how these pictures adhere to a representational strategy that embraces the politics and ideology of colorblindness. Bonilla-Silva (2014) argues that whites live in a "white habitus that creates and conditions their views, cognitions, and even sense of beauty" (p. 171). Since whiteness is not perceived as a racial category, race isn't seen in the white environs. It is in this space that raceless films are able to represent the sameness and ambiguity that characterizes these pictures. While these filmmakers may appear to foreground race with quasi-diverse casts, they imply that we don't need to see race since America has moved beyond its problematic past (Turner, 2014). Colorblindness in film denies the structural or class basis of racial inequality and allows viewers to remain blind to black working class struggle (De Rosa, 2014). Sorrells (2012) argues that the idea of a raceless and color-blind society renders the unmarked elevation of whiteness invisible. White norms and ways of being become the standard or default. Indeed, the notion of racelessness pertains to an entire ecosystem of circumstances and settings.

The Lineage of Racelessness and its Appearance in Film

One of the problems with discussing race is that people often debate extremes. We forget to take the big picture into account. We see ourselves at a given point in time and miss the fact that there is a range and history to these issues. It isn't all black and white. The term *postracial* suffers from this problem. Many observers have interpreted it as a collective state of being or an arrived destination. An absolute and all or nothing declaration that race no longer mattered. A better way to regard the idea of a postracial ethic is to define it as a progression rather than a fixed point in time. The tragic mulatto appeared during this progression and was cause for some to

consider questions of racial identity and the rigid rules of categorization. Later, the practice of mulattoes passing for white challenged the idea that race was somehow visual in nature. The visibly white mulatto destabilizes the notions of racial categories and stereotypes. Racelessness is another genre that occupies a place on this timeline.

The term racelessness was first used by Signithia Fordham (1988) in a study examining the complex relationship between racial identity and school performance among Black adolescents. Fordham collected ethnographic data on six high achieving students at Capitol High in Washington D.C. She concluded that part of the reason for student success was due to the students' attempting to adopt a raceless persona. "Racelessness, then, is the desired and eventual outcome of developing a raceless persona, and is either a conscious or unconscious effort on the part of such students to disaffiliate from the fictive-kinship system" (pp. 57-58). This study stems from work Fordham did with John Ogbu in 1986. They found that some black students did not embrace certain academic behaviors and Standard English because they perceived them as "acting white." As a result, they argued, students who refrained from these behaviors and attitudes risked poor school performance. Of course this was not the only factor, yet their work points up questions regarding the concept of racelessness and its historical relationship to the idea of acting white.

Other scholars have used the term to undermine racial categories. Naomi Zack (1993) argued that all racial categories should be eliminated since they lacked any scientific underpinning. Linking the conception of racelessness to newness and authenticity, Zack posited that racelessness grows out of the resistance to classification. Another form of racelessness is the so called transcendent identity in which the individual subverts racial categorization by claiming to be beyond race (Spencer, 1999; Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002). In *Raceless Like Me* (2011), Zoe A. Y. Weinberg interviewed Harvard student Paula M. Maouyo who describes herself as

“aracial.” While her Chadian father was black and her American mother was white, race was never a significant part of her life. Greg Carter (2013) reminds us how during Barack Obama’s 2008 campaign, many writers grappled with how to describe the aspiring commander in chief’s racial identity. Although many used terms like “biracial” or “mixed,” most proscribed a monoracial or raceless label, instead of embracing the original attraction of ambiguity. In other words, since Obama’s racial background didn’t prohibit his eventual election, his persona could be read as partially raceless. The following pages are informed by these conceptions as they denote the absence of race as a defining feature. Racelessness should not be taken to mean that difference and variation doesn’t exist. Rather it is the idea that difference and human variation are not tied to the socially constructed concept of race.

Turning to film, critics and scholars have pointed to a raceless aesthetic in movies featuring biracial film characters. Bogle (2004) cites the “colorless” nature of Rae Dawn Chong in films like *Quest for Fire* (1981) and *American Flyers* (1985). Likewise, in *Flashdance* (1983) and *The Bride* (1985), Bogle draws attention to the fact that the Jennifer Beals is almost completely uncoupled from any sort of familial background which, in turn, strengthens the sense of racelessness. Mary Beltrán (2005) identifies the raceless aesthetic in *Romeo Must Die* (2000) and *The Fast and the Furious* (2001). She contends that the protagonists survive by abandoning their families and embracing racelessness and accepting the sum of their combined ethnic identities instead of retreating back to the familiar climes of their respective communities. However, familial and ethnic identity isn’t the only factor that contributes to a raceless aesthetic in film. Some films accomplish this by embracing a sense of the ordinary without presenting unrealistic stereotypes.

In 1984’s concert picture *Purple Rain*, mixed race musician “The Kid” (Prince) struggles with the stormy relationship between his black father (Clarence Williams III) and his white

mother (Olga Karlatos). And yet, the Kid doesn't have any problems with identity. While he is hardly ordinary as a musician, he isn't "raced" in the context of the story. This same strategy of ignoring stereotypical portrayals is at work in *Brewster's Millions* (1985). The black Montgomery Brewster (Richard Pryor) suddenly inherits a large sum of money from a distant white relative with one caveat, he can only get the full inheritance if is able to spend thirty million dollars in thirty days. His spending is monitored by light –skinned Angela Drake (Lonette McKee), a paralegal employed by the law firm managing the estate. After burning through tons of money by paying outrageous salaries and living in the lap of luxury, Brewster inherits the money. Despite having a racially diverse cast, the film doesn't present obvious racial stereotypes. Although the viewer sees variation and difference, they are not visually or otherwise linked to stereotypical representations. Most strikingly is Pryor's character. He is visually black and yet his character doesn't adhere to any traditional black stereotypes. McKee's character is more problematic in that she appears white. Many viewers might not be privy to Mckee's racial background and thereby assume that she is white. This underscores a central tension in this and the pictures that follow between the right to be unrestricted and making whiteness normative. Given these points, it should be noted that raceless cinema with mixed race characters began with Jennifer Beals and *Flashdance*.

Beals is the daughter of Jeanne Anderson, an Irish American school teacher, and Alfred Beals, an African American grocery store owner. Jennifer Beals grew up on the south and then the north side of Chicago and at age thirteen got a job working for Baskin-Robbins largely based on her height and the fact that she lied about her age. At sixteen, she began modeling for fashion magazines and store catalogs. She studied acting, playwriting, set design and directing at the Goodman School of Drama at DePaul University. Her film debut came in 1980's *My Bodyguard,* where she played an extra in a high school classroom. She applied and was accepted at Yale University, but her first year was interrupted by another sort of application, her audition for a part

in *Flashdance*. Beals was one of three finalists, one of which was Demi Moore, another soon to become famous Hollywood actress. Once filming was completed, Beals went back to Yale and finished her B.A. in American Literature, graduating with honors. Upon its release, *Flashdance* became an instant hit and catapulted Beals' acting career into super-stardom. The film has been widely cited as an example of the raceless genre.

Flashdance is the story of Alex Owens (Jennifer Beals), an aspiring dancer who works as a welder in Pittsburg, Pennsylvania. She also works as an exotic dancer at a local nightclub. The film has the feel of a musical with its series of hit songs from the 1980s including Irene Cara's - *Flashdance…What a Feeling,* Laura Branigan's *Gloria,* and Michael Sembello's *Maniac.* The coincidental rise of the cable music network *MTV* also helped increase the film's popularity among young viewers. It begins with several shots of a silhouetted woman riding a bike through the city. This is followed by a series of interior shots of a factory where people are welding in dark, spark-filled spaces. These images are interspersed with a shot of a person welding with the name Alex written on their welding mask. This continues for some time adding to the mystery of the person's identity that began with the woman on the bike. The mask is important to this scene. While all of the workers are wearing them for protection, the mask reinforces their faceless and nondescript nature. They are cogs in a machine. The mask is also is a symbol that suggests concealment and anonymity. It allows those behind them to hide or blend in. In Alex's case, part of what is revealed in taking her mask off is gender. The name Alex could either masculine or feminine and audiences of the time most likely expected to see a male behind the mask in the beginning of the film. In the last of this series of shots, Alex removes her mask revealing her identity. Next we see her dancing at a bar called Mawby's where she is noticed by Nick Hurley (Michael Nouri), the owner of the factory. He pursues her and they begin dating. Meanwhile, Alex works on her professional dancing and trying to get in the local dance school.

Later, she dons a different kind of mask. For one of her routines at Mawby's, she wears whiteface while dancing and contorting her body in front of a fake television. The idea of the mask has yet another, more subtle connotation in the context of *Flashdance.* It brings to mind images of race and, perhaps, ethnicity that are difficult to pinpoint with Alex. After all, isn't race used as an imposed or assumed mask at times? Ultimately Beals' character is either passing as white, presumed to be white, or she is raceless. While it might be safe to think that Alex is white, there are subtle clues that lead us to believe otherwise. Although she barely interacts with black characters, she also doesn't appear to be that close with her white friend. This surfaces an old idea that mixed race people often had trouble fitting in or being accepted by either side. Indeed, she is pictured alone for much of the film. Further, when she is with other characters, her loner-vibe is pronounced. While she is never shown with a family, Alex has a white mother proxy named Hanna (Lilia Skala) who encourages her to pursue her dream of becoming a dancer. The absence of family is also an old idea associated with mixed race people.

Flashdance demonstrates a central tension regarding the analysis of raceless films. On one hand, because these pictures often omit any racial designation of ambiguous characters, they leave open the possibility for audiences to simply interpret them as white. On the other hand, ambiguity can work in the other direction in which viewers conclude that race doesn't matter in the context of a given film. The problem here is that these interpretations can be seen as one in the same if one sees whiteness as the equivalent of racelessness. However, mixed race identity emerges from the sum of its parts and doesn't carry the definitional weight of black or white categories. These characters are neither white nor black. They are raceless. In each of the following films this tension is raised in varying degrees. While some characters prove to be Alex-like in their depictions, others move freely between acknowledging racial difference, family and suggest ways in which new identities can be forged and interpreted.

Wishful Thinking

While many of the aforementioned films are of note because there share a bent for the ordinary and mundane, a recent crop of films so fully embraces the raceless aesthetic they could be considered serially raceless. These movies featuring mixed race actresses with ambiguous features share some cinematic terrain with films in the passing genre. More importantly, these films present white cultural environments that raise questions regarding the absence of Others and social normativity. In the romantic comedy *Wishful Thinking* (1997), Elizabeth (Jennifer Beals) meets Max (James LeGros) while she is working at a veterinary clinic. The two begin dating and have sex on the first date. After a short period of time, Elizabeth begins to hint at marriage, which is met with indifference by Max. At a cocktail party, Max notices Elizabeth talking closely with Jack (Eric Thal). After the party, Max confronts Elizabeth, but she claims it was innocent small talk. At his job as a film projectionist, Max begins to worry about losing Elizabeth and imagines her and Jack in his screening of *I, Mobster* (1959). Lena (Drew Barrymore) works the ticket booth and is in love with Jack. Fearing that he may lose Elizabeth, Max proposes, but she has already given up on the idea. Lena begins to sabotage Max and Elizabeth's already fragile relationship by telling Max that she knows Elizabeth and Jack are together. Max confronts Elizabeth about Jack, but she denies it and leaves. She runs into Jack and asks him out for coffee, but he has another date and declines. Elizabeth ends up at a diner where she meets Henry (John Stewart), another mutual friend of the group. After a long and rather goofy conversation, they decide to go to Coney Island. Eventually they end up in bed together back at Elizabeth and Max's apartment. When Max comes home, he discovers the door has been chain-locked. He breaks the door down, runs past Elizabeth, and up the fire escape. On the roof, Max confronts a man who turns out to be the wrong guy and Max takes a beating for his troubles. Henry was hiding in the shower the whole time. Elizabeth finds Max on the roof, and the two decide to go their separate ways amicably.

Wishful Thinking has a distinct affect that is present in nearly every film in the raceless genre. Because the character's race isn't signified or called out in any way, the viewer is left to make an appraisal, whether conscious or unconscious, regarding the character's racial identity. Without knowing more details about the casting process for this film and others like them, appraisal and analysis of other questions can provide some understanding of what raceless films are saying or not saying about race. Beals has made a career out of playing racially ambiguous characters. While *Flashdance* is the most widely noted as being one of the first examples of raceless cinema (Bogle, 2004; Smith, 2006), she's often been cast as white-looking characters. In *The Bride* (1985), Beals plays Eva, Dr. Frankenstein's perfect creation. Here again, her race isn't defined in any way. Her character evokes images of the fictional abolitionist mulatta who appears childlike and docile. Indeed, most of her work as an actress has been as characters in these so called raceless roles.

Beals' race was certainly on the radar of those casting *Wishful Thinking*, but what was the calculus or need? Was her audition better than anyone else's? Did they intend on having a mixed race actress with very light skin or was the part written for a white female? Was she the best white female for the part? While mistakes sometimes make their way into films, most of what happens on screen is there because someone wanted it there. Certainly actors and actresses fall into this category. What else? Things like locations, interiors, and exteriors. The general *mise-en-scène.* It is often what happens in the background that has the most meaning for film analysis and may provide some clues as to the filmmaker's intention. The marquee above the theater entrance where Max and Lena work reads "VISIONS IN BLACK AND WHITE." Perhaps this is the director's way of alluding to Max imagining his troubles playout on screen. Perhaps it is also a subtle attempt at priming the racial imaginations of viewers. *Wishful Thinking* also contains a scene in which Elizabeth calls her parents. The answering machine picks up, and her mother says

"You've reached the Black residence." As many mixed race characters go, Elizabeth is virtually cut off from family. This phone call is the only suggestion that she even has one.

Elizabeth is clearly a raceless character in this picture but what kind of raceless character? Ideally, racelessness is best represented in films in which there is an absence of racial stereotypes without being void of racial variation. Further complicating this analysis is the central tension arising in trying to determine if racelessness in a given film is simply a reproduction of white culture or a true absence of racial stereotypes. Moreover, racelessness is also a function of the viewer not imposing race onto a character, which is akin to passing.

In speeches and interviews, Beals cites the absence of biracial role models and often feeling that she didn't fit in socially when she was young. During an acceptance speech for a 2005 GLAAD Award, she described the scarcity of biracial images in the media during her formative years. She says:

> Somehow my story wasn't there. I was too young to start reading Faulkner. I hadn't seen Imitations of Life so I wasn't aware that I was supposed to be this insane, over-sexed tragic mulatto gal. I mean certainly my otherness sometimes was so palpable it was a wonder that anyone could see me. I was that invisible. And certainly when society fails to tell your story there is an unspoken message that the story is not worth telling.[10]

Her comments here reflect an all-too-familiar dilemma facing mixed race people in America. Being neither black, nor white, yet both is a challenging position to navigate and one that hasn't changed as much as one might expect over the last century.

Away We Go

In another romantic comedy, *Away We Go* (2009), mixed race Verona (Maya Rudolph) and white Burt (John Krasinski) are expecting their first child. Burt sells "insurance for

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[10] My transcribed portion of the YouTube video posted by user wildchildivy.

insurance" while Verona is an illustrator for medical textbooks. They embark on an unplanned journey to find the ideal environment to start a family. The couple travels from Phoenix to Tucson then to Madison, Montreal, and Miami before settling down in Verona's family home somewhere in the South. Along the way, Verona and Burt visit family, and mostly white, old friends, and former colleagues in each city. Early in the picture, Verona is talking to her sister on the phone about Burt's parents helping with the baby. She is surrounded by drawings of human anatomy. These consist of a painting of the muscular structure of a torso, sketches of skeletal ankles, and a plastic model of the brain. Hidden among them is a portrait of what appears to be an infant Verona being cradled by her sister. The inclusion of this photo amidst cold instructional nature of the medical drawings is striking. Here the auteur reminds the viewer of the human within these disjointed parts. Talking with her sister, Verona hints that Burt's parents are selfish. She snarks, "I think they're probably happy to be the only set of grandparents. They'll have the baby to themselves."

Their quest begins in their own city of Denver. Burt and the now very pregnant Verona drive to Burt's parents for dinner. During the drive Burt (in the passenger seat) says "I really want her to have an epic kind of childhood. I want her to run along streams and know how to work a canoe—be able to entertain herself outside. I want her childhood to be… Huck Finny. Ya know?" Verona, gazing wistfully ahead into the distance of the mountain road replies, "Yeah I had that." Burt turns and looks at her in total disbelief but only says "Yeah, exactly." When they arrive at Burt's parents, they are met at the door by his mother, Gloria (Catherine O'Hara) who brings them inside. She has Verona sit next to her on the couch so she can listen to the baby's heartbeat. Gloria asks, "Verona do you think she's going to look like you?" Verona replies, "Well I hope so. I think I'm the mom." Gloria continues, "Okay, and just how black do you think she'll be?" Burt only offers a whispered "Mom!" Verona says "Wow. I don't know." Although this scene is meant to be funny, it does mark Verona's mixed race and evokes the eternal notions of percentage and

the one drop rule. While Burt's mom seems interested in their future grandchild, Burt's father, Jerry (Jeff Daniels) is not as thrilled. Later, over dinner, Jerry and Gloria announce that they will be leaving for a two-year trip to Antwerp, Belgium one month before the baby is due. Burt and Verona are shocked because they were counting on Burt's parents for help with the baby. Even though Burt and Verona moved to Denver for them, they are selling their house and moving out of the country to get away from the baby. Verona's parents are deceased.

They then fly to Phoenix to visit Verona's old boss Lily (Allison Janney) and her husband Lowell (Jim Gaffigan). Along with Lily and Lowell's middle school age children, they all go to the dog track. When the race ends, they get lunch, and we find out that they are not married. Burt wants to, but Verona doesn't. After witnessing Lily and Lowell's alcoholism and familial dysfunction, they head to Tucson to meet Verona's sister Grace (Carmen Ejogo). They meet in the hotel lobby where Grace works, and talk about getting lunch. Grace asks if they would like to go out to eat, but Burt thinks it's too hot. He says, "Literally like an oven. Like if you were in an oven that's what it would be like. It's almost like… god's trying to melt us all down, make something better." Later, Verona and Grace are shopping for bath tubs and decide to climb inside to try one out. Verona lies back into her younger sisters arms and they talk about their parents and the new baby. Grace says "You know that baby's gonna have something of them in her. I mean what if she's got mom's crazy green eyes or something? What if it's one of those features that skipped you and me and jumps onto the face of that little baby? You're bringing them back you know in a little way."

Burt and Verona then take the train to Madison to visit Burt's pretend cousin LN Fisher-Herrin (Maggie Gyllenhaal) and her husband Roderick (Josh Hamilton). LN, a professor at UW-Madison gives Verona disingenuous compliments about her looks saying "Oh Verona you look just beautiful. Look at your hair." As LN stares at Verona's hair, the look on her face betrays her

polite words. LN is simply a passive-aggressive racist. Despite the liberal zeal she applies to feminist issues, LN shares the same prejudice as any racist. LN and Roderick are rather arrogant about their parenting practices, which include a family bed, the disdain of strollers, and breast feeding their toddler. At dinner, it becomes too much for Burt when LN says to Verona "I was just wondering how much your momma was able to pass on to you about motherhood before she died. Your people have such a wonderful oral tradition." Fed up with LN's thinly veiled condescension, Burt blows his top and directs a few choice words at LN and Roderick. Before leaving, he convinces LN's son to go for a wild ride through the house in the stroller while his mom chases the two.

From Madison, they fly to Montreal to visit some college friends Tom (Chris Messina) and Munch (Melanie Lynskey). Verona loves their big, somewhat cosmopolitan family with four adopted kids. The two couples go out to a jazz club, then to a diner when the subject of marriage comes up again. Unfazed when he learns that Verona is resistant to the idea of marriage, Tom uses a white sugar cube and two brown ones to symbolize his friend's family. He covers them with an entire bottle of syrup which he explains symbolizes love. Later at karaoke, Tom confesses that Munch had another miscarriage recently. Next, Burt receives a call from his brother Courtney (Paul Schneider) in Miami explaining that his wife has left him. They get on a plane and head south. After a few days, the couple drives to Verona's childhood home somewhere in the South. The house resembles an old plantation mansion. They open the double door and pass through to the rear of the house, stopping on the back porch that overlooks the water. They have finally found a home. The film ends.

With respect to racelessness, *Away We Go* shifts back and forth between scenes in which Verona's race is foregrounded or raised in ways the viewer can't ignore and scenes where her race fades and becomes unseen. Aside from the comment made by Burt's mom regarding the

baby's skin tone and LN's passive aggressive remark about Verona's people, the film ignores Verona's biraciality. Indeed, the picture seems absolutely committed to liberal-minded colorblindness. In the screenplay written by Dave Eggers and Vendela Vida, Verona is described as being "34 and of mixed race—her mom was white, her father black" (p. 7). When asked about Verona's race in a 2009 interview with *Women and Hollywood*, co-writer Vida replies:

> Yes we did and we wrote her with Maya Rudolph in mind. It was important to me that she be mixed race and it was also important that she and her partner not have any conversations between the two of them of her being mixed race. Other people could comment on it but it's never an issue between Burt and Verona.

The movie's director, Sam Mendes, echoes these sentiments in a separate 2009 Movie|Fone interview. Addressing the issue of race in *Away We Go* he says:

> We're talking about an era in which probably the most important person in the country is mixed race, and you've got this mixed-race person (in the movie) who's part of this couple and that's never commented on. Which I always loved about the movie – it's just a fact that oh yeah, Burt and Verona, they've been living together since college. Yeah, they're mixed race, so what's the big deal? Nobody even thinks about it. That all is part of why hopefully it speaks to people now.

Mendes was referring to the newly inaugurated president here. Interestingly enough, Obama cited the film as a favorite in a 2010 interview with *People*. While the film goes to some length to downplay race, there are a few items that are difficult to ignore. Much like Verona's presence primes viewers with questions of ancestry, her unborn child is also an ever-present reminder that although the film presents a world that tries to be nonracial, a transgression of the color line still carries the psychological baggage of its history in the United States. While the actions of Burt's parents could be read simply as their attempt to avoid helping with caring for the baby, one could argue that they are also attempting to avoid difficult questions regarding the child's ancestry. Moreover, the filmmakers want the fact that Burt and Verona are not married to be read as progressive and generational; it nevertheless is another echo of the husbandless tragic

mulatto figure. However liberal Burt's parents appear, the fact that their son is fathering a mixed race child out of wedlock is for them too much to take.

Despite the attempt to present a colorblind landscape, *Away We Go* hints at racial imagery and suggestion. Firstly, there is an undeniable abundance of anatomical symbols and signs. It's as if Mendes, Eggers, and Vida are challenging the viewer to question how they see the racial body. Beyond the paintings and sketches hanging in Verona and Burt's home, there are the three-dimensional ultrasound photos that they share with Burt's parents, the references to Verona's "tilted uterus," as well as the tub scene where Verona's sister talks about "features that skip" with regard to the baby. Secondly, there is an uncertainty about Verona that runs throughout. This is especially underscored by the absence of her parents but also by Burt's apparent indifference to his wife's background. When she likens her childhood to Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, Burt is unable to place the image of his wife into such a halcyon youth. This is humorously evidenced early in the picture when Verona wakes to find Burt sitting at his workbench whittling a piece of wood. The following exchange takes place:

> Verona: What are doing?
>
> Burt: Cobbling?
>
> Verona: (Laughs).
>
> Burt: I really want to be that dad that knows how to make stuff outta wood. Ya know? I just want our kid to… wake up in the morning and walk out onto the back porch and find me cobbling.
>
> Verona: You know… that's not what it's called.
>
> Burt: Yeah it is.
>
> Verona: Burt, cobbling is shoes. That's why the people that make shoes are called cobblers. You're not cobbling you're carving. Or… possibly whittling.

Here we are reminded that Verona had a "Huck Finny" childhood. She knows the difference between whittling and cobbling whereas Burt does not. That Burt doubts Verona's

connection to a life like Twain's character is an example of colorblindness. The film's attempt to present Verona as ordinary is admirable. However, the ways in which race is submerged as opposed to being inclusive troubles readings of a raceless utopia. While Burt's allusion to the browning of America is intended to have an inevitability sanctioned by "god," the couple's idealistic view of race still meets resistance from the unlikely corners of Burt's parents and LN. In the end, *Away We Go* presents an alternative vision of a mixed race character that is both progressive and problematic. On one hand it is refreshing to see a character that is not completely raceless. The viewer is made aware of her ancestry but we don't dwell there. On the other hand, we also see that Verona inhabits mainly white spaces. It becomes difficult to parse Verona's identity from the white environment that surrounds her, and yet she is never fully made a member of the club. One has the sense that she has a different view of the racial world, but we barely get a glimpse of what it might be like.

Maya Rudolph also played a prominent role in the romantic comedy *Bridesmaids* (2011) as the bride to be Lillian. Shot partly in Milwaukee, the film is a crudely funny look at the way two bridesmaids compete for Lillian's attention. Her best friend Annie (Kristin Wiig) resents the constant one-upmanship that occurs between herself and the gorgeous and wealthy Helen (Rose Byrne). Initially, Annie was Lillian's wedding planner, but after the group gets food poisoning at a restaurant that Annie suggested, Helen takes over planning the shower and wedding ceremony. While the film centers on Annie and Helen's tug of war, Rudolph's character merits mentioning in the context of this chapter. The film manages to avoid portraying Lillian in a stereotypical fashion. The viewer is made aware of the fact that she is mixed primarily through the image of her parents at the engagement party. Her black father (Franklyn Ajaye) delivers a congratulatory speech while Lillian's white mother (Lynne Marie Stewart) looks on from the front of the gathering. Her father says he looks forward to having Lillian's rich white fiancé as a part of the family. He continues, "So much so that you two should get married right now and save me a shit-

load of money." This sentiment is repeated nearly two hours later. When the 1990s pop group Wilson Phillips makes a surprise appearance at the end of the ceremony to which he mumbles "I am not paying for this shit."

Although these scenes reinforce old stereotypes about race and wealth, Rudolph's character pushes back on old stereotypes of mixed race individuals and interracial marriage. Historically rare in mixed race cinema, she is shown with two parents. Their casting almost seems like an afterthought. Her father is black – another atypical feature as mixed race characters were usually assigned white fathers. However, her parents are given very little screen time in comparison to Annie's mother Judy (Jill Clayburgh). Her mother has no lines. Her father does but they are brief and underscore his otherness. He is not raceless. Seldom were the mulattas of old portrayed with a love interest let alone allowed to marry a rich white man without inviting the wrath of the surrounding white community. Lillian is also at home with who she is. She has no identity issues or problems fitting in. Her marriage isn't novel and everything about her life is simply ordinary. The difficulty here is trying to parse what is ordinary from what is white.

Rudolph also took a supporting role in *Friends with Kids* (2011), a story about three (with the exception of Rudolph's character) white couples who struggle to maintain their relationships after they begin having children. Leslie (Maya Rudolph) and Alex (Chris O'Dowd) are the first to have a baby followed by Missy (Kristin Wiig) and Ben (Jon Hamm). Finally, Julie (Jennifer Westfeldt) and Jason (Adam Scott) join the rest of the circle after agreeing to have one of their own as unattached best friends. Unlike her roles in *Away We Go* and *Bridesmaids*, Leslie's race isn't marked. Beyond observing that her skin is slightly darker than that of her friends, nothing identifies Leslie in a racial sense. She also has mixed race children. Even though she isn't the star, she appears throughout the picture. After the beginning dinner scene with all six friends, the film moves four years ahead to the night of Adam's birthday. Everyone meets at the home of Leslie

and Alex, but instead of a celebratory atmosphere, they are greeted with the loud shouting of Leslie as she tries to cajole Alex into doing his part of the childcare and household duties. She is in full mom-mode as she walks through the house picking up toys and gathering laundry. Alex is the dutiful yet oblivious husband who just wants to stay out of his wife's crosshairs. As the film progresses, Missy and Ben separate under the strain of their relationship and eventually Julie and Jason drop their platonic status and become romantically involved.

The racial environment of *Friends with Kids* is much more sterile than *Bridesmaids* and *Away We Go*. There aren't any references to Leslie's ancestry nor are there any gratuitous stereotypes or crude racial jokes. Like Elizabeth from *Wishful Thinking*, Leslie is just one of the gang. And yet, one wonders if this is only another mixed race character added as a token in a white environment. None of Leslie's friends see her as a person of color nor does the writer/director. Frankenberg (1993) has argued that this kind of color evasiveness acts a way to distance whites from perceptions of essentialist racism. Moreover, Doane (2003) contends that claiming not to see race ultimately serves to mark racial topics as illegitimate for conversation and upholds white hegemony. While it is tempting to tell ourselves that what we see in Leslie is a seemingly mixed race woman living an ordinary life, it is a life that too closely resembles whiteness. We do not see or hear about her extended family nor does she have any black friends so there is no opportunity for her to code switch. She doesn't display a knowledge of black music or art that would connote a mixed cultural background. She is functionally white. Although many viewers would know her racial background, in the dreamy space of suspended belief, Leslie becomes white. In the end, *Friends with Kids* reinforces sameness precisely by ignoring or "not seeing" Leslie's race.

The daughter of famous singer-songwriter Minnie Riperton and music producer Richard Rudolph, Maya Rudolph was born in Gainesville, Florida on July 27th, 1972. Rudolph graduated

from the University of California at Santa Cruz with a B.A. in photography. Before turning to acting, Rudolph played in the bands *Super Sauce* and *The Rentals.* She began acting with an offbeat comedy troupe called *The Groundlings* and earned small movie roles in *As Good as it Gets* (1997), *Gattaca* (1997), and the television series *Chicago Hope* (1996-1997). Her career took off when she joined the cast of *Saturday Night Live* in 2000. She remained a cast member until 2007 and occasionally does special appearances on the show. Indeed, her chameleon-like work on SNL paved the way for her ambiguously-raced film roles. She effectively passed for white, Asian, and Latina with her impersonations of Barbara Streisand, Lucy Liu, and Jennifer Lopez. In the documentary film *The Black List: Volume Two*, she shares some thoughts on her own sense of racial identity. She says “My mother’s black. My father’s white. Uh my brother’s darker than me and I’m lighter than him and we’re just, we’re everything.” While to some it may sound like Rudolph is avoiding blackness, it is clear that she is simply acknowledging her parents and attempting to describe a new identity that is much more pluralistic in nature. Interestingly, when discussing going to see *Flashdance* in 1983 she says “I had no idea she was mixed. And that was not because she wasn’t, you know, in a black family on a sitcom, you know. She was just her own entity in that movie. It didn’t have to be, um, labeled. Which, I love, personally. I don’t, I don’t care for labels. They’re just kind of, uh, forced.”

Celeste & Jesse Forever

Rashida Leah Jones, is the daughter of music giant Quincy Jones and actress Peggy Lipton. Jones began her acting career with a small part on the television mini-series *The Last Don* (1997). Movie roles soon followed with *Myth America* (1998), *East of A* (2000), and *Roadside Assistance* (2002). In 2000, she won the part of Louisa Fenn in Fox’s *Boston Public.* She is best known for her roles as Karen Filippelli on NBC’s *The Office* (2006-2011) and Ann Perkins on *Parks and Recreation* (2009-2014). Her most notable film roles include *I Love You, Man* (2009),

Our Idiot Brother (2011), and *Celeste & Jesse Forever* (2012). This last picture lives in the same world as *Wishful Thinking* and *Away We Go* – a world of romantic comedies with an edge that avoids the well-worn formulas that most films in this genre contain. Most importantly, Jones' character occupies the same racially ambiguous space that we have examined in the previous films.

Celeste & Jesse Forever is the story of Celeste (Jones) and her white husband Jesse (Andy Samberg). High school sweethearts, they married young but at age thirty they have grown apart. Whereas Jesse is passive and extremely laid-back, Celeste is ambitious and driven. She feels that Jesse is not going anywhere in life, and she initiates a divorce. However, the couple decides to remain best friends and live next to each other. At first, all is well. They still hang out and do things together but their white friends Beth (Ari Graynor) and Tucker (Eric Christian Olsen) are appalled. Things change when Jesse decides to start dating but not without sleeping with Celeste in between. After a night of drinking, they end up in bed. The next day Celeste is full of regret and says "That was a bad idea. I'm so sorry." She practically kicks him out. Offended, Jesse leaves. On a trip to San Francisco and Boston, she comes to the realization that she wants to get back together. It isn't long before the real bombshell hits – Jesse confesses that he is having a child with his white girlfriend Veronica (Rebecca Dayan) and wants to make it work. Celeste doesn't take the news well and descends into a tail spin of depression and drinking. Initially, she dives into yoga, running, and dating. After three failed dates, it's clear that she is not ready to let Jesse go and withholds finalizing their divorce, thus preventing Jesse and Veronica from getting married. Celeste hits it off with the white Paul (Chris Messina) from yoga class but keeps him at arm's length. As a bridesmaid in Beth's wedding, the specter of the ceremony reminds Celeste that her own marriage fell apart. In the end of the movie she grants Jesse the divorce and takes her relationship with Paul more seriously.

In a February 6, 2012 post on the blog *Racialicious*, contributor Latoya Peterson identified some of the subtle issues and red flags contained in the film. Peterson writes, “Jones’ character is in a majority white world” and points out that she attends a Halloween party in a “white trash” costume. Several readers took issue with elements of the film as well. One commenter wrote, “I am really curious how Rashida feels about being cast only as a White woman and only with White love interests.” Another reader responded, “She's definitely building a name for herself in these predominantly white spaces, but it always feels a little false like there's this underlying assumption that she might not be "white white" but let's not talk about it and you should just think she's extra tan.” Other commenters associate Jones’ roles with a kind of racial passing or compare her to the roles Maya Rudolph and Jennifer Beals have selected over the course of their careers. It is interesting to note the similarities between these actresses and their challenges to identity with those that Fredi Washington faced some ninety years earlier.

Rashida, along with her sister Kidada, mother, and father were featured in a candid interview in a 2005 issue of *Glamour* magazine. Some of the exchanges between the two sisters are particularly poignant. Growing up, the contrast of Rashida’s green eyes and light-brown straight hair with that of her older sister’s darker skin and curly hair posed difficult situations. For example, Kidada recalls not wanting her mother to pick her up at school to avoid difficult questions from other students. She points out that her sister didn’t have to endure questions about her white mother because “She passed for white!” (p. 247). Rashida’s pleading reply is telling. She says, “Passed?! I had no control over how I looked! This is my natural hair, these are my natural eyes. I’ve never tried to be anything that I’m not. Today I feel guilty, knowing that because of the way our genes tumbled out, Kidada had to go through pain I didn’t have to endure. Loving her so much, I’m sad that I’ll never share that experience with her” (p. 247). It is clear that Rashida passed unintentionally, which underscores the problem of relying on race as a visual fact. Later in a 2008 interview with *Women’s Health* magazine, she expresses a more

cosmopolitan notion of racial identity. She says, "I'm lucky because I have so many clashing cultural, racial things going on: black, Jewish, Irish, Portuguese, Cherokee. I can float and be a part of any community I want. The thing is, I do identify with being black, and if people don't identify me that way, that's their issue. I'm happy to challenge people's understanding of what it looks like to be biracial, because guess what? In the next 50 years, people will start looking more and more like me" (p. 88). Perhaps this last revelation explains the largely raceless nature of *Celeste & Jesse Forever*.

While she didn't direct the film, Jones co-wrote the script along with Will McCormack. Perhaps this helps to explain some of the progressive representation of her character. Celeste is the anti-mulatta. Gone is the white male benefactor from days of old. Jesse is kicked to the curb by the professionally ambitious Celeste. She emasculates him further by calling him "Jess" for short. Celeste explodes the notion of the tragic mixed race figure and replaces it with unapologetic boldness. During an interview for her book *Shitegeist*, she proclaims, "American culture is dying and there is an unrelenting appetite in this country for reality shows, uh, talentless pop stars like Riley Banks, recycled, bloated movie franchises, and the more we consume crap the more we want crap. You are what you eat." Although Celeste is a "trend forecaster," these statements could be read as an indictment of white culture. It also stands to reason that Jones is aware of the long history of mixed race representation and is pushing back against it. Based on her comments in the *Women's Health* interview it's evident that she is resistant to racial labels. This makes one wonder if the world Jones presents in the film is meant to be white or one that simply doesn't adhere to the same rules. Ultimately, *Celeste & Jesse Forever* challenges viewers to decide the importance of race when it is simply ignored, or rendered invisible, or white-washed.

It is clear that representations of “biracial” people have evolved considerably over time and that part of this change has resulted in moving our society closer to a less-racial one. Yet, questions still remain. For raceless representations, the tension between being unrestricted culturally and making whiteness normative cannot be understated. Mixed race identity implies a freedom from proscription that allows individuals to choose cultural elements from each part of their parental lineage. On the other hand, most of the films in this genre could be read as having mixed race characters who are simply acting white. Perhaps we could stretch this last assessment and conclude that these characters are code shifting and that we are observing them as they navigate white environments. The problem is, however, with the exception of Maya Rudolph’s character in *Away We Go*, the viewer is not shown anything beyond their interactions with other whites in white spaces.

While so called raceless movies often received the most attention, during the same time period several films dealt with mixed race identity in ways that didn’t ignore racial difference. This parallel current in mixed race cinema works to delineate raceless films as a separate genre. It illuminates racelessness as an ideology rather than a mechanism of casting. In concluding this chapter it is important to note the films that did not adhere to colorblind ideology in order to show that racelessness isn’t a typical component in every mixed race movie. As mentioned earlier, tragic mulatto characters largely fell out of favor during the Civil Rights movement, and yet they didn’t completely disappear. In the comedy *Carbon Copy* (1981), successful white businessman Walter Whitney (George Segal) discovers he has a long lost black son in black Roger Porter (Denzil Washington). *Under the Cherry Moon* (1986) channeled elements of the old stereotype through the character Christopher Tracy (Prince) who falls in love with the wealthy white Mary Sharon (Kristin Scott Thomas). Her father (Steven Berkoff) objects and has one of his henchmen shoot Christopher. He dies in Mary’s arms. *Angel Heart* (1987) paid disturbing homage to the trope with mixed race priestess Epiphany Proudfoot (Lisa Bonet). Set in 1950s Louisiana, the

film is replete with plantation and voodoo imagery. Epiphany meets the white private investigator Harry Angel (Mickey Rourke) and the two eventually sleep together before discovering that they are father and daughter. Angel murders Epiphany in the end. Many of Spike Lee's films explored racial tensions with light-skinned characters. *School Daze* (1988) portrayed the racial politics on an all-black college campus as they played out between the dark-skinned "jiggaboos" and the light-skinned "wannabees." *Jungle Fever* (1991) looked at the fallout of an affair between the dark Flipper (Wesley Snipes) and his Italian-American secretary (Annabella Sciorra) on his mixed race wife (Lonette McKee).

As the century drew to a close, a dramatic increase in activism and scholarship geared toward raising awareness of mixed race identity gained visibility in the mainstream media and national discourse. The inclusion of a multiracial category on the 2000 United States census also helped the growing recognition of mixed race identity. Film and television followed suit leaving many to claim that we had moved beyond the racial strife of the past. *Multifacial* (1995) was Vin Diesel's brief exploration of the casting issues he faced as a multiracial actor. In *Get on the Bus* (1996) dark-skinned Flip (Andre Braugher) persists in trying to impugn Gary's (Roger Guenveur Smith) mixed race identity. *A Family Thing* (1996) peers into the life of white Earl Pilcher Jr. (Robert Duval) after he finds out that his biological mother is a black woman and meets his black brother Ray Murdock (James Earl Jones). *Mixing Nia* (1998) is the story of mixed race advertising executive Nia (Karen Parsons) and her mostly light-hearted journey to unpack her racial identity. *Devotion* (2005) tells the tale of eleven-year-old Alice Hope (Jasmine Richards) and her struggle to come to terms with the loss of her white mother in a car accident at the hands of her black father Grant (Carl Bailey). After moving to a new town, she has conflicts with black and white students at school and finds it difficult to make friends. *Devotion* also gives a nod to Sirk's *Imitation of Life* with two doll scenes. Like Sarah Jane's tussle with Susie over the black and white dolls, Alice's conflict with her father over her dolls parallels the scene from *Imitation*

of Life. It also resurrects the image of the Clark doll study so widely associated with the *Brown* decision in 1954.

In *Rain* (2006), the mixed race Rain Arnold (Brooklyn Sudano) witnesses the murder of her sister. Her black adoptive mother (Khandi Alexander) sends her back to live with her white biological mother (Faye Dunaway). *Yelling to the Sky* (2011) portrays two mixed race sisters who grow up in a crime-filled neighborhood. Sweetness O'Hara (Zoe Kravitz) and her older sibling Ola Katherine (Antonique Smith) live at home with their white alcoholic father Gordon (Jason Clarke) and their emotionally disturbed black mother Lorene (Yolanda Ross). *Yelling to the Sky* stands as one of the few to portray the interpersonal dynamics that can occur when mixed race characters try to fit into the black community.[11] While the devastation associated with being rejected is clear in most of the films in this project, it is most often linked with rejection of the white community. Being shunned by black folks carries an extra sting that, although subtle, is apparent in *Yelling*.

It's striking to juxtapose the racist imagery and revisionism of *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) with *Lincoln* (2012). While we still have inexcusable racism, Americans of a century ago would likely marvel at the changes in race relations. Director Steven Spielberg's portrayals of mixed race characters are an interesting contrast to those seen in *The Birth of a Nation*. His retelling of the Civil War's final months includes some fairly sophisticated representations of the mixed race characters Lydia Hamilton Smith, Elizabeth Keckley, and William Slade that breathe life into these oft overlooked yet central figures from Lincoln's circle. Unfortunately in the film, each of these characters is given little screen time and even worse, their own contributions to abolish slavery were completely ignored. Elizabeth Keckley (Gloria Reuben) is largely portrayed

[11] For films that feature mixed race characters in mostly black environments see *The Landlord* (1970), *Trick Baby* (1972), *Buck and the Preacher* (1972), *Sparkle* (1976), *School Daze* (1988), *Malcolm X* (1992), *Get on the Bus* (1996), *Eve's Bayou* (1997), and *Hav Plenty* (1997).

as someone who despite being in close proximity with the president, is only seen discussing the amendment once even though she founded the Contraband Relief Fund who gave aid to freed men and women. What's more, even though she was Mrs. Lincoln's dress maker she is not depicted as the true entrepreneur that she was in real life. William Slade (Stephen Henderson) is depicted as a slave-like valet in the film, brushing the president's suit and trying to persuade him to wear dress gloves. However, Slade was an activist for the cause. As a member of the Columbian Harmony Society, he helped African Americans secure burial plots in the 1850s. He also exchanged information regarding fugitive slaves held in Washington between African American communities in Ohio and D.C. (Sweet, 2013). Lydia Hamilton Smith (S. Epatha Merkerson) isn't seen until near the end of the film and while Thaddeus Stevens (Tommy Lee Jones) appears to love her, one concludes that she is still the housekeeper. And yet, there is some evidence to suggest that she and Stevens participated in the Underground Railroad. Smith also ran a successful boarding house.

Indeed, even Lincoln himself can be read as a mixed race figure. Not only does he metaphorically bridge the gap between blacks and whites in trying to end slavery, but his actual racial ancestry is called into question. In a scene at the start of the film, the president (Daniel Day-Lewis) is talking to two black soldiers at an army camp. Private Harold Green (Coleman Domingo) and Corporal Ira Clark (David Oyelowo) are describing the battle at Jenkins' Ferry when Corporal Clark takes the opportunity to point out the gap in wages between white and black soldiers and the fact that there no negro officers. Then the following exchange takes place:

> Lincoln: "What will you do after the war Corporal Clark?"
>
> Corporal Clark: "Work, Sir. Perhaps you'll hire me."
>
> Lincoln: "Perhaps I will."
>
> Corporal Clark: "But, you should know sir that I get sick at the smell of boot black and I cannot cut hair."

> Lincoln: "I've yet to find a man that could cut mine so it would make any difference."
>
> Private Green: "You got springy hair for a white man."
>
> Lincoln: (laughing) "Yes I do. My last barber hanged himself. And the one before that. He left me his scissors in his will."

Private Green's springy hair comment is subtle but it demonstrates the idea that to some degree, questions regarding Lincoln's racial lineage remain a part of his legacy. The primary claim is that Lincoln's mother Nancy Hanks had an affair with a slave from a nearby plantation and the 16th president became the result of that union. There is not much in the way of evidence for any of this and yet it's interesting that some scholars and filmmakers have acknowledged these old accusations in recent work on Lincoln. In *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln,* Doris Kearns Goodwin describes Lincoln's parents. His father Thomas was "a rough carpenter and hired hand when he married Nancy Hanks, a quiet, intelligent woman of uncertain ancestry" (p. 47). Other biographers and historians have examined these persistent rumors and most accept that Nancy Hanks was the illegitimate daughter of Lucy Hanks but none can say conclusively who her father may have been (Donald, 1995; Steers, 2007; Simon, 2010; Wilson, 2010).

Black or White (2015) is the story of the mixed race child Eloise (Jillian Estell) caught in a custody battle between her white grandfather Elliott Anderson (Kevin Costner) and her black grandmother Rowena Jeffers (Octavia Spencer). Interestingly, this film also contains a reference to the Clark doll study - Eloise has one black doll and one white doll standing prominently on her dresser. That *Black or White* is such a recent picture with a major Hollywood star suggests that mixed race themes and issues are still quite salient. Costner's effort here is admirable. Beyond financing much of the project himself, he is attempting to have a conversation with viewers regarding race and presumably expects viewers to have conversations with each other. Moreover,

Costner has a genuine understanding of what we learn from film and the history therein. At a private screening for Pastor T. D. Jakes and friends, he said the following during a Q&A session:

> Theater is one of the great places in our life. It's one of the first places our parents ever allow us to go because they somehow think that the theater is safe. And we come to the theater and what do we see? I don't know I'm a guy I finally learned that must be how you kiss a girl because that's how Sean Connery's kissing her. And I learned what it was like to be a hero when someone stepped forward and was heroic. And I learned when I watched *Giant* when Rock Hudson got beat in the last fist fight. He lost. He was the hero but he lost. That was different for me. But when Elizabeth Taylor leaned down and said you never stood taller, I understood that you don't have to win in order to win. You don't have to be the winner to be the one who's heroic. And so the movies have those opportunities. Are we making the most of them in American cinema?

It's fascinating that Costner's comments echo those of Jane Addams in *The Spirt of Youth and the City Streets* more than a century earlier. She argued that children yearn for "a play unlike life." Thomas Edison likewise believed that he could "teach them by pictures." Henry Giroux maintained that movies act as a locus of "public pedagogy" just as bell hooks contended that the cinema served "a pedagogical role in the lives of many people." Roger Ebert as well believed that film acted as a vehicle that enabled viewers to "identify with people." These sentiments noted in the first chapter of this dissertation underscore the long standing interdependent relationship between children and film – a relationship that is sure to continue. Moreover, this dissertation has shown that children and adults alike learn popular representations of "biracial" people from film.

CHAPTER FIVE

PRESENT, PAST, AND FUTURE

All this has happened before, and it will all happen again.

Narrator, *Peter Pan*, 1953

Findings

My original contribution to this area of research is one of scope. Although a number of film scholars and critics have analyzed mixed race characters, there is no treatment spanning the last hundred and thirteen years. Moreover, within the context of the thirteen major films in this project, I have viewed and analyzed over one hundred and thirty movies and television shows. Secondly, my dissertation focused exclusively on mixed race characters that arose from black and white unions. While other mixed race formulations are just as worthy of this kind of effort, black/white mixed race characters have come to symbolize the triumphs and struggles of our nation. Furthermore, few if any have asked to what extent film representations of mixed race characters have had the capacity to educate audiences beyond mixed race stereotypes. This dissertation also represents the most rigorous attempt at analyzing the three broad themes of the tragic mulatto, racial passing, and especially racelessness in mixed race cinema. There are few formal examinations of racelessness and its links to colorblind ideology in cinema. Finally, this study examines the films and situates them in the context of historical events as well as the current racial and social climate.

The trajectory of positive representations in mixed race cinema does not indicate a straight ascending line over time. It is an up and down path that follows changes in the racial attitudes of the dominant culture as well as the motivations of the filmmakers who made them. The mixed race depictions in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* were benign compared to the ghouls in *The Birth of a Nation*. Indeed Griffith's film was much more in line with the Jim Crow environment

of the time. Oscar Micheaux's work served as an exception regarding mixed race portrayals. As a black filmmaker, he had a different perspective on the many shades of black life. His mixed race characters were not merely positive they were truthful in that they mirrored the good and bad in everyday life. Unfortunately, few whites beyond censors saw his movies until his last film *The Betrayal* (1948), which was the first black-produced movie to open in white theaters. Micheaux was also one of the few directors to depict positive mixed race characters who shared space alongside of positive portrayals of unequivocally black characters. Reading these situations through a critical mixed race lens reveals tensions and continuities between the presentation of light and dark skin on screen. Writing in the *Journal of Critical Mixed Race Studies*, G. Reginald Daniel writes:

> European Americans, even if only unconsciously, often select individuals of color who more closely approximate them in physical appearance, believing they are making impartial decisions based on competence or other criteria. Verna Keith, Cedric Herring, and other scholars, by contrast, hold that European Americans may consciously express a preference for individuals of color who more closely approximate their phenotypical norms as well as assumed behavioral and attitudinal characteristics. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the media, entertainment industry, and world of high fashion—to name only a few obvious areas—where there are advantages that accrue to those who more closely approximate the dominant European American aesthetic pervading those cultural spheres. (p. 14)

Although they are prevalent in many mixed race films, these mechanisms are not as apparent in Micheaux's films. In *Within Our Gates*, Sylvia Landry is seen with her honest, hardworking, and unmistakably black parents. Likewise, in *The Symbol of the Unconquered* we see Eve Mason and Hugh Van Allen with the diligent yet comedic Abraham. *Veiled Aristocrats* also portrays this dyad in Rena Walden and Frank Fowler. Importantly, Micheaux was always able to include light and dark characters that did not fit into positive categories. While he has been accused of favoring light skinned actors and actresses, he did not let skin tone dictate a character's honor or lack thereof. *Lost Boundaries* was analogous to Micheaux's pictures in that Scott and Marcia Carter were seen with black doctors and the like who were undeniably positive

in how they were represented. Elements of *Pinky* fit this mold as well. Still, many of the films in this dissertation have mixed race characters that are variously juxtaposed with black characters that are either undesirable in some fashion or serve to elevate the light skin of the other.

In view of these depictions, one could conclude that the average viewer learned something about these characters that pushed beyond the stereotypes but we can never fully know what contemporaneous viewers made of these observations. Indeed, one of the major limitations of this project is not being able to survey those audiences regarding what they may have learned and suggests possible areas of further inquiry. Future researchers could design studies that capture viewer response to new films with mixed race characters as well as older pictures.

It's rather astonishing to consider just how long mixed race characters have occupied the contentious cinematic space they do. While there has been obvious change in representation over the last century, the degree to which this change has been positive remains unclear. Sure, gone are the days of the villainous and conniving mulattoes that appeared in *The Birth of a Nation* or characters that would deny their ancestral origins in order to pass for white; however, this is complicated by themes of racelessness as well as echoes of the tragic mulatto. Why is it after all these years that filmmakers and viewers alike continue to be interested in these seemingly marginal figures? The answer is simple – race still matters in America and likely always will. Moreover, mixed race matters even more to us precisely because it symbolizes our fitful and troubled union and history. It should come as no surprise that cinematic representations of mixed race people continue to be a popular locus of racial discourse.

Not surprisingly, it became clear throughout this project that whiteness is porous while blackness is not. This is especially evident in films in which racial passing plays a central role. Because passing characters are understood to be white in the context of the plot, their racial identity is indeterminate. These figures move back and forth between their projections of black

and white images. White-looking skin enables this camouflage whereas black skin does not. Passing demonstrates that the act was bidirectional. Although passers often did so intentionally, they were also subject to mistaken identity.

Like the plethora of mixed race literature that came before them, the *Uncle Tom's Cabin* films, *The Birth of a Nation* and Oscar Micheaux's work generated debate and discussion amongst viewers regarding blackness, the specter of intermarriage, and racial uplift. The debate continued with both *Imitation of Life* pictures, *Pinky*, and beyond. However, this time the discourse centered on whiteness, sympathy, and loyalty. Racelessness demonstrated that while passing themes faded, mixed race representation continued to create consternation regarding race and visibility, cultural freedom and proscription, colorblindness and whiteness. While some of the most recent movies embrace mixed race themes, *Devotion*, *Yelling to the Sky*, *Black or White*, they simultaneously call into question the continuing problems with mixed race representation and makes one wonder just how far we have come since the earliest days of these marginal characters.

Throughout this dissertation, I have had the desire to conclude that the racial problems of the past have begun to disappear. I hoped, in the end, to arrive at a place in which mixed race representation in film bridged the gulf between black and white and helped to heal the ugly scars of racism and discrimination in this country. Unfortunately this is not entirely the case. Racial strife and struggle are baked into the American experience. The anxiety around mixed race people as it is expressed in cinema started long ago. The films in this dissertation demonstrate that representations of these people have improved over time and yet the epidemic of colorblind ideology is disheartening. One can imagine circumstances in which filmmakers made casting decisions based on fairly innocuous reasons, i.e. reputation for work ethic, prior performance, contractual obligation, etc. However these reasons do not shield these films from a colorblind or

raceless analysis. Sure, *Wishful Thinking*, *Away We Go*, and *Celeste & Jesse For Ever* contain more positive representations than we've seen historically, but we also never really understand much about those characters beyond their current situations. Characters without indicators that anchor them to familial or ancestral ties encourage viewers to draw their own conclusions.

What I have demonstrated here is that mixed race representation has changed dramatically over the last century. Characters have progressively become more positive. While some characters continue to be subjected to racial proscriptions and expectations of the larger society, they still exhibit the capacity to diminish racism. In spite of all this, mixed race characters have shown to be diverse and varied over time. They haven't always been benevolent. Although the mixed race figures in *The Birth of a Nation*, Jefferson Driscoll from *The Symbol of the Unconquered*, and Sergeant Waters in *A Soldier's Story* were detestable, they nevertheless presented difficult truths about all people – some are evil, mean-spirited and undeserving of sympathy. It is hoped that the mixed race characters in future films will be just as varied and complex as the real people they are ostensibly modeled after.

While the legacy of slavery is distant in regard to today's mixed race characters, tragic mulattoes still exist in cinema. They are no longer defined by plantation life, rape, and white fathers, and yet they retain another tenet that is central to this ancient figure – the contested racial space between black and white. Despite over a century of slow progress, the racially mixed in America continue to symbolize the history of turmoil, violence, and conflict amongst these two groups. Nowhere is this illustrated more powerfully than on the silver screen. Although the raceless characters in Chapter Four appear to work against this analysis, they're ambiguity functions much like their passing predecessors whether the audience knows it or not. Indeed, this project is all the more salient given the current racial climate. A hundred years ago, racism was

much more overt in society and the films reflected it. Now, most films with mixed race characters tend to shy away from engaging these themes.

Recent films demonstrate that the appeal of the racially marginalized continues for filmmakers. Mixed race stereotypes have evolved overtime in a generally more positive direction. Yet, one wonders what this signals after over a century of moving pictures employing variations of this trope. Do we conclude that these new biracial figures symbolize new understandings of what it means to live along the color line? Do we live in a post-racial society? The answer to this question depends on who you ask. Indeed, the use of “post” has become ubiquitous in academia and beyond (Subramanian, 2010). The recent unpleasantness over the Cheerios commercials may provide some anecdotal evidence that suggests that we are anything but post-racial. In late May of 2013, General Mills released a Cheerios ad depicting a biracial family. After *Just Checking* aired, the company also posted the commercial on its YouTube channel. The ad begins with a young biracial girl asking her white mother about the cereal. She says, “Dad told me that Cheerios is good for your heart, is that true?” Her mother replies, “Says here that Cheerios has whole-grain oats that can help remove some cholesterol, and that’s heart-healthy.” The girl takes the cereal box and scampers off toward the living room. The spot ends with the girl’s black father waking up on the couch and discovering his chest has been covered with Cheerios. In the days that followed, a firestorm of controversy erupted over the casting in this commercial. An apparently small minority of commenters on the product’s YouTube site posted racist, bitter, and venomous reactions to the ad. The vitriol became so caustic that General Mills disabled the comment section. In a National Public Radio interview, Michael Bürgi of Adweek called the negative comments “bile of the darkest order.” General Mills stood by the ad continuing to air it and kept it posted on YouTube where at the time of this writing it has been viewed 4,955, 397 times. Camille Gibson, Vice President Marketing for Big G cereals said, “We felt like we were reflecting an American family.”

Fast forward to Super Bowl Sunday, February 2, 2014. General Mills aired a sequel to *Just Checking* titled *Gracie* during the game. This time, the family is shown in the kitchen. Gracie and her father are sitting at the table while mom is standing next to a countertop with her back to the camera. Using individual cheerios to demonstrate, the dad says, “Hey Gracie, you know how our family has Daddy, Mommy…” Gracie interjects, “and me!” as she pushes a third cheerio next to the other two. The dad says, “Yeah that’s right. Pretty soon… you’re going to have a baby brother” and adds a fourth piece to the group. The mother turns to reveal the profile of her growing belly. Looking slightly puzzled, Gracie smiles and pushes a fifth piece of cereal to the group. She says, “and… a puppy.” The dad says, “Deal.” The mother looks at him silently nonplussed, and the spot ends with the word “Love.” While the commercial has garnered loads of attention in the media, it appears that the cereal maker has been more proactive about removing racist comments from the YouTube site. However, the ad is discussed in other forums and venues where trolling and racism abound. And yet, the overall response to both ads has been positive. At the time of this writing, both ads amassed 76,798/22,398 approvals and 3,103/2,373 disapprovals respectively. Some observers have argued that this controversy and others like it actually represent progress in American society.

Eric Liu, former speech writer and policy advisor to President Bill Clinton, wrote a piece in *Time* in which he provides three lessons to be learned from incidents like these. One, this kind of over the top racism occurs when a society begins moving forward. “To angry whites who resent the multicolored future for leaving them behind, lashing out at a mixed-race kid who likes Cheerios might seem like an act of defiant political incorrectness-but it’s the epitome of powerlessness.” Two, despite the fact that pseudo-controversies like these emerge as a result of well-publicized reports pushed by liberal news editors, they are often more valuable as forms of moral instruction not their newsworthiness. Finally, race is so multivalent that people are often lost in their own understanding of it. In the same *Time* article Liu writes, “The deepest lesson is

that race is getting too complex for racists and more complex than even the well-meaning sometimes realize. *Bi*-racial even seems too simple." Liu's observations seem apt when taken in context of the long arc of history. Still, one wonders how these ads are conceived and what their creators calculate in terms of fallout. The people who attacked the Cheerios ads are the same type who directed racism and hatred toward the first "black" president.

The election of Barack Obama is perhaps one of the most visible challenges to standard notions of racial identity in recent times. Although the president obviously can't be considered a film character, his ubiquitous presence in media equals that of a major movie star. He, more than any other "character" in this project, is a household name. This unprecedented fame is an example of life imitating art. Indeed, since the early 1970s, a host of films and television shows were created with fictional black presidents. These works acted as priming agents for audiences and subconsciously prepared them for the real deal. Moreover, the convergence of cinema, television, and other forms of new media has tended to blur the line between entertainment and reality. Ronald Reagan was the first commander in chief to literally obscure the boundaries between cinema and politics (Rogin, 1987; Doniger, 2004; Menne & Long, 2015). Movies like *The Man* (1972), *Deep Impact* (1998), and *Head of State* (2003) exhibited fictive black presidents and almost appeared as though they were preparing the American public for the real deal. By the time Obama took office, his own stratospheric celebrity would blur the lines between entertainment and politics further than ever before (Kellner, 2009).

Obama's pervasive image defied traditional stereotypes. During the 2008 campaign one often heard him described as well-educated, inspirational, and charismatic (Devos, 2011). Unfortunately, this seems to cut both ways. Obama's omnipresence also includes a world of racist and stereotypical imagery that echoes those of the Jim Crow era. One image in particular drew immediate attention shortly after the first inauguration. On February 18, 2008, the *New York Post*

published a political cartoon that mocked the president's stimulus bill. Drawn by Sean Delonas, the cartoon portrays a dead chimpanzee lying face up in a pool of blood. Standing over the chimp are two police officers. Both have a surprised, if not worried, look on their faces as if to convey their realization that they have just gunned down an unarmed black man, and to make matters worse, that black man happens to be the president of the United States. While one officer's gun is still smoking the other says, "They'll have to find someone else to write the next stimulus bill." Another image that captured the nation's attention was a July 21, 2008 cover of *The New Yorker* which depicted candidate Obama and his wife Michelle re-enacting their infamous fist bump. Obama is dressed in what some might interpret to be full Muslim garb while Michelle sports an afro, camouflage, combat boots, and an assault rifle. The two are standing in the Oval Office next to a full size portrait of Osama Bin Laden and an American flag going up in flames in the fireplace. While each of the images was couched in satire, they were offensive to some and call into question the boundaries of caricature and parody. Some might quibble about which was worse—the monkey or the Muslim—yet, each evoked negative stereotypes.

So when we describe the president's election as a watershed or post-racial moment in American race relations, it must read against the backdrop of the racism simmering just below the surface in our society. The Obama presidency is an important moment in American history, but it does not signal the end of racism. In a sense, Obama functions much like the tragic mulatto in literature and film. He is a figure bridging two worlds and personifies elements of the old trope. Did white voters sympathize with Obama's heritage the way white readers did with Eliza's in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*? Or perhaps, according to some observers, he has more in common with Uncle Tom, a Magic Negro of the highest order (Asim, 2009). Of course, it is nearly impossible to read Obama as a tragic mulatto in the traditional sense, and yet there are aspects of his story that fit the mold. Even the president alludes to this association in *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*. He writes:

> When people who don't know me well, black or white, discover my background (and it usually is a discovery, for I ceased to advertise my mother's race at the age of twelve or thirteen, when I began to suspect that by doing so I was ingratiating myself to whites), I see the split-second adjustments they have to make, the searching of my eyes for some telltale sign. They no longer know who I am. Privately, they guess at my troubled heart, I suppose—the mixed blood, the divided soul, the ghostly image of the tragic mulatto trapped between two worlds. (p. xv)

The overt and subtle racism directed at the president and Cheerios incident illustrate that while many want to believe otherwise, the United States has not become a post-racial society. Over his two terms in office, some Americans thought it acceptable to express racist sentiment toward Obama especially when they are hidden behind an anonymous identity on the internet. Moreover, he has been attacked by whites and blacks for either being black or not being black enough.

Two key components in the Cheerios incident contributed to the way events unfolded. One is the ability for individuals to remain largely anonymous on the internet providing cover for, if they so choose, nefarious behavior. The other component is the increasing numbers of mixed race families. A February 2012 report by the Pew Research Center examines this rising population. Led by Wendy Wang, the report is based on the analysis of the U.S. Census' American Community Survey in addition to Pew's own telephone surveys which explored public attitudes toward intermarriage. Some key findings include the overall increase in interracial unions. In 1980 the percentage of people who married outside of their race was 6.7%, whereas in 2010 the number rose to 15%. When asked if more intermarriage is good for society, 43% said they thought it was a positive change in society, while 11% reported that the change makes things worse. 44% said that the rise in intermarriage made no difference. 35% of Americans said they had an immediate family member or close relative who is currently married to someone from a different race. Moreover, 63% of Americans reported that it "would be fine" if a member of their family married a member of another race or ethnic group. Surely these percentages will increase

as the nation's demographic profile continues in the direction it is headed. Despite not being a post-racial society, the report's findings are an indication of progress.

Future Research

By any measure, there is a great deal of potential future research to uncover in the area of mixed race representation in film. Perhaps most importantly would be the effort to locate and preserve lost films. The following films would be invaluable to researchers and scholars were they to be found. *In Humanity's Cause* (1911), *The Debt* (1912), and *In Slavery Days* (1913), could shed additional light on the relationship between the depiction of mixed race characters and the historical context in which these films were made. *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1916) would be important, given the popularity of Mark Twain. The holy grail of lost films as far as this project is concerned is surely Oscar Micheaux's *The Homesteader* (1919). Although a number of his later films featured nearly identical themes, plots, and characters, its historical value and the fact that it is Micheaux's very first film would make it an incredible find. Likewise, *The House Behind the Cedars* (1924) might provide the modern viewer with a window into one of the only films in which Micheaux negotiated terms with the author whose work was adapted to the screen. Lastly, while five of the eight films in Fredi Washington's filmography are easily found, *Ouanga* (1936) and *One Mile from Heaven* (1937) exist largely in private collections or behind the walls of various film archives. Given her significance as a mixed race figure in cinema, ensuring her films are more widely available would aid in further understanding an admittedly short acting career. Washington's first film *Square Joe* (1922) may be lost. Preservation should be a priority for historians and scholars of film. Beyond locating lost films, there may be prints of recently found films that are in better condition or contain additional footage that would improve continuity. Both of Micheaux's *The Symbol of the Unconquered* and *Veiled Aristocrats* contain gaps that prevent a complete analysis. Still other films, though they are not lost, remain largely unavailable

to the public due to indifference on the part of the owner or disputes over copyright. Perhaps also, the subject matter of these films works against the possibility that they would be re-released. Some examples are 1959's *Night of the Quarter Moon*, *High Yellow* (1965), and *Quadroon* (1971). These films exist but are not in wide circulation.

It would also be interesting to examine how mixed race/light skin functions in "black" films in which mixed race themes are absent. *The Scar of Shame* (1927), *The Bronze Buckaroo* (1939), *Sepia Cinderella* (1947), *Lydia Bailey* (1952), *Bright Road* (1953), *Cooley High* (1975), *House Party* (1990), and *Hav Plenty* (1997) are a few of the pictures that come to mind with light skinned characters who are submerged in black environments. In the films in this dissertation, mixed race characters were often portrayed more positively than their darker counterparts in mostly white environments. Moreover, simply elevating mixed characters in any way conveyed negative messages about dark skin. I suspect that films set in black environments might present a more egalitarian atmosphere regarding the degree of blackness apparent in characters.

An extensive look at the individual careers of contemporary mixed race actors and actresses would be useful in further understanding how passing, racelessness, and whiteness function in these roles. Halle Berry, an actress whose work was not included in this study, has appeared in close to fifty films and television shows since the early 1990s. Although this dissertation examined some of Jennifer Beals' roles, her film career stretches back to 1980. This kind of study was impractical for this project, and yet it could provide further insight into how and why racial representation in film is still so contentious more than a century after its birth.

Another intriguing area of study would be to look closely at the ways in which mixed race representation and notions of hybridity are transmitted to children by examining film and television designed for kids. For decades now, countless observers agree that moving pictures have a strong influence on children and, for better or worse, how they come to understand the

social world around them. Everyone from Thomas Edison to bell hooks has cited the educational power of movies and visual media. That film is so effective in transmitting information is precisely why parents and educators need to be highly cognizant of what children and students are consuming and to mediate and question representations of racial, ethnic, and gender groups. Cartoons in particular, have a somewhat checkered past regarding the depiction of minorities. As noted in Chapter Two, Disney, Warner Brothers, and others produced short animated versions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin.* To be sure, most of these cartoons were shown as pre-movie entertainment intended for adult audiences. However, age restrictions for certain films were not put into place until the late 1960s and by then, many of these cartoons were showing up on Saturday morning television. Given that Stowe's book was read widely by children, it would be interesting to look at how young readers reconcile the images they form when reading books and comparing it to the same characters depicted in films, animated movies and cartoons.

In more recent times, ideas about mixed race and hybridity can be less obvious and much more subversive. The television series *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* (2010) is an example of a seemingly innocent and wholesome program designed to teach life lessons of friendship, determination, and loyalty. Yet, not too far beneath the surface, the long familiar process of reifying race even sullies the youthful purity of *My Little Pony*. While some observers have criticized the series for embracing a kind of black-white dualism in which good ponies are depicted as light-colored and pure as opposed to evil ponies which are depicted as dark-colored, there is much more to be wary of in the way of subtle stereotypes.

Some characters in the *My Little Pony* universe are disturbing. In *Applebuck Season,* the unicorn Twilight Sparkle calls her friend Applejack "stubborn as a mule." Just off camera, a mule whinnys and brays. Twilight turns to face the mule and says "No offence" to which the mule (now on camera) replies "None taken." A nearly identical exchange occurs in *Hurricane*

Fluttershy. When the Pegasus Rainbow Dash calls a mandatory meeting for all pegasi in Ponyville she says, "Library, tonight. Be cool or be mule. No offence." Again the mule replies, "None taken." The problem with this mule is that it is depicted as an outsider who has no true connection to the group and yet he must have parents. Despite the fact that *MLP* doesn't describe the mule's family, the implication that his father is a donkey and his mother is a horse, remains. His physical appearance is drab and devoid of the exuberant energy found in the other ponies. He looks grotesque with buck teeth, knobby knees, droopy eyes, and nearly hairless skin. Even more troublesome is how mules are regarded by the pony named Rarity in the episode *A Dog and Pony Show.* As a fashion designer, Rarity uses gems to adorn her creations. With her supply dwindling she must go out and search for more. During her search, she is abducted by three Diamond Dogs who order her to look for gems and pull a cart filled with their treasure. One of the dogs smacks her on the backside and says "Hyah, mule!" Rarity asks, "Did you just call me a…*mule*? Mules are ugly. Are you saying that I too am ugly?" Given the historical association of the term mulatto with mules, it is difficult to watch these themes embedded in a children's program. Although the term mulatto is never used in *MLP,* one can assume that young viewers are able to deduce the relative value of mules in Equestria.

Other notions of mixed-ness and hybridity turn up in *MLP.* In *Baby Cakes,* two ponies (Mr. and Mrs. Cake) give birth to twins – a son named Pound Cake and a daughter named Pumpkin Cake. The other ponies have come to the hospital to see the newborns. The only problem is one has wings and the other has a horn. Noticing this, Applejack asks "Now how in thunderation is one of them twins a Pegasus and the other one a unicorn?" Mr. Cake answers, "Easy. My great-great-great-great grandfather was a unicorn, and Cup Cake's great aunt's second cousin twice removed was a Pegasus. That makes sense, right?" While this might make genealogical sense, it primes ideas about racial mixing and regressive genes, i.e. blacks with blue eyes etc. A final observation on hybridity in *MLP* is the character Discord. Technically, Discord

is a chimera not a hybrid. Although there is some disagreement as to what constitutes a chimera versus a hybrid, Discord more closely resembles the compound creatures from Greek mythology than something akin to the mule. A subtle difference to be sure. However, it's also one that might be lost on young viewers. Discord is composed of a horse-like head with a deer antler and goat horn. He has a forked tongue, a lion's arm and an eagle claw, one bat wing and one Pegasus wing, a lizard and goat leg, and a dragon's tail. Despite the fact that Discord is an imaginary creature, he can be read as a warning against racial mixing.

Not all mixed race representations are negative in children's entertainment. PBS's *Sid the Science Kid* features an interracial family without overly obvious foregrounding. In this animated series, Sid is an infinitely curious student who loves his friends and family. His father was raised Jewish and his mother is of African descent. Each episode explores basic scientific principles. Also on PBS is *Super Why!* a show that emphasizes reading and problem solving. One of the main characters is Princess Pea whose parents' racial makeup is like Sid's parents – her mother is African American and her father is white. Racial identity isn't called out in *Super Why!* It would be interesting to see what this kind of mixed race representation teaches their intended viewers.

In the future, researchers will likely have access to an ever evolving body of films with mixed race characters. While we might assume that pictures with tragic mulatto or racial passing themes are a permanent part of the past, they will more than likely resurface in one form or another. The same will be true of raceless movies. As long as American society remains preoccupied with race there will be racial subjects to satisfy them.

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Rock, C. (Director). (2003). *Head of State* [Motion Picture]. United States: DreamWorks SKG.

Roddam, F. (Director). (1985). *The Bride* [Motion Picture]. United States: Columbia Pictures Corporation.

Rossen, R. (Director). (1957). *Island in the Sun* [Motion Picture]. United States: Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation.

Rydell, M. (Director). (1972). *Cinderella Liberty* [Motion Picture]. United States: Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation.

Sargent, J. (Director). (1972). *The Man* [Motion Picture]. United States: Paramount Pictures.

Sax, G. (Director). (2010). *Frankie & Alice* [Motion Picture]. United States: Access Motion Pictures.

Schaffner, F. J. (Director). (1968). *Planet of the Apes* [Motion Picture]. United States: Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation.

Schepisi, F. (Director). (1993). *Six Degrees of Separation* [Motion Picture]. United States: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.

Schultz, M. (Director). (1981). *Carbon Copy*. [Motion Picture]. United States: First City.

Schwartz, L. (Director). (2014). *Little White Lie* [Motion Picture]. United States: Truth Aid.

Scott, R. (Director). (1982). *Blade Runner* [Motion Picture]. United States: Warner Bros.

Simien, J. (Director). (2014). *Dear White People*. [Motion Picture]. United States: Code Red.

Singer, B. (Director). (2000). *X-Men* [Motion Picture]. United States: Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation.

Sirk, D. (Director). (1959). *Imitation of Life* [Motion Picture]. United States: Universal Pictures.

Spence, G. (Director). (1998). *The Prophesy II* [Motion Picture]. United States: Dimension Films.

Spielberg, S. (Director). (2001). *A.I Artificial Intelligence* [Motion Picture]. United States: DreamWorks Pictures.

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Stahl, J. (Director). (1934). *Imitation of Life* [Motion Picture]. United States: Universal Pictures.

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Stevens, G. (Director). (1956). *Giant* [Motion Picture]. United States: Warner Bros.

Stevenson, R. (Director). (1974). *Herbie Rides Again* [Motion Picture]. United States: Walt Disney Productions.

Stone, A. L. (Director). (1943). *Stormy Weather* [Motion Picture]. United States: Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation.

Swan, A. (Director). (1998). *Mixing Nia* [Motion Picture]. United States: Arrowhead Pictures.

Tarantino, Q. (Director). (2012). *Django Unchained* [Motion Picture]. United States: Columbia Pictures.

Terwilliger, G. (Director). (1936). *Ouanga* [Motion Picture]. United States: J. H. Hoffberg Company.

Toback, J. (Director). (1999). *Black and White* [Motion Picture]. United States: Palm Pictures.

Tourneur, M. (Director). (1920). *The Last of the Mohicans* [Motion Picture]. United States: Maurice Tourneur Productions.

Turner, O. (Director). (1913). *In Slavery Days* [Motion Picture]. United States: Rex Motion Picture Company.

Twohy, D. (Director). (2000). *Pitch Black* [Motion Picture]. United States: Polygram Filmed Entertainment.

Twohy, D. (Director). (2004). *The Chronicles of Riddick* [Motion Picture]. United States: Universal Pictures.

Tykwer, T. & Wochowski, A. & Wachowski, L. (Directors). (2012). *Cloud Atlas* [Motion Picture]. United States: Cloud Atlas Productions.

Unknown (Director). (1911). *In Humanity's Cause* [Motion Picture]. United States: Rex Motion Picture Company.

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Van Peebles, M. (Director). (1970). *Watermelon Man* [Motion Picture]. Columbia Pictures.

Von Trier, L. (Director). (2005). *Manderlay* [Motion Picture]. United States: Zentropa Entertainments.

Walsh, R. (Director). (1957). *Band of Angels* [Motion Picture]. United States: Warner Bros.

Wayans, K. I. (Director). (2004). *White Chicks* [Motion Picture]. United States: Sony Pictures Entertainment.

Weis, J. (Director). (1971). *Quadroon* [Motion Picture]. United States: Presidio Films.

Werker, A. L. (Director). (1949). *Lost Boundaries* [Motion Picture]. United States: Film Classics.

West, J. (Director). (1994). *Star Trek: The Next Generation: Firstborn* [Television Series]. United States: Paramount Television.

Westfeldt, J. (Director). (2011). *Friends with Kids* [Motion Picture]. United States: Red Granite Pictures.

Whale, J. (Director). (1936). *Show Boat* [Motion Picture]. United States: Universal Pictures.

Wilcox, F. M. (Director). (1960). *I Passed for White* [Motion Picture]. United States: Allied Artists Pictures.

Wilder, B. (Director). (1950). *Sunset Boulevard* [Motion Picture]. United States: Paramount Pictures.

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My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic: Baby Cakes: First aired 2012

My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic: Hurricane Fluttershy: First aired 2012

Celeste & Jesse Forever (2012, dir. Lee Toland Krieger)

Cloud Atlas (2012, dirs. Tom Tykwer, Lana Wachowski, & Andy Wachowski)

Lincoln (2012, dir. Steven Spielberg)

Django Unchained (2012, dir. Quentin Tanantino)

Movie 43 – Segment "Truth or Dare" (2013, Peter Farrelly)

The Call (2013, dir. Brad Anderson)

Belle (2013, dir. Amma Asante)

Little White Lie (2014, dir. Lacey Schwartz)

Dear White People (2014, dir. Justin Simien)

Black or White (2015, dir. Mike Binder)

Nina (2016, dir. Cynthia Mort)

The Birth of a Nation (2016, dir. Nate Parker)

Loving (2016, dir. Jeff Nichols)