

“ANXIETIES OF BELONGING:” THE TROPE OF THE ORPHAN IN AFRICAN-
AMERICAN NOVELS

A Dissertation
Submitted to
the Temple University Graduate Board

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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May 2018

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation investigates the trope of the orphan in African-American novels and analyzes the prevalence of the figurative expression in the genre over time. Alienated from and deemed illegitimate by the larger society throughout their history, African Americans have grappled with competing desires to at once belong to the nation-as-family and to simultaneously be liberated from its White supremacist underpinnings. Systematically deprived of their rightful familial and cultural inheritances from their initial arrival to the Americas, Blacks have operated out of a perpetual state of orphanhood in the United States ever since, demanding acknowledgement as equal citizens while cobbling together their own intra-racial kinship bonds. By replacing nation-as-family with race-as-family to stem the tide of oppression, African Americans endeavored to carve out protective spaces for themselves within a hostile environment. The frequent deployment of Black orphan characters in African-American novels alternately reflects and interrogates this interplay between longing and liberation, transmuting over time to foreground how the exigencies of the moment come to bear on African Americans' collective quest to find what scholar Amy Lang calls "a home for those without a home in the nation."

In order to conduct this work, I first construct a lens through which to evaluate Black orphan characters as tropological revisions, one of the four modes of double-voiced textual relations or significations delineated by Henry Louis Gates Jr. in the *Signifying Monkey*. This opens a field of vision from which I analyze conceptualizations of kinship, home, and their relationship with what Toni Morrison calls the "anxieties of belonging" in African-American novels. Her phrase furnishes a framework for viewing

orphanhood as a metaphor for historical conditions that have caused African Americans to confront the absence of ancestral history, a circumstance precipitated first by their forced deportation from the continent of Africa and then concatenated by the subsequent dissolution of Black family ties through the mechanics of chattel slavery. While White American novels like *Huck Finn*, for instance, rehearse a desire for independence and the disavowal of familial ties in favor of formulating one's own identity, African-American narratives function as meditations on how forced dependence sought to sever Blacks from their heritage and preclude the formulation of identity, and how Blacks could resist those dehumanizing effects.

My dissertation consists of six chapters that match seminal works of African-American literature with the tenor of the times around their publication date; thereby, it plots points of intersection between historical exigencies and cultural enterprises personified in the literary tradition. Opening with the narratives of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, this investigation authenticates the parameters and topographies of the trope of the orphan that recur in subsequent African-American novels, including those that are the focus of my work: Frank J. Webb's *The Garies and Their Friends* (1857); Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's *Iola Leroy* (1892); Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929); Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979); and Paul Beatty's *White Boy Shuffle* (1996). By identifying characters in the given novels as instances or inflections of the trope of the orphan and its evolution over time, I demonstrate that historical conditions have rendered orphanhood a powerful symbol for the Black experience in American society, one that has come to stand for the cultural, political, and nationalistic anxieties. In plotting the coordinates of these tensions through the use of Black orphan characters, African-

American novels destabilize fixed notions of identity. Moreover, they chart a course for attaining an authentic sense of belonging by cobbling together both intra- and inter-racial communities predicated on the acknowledgement of the full humanity of the orphaned character, and by extension, of African Americans as a whole.

INTRODUCTION

ANXIETIES OF BELONGING

Orphan figures pervade African-American literature. From the tradition's roots in antebellum autobiographical narratives, written by enslaved people, to contemporary novels, which chronicle the Black experience, the African-American orphan is a recurrent motif throughout the canon, thematically linking time periods and genres. Authors invoke the trope because of its multiple valences. The orphan lacks both home and family, and as a result, is left vulnerable to an often hostile world. The orphan's pursuit of a sanctuary from that hostility becomes his or her means of achieving the overarching goal: to soothe anxieties of belonging. African-American literature has accorded the orphan a special place among its most valued figures and metaphors, because the orphan, disjoined from both heritage and haven, mirrors the collective history of the race. African Americans have existed in an orphan-like state in America over the course of the last four-hundred years. Forcibly separated from family and homeland and shipped to North America in chains, African Americans as a group became veritable orphans who felt the insatiable pangs of loss associated with these disjunctures.

Neither the abolition of slavery nor the passage of civil rights acts a century after served to eliminate those anxieties of belonging, so it only follows that that the African-American novelistic tradition has continued to deploy the orphan figure to explore the various ways in which a people whose claims to "legitimacy, authenticity, community, and belonging" (Morrison "Home" 5) have been perpetually in doubt. The trope of the African-American orphan is what scholar Henry Louis Gates, Jr. calls a "tropological revision," one of his four modes of double-voiced textual relations or significations. To

paraphrase the scholar, the type of modification at issue is a trope repeated with a difference across multiple texts. As Gates claims, the recurrent motif of “signifyin(g)” in African American literature “is the Black trope of tropes, the figure for Black rhetorical figures” (51). The trope of the orphan is a prime manifestation of signifyin(g), one that not only repeats with a difference the features of orphan characters depicted in White American literature, but also reappears within the African-American literary tradition across time periods in response to the changing exigencies of Black life in the United States.

This dissertation shows that the trope of the orphan is a major recurrent theme in African-American novels, evolving from classic slave narratives, showing the discrete “anxieties of belonging” experienced by African Americans over the course of their collective experiences in America. Moreover, this study demonstrates that the orphan as a figure of speech in African-American novels has undergone several transmutations. In its nascent phase during the antebellum era, the trope manifests itself as both literal and figurative; orphaned Black characters live out the deleterious impact of parental loss and symbolize the cultural disjuncture wrought by the institution of slavery. Later, it mutates into a post-Reconstruction reflection of the modes of response by the African-American populace to the mechanisms of White supremacy and Jim Crow terrorism at the turn of the twentieth century. And finally, it transmutes into a critique of the reductive, fixed notions of identity that can come to bear on the Black orphan’s desire to be adopted into a family and secure what scholar Amy Lang calls “a home for those without a home in the nation” (43) in the broader American society of the mid- to late-twentieth century.

At its most elemental level, the state of orphanhood is determined by loss. However, pinning down a precise definition of the term “orphan” can be problematic. It has a multiplicity of meanings in different cultural and historical contexts. Cheryl Nixon supplies a useful interpretation in light of her observation that “in literature, the term ‘orphan’ is often used loosely, encompassing many types of children: the unfortunate child victimized by death, the child sent away from the biological family to live with others, the abandoned child left to his or her own devices, the foundling taken in by a replacement family or institution, and the illegitimate child marked by bastardy” (5). Nixon argues, “The orphan must not only take control of his or her life, but must take control of his or her story” (15), laying the grounds for witnessing an inextricable concern with self-determination in African-American novels. Nixon places the need to take control at the heart of a child without parents. Her idea validates the implication by Houston A. Baker that Black writers have written themselves and their experiences into being, pivoting from “property to humanity,” from slavery to freedom, and ultimately from object to subject (31).

Unmoored from the protections of home and kin, the orphan must negotiate an unfamiliar, threatening world. The figure must look to shape his or her future without the benefit of lessons from a discernible, official past. In her seminal work on orphans in literature, critic Nina Auerbach describes the orphaned character as navigating “in a world without maps” (410). According to Auerbach, orphans in literature are mutable and mobile; they frequently operate as martyrs and change agents. This is particularly applicable to orphans in African American novels, whose “image is closely connected to the idea of journeys” (Vega-Gonzalez 121). Given, as John Ernest purports in *Chaotic*

Justice, African American novels take as a primary consideration the tensions between constraint and mobility, the trope of the orphan presents a fertile analytical field to be tilled in this regard.¹ The cited critics lend credence to my finding that African-American novels wrestle with anxieties of belonging and the concomitant pursuit of a home and haven first tackled by nineteenth-century autobiographical accounts of enslavement and self-emancipation.

Orphanhood involves the want of parents, home, and social affiliation; the losses add up and amplify the effects of familial disjuncture. That orphans lack family begs a definition of “family” as a construct. The rise of the “domestic family” in the nineteenth century plays a significant role in the trope of the Black orphan, both during that era and subsequent to it. Scholar Stephanie Coontz details the phenomenon of this rise, one in which there existed “a conceptual separation between female reproductive activities and male productive ones [which]... testified to the real centrality of families as places where each class or ethnic group reproduced its position and pursued its own goals and interests” (34). Families, then, became a clearinghouse for societal concerns for

¹The African-American literary orphan figure bears much in common with its European analog, as described by Auerbach. Both must construct identities for themselves in the wake of the traumatic loss of parents, a task that requires fortitude, resourcefulness, and the ability to forge new kinship bonds of one form or another. However, a few key differences between European and African-American orphan figures exist. First, for the European orphan, the revelation of “true” familial heritage at the novel’s climax is often concomitant with the inheritance of wealth that catapults him/her into a higher socioeconomic class and increased respectability. Yet the African-American orphan’s inheritance neither fills in the gaps of his/her lineage nor catalyzes socioeconomic ascendancy; instead, it is an inheritance of losses on familial, cultural, and national levels that must be overcome, which is why Black orphan literary figures tend to represent the circumstances of African Americans as a whole. Second, for many White orphan protagonists, a respectable identity is cinched fully at the novel’s conclusion, whereas the resolution to the Black orphan’s desire to belong is often mitigated by a reminder of his/her continued vulnerability maintained by the robust mechanics of White supremacy under which s/he must live. This ultimately places the African-American orphan figure in a permanent liminal state, as I detail in Chapter 1, pages 39-41.

Americans during this time, adding extra weight to the African-American orphan figure's desire for it. Consequently, the search for origins both familial and cultural is paramount for the orphan in African-American novels. But the value of such a pursuit is troubled by the threat of what scholar Margaret Homans terms "the absence of origin" ("Adoption" 6), that is, the distinct possibility that one's roots are so fully obscured by historical erasure as to be irretrievable. And so, Homans wonders if issues of origin work to haunt or liberate a person confronted by the problem.

Homans's question triggers a series of others: How do African-American novels foreground the interplay between longing and liberation through the trope of the orphan? How do they tease out the various antecedent challenges of African-American experience that destabilize origins to the point of elision? What (if any) answers do they suggest? And of supreme significance, in light of Diana Loerner Pazicky's claim that "a group or nation, like an individual, can experience a sense of orphanhood and... its collective identity formation is also relational in nature" (xii), how do African-American novels leverage the figure of the orphan to stand for the cultural, political, and nationalistic anxieties of their respective eras? To what extent do race-as-family and race-as-nation equivalencies get reified in the orphan's quest for identity, and to what degree do they get subverted? To answer these questions, I trace the contours of the trope of the orphan and position it as a central tropological revision in African-American novels stemming from antebellum narratives written by enslaved people. I also furnish a theoretical framework regarding orphanhood in African-American literature that expands the scholarly field of vision in consideration of how the tradition represents the desire to find "a home for those without a home in the nation."

In Chapter 1, I frame out the theoretical elements of the trope of the African-American orphan as established in antebellum first-person accounts of enslavement and self-emancipation, namely 1) natal alienation, 2) social ambiguity, 3) reformulated kinships, 4) concerted efforts to recuperate personhood, and 5) unresolved anxieties associated with homelessness. In the chapter, I use Frederick Douglass's *Narrative Of the Life Of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845) and Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents In the Life Of a Slave Girl* (1861) as case studies that demonstrate these features. Both Douglass and Linda Brent, Jacobs's nom-de-plume, become literal orphans early in their respective narratives and then embark on quests to find safe havens from the tentacles of slavery in the North. Once there, though, each finds that the relative sanctuary offered by the North is just that - relative. Douglass and Linda gain agency during their pursuit of freedom, yet they also discover that their liminal position in the North post-emancipation prevents them from establishing a true home for themselves within the nation and soothing their anxieties of belonging.

At the same time as Douglass and Jacobs pen their narratives, the trope of the African-American orphan migrates to the realm of fiction. In Chapter 2, I analyze how Frank Webb's *The Garies and Their Friends* (1857) marshals the constitutive elements of the trope as metaphor for the familial and cultural disjuncture endured by Black people in the North. Disavowed by the broader nation-as-family, the African Americans in Webb's work cobble together their own protective confraternity based on a race-as-nation ideology that mimics the proto-Black nationalism of nineteenth-century activists Martin Delany and David Walker. This new kinship network is predicated on the idea of nation as a magnification of family; racial kin must act in solidarity to attain any measure of

security. When the orphaned Emily Garie, the only member of the Garie family to survive the novel, marries Charlie Ellis and officially officially joins the Black Ellis family, she fulfills prevailing nineteenth-century attitudes towards “family” as a construct. Coontz claims, “The family is both a place and an idea” (14), and this resolution, dependent on Emily’s establishment of an intraracial family in the wake of own familial loss, forges links between family, home, and intraracial affiliation.

Iola Leroy by Frances Harper is the subject of Chapter 3, and it represents the first revision to the trope of the African-American orphan. In many respects, the circumstances of the eponymous protagonist mirror those of Emily Garie, but Harper alters the formula for assuaging the orphan’s anxieties of belonging put forth in Webb’s novel. Written in 1892, *Iola Leroy* takes into account the changing exigencies of Black life in the post-Reconstruction era. I explore those exigencies and the ways in which Harper’s novel deals with them through Iola, whose mistaken belief that she is White presages her downward social mobility from freedom to enslavement. Separated from family and rendered homeless, Iola embarks on a journey to restore her own humanity. This journey has a dual culmination: Iola reunites with her mother following the end of the Civil War, and then she marries a Black doctor, George Latimer. By first finding and then founding a family, Iola recuperates some measure of the security her enslavement stole from her, utilizing “family stability as a way to improve social and economic position” (Coontz 258) like her predecessor, Emily Garie. Yet it is her decision to participate in the racial uplift movement that represents a fundamental alteration to the trope. No longer is domestic family life a sufficient balm to the trauma of orphanhood;

the Black orphan figure must contribute to the elevation of his or her racial kin in order to overcome his or her orphan-like state.

Passing, written by Nella Larsen in 1929, imagines Harper's strategy come to fruition. I argue in Chapter 4 that through Irene and Clare, the co-equal protagonists of the novel, Larsen troubles the notion that intraracial family and racial uplift work ameliorates the orphan condition. In this chapter, I tease out the thematic implications of both women's passage between racial identities, and how their mobility between multiple racial and socioeconomic positions is symptomatic of lingering anxieties associated with familial and cultural orphanhood. Clare's chameleon-like capacity to invade and adapt to new circumstances becomes unsettling to Irene when she comes to suspect that Clare is pursuing Irene's husband. At novel's end, Irene's unease causes her to abandon the principle of intraracial solidarity that her domestic and public life seemed to reinforce in favor of security. Clare has breached Irene's safe haven, so Irene must eliminate her, in the process exposing herself as the charlatan of the work.

In Chapter 5, I explore how Octavia Butler's *Kindred* transforms the trope of the African-American orphan to address the challenges faced by African Americans in the aftermath of the passage of the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965. The novel's protagonist, Dana Franklin, is both a literal orphan and orphaned in the past as a result of her time travels. In this chapter, I consider how Dana's time travels represent a reverse migration, and as such, how they function as a different sort of passing. Dana's survival hinges on her ability to negotiate the two halves of her mixed racial ancestry, personified by her ancestors: Alice Greenwood, an enslaved Black woman, and Rufus Weylin, Alice's White owner. Moreover, Dana's ability to forge kinship ties both within and

across racial boundaries while coming to terms with her own racial and ancestral heritage underscores a reality that earlier incarnations of the Black orphan figure ignore - recovering lost ancestry requires acknowledgment of knotty, inter-racial lines of descent.

My final chapter details how Paul Beatty's 1996 novel, *The White Boy Shuffle*, revises the trope of the African-American orphan by evacuating "orphan" of its literal meaning as parentless child. Instead Gunnar Kaufman is a cultural orphan who has only liminal status in both the White community of Santa Monica that he inhabits early in the novel and in the Black-and-Latino community of Hillside to which his family moves later in the work. By creating such a character, Beatty plays with with the trope of the orphan as established by his literary predecessors in order to amplify its figurative representation as a cultural outsider. Gunnar's skin tone marks him as Other in Santa Monica, but his attitudes, attire, and speech patterns come to mark him as Other in Hillside. I propose that through Gunnar, Beatty's novel theorizes that all kinships, biological and otherwise, are chosen through continual relation and affiliation, destabilizing essentialized notions of family, and by extension, race and nation as well. By choosing to identify with groups both within and across racial boundaries, Gunnar drafts a blueprint for shrinking the orphan's anxieties of belonging. It is only by fashioning this cross-section of affiliations that this African-American orphan figure, a perpetual outsider, can hope to finally establish a home for himself in the nation. This hints that the longing for home and haven that marks these novels can potentially be satiated and that goal of inclusion may in fact be attainable for African Americans as a whole.

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CHAPTER 1

"THE ULTIMATE REACH OF LOSS:" THE BIRTH OF THE TROPE OF THE ORPHAN IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY EMANCIPATORY NARRATIVES

In the first half of the nineteenth century, enslaved African Americans endured an orphan-like existence. Their connections to their African ancestors were broken. They lived at the mercy of White supremacists bent on denying them a chance to feel at home in the country. Many of the enslaved took flight from bondage and wrote autobiographies, relating struggles to maintain pride in slavery. Their personal narratives tell how they coped with feeling orphaned in the land. The stories, named "emancipatory narratives" by Angelyn Mitchell (ix),² reveal that the narrators sought literacy with ingenuity and intrepidity to escape the alienation of an orphan and achieve a sense of belonging to a family. Each of these stories convey themes of disjuncture, dislocation, disorder, and detachment; they introduced the image of an orphan as a trope in African American literature, including a range of novels, where the loss of heritage and haven afflict the main characters.

Appearing between the late-eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries, these emancipatory narratives begin with an initial pronouncement that the narrators have been disjoined from one or both of their parents, and then the accounts periodically circle back to the ill effects of being parentless throughout the rest of the work. Emancipatory narrators position themselves as being in the throes of what critics Baruch Hochman and Ilja Wachs call "the ultimate reach" of loss, as they attribute their status as orphans to the

² Mitchell's term is more apt for these works than the traditionally-applied "slave narratives." Douglass, Jacobs, and others recount their efforts to emancipate themselves from enslavement, rather than simply describing their lives in enslavement. Furthermore, the accounts were written after the authors escaped, so they are not "narratives written by slaves," strictly speaking.

institution of chattel slavery and explicitly claim this circumstance as desired by slaveholders for their slaves. Orphanhood, they suggest, is more than simply the loss of parents. Hochman and Wachs claim that is “a state of mind that besets the orphan child and the adult the orphan becomes,” in essence permanently hardwiring an anxiety in the orphan that dictates the course of his or her life. More importantly, the given researchers add that this orphan’s state of mind “informs some part of everyone’s imagination.” The fear of catastrophic loss plagues all people because “loss is the primary condition of human life,” and “orphanhood is the ultimate reach of our ineluctable sense of loss” (14). Hence, orphanhood comes to represent the worst kind of loss one can conceive, and as a result, functions as a powerful symbol for the panoply of losses endured by enslaved Africans and their descendants. Dogged by anxieties of belonging, emancipatory narrators leverage their orphan-like status to amplify the multiple valences of dislocation to which enslaved African Americans were subjected: familial, cultural, and national.

The seeds of the trope of the orphan in African Americans novels germinated in these nineteenth-century emancipatory narratives. Autobiographies like Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative Of the Life Of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (1845) and Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents In the Life Of a Slave Girl* (1861), written under the pseudonym Linda Brent, constitute the staging post for the trope in its nascent phase. In many respects, Douglass and Jacobs in particular co-formulate it; as two of the most highly regarded and widely read emancipatory narratives writers in the African-American literary tradition, their meditations on their own orphan-like status and pursuit of a home within the human family set the parameters of this trope, which I propose to be the following: 1) natal alienation, 2) social ambiguity, 3) reformulated kinships, 4) concerted

efforts to recuperate personhood, and 5) unresolved anxieties associated with homelessness. As the later chapters of this study will make clear, African-American novelists have modeled their explorations of collective Black experience on these antebellum autobiographies. They have incorporated elements of the nineteenth-century emancipatory narratives' central conceit in their fictional works, rendering art an imitation of life. Therefore, any full scale assessment of the trope of the orphan in African-American novels must necessarily commence with the authenticated written accounts of formerly enslaved people.

Natal Alienation and Sites of Orphanhood

Orlando Patterson's theoretical term "natal alienation" is a useful tool in ascertaining the contours of the ultimate reach of loss experienced by enslaved Africans and their descendants. In his work *Slavery and Social Death* (1982), a comparative study of enslavement and its effects, Patterson defines natal alienation as the final product of the dehumanizing mechanics of the institution of chattel slavery, namely the reduction of the enslaved person to a "genealogical isolate." The enactment of this strategy upon enslaved people had far-reaching consequences: "Not only was the slave denied all claims on, and obligations to, his parents and living blood relations, but by extension, all such claims and obligations on his more remote ancestors and on his descendants" (5). By virtue of being a genealogical isolate, an enslaved person had no economic inheritance, to be sure, but also no familial legacy either to receive from the past or to bequeath to future generations, according to Patterson. Moreover, this genealogical isolation foreclosed any broader transmission of historical or cultural frameworks of identity - places of origin, shared accomplishments, ordinary myths, religious practices,

and the like. The end result was that the enslaved person was “formally isolated in his social relations with those who lived, and he was also culturally isolated from the social heritage of his ancestors. He had a past, to be sure, but a past is not a heritage” (Patterson 5). Divorced from familial, cultural, and national histories, the enslaved were hemmed into a perpetual present and precluded from the collective, both with regards to reaching back beyond their own individual past experiences into ancestral memory and to imagining a liberated future.

Patterson frames the ultimate reach of loss in terms of estrangement (“alienation”) initiated at birth (“natal”), suggesting that the grim effectiveness of the system meant that orphanhood became consubstantial with enslavement. In particular, for those African prisoners of war and kidnap victims jammed onto boats and deported across the Atlantic, the rupture was not literally at birth, but rather at the conclusion of the journey that deposited - or birthed - them in an unfamiliar and unfriendly circumstance. Once this forced migration was completed, all subsequent generations of enslaved Blacks born on American soil were in fact delivered into cultural orphanhood, deprived of both heritage and haven. This was particularly devastating because the state of natal alienation, Patterson claims, is both “perpetual and inheritable;” there is no end date in sight. The discrete tactics of rendering Blacks “the ultimate tool, imprintable and disposable” (6), relied on inducing more than cultural dislocation. The policies and procedures of slaveholding dictated that family relations go unrecognized. Thus, slave couples were separated; wives were made to satisfy the lust and greed of their masters through rape, with their husbands powerless to stop it; parents were deprived of basic custodial rights; and families lived in perpetual fear of being broken up at the whim of their masters. In

this way, the institution of slavery reified the anxieties of belonging and chaos inaugurated at the outset of the transatlantic journey so as to paralyze the enslaved into compliance. Natal alienation, then, was the oil that greased the human machinery of the entire enterprise.

In his *Narrative*, Frederick Douglass reports how the features of natal alienation manifested themselves in his life before leading the reader to extrapolate from his experience that it typifies what enslaved people were forced to endure, positing that his particulars stand for the collective:

My mother and I were separated when I was but an infant - before I knew her as mother. It is a common custom, in the part of Maryland from which I ran away, to part children from their mothers at an early age. Frequently, before a child has reached its twelfth month, its mother is taken from it, and hired out on some distant farm a considerable distance off, and the child is placed under the care of an old woman, too old for field labor. For what this separation is done, I do not know, unless it be to hinder the development of the child's affection towards its mother, and to blunt and destroy the natural affection of the mother for the child. This is the inevitable result. (48)

As an adult reflecting upon his forced separation from his mother during his childhood, Douglass teases out both the lineaments and the products of this practice. The woman who birthed him cannot fulfill her parental function, even though she is within reasonable physical proximity to him, and as consequence, their relationship suffers the loss of “natural affection.” In effect, Douglass is orphaned by the physical and emotional separation, despite the fact that his mother is alive. According to critic Michael Chaney, Douglass’s “distance from [his] mother establishes a compelling parallel to slavery’s exile of slaves from structures of kinship and natal intimacy” (20). By extension, then, Douglass’s description here foregrounds the intrinsic inhumanity of slavery as a whole, submitting his own natal alienation as evidence. In this way, Douglass casts blame for his condition not simply on his owner, but on the very institution itself.

In the following paragraph, Douglass resumes his intentional deployment of the language and emblems of a broken family as he describes his mother's death later in his childhood. Marked by frank indifference, Douglass's report of what *should* be a traumatic event underscores that he had been emotionally and psychologically orphaned, that is, separated, from his mother long before her passing:

I never saw my mother, to know her as such, more than four or five times in my life, and each of those times was very short in duration, and at night Very little communication ever took place between us. Death soon ended what little we could have had while she lived, and with it her hardships and suffering. She died when I was about seven years old I was not allowed to be present during her illness, at her death, or burial. She was gone long before I knew anything about it. Never having enjoyed, to any considerable extent, her soothing presence, her tender and watchful care, I received the tidings of her death with much the same emotions I should probably have felt at the death of a stranger. (48-9)

This account of maternal disjuncture casts in stark relief a striking reality of enslavement: one's mother is reduced to veritable "stranger." Scholar Diana Pazicky chronicles the development of the orphan figure in American literature in her critical work, *Cultural Orphans In America*, proposing that the American literary orphan was often a response to social upheaval, reflective of historical and cultural tensions, metaphoric for alienation from the dominant culture. In keeping with the final feature of her description of American literary orphanhood, alienation, Douglass's experience is emblematic of the collective experiences of Africans and their descendants. Pazicky writes, "Slavery not only made Douglass an orphan but robbed him of a personal and historical identity. His traumatic experiences and the strategies for identity formation he developed in reaction to it are representative of the struggle undergone by all slaves [who could not]...trace their heritage past its origins in captivity" (180). So inhumane is the institution that it defies nineteenth-century preconceptions of the inviolable strength of parent-child bonds. When Douglass all but declares in the passage above that he was orphaned long before his

mother's passing, his comment rings true on both the familial and historical registers, since parent-child bonds are also metonymic, reflecting a sense of kinship between people and their cultural, national, and ancestral home(s). Douglass makes scant reference to his mother subsequent to this in his *Narrative*, affirming his alienation from her by omission. His mother's absence from his narrative consciousness underscores the larger ancestral disconnection experienced by every enslaved Black person.

The family circumstances of Harriet Jacobs, writing as Linda Brent,³ seem to run counter to those of Douglass, undermining the trope of the orphan. Some scholars, most notably Valerie Smith, have advanced this assertion. In *Self-Discovery and Authority In Afro-American Literature*, Smith teases out the linkage between literacy and identity to emancipatory narrators. In the midst of applying that larger analysis to Douglass and Jacobs, she suggests that *Incidents* diverges from the trope because Jacobs did not sustain the same degree of natal alienation as Douglass. His narrative "begin[s] with an absence," a lack of knowledge about his origins. In contrast, Smith observes that Jacobs was "born into a stable family... nuclear and extended." Moreover, according to Smith, Jacobs "remained close to her grandmother... and to her aunts and uncles" (36) following the deaths of her parents during Jacobs's childhood. While this assessment correctly

³ In her definitive biography of Harriet Jacobs, *Harriet Jacobs: A Life*, Jean Fagan Yellin explains why Jacobs writes under the pseudonym Linda Brent. Despite the fact that Jacobs was legally emancipated by the time the work was published in 1861 and hence did not have to protect herself from capture as many fugitives did, Jacobs used the pseudonym because of the prevailing sexual conventions of the era. In chronicling her liaisons with Mr. Sands (real name: Samuel Treadwell) and revealing that she produced offspring with him, Jacobs opened herself up to potential backlash from the very audience - White, Christian women in the North - whom she hoped her account would convince to join the abolition movement. For the sake of clarity, in this chapter I use "Linda" when discussing the work's protagonist and "Harriet Jacobs" when discussing its author.

identifies that the situations of Douglass and Jacobs differ in kind, Smith overlooks crucial similarities between the circumstances of the two narrators that override this superficial disparity and hence position Jacobs as just as much an exemplar of the trope of the African-American orphan as Douglass.

Beyond the simple fact that Douglass recounts his affection for his grandmother, too, in his *Narrative*, the trajectories of their respective orphanhood converge in other ways. In order to excavate these similarities, one needs to look no further than the opening of *Incidents*, when Jacobs writes, “I was born a slave, but I never knew it till six years of happy childhood passed away.... [My family] lived together in a comfortable home, and though we were all slaves, I was so fondly shielded that I never dreamed I was a piece of merchandise, trusted to [my parents] for safe keeping, and liable to be demanded of them at any moment” (1). Early on, then, the protagonist Brent is screened from the realities of slavery, and it is only upon the occasion of her mother’s death that she “for the first time... learned, by the talk around me, that I was a slave” (3). Yet Douglass too is screened from the truth of his status. He punctuates the harrowing eyewitness account of Aunt Hester’s beating at the hands of Captain Anthony, which he witnesses through a partially-opened closet door, by saying, “I had never witnessed anything like it before” because he had spent most of his young life “with my grandmother on the outskirts of the plantation” and hence had been “out of the way of the bloody scenes” (52) typical of plantation life.

Brent is sent away from her home to live with her slave mistress immediately after her mother’s death. Although her father is still alive, his work forces him to be gone for extended periods, so this opening sequence represents her induction into orphanhood

because she is completely deprived of parental oversight and protection. The meaning of “belonging” shifts from member of a family and resident of a home to owned object, one denied all claims of interconnectedness by the dehumanizing apparatus of slavery. As for so many other enslaved people, this also represents “a loss of humanity as well as identity and is the result of the inextricable relationship between capitalism and racism” (Pazicky xiii). Smith purports that Jacobs “was fortunate enough” to have known both of her parents as such, unlike Douglass, but she does not acknowledge that the “ultimate reach of loss” for Jacobs extends beyond that of Douglass because she had authentic parent-child bonds that were prematurely severed, and hence can be considered in some respects more acute. Douglass loses his mother and is devoid of emotion, already numb to the trauma of her absence; Jacobs loses her mother and her innocence simultaneously. Despite this difference, both are plunged into literal orphanhood early in their lives as a result of the death of their respective mothers, a commonality that initiates their elevation from characters into figures of the trope.

Kinlessness, Social Ambiguity, and Chaos

In the narratives of Douglass and Jacobs, as I will demonstrate in due course, inauguration into literal orphanhood throws the narrative subject’s world into chaos. The cultural anxieties of belonging already implanted within the enslaved through the process of genealogical isolation get amplified by actual parental loss. In founding the trope of the orphan in this way, nineteenth-century emancipatory narrators like Douglass and Jacobs gesture towards a degree of loss that surpasses the individual, also standing in for collective dislocative shock endured by the millions of Africans expatriated to America in cargo holds. Hortense Spillers fleshes out the enormity of this dislocation in her seminal

essay, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." She theorizes that the damage inflicted by this mass displacement was psychic as well as physical, a combination she represents as the "*theft of the body* - a willful and violent severing of the captive body from its motive will, its active desire" (67). Captivity precludes freedom to bring one's desires to fruition, along with freedom of movement.

Permanently separated from their parents, both Douglass and Jacobs find it difficult to fend for themselves in hostile environs with no hope of sanctuary. As such, they become doubly displaced, not only parentless but also homeless, lacking any control over their bodies or their lives. The traumatic inauguration of their orphanhood mirrors the ultimate reach of cultural and national loss originating from the mass displacement of Africans that Spillers addresses above. Douglass, for instance, shuttles from owner to owner for the duration of his childhood - first to the Lloyd plantation in Talbot County, then to the Baltimore home of Hugh Auld for several years, and finally to Thomas Auld's plantation in St. Michael's in 1832. In between, Douglass becomes acquainted with his "valuation" as "property" when Captain Anthony, his old master, dies, and his estate must be settled. Douglass, "now between ten and eleven years old," must travel back to the plantation so that his monetary value can be determined. This forced journey supplies Douglass with "a new conception of [his] degraded condition" and causes him to leave "Baltimore with a young heart overborne with sadness, and a soul full of apprehension" (89). His frequent displacement a reminder of his homelessness and vulnerability, the orphaned Douglass grapples with the ramifications of his status as property on his own. In *Incidents*, Brent experiences a similar sequence. When her mother dies, she is sent to live with the daughter of her mother's owner, who "was so kind to me that I was always

glad to do her bidding” (4). But a few years later, that mistress dies, and in her will, Brent is bequeathed to her mistress’s five-year old niece, the daughter of Dr. Flint, and is displaced again. Unsettled and disoriented by multiple dislodgments, both orphaned narrators are deprived of stability and sanctuary, now defenseless against the will of their respective enslavers.

This entanglement of orphanhood and bondage engenders social ambiguity. Spillers proposes that “The enslaved person as *property* identifies the most familiar element of a most startling proposition ... But to overlap *kinlessness* on the requirements of property might enlarge ... the conditions of slavery.” Not only does “‘kinship’ lose [its] meaning, *since it can be invaded at any given and arbitrary moment by the property relations*” (74), as Spillers posits, but “home” is evacuated of its meaning as well. The prevailing notion of family in the nineteenth century, however a particular family might be configured, was that it was expected to supply some measure of security for its members, functioning as a metaphorical shelter or harbor. The reduction of the enslaved to a state of kinlessness, that is lacking connection to and protection accorded by a biologically- and socially-constructed network of immediate and extended family, placed the enslaved person in a precarious position. For both protagonists, Douglass and Brent, the loss of parents leads to a physical removal from the places where they live, Douglass from Captain Anthony’s and Brent from her own family’s home. This compounds the anxieties each must negotiate, illustrative of Spillers’s contention that “the destructive loss of the natural mother, whose biological/genetic relationship to the child remains unique and unambiguous, opens the enslaved young to social ambiguity and chaos” (76). Used to chaos early in life because of separation from his mother, Douglass evinces

apathy when told that he would be leaving the plantation where he spent his early life.

This detachment only amplifies the degree of trauma he has already faced:

The ties that ordinarily bind children to their homes were all suspended in my case. I found no severe trial in my departure [from Colonel Lloyd's plantation]. My home was charmless; it was not home to me; on parting from it, I could not feel that I was leaving anything which I could have enjoyed by staying. My mother was dead, my grandmother lived far off, so that I seldom saw her. I had two sisters and one brother, that lived in the same house as me; but the early separation of us from our mother had well-nigh blotted out the fact of our relationship from our memories. (73)

Home and parental affection are entwined in this passage, and to Douglass, the former cannot exist without the latter. Moreover, lacking a mother to model and transmit familial intimacy to her offspring, Douglass and his siblings are siblings in name only, devoid of mutual affection.

In this moment, Douglass embodies the “kinless-as-property” configuration and underscores the full weight of the intersecting anxieties provoked by enslavement. Douglass’s claim on personhood is undercut by the fact that he belongs to no one in a familial sense; he is chattel-personal to his owner, and hence, his only means of belonging to anyone is predicated on his status as property. Furthermore, he has no physical space or place to call his own, another element of subjective personhood. In *To Tell a Free Story*, William Andrews traces the development of African-American autobiography from the mid-eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century, delineating some common features that mark the genre. One such feature upon which Andrews remarks is the prevalence of these ambiguous notions of belonging, writing, “To speak of where one comes from is to imply where one belongs, which is further imply that one belongs somewhere.” A place of origin and the ability to supply a location of home “helps to establish one’s identity,” and “the citing of family names and family history simply reinforce this impression of connectedness.” The chaos concomitant with enslavement

prevents each of these, diminishing the enslaved person's capacity to demonstrate that he or she "is literally related to some part of the human family" (27). In this conception, to have a family and a home has historically been considered a component of being human, so for enslaved Blacks, the loss of this knowledge operates to deprive some measure of humanity from them. In his own words, Douglass belongs nowhere as well as to no one. As property, he is an object to be deployed as his owner sees fit, with no regard for his desires. To cope with the continual assault on his humanity that this breeds, he projects stoicism. Dissociated from his ancestry and his place in the world, and thrust into the chaos of an unfamiliar and threatening situation, Douglass suppresses the traumas of orphanhood and familial disjuncture as a means of survival.

Brent too is reduced to an object by her owners early in *Incidents*. While describing the day of Brent's father's death when she was twelve years old, Jacobs writes, "I thought I should be allowed to go to my father's house the next morning, but I was ordered to go for flowers, that my mistress's house might be decorated for an evening party" (6). Her function as chattel-personal overshadows her orphan's grief in the eyes of the Flint family, a fact that Jacobs ironizes when she reports that Brent "spent the day gathering flowers and weaving them into festoons, while the dead body of my father was lying within a mile of me. What cared my owners for that? He was merely a piece of property" (6). As the daughter of "property," then, young Brent inherits that status from him, her orphanhood making her newly aware of her social ambiguity. Brent's vulnerability at this moment is cast in stark relief against the callousness of the Flint family's treatment of her. This represents a strategic narrative maneuver by Jacobs to appeal to the sentimentality of her readership, particularly their presumable desire to

protect the orphaned Brent and others like her from this cruelty, an appeal to which I will return shortly.

Now fully orphaned, Jacobs continues to seek solace through frequent visits to her parents' graves. Yet even at this sacred spot, her parents' permanent resting place, she is barred from gaining sanctuary, announcing, "My master met me at every turn, reminding me that I belonged to him....If I knelt at my mother's grave, his dark shadow fell on me even there" (30). She can visit her parents' graves, Dr. Flint suggests, but she no longer belongs to them; in fact, she never did anyway. In this scene, Jacobs vividly depicts the power of the enslaver to override the sanctity of familial bonds, inserting himself as a perverse paternal figure. In *The Slave's Narrative*, Henry Louis Gates and Charles Davis assert that the narratives of Jacobs, Douglass, and so many others serve as the building blocks of African-American collective memory, which substitutes for the familial memory lost to enslaved people. Part of this collective memory is emotional; Gates and Davis suggest that "the innumerable accounts of slaves [are] charged with anguish - an anguish that reveals the black bondsman to himself as cast into the world, forlorn and without refuge" (245). The anguish of the scene crafted by Jacobs here magnifies Brent's status as an article of belonging instead of a person who belongs. Homeless and parentless, the orphaned Brent is fully exposed to Dr. Flint's machinations. And because the experiences of "Linda Brent," the protagonist of the narrative, mirror Jacobs's own life, the very act of narrating this harrowing moment represents an assertion by Jacobs of her own humanity, both because it is "a refutation of claims that blacks could not write" (Gates and Davis 245) and also because the emotional register of the moment it recounts is fundamentally human.

Reformulations of Family: Fictive and Alternative Kinships

Fictive Kinship

Multiple substitute forms of kinship arise in the wake of the kinds of orphanhood instigated by enslavement. One is what Patterson terms “fictive kinship,” and is constituted by an interracial bond. This form bifurcates into two distinct categories, quasi-filial and adoptive. In a quasi-filial fictive kinship, according to Patterson, the White slaveholder uses the language of kinship to express his/her power over the slave under the guise of parental protectiveness. Because in the situation of enslavement, “we cannot read ‘birth’ ... as a reproduction of mothering because the female ... has been robbed of her parental right” (Spillers 78), enslavers could supersede all existing parental obligations and demand filial obedience from their slaves, which is precisely what Jacobs’s depiction of the graveside scene interrupted by Dr. Flint demonstrates. Furthermore, as Diana Pazicky remarks, “White masters ‘fathered’ a race of orphans” (22), first by literally inseminating their female slaves to produce enslaved offspring that they could hold as property, and then by perpetuating the inhumane conditions that reduced enslaved people to “genealogical isolates.” Douglass hears “the whisper that my master was my father” and then extrapolates from this that the financial advantage of “the slaveholder [being] ... the double relation of master and father” (49) cancels all paternal affection. Douglass’s father, if in fact the whispers were true, never acknowledges his paternity, implicitly rejecting Douglass and cutting him off from the White half of his ancestry.

The degree to which a slaveholder worked to enact quasi-filial, fictive kinship was directly proportional to the increase in power such a relationship would incur.

Patterson writes of slavery as consisting of three forms of power relations: social, psychological, and cultural. In the cultural form, the use of force by the slaveholder gets transformed into a duty, often expressed in the terminology of patriarchal family obligation. During the antebellum era, this became a hallmark of pro-slavery rhetoric as slaveholders analogized their relations with the enslaved members of the plantation community to a father's relationship with his children. While neither Douglass nor Jacobs view their masters as father figures, when taken in tandem, the two depict the range of options available to masters to maximize control of their slaves. Douglass's White biological father/enslaver ignores all kinship, both biological and fictive, with him, his power enabling him to disavow his son with impunity. Meanwhile, in *Incidents*, Dr. Flint endeavors to exert his full authority over Brent by adopting the language of paternity (although he is not her biological father) to cement the quasi-filial, fictive kinship he hopes to cultivate between them.

Sometimes my persecutor would ask me whether I would like to be sold. I told him I would rather be sold off to any body than to lead such a life as I did. On such occasions he would assume the air of a very injured individual, and reproach me for my ingratitude. "Did I not take you into the house, and make you the companion of my own children?" he would say. "Have I ever treated you like a negro? I have never allowed you to be punished, not even to please your mistress. And this is the recompense I get, you ungrateful girl!" (36)

The menace of Dr. Flint is couched in the lexicon of fatherhood as he expresses disappointment with Jacobs for her refusal to submit to his lust, an ironic conflation of modes of kinship that not only represents a usurpation of authentic paternity but also an incestuous perversion of it. In an effort to secure her submission to his desires, Flint leans heavily on the staging of a fictive kinship between them. Note that while his references to providing a home for her, adopting her into the family and making her one of his children, and treating her gently each intentionally mask his lascivious motives, they

traffic in particulars typical of traditional paternal duty. In this manipulation, Flint seeks to reactivate the anxieties of belonging with the orphaned Brent, appealing to her presumed desire to belong in a family and to a home. While she is astute in perceiving Dr. Flint's aim immediately, this nonetheless constitutes an effort to forge a quasi-filial, fictive kinship on Flint's part, albeit one that Brent resists and ultimately rejects. Though neither Douglass nor Brent views the master as an actual father, both tease out the complexities associated with being an enslaved orphan; for Douglass, his father/owner's silent repudiation of him is a constant reminder of kinlessness even in the midst of biological kin, and for Brent, Dr. Flint's harassment under the guise of paternal concern is a sign of her particular vulnerability as a woman.

Conversely, the adoptive form of fictive kinship is the assimilation of the enslaved person into at least a partial familial bond marked by genuine care and cutting across racial difference, precisely the kind of kinship pro-slavery forces claimed existed in general throughout the antebellum South. By recording these adoptive fictive kinships in their narratives, Douglass and Jacobs appropriate that convention, repurposing it for their own rhetorical ends. One of the overt goals of emancipatory narratives was to appeal to the Christian morality of their mostly Northern, White readership. The adoptive form of fictive kinship countermands reductive notions of institutional slavery as monolithic and all Whites as unsalvageable, hinting to the readership that they, as Whites, can redeem themselves by participating in the abolitionist movement. While neither Jacobs nor Douglass discounts the truth that holding another person as property is itself an egregious violation of the enslaved person's human rights, they also do not paint all Whites as irredeemably evil; some slaveholders and White Northerners can and do

operate with decency and affection on occasion, their narratives suggest. In his *Narrative*, Douglass points to Sophia Auld as having more than a modicum of maternal affection towards him. When he lives with her as a child in Baltimore, she teaches him his ABC's until her husband demands that she cease the practice. Much later, back in Baltimore under her ownership, Douglass is beaten by White dockworkers angered by his audacity in earning money beside them. He retreats back to the Auld house for protection and she immediately comes to his aid.

The heart of my once-overkind mistress was again melted into pity. My puffed-out eye and blood-covered face moved her to tears. She took a chair by me, washed the blood from my face, and, with a mother's tenderness, bound up my head, covering the wounded eye with a lean piece of fresh beef. It was almost compensation for my suffering to witness, once more, a manifestation of kindness from this, my once affectionate old mistress. (133)

The diction here (“once-overkind,” “mother’s tenderness,” and “affectionate”) imbues Sophia with some degree of human sympathy and maternal concern. Douglass implies that in his moment of need, Sophia treats him as she would her own child, in essence temporarily adopting him and tending to his needs. Douglass’s strategic placement of this instance is designed to highlight that Whites, even those who hold slaves, can have moral scruples and the capacity to do good, and as such can choose to transcend the inhumanity that slavery imposes upon them as owners. To the extent that his *Narrative* works to call Whites to conscience, this scene maps out an awakening to the emancipatory and ultimately redemptive possibilities available to his White readership and functions as an appeal to them to enlist in a just cause.

Unlike Douglass, Brent does not experience firsthand the adoptive form of fictive kinship during her period of enslavement, but she does bear witness to it nearby.

I knew a young lady who ... was an orphan, and inherited as slaves a woman and her six children. Their father was a free man. They had a comfortable home of their own, parents and children living together. The mother and eldest daughter served their mistress during

the day, and at night returned to their dwelling, which was on the premises The eldest daughter of the slave mother was promised in marriage to a free man; and the day before the wedding this good mistress emancipated her, in order that her marriage might have the sanction of *law*. (53)

Jacobs suggests in this passage is that it is the White mistress's own orphanhood status that engenders empathy for her slaves. Her empathy has its limits, of course, and the inherent contradiction of owning human beings and treating them with kindness is not lost on the narrator or the reader. This "young lady" does not immediately manumit her slaves upon receipt of them as property; instead, she exploits their free labor for her own benefit, and consequently, is fully complicit in the inhumane system. However, Jacobs does draw attention first to the mistress's kinlessness and then links it to the good turns she does for the family in allowing them to cohabit as such and then in freeing the eldest daughter so that her progeny are not doomed to the "perpetual and inheritable" status of enslavement. In this way, Jacobs too indicates that White slaveholders had the capacity to treat Blacks with dignity, however partial or temporary, and like Douglass, intimates to her mostly White readership that they can participate in this redemptive effort by working for abolition. Most certainly, this kind of appeal traffics in paternalism, presenting enslaved people as children in need of protection and Whites with abolitionist inclinations as prospective parents who, because of their relative power, can provide sanctuary from the threat of perpetual enslavement. When the "children" in this metaphor are depicted consistently as orphans, the most vulnerable children of all, as they are portrayed in these narratives, the sentimental effect on readership has the potential to intensify, a fact surely not lost on Douglass or Jacobs.

Both narrators experience adoptive, fictive kinships in North as well, highlighting for their audiences the efforts of White abolitionists on the behalf of fugitives new to the

North. In his *Narrative*, Douglass writes of Mr. David Ruggles of New York, “whose vigilance, kindness, and perseverance I shall never forget” (144), and of Mr. and Mrs. Nathan Johnson, who demonstrate “a deep and lively interest in [Douglass and his bride Anna’s] welfare” and who “proved themselves quite worthy of the name of abolitionists” (146). Douglass is so grateful to Nathan Johnson for taking Anna and him under his care that when it comes time for Douglass to give himself a new name, he “gave Mr. Johnson the privilege of choosing me a [last] name” (147). By assigning Johnson the task of selecting a last - or familial - name for him, Douglass affirms Johnson’s role as adoptive father. Similarly, Jacobs in *Incidents* has Brent recount the adoptive kinship she forms with Mrs. Bruce in New York. When she first goes to work for Mrs. Bruce, Brent is guarded, reflective of her orphan’s anxieties of belonging and her fear of detection as a fugitive:

I spoke [to Mrs. Bruce] of being separated from my children, and from relatives who were dear to me; but I did not mention the constant feeling of insecurity which oppressed my spirits. I longed for someone to confide in; but I had been so deceived by white people that I had lost all confidence in them. If they spoke kind words to me, I thought it was for some selfish purpose. I had entered this family with the distrustful feelings I had brought with me out of slavery, but ere six months had passed, I found that the gentle deportment of Mrs. Bruce and the smiles of her lovely babe were thawing my chilled heart. (190)

Once her “chilled heart” is thawed, Brent does confide her situation to Mrs. Bruce. In so doing, she finds sanctuary in the Bruce home and assistance in both locating Ellen, her daughter previously sent North, and procuring her son, Benny, from the Flint plantation. The White Mrs. Bruce, then, is a vehicle through which Brent can reunite with her children. Though Douglass and Jacobs both refer to these benefactors as “friends,” they position these figures as temporary adoptive parents who shelter the vulnerable orphans from the threat of predatory slave catchers and from a return to the social ambiguity and chaos of enslavement by providing a transitional home.

Alternative Kinship

Another kind of substitute kinship, called alternative kinship, was manufactured by the enslaved themselves. Cut off from authentic parental relations, Blacks frequently constructed intraracial bonds with other enslaved persons in close physical proximity or with extended relatives, becoming in effect families of orphans mutually adopting one another. In their examination of the functions of orphanhood in American literature, Maria Holmgren Troy, Elizabeth Kella, and Helena Wahlstrom consider the African-American orphan figure as a distinct category, indicating that Black orphan characters tend inhabit the liminal status of African Americans in general. For these Black orphan characters to counteract the adverse effects of this position, Troy, Kella, and Wahlstrom assert first that the figures work to build alternative kinships to carve out a sphere of belonging for themselves, and then they suggest that “The alternative kinship formations that the [African-American] orphan inhabits... signify on both familial and national levels” (4) because they reflect the burgeoning sense of shared experience amongst the enslaved. Their common bondage knitted them together as a community; protecting one another through providing nurturance, intimacy, and sanctuary whenever possible was the most productive means of effectuating their survival. In his *Narrative*, Douglass forges an alternative kinship with three other young men with whom he plans to escape. The plot is foiled and they are led off to separate jail cells, presumably to await being sold off to different plantations. According to Douglass, “I regarded this separation as a final one. It caused me more pain than anything else in the whole transaction. I was ready for anything rather than separation ... I was now left to me fate. I was all alone, and within the walls of a stone prison” (129-30). His severance from his alternative kin leaves him

desolated and spurs an attack of anxiety remarkably absent from his earlier description of his disjuncture from his biological mother.

The alternative kinship that Jacobs describes in *Incidents* is between Brent and her grandmother. Although the two are biologically related and intimately acquainted, her grandmother assumes the role of surrogate mother for Brent after her biological parents die. Both benefit, the orphaned child recuperating some measure of maternal affection and the childless mother, whose offspring had all either died or been sold away, reviving her capacity for nurturance:

My grandmother had, as much as possible, been a mother to her orphan grandchildren. By perseverance and unwearied industry, she was now mistress of a snug little home, surrounded with the necessaries of life. She would have been happy could her children have shared them with her. There remained but three children and two grandchildren, all slaves. Most earnestly did she strive to make us feel that it was the will of God; that He had seen fit to place us under such circumstances; and though it seemed hard, we ought to pray for contentment. (14)

Her grandmother, it bears stating, is a free Black woman. However, she is neither immune to the ravages of the institution of slavery nor unaware of her potential to mitigate its deleterious effects on her grandchildren through her assumption of the role of surrogate mother, for which she feels gratitude, according to the narrator. Brent misses her mother, and her grandmother misses her own children, so the two perform the roles of mother and daughter for one another in an effort to assuage the permanent losses each has sustained - Brent's loss of parents and her grandmother's loss as parent.

From Property To Humanity: The Orphan's Recuperation of Personhood

Formerly enslaved African Americans who penned emancipatory narratives privileged literacy as an indispensable ingredient in their attainment of both identity and freedom. By learning how to read, their field of vision widened beyond their present reality. They became capable of imagining the potential for self-emancipation, and came

to believe that they deserved to be free from the auspices of enslavement to gain admittance to the human family. Emancipatory narratives instantiate a literacy-identity-freedom continuum out of which the trope of the orphan emerges. For so many emancipatory narrators, the moment of achieving literacy is a catapult, propelling them to a new recognition of self and position in the world. Only then can narrators consider any possibility beyond their own current state. Both Douglass and Brent learn to read at an early age--Douglass first from Sophia Auld and then from “the little white boys . . . [whom] I met on the street” (82) in Baltimore, Brent from the “kind mistress” (4) to whom she is delivered after her mother dies. This acquisition subverts the slave system as it affords the enslaved greater understanding of their humanity and right to self-control.

Literacy acquisition, then, is figured as the key to psychological liberation from the control of the White master/father. For instance, in the aftermath of Hugh Auld’s demand that his wife cease teaching young Frederick to read, Douglass muses on its value relative to the desire of Whites to prohibit it, writing, “I now understood what had been to me a most perplexing difficulty - to wit, the white man’s power to enslave the black man. It was a grand achievement, and I prized it highly. From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom . . . the argument which he so warmly urged, against my learning to read, only served to inspire me with a desire and determination to learn” (78-9). Just as slaveholders denied financial compensation to enslaved laborers, so too did they expend tremendous effort to prevent their slaves from accessing knowledge, under the precept that ““Learning would *spoil* the best nigger in the world”” (78), as Auld tells his wife. Once enslaved people earn money for their labor, they will be less likely to acquiesce to working for free as a tool owned by the

slaveholder. In that same fashion, once enslaved individuals come to know the world through reading, they are less likely to submit to being treated as chattel, a shift that would, in the minds of slaveholders, undermine the entire system.

For enslaved persons, writing doubles as an act of will that repositions the narrator from object to subject, erasing the social ambiguity initiated by “the theft of the body.” The written chronicle of the personal experiences of enslavement and emancipation functions as a crucial component of my theory of the trope of the African-American orphan in that it serves as demonstrable proof of the narrator’s claim to humanity and a qualification for inclusion into the human family. In “Narrative Orphanage,” the introduction to her critical work *Post-Plantation Literature*, Valerie Loichot maintains that African-American writers speak back to the violence of plantation slavery by first delineating how the mechanics of enslavement placed folks of African descent in the shoes of orphans. Then, Loichot outlines how family and narrative became entwined as a means of recuperating familial and ancestral links for enslaved Africans and their descendants. Moreover, Loichot asserts, “the orphan narrative is . . . not only a narrative without a parent, but, more important, a narrative initiated by the orphan” (3), an apt description but one that I would like to refine. In fact, the orphan narrator gives birth to him- or herself as subject through the act of writing. Garnering agency in this way, the narrator can subvert what Loichot describes as “the socioeconomic structure of slavery . . . [that] attempted to orphan [Africans] from family cohesion, timelines, and organized narrative” (1). By acquiring the tool necessary to chronicle his/her experience, “orphans are active performers in family reconstruction” (3). Loichot goes on to parse the inextricable link between the enslaved African-American narrator’s deployment of

storytelling and the effort to recover his/her denied humanity. Narrators commit their experiences of enslavement to paper and preserve it for posterity, interrupting the inheritability of the orphan condition by establishing a new lineage with which future generations of both familial and racial kin can identify.

In conjunction, the orphan narrator yokes the restoration of ancestral memory to the attainment of liberation, rehabilitating the fractures precipitated by the “commercial deportation” (Baker 27) of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Dislocated from family and culture, enslaved Africans and their descendants did not succumb to the desensitizing influence of enslavement that endeavored to erase their heritage from collective memory. The power of culture is that it is portable, and enslaved people in America refashioned their indigenous cultures as tools of resistance and emancipation. In his *Narrative*, Douglass heralds the coming of the climactic fight with Mr. Covey by declaring, “You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall now see how a slave was made a man” (107). Scholars often point to this moment as evidence of writing one’s self into being. While this is true, it fails to acknowledge the significance of what occurs in the interim between that utterance and the fight itself, namely Douglass’s reliance on the assistance of another enslaved man, Sandy:

That night I fell in with Sandy Jenkins, a slave....I found Sandy an old advisor. He told me...I must go back to Covey; but that before I went, I must go with him to another part of the woods, where there was a certain *root*, which, if I would take some of it with me, carrying it *always on my right side*, would render it impossible for Mr. Covey, or any other white man, to whip me To please him, I at length took the root, and, according to his direction, carried it upon my right side. (111)

Sandy functions as alternative kin to Douglass, a replacement for the White master/father from whom he disaggregated himself by attaining literacy. Moreover, Sandy’s application of West African religious practices (namely the use of common organic

materials for sacred or magical purposes, sometimes referred to as *obi*) through the gift of the root as talisman gestures towards ancestral, cultural memory.⁴ Toni Morrison has written that one of the “distinctive elements of African American writing ... is the presence of an ancestor ... And these ancestors are not just parents, they are sort of timeless people whose relationships to the character are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom” (“Rootedness” 342-3). In this moment, Sandy Jenkins typifies this archetype of the ancestor as elucidated by Morrison, underscored when, after following Sandy’s directions, Douglass succeeds in physically repelling Covey. Douglass the orphan narrator can only achieve full humanity and survive to write his tale of psychological liberation by leaning on his ancestral heritage as represented by Sandy and the root. Douglass rewards Sandy by including him in his escape plan, but Sandy proves unworthy of the honor, revealing the plan to Douglass’s master, foiling it, and landing Douglass in jail. It would be a mistake to dismiss Sandy’s function in supplying Douglass with the root, though, because of his unfortunate decision later to turn on Douglass. In the narrative, Sandy is not intended so much to embody the African ancestors lost to Douglass as to serve as a transmitter of ancestral knowledge; he is not an ancestor, but a temporary conduit for ancestral wisdom. Moreover, Sandy’s decision to turn on Douglass may reflect an underlying ambivalence towards Douglass’s desire to escape; to Sandy, Douglass’s impending departure may feel like a familial abandonment of sorts, one that he wishes to thwart in order maintain their kinship bond by keeping Douglass close.

⁴Of course, Douglass also leans heavily on the Christian tradition in this segment of his narrative as well, positioning himself as Christ figure. After he bests Covey, he writes, “I felt as I never felt before. It was a glorious resurrection, from the tomb of slavery, to the heaven of freedom” (109).

Ancestral heritage comes to bear on the escape of Brent as well. In *Incidents*, she returns to her parents' graves, the same site where Flint had previously asserted his master/father relation to Brent. This time, she is in the midst of pondering the full weight of her planned escape. Brent is compelled to be in the presence of her familial ancestors, in part to strengthen her resolve to undertake risk of her plan, and in part to share physical space with them for what may very well be the last time. The narrative passage chronicling this pivotal moment explicitly marshals ancestral memory to reconnect severed familial and cultural bonds. Moreover, ancestral memory functions as a catalyst in the imagining of a liberated future, as the following passage illustrates:

I knew the doom that awaited my fair baby in slavery, and I determined to save her from it, or perish in the attempt. I went to make this vow at the graves of my poor parents, in the burying ground of the slaves I knelt by the graves of my parents, and thanked God, as I had often done before, that they had not lived to witness my trials, or to mourn over my sins. I had received my mother's blessing when she died, and in many an hour of tribulation I had seemed to hear her voice, sometimes chiding me, sometimes whispering loving words into my wounded heart. I have shed many and bitter tears, to think that when I am gone from my children they cannot remember me with such entire satisfaction as I remembered my mother. (100-1)

It is striking to note that at the outset of the vignette, Jacobs iterates that her visit to the cemetery is instigated by another kind of anxiety of belonging, this one regarding the future of her own progeny. This narrative maneuver links past, present, and future generations of family members disjoined by the institution of slavery. By standing at her parents' graves, Brent is reminding herself of the fate that awaits not only her if she remains, but also her children, and the promise she makes to her parents in effect doubles as a pledge of commitment to her children's future. By resolving to found a new lineage beyond the grasp of enslavement, she is endeavoring to satiate her own anxieties of belonging and preclude her children from experiencing them. Orphaned both by her parents' deaths and a broader sense of isolation engendered by her status as a slave, Brent

plots the coordinates of a form of liberation that grants her the agency to both restore her own humanity and reunify her family.

Later in the same passage, Jacobs gestures towards a degree of ancestry that exceeds the strictly familial, linking it with broader cultural recuperation. In coupling the two in the narrative sequence below, she positions Brent as a descendant in both ways, and an inheritor of traits from each source:

A black stump, at the head of my mother's grave, was all that remained of a tree my father had planted. His grave was marked by a small wooden board, bearing his name, the letters of which were nearly obliterated. I knelt down and kissed them, and poured forth a prayer to God for guidance and support in the perilous step I was about to take. As I passed the old meeting house where, before Nat Turner's time, the slaves had been allowed to meet for worship, I seemed to hear my father's voice come from it, bidding me not to tarry till I reached freedom or the grave. I rushed on with renovated hopes. My trust in God had been strengthened by that prayer among the graves. (101)

Her father's name, virtually erased from his grave marker, does not get referenced in the narrative moment, despite her obvious affection for him. Instead, Brent pivots to a memory of the old meeting house, invoking Nat Turner by name. This is no coincidence. She is recalling a particular collective cultural experience, meeting for worship prior to Nat Turner's rebellion,⁵ to foreground the importance of communal memory as a source of sustenance. More importantly, the mere reference to Turner subtly aligns him as Brent's ancestor, too, her father's disembodied voice telling her "not to tarry til [she]

⁵On August 21, 1831, Nat Turner led an insurrection of enslaved people in Southampton County, VA. This army managed to kill 55 people before it was quelled and many of the revolutionaries were captured. Turner escaped into the woods, but was eventually captured at the end of October of that year after he was discovered by a hunter and his dog. Turner was tried during the first week of November, found guilty, and executed on November 11, 1831. The uprising shook the White South, and many southern Whites enacted violence against enslaved and free African Americans alike to reassert their control over the Black populace. Jacobs recounts just such an event, which she describes as a muster, in Edenton, NC that occurred shortly after news of Turner's revolt reached the town. The homes of freed Blacks were raided and looted, and men were dragged out into the streets and beaten.

reach[es] freedom or the grave” commingling with the opaque reminder of Turner’s act of will to impel Jacobs to initiate the actions that will enable her to attain self-liberation.

Patterns of the Past: Homelessness and Liminality Post-Liberation

A final, vital component of many nineteenth-century emancipatory autobiographies is the author’s reportage of what life in the North, and hence on the other side of the slavery-freedom divide, is like. No postscript, this sequence countermands pro-slavery claims that fugitive slaves reached the North only to endure greater deprivation there, functioning as a direct narrative rebuttal to the patent falsehoods propagated by slaveholders and their supporters. Andrews includes this as the final stage of what he terms the “pattern of the past” in these kinds of works. His schema consists of three stages: an “initiatory separation from the community or home,” “periods of isolation and alienation within oppressive hierarchies,” and “a final recognition, from the liberating perspective of liminality, of the conditions on which lasting community had to be predicated” (253). Implicit in the first stage is separation or orphanhood, but more relevant to the five elements of the trope of the African-American orphan that I propose is the third stage, which suggests that, even from the vantage point of emancipation, emancipatory narrators like Frederick Douglass and Linda Brent are still in a transitional phase. Haunted by lingering anxieties of belonging and unable to gain full incorporation into free society, both lack a “home within the nation.” Because the post-escape portions of the two narratives are brief and appear at the conclusions of each work, neither Douglass nor Jacobs explores the full impact of estrangement in the North. Instead, they both strike an ambivalent chord about these new circumstances, happy to be free from their former enslavers but uneasy about their liminal place in society. Yet this liminality

also gives them a “special sight,” so to speak. From the margins they can cast a critical eye towards that nominally “free society,” being only nominally free themselves, offering an even-handed assessment of life in the North for African Americans.

These segments are shot through with notions of homelessness. Eager to establish new lineages in the North, each of these African-American orphan narrators quickly deduce that crossing the threshold from cultural/genealogical isolate to acknowledged community member is more fraught than they previously anticipated. Upon arriving to the North, Douglass comments, “There I was in the midst of thousands, and yet a perfect stranger; without home and without friends, in the midst of thousands of my own brethren--children of a common Father . . . in the midst of houses, yet having no home” (143-4). Removal from the site of his enslavement has not ameliorated his orphan’s acute awareness of “otherness.” While Douglass sees the city’s residents as his “brethren,” intentionally selecting a term associated with family, he simultaneously acknowledges the sensation that he is not like them, not one of them, but rather is “in the midst of wild beasts, whose greediness to swallow up the trembling and half-famished fugitive is only equalled by that with which the monsters of the deep swallow up the helpless fish” (144). As a natal alienate, he does not fit no matter where he goes, and is cognizant of his continuing vulnerability, despite the help of his adoptive White kin, Mr. Ruggles and Mr. and Mrs. Johnson. Not only is Douglass a veritable stranger in the North, he also perceives himself to be estranged from his new community. He is fundamentally alone and persistently lonely. Peripheral to the interconnected lives of those around him, Douglass’s sensation of strangeness corresponds to his notion of homelessness.

Through the narrative voice of Linda Brent, Harriet Jacobs, too, laments that her freedom is provisional, partially checked by her inability to create a domestic space for herself and her family in the North. The nagging anxieties of belonging continue to plague her. While her post-flight experiences are not marked by the isolation articulated by Douglass, she does ruminate on her homelessness when she concludes *Incidents* in the following fashion: “Reader, my story ends with freedom; not in the usual way, with marriage. I and my children are now free! ... [But] The dream of my life is not yet realized. I do not sit with my children in a home of my own. I still long for a hearthstone of my own, however humble. I wish it for my children’s sake more than my own” (225). Like Douglass, then, Jacobs acknowledges that liberation without safe harbor is partial at best, in spite of family reunification. Loichot’s stance that “Control of the family can be achieved through the power of its telling, imagining the family story” (35) holds true at the end of *Incidents*; the orphaned narrator has acquired a degree of control over her family’s future through its telling. Yet I contend that this control is only partial, as her life’s dream will remain incomplete until she can make a home of her own.

This clinches the last facet of the trope of the orphan in African-American emancipatory narratives. Douglass and Jacobs, albeit free, lack a literal “home within the nation.” Because both authors, like so many nineteenth-century African-American autobiographers, position themselves and their experiences as representative of their race and class, they choreograph their orphanhood metonymically as a stand-in for the collective ordeal of African-American cultural orphanhood under which so many others like them suffered. Enslaved in the South, ostracized and exploited in the North, African Americans in the pre-Civil War era came to embody the liminality delineated by

Andrews and inscribed by Douglass, Jacobs, and a host of other orphaned emancipatory narrators in search of heritage and haven. Antebellum African-American novelists take up the trope of the orphan, embedding each of its features into their protagonists and modeling the trajectories of their fictions on the lived experiences of their racial kin as they undertake to envision the establishment of that “home in the nation” that Jacobs and others expressly desire.

CHAPTER 2

“A HOME FOR THOSE WITHOUT A HOME IN THE NATION:” LONGING FOR A
HAVEN IN FRANK J. WEBB’S *THE GARIES AND THEIR FRIENDS*

The emancipatory narratives of Douglass, Jacobs, and others stand as the Ur-texts of African-American literature. However, citing them as the sole sources of representative narratives in the tradition runs the risk of missing how modern Black novels like *Passing* and postmodern texts such as *Kindred*, not to mention later works, including *White Boy Shuffle*, taut with tension between longing and liberation, draw from true stories of emancipation. These twentieth-century pieces have another set of source material as well, antebellum works of fiction that concern wishes for a place to call home such as Frank J. Webb’s 1857 novel, *The Garies and Their Friends*. William Wells Brown’s *Clotel, or, The President’s Daughter* (1853) is considered to be the first novel published by an African American in the United States, and Harriet Wilson’s *Our Nig* (1859) is the first written by an African-American woman. Sandwiched between the publication of these two novels is *The Garies and Their Friends*, which, like Wilson’s work, chronicles the hardships associated with being Black in the antebellum North. *The Garies* dispels the notion that a migration northward across the Mason-Dixon Line made an escape from the tentacles of White supremacy possible; Webb illuminates the travails that await those who venture up north through his novel’s two orphans, siblings Clarence and Emily Garie.

By planting his Black orphans in the antebellum North, Webb demonstrates that the familial and cultural orphanhood experienced by Douglass and Jacobs are not endemic to the South, but in fact exceed both geographical boundaries and personhood

status. Victims of anti-Black racism in pre-Civil War Philadelphia, the orphan figures of Webb's novel function dialectically within the parameters of the trope to reflect the particular challenges faced by free African Americans in the antebellum North, where liberation from White supremacy was incomplete. Through biracial Clarence and Emily, Webb charts divergent paths taken in hopes of soothing anxieties of belonging. The novel's conclusion suggests that Black families and Black homes are primary bulwarks against White encroachment and that intraracial solidarity is the means through which Blacks can maintain at least a partial safe haven from oppression. In this way, the project of African-American family-building that soothes the orphan's anxieties doubles as an enactment of Black nationalism in that it fashions the domestic sphere into a political tool; the Black home is a site of self-sovereignty, free from White oppression, where intergenerational race pride can be cultivated. The race-as-family model is made literal, but it is also transfigured into a race-as-nation equivalency. Thus, the cultivation of a place of intraracial belonging made manifest through family and home becomes concomitant with the African-American pursuits of self-empowerment and self-determination that mark the early Black nationalism of the nineteenth century. But this solution, uneasy at best, is complicated by its reliance on a patriarchal model of family, which threatens to reconstitute oppressive structures along gender, rather than race lines.

The Garies and Their Friends begins in Georgia, where Mr. Clarence Garie, a White man, owns a profitable plantation. He lives with an African-American woman named Emily, whom he considers to be his wife, though he has purchased her and taken her as his mistress. While Webb depicts their relationship as authentically loving in its emotional register, Clarence still retains property rights over his "wife" and their

namesakes, young Clarence and Emily. Upon the conception of their third child, Mrs. Garie says, “It will kill me to have another child here [in Georgia] . . . it is a fearful thing to be an inheritor of chains” (51), which precipitates a move to Philadelphia. The Garies come to Philadelphia only to inhabit the house right next to one of Mr. Garie’s distant relatives, the conniving Mr. Stevens. Motivated by a potent mixture of anti-Black racism, a disgust of miscegenation, and naked greed, Stevens incites an Irish mob to attack the Garie home and Black neighborhoods throughout the city, including that of the wealthy Black landowner and friend of the Garies, Mr. Walters. In the widespread violence that ensues, Mr. Garie is shot and killed, Mrs. Garie dies in premature labor, and their two surviving children are rendered parentless. Mr. Walters defends his home with the aid of other Blacks in the neighborhood, repelling the White mob and protecting his property. The Ellises, a middle-class Black family and friends of both Walters and the Garies, do not escape unscathed, though, as Mr. Charles Ellis is pushed off of the roof of a building and is permanently disfigured from the trauma.

Subsequent to this attack, Walters assumes stewardship over the orphaned Garie children, performing the role of father for the two in the wake of Mr. Garie’s death. He sends Clarence off to boarding school, with the demand that Clarence pass as a White person so as to be allowed to matriculate at the academy. For Emily, however, Walters elects to install her in the Black Ellis home with no requirement of concealing her racial identity. In this maneuver, Webb stages divergent paths towards gaining access to a family; Clarence must repudiate his African-American heritage, while Emily is free to claim hers. These disparate routes towards achieving belonging have vastly different consequences. Several years later, at boarding school, Clarence falls in love with a White

woman. He becomes engaged to her only to have their union thwarted through the revelation of his Black identity by Stevens's son. Brokenhearted, Clarence wastes away to his death. Emily, on the other hand, flourishes under the care of the Ellis family, eventually becoming betrothed to Charles Ellis, Jr. By novel's end, the respective fates of Clarence and Emily constitute a study in contrasts: Clarence grows more orphan-like, his increasing alienation a contributor to his death, while Emily thrives after ingraining herself in an intraracial family structure.

In a convention typical of nineteenth-century sentimental fiction, the novel's final vignette is a nuptial scene, in this case, one that consists of three weddings - Emily to Charlie; Esther Ellis, Charlie's sister, to Mr. Walters; and Kinch, Charlie's childhood friend, to Caddy, his other sister. In the midst of the gaiety of the wedding feast, these new families confront the spectre of White supremacist violence. The threat to their welfare is symbolized by bullet holes in the ceiling left over from the mob attack. Mr. Ellis, seemingly laboring "under the impression that [the gathering of guests] was another mob" (305), endures a frightful flashback to the moment of his attack. Nevertheless, the novel strikes a hopeful chord at its conclusion. Each of the three mixed-race couples, the narrative suggests, will establish a new familial lineage founded on racial solidarity and socio-economic ascendance. Thrift and cooperation will lead to self-determination for the pairs of Black newlyweds; thus, Webb suggests, intraracial family-building is an act of Black nation-building.

Embedded in the narrative arc of *The Garies* are all five constitutive elements of the trope of the Black orphan. Attenuated to these is what scholar Bernard Bell, in *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition*, terms "socialized ambivalence," which he deems

a distinctive feature of African-American novels. According to Bell, “socialized ambivalence [is] the dancing of attitudes of Americans of African ancestry between integration and separation, a shifting identification between the values of dominant white and subordinate black cultural systems as a result of institutionalized racism” (xvi). Distinct from Spillers’s social ambiguity,⁶ socialized ambivalence involves the predicament of Blacks, rendered socially ambiguous, in their effort to achieve full personhood in a system bent on denying it. In an effort to survive, African Americans vacillate between resistance to White oppression and assimilation of some of the very standards of White-American society that foment oppression. The overriding desire to locate a safe haven in the midst of racialized hostility obliges Clarence to follow the instructions of Mr. Walters to conceal his true racial makeup and Emily to interweave herself into the fabric of the Black Ellis household. Together they speak to the oscillation between their conflictual racial identities instigated by their orphanhood; knowing that their Blackness positions them as prime targets of institutional racism, each is compelled to establish a new lineage through marriage, choosing to yoke themselves to one half of their mixed descent. Where Clarence’s subterfuge dooms him to fail in the endeavor, Emily’s embrace of her Blackness paves the way for her to succeed. This bifurcation of the Black orphan figure allows Webb to explore the knottiness of socialized ambivalence for African Americans in the antebellum North by posing significant questions: What must be sacrificed for freedom? What must be subsumed by the interlocking projects of intraracial family- and nation-building?

⁶ For more on the concept of social ambiguity and its application to African-American narratives, see Chapter 1, pages 9-15.

Emily's effective navigation of socialized ambivalence is in concordance with notions of Black domesticity. By enfolding herself into the existing Black family structure embodied by the Ellises, Emily fashions a sanctuary for herself, yet it is one that compels her to conform to the limiting, socially-constructed gender roles proscribed by the era. The haven of the Ellis home and her eventual marriage to Charles afford her a measure of liberty from White oppression, but simultaneously deprive her of the freedom to pursue a life beyond the domestic sphere. In his introduction to the 1997 reprint of *The Garies*, critic Robert Reid-Pharr discusses "the project of black domesticity [as] an ideological orientation that emphasizes family and familial life as the wellspring of black economic, political, and social development" (viii), and in which the conceptualization of race-as-family is braided with Black nation-building. Emily's role in this project of Black collective empowerment is to reproduce and then to raise offspring while serving in a subsidiary role to Charles, Jr., her husband and the patriarch of her household by novel's end.⁷

In contradistinction to Emily, Clarence's inability to ingrain himself in an existing African-American family structure or to establish a new one for himself renders him powerless to withstand the racial antipathy that leads to the demise of his relationship with Birdie. Here, the interplay between longing and liberation elemental to the trope of the Black orphan swells with significance. Disavowal of his Blackness causes Clarence's longing for a home to go unsatisfied, while Emily's attachment to her racial identity

⁷ This conclusion aligns with broader nineteenth-century American notions of an idealized domestic family. In her work, *Social Origins Of Private Lives*, Stephanie Coontz proposes that this vision of family included the sexual division of labor and the conceptual separation between female reproductive and male productive activities, which combined to "obscure class and ethnic differences and simultaneously testify to the real centrality of families or places where each class or ethnic group reproduced its position and pursued its own goals and interests" (34).

becomes the means through which she can gain access to a home. The overarching message here produced by Webb's deployment of the trope of the African-American orphan is that the Black family, and by extension, the Black community or nation, is the primary defender of the Black body; without that protection, one is perpetually at risk. Citing Mr. Walters as evidence, Reid-Pharr suggests that the home and family supply the stability necessary for Black self-empowerment. To this claim I wish to add that Walters assumes the mantle of symbolic African-American patriarch, the Black (nationalist) father who intercedes benevolently in the lives of the other characters in service of cobbling together a unified, intraracial community.

That this Black father also serves as primary bread-winner for his race-as-family is of no small consequence. Bernard Bell identifies the antidote to anti-Black racism proposed in the novel in light of this, claiming, "Instead of Christian charity or black power, Webb's answer to racial discrimination is green power" (43), that is, power associated with the accumulation of wealth. Green power encompasses building economic security to increase self-sufficiency, as Walters has through real estate, but it also includes the ability to leverage financial assets for political advantage in an effort to insulate oneself against the mechanics of White supremacy. Green power represents both a freedom from White incursion and a freedom to pursue wealth, and Webb's depiction of Walters reflects this braiding of the two. Yet Bell's commentary is an oversimplification of the nuanced ways that various modes of power overlap in the lives of the novel's African-American characters, all of whom can be considered culturally orphaned in consequence of their Blackness.

Although green power is elevated by Webb to some degree, it has its limitations, too, in *The Garies*. Walters's failed effort to use his access to the mayor to ward off the impending mob action illustrates this. Walters, Webb intimates in this scene, is still Black regardless of his financial assets, and will not be protected by the law. In the narrative, green power becomes a means through which characters can obtain some measure of Black power, as the amassing of wealth and the ascendancy that this catalyzes function as counterfactuals to the prevailing racist beliefs that Blacks were incapable of self-sufficiency. Michael Borgstrom devotes a chapter of his critical work, *Minority Reports*, to how race and class function both dialectically and dialogically in Webb's novel. He notes that other scholars have tended to critique *The Garies* for its seeming celebration of the class ascendancy of its protagonists and effacement of the goal of collective African-American political empowerment, but to Borgstrom, this evaluation represents a myopic view of the methods of acquiring power. He notes, "It may be unwise . . . to presume that the novel's apparent endorsement of black bourgeois achievement necessarily signals a concomitant rejection of African-American racial solidarity. Indeed, throughout *The Garies* Webb suggests that the upward mobility of black culture may in fact complement more overt expressions of African-American racial activism" (42). To put it more strongly, Black economic advancement is itself a discrete form of racial activism. As Clarence's tragic end crystallizes, while economic privilege alone does not necessarily lead to the fulfillment of longing for a home, it can be an effective tool in cultivating Black-controlled spaces in the public sphere for the collective good as well as founding an intraracial home stable and prosperous enough to accommodate and protect others in times of need.

The Black Home As Fortress

To understand the mechanics of the African-American orphan's resolution of the tension between longing for incorporation into a family and liberation from the interlocking systems of oppression that deny the orphan figure's humanity, it is necessary to tease out the distinct features of the two major configurations of home and family Webb presents in *The Garies*, the intraracial one assembled by the Ellis family and the inter-racial one built by the Garies. The narrator introduces the Ellises near the outset of the novel by stating that "Mr. and Mrs. Ellis were at the head of a highly respectable and industrious coloured family" (19) that includes three children: Charlie, Esther, and Caddy. Mrs. Ellis holds equal power in the family home; she and Mr. Ellis both "head" the family, and have collaborated so well that their family is qualified by the descriptors "highly respectable" and "industrious," a pairing that conjoins social and racial uplift with upward economic mobility, while also undercutting to some extent the sexual division of labor delineated by the prevailing cult of domesticity of the mid-nineteenth century. The Ellises, then, epitomize the way that green power engenders Black self-empowerment, even in the racially restrictive environment that they inhabit. Theirs is a "black household that produces exclusively black Americans" (Reid-Pharr xii), and the fact that the family survives the mob attack intact, albeit not unscathed, serves as a commentary about the strength and resiliency to be gleaned from the maintenance of the Black family.

In contrast, the Garie home has been constructed across racial difference and, more significantly, squarely on the backs of the enslaved. Mr. Garie has literally purchased his wife, Emily, presumably with funds generated by the success of his

Georgia plantation. And Emily has no real decision-making power in the relationship; as a result, she is reduced to deploying persuasion to convince him to accede to her request to move from Georgia to Philadelphia. Moreover, the lack of legal sanction associated with their relationship makes it vulnerable to assault, and it has no community protection from one race or the other. Strikingly, Garie's apparently genuine affection for Emily in no way influences his attitude towards the institution of chattel slavery. Though the narrator reports, "Mr. Garie was a very kind master, and his slaves were as happy as slaves can be under any circumstance" (53), Garie's seeming love for Emily does not spark any epiphany regarding the humanity of his slaves or any pang of remorse over owning them at all. Even after the Garies depart from Georgia for Philadelphia, Mr. Garie continues to amass wealth through his plantation, and does not manumit any of the enslaved persons over whom he has property rights, including Emily and their two children. This is the cardinal sin that eventually causes the Garie home to fall in on itself, a truth is made manifest in Stevens's claims on the Garie children as property following their parents' demise.

Whiteness and its concomitant willingness to subjugate others to enrich itself is the undoing of the Garie family as it is originally composed, and the novel holds Clarence Garie responsible for that. Though Whites beyond the walls of the Garie house in Philadelphia are the literal culprits, "the more significant danger is not the clearly defined white mob, but the white friend and in particular, the white lover - the interloper who would disallow black purity" (Reid-Pharr xii). In essence, the children's orphaning is precipitated not only by the White supremacist response to the inter-racial composition of the Garie family, but the White supremacist ideology enacted by Mr. Garie himself, all

too comfortable purchasing his lover from the auction block and retaining ownership of her and their offspring, his unfulfilled declaration that “I wish to emancipate and educate my children” (85) notwithstanding. Emily’s status as property is two-fold: first, as an enslaved person under the control of her master, and second as a wife in subjugation to her husband. Mr. Garie literalizes the “family” metaphor of pro-slavery rhetoric in one fell swoop; Emily and their children are at once his slaves and his family through cohabitation (their marriage not recognized by Georgia law) and reproduction, and as such, he can wield absolute power over them.

Following the dissolution of the Garie family and the destruction of their house, Webb immediately foregrounds the altered state of being that White violence has imposed upon the Garie children. After the mob attack in which Mrs. Garie dies in premature labor as she and the children seek refuge in the woodhouse behind their residence, young Clarence glances over at his mother, and the horror of having watched his mother die right before his eyes dawns on him. The narrator reports that in that moment, “there was a cry of grief sprung up from the heart of that orphan boy ... it was the first outbreak of a loving childish heart pierced with life’s bitterest grief - a mother’s loss” (189). The terrorist assault on the Garie home has snatched from Clarence whatever sanctuary his Black mother could provide for him and his sister, and has induced a natal alienation that will haunt Clarence for the rest of the novel, as his unrequited longing for home and affection will eventually engulf him. More immediately, however, the change in fortune flings the parentless Garie children into a state of social ambiguity, threatening to trans-substantiate them from human beings to property. Mr. Balch’s revelation of Mr.

Stevens's intention to swindle the children out of their rightful inheritance illustrates this reality:

It is my opinion, that without a will, these children cannot oppose [Stevens's] claim successfully, if he can prove his consanguinity to Mr. Garie. His lawyer showed me a copy of the letter and papers that are to be used as evidence, and, I must say, they are entirely without flaw. He proves himself, undoubtedly, to be the first cousin of Mr. Garie. You are, no doubt, aware that these children being the offspring of a slave woman, cannot inherit, in this State (except under certain circumstances), the property of a white father. I am, therefore, very much afraid that they are entirely at [Mr. Stevens's] mercy. (211)

Instead of inheriting their father's wealth, Clarence and Emily become part of his property holdings simultaneous to their being rendered kinless, echoing one of the features typical of social ambiguity as delineated by Hortense Spillers. While Stevens may not intend to sell the children off, as their inheritor, he is within his rights to do so, a fact he exploits in his negotiations with Balch and Walters in an effort to get them to demur to the better part of his demands regarding the dispersal of Garie's financial assets.

A third Black household, that of Mr. Walters, holds outsized importance in the novel's thematics. A bachelor who lives alone, Walters has no literal Black family, but he does have a home to protect during the mob attack. And unlike the Garies, whose social ambivalence has amplified their vulnerability, Walters's unequivocal Blackness enables him to call his friends and neighbors to arms in defense of their neighborhood as a whole and his home in particular. Walters, a pillar of Philadelphia's African-American elite, learns about the imminent incursion and entreats the White mayor to order police to ring the neighborhood in defense. When his request is rebuffed, he rejoins, "If I am attacked, they will find I am not unprepared" (170), iterating a proto-Black nationalist ethos.⁸ This

⁸ Mid-nineteenth century Black nationalism consisted of two strains - political/social and geographic/spatial. David Walker (1796-1830) advocated for Black political and social self-determination within the United States in his fiery abolitionist work, *Appeal To the Colored Citizens Of the World* (1829). Martin Delany (1812-1885) proposed that African Americans expatriate themselves voluntarily, believing that they would never be treated

Black home becomes microcosmic of the Black nation here; solidarity is a necessary bulwark against White encroachment. Thus, in short order, “Guns were stacked in the corner, a number of pistols lay on the mantelpiece, and a pile of cartridges were heaped up beside a small bag of powder that stood upon the table opposite the fireplace” (171) as Walters girds his home for battle. Several friends, including the Ellis children and their friend Kinch, seek refuge in his home, enlisting for duty when Walters declares, ““I am the commander of this fortress”” (174). His safe haven from Whiteness threatened, Walters re-imagines it as a garrison, assumes the role of the hero whose portrait adorns the wall, Toussaint l’Ouverture, revolutionary anti-slavery leader of the armed Black revolution against the White planter class in Haiti in 1791,⁹ and takes command of the collection of African Americans he is harboring in his home in the defense of it. A pitched battle ensues, with the children actively participating in repelling the Irish assailants, a stark contrast to the helpless Garie children passively enduring assault at their home nearby. In “The Property of Blackness: The Legal Fiction of Frank J. Webb’s *The Garies and Their Friends*,” Elizabeth Stockton contends that the novel is as much a commentary on the legal and property rights denied to Blacks in the antebellum North as it is a reflection of dominant discourse regarding domesticity. In particular, Stockton holds up this race riot scene as evidence. She writes, “Through the violence of the race riot, Webb compares the protection afforded by Walters’s home to the fragility of the

equally in the United States. He traveled to West Africa in the late 1850’s to scout out land for potential settlement and upon his return to the United States published a document, his *Official Report Of the Niger River Valley Exploring Party*, outlining his plan in 1861.

⁹Toussaint L’Ouverture (1743-1803) commanded a military force that defeated French forces and liberated the island of Saint Domingue from French colonial rule and its nearly 500,000 African inhabitants from enslavement.

mixed-race Garie home” (479). By virtue of his relationship with Emily, Garie’s property rights no longer need be respected. In this way, he is reduced to Walters’s position of having to defend himself from White attack, yet because Walters’s situation is strengthened by the communal Black resistance to property infringement enacted in this moment, he can withstand the mob onslaught while the Garies simply cannot.

Through this juxtaposition of the two homes, *The Garies* rehearses a version mid-nineteenth century proto-Black nationalism. The mob attack undermines the nation-as-family ideology that suggested that if citizens demonstrated their fealty to the country and proved themselves productive members of it, they could earn the security and full range of liberty the nation offered. Of course, as the riot reveals, the opportunity to enter the nation-as-family was not extended to Blacks, regardless of their accumulation of financial assets or willingness to act in solidarity across racial differences. Cruelly, it is these attributes - the desire for social equality and the pursuit of economic gains - that draw the ire of Whites, both in the novel and in the histories of antebellum cities in the North, like Philadelphia. Theorist Benedict Anderson suggests, “The modern nation-state is conceived in familial terms as a ‘natural association’” (Troy 22); in this formulation, the nation leans on the notion of the primacy of common heritage and the expectation of fealty considered inherent to the family structure in its idealized mid-nineteenth century iteration. But because Blacks were perceived as subhuman and prone to degeneracy if freed from subservience to Whites, full access to the citizenship rights purportedly offered by the United States would never be granted to them. And Webb, aware of these realities, proposes that African Americans’ survival and success hinges upon not interracial collaboration within the nation, but rather intraracial alliances, or more aptly,

kinships, to craft what W.E.B. DuBois would later dub “a nation within the nation” (265). In *The Garies*, this “nation within the nation” moment nullifies the nation-as-family analogy, proposing as a replacement a race-as-family equivalency. Disowned by the nation - personified by the Irish mob, which is seeking to demonstrate itself worthy of access to full citizenship in White America by eschewing class solidarity with Blacks in favor of racial solidarity with the established White patriarchy¹⁰ - African Americans assert and then defend their full humanity in a collective fashion that proves effective for Walters in the novel.

Black Families and the Unwriting of Race

In the aftermath of the destruction of the Garie family, the destinies of young Clarence and Emily diverge. The two newly orphaned Black characters initially get subsumed into a single, intraracial household when Walters transforms his home into a temporary sanctuary for those whose families have been traumatized by the attack, namely the Garie orphans and the displaced Ellis family. Walters assumes the role of surrogate father for the surviving Garies, empowering himself to make decisions about their respective futures; as African Americans light enough to pass as White, Clarence and Emily have options as to their placement into new homes, a fact that Walters knows full well. Walters relinquishes Emily into the care of the Black Ellises. For Clarence, Walters selects a much different course of action. Rather than keeping the two orphans together to allow them to retain their biological kinship bonds, he sends Clarence off to

¹⁰Noel Ignatiev writes in *How the Irish Became White* (1995) that in this scene, Webb fictionalizes an actual mob attack in Philadelphia in 1849 on the California House Tavern, an establishment owned by a Black man and his White wife. See also *The Wages Of Whiteness* (1991) by David Roediger for more on the ways that mid-nineteenth century Irish immigrants initiated violence against African Americans to achieve class ascendancy.

Sudbury, a Whites-only boarding school. This arrangement requires that seven-year old Clarence cross race lines, an issue that Walters elucidates for the White Mr. Balch, the Garies' lawyer, as he reflects on the choice:

I admit...that in our land of liberty it is of incalculable advantage to be white; that is beyond dispute, and no one is more painfully aware of it than I....Why," he continued with a sneering expression, "It is everything to be white.... [But] an undetected forger, who is in constant fear of being apprehended, is happy in comparison with that coloured man who attempts, in this country, to hold a place in the society of whites by concealing his origin. He must live in constant fear of exposure; this dread will embitter every enjoyment, and make him the most miserable of men. (228-9)

Walters calculates that the advantages of Whiteness outweigh the perils of passing for Clarence, though his "sneering expression" belies his misgivings about the proposition. Clarence, though, is no stranger to the difficulties associated with being a Black student in a White school; earlier in the novel, he comes "to learn the anomalous situation he was to fill in society" (133) when Mrs. Stevens has him ejected from Miss Jordan's school in Philadelphia after she discovers Clarence is Black. Long before his parents' demise, Clarence is called to reflect on his liminal status as an African American, disavowed by White society.

Webb's use of the word "anomalous" in the above quotation situates Clarence and Emily as figures of the trope of the African-American orphan, perpetual outsiders because of their racial identity. Moreover, when Walters settles on disparate options for each, Webb installs the children as embodiments of the two poles of Bell's "socialized ambivalence." Emily will remain ensconced in a Black family and home, while Clarence will integrate himself into White society. Hazel Carby asserts in *Reconstructing Womanhood* that persons of mixed descent, mulattos, serve two discrete functions in literature; they both "explore" and "express" the relationship between the races (89), their navigation of both worlds exploring the outer limits of how Whites and Blacks

interact, and their physical bodies functioning as a tangible expression of the power differential between Whites and Blacks as made manifest through sexual reproduction. Yet through Clarence and Emily, Webb adds a third function: a meditation on the limited options available to African Americans endeavoring to participate in a nominally free society, one in which constraints are loosened but still extant. Henceforth, the narrative doubles as a commentary on the relative merits of, on one hand, integration and assimilation into dominant White culture through Clarence, and on the other, at least partial separation from White society through Emily.

The novel ultimately suggests through Clarence's passage into the White world that assimilation is a losing proposition. Walters dooms Clarence by telling him, "Should any of your schoolmates ever make inquiries respecting your parents, all you have to answer is, they were from Georgia, and you are an orphan" (233) and that "This concealment is necessary for your welfare, or we would not require it" (234). Subtextually, his orders to Clarence communicate that his orphanhood status will elicit sympathy from his new classmates as long as he hides his true racial identity in the revelation of it, and that Clarence will be better off if he adheres to the ruse. Clarence is better off by some measures at Sudbury; he receives a top-notch education, becomes a favorite of his peers, and wins the heart of a White girl, Birdie, to whom he eventually becomes engaged. Yet the tenuous nature of his situation and the severance of familial and racial kinship bonds in pursuit of it render him perpetually vulnerable to losing the privileges he has accrued through the exposure of his true racial identity.

Immediately upon his arrival at Sudbury, Clarence wins the maternal affection of another White woman, Ada Bell, a 35-year old with whom he boards for the duration of

his matriculation there and forges an authentic inter-racial kinship bond. In their first conversation, Ms. Ada declares, ““You have such a good face, Clarence, and no doubt an equally good heart; we shall get along charmingly, I know!”” to which the narrator adds, “Those kind words won the orphan’s heart, and from that day forth, Clarence loved her” (237), cementing this as a moment of adoption. Ms. Ada’s initial warmth is predicated, in part, on Clarence’s “good face,” from which she infers that he will also prove to be good-hearted; since she conflates his appearance as White with his personality, she reaffirms Walters’s command to closet his Blackness. This makes her ill-equipped to “mother” Clarence, because even though she considers him to be “her adopted son” (268), showering him with motherly affection despite her knowledge of his mixed descent, she cannot in any way prepare him to face the adverse circumstances that his Blackness will instigate if discovered by others at Sudbury. Giulio Fabi in his detailed analysis of family and home in *The Garies* argues, when Clarence begins passing as a child, he “becomes an exemplar of the evils of internalizing the discriminatory value system of white northerners” (37). To this assessment I would add that his internalization is accelerated through his interactions with well-meaning northern Whites like Ms. Ada, who, in an effort to shield him from exposure, model for him the performance of Whiteness so effectively that he cannot but emulate it, erasing his African-American identity in the process. Once this metamorphosis is complete, though, Clarence is destined to learn that passing is not escape, but rather a trap.

It is only as a young adult that Clarence can begin to unpack the adverse impact that his permanent passage into Whiteness has wrought on him; he has in effect, become

the forger fearing apprehension of which Walters talked earlier. He iterates to Ms. Ada the anxieties of belonging that his situation has engendered:

Sustaining the position that I do - passing for a white man - I am obliged to be very circumspect, and have often been compelled to give [my sister] pain by avoiding many of her dearest friends when I have encountered them in public places, because of their complexion. I feel mean and cowardly when I do it; but it is necessary - I can't be white and coloured at the same time; the two don't mingle, and I must consequently be one or the other. My education, habits, and ideas, all unfit me for associating with the latter; and I live in constant dread that something may occur to bring me out with the former. (269)

For Clarence, racial identity is fixed, not by heredity or even by outward appearance, but by his choice of which identity to enact. By virtue of his mixed parentage, he is simultaneously White and Black, yet as he admits, he “can’t be white and coloured at the same time” in a society that demands submission to absolute racial categorization. Clarence affiliates himself with White custom and culture as a protective measure through “education, habits, and ideas” inculcated in him by his boarding-school experience, but rather than ameliorating his anxieties of belonging, it has infused him with “constant dread” of exposure. In the scene that directly follows, his fear is realized; Clarence’s ruse is revealed to Birdie through the machinations of Stevens’s son, who revels in outing her black lover. Despite Birdie’s protestations to her father, she is forced to repudiate Clarence because of his African-American ancestry, effectively divorcing him from the White world he has adopted as his own. And Clarence, lacking the intraracial, familial structures that could help him navigate this catastrophe, spirals downward towards a tragic, premature death. That this comes at the hands of the son of the man who literally orphaned him as a child reopens the traumatic wounds of disjuncture whose scars he has used his ostensible Whiteness to conceal.

In *Passing and the Fictions of Identity*, Elaine Ginsberg explains that the act of passing constitutes a “fraudulent white identity” and defines the person who passes as

“someone who has ‘trespassed’” (3) on White territory in an effort to escape the legally-sanctioned subjugation and maltreatment of those who fall on the wrong side of the “one-drop” rule.¹¹ While Clarence’s “white identity” is not strictly fraudulent - his biological father is White. This fact is irrelevant, though, because race is a social construct designed to consolidate power rather than accurately reflect one’s diverse lineage. Clarence’s claim to Whiteness is illegitimate both under law and according to social convention and hence invalid, which leads him to stay silent on the matter. Several scholars lean heavily on Clarence in their articulations of the work’s critique of passing, which looms large in the novel. In “The Property of Blackness,” which outlines how Webb’s novel depicts the ways that property and family law conspired to deprive free African Americans in the North of their civil rights, scholar Elizabeth Stockton paints broadly, positing, “*The Garies* cautions against the enervating consequences of interracial mingling” (483). According to Natasha Kohl, the novel is more expansive in its evaluations, attacking the interlocking systems that come to bear on Clarence’s passage into White society. She claims that the novel does more than simply critique passing; rather, it includes the choice to pass in its larger commentary on “the dangers of white education and the destructive demands that an unjust system places on black and multiracial children.” For Kohl, Clarence is victim, not perpetrator or trespasser, because he is “educated to pass by his black and white mentors,” Walters and Ms. Ada. Kohl suggests that Clarence does not “desire an elusive whiteness” (89). It is an apt analysis, but Kohl neglects to observe

¹¹ This idea suggested that anyone with one drop of African blood, that is, with any African ancestry at all, would be classified as Black. This was not codified into law until 1924, but was used widely in the nineteenth century to exclude people of African descent from a multitude of freedoms and rights. For more on this concept of blood and nineteenth-century blood rhetoric, see Chapter 3, pages 86-88.

what it is that leads him to continue his performance of Whiteness. Simply put, it is his orphan's longing for affiliation.

Disjoined from his former Black community in general and his sister in particular, Clarence enacts the orphan's role, attaching himself first to Ms. Ada and then to Birdie. Yet, because these affiliations are interracial, they are fraught, the former because Ada cannot empathize with Clarence's experience as an African American, and the latter because of Birdie's ignorance of Clarence's Blackness until it is exposed and she is forced to end their relationship. What Clarence needs is precisely what he lacks, intraracial kinship bonds that can assist him in (re)assembling a Black life for himself. Borgstrom holds, "Clarence's fate is inevitable . . . but it merits readers' sympathy; rather than castigate Clarence as a sell-out to his race, the book suggests that readers should learn from the example his character offers on the vital importance of racial solidarity" (44). Here, race-as-family is foregrounded as the antidote for the Black orphan's dilemma. While Clarence does not initially choose to pass as White, he does opt to remain White through his silence surrounding his racial identity as he matures into young adulthood. In so choosing, Clarence maintains his orphan-like status, guaranteeing his downfall.

Even after Clarence's death, the novel leverages his figuration as a Black orphan to elevate the power of intraracial confraternity. In the time leading up to his demise, Clarence returns to the Black community of Philadelphia, staying with a friend of Charlie's. To Clarence, who is "ashamed to seek the society of coloured men now that the whites despised and rejected him" (316), this homecoming is nominal; his years of absence from the company of African Americans have made him unfamiliar. He cannot

belong to this race-as-family, and it is this deprivation of kinship and sanctuary, to some extent self-inflicted, that accelerates his demise. In this narrative turn, *The Garies* inscribes an injunction against passing, to be sure: African Americans ought weigh carefully the risks associated with the practice, because once a person crosses over into Whiteness, it is nearly impossible to cross back. More importantly, the admonition strikes at the heart of what it means to be Black and hence culturally orphaned in America. Socialized ambivalence, the novel indicates, could have led African Americans to assimilate fully with White society in the antebellum North in order to ease the anxieties of belonging, placing themselves in existential peril.

The novel does temper its final judgment of Clarence when a procession of Blacks who had known him as a child participate in the funeral. The narrator reports, “They buried Clarence beside his parents; coloured people followed him to his last home, and wept over his grave. Of all the many whites he had known, Aunt Ada and Mr. Balch were the only ones” who attended (325). Clarence’s final resting place is “beside his parents,” which represents the posthumous acknowledgement of his biraciality that he could not admit in life. Yet despite his disavowal of them, it is the African Americans who mourn Clarence’s fate while the majority of Whites with whom he had come into contact harbor no sympathy for him, even in death. In this passage, then, the novel ruminates on the concept of home: it is both spatial and relational.

Clarence defies easy categorization. Stephen Knadler, in “Traumatized Racial Performativity: Passing In Nineteenth-Century African-American Testimonies,” indicates that racial passing was a response to traumatic violence, using young Clarence as an exemplar. Knadler reads Clarence as a “traumatized mixed-race man” who, as a

child, endures a host of ordeals that inform his continued act of passing, including witnessing his mother die, hearing his father's shooting death, and being separated from his remaining relative. The trope of the orphan is the single key that unlocks this nuanced consideration of Clarence in the final analysis. Having undergone catastrophic trauma, Clarence is compelled to seek liberation in ostensible Whiteness to satiate his hunger for affiliation. Though not condoning this path, the novel conjures an image of him that evokes pity while underscoring what Fabi describes as "the desirability of belonging to an African-American community" (36).

Webb positions Clarence's sister, Emily, as a thematic counterweight to the injunction against passing represented by Clarence. In order to establish this, the narrative leans heavily on the conventions of nineteenth-century American sentimental fiction in its treatment of orphans. Clarence, the male orphan, lights out on his own to carve out an identity for himself, repudiating existing kinship ties in the process. Meanwhile, Emily seeks liberation from the anxieties of belonging by weaving herself into the fabric of the Ellis family, in accordance what Maria Troy, et al describe as the primary goal of female orphan characters of the era, "to form bonds with the people around her, and to find, or perhaps rather create a home" (16). Yet while Clarence's adherence to the convention results in his death, Emily's leads to her successful integration into an established intraracial family. Like her brother, Emily longs for the comfort and security of affiliation, and is informally adopted into a home. But whereas Clarence's interracial adoption by Ms. Ada further alienates him from his race-as-family and cements his passage into Whiteness, Emily's intraracial adoption by the Ellises represents a convergence of the cultural and the familial that satisfies her orphan's longing.

Furthermore, it opens up for Emily avenues for at least partial liberation from the suffocating effects of natal alienation and social ambiguity that foreclose liberation for Clarence.

Webb upends another convention of nineteenth-century sentimental fiction in this maneuver: the trope of the tragic mulatto.¹² The intersection of Emily's racial identity and her gender would typically make her vulnerable to the predatory instincts of White society, but Black family life as experienced with the Ellises shields her from that threat. This positive resolution to her natal alienation through marriage to Charles hinges on her embrace of her own Blackness despite the light skin and typically European physical features that she inherited from her father. When she writes to Clarence of her impending marriage to Charlie Ellis despite Clarence's protestations (which emanate from his own fear of discovery by Birdie), she couches her refusal to accede to his wishes in the language of race pride:

Do not think I wish to reproach you. What you are, Clarence, your false position and unfortunate education have made you. I write with pain - your demand [to renounce Charlie] seems extremely selfish. I fear that it is not of *me* but of *yourself* that you are thinking, when you ask me to sever, at once and forever, my connection with a people who, you say, can only degrade me. Yet how much happier I am, sharing their degradation, than you appear to be! ... Our paths lie so widely apart that they need never cross. You walk on the side of the oppressor - I, thank God, am with the oppressed. (279-80)

Here, Emily iterates a stance that entwines Black domesticity and Black nationalism, no surprise in *The Garies* despite "the black female orphan protagonist's lack of or limited access to domesticity" (Troy 17) in much of the tradition's nineteenth-century fiction,

¹² The tragic mulatto was an archetypal mixed-race person who belonged neither to the White nor the Black world, and as a result, was melancholy and often driven to suicide. I explore this concept in more detail in Chapter 3, pages 82-84.

such as Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig*.¹³ Webb has linked the two from the novel's outset, and by this juncture, it is clear that Emily will refuse to expose herself to another traumatic rupture to appease her estranged brother. Particularly, her deployment of the phrase "connection with a people" resonates with her African-American orphan's compulsion towards the sanctuary of intraracial kinship. The dual meanings of "people" in her phrase, referring to both the Ellis family and African Americans as a group, interlock to amplify the significance of its usage in service of a Black nationalist, race-as-nation ideology. Emily revels in her choice, pride in her race strengthening her to withstand whatever negative impact the White supremacist antebellum North will have on her future with Charlie. In contrast, it is her brother Clarence who conforms to the archetype. Tess Chakkalakal, in her critical work, *Novel Bondage*, unpacks the ways that the concepts of marriage, slavery, and freedom operated in conjunction with each other nineteenth-century novels. According to Chakkalakal, Clarence "follows the well-trod path of the tragic mulatto; he dies of a broken heart because the white woman he loves refuses to marry him when his origins are revealed" (56), thus re-gendering the formula of the tragic mulatto. In this maneuver, Webb signifies on the trope of the orphan as deployed in American literature, as Clarence's true racial identity cancels out his pursuit of becoming a self-made man.

¹³ In Wilson's novel, the Black orphan protagonist, Frado, is the offspring of an interracial couple. Frado's dad dies, and eventually her White mother remarries, this time to a White man. Eager to be rid of the visible symbol of her interracial sexual union, Frado's mom abandons Frado at the home of the wealthy, White Belmont family. The Bellmonts hold Frado in de facto enslavement, despite it being illegal in Massachusetts, where the novel is set. At age 18, Frado extricates herself from the Belmont household, but she is so broken by the experience that her life ends in tragedy; she dies homeless and alone.

For the African-American orphan figure, self-identity is consubstantial with authentic communal identity through the establishment of intraracial kinship bonds. This explains why it is only after she affiliates herself with the African Americans around her that Emily can situate herself in the sanctuary of her own home and new family through marriage to Charlie, evidenced in the first moments after the nuptials, in which “Emily was clasped by Mrs. Ellis’s arms, called her ‘daughter,’ and kissed her cheek with such warm affection that she no longer felt herself an orphan” (312). The home that Emily and Charlie will build for themselves upon this foundation of intraracial kinship, *The Garies* indicates, will be unabashedly Black. Amy Lang theorizes that the Black home has a special “cultural power” in Webb’s novel because it is a place where one can find relief from the public performance of Blackness that requires the individual to repress personal ambitions and desires. In this way, according to Lang, “the black home unwrites race - that is, offers a respite from a social universe organized around racial distinctions, thereby challenging the saliency of those distinctions” (48-9). For Emily, the securing of an entirely Black domesticity erases the socialized ambivalence triggered by her mixed-race status and accords her some measure of freedom of expression and enactment of her desires. In light of this, it is crucial to note that Emily, “the only one of the five Garies to survive the novel named after the family... marries into a ‘pure’ black family and becomes the ideal wife” (Stockton 480).

The “unwriting of race” procured through the establishment of a Black home does require Emily to conform to the Cult of True Womanhood, a term describing the set of conventions of the period which circumscribed women’s lives: piety, purity, domesticity, and submissiveness. On its surface, Emily’s enactment of this may exploit gender

stereotypes in service of Black self-empowerment. But, viewed through the lense of the nineteenth-century convention, which stipulated that “the ideology [of true womanhood] excluded black women from the category ‘women’” (Carby 40), the depiction of a Black woman who embodies the idealized portrait of domesticity is itself subversive in its implication of Black women’s full personhood. She dispels White supremacist prevarications that purported that Blacks were subhuman and degenerate, and hence incapable of gaining full personhood or, more specifically in Emily’s case, womanhood status. Instead, through Emily, the novel advances “a new domestic model that establishes black motherhood as a generative force [and] ... deploys sentimentalism’s emphasis on the family to privilege the strength and resilience of black women,” according to Anna Mae Duane’s evaluation of how Black motherhood becomes a key to citizenship in *The Garies*. Duane contends that the “vital labor of the maternal body” is a “generative force” (202); the claim is affirmed by the fact that several of the women of Webb’s novel, most especially Emily, anchor the enterprise of Black self-empowerment through their ability to create and “head” Black-only spaces beyond the auspices of White control. Yet this enterprise is tempered somewhat because it is only through heteronormative means, namely marriage and procreation, that Emily can participate in Black empowerment, complicating the subversiveness of the maneuver and calling into question the efficacy of trading one form of subjugation for another. The strain of Black nationalism modeled in *The Garies* requires African-American women to function primarily as agents of reproduction and intergenerational transmission of ideology, important but ultimately limited and limiting work in service of nation-building.

The Limits of Freedom

The resolution of multiple marriage plots at the conclusion of *The Garies* might seem to clinch the inviolability of Black homes and families. While true that the novel promotes intraracial solidarity to nullify the pernicious effects of White supremacy in the antebellum North, the freedoms that such a Black nationalist enterprise might provide have their limits. The marriages themselves are the subject of substantial scholarly consideration, but little of it gestures towards these limitations. Robert Levine writes that these marriages “signify these characters’ commitments to forging bonds that will further strengthen their community” (366), while Knadler claims that as a result of them, “the novel culminates in a moral and political allegory about the formation of a new black-identified ‘race-family,’ as all characters renounce the life of passing and assimilation that precipitated the tragedy of the ‘passer,’ Clarence Garie” (79). But while these critics aptly identify the novel’s proposal that Black power is correlative to the Black family, they neglect to acknowledge how racist sentiment lingers just outside the door of the Black home in the antebellum North, rendering the power derived from those families and homes vulnerable still.

The Garies explicitly invokes this ubiquitous threat in its concluding pages, yoking the optimism of the nuptial scenes with vestiges of the harrowing mob attack. Included in the description of the Walters house bustling with preparations for the matrimonial ceremony and feast for Walters and Esther is the fact that a single bullet hole left from that night pockmarks the ceiling of the living room, “which Mr. Walters declares shall remain unfilled as an evidence of the marked attention he has received at the hands of his fellow citizens” (277). And later, as guests arrive for the Emily-Charlie

wedding, Mr. Ellis endures what amounts to a flashback to the moments leading up to the assault; the narrative notes that “The poor old gentleman scarcely seemed able to comprehend the affair, and apparently laboured under the impression that it was another mob, and looked a little terrified at times when laughter or conversation grew louder than usual” (309). While this recollection does not mar the proceedings, it does superimpose the spectre of anti-Black violence on this and the other two marriages, intimating that, although these new African-American family units are nominally free, they will operate in a hazardous climate bent on perpetuating existing racial hierarchies at all costs. For the next generation of Black families in the antebellum North, then, social, economic, and physical mobility is tightly circumscribed, beset on all sides by predatory Whiteness, and even those families with economically prosperous homes have no more than partial sanctuary from White supremacy. This sanctuary provides freedom from predatory Whiteness, but not lasting liberation to pursue individual and collective goals without fear of attack and disruption. As such, Emily’s affiliation with Ellises can only go so far in assuaging her Black orphan’s longing for kinship and its provision of a home in the nation.

However insufficient a safe haven Black homes and families may be in *The Garies*, they do represent viable options for self-defense and self-determination, two major aims of Black nationalism. The formulation of a new Black family, enfolded in a Black community, affords Emily the opportunity to initiate a new, more intraracial line of descent. Though Emily is biracial, her marriage to Charlie and her choice to raise her future children in a decidedly Black space has the potential to reduce the cultural imprint of Whiteness from Emily’s lineage. As Chakkalakal notes, “The novel’s progression

away from the troubled inter-racial marriage of [the Garies] and towards a marriage that embraces rather than rejects public opinion that suggests that the security and prosperity of free blacks relies on a marriage that is as committed to social appearance as it is to personal feeling” (56). This “embrace” of “public opinion” through intraracial marriage also includes a tacit acceptance of prevalent gender norms that threaten to reduce Emily’s capacity to be a change agent beyond the domestic sphere, suggesting that Black women must conform to these expectations in order to advance an agenda of racial liberation.

In the choice to disavow her father’s race through marriage to Charlie, she hews to her mother’s ancestry. While it may be tempting to propose that by marrying Charlie, Emily is in effect rebuking her mother for being in relationship with Mr. Garie, that would assume that her mother actually had a choice in the matter, which the ethics of chattel slavery cast into doubt. Rather, it suggests that the liberatory option for Blacks in the antebellum North is to avoid “the white lover - the interloper who would disallow black purity” of which Reid-Pharr writes. Of course, Emily is “tainted” with White ancestry, according to the prevailing nineteenth-century blood theory of race as a biological construct, but her choosing to take a Black husband positions *The Garies* as a “novel ... that values black pride over shame, community over the individual, integrity and freedom over money” (Levine 351). Pride, community, integrity, and freedom - all hallmarks of the various incarnations of Black nationalism - punctuate *The Garies*’ clarion call to African Americans to empower themselves politically, economically, and socially through intraracial solidarity. And Emily, as the surviving orphan figure of the narrative, comes to embody the ethos of the movement.

Webb's novel concludes with summary descriptions of the post-matrimonial lives of the three Black couples, and each contains a reference to the offspring they produce, highlighting the establishment of new, intraracial lineages. Of the progeny, only the children of Walters and Esther receive more than a passing mention by the narrator. Specifically, the Walters brood appears twice in the waning pages of *The Garies*, and both instances stage the African-American family as the resolution to the Black orphan's liminal status as personified by Clarence and Emily. First, the narrator returns to the living room of Mr. Walters, its furnishings now updated by Esther. Amongst the new articles, one in particular catches the narrator's attention, the addition of a new portrait hanging from the wall:

Then opposite to the portrait of Toussaint is suspended another picture, which no doubt holds a higher position in the regard of the owner of the mansion than the African warrior aforesaid. It is a likeness of the lady who is sitting at the window, Mrs. Esther Walters, *nee* Ellis. The brown baby in the picture is the girl at her side, - the elder sister of the other brown baby who is doing its best to pull from its mother's lap the doll's dress upon which she is sewing. (277)

This tableau of domestic bliss - a mother sewing a doll's dress for one child while the other sits next to her - connotes the comfort and security that belonging to a family and in a home can supply. But the positioning of the new portrait alongside the old one, Esther and child next to Toussaint, operates as a symbol for what is required to protect Black children from literal and cultural orphanhood. Toussaint, the "African warrior," embodies the necessity of defending racial kin against White supremacist incursion, as Walters, the Black patriarch of *The Garies*, has done earlier in the novel. By placing the painting of Esther and their older daughter on the same wall, *The Garies* proposes that racial and familial kinship bonds are inextricable and fortify one another. Moreover, the fact that the new portrait "holds a higher position in the regard" of Walters intimates that the founding

of Black families, generated by the “vital labor” conducted by Black women in the domestic sphere, overwrites the revolutionary call to arms that Toussaint represents, and is African Americans’ best means of self-determination in pursuit of full personhood status within the nation. This project is effectuated by Walters not only through his own domestic partnership, but through his engineering of Emily’s incorporation into the Ellis family.

And in the final sequence of *The Garies*, as the narrator chronicles the after-stories of the main characters, readers learn that Mr. Walters and Esther add a third child to their household, “a boy, whom they named ‘Charlie’” (326), after his uncle. Here, Webb completes the blueprint for African-American survival in the antebellum North. The Walters children are still vulnerable to an anti-Black racism that has the potential to orphan them, although their parents have supplied for them the sanctuary of a home. But the Walters family will not make the same mistake as Mr. and Mrs. Garie in failing to make provisions for their children in the event of their demise. By naming their son after Charlie, they not only honor Esther’s brother, they in effect make him responsible for the boy’s - and, by extension, his two sisters’ - care. Unlike the orphaned Clarence and Emily, the Walters children will never be completely divorced from their Black kindred and forced to face the hostilities of the antebellum North alone.

CHAPTER 3
“BY BLOOD AND BY CHOICE:” (RE)AFFILIATING THE
BLACK ORPHAN IN *IOLA LEROY*

The Garies and Their Friends suggests that the establishment of a new lineage can soothe the African-American orphan figure's anxieties of belonging. The three marriages that punctuate the novel's concluding pages attest that new kinship networks, knitted together from the frayed edges of parental loss and cultural dislocation, mitigate the trauma of natal alienation. By instantiating the Black orphan as representative of the collective circumstances of Africans and their descendants in mid-nineteenth century America, Frank J. Webb builds on the tradition established by Douglass, Jacobs, and so many other emancipatory narrators. The dislocation induced by literal orphanhood mimics the cumulative losses of Black people that thrust them into an orphan-like state, far from family, culture, and home. In particular, the resolution of *The Garies* hinges on Emily, the African-American orphan figure who creates a safe haven for herself through incorporation into an existing intraracial community and the founding of a new family line by her marriage to Charlie. For Emily, the rupture of her bonds with her parents is permanent, but rather than languish as a victim, she formulates a set of relationships that have the potential to stem the tide of natal alienation for her and her descendants. *Iola Leroy*, written by the prominent African-American social reformer Frances Ellen Watkins Harper a generation later in 1892, carries forward the themes contained in *The Garies*, revising and updating them to address both the persistence of the metaphorical orphanhood and the new exigencies of the post-Reconstruction era experienced by African Americans.

In particular, Harper refines the trope of the African-American orphan advanced by Webb. Harper's orphan figure, Iola Leroy, suffers a tragic separation from her parents as a young girl; she navigates the predatory environment associated with being a parentless and hence especially vulnerable child with the assistance of older, African-American allies; and she resolves her anxieties of belonging in part by forming a new line of descent through a conjugal partnership both intraracial and heteronormative. In many respects, Harper's novel parallels Webb's in its treatment of the Black orphan. However, while Emily Garie finds sanctuary and solace in founding a new lineage, Iola Leroy, the next iteration of the Black orphan figure, adds to this feature yet another, namely the recuperation of a parental relationship fractured by the mechanics of enslavement. In fact, Iola's reunification with her mother, Marie, following the end of the Civil War is a precondition for her consideration of matrimony. In this way, Harper's heroine becomes a permutation of the trope of the orphan, symbolizing the postbellum quest of so many formerly enslaved African Americans to rejoin their existing families before embarking on a life of emancipation. They insisted on finding the family before founding a family, a process I term (re)affiliation because it encompasses the fusion of the past with the future by both restoring severed bonds and forming new ones.

Iola Leroy presents further evidence that orphans pervade African-American fiction because historical conditions have raised this sense of being. The novel's dual settings straddle the Union's victory over the Confederacy in the Civil War, a positioning that allows Harper to link the orphan-like state endured by enslaved Blacks to its postbellum analog, in which African Americans were nominally "free" from literal bondage yet still not free to enjoy full citizenship rights or the reasonable expectation of

the pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness unhampered by White harassment. Harper refashions the trope to function as a commentary on the postbellum existential threat to African-American liberty posed by the rollback of Reconstruction-era political gains in the years between 1877 and 1915. Advances in voting and property rights; formal representation in local, state, and federal legislatures; and legal protections against racialized violence obtained in the decade after the end of the Civil War were revoked during the post-Reconstruction years, replaced with White supremacist laws designed to curtail Blacks' freedom and institutionalize the privileging of the White, or "master," race. By granting African Americans their freedom but still placing oppressive limits on their ability to participate in the life of the nation, the United States effectively excluded Blacks from the nation-as-family, reinstating the very orphan-like situation that emancipation ought to have eliminated.

Ostracized and denied access to economic, social, and political power in the post-Reconstruction period, this race of orphans resorted to strategies of intraracial solidarity and the accumulation of Black wealth as proposed in *The Garies*. This was an effort to cobble together a new network of belonging predicated on the shared experience of being Black in America and the desire to create a safe haven. If the postbellum nation-as-family refused to grant access to African Americans, then it was left to African Americans themselves to devise their own "family model" to which they had access, namely the configuration of race as family unit. Akin to Webb's novel, *Iola Leroy* suggests that economic empowerment is crucial to African-American survival, but it adds to that political, educational, and social empowerment, too, beneath the overarching concept of "racial uplift" advocated by post-Reconstruction racial activists. All of these ingredients -

the economic, the political, the educational, and the social - serve as underpinnings of community- or family-building. In short, racial uplift and the protection it had the potential to provide relied on the construction of race-as-family, a pursuit inextricably interwoven with the urge to satiate African Americans' collective anxieties of belonging.

Harper, eager to narrativize this philosophy in *Iola Leroy*, embeds it in the exploits of the title character, a young girl orphaned shortly before the onset of the Civil War. In depicting Iola as parentless for much of the novel, Harper braids racial uplift with the conventions of the figure of the orphan extant in mainstream American literature of the second half of the nineteenth century, in which the (White) female orphan protagonist earns the right to be incorporated into a family, here a microcosm of the nation, through demonstrating middle-class values and fealty to the prospective family. Two popular novels of this type often cited by scholars are *The Wide, Wide World* (1850) by Susan Bogert Werner and *The Lamplighter* (1854) by Maria Cummins. Both involve girls, Ellen and Gerty, respectively, who first lose their class privilege when their well-off parents die. Each exhibits perseverance and a strong work ethic in the midst of their orphanhood; only after this is established do the protagonists gain admittance to a new family and simultaneously regain their class status. In these kinds of mainstream orphan narratives, the other half of that compact is enacted by the family, who agrees to accept the parentless child in exchange for his or her display of worthiness for inclusion. This type of orphan narrative becomes a critique of society's failure to protect the disadvantaged until it redeems itself by incorporating them into the nation itself. The relationship between orphan and prospective family, then, operates metaphorically for the relationship between the individual citizen and the nation. Yet because Iola is a Black orphan, the

chance to forge this bond with the nation is foreclosed. Unlike the orphan figures typical in the European and mainstream White American literary tradition as outlined by Auerbach, Iola cannot join the nation-as-family, and hence must pursue an alternate, intraracial means of adoption into a kinship network.

Through Iola then, Harper signifies on the mainstream orphan narrative. Iola's eventual (re)affiliation with a Black kinship network after being disowned by the White world reflects African Americans' urge to strengthen racial bonds in the face of the continuous White supremacist assault on Black civil rights in the wake of the dismantling of the policies of Reconstruction. Iola finds her family when she reconnects with her birth mother for nurturance; then she forms a family by establishing a conjugal partnership with a Black man, Dr. Latimer. Iola, a homeless orphan throughout *Iola Leroy*, satiates her unease and reduces her vulnerability in this bifurcated resolution, ultimately locating a home for herself in the bosom of the race-as-family. However, unlike the marriage plot resolution of *The Garies*, which suggests that middle-class Black conjugal partnership and the economic security it affords can effectively shield and thereby liberate Blacks from White exploitation and violence, Harper's novel proposes that the family's devotion to building a protected domestic space and accumulating wealth is insufficient. In order for the post-Reconstruction Black race-as-family to effectively counteract the collective orphan-like state imposed on African Americans, it must incorporate social activism, or racial uplift, as a primary tactic.

Iola Leroy: Black Identity and Racial Uplift

Harper's novel centers around Iola Leroy, the daughter of a White plantation owner, Eugene Leroy, and the mulatto woman, Marie, that he has purchased out of

enslavement, manumitted, and married. Like Clarence and Emily Garie in *The Garies and Their Friends*, the Leroys lead a life of luxury in the South, one built largely on the backs of the enslaved Africans that work on their plantation. And like the Garies, the Leroys face a dilemma when they become parents: Do they tell their children the truth about their racial identity, or do they keep it a secret and allow their offspring to believe themselves to be White? Here is where the narratives diverge; whereas the Garies tell their kids about their racial heritage and choose to move North to escape anti-Black racism and the threat of re-enslavement, the Leroys opt to withhold their children's mixed-race status from them and remain in the South. As a result, Iola is raised believing herself to be White. After Eugene dies from yellow fever, his greedy White cousin, Alfred Lorraine, has Eugene and Marie's marriage invalidated, thereby reducing Marie and her children to chattel. This is when Iola learns the truth.

The family is dissolved when Lorraine sells them separately into enslavement, and Iola and Harry, the two surviving Leroy children, are rendered parentless. Iola is then befriended by Robert Johnson and Tom Anderson, two enslaved Black men who escape to join the Union Army when troops reach North Carolina. These two effectuate her escape to Union lines, where Iola becomes a battlefield nurse and meets the White physician Dr. Gresham, who falls in love with her and proposes marriage when the war concludes. She declines, declaring that she must reunite with her mother before all else, establishing that finding her family must come before founding a new family through matrimony. Meanwhile, her brother Harry has also joined the Union Army as a colored soldier, despite his ability to pass as White, and it is he who reunites with Marie first, in a war hospital where she too is serving as a nurse. Harry and Marie then locate and rejoin

Iola. Gresham reiterates his proposal, and Iola declines again, citing as rationale his desire for her to conceal her racial identity and live with him in the North as a White woman. Instead, she accepts the entreaties of Dr. Latimer, who is also of mixed ancestry, and the two intend to embark on a shared life of racial uplift by using their education, social status, and economic prosperity to elevate others in their African-American community. At novel's end, Harry gets engaged as well, to Lucille Delaney, an African-American woman without "the least hint of blood admixture" (156), striking a stark contrast to the Black male orphan Clarence's choice of mate, the White woman Birdie, in *The Garies*. In the concluding pages of *Iola Leroy*, the narrator announces that Lucille has opened a school exclusively for the domestic training of Black women, a manifestation of the racial uplift ideology Harper promoted.

The Shadow Of Orphanhood

The novel's subtitle, "Shadows Uplifted" hints at the orphan's anxieties of belonging and the desire to soothe that discomfort by assembling a race-as-family kinship network. In this framework, the "shadow" contained in the subtitle can be read as the shadow of orphanhood that plagues the disaffiliated. In this metaphoric configuration, the shadow serves a dual function. On one level, a shadow is a synonym for a ghost or spectre, and hence Harper's usage represents the entity that haunts Black orphans until they can (re)affiliate themselves by joining an intraracial family or community. Yet on another, the shadow symbolizes the bleak circumstances of the orphan, here a stand-in for post-Reconstruction African Americans, disarticulated from the American body politic, a figurative gloom that will dissipate under Harper's plan for racial uplift.

Frances Ellen Watkins Harper was well acquainted with the shadow of orphanhood in her own life, and her personal experience with the anxieties of belonging triggered by it are reflected in her handling of the orphan figures that populate *Iola Leroy*. Born free in Baltimore, MD in 1825, Frances Watkins was orphaned at age three when her parents died. She was taken in by an uncle, Rev. William Watkins, who ran a private school. She was classically educated there, and her incorporation into her uncle's home provided a safe haven. Yet the traumatic disjuncture from her mother in particular left a lasting imprint on her for the rest of her life. Her contemporary, William Still, in his *Underground Railroad*,¹⁴ a chronicle of his experiences assisting fugitive slaves, quoted her: "Have I yearned for a mother's love? The grave was my robber. Before three years had scattered their blight around my path, death had won my mother from me" (Sanborn 709). Even as an adult, the absence of "a mother's love" plagued her. In 1864, Harper endured yet another catastrophic familial loss, when her husband Fenton Harper, died. Over her protests, she was forced to relinquish her three stepchildren because her husband's massive debts meant she could not care for them. Only her biological child, Mary, was able to remain in her custody, perhaps because Harper did not want her daughter to suffer the grief of an orphan as she did. While it is reductive to point to an author's personal biography as the rationale for inclusion of similar situations, characters, or themes in her works, this intimate awareness of the wounds inflicted on both parent

¹⁴ Published in 1872, Still's *Underground Railroad* was the result of Still's years of diligent record-keeping as a member of the Vigilance Committee in Philadelphia. One of his reasons for maintaining such meticulous notes on the identities of those fugitives who passed through Philadelphia was to assist in the reunification of families post-escape. By logging important details about each person, including physical features, aliases, intended destination, etc., he could convey information of their whereabouts to any family members who subsequently arrived to Philadelphia.

and child by orphanhood inform Harper's depiction of these traumas and their aftereffects in *Iola Leroy*.

Iola Leroy centralizes the shadow of orphanhood at its outset. In Harper's introduction of the eponymous heroine of the novel, Iola Leroy, the narrator supplies a brief description of her liberation from enslavement as being like taking "a trembling dove from the gory vulture's nest and [giving her] a place of security" (39). Here, the narrator indicates that Iola, the innocent dove, has been abandoned and left vulnerable - in effect, orphaned - in the vulture's nest of predatory Whiteness. When Iola makes her first actual appearance in the novel, she is working in a Union Army field hospital as nurse, tending to Tom, who has been mortally wounded in battle. She responds to his pronouncement that he is dying, "Do not talk of leaving me. You are the best friend I have had since I was torn from my mother. I should be so lonely without you" (50). Iola defines herself in relation to her mother, her emotional response to Tom's death governed by the scar left by maternal disjuncture. Elizabeth Young writes about the ways that Harper leverages the concept of "civil war" in *Iola Leroy*, using it to reflect the literal war between North and South but also to symbolize the internal strife Iola endures in the novel. In particular, the above passage can be read, according to Young, as expression of the trauma of kinlessness that positions Iola as a figure that "stands more generally for the familial dislocation which often characterized the slave experience, and which the fighting of the war was meant to end" (281). Yet, I advance that Iola's metonymic function in *Iola Leroy* is more expansive than Young's formulation takes into account, as evinced by Iola's postbellum crusade to (re)affiliate herself with not only her mother but

also her formerly unknown Black identity through intraracial marriage and engagement with the enterprise of racial uplift.

Post-Reconstruction Black Women's Fiction

The permutation of the African-American orphan figure as it functions metonymically in *Iola Leroy* is best understood in the context of post-Reconstruction African-American women's fiction. Many of the novels of this era pursue dual aims: first, to valorize the quest for class respectability by African Americans and second, to contest the racialized component of the Cult of True Womanhood¹⁵ on its own terrain. Both of these are shot through with the desire for incorporation; through class ascendancy, African Americans could demonstrate their collective worthiness to participate in the civic life and economic growth of the nation, and through adherence to prevailing American gender norms, African-American women could countermand prevailing White-supremacist attitudes concerning the race's degree of humanity. These two goals bear much in common with the primary objective of the Black orphan, namely to earn the opportunity to be enmeshed into an existing family and/or to be given the latitude to carve out the space to establish a new family line.

The thematic implications of *Iola Leroy* have been the subject of substantial debate amongst feminist critics. Some hail Harper's novel for its presentation of the intersectional nature of oppression through its female protagonist, who navigates the unstable ground of race, class, and gender. By the end of the work, Iola Leroy comes to espouse the "Lift As We Climb" motto adopted by the National Association of Colored

¹⁵ The Cult of True Womanhood is a term scholars use to describe the set of restrictive social conventions that dictated how an ideal woman ought to act. These include piety, domesticity, purity, and submissiveness. For more on this, see Chapter 2, pps. 59-61

Women,¹⁶ an organization for racial uplift designed to promote self-help amongst Black women, founded by Harper herself two years after the novel's publication. The organization itself and the mission it promoted relied on African-American women of the middle- and upper-class, like Iola, coming to the aid of those Black women who lacked the economic, educational, and social privileges that financial security provided. One critic, Andrea Williams, explores the intersection of gender, class, and race in *Iola Leroy*, suggesting that much of *Iola Leroy* centers around the pursuit of respectability by African Americans. Iola comes to personify this pursuit, a narrative maneuver executed by Harper that is founded on the idea that "the orphaned or poor [female] protagonists ... develop moral fortitude through serial trials, often orchestrated by their rich, self-indulgent antagonists ... [and in the end] are rewarded with marriage and economic stability" (35). The resolution of the female orphan's existential dilemma is incorporation into a family, an opportunity that her forbearance in the face of adversity has earned for her. But for the African-American female orphan, Williams posits, "race complicates African Americans' chances of social mobility, making it necessary that the black heroine must move progressively into engagement with the politics and social inequalities that aim to impede her advancement" (36). Iola effectuates her own "advancement" as the novel progresses, demonstrating a degree of agency and self-sufficiency often denied Black female characters. and chooses to use the privileges this confers to assist others like her who have been deprived of the opportunity.

¹⁶ Established in Washington, DC in July 1896, this organization made its mission to protect the rights of women and children, to promote the social, economic, moral, and religious welfare of women and children, and to raise the standard and quality of family and home life. Another aim of the club was to demonstrate the contributions made by Black women to African-American social and political progress.

Another school of critical thought pushes back against the positioning of *Iola Leroy* as a proto-feminist novel because it rewards Iola for her conformity to the restrictive gender conventions of the Cult of True Womanhood. This counter-argument proposes that Iola's movement from enslavement through emancipation to a life of relative privilege is cemented only through marriage to Dr. Latimer and a commitment to the formation of a nuclear, two-parent, economically-stable household. In effect, she sacrifices personal freedom from the constraints of heteronormative conjugal partnership in service of racial uplift. According to Claudia Tate, "domestic allegories of political desire" in novels written by African-American women such as *Iola Leroy* "depict ideal family formations" as the resolution to the protagonist's primary conflict. This resolution is intended to "parallel community prosperity in the context of an equitable society... [and] equitable political system that distributes rewards on the basis of personal integrity, commitment, and hard work" (101). The pursuit of political and social justice on behalf of African Americans, in this context, supersedes any qualms the heroine may have about gender inequality.

Race As Inheritance in *Iola Leroy*

Much of the attention devoted to *Iola Leroy* focuses on its interrogation of gender norms and the degree to which its depiction of a Black heroine whose fortitude in the face of adversity does or does not model female agency in opposition to White patriarchal structures. However, the novel warrants more attention for its portrayal of African-American orphanhood. Harper refracts the orphan-like state of African Americans through the concept of inheritance in *Iola Leroy*. Deprived of any inheritance in the material sense through the intergenerational transmission of wealth as a result of the

mechanics of enslavement, Black people post-Civil War found themselves trapped at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder. Worse, institution slavery had erased much of the race's history and culture, attempting to reduce African Americans to genealogical isolate.¹⁷ The only inheritance accessible to African Americans was the concept of permanent Black inferiority foisted on them by White America and reified over the course of roughly 250 years of legalized human bondage.

It was the intergenerational transmission of this idea that inspired Harper to embark on a career as a social activist. Of the underpinnings of this career, she once wrote, "Born of a race whose inheritance has been outrage and wrong, most of my life has been spent battling these wrongs" (Salvant 92-3). *Iola Leroy* stages Harper's battle in narrative form, and in describing the Black orphan's pursuit of a familial and cultural inheritance against the "outrage and wrong" perpetrated against her in particular and her race in general, Harper leverages the figure of the African-American orphan to recoup some of the losses suffered as a result of enslavement.

Living as the apparent White daughter of a rich Southern plantation owner, Iola and her siblings inherit all of the privileges associated with Whiteness and wealth, "unconscious of the doom suspended over their heads" (67). This privilege includes the perceived right to justify chattel slavery, as when she rails against abolitionism in a conversation with a classmate at her boarding school in the North, saying, "I don't think these Abolitionists have any right to meddle in our affairs. I believe they are prejudiced against us, and want to get our property. . . My father says the slaves would be very well contented if no one put wrong notions in their heads'" (84). By embedding this in an

¹⁷ For more on this term, see my discussion of Orlando Patterson's usage of it in Chapter 1, pps. 3-5.

analeptic sequence occurring a decade before the narrative present, Harper amplifies the dramatic irony of Iola's sentiments; the audience is well aware that Iola is of mixed racial ancestry and that she will soon become "property" stolen not by abolitionists but rather by her White extended relative, Alfred Lorraine. Rather than receiving a material inheritance upon her father's death, Iola will instead become someone else's bequest.

Iola's mother, Marie, also knows the African-American orphan's anxieties of belonging, and this becomes part of Iola's inheritance, too, the "doom suspended over her head" poised to descend once their legal status as Black is revealed. Eugene Leroy relates her familial circumstances to Alfred, saying, "By degrees I became acquainted with [Marie's] history. She was all alone in the world. She had no recollection of her father, but remembered being torn from her mother while clinging to her dress" (61). Marie labors actively to screen her children from the same misery. By withholding their mixed-race status from Iola, Harry, and Gracie, Marie hopes to found a new lineage for her descendants, one predicated on the freedoms concomitant with White identity. That foundation is flawed, though, because of the inter-racial means of establishing it and the "shadow" of Black ancestry that silently follows the children, under constant threat of exposure. Marie articulates the threat this shadow represents when she says to Eugene, "Oh how glad I am... that these children are free... I can understand how savages, fighting with each other, could doom their vanquished foes to slavery, but it has always been a puzzle to me how a civilized man could drag his own children, bone of his bone, flesh of his flesh, down to the position of social outcasts, abject slaves, and political pariahs" (67-8). Marie believes that Eugene has already freed her children by virtue of manumitting her, a belief that collapses under the weight on inheritance law after Eugene

dies. Her statement equates slaveholding with savagery, a subtle commentary on Eugene's ownership of enslaved Africans. It hints that he, as a "civilized man," ought to consider releasing all of his human property, and in this utterance, Marie foreshadows unknowingly her own and her children's descent from human to property status.

Thus, the liminal state in which young Iola unwittingly exists comes to represent the knotty politics of inter-racial sexual unions and family formations in the antebellum era. This is underscored by the phrase "political pariahs" in Marie's quotation above; for Blacks light enough to pass as White in the pre-Civil War era, their mixed-race status threatened their access to either racial group, placing them under perpetual threat of cultural orphanhood. As Hazel Carby writes in her introduction to the 1987 Beacon Press edition of the novel, "Iola, as heroine, has a maternal and paternal heritage that illustrates the precarious relations between slave masters and their female slaves. The relation between Iola's mother and father is not determined by the parameters of romantic love but by the systematic limitations of slave society" (xxii). Purchased as property by Eugene, Marie has little choice but to acquiesce to his romantic entreaties and master plan for her elevation to White marital domesticity. Moreover, people of African descent a generation later in post-Reconstruction America, regardless of skin tone, found themselves in a similarly precarious position. The "systematic limitations" imposed by institutional slavery have been replaced by the denial of voting rights, access to education, and economic opportunity. This constituted wholesale exclusion from the nation, such that the Thirteenth Amendment's prohibition of slavery¹⁸ did not so much

¹⁸ The Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution of the United States abolished slavery throughout the nation and its holdings, except as punishment for a criminal conviction. It passed the Senate on April 8, 1864 and the House of Representatives on January 31, 1865.

erase the stigma of orphan-like status for African Americans as compel America to devise a new means of maintaining it.

The full extent of Marie's powerlessness in her conjugal relations is unveiled when she discloses to Iola her true racial identity and the diminished future that awaits in the wake of Eugene's untimely demise.

Iola, I must tell you what your father always enjoined me to be silent about. I did not think it was the wisest thing, but I yielded to his desires. I have negro blood in my veins. I was your father's slave before I married him. His relatives have set aside his will. The courts have declared our marriage null and void and my manumission illegal, and we are all to be remanded to slavery. (89)

In keeping with her circumstance as an enslaved Black woman, Marie must "yield" to Eugene's desire to withhold the fact of her and her children's African-American lineage - their "negro blood" - from them, since maternal ancestry conveys racial identity and legal status in the antebellum era. The consequence, heretofore hidden in the proverbial shadows, is a reversal of fortune for Iola. When Iola learns that she is Black, she is racially orphaned from Whiteness and its consubstantial privileges at the self-same moment that she learns that she has been literally orphaned. She has lost her father, and as a Southerner all-too-aware of the mechanics of chattel slavery, she anticipates the prospect of being sold away from her mother. Iola reacts predictably: "Almost wild with agony, Iola paced the floor, as the fearful truth broke in crushing anguish upon her mind" (89). The palimpsest of losses - racial, economic, and familial - combine to reduce her from person to property in an instant. The disunion from Whiteness presaged in Marie's disclosure precipitates an epic fall from grace that Carby suggests "displaces Iola from her membership within a privileged elite [and also]... indicates the depth of social corruption as it is embedded in the institution of slavery" ("Introduction" xxvii). Yet, I

suggest that this moment also opens up a new narrative field of vision for Harper, who can now set the stage to grant Iola her choice of racial affiliations due to her biracial identity. In so doing, Harper's novel becomes not just a rumination on the vestiges of institutional slavery, but also a blueprint for the assembly of a form of racial uplift designed to "battle" the "inheritance [of] outrage and wrong," cited by Harper, which was imposed on African Americans in the post-Reconstruction era. Iola's quest to (re)affiliate herself with her Black identity represents the claiming of a lost cultural legacy, an inheritance not at all material but of paramount importance to the Black orphan figure who craves above all else to belong.

Racial Orphanhood and the Tragic Mulatta

Iola Leroy appropriates the construct of the "tragic mulatta," common in nineteenth-century American novels, as a vehicle through which it can comment on the plight of the Black orphan figure and propose avenues through which African Americans can work actively to reclaim their collective and rightful racial inheritance by enacting a race-as-nation ideology. Typically, the tragic mulatta in this era exists in a liminal position. Unable to be White and unwilling to be Black, the tragic mulatta vacillates between her dual identities, ultimately finding sanctuary in neither. The "taint" of a supposedly inherited Blackness and its abject status predestines her to traumatic losses - of family, of lovers, and of friends - when her ancestral history and racial identities are uncovered. Carby writes that, because of the high stakes of the racialized political moment, "it is no historical accident that the mulatto figure occurs most frequently in Afro-American fiction at a time when separation of the races was being institutionalized throughout the South" ("Introduction" xxi), so that the mulatta figure becomes not only a

veritable racial orphan but also a meditation on the perils of the commingling of the races.

Legitimacy, or the lack thereof, is a central component of the mulatta figure. She is deemed illegitimate by virtue of her mixed parentage, the product of a sexual union often prohibited by law and scorned by society, regardless of whether that union is a married one or not. As is evident in *Iola Leroy*, inter-racial marriages held little legal weight, effectively bastardizing the offspring of such a coupling and exposing the child to the menace of orphanhood. More than a mere plot device, the severance of familial relations underwrites the cultural and legal liminality within which the character exists, which is precisely why so many mulatta characters double as orphans. In one of the analeptic sequences in *Iola Leroy*, Camille and Bastine are sent by Lorraine to fetch the unsuspecting Iola from her school to remand her into Lorraine's possession. Camille remarks, "Lorraine knows her market value all too well, and is too shrewd to let so much property pass out of his hands without making an effort to retain it" (86), a statement that encapsulates not just the socially ambiguous state that Iola will soon inhabit as chattel, but also the economic worth of the mulatta. One scholar, Lauren Berlant, defines this state as "the mulatta's genealogy." The family history of the mulatta marks her as "illegitimate, far beyond the horizon of proper citizenship" and renders her body "a site of privileged fantasy property and of sexual contact that the law explicitly proscribes but privately entitles" (338). Perceived as exotic, near-White, and sexually available, the mulatta was a valuable commodity whose worth rested in her potential to serve as concubine. She simultaneously satisfied the lust and lined the pockets of her owner. Moreover, she was fated to produce mixed-race children who almost invariably are

forced to repeat the perverse cycle. Iola is imperiled as such from the instant Camille and Bastine collect her. On the train ride home, Iola is “awakened [from a dream] by a burning kiss pressed on her lips, and a strong arm encircling her” (87). She fends off the lascivious Bastine, but the prospect of rape inducts Iola into the illegitimacy of mixed descent. As a biracial woman, she assumes an orphan-like status, abandoned and left vulnerable to exploitation by Whites, a circumstance compounded by her literal orphanhood by virtue of her father’s death.

Yet, Iola manages to break the cycle of the mulatta’s genealogy. She resists the figure’s traditional plight, first by rebuffing Bastine and later by escaping with Robert and Tom to the Union lines. Unlike the tragic mulatta, subject to the proscriptions of the “national symbolic order” of bastardy Berlant codifies, Iola gains agency for herself. She climbs out of her abject situation by dint of her own resourcefulness and the assistance of an intraracial coalition of African-American allies, a feature typical under my theoretical framework of the trope of the African-American orphan. As such, the newly-free Iola is faced with a choice of identities at once complicated by the politics of racial affiliation and dictated by her orphan’s longing to be incorporated into an intraracial family or community.

Renouncing Whiteness/Choosing Blackness

Iola Leroy entwines the complexities of racial affiliation with the African-American orphan’s anxieties of belonging primarily through the marriage plot that predominates the postbellum segment of the novel. Through the White physician Dr. Gresham, Harper articulates the uneasy privilege conferred through passage into Whiteness. According to the narrator, Gresham “resolved to win [Iola] for his bride, bury

her secret in his Northern home, and hide from his aristocratic relations all knowledge of her mournful past” (55). When he invites her to join him for a “furlough” in the North, she responds, “I have no special friends in the North, and no home but this in the South. I am homeless and alone” (55). For Iola, doubly orphaned by her disconnection both from her parents and her African-American roots, she is “homeless and alone” although free, underscoring her experience of the same unresolved anxieties that haunt antebellum African-American autobiographers like Douglass and Jacobs post-emancipation. Dr. Gresham seeks to ameliorate these, and phrases his marriage proposal as an appeal to her orphan’s craving for affiliation: “Miss Leroy, you need not be all alone. Let me claim the privilege of making your life bright and happy” (55). He adds to this appeal a measure of White paternalism when he reiterates his proposal to her later in the novel, saying “Your complexion is as fair as mine. What is to hinder you from sharing my Northern home, from having my mother be your mother?” (97). This time, attenuated to the invocation of “home” is the suggestion that she will need to relinquish any claim to her African-American identity in exchange for the purported security a marriage to him would provide, replete with a new, White mother to replace Marie, from whom she has been separated, perhaps permanently. Tugging at the Black orphan’s insatiable desire for kinship, he all but insists that she repudiate her Blackness, in effect requiring her to trade racial affiliation for admission into his White family, a coercive tactic that would reconstitute Iola in the mulatta’s genealogy.

Her reply to this suggestion encompasses the racially-freighted nature of the choice. She rejoins, “I have too much self-respect to enter your home under a veil of concealment. . . I would never enter a family where I would be an unwelcome member”

(97). For Iola, parentless and alone, the possibility of assimilation into an existing family structure may be enticing, but it is outweighed by her knowledge that by hiding her Black identity, she would be disavowing that aspect of her ancestry, refusing her racial inheritance. Harper here gestures towards the trope of the African-American orphan, positioning Iola's recognition as a metaphor for the status of African Americans as a whole as unwelcome or illegitimate members of the nation in the eyes of many Whites. When Gresham renews his offer for the third time late in *Iola Leroy*, she restates this conviction in no uncertain terms, saying, "No, Doctor, I am unwilling to live under a shadow of concealment which I thoroughly hate as if the blood in my veins were an undetected crime on my soul" (181). Harper traffics in the blood rhetoric of the era here, speaking back to the purported biological underpinnings of White supremacy in its own terms, a concept to which I shall return shortly. Suffice it to say that for Iola, choosing Gresham would mean choosing Whiteness. Through the narrative tactic of Iola's refusal to be re-absorbed into Whiteness, Harper equates the concealment of African-American ancestry, rather than the ancestry itself, as a crime. The illicit Blackness Iola embodies in the eyes of the post-Reconstruction New South becomes legitimized by the novel in this overt acknowledgement of her inherited status as an African American.

The invocation of blood rhetoric in the above scene is not the first uttered by Iola in the novel. Previously in the narrative, after being denied access to employment because of her racial identity, Iola says, "I am resolved to do nothing that shall tempt me to deny [my race]. The best blood in my veins is African blood, and I am not ashamed of it" (162). It is this philosophy that undergirds her subsequent declining of Gresham's marriage offer, and what ultimately compels her to accept the advances of her African-

American suitor, Dr. Latimer. Throughout *Iola Leroy*, “blood” functions much as it does across nineteenth-century racial discourse, operating as a term that encompasses biology, heredity, genetics, and lineage, as Salvant explains. In perceiving bloodlines as significant, Iola embraces a form of race pride predicated on her “African blood,” an attitude and corresponding set of traits she wants to pass along presumably to her own offspring. In this way, Harper seems to reinscribe the very racial hierarchy that racial uplift intended to undermine by suggesting that racialized traits are immutable. Yet as Salvant claims, “Iola’s devotion to her ‘African blood’ emerges from her response to epic loss. As ironic as it is inspiring, Iola’s adamant declaration of blood fealty belies the capriciousness and volatility of her own racial experience” (75). To Salvant, Iola’s epic loss is one of status due to her racial indeterminacy, an apt but narrow consideration of the various losses she suffers. For a young woman who has said, “I have resolved never to marry until I have found my mother” (98), the scope of catastrophes is much wider than the loss of privilege through a reversal of racial identity, I contend. Rather, it includes the most elemental and epic loss of all - the loss of one’s parents. Once reunited with her surviving family members, namely her mother and her brother, and with a grasp of her African-American heritage, Iola can found a new lineage, or “bloodline,” through conjugal partnership. When Iola eventually chooses Latimer over Gresham as a mate, she opts for a marriage both legally recognized and socially responsible according to late nineteenth-century convention, and one through which she can promulgate the race through reproduction.

In the context of post-Reconstruction politics and culture, the deployment of blood rhetoric was a manifestation of how fraught the era was with the legal and social

consequences associated with delineating the “color line.” With the Fourteenth Amendment’s confirmation of citizenship rights for African Americans,¹⁹ new ways of marking that proverbial line became necessary to maintain White supremacy. One such means was the use of blood rhetoric by White writers of the era to classify by race. The term “blood” in late-nineteenth century discourse became a stand-in for biology and heredity, implying that Black inferiority was innate and therefore transmitted intergenerationally. Black identity was inherited and inescapable; it coursed through one’s body, regardless of outward appearances to the contrary. While many White American authors deployed blood rhetoric to amplify the features of the tragic mulatta, cursed by her “Black blood,” some African-American novelists, Frances Harper included, appropriated both the figure and the rhetoric, strategically reshaping the conventions to tease out the emancipatory options available to African Americans in the late-nineteenth century who strove to legitimize themselves within the broader, White nation by both finding and forming family.

Iola Leroy indicates that the racialized history of the nineteenth-century United States fostered such narratives of Black people in search of family, identity, and most significantly, belonging. Through Iola’s quest for (re)affiliation, Harper’s novel proposes a two-fold solution to the crippling effects of the orphanhood imposed on African Americans in the post-Reconstruction era: repair severed family bonds and establish new ones. Because family identity is a microcosm of national identity in *Iola Leroy*, this

¹⁹ The Fourteenth Amendment, ratified by Congress on July 28, 1868, defined national and state citizenship for the first time, granting citizenship to “all persons born or naturalized in the United States,” including formerly enslaved people. It also prohibited any abridgement of citizenship rights, including voting rights and equal protection under the law, for African Americans.

solution requires a kind of racial nationalism from post-Reconstruction African Americans excluded from the nation-as-family. In effect, by reuniting with her mother, Marie, and then marrying Dr. Latimer, Iola chooses Blackness, that is to say, she assembles an exclusively intraracial kinship network from the rubble of her orphanhood. History shows that at the conclusion of the Civil War, many African Americans expended significant time and energy in locating family members from whom they had been separated by the machinations of institutional slavery. Finding surviving family members was of paramount importance to formerly enslaved people in the years following Lee's surrender at Appomattox, and Iola conforms to that historical reality, grounded as it was in the traumatic disjuncture from family that left so many African Americans in an orphan-like state. Iola's refusal of Gresham's proposal on the grounds that she needs to find her mother before even considering matrimony is no mere excuse to push him off, then. Iola's family reconstruction (itself a metaphor for the inauguration of the period of Reconstruction in the United States) is a prerequisite for initiating a new one through domestic partnership. Throwing off the yoke of Black orphanhood in this dual fashion by first reuniting with Marie and Harry and then marrying Latimer opens up new possibilities for Iola. This resolution of Iola's anxieties of belonging applies to African Americans as a group in conceptualizing its collective future in freedom, the novel implies, because of the allegorical nature of individual as citizen and family as nation in *Iola Leroy*, or more precisely, intraracial kinship as race-as-nation.

In electing to proclaim in both word and deed that her African ancestry is central to her self-identity, Iola Leroy chooses Blackness as a means of satiating her orphan's longing for affiliation, a bold proposition not just for her but also for the majority of post-

Reconstruction era African Americans. Coalescing as a united, intraracial body around the goal of elevating the race to equal footing alongside Whites bore inherent, existential risks. This risk was made manifest by what Salvant dubs “the new exigencies of racial blood rhetoric.” These exigencies included a series of laws “used to circumvent the protections of the Fourteenth Amendment,” which were designed to operate in unison towards the “construction of a post-emancipation form of blackness ... [still] premised upon black inferiority” (14). Harper, with the character of Iola as her vehicle, appropriates for her own ends the racial blood rhetoric of White supremacy that saw African-American ancestry as an inherent stain of illegitimacy and an irrevocable precursor to racial degeneracy for White America if the two were permitted to commingle.

Harper intimates that Iola’s loyalty to her race despite its subjugated social position is only as valuable as the subsequent actions it spawns. To that end, when Iola opts not to be subsumed into Whiteness by marriage to Gresham, she readies herself to make a more suitable, intraracial match with Dr. Latimer. Gresham’s description of Latimer, that he ““belongs to that negro race both by blood and by choice. His father’s mother made overtures to receive him as her grandson and heir, but he has nobly refused to forsake his mother’s people and has cast his lot with them”” (185) aligns Latimer with Iola in terms of choosing Blackness. Moreover, it enfolds into this decision notions of disavowing the inherited privileges of Whiteness, thereby making him a logical mate for the racially-conscious Iola. Although Latimer’s heredity, his “blood” in nineteenth-century terminology, marks him in Gresham’s view as Black regardless of Latimer’s own wishes, Latimer’s conscious “choice” to affiliate overtly with the “negro race” rather than

pass as White becomes an act of citizenship. Michael Borgstrom writes that *Iola Leroy* “suggests that African Americans locate community in Reconstruction not through a masking of their political concerns but rather through a public assertion of their loyalties to the race, ... all the more radical when claimed by those who are not obviously marked” as African American (96). For both Latimer and Iola, choosing to live out their African-American identity in both the domestic and public spheres is tantamount to participating in Black nation-building, an act of racial patriotism that consecrates communal over individual gain.

Very little in way of romantic love manifests itself in the courtship between Latimer and Iola. This notable absence, particularly in light of the “tell-tale flush [that] rose to [Iola’s] cheek” (92) when Gresham confides his interest in her earlier in the novel, indicates that Latimer’s and Iola’s fondness for one another operates on an emotional register different than passion. The flush that Gresham’s presence elicits from Iola is indicative of romantic attraction, yet Harper describes no such reddening of Iola’s cheeks when she interacts with Latimer. Instead, Harper writes of their relationship as one predicated on shared political and social aspirations: “Kindred hopes and tastes had knit their hearts; grand and noble purposes were lighting up their lives; and they esteemed it a blessed privilege to stand on the threshold of a new era and labor for those who had passed from the old oligarchy of slavery into the new commonwealth of freedom” (210). The diction here - hopes, tastes, purposes, privilege, and labor - denotes the aims of political activists, not a couple in the throes of romantic love. Their union and the African-American family they will presumably build together functions as an affirmation of their commitment to their race, and in the context of the period of the novel’s

publication, according to Henry Louis Gates, it doubles as “a call to arms to the small but emerging black middle class to avoid the temptation of believing that they could ‘escape’ the social condition of ‘blackness’ in American society, and instead dedicate their lives to the betterment of the entire ethnic group” (“Introduction” xiii). Iola mitigates the lingering after-effects of the trauma of her orphanhood through the process of (re)affiliation. In so doing, she gains citizenship in the race-as-nation, cinching her position as an exemplar for post-Reconstruction African Americans still wrestling with the orphan’s anxieties of belonging.

To Be a People

In the final analysis, the central message of *Iola Leroy* can be distilled into one sentence, uttered by Robert as he and Tom plan their escape to Union lines early in the novel: “If we ever get our freedom, we’ve got to learn to trust each other and stick together if we would be a people” (35). To stake a claim to one’s own personhood is not enough, Robert implies. Blacks must coalesce into “a people,” unified across their differences by a common history and shared aims for the future. In the post-Reconstruction South, becoming “a people” meant forming intraracial communities grounded in solidarity in order to found “a nation within the nation” devoted to racial uplift. In this light, family disjuncture and cultural displacement perpetrated on a grand scale against African Americans in the antebellum era get refracted through Iola’s forced removal from home and parents. Her postbellum quest to (re)affiliate herself with her mother and her Black identity personify the post-Reconstruction collective aim of African Americans.

Iola achieves partial resolution of her anxieties of belonging through reunification with her family, the establishment of a new lineage through intraracial marriage, and the potential for inclusion into the African-American body politic through racial uplift work. The privileges of Whiteness are not easily sloughed off, though, and the success of her effort to educate her racial kin hinges on her renunciation of it and an unflagging commitment to her Blackness. In his reading of the novel, critic Peter Schmidt claims that *Iola Leroy* seeks to establish a framework through which African Americans can gain admittance into the nation by congealing into a unified community. To actualize that possibility, he suggests, “Iola must pass not just from the white community to the black, but also through a series of her own prejudiced misunderstandings of what it means to be black. She must learn to renounce class and color-complexion prejudice, not just ignorance” (74). Barbara Christian comments that *Iola Leroy* “describes the rise of a black middle class headed by mulattoes who feel the grave responsibility of defining for the black race what is best for it, who work within the context of moral Christian ethics, and whose faith in the country and the culture enables them to be conservative in all matters except for race” (29). Despite the lingering problem of conservatism that Christian critiques, the novel hints that racial uplift need not be limited strictly to the achievement of middle-class respectability, but instead can pursue a vast array of full citizenship rights that cuts across class lines, provided that the movement eschews the paternalism modeled by Whites that placed African Americans in an orphan-like position and necessitated the initiation of the racial uplift movement.

Harper's novel adopts a philosophy that augurs the multilayered architecture of W.E.B. DuBois's "Talented Tenth" framework,²⁰ which advanced that African-American voting rights and access to education, not mere economic development, would be the pillars of a more just, equitable nation for Blacks. And rather than waiting for Whites to agree to these demands, reformers like Harper and DuBois exhorted African Americans to empower themselves to fulfill them and carve out a "home in the nation." What they asked of Whites in the post-Reconstruction age, marred as it was by racialized violence and a systematic denial of basic citizenship rights, might best be summed up in a comment made by Gresham to another White man, Dr. Latrobe, as they discuss the "Negro problem." When Latrobe asks what should be done with freed Blacks if expatriation is no longer an option, Gresham responds, "'Deal justly with them ... and leave them alone'" (178). A partial solution to the ostracism late-nineteenth century Black people faced, this still represents an improvement in circumstances. By leaving African Americans alone, Whites would continue to hold Black people at a distance, denying them full incorporation into the nation-as-family. Yet at the same time, the benign neglect this strategy implies would free African Americans to leverage a race-as-family ideology to assemble a nation within a nation. Of course, this strategy was not enacted, and anti-Black racism in the form of Jim Crow laws and widespread racialized

²⁰ DuBois's "Talented Tenth" essay was published in 1903, the same year as his seminal sociological work, *The Souls Of Black Folk*. In it DuBois specified that the top 10% of African Americans, if properly trained, could lead the masses, elevate the people, and enact social change. DuBois proposed that a class of Black intellectuals ought to be given the opportunity to rise to leadership positions through classical education and voting rights. Many Black people were denied equal access to education, and DuBois advanced that African-American intellectuals establish their own elite colleges to fill that gap. And despite the protections of the Fourteenth Amendment, African Americans were prevented from full voting rights as a result of discriminatory poll taxes, literacy tests, and grandfather clauses; he suggested that the only way for African Americans to garner equal treatment under the law was to agitate for equal access to the ballot box.

violence continued to hamper the efforts of African Americans to counteract the deep-rooted anxieties of belonging.

Conclusion

In *Iola Leroy*, Frances Harper activates the trope of the African-American orphan handed down from emancipatory narratives and antebellum fiction, and reconfigures it to meet the exigencies of her own epoch. While her refashioning of this established figure gestures towards aspects of mainstream, White American literary treatments of orphanhood, it does not co-opt them, according to Carby, who asserts, “Unlike [American White women’s fiction of the 19th century], the consequences of change in Iola’s condition apply not only to the individual heroine but also to the entire race. The social displacement of a whole people cannot be remedied by the triumph of an individual woman” (“Introduction” xvii). Because the Black orphan figure in *Iola Leroy* is plagued by natal alienation and consequent social ambiguity, Iola is traumatized by a kind of dual orphanhood, at once familial and cultural.

While the novel’s two-fold antidote to the want of belonging that haunts the African-American orphan figure enables Iola to reconnect with her kin and forge a new intraracial family structure dedicated to racial uplift, it does not eradicate completely the state of orphanhood that plagues African Americans near the turn of the twentieth century. True, Iola now has a safe haven from White supremacy provided by a Black domestic space and a new-found confidence in her racial identity that propels her to contribute to the cause of racial uplift. However, this solution poses significant problems. First, it proclaims that Black women, despite the degree of agency they have gained post-emancipation, must trade one form of patriarchal oppression, racial, for another, gender.

Iola submits to a heteronormative marriage to become an active participant in racial uplift and Black nation-building, and more importantly, to earn full citizenship in the race-as-nation. Her value still resides in her ability to produce offspring, just as it did in the antebellum era, the only difference being who benefits. Second, Harper's appropriation of the blood rhetoric of White supremacy is troubling. Though it works to remove the stigma of permanent inferiority that Whites attached to "Black blood," that is, African ancestry, *Iola Leroy* traffics in both the language and ideology that racial identity is genetic and immutable, rather than a social construct designed as a tool of oppression. In this way, it reinforces the very attitude it attempts to subvert. Last, the novel advances the notion that African Americans of higher economic class and intellect or educational attainment have a duty to lend a hand to the Black masses through racial uplift. This endeavor is noble, but it risks fomenting a kind of self-congratulatory paternalism that undercuts the intraracial solidarity it purportedly promotes. In these ways, the novel's proscriptive measure for resolving the orphan-like state inhabited by post-Reconstruction African Americans is fraught at best. At worst, it threatens to reconstitute the anxieties of belonging it intends to soothe.

It is precisely the three issues - intraracial marriage and family-building, the immutability of racial identity, and the racial uplift movement - that Nella Larsen's 1929 novel, *Passing*, takes up as its primary themes. As I will propose in the next chapter, Larsen deploys the trope of the African-American orphan in *Passing* to unsettle what Harper's work intended to resolve by these means, as family, racial identity, and racial uplift each collapse under their own weight. Both Clare Kendry Bellew, the literal Black orphan of *Passing*, and Irene Westover Redfield, who finds herself in an orphan-like

situation as the novel progresses, attempt to marshal domesticity, race, and community affiliation to ease their anxieties. However, their efforts place them in a direct conflict whose tragic consequences hint at the shifting terrain of racial affiliation that African Americans had to traverse in post-World War I America.

CHAPTER 4

“A SHADE RELUCTANTLY:” ORPHANHOOD AND
RACIAL AMBIVALENCE IN *PASSING*

While Frances Harper's *Iola Leroy* charts a course for African-American self-determination through racial uplift facilitated by patriarchal Black family life, Nella Larsen's 1929 novel, *Passing*, imagines that course's unpromising prospects. Published nearly four decades after Harper's work, *Passing* carries forward many of the devices deployed in *Iola Leroy*; it thereby functions as an epilogue to Harper's novel. Irene Redfield, through whose accounts the narrative unfolds, is a light-skinned Black woman married to a Black doctor, Brian. The setting is changed from the rural North Carolina of the 1890's to the bustling Harlem of the late 1920's, but Irene is engaged in the very enterprise of racial uplift that Iola so adamantly desires to pursue at the conclusion of *Iola Leroy*. Irene too is a "race woman" whose plan to elevate African Americans is two-fold: first, to build a family lineage through intraracial marriage and maternity, and second, to organize public events designed to raise money to help Black families and communities in need. At first blush, Irene is living out Iola's mission in its entirety. Yet the postscript that Larsen pens strikes a darker chord with regard to racial uplift than Harper could have envisioned, casting a dreadful pall on the prospects for African Americans' full inclusion into the nation-as-family. Larsen positions Clare Kendry as Irene's co-equal and ultimate antagonist in *Passing*. Also light-skinned, Clare has passed into the White world, rejecting her racial heritage for a life of wealth and privilege underwritten by her marriage to the White Jack Bellew. Clare is an orphan - her Black mother dies when she is a child and her White father dies as a result of alcohol abuse when she is a teenager.

Not surprisingly, she exhibits the anxieties concomitant with orphanhood, which manifest themselves in her insatiable hunger to belong. Racially indeterminate, Clare is a chameleon, changing shape to achieve her primary aim: to attain security and status by ingraining herself in her surroundings.

Like Clare, Irene also leads an orphan-like existence, but she functions as a new kind of orphan in the African-American novelistic tradition. While Irene's mother is dead, which makes her under broad definition a literal orphan though her father is still alive and a part of her life, Larsen positions her more prominently as a cultural orphan whose socio-economic aspirations have divorced her from a substantial proportion of Black life and caused her to suffer from anxieties of belonging as well. As a member of the elite African-American bourgeoisie, Irene associates primarily with a only a distinct subset of her racial group. The promise of race-as-family and economic ascendancy as dual sources of solace for orphan figures as mapped out by Harper in *Iola Leroy* proves a snare for Irene. She comes to recognize this disappointing truth only after Clare has infiltrated her life, discovered Irene's misery and alienation, and tempted Irene to also compromise herself in order to maintain her security. I propose that, in this way, Larsen's narrative breaks with the tradition of African-American orphan figures. Inclusion in a Black family and/or community is not liberating for Irene; instead, it becomes a yoke, engendering grief rather than comfort.

Both Clare and Irene are lost as a result of their ambivalence towards their racial identity and their bourgeois aspirations. Thus, the pairing represents a significant revision to the trope of the orphan in African-American novels, and it enables Larsen to explore the effects of racial disaffiliation on African Americans in the era of racial uplift. For

both Irene and Clare, natal alienation and the resulting hunger to find sanctuary leads to tragic consequences at the climax of the novel when Clare plummets to her death from an apartment window, apparently pushed by Irene, who fears Clare has become romantically involved with her husband, Brian. In her introduction to the 1986 edition of *Passing*, Deborah McDowell comments on the novel's engagement with radical female sexual desire through its depiction of its apparent fluidity as embodied by Clare. Within the analysis, though, McDowell critiques the work's final turn, complaining that Larsen sacrifices Clare and Irene "to the most conventional fates in narrative history: marriage and death" (xi). While true that the domestic partnerships that stifle Clare and Irene are conventional in their heteronormativity and reliance on the female characters' submission to stereotypical domestic gender roles, McDowell's commentary ignores that Larsen is leveraging these stereotypes in service of a larger commentary about racial uplift.

Thadious Davis, Larsen scholar and biographer, gestures towards this larger commentary, reflecting that Larsen is "more pessimistic than earlier ... black novelists, such as Frances Harper, about the work of uplift as a manifestation of the racialized female's role in society." Davis claims that *Passing* is a "novel without illusions about emancipatory strategies or future possibilities for women" (xxix), instead foregrounding the domestic binds of marriage and maternity that can limit Black women's pursuit of freedom.

The primary difference between the novel's two orphan figures resides in their comparative levels of recognition of these limitations at work in their lives. Clare understands them full well and uses her chameleon-like ability to adapt to her surroundings to circumvent the constraints her racial and gender identities put upon her and acquire what she wants. In contrast, Irene lacks the awareness to recognize her

pursuit of conventional aspirations as illusory until Clare's intrusion into her life reveals this. The tragic end result of this futile pursuit occurs when Irene pushes Clare downward to her death, ironically inverting the "lift as we climb" motto espoused by social activists like Harper a generation earlier. My contention is that through her dual orphan figures, Larsen foregrounds how racial disaffiliation and the unresolved traumas of Black orphanhood have catastrophic consequences in the lives of those who suffer from them.

For Irene Redfield, her own anxieties of belonging are refracted through her relationship with the orphaned Clare. Irene, too, wishes to erase the stigma of her racial identity, but in a different way than Clare has done. Irene ascends to middle-class respectability through building a home that protects her from intrusions of race. This version of freedom, a freedom *from*, requires a necessarily defensive posture, and because Clare, the orphan, represents the ultimate threat to Irene's home - marital, spatial, and, significantly, ancestral - Irene must stamp her out. But in this act of racial betrayal, Irene also acts on another impulse. To some degree, Clare represents everything that Irene is not: free-spirited, attuned to her female sexuality, and desiring (re)affiliation with her Black identity. Clare's behavior comes as a reaction to her recognition that the pursuit of middle-class security is folly, the dream proposed by *Iola Leroy* a mere fairy tale. In short, Clare is a living emblem of what Irene has sacrificed to attain that security and class status, a kind of freedom *to*, and close proximity to Clare angers Irene. Clare's shape-shifting lifestyle casts in stark relief for Irene the ultimate futility of securing happiness in the bosom of Black, bourgeois, conventional family life. This is a truth so painful to Irene that she feels compelled to eliminate Clare.

Much of the critical scholarship surrounding *Passing* tries to ascertain the nature of the novel's central conflict. McDowell posits, "Focusing on racial identity or racial ambiguity and cultural history, [*Passing*] invites the reader to place race at the center of any critical interpretation" (xxiii). This stance is in keeping with Mary Mabel Youman's assertions in her seminal article, "Nella Larsen's *Passing*: A Study In Irony," specifically that, "*Passing* is a novel which shows that Blacks can and do lose the spiritual values of Blackness though they remain in the black world" and that, in exchange for "security, middle-class morality, and middle-class standing ... Irene has lost her Black heritage of spontaneity, freedom from convention, and zest for life" (337), implying that these are culturally inherited traits that some repudiate. According to McDowell and Youman, though, race is the catalyst of Irene's and Clare's turmoils. In contrast, Claudia Tate's analysis of the novel asserts that its modernist ambiguities put pressure on this kind of racialized reading, suggesting, "The work's central conflict develops from Irene's jealousy of Clare and not from racial issues which are at best peripheral to the story" (143), privileging the domestic turmoil over the racial. In fact, I advance that it is not an either-or but rather a yes-and proposition, especially in light of Larsen's deliberate deployment of the trope of the African-American orphan in *Passing*. The orphan figure's insatiable hunger for security as exhibited in discrete ways by Clare and Irene becomes the fulcrum upon which the domestic and racial pivot in *Passing*. Both Clare and Irene seek safe havens from the oppression associated with their Blackness. For Clare, this means first passing as a White woman to escape it through marriage and maternity, and later (re)affiliating herself with her racial kin to counteract the stifling effects of the domestic charade in which she has engaged. For Irene, this means leveraging her

intra-racial domestic life to insulate herself as best she can from the encroachment of White oppression.

Illegible and Illegitimate: The Orphans of *Passing*

Margaret Homans has written extensively about orphanhood and adoption in literature, in particular about the unsatisfying nature of the orphan's search for origins and an accompanying originary narrative, citing Oedipus as the exemplar. According to Homans, the complicating factor for the orphan figure seeking an ancestral identity is the "difficulty of both establishing origins and doing without them" (23), a dilemma for both Clare and Irene in *Passing*. Larsen prefigures this through her selection of the epigraph for the novel, a quatrain from Countee Cullen's 1925 poem, "Heritage."²¹ In the given bit of verse, Cullen's speaker romanticizes an African landscape he has never seen and then questions its connection to his existence.

One three centuries removed
From the scenes his fathers loved,
Spicy grove, cinnamon tree,
What is Africa to me?

Marked by despair, the lines capture the legacy of ancestral loss that haunts African-American culture. All the speaker knows of Africa is what he has read or heard; he cannot retrieve the particulars of his racial heritage from across the Atlantic, so he falls back on prelapsarian imagery of nature's lush bounty ("spicy grove, cinnamon tree") here

²¹ This poem was first published in the March 1925 edition of the journal, *The Survey*. Its ambivalent tone mirrors Cullen's fraught relationship with his own racial identity, something he shares in common with both Clare and Irene. Throughout his career, Cullen eschewed the title of "race poet," wishing instead to be seen simply as a "poet." Cullen frequently deployed classical European poetic forms and techniques, such as in "Heritage" and his sonnet "Yet Do I Marvel," however his subject matter often centered around issues of race.

and elsewhere in the poem in a futile effort to conceptualize “the scenes his fathers loved.” The speaker is Black, to be sure, but his connection to Africa is only skin-deep, as access to his origin is foreclosed, which leads him to wonder, “What is Africa to me?” This question can be read two ways. First, it expresses an authentic lament at the absence of originary identity and the illegibility of his cultural past before the period of enslavement. Second, because it is repeated throughout the poem, it also operates as a rhetorical question that implies the tragic answer, “Nothing.” These dual meanings of this uncertain ending highlight the gulf between African Americans’ socially-constructed racial identity, that is, to what race they are perceived to belong, and their authentic ethnic, cultural, and/or national origin. Clare and Irene, the novel’s African-American orphans, seek to close the social and emotional distance between perception and reality through intraracial affiliation, yet through their respective routes to achieve that end, Larsen illuminates the conflictual relationship between fealty to racial identity and conformity to bourgeois conventions.

Larsen’s narrative commences with the arrival of a letter written by Clare Kendry Bellew to her recently-rediscovered childhood friend, Irene Westover Redfield. While it triggers a sequence of flashbacks that trace the contours of Clare’s life and Irene’s connection to her, the letter itself functions as an apt introduction for Clare. The narrator reports, “It was the last letter in Irene Redfield’s little pile of morning mail ... the long envelope of thin Italian paper with its almost illegible scrawl seemed out of place and alien ... [a] thin sly thing which bore no return address to betray the sender” (9), and for Irene, the envelope is symbolic of the danger that Clare’s presence in her life represents. Of particular significance is the description of the handwriting as “almost illegible

scrawl,” because like the penmanship, Clare Kendry turns out to be unreadable. Martha Cutter, in writing about Clare’s plural identities as simultaneously Black and White, heterosexual and lesbian, middle-class with working-class roots, declares her to be so fluid as to be “a signifier whose meaning cannot be stabilized” (76). The letter which opens the novel, then, symbolizes Clare’s indeterminacy. Moreover, the lack of a return address mimics Clare’s origins, carefully and intentionally obscured so that she can adapt chameleon-like to whatever environment in which she finds herself. Despite her best efforts, though, she is “out of place and alien,” both in the White world into which she has slipped unnoticed and in the Black world into which she attempts to re-immense herself.

Clare obscures her origins in part because of their taboo nature. Though not born out-of-wedlock, Clare is the offspring of an interracial relationship, rendering her claims to racial identity unsettled, ambiguous, and potentially illegitimate. Furthermore, her choice to disjoin herself from the African-American portion of her lineage violates social convention, and this racial illegitimacy is underscored by the permanent absence of her African-American mother. Maternal absence here stands figuratively for cultural dislocation, which for Clare induces a desire to recuperate her previous connections with the Black world she once knew. As she writes in her letter to Irene, “I am lonely, so lonely ... cannot help longing to be with you again, as I have never longed for anything before ... It’s like an ache, a pain that never ceases” (11), iterating in stark terms the orphan’s trauma of familial disjuncture. She craves relocation within a nurturing Black community that will heal the wounds of orphanhood, a safe and familiar haven in Clare’s memory. As such, this longing extends beyond a need to be in relationship with Irene,

and includes the wish to incorporate herself into the Black intellectual circles of Harlem in which Irene travels, illustrating that, as Charles Larson writes in his literary biography of Larsen, “Clare seeks out Irene because she has learned that she cannot obliterate her past, that she cannot live outside of black life” (82).²² Clare is the quintessential Black orphan, severed from family ties, the sanctuary of home, and her racial lineage. This is a potent combination that makes her daring enough to invade Irene’s life, a risky maneuver that compels Irene to consider how to permanently eliminate Clare from the haven she has cobbled together for herself.

Unlike her nineteenth-century forebearers Emily Garie and Iola Leroy, Clare Kendry does not expend substantial effort assimilating into an African-American family or community immediately upon family disjuncture. Instead, she leverages her light skin and her unknown origins to not only flee the oppressive White aunts, who conscript her into domestic servitude after her father dies, by marrying a racist White man, Jack Bellew, but also to escape the rigid racial and sexual conventions of the era. The coerced labor demanded of Clare by her aunts becomes one half of an economic exchange. Clare says to Irene that her aunts, ““were respectable and authentic enough for anything or anybody ... [and] they were white ... I was, it was true, expected to earn my keep by doing all the housework and most of the washing. But do you realize, ‘Rene, that if it hadn’t been for them, I shouldn’t have had a home in the world?’” (25-6). For the orphaned Clare, who suffered first the death of her mother and then the abuse of her father prior to his death,

²² Charles Larson, Thadious Davis, and other biographers chronicle Nella Larsen’s own mixed parentage; she was the daughter of a White Danish immigrant, Marie, and her Afro-Caribbean husband, Peter Walker. After her dad died, Nella’s mother remarried, this time to a fellow Danish immigrant, Peter Larsen. Subsequently, Nella Larsen spent a few years abroad in Denmark living with relatives before returning to her mother and stepfather in Chicago.

living with her White aunts not only has given her a literal “home in the world,” but it also erased her Black past and legitimized her as White so effectively that she could screen her African-American ancestry, marry a man as prejudiced as Jack, and rise to a life of privilege.²³ Critic Jonathan Little astutely points out in the midst of his detailed consideration of Larsen’s deployment of irony in *Passing* that “Clare’s background of grinding oppression and physical abuse shaped her decision to pass for white and improve her circumstances” (176). I would add here that to some degree, this escape is no escape at all, but rather a pivot from one oppressive circumstance to another, ironic in its futility. No Black family and home available to her, Clare resorts to the best available option, one that requires an exploitation of racial and sexual conventions that also doubles as a tacit disavowal of her Blackness.

Though a significant revision of the trope of the Black orphan through her insistence on re-inserting herself into Black life subsequent to disaffiliation, Clare also exhibits many of the characteristics typical of the European orphan figure. She is dangerous, unpredictable, and highly pragmatic. In her seminal work on orphanhood in European literature, Nina Auerbach claims that although “it is an easy sentimental mistake to think of the orphan as fragile,” instead they are more likely to be made of “alternate layers of glass and steel” (395), a metaphoric coupling that aptly describes Clare. In *Passing*, Irene thinks that Clare “had remained what she had always been, an attractive, somewhat lonely child - selfish, willful, and disturbing” (73), simultaneously

²³ Clare’s abject childhood circumstances mimic those of Frado in Harriet Wilson’s “*Our Nig*,” published in 1859. Both are impressed into de facto enslavement as domestics for White people. And like Frado, Clare is christened with the nickname “Nig;” her husband, Jack, uses it as a term of endearment for her, wholly unaware of the irony and her true racial identity. In fact, as Thadious Davis points out, Larsen’s working title for the novel was *Nig*, an overt gesture towards Wilson’s novel.

troubled and troubling, but certainly not fragile. In Auerbach's formulation, the European orphan character possesses a distinctive series of traits: mutability, friendlessness, upward mobility, manipulateness, sexual precocity, transgressiveness, and supernatural power or sanction. Clare's apparent pursuit of Brian, her eagerness to interact with Irene's children and Black servants, her ability to perform Blackness and Whiteness depending on the situation, and her general lack of concern for the consequences of her actions all situate her well within the confines of Auerbach's schema.

Even the supernatural feature applies. After Irene begins to suspect Clare of seducing Brian, she thinks that Clare can "get at her thoughts" (71). Though Irene's suspicion may be saying more about Irene's disintegrating hold on reality than Clare's supernatural powers, Irene's belief in Clare's telepathy confirms Clare as a quintessential orphan figure. Moreover, Clare is a changeling, able to adapt fully to her surroundings in order to enhance her position, as she does at dinner parties hosted by Irene and her friends. Irene acknowledges that Clare is "well-liked," generous in her distribution of "flattery" and unashamed to appear "pathetic or ill-used, so that people could feel sorry for her" while maintaining emotional distance so that she is "someone to wonder about and to admire and to pity" (80). At the parties and elsewhere, Clare amplifies the seeming fragility of the orphan for her audience to elicit the desired response, pity. While her liminal position is pitiable on its face, her manipulation of it for her own ends is not. Yet unlike the White orphan figures in Auerbach's formulation, Clare is unable to leverage these traits into a full-fledged, permanent identity that ameliorates her orphan's anxieties, which is what compels her to continue her charade despite having the trappings of respectability.

In a much different sense, Larsen fixes Irene as an orphan, too. The freedom accorded by middle-class status is tenuous and activates a distancing effect between Irene and Black life in Harlem, an effect only amplified by Clare's return to Irene's world. Irene is haunted by her perilous position, wondering to herself, "Was she ever to be free of it, that fear which crouched, always, deep down within her, stealing away the sense of security, the feeling of permanence, from the life which she had so admirably arranged . . . and desired so ardently to have remain as it was?" (57). Irene has orchestrated a middle-class life for herself and her family, the prescription for easing the African-American orphan's anxieties of belonging offered in *Iola Leroy*, but she is still plagued by "fear . . . deep down" that her favorable circumstances could precipitously change at any moment. According to Candace Jenkins, who interprets the novel's hints at domestic indiscretion as a metaphor for racial disloyalty, "In the historical moment in which Larsen's novels take place, the middle-class blacks she writes about were estranged from an assumed black 'authenticity'" (133). In this view, class ascendancy initiated a breakdown of intraracial solidarity along class lines. Jenkins's use of "authenticity" in quotations is multi-valenced here, gesturing at once towards middle-class Black anxieties about abandoning their working-class racial kin, the impossibility of pinpointing exactly what "authentic Blackness" might look like, and the reductiveness of limiting it to only those who are both African-American and poor. The African-American intelligentsia in Harlem, then, were beset by anxieties of belonging, divorced from the "authentic" working-class, lower-income Blacks whom they ostensibly intended to lift up but to whom they demonstrated little fealty. Jenkins identifies that this growing unease was

only amplified by the fact that “black bourgeois social and cultural spaces in that historical moment were commonly integrated by whites” (133).

As a member of this set, Irene mirrors the orphaned Clare. Both have made sacrifices for socio-economic security; however, Clare’s repudiation of her heritage is precipitated by her orphanhood, while Irene’s relinquishment of hers actually instigates a different kind of orphanhood and catalyzes new anxieties of belonging. The novel becomes “despairing in its depiction of the lives of middle-class black women,” Charles Larson writes, the despair stemming from the constraints on desire that class ascendancy places upon them. Larson proposes, “The story has been frequently misconstrued as Clare Kendry’s tragedy, since she is the character who crossed over the color line . . . Yet the central story - for all the realities of Clare’s unhappy life - is what happens to her childhood friend, Irene” (“Introduction” xv). Though Irene survives the conclusion of the novel, she is doomed to suffer from the lingering traumas of not only Clare’s death and her guilt as the cause of it, but also her own alienation from African-American life. The horrible truth - that Irene is willing to murder her childhood friend and racial peer to maintain her class and domestic positions - reveals that Irene too is engaged in a high-stakes charade. Irene passes herself off as unstintingly loyal to her race while simultaneously undercutting the efforts of another Black woman to reconnect with her racial identity once it becomes clear that this project interferes with her own. Like Clare, she too is a charlatan.

“The Having Way”

The orphan’s anxieties often manifest themselves in a longing to possess and control, driven by an acute desire to tamp down the chaos associated with the traumatic

experience of orphanhood. Early in *Passing*, during their chance meeting at the Whites-only rooftop cafe of the Drayton, Irene identifies this appetite in Clare, a hunger she dubs “the having way.” To Irene, it appears that Clare “has succeeded in having a few of the things she wanted” (20), referencing Clare’s fine clothing and ability to gain entree into an upscale, segregated cafe. What Irene cannot see is that she too has “a having way,” and has in fact acquired the very things that Clare so keenly desires - a Black home, a Black family, and a Black social circle. Clare inveigles her way into Irene’s life, developing a bond with Brian and inviting herself to the Negro Welfare League ball despite Irene’s opposition. It dawns on Irene that “Clare, it seemed, still retained her ability to secure a thing that she wanted in the face of any opposition, and in utter disregard for the convenience and desire of others” (73). Clare’s “having way” compels her to attack all obstacles preventing the fulfillment of her desires. Irene’s recognition of this trait within Clare blossoms eventually into the larger epiphany that Clare’s longing to inhabit Irene’s domestic, social, and racial position is a threat to Irene’s most treasured possession - security.

Irene is blind to the hard truth that she shares the same proclivity to acquire and control the objects she desires, both tangible and intangible. She conquered Brian’s urge to move to Brazil early in their marriage to preserve the safe haven she built for herself under the auspices of her husband’s and her sons’ best interests, for instance. However this position of security proves to be a delusion, one to which she circles back after the Christmas party where she suspects that Brian and Clare are romantically involved.

Security. Was it just a word? If not, then it was only by the sacrifice of other things, happiness, love, or some wild ecstasy that she had never known, that it could be obtained? And did too much striving, too much faith in safety and permanence, unfit one for these other things? ... She was aware that, to her, security was the most important and desired thing in life. Not for any of the others or for all of them, would she exchange it.

She wanted only to tranquil. Only unmolested, to be allowed to direct for their own good the lives of her sons and her husband. (107)

Throughout this extended quotation, and more broadly, throughout the novel, Irene clings to “security” and “permanence,” two states of which the orphan is perpetually deprived. These become the dual sources of Irene’s fatal flaw, her having way, and she is willing to forgo others of life’s joys to maintain them. By contrast, Clare has already recognized that security is a mirage and permanence a fantasy; she flouts the very conventions to which Irene adheres, instead manipulating others for her own advantage. The Black sanctuary Irene has built for herself in pursuit of security mirrors that of her nineteenth-century fictional antecedent, *Iola Leroy*, but the promise of intraracial solidarity and domestic bliss that the conclusion of *Iola’s* tale implies goes unfulfilled in Irene, who has followed the strategy but is still threatened with alienation. In this way, the African-American home as predicted in *Iola Leroy* is marred, reduced to what Charles Scruggs calls “an image of bourgeois aggressiveness and acquisitiveness, not an innocent image of family values” (160). Rather than being a bulwark against White supremacy, the African-American family life Irene has cobbled together reinscribes the same self-serving pursuit of wealth and consolidation of power that drives White supremacy.

The relative security of Irene’s class position does not correspond to an increased degree of liberation, and she lives under constant threat of ejection from the life she has assembled, whether it be from the Whites-only space of the Drayton or from her marriage and home as a consequence of Clare’s incursion into her family. Irene’s racial indeterminacy serves as a tool for her to wield; when it suits her, Irene is willing leverage her light skin-tone to pass situationally, as when she gains admittance to the Drayton, yet she also claims proudly her African-American heritage at other junctures, particularly

when referencing her racial uplift work. While the narrative is told from the third-person, it is filtered through Irene's consciousness, which enables Larsen to reveal Irene's fears regarding the fragility of her racial and class identities. Although Irene has a degree of mobility due to those identities, they prove to be more constraining than liberatory, especially when considered in tandem with her submission to gendered domestic norms. Her belief that marriage and financial security will protect her is ill-founded, and the tenuousness of Irene's hold is exploited by Clare.

Notably, Irene discusses these concerns and her possible responses to them with no other character, Black or White, in *Passing*. Davis asserts that "Irene's aloneness signifies her lack of connection" (xix) - to her husband, to other Black women, to the Negro Women's League dance attendees, to the Christmas party-goers, and even to her own siblings and father, who are referenced occasionally but never speak in the narrative present. Irene's lack of interpersonal connections reflects "a loss of racial and cultural ties" that undergirds the broader definition of the act of passing supplied by Jacquelyn McLendon, which "may be regarded as any form of pretense or disguise that results in the loss or surrender of, or a failure to satisfy a desire for, identity, whether racial, cultural, social, or sexual" (96). Clare's facade of Whiteness has divorced her from African-American culture and precipitated at best a longing to return to it and at worst a desire to indulge all of her desires since she sees no legitimate path towards recuperating her authentic identity. So too has Irene's veneer of class ascendancy reduced her capacity for meaningful intraracial, interpersonal relationships. In effect, Clare seeks re-entry into Black life, while Irene inches closer to exiting it. As a result, Irene has culturally orphaned herself through the successful execution of her scheme to insulate herself at

least partially from anti-Black racism, making herself vulnerable to the existential threat embodied by Clare.

In writing about Larsen's characters in general, McLendon proposes, "They are motivated by a constant and deeply embedded fear that leads them unwittingly into violent thought and action in an effort to take control of their lives" (95). Because Irene cannot assuage her fear of returning to orphanhood, she becomes fixated on permanently removing Clare from her life in order to protect what she has acquired for herself and erase the living reminder of the futility of her wishes of bourgeois domestic contentment. In the midst of listening to Irene's apology for failing to write her back, Clare says that Irene has no idea how isolated she feels, and laments, "'How could you know? How could you? You're free. You're happy. And,' with faint derision, 'safe.'" But Irene knows that this is a mere projection, and the truth of her situation dawns on Irene, evidenced when she responds, "'I'm beginning to believe ... that no one is ever completely happy, or free, or safe'" (67). Later, Irene reflects on the moment at the Christmas party in which she smashed a cup upon noticing Brian and Clare conversing in a corner, remembering, "I had only to break it, and I was rid of it forever!" (94). Irene perceives a route to retaking control, albeit one repugnant to her: "Then came a thought which she tried to drive away. If Clare should die! Then - Oh, it was vile! To think, yes, to wish that! She felt faint and sick. But the thought stayed with her. She could not get rid of it" (101). Though not yet willing to admit it, Irene wishes to lash out at the threat to her security, and in the end, these violent thoughts do lead to violent action that ends Clare's life.

“The Cruellest Thing In the World:” The Problem of Maternity in *Passing*

In *Passing*, maternity complicates race and class aspirations for Clare and Irene. Both are motherless themselves; Clare’s died when she was young, and as Irene reveals in her conversation with Irene at the Drayton, her mother passed away sometime after Clare’s disappearance from their former childhood neighborhood. This shared experience of maternal absence leaves them bereft of both motherly example and wisdom as they rear their own children. Moreover, in a significant narrative maneuver, Larsen removes Irene’s father from the story. True, Irene is in Chicago at the novel’s outset to visit her dad, yet when she returns to his house after the narrative sequence at the Drayton, he is not home. His only piece of dialogue is in an analeptic sequence in response to a question about Clare’s father Bob Kendry’s odd circumstances as a highly educated janitor: “One of Irene’s brothers, who had put the question [of Kendry’s situation] to their father, had been told, ‘That’s something that doesn’t concern you’ and given him the advice to be careful not to end in the same manner as ‘poor Bob’” (20). All of this conspires to align Irene with Clare by effectively rendering her parentless, in keeping with the literal/cultural orphanhood dichotomy Larsen expends substantial effort to establish early in *Passing*. As parents themselves, neither woman can rely on the sagacity or assistance of their own mothers. Critic Licia Calloway writes that in *Passing*, Black motherhood functions as a clearinghouse for a host of larger concerns regarding the legacy of the past, exigencies of the present, and the potential for collective action in the future. Within the symbolic framework of African-American maternity that Calloway outlines, “The representation of motherhood becomes a mechanism by which to interrogate class consciousness and class mobility, to explore the issues surrounding self-determination

and individuation, to investigate the working of collective racial uplift and moral responsibility” (11). Along with being a conduit for class concerns and racial identity formation, maternity as formulated in *Passing* is linked to the trope of the orphan. I propose that for Clare and Irene, maternal absence superimposes itself on top of Calloway’s schema, as evident in each woman’s perceptions of child-bearing and interactions with her children. Their connections to their own mothers severed at an early age, the two women are left to navigate the unfamiliar terrain of motherhood without guidance or example.

Clare’s motherhood jeopardizes her apparent Whiteness and obstructs her capacity to obtain the freedom of full personhood. Clare wishes to (re)affiliate herself with African-American life, but to do so would reveal her charade and betray her racial identity to her husband. This, in turn, would expose her to the loss of everything that her “having way” has garnered for her. She can only have her way by circumventing social conditions. Pregnancy too has the capacity to unmask Clare, as she articulates to Gertrude and Irene at the tea party in her apartment: ““No, I have no boys and I don’t think I’ll ever have any. I’m afraid. I nearly died of terror the whole nine months before Margery was born for fear that she might be dark. Thank goodness, she turned out all right. But I’ll never risk it again. Never! The strain is simply too - too hellish”” (36). Despite Clare’s apparent sexual magnetism throughout *Passing*, the fulfillment of her sexual desire with Jack is fraught with anxiety. Davis writes that for Clare, sex is “the source of ‘terror’ because it can result in pregnancy and subsequently in the birth of dark child which would expose all these mothers wish to erase about themselves” (xx). Gertrude, though married to White man who is aware that she is Black, shares this fear, expressing that her

husband and in-laws “‘don’t know like we do, how it might go way back, and turn out dark no matter what colour the father and mother are’” (36). Blackness, however shrouded, is an inherited shame to Gertrude and an impediment to Clare, both of whom buy into destructive and limiting notions of an inescapable and biological Blackness, transmitted by “blood,” that marks *Iola Leroy*.

Clare accrues a debt to this sort of biological, unavoidable Blackness, echoing her nineteenth-century literary analogs. To underscore the inevitability of her exposure as a Black woman masquerading as White, she quotes her White father on the subject: “As my inestimable dad used to say, ‘Everything must be paid for’” (37). Through marriage and maternity, Clare faces a dilemma: to pass as White removes her from the socio-economic encumbrances all-too-often attenuated to Blackness in the post-World War I era, yet it deprives her of the ability to be her authentic self as a Black woman with the agency to fulfill her craving to belong. In this way, Lori Harrison-Kahan’s stance that “Most importantly, Clare’s desire to be a person - that is, a subject, is directly connected to her decision to pass” (128) contains a degree of irony. Perhaps Clare is motivated to pass as White in part to gain control over her life circumstances, but the enactment of Whiteness simultaneously thwarts the attainment of that goal. Clare expresses this reality near novel’s end, ruminating about her daughter, “‘Margery?... If it wasn’t for her, I’d [live in Harlem]. She’s all that holds me back’” (106). More significantly, the preservation of White motherhood reifies Clare’s dilemma and exacts an emotional and psychological toll on her, leading her to lament that “being a mother is the cruellest thing in the world” (68). In maintaining her precarious status as a White woman through

seeming White maternity, Clare knows that she has amputated herself from her African-American identity.

In marked contrast to Clare's expressed ambivalence to maternity, Irene uses her motherhood as a tool to rationalize her pursuit of upward social mobility within the African-American middle class. She convinces herself that everything that she does is for the sake of her husband and her children, Brian Jr. and Theodore, evidenced when she tells Clare, "I take being a mother rather seriously. I am wrapped up in my boys and the running of my house" (81). Her life has all of the trappings of Black domestic bliss preordained by Iola's marriage to Dr. Latimer, yet the reality of Irene's domestic life does not live up to the promise of *Iola Leroy*. Irene's relationship with her sons is formal and stilted, especially in contrast to Clare's warmth in her brief interactions with them. When first introducing Clare to the boys, Irene scolds them for poor manners in meeting their guest. Yet after just a few visits by Clare, Irene notes, "Clare could very happily amuse herself with Ted and Junior," an occupation in which Irene never engages within the boundaries of the narrative, and as a result of Clare's interest in them, the boys "conceived for her an admiration that verged on adoration, especially Ted." Moreover, the narrator indicates that Irene, "while secretly resenting these visits to the playroom ... never requested that Clare make an end to them" (79). Clare's performance of African-American maternity with Ted and Junior far outstrips Irene's, making Clare the more convincing and self-aware charlatan of the two. The growing resentment Irene harbors towards Clare is in part due to the dawning awareness that she, Irene, is not what society might deem a "good mother." Instead, as Licia Calloway suggests, Ted and Junior are "often an afterthought to her, meaningful in their practical utility as symbols of her

rightful claim to a position of prominence in the black middle class” (104). In pursuit of social status, Irene feels bound to conform to bourgeois standards of motherhood, though she seems to be devoid of authentic emotional attachment to her children.

That Irene considers coercing Brian to send the boys to boarding school in Europe is telling in this regard. While Clare sends Margery away to efface her Black identity, Irene weighs sending her boys off as a badge of Black middle-class maternal honor which will impress her bourgeois peers in conversation at social functions like the Negro Women’s League ball. She does not wish to actually be with her sons; her desire is for them to amass a degree of educational prestige that will reflect positively on her achievement as an African-American mother. To the extent that “practicing maternity is represented as a tangible investment in the future of the race and an act of direct participation in molding that future” (Calloway 17), Irene’s effort to maximize her sons’ academic achievements is a manifestation of a highly-gendered version of racial uplift. When examined more closely, it is countermanded by the “cold, hard, exploitative, and manipulative determination” (McDowell xxv) that fuels Irene’s contemplation of this option for them. Larsen depicts Irene as no different from Clare; in one of the myriad ironies of *Passing*, both Irene and Clare seek to disavow their offspring to soothe their own anxieties of belonging.

“A Shaded Reluctantly:” Racial Uplift and Cultural Orphanhood

The rhetoric of racial uplift hides Irene’s burgeoning unease. Ostensibly, Irene is Iola Leroy reincarnated, leveraging intraracial marriage and maternity to promote African-American progress through domesticity and engaging in philanthropic endeavors like coordinating Negro Women’s League events to contribute to the cause in the public

sphere. Yet, behind the visage of the race woman lies a class-conscious cultural orphan who has willfully dismembered herself from African-American life in pursuit of upward socioeconomic mobility. During the tea party scene, Larsen's narrator intimates as much, providing a detailed description of Gertrude, who had "grown broad, fat almost" and was "prematurely aging." More damning is Gertrude's attire - a "dress too short ... [and] sleazy stockings" (35). To Irene, whose consciousness the narrator voices, Gertrude is marked as a woman whose middle-class aspirations have been unmet. Like Clare and Irene, Gertrude is a light-skinned African-American woman, yet her comportment elicits only bourgeois contempt from Irene. She wonders how "the woman that Clare is now should have invited the woman Gertrude is" (34). That Clare's interest in Gertrude perhaps stems from the fact that Gertrude has also married a White man, but one who has full knowledge of her African-American ancestry, escapes Irene entirely in the moment. Rather than recognizing the various ties that bind the trio together, Irene focuses on the distance between her and the others: "Later, when she examined her feeling of annoyance, Irene admitted, a shade reluctantly, that it arose from a feeling of being outnumbered, a sense of aloneness, in her adherence to her own class and kind; not merely in the great thing of marriage, but in the whole pattern of her life as well" (34). Irene has drawn a bright line that divides her Black peers by class, separating herself from those who do not match her socioeconomic status. Her "aloneness" derives from this, and it is telling that Irene's "adherence" is to "class and kind," that is, a specific subset of African Americans who have ascended to the middle class. Though Irene believes that "Clare Kendry cared nothing for the race" (52), having shunned her African-American identity to gain status and security, Irene is just as guilty of repudiating her

racial kin in favor of the same. Irene acknowledges this “a shade reluctantly,” but she is much more reluctant to consider the degree to which her acquisitiveness has alienated her from Black life and induced racial ambivalence within her.

Intraracial colorism ruptures through the surface of Irene’s consciousness as well. This is symptomatic of her desire to marshal surface distinctions to elevate herself above others with whom she might otherwise forge kinship bonds based on shared experience, an enterprise that exacerbates her alienation and orphan-like state. Irene is highly aware of skin tone, and throughout the novel, she notes internally the hues of the African Americans with whom she interacts. Clare has an “ivory face” (28) and Gertrude a “large white face” (35), for instance. One of her servants, Liza, has an “ebony face” (30), while the other, Zulena, is “a small, mahogany-coloured creature” (54). She even assigns her husband, Brian, a gradation on the color-wheel; he is “a deep copper colour” (54). Amongst the four women, class and skin tone partially align. The lighter-skinned Clare and Gertrude have middle-class leanings, while Liza and Zulena, decidedly darker, are working-class domestic women. That Irene has servants bespeaks her bourgeois sensibilities, and that they are dark-skinned Black women reinscribes the intraracial hierarchies of colorism. But then how to reconcile this with her marriage to a “copper-coloured” man? This apparent contradiction serves dual narrative purposes in *Passing*. First, her marriage to Brian reifies the primacy of class over race; by wedding a medical doctor, Irene assures herself a life of socioeconomic security. And second, by marrying an African American substantially darker than herself, she affirms her apparent commitment to racial uplift, mirroring not Iola but Iola’s brother Harry, who marries the dark-skinned teacher and race woman, Lucille Delaney, at the conclusion of *Iola Leroy*.

But Irene's fealty to race is conflicted, rendering her racial uplift work a ruse designed to confer status upon herself.

Her marriage, fraught with subterranean instability, underscores this. Brian resents Irene's efforts to control his life, and his bitterness spills over into their shared role as parents. In response to Irene's concern that Junior is picking up some unsavory ideas from his older schoolmates, Brian retorts, "The sooner and more he learns about sex, the better for him . . . most certainly if he learns it is a grand joke, the greatest in the world." Implied is that the couple is experiencing marital issues connected to their sex life, Brian unsatisfied and Irene finished with it now that she obtained from it what she wanted, namely two children. According to Brian, Junior needs to learn that sex is a "grand joke" in order to "keep him from lots of disappointments later on" (60), a thinly-veiled attack on Irene's uninterest in physical intimacy. Moreover, it is also a suggestion that she used the promise of sex to lure Brian into marriage with her, only to largely withhold it once married, proving the futility of Irene's commitment to convention as a bulwark against her unease.

Later in the novel, the rifts in their union are again exposed, this time when Brian tries to explain to his sons at the dinner table why lynchings occur. Although this kind of intergenerational transmission of race-related wisdom and survival skills has been a crucial component of African-American family life dating back to the antebellum era, Irene bristles at the conversation, saying, "I do wish, Brian, that you wouldn't talk about lynching before Ted and Junior. It was really inexcusable for you to bring up a thing like that at dinner." To Irene, the conversation intrudes upon her domestic haven, an imposition rather than a reality of African-American family life. Irene wants to defer the

transmission of this sort of race-based knowledge to an undetermined future time, claiming, “There’ll be time enough to learn about such horrible things when they’re older” before admonishing Brian by saying, “You’re not to talk to them about the race problem. I won’t have it” (103). In her demand that Brian cease all discussion with their sons “about the race problem,” Irene endeavors to maintain freedom *from* anti-Black racism, but in so doing curtails her husband’s and her sons’ freedom *to* confront and survive the realities of their racialized existence. Cheryl Wall addresses this very issue in her extended analysis of the different modes of passing in which Larsen’s heroines engage, purporting that as consequence of Irene’s passage into the middle-class, she “has spun a cocoon around her sons, forbidding discussion of racism and sex as too disagreeable ... Nothing is allowed to encroach upon the sanctuary of home and family” (110). But that cocoon is as isolating as it is protective, illustrating yet again that for Irene, efforts to abide by convention fail to soothe her anxieties of belonging. By decreeing that race-related conversations ought not take place amongst her family, she represses her own as well as her sons’ Blackness, ignoring the vulnerability associated with that identity regardless of class status. In effect, her refusal to discuss race is itself a repudiation of race. Home and family are no longer the safe haven for the African-American orphan figure, as they were in nineteenth-century novels. Instead of a sanctuary, the Redfield home has become a trap for both the disgruntled Brian and the culturally-disaffiliated Irene.

More specifically, Irene has ensnared Brian in the web of their middle-class existence. His dream of moving to Brazil²⁴ has been thwarted by Irene’s quest of upward

²⁴ For much of the first half of the nineteenth century, Brazil had the world’s largest population of enslaved Africans. Brazil maintained institutional slavery well after it was

mobility, so Brian is now doomed to an unfulfilling professional life in Harlem, as he complains to Irene: ““Lord, how I hate sick people, and their stupid, meddling families, and smelly, dirty rooms, and climbing filthy steps in dark hallways”” (56). Later, after the argument about discussing lynchings with their sons, Brian rues the choice to raise them in the United States, saying, ““I’d feel like I hadn’t done my duty by them if I didn’t give them some inkling what’s before them. It’s the least I can do. I wanted to get them out of this hellish place years ago. You wouldn’t let me. I gave up the idea, because you objected. Don’t expect me to give up everything”” (104). Brian, too, had hoped to cross a border, not racial like Clare or socioeconomic like Irene, but geographic. Though unrealized, Brian’s desire to move to Brazil operates as a subtle commentary on New Negro Movement-era Harlem,²⁵ suggesting that it is perhaps no longer a sanctuary for Blacks. By 1929, the year in which *Passing* was published, Harlem’s social scene was largely integrated, as White intellectuals and writers such as Carl Van Vechten²⁶ became

abolished in the United States, specifically until 1888. Yet Brian’s dream of Brazil as an ideal place to go with his family and raise his kids is not so far-fetched. Racial commingling - social, educational, and sexual - was much less taboo in Brazil in the 1920’s than in the United States, and because people of African descent made up a critical mass of Brazil’s population, many believed that Brazil was more likely than the United States to achieve racial equality, despite its own racist government policies.

²⁵ Alain Locke’s term, “the New Negro,” was the term of choice that contemporaries applied to the movement today known as the Harlem Renaissance. In his 1925 article of the same name, published in a special “Harlem” edition of the journal *Survey Graphic*, Locke defined the New Negro as a new breed of African American, at once race conscious, politically empowered, intellectual and creative, economically self-sufficient, and willing to act in solidarity with other African Americans. Based on these characteristics, Irene is, on the surface, an exemplar of this New Negro.

²⁶ Carl Van Vechten (1880-1964) was a White American intellectual, artist, and writer who closely associated with several leading Black figures of the New Negro Movement. In 1926, his novel, *Nigger Heaven*, prompted a firestorm of controversy, as some African-American writers, like Langston Hughes, condemned the work as trafficking in base stereotypes. Nella Larsen defended Van Vechten against such criticism. In *Passing*,

attracted to “Negro life” and populated the jazz clubs of the neighborhood. Moreover, it is ironic that Brazil, not a country on the continent of Africa, is the imagined site of escape from racial oppression, intimating that “There is no supportive ‘birthright’ to which passers may return” (Little 175). But just as Jack Bellew makes his fortune by uncovering gold on an expedition to South America, so too does Brian hope to unearth a new life for himself and his family in Brazil, free from both the “monotonous ... and nerve-wracking” (42) life of a doctor and the intrusions of Whiteness.

Irene, though, will have none of it, clinging to the stability of the life in the United States, however confining due to racial oppression. According to the narrator, Irene feels that she “belonged in this land of rising towers. She was an American. She grew from this soil, and would not be uprooted” (107). Irene lays claim to her American birthright, echoing the sentiments of Black abolitionists and anti-colonizationists a century prior, like David Walker,²⁷ who posited that African Americans belonged in America because “This land ... watered with our tears and our blood is now our mother country” (77). However, Irene’s claim, unlike those of her antebellum antecedents, is predicated not on a sense of a rightful inheritance but rather a belief that her quality of life will be impinged elsewhere. To leave would be to risk the security that she believes she has gained through class ascendancy and Black domestic life, thus her deployment of the language of African-American self-liberation and racial uplift is an effort to rationalize her true motives. Gayle Wald writes about Larsen’s deployment of racial uplift in *Passing*, suggesting that “Larsen thematizes the clash between narratives of

Hugh Wentworth, the White man who hosts the Christmas party at which Irene smashes the cup, is widely believed to be modeled on Van Vechten.

²⁷ For more on Walker and Black nationalism, see Chapter 2, pages 45-47.

American individualism and racial uplift notions of collective duty and race progress.” Caught between the goal of using financial prosperity to enact civic and legal reform for African Americans and the reality of “segregation as a ‘leveling’ narrative” that erases class distinctions to maintain racial hierarchies (488), these adherents to the doctrine of uplift faced a dilemma: fight a battle doomed to futility, or choose between class and race loyalty to minimize exposure to traumatic losses inflicted by White supremacy. For Irene, who subordinates her sense of “collective duty” to her race in favor of class privilege, that dilemma and her decision in response to it produces complete alienation from Black life, cementing her orphan-like condition.

Irene’s surface loyalty to Clare belies this alienation. After Jack Bellew’s racist jokes at the tea party, Irene ruminates on the reason why she remained silent, and ultimately convinces herself it resulted from a genuine desire to protect Clare from exposure, claiming that “She couldn’t betray Clare, couldn’t even run the risk of appearing to defend a people that were being maligned, for fear that the defense might in some infinitesimal degree lead the way to final discovery of her secret” (52). The ambiguity of the final phrase - “her secret” - is intentional. Though Irene is referring to the secret of Clare’s racial identity, on a deeper level Irene is expressing her fear over the prospect of having her own “secrets,” that is, her ambivalence towards her Blackness and her bourgeois acquisitiveness, revealed. Above all else, she must maintain appearances. Again she rationalizes her urge to protect herself, continuing, “She had to Clare Kendry a duty. She was bound to her by those very ties of race, which, for all her repudiation of them, Clare had been unable to completely sever.” Irene considers herself “bound” to Clare by race, but does not feel bound to her race in general, and as such, chooses not “to

take up the defense of the race to which she belonged” (52) during the awkward exchange at the tea party. Yes, she refuses to betray Clare, but in so doing, betrays her African-American heritage.

In truth, these two orphans maintain diametrically opposed relationships with their Blackness. Clare, the literal orphan, longs to (re)affiliate herself with her roots by returning to the Black life she previously repudiated, even if only temporarily. She begs Irene to invite her to the Negro Women’s League ball, explaining, ““You don’t know, you can’t realize how I want to see Negroes, to be with them again, to talk with them, to hear them laugh”” (71). Meanwhile, Irene, the cultural orphan, believes herself to be “caught between two allegiances, different, yet the same. Herself. Her race. Race!” (98) when confronted with the prospect of Clare’s seduction of Brian. The individualist within her wants to out Clare as African American and eject Clare from her life, but as a race woman she feels compelled to stay quiet about Clare’s Blackness. In this moment, according to the narrator, “Irene Redfield wished, for the first time in her life, that she had not been born a Negro” (98), a stark revelation of Irene’s desire to disaffiliate herself from her race, despite her stated commitment to racial uplift. Though she has not fully passed into the White world like Clare, Irene has engaged in situational passing, like when she visits the Drayton. Yet that is done for convenience and almost as a game or joke to be played on Whites. The deep ambivalence evinced in the above admission springs from something much more elemental, namely her self-activated cultural orphanhood. After repeatedly subordinating race to class concerns, opting for individualism over collective racial progress, Irene is plagued with uneasiness as she negotiates competing and often contradictory sets of conventions regarding race, class,

and gender. At novel's end, though, she is focused on the piece of her identity that she deems most worthy of protection, her family life, which represents the intersection of all three.

Clare's death at the conclusion of *Passing* represents the culmination of the clash between American individualist and racial uplift ideologies. The preponderance of circumstantial evidence suggests that Irene is likely guilty of pushing Clare out of the window during the party at Felise's apartment.²⁸ Irene, overcome with anxiety that she will lose her class position along with her husband if Clare is left unchecked, seizes the opportunity to eliminate Clare in the moments after Bellew rushes into the room to confront his wife about her true racial identity.

[Irene] ran across the room, her terror tinged with ferocity, and laid a hand on Clare's bare arm. One thought possessed her. She couldn't have Clare Kendry cast aside by Bellew. She couldn't have her free... What happened next, Irene never afterwards allowed herself to remember. Never clearly... Irene wasn't sorry. She was amazed, incredulous almost. What would the others think? That Clare had fallen? That she had deliberately leaned backward? Certainly one or the other. Not -. (111)

The central moment of the sequence, Clare plummeting to the street from the window, is omitted from narration, mirroring Irene's conscious repression of the memory of what she has done. In the instant preceding it, Irene experiences "terror mixed with ferocity;" she is "possessed," at once feral and demonic. In the instant that follows, Irene isn't "sorry." Rather, she is remorseless in the aftermath of her act of violence, albeit "amazed,

²⁸ There are multiple theories regarding the nature of Irene's death. Most scholars, like Lori Harrison-Kahan, read her death as ambiguous, leaving the three main possibilities - murder, suicide, and accident - as plausible readings. Harrison-Kahan only grants that Clare "is expelled from a window" (115), and Charles Scruggs claims that "Only one thing is certain: Irene has murdered Clare indirectly by not telling Brian or Clare that [Jack]Bellew had met her and Felise the previous afternoon" (161). For more on the unresolved ambiguities of the novel's conclusion, see the scholarly introductions to various editions of *Passing* written by Thadious Davis (1997), Deborah McDowell (1991), Charles Larson (1992), and Mae Henderson (2002).

incredulous” at her capacity to commit such an act. Ill-at-ease even in the moment she eradicates the threat to her class position, Irene suggests two alternatives that paint her as innocent, but cannot utter the words to describe the possibility that would cast her in a guilty light and lead her to be shunned by her peers, indicated by the dash that concludes the quotation. Nell Sullivan’s examination of Larsen’s novel, and in particular its climax, considers the term “passing” to include not only the act of crossing social boundaries, but also the “passing” over from life to death, and how passing into the White world, or into middle-class security, or into conventional gender roles can be read as a metaphoric death. To Sullivan, Irene’s complicity in Clare’s actual death “reveals the extent to which she has been infected by white ideology, ironically, even while conscientiously playing the role of a ‘good race woman’” (383), to which I would add that it also exposes the depths of Irene’s ambivalence about her own Blackness. For Irene, intraracial solidarity and the willingness to protect Clare are only primary when convenient.

Clare Kendry, though, faces Bellew’s anger with preternatural calm, with “even a faint smile on her full, red lips, and in her shining eyes” (111), suggesting that she relishes exposure of her African-American identity and the liberation it will bring. She will be released from the enactment of fraudulent Whiteness and from the constraints of the conventions associated with White domestic life, and consequently become free to (re)affiliate herself with Black life after a dozen years of alienation from it. Jennifer Brody, for one, reads this moment as emancipatory, writing, “The last vision of Clare suggests that she went to her death knowingly and perhaps proudly as a Black woman” (407). In this maneuver, Larsen strategically repositions the dual protagonists; Irene is now fully unmasked as the novel’s race traitor and Clare is situated as the unabashed race

woman, willing to lose her life rather than her Blackness. The Black feminist theorist bell hooks has declared, “To love Blackness is dangerous in a White supremacist culture - so threatening, so serious a breach in the fabric of the social order, that death is the punishment” (8). Clare’s love of Blackness, both her own and others’, leads to her demise, with Irene functioning as proxy for a White supremacy bent on reifying its power and privilege. Thadious Davis writes that, as such, “it is difficult to read Clare’s death neatly as a punishment for passing or a commentary on biraciality” (xxx) in the vein of Clarence’s death in *The Garies*, for instance. Clare has chosen to be Black, even though it carries tremendous, immediate risk. As a result, she has assuaged her orphan’s anxieties of belonging and come to terms with her racial identity.

Conversely, Irene Redfield has severed all authentic racial kinship ties, inflicting a metaphorical death upon herself. When Irene realizes that Clare has died as a result of the fall, “a sob of thankfulness . . . rose in her throat” (113), confirming that the fruits of her “having way,” middle-class security and at least the semblance of marital stability, supersede both racial solidarity and basic moral scruples for Irene. She has preserved her Black nuclear family in the face of the danger embodied by Clare. But in eliminating Clare, as Charles Larson asserts, Irene “has inherited Clare’s life of duplicity and isolation” (“Introduction” xv), cursed to maintain her charade that African-American domestic life and class ascendancy have secured her identity. Beneath the surface, though, she has relegated herself to cultural orphanhood by driving a wedge between herself and her racial peers. Larsen’s novel represents a major tropological revision of Black orphanhood; no longer can the African-American orphan figure assuage the anxieties of belonging through intraracial affiliations and the pursuit of upward class

mobility. *Passing* proposes that all African Americans, even those embedded in Black families and actively engaged in racial uplift, are still susceptible to disaffiliation from their heritage that can render them culturally orphaned, much like the speaker in the Countee Cullen poem that is the epigraph of the novel.

CHAPTER 5

“THE TRANSFERAL TO COME:” RECUPERATING LOST

ORIGINS IN *KINDRED*

Published in 1979, *Kindred* represents a shift in the function of the orphan figure in African-American novels. The orphan-like characters in *Passing*, Clare and Irene, seek to escape some aspect of their past in order to forge a liberated future. For Clare, this means passage into Whiteness, and for Irene, it means eliminating Clare from her life.

Kindred, a neo-slave narrative²⁹ written near the end of the Black Arts Movement (BAM),³⁰ uses Dana, its Black orphan protagonist, to explore how the weight of the past -

²⁹ Ashraf Rushdy supplies the most succinct definition of the neo-slave narrative: “Neo-slave narratives are contemporary novels that assume the form, adopt the conventions, and take on the first-person voice of the antebellum slave narrative” (*Remembering* 3). He asserts that neo-slave narratives emerged out of an effort by African Americans in the 1960’s and 1970’s to assess the implications their historical legacy on the political moment in which they were living. Angelyn Mitchell uses an alternative term, “liberatory narrative,” (*Freedom* xi) to describe the neo-slave narrative; in her framework, the liberatory narrative is a late-twentieth century novel that reveals the “residuals of slavery” by adopting the conventions of the slave narratives, or, in her terminology, the “emancipatory narratives” of the nineteenth century.

³⁰ The Black Arts Movement arose in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement as an artistic effort by African Americans to represent their racialized experiences and celebrate their racial identity. Scholars debate the bookend dates of the movement; I pinpoint its start as 1966, the year Stokely Carmichael voiced the phrase, “Black Power,” (see note 3 for more on that moment), and the end as 1987, the year Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction. Regardless, the Black Arts Movement consisted of writers, musicians, actors, visual artists, and theorists who endeavored to define and create a “Black Aesthetic” that merged artistry with political activism. Howard Ramsby writes that Black Arts discourse was 1) an expression of militant and nationalist sensibilities, 2) a direct appeal to an African American audience, 3) a critique of anti-Black racism, and 4) an affirmation of African Americans’ cultural heritage (11). BAM writer and theorist Larry Neal captured the synthesis of the political and artistic when he claimed, “Black Art is the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept” (Washington 308). For more contemporaneous examinations of the Black Arts Movement, see *Understanding the New Black Poetry*, edited by Stephen Henderson (1973), and *The Black Aesthetic*, edited by Addison Gayle (1972). For analyses of BAM conducted by scholars a generation later looking back on the movement, see William Van de Burg’s *New Day In Babylon* (1992), Cheryl Clarke’s *After Mecca* (2005), James

familial, racial, and national - must be confronted and ultimately reconciled with the present. By thrusting Dana back in time, *Kindred* closes off escape from it; Dana is forced to grapple with the racialized experiences of her ancestors and consider its cumulative impact on her existence in order to return to her present.

That is not to say that the time-traveling Dana does not wish to free herself from the past. During her second journey in time from Los Angeles, circa 1976, to antebellum Maryland, she attempts to navigate her way through the pitch-black night to reach the cabin of her supposed ancestor, Alice Greenwood. Scared by the unfamiliar surroundings and anxious to return home to her own era, she flushes out a small animal as she walks. “I froze,” she recounts, “too terrified to even scream... I found myself swaying a little, swaying dizzily. I collapsed to my knees, desperately willing the dizziness to intensify, the transferal to come” (34). But the dizziness, a visceral precursor to her time travel, does not intensify, “the transferal” does not come. Instead, she opens her eyes to discover that she is still abandoned in 1819 on the outskirts of the Weylin plantation.

It is in foregrounding this confrontation with that past that *Kindred* redesigns the African-American orphan figure, enacting a tropological revision. The heroes and heroines of the works considered thus far have endeavored to found a new, intraracial lineage free *from* the White supremacist legacy that has haunted their lives and those of their ancestors, with varying degrees of success. Some, like Emily in *The Garies and Their Friends* and Iola in *Iola Leroy*, achieve a favorable outcome, establishing sanctuaries for themselves and their kin beyond the auspices of Whiteness. Others, like Emily’s brother Clarence and both Irene and Clare in *Passing*, are not so fortunate. In

Smethurst’s *The Black Arts Movement* (2005), and Amy Abugo Ongiri’s *Spectacular Blackness* (2009).

Kindred, Dana's narrative arc functions as a reverse migration of sorts, as she passes back across history to recuperate her ancestral heritage. By mining her past, Dana obtains both the details of her ancestral origins and a measure of experiential literacy; once collected, these become portable, granting her insight into the racialized late-twentieth century present she inhabits as well as the freedom *to* live out a liberated future.

The orphaned Dana's project of excavating her family history during her journeys from 1976 Los Angeles to the Weylin plantation in antebellum Maryland doubles as a narrative exploration of the exigencies of the narrative present, namely the thorny politics of racial affiliation during the post-Civil Rights era. By troubling notions of racial purity through Dana's navigation of her mixed ancestry, Octavia Butler suggests that strict adherence to intraracial solidarity forecloses the prospect of full agency and subjectivity for not only the African-American orphan protagonist of *Kindred*, but also for contemporary African Americans wrestling with the complex relationship between their collective history and present reality. In deploying the trope of the orphan, the novel asks the following series of questions: What exactly does history mean to one who has been denied access to fundamental knowledge about her origins? More broadly, how can history be made meaningful to African Americans, a group of people who have existed in an orphan-like condition as a result of centuries of racial oppression? And perhaps most significantly, what ought to be done with the gaps in knowledge precipitated by the past that can never be recuperated?

Edana (Dana) Franklin is an aspiring Black female writer living with her White husband, Kevin, in an apartment in Los Angeles in 1976. Without warning, Dana is transported through time and space to rescue a drowning five-year old, Rufus. When a

gun is thrust in her face a moment later, Dana is returned to her living room in Los Angeles. She is disoriented and struggles to explain what has just happened to her skeptical husband, but before they can make sense of the strange events, she is transported again to prevent the same boy, now four years older, from burning his house down. Dana quickly deduces that she is being summoned by Rufus, who is a White boy living on his father's plantation in Maryland in 1815, when he is in mortal danger, and moreover, that he is her "several times great grandfather" (28). Her charge, then, is to keep the boy alive long enough for him to participate in the conception of her family's matriarch, Hagar Weylin Blake.

The rest of the novel traces both Dana's quest to preserve Rufus's life and also her travails as a Black orphan figure navigating the perils of an unfamiliar environment rife with the violent subjugation of African Americans. Dana takes six trips total to the antebellum South over the course of the novel, each ostensibly to save Rufus from harm, but also to soothe her orphan's anxieties of belonging. In order to protect herself, Dana finds kinship bonds with the enslaved persons on the plantation, for instance, including another of her Black foremothers, Alice, who is born free but subsequently remanded to slavery as punishment for assisting her enslaved husband in a thwarted escape attempt. Eventually, Rufus and Alice do conceive Hagar, but when Alice commits suicide, Rufus attempts to sexually assault Dana and replace Alice with her. Dana chooses to murder her ancestor rather than submit to him, at once an act of survival and self-orphaning. She stabs Rufus, but in the scuffle, Rufus grips Dana's left arm just as she is being transported back to Los Angeles for the final time. Dana returns to her apartment, but suffers another traumatic loss in the process when her arm is amputated at the very spot Rufus held. In

the novel's epilogue, Dana and Kevin visit the site of the Weylin plantation, where Dana struggles to reconcile her first-hand experiences of the past with the absence of official records documenting the plantation's former inhabitants, some of whom were her ancestors.

Contextualizing History In the Black-Power Era

Octavia Butler's impetus for writing the novel becomes a useful lense through which to examine this reconciliation project in which Dana engages. In interviews given over the course of her career as a novelist, Octavia Butler pointed to two moments that informed her writing of *Kindred*. The first, which she discussed at length in a 1997 interview conducted by Charles Rowell, occurred during her childhood. Butler's father died when she was very young, and she was raised primarily by her mother and grandmother. Her mother was a domestic worker, and occasionally took Octavia to work with her. According to Butler, she could "hear people talk about or to my mother in ways that were obviously disrespectful ... [I] did not blame them for their disgusting behavior, but I blamed my mother for taking it." Ruminating on those experiences much later as an adult, Butler said that she "realized that this was what kept me fed, and this is what kept a roof over my head" which led her "to pay attention to my mother and even more my grandmother and great-grandmother ... [and] what they all went through" (Rowell 51). Butler's need to grasp the nature of "what they all went through" animates *Kindred*, reflecting a desire to unearth the racial and economic complexities of what appeared to her as a child to be a willingness to be demeaned, but was in reality a series of mechanisms designed to survive White supremacy.

Some African Americans of Butler's generation struggled to empathize with the nature of the adversity that previous generations of Blacks had faced. In Butler's words, young adult African Americans of the late 1960's "were feeling ashamed of, or more strongly, angry with their parents for not improving things faster" (Kenan 28), frustrated by what they perceived as the failures of the Civil Rights Movement to enact racial justice and lasting social change. Like Stokely Carmichael chanting to the waiting crowd upon his release from a Greenwood, MS jail in 1966,³¹ the rising generation wanted Black Power and wanted it now, but in Butler's mind, this aspirational mantra lacked the counterweight of historical context that would enlighten their pursuit of empowerment. This truth crystallized for Butler during a conversation she had with a fellow Black student during her time at Pasadena City College. In one interview, she describes the man as a "friend who could recite history but couldn't feel it" (See 64), and in another she says he "would have killed and died, as opposed to surviving and hanging on and hoping and working for change" (Brown 182).

In her interview with Charles Rowell that contains her most extensive remarks on the discussion, Butler paints him as "a young man who was the same age as I was but who had apparently never made the connection with what his parents did to keep him alive" before launching into a detailed account of his comments. Butler reported that he said, "I'd like to kill all these old people who have been holding us back for so long. But

³¹ African-American political activist Stokely Carmichael, organizer for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, raised the chant, "What do we want? Black Power! When do we want it? Now!" at a rally held upon his release in June 1966 from a Greenwood, MS jail for marching in protest of the shooting of James Meredith during his "One-Man March." The phrase "Black Power" quickly became the name of the social and political movement, the Black Power Movement, of the era that promoted racial pride, self-determination, and justice.

I can't because I'd have to start with my own parents.'" She went on to interpret his declaration as an indictment, claiming, "When he said *us* he meant black people, and when he said *old people* he meant older black people." And it was this epiphany that sparked Butler's decision to pen *Kindred*, recalling to Rowell that she "wanted to take a character ... back in time to some of the things that our ancestors had to go through, and see if that character survived so very well with the knowledge of the present in her head" (51). Butler's classmate blamed his African-American ancestors for their seeming inaction, yet Butler saw in this repudiation of the racialized past some potential for revision and recovery. *Kindred* is the realization of that potential, predicated on an emotional "transferral" from anger to empathy on the part of her generation of African Americans.

This is not to say that *Kindred* nullifies the aims of Black nationalism as practiced in the Black Power Movement; rather, the novel proposes that the agency and self-determination sought by the movement had to reconcile with the particulars of the past and imagine a future "home in the nation" where intraracial solidarity could co-exist with the more expansive, interracial reality of human kinship. By centralizing the trope of the African-American orphan in this inclusive vision, *Kindred* demonstrates Maria Troy, Elizabeth Kella, and Helena Wahlstrom's precept that "orphans have an important role to play in learning about the past and envisioning alternative futures" (174). Through Dana, the past and future are situated dialogically, reshaping her conceptions of race, home, family, and kinship. John Ernest theorizes that one of the complexities of racial identity is how the broader culture in a given historical moment delimits it, writing, "In terms of race, it matters when and where an individual is born" (*Chaotic* 66). Dana epitomizes this

truth, and by oscillating between two distinct time periods, Dana becomes the embodied comparative study of how time and place of origin superimpose themselves on one's racialized experience. In *Kindred*, past, present, and future are conflated as a result of Dana's spatio-temporal journeys. I suggest that the dislocations she experiences over the course of the narrative's trajectory trouble the fixity of historical knowledge, illuminating the gaps in what is known without filling them, leveraging the trope of the orphan to reveal the partial irrecoverability of the figure's originary story.

Literacy and Lineage

Dana first locates these apertures in her own fractured family history through the information inscribed in her family's Bible. During her second journey to the Weylin plantation, Dana prevents Rufus from burning his house down. Moments after, she has an epiphany that helps her to understand the nature of her spatio-temporal travels, thinking, "if the child before me was real and telling the truth, maybe he was one of my ancestors. Maybe he was my several times great-grandfather." This revelation is catalyzed by her hazy recollection of her family's "large Bible in an ornately carved wooden chest" in which Hagar Weylin, whom Dana supposes is/will be Rufus's daughter, "had begun keeping [family] records." The account of Dana's family lineage kept in that Bible prompts her to ruminate on the circumstances that brought her family into existence.

Grandmother Hagar. Hagar Weylin, born in 1831. Hers was the first name listed. And she had given her parents' names as Rufus Weylin and Alice Green-something Weylin ... Alice Greenwood. How would she marry this boy? Or would it be marriage? And why hadn't someone in my family mentioned that Rufus Weylin was white? If they knew. Probably they didn't. Hagar Weylin Blake had died in 1880, long before the time of any member of the family I had known. No doubt most information about her life had died with her. At least it died before it filtered down to me. There was only the Bible left. (28)

Hagar's records include both Rufus and Alice, her parents, but as Dana articulates, at least one crucial piece of information, Rufus's racial identity, is omitted not just from the

Bible but also entirely from the family's originary stories passed down through generations. In nineteenth-century emancipatory narratives like those written by Douglass and Jacobs, there is a clear link between literacy and freedom that suggests that the ability to read and write propels the subject towards a liberated future. In Butler's neo-slave narrative, the flow is reversed; Dana is the end result of that liberated future, and must use Hagar's writing to retrace her ancestral past, a heritage that includes both Rufus and Alice. While the familial knowledge the Bible contains is sparse, it clues Dana to her circumstances while simultaneously triggering a sequence of deeper questions that Dana will seek to answer throughout the rest of the novel.

Kindred also raises issues associated with heredity through Hagar's Bible. Dana's fealty to Rufus transcends her own quest to safeguard her family line and her own eventual conception. As she looks "at the boy who would be Hagar's father," she recognizes that "there had to be some type of reason for the links" between them that draw her to him when he is in existential danger. She states, "Not that I really thought a blood relationship could explain [it] ... But then, neither would anything else. What we had was something new ... Some matching strangeness in us that may or may not have come from being related" (29). Dana gestures towards nineteenth-century "blood rhetoric"³² when she uses "blood relationship" as a synonym for biological relation. Of course, while Dana and Rufus are familial kin, they are not racial kin, based on Dana's conception of herself as an African-American woman, which is in part why the revelation of Rufus's Whiteness is so disconcerting. As I will address later, Dana faces the dilemma posed by these two competing notions of kinship - racial and familial. The very question

³² See Chapter 3 for more on this concept, particularly its operation in Frances Harper's 1892 novel, *Iola Leroy*.

that troubles Irene in *Passing*, namely to either be loyal to Clare and therefore her race, or to protect her family, also haunts Dana. For latter, the trap of history positions her to participate in the subjugation of her racial kin to preserve her family lineage. Robert Crossley, in his critical essay that doubles as the reader's guide appended to the end of the 2003 edition of the novel, investigates how the past and future conspire against Dana in *Kindred*. Crossley posits that she is "chained to her ancestral past by the genealogical link that requires her to keep the oppressive slave master alive until her own family is initiated" (278). Her "matching strangeness" with Rufus compels her to protect him, and it also precludes her at crucial junctures from acting with loyalty towards the enslaved African Americans under his ownership.

Dual Orphanhood

Dana endures dual orphanhood in *Kindred*; she is a literal orphan whose parents died when she was a child, and she is a cultural orphan throughout her time on the Weylin plantation. The anxieties of belonging concomitant with orphanhood permeate the novel's two settings, amplifying the insatiable hunger for security that Dana's situation as time traveler engenders. Dana's father died when she was an infant, and her mother died "back in nineteen sixty" (111), which based on Dana's 26th birthday coinciding with her first trip to rescue Rufus on June 9, 1976, puts her at ten-years old at the time of her mom's death. She is reared by her aunt and uncle, who "wanted kids, but couldn't have any" (111). Though nurtured and loved by these extended relatives, Dana still feels the pangs of the traumatic loss of her parents. Kevin, too, is parentless, and this shared experience of orphanhood between the two is partially what knits together their romantic relationship. In the sequence in which Dana recounts first meeting at Kevin at

the labor agency, she characterizes him as being “as lonely and out of place as I was” (52), and shortly thereafter, when she learns that his parents “were dead ... Years before in an auto accident” (56), she comes to view him as a “kindred spirit” (57). This expansive vision of kinship supersedes both genealogical relation and racial affiliation, predicating it instead on similar past experiences and goals for the future (both are aspiring writers), again situating past and future in conversation with the narrative present.

While past and future seem to harmonize in her relationship with Kevin, they instigate discord with Dana’s aunt and uncle. The threat of White incursion into their intraracial family is too much for her guardians to bear, so when Dana informs them she is marrying Kevin, they sever their ties with her, re-opening the wounds of Dana’s initial orphanhood. Of her uncle’s reaction to the news, Dana tells Kevin, ““it’s as though I’ve rejected him ... He was more hurt than mad ... He wants me to marry someone like him, someone who looks like him. A Black man” (111). In consequence, her uncle disinherits her, saying, ““The last thing he said to me was that he’d rather will [his apartment houses] to his church rather than leave them to me and see them fall into white hands”” (112). For Dana’s uncle, intraracial solidarity overwhelms his fealty to kin, and the fear of losing to Whites the economic self-sufficiency those apartment houses have allowed him to obtain for future generations stifles his desire to bequeath his wealth to his niece. Hence, Dana’s decision to violate racial taboo by wedding Kevin amputates her from both her last remaining familial bond and an inheritance that in theory will allow her to provide an economically secure life for her and Kevin’s future offspring. This tension between inter- and intraracial relationships crosses spatio-temporal boundaries in *Kindred*; Dana’s

relationships with the novel's two White men, Kevin and Rufus, are analogic, as are her bonds with her Black aunt and uncle in L.A. and her ancestor, Alice, in Talbot County, MD. These binaries intimate that for the African-American orphan, and more broadly, for African Americans as a whole, the shifting interpersonal terrain associated with being Black in a White supremacist culture exists irrespective of the era, and can produce a disorienting effect on Black people who by necessity must attempt to navigate that terrain.

Marooned in the past, Dana confronts the other kind of orphanhood that often plagues African-American protagonists in novels: cultural orphanhood. In the works I have considered thus far, this cultural orphanhood has been frequently the direct result of passing into the White world and the unfulfilled desire to cross back into the Black community the protagonist enjoyed earlier in life. For Dana, too, cultural orphanhood is activated by a form of passage, but not across racial boundaries like her novelistic antecedents. Instead, it is the passage back in time that dislocates her from her racial identity and renders her an alien amongst her racial kin on the Weylin plantation. Dana's perception that she is out of place there is reinforced through many of her interactions with the enslaved populace, who point to her modes of speech and dress as markers of her foreignness. In the chapter entitled "The Fall," Carrie plucks at Dana's blouse and pants upon meeting her and then frowns, signalling that to Carrie and others, Dana does not match their expectations of what an enslaved Black woman ought to look like. In the same segment, Nigel admonishes Dana for the way she talks, saying, "Why you try to talk like white folks? ... More like white folks than some white folks ... You'll get into trouble ... Marse Tom already don't like you. You talk too educated and come from a

free state” (74). Nigel fears the potential repercussions of Dana’s level of education, which he and others associate with Whiteness, for the entire Black community on the plantation, in much the same way Dana’s aunt and uncle fear the consequences of her affiliation with Whiteness through marriage to Kevin. In both instances, Whiteness is a legitimate threat to Black security - the former bodily, the latter economic - and the automatic response to wall out that threat is a survival mechanism honed by generations of negative experiences with White people and institutions. For Dana, however, this formal notice of her liminal status in the community only exacerbates her sense of being divorced from those whose racial and/or familial identity she shares.

Later in the novel, Alice reifies Dana’s position as a perpetual outsider by referring to her several times as a “white nigger.” This phrase is intended to ironically remind Dana of her lack of racial authenticity as well as loyalty; because she acts and speaks in ways that Alice and others perceive as more typically White, she is considered dangerous. After Dana nurses Alice back to health, she obeys Rufus’s command to send Alice to him so she can be his concubine. In this moment, Alice articulates her latent mistrust of Dana, now come to fruition, by questioning her Blackness: “‘Doctor nigger,’ she said with contempt. ‘Think you know so much. Reading nigger. White nigger! Why didn’t you know enough to let me die?’” (160). Here, Alice links literacy and medical knowledge to Whiteness, and disavows Dana as racial kin. The epithet, designed to highlight Alice’s view of Dana as a race traitor, underscores unwittingly Dana’s mixed racial heritage, which she is already struggling to reconcile. Alice leverages Dana’s insecurity on this point by reiterating the phrase several other times. When Dana laments that Kevin is not with her, Alice retorts, “‘You ought to be ashamed of yourself, whining

and crying over some poor white trash of a man, black as you are. You always trying to act so white. White nigger, turning against your own people!” (165). Though Dana’s skin tone marks her as Black in the eyes of Alice and everyone else on the plantation, that is not enough to garner admission into the African-American community there. Only when coupled with the shared experience of oppression and the visible demonstration of loyalty to the race can one be accepted as authentically Black, Alice suggests.

Shortly thereafter, Rufus cements Dana’s liminal status, saying to her, ““You think you’re white! ... You don’t know your place any better than a wild animal”” (164), adding later that his father, Tom Weylin, ““always thought you were dangerous because you knew too many white ways, but you were black. Too black, he said. The kind of black who watches and thinks and makes trouble”” (255). It is of no small import that Dana’s alienation is magnified by her forebearers Alice and Rufus, the very ancestors whose names sit at the proverbial root of her family tree as inscribed in Hagar’s Bible. According to Rushdy, “Butler uses the occasion of Dana’s family secret [of a White ancestor] to generate a series of meditations on issues of purity and impurity, in families, in history, and in racial affiliations” (*Remembering* 100), and these meditations extend beyond both genetic and race-as-family associations to include the issue of who has the authority to label one “pure” or “impure.” In *Kindred*, Dana cannot choose how to label herself, and is deemed both too Black by Rufus and too White by Alice to be granted full access to either identity. Furthermore, the moral impurity of Dana’s motivations throughout the novel, despite her numerous acts of kindness to Rufus, Alice, and others, underscores her inability to reconcile the two aspects of her identity.

Dana As Alien

Dana's twofold orphanhood renders her a foreign body who temporarily invades the Weylin plantation and the lives of its residents. Octavia Butler once said in an interview with Rosalie Harrison, "To be black is to be abnormal" (6), and in *Kindred*, the stigma of Blackness operates in much the same fashion as the stigma of orphanhood to position Dana as somehow intrinsically different or alien. Troy, Kella, and Wahlstrom state that orphans are "unfamiliar" (175), a term derived from a Latin word meaning "not of a household." Butler accentuates this by endowing Dana with skills that by the early-nineteenth century standards held by the other characters are considered to be supernatural powers. Not only does her status as a literate Black woman render her unusual, but her basic twentieth-century medical acumen and, more significantly, her ability to teleport stamp Dana as strange. On her second trip to the Weylin plantation in the chapter entitled "The Fire," Rufus tells her that "'Mama says she saw [a ghost] once,'" of which Dana reports, "I managed to hold back my opinion [that] ... I was probably her ghost" (24). Later, in "The Storm," Tom Weylin remarks, "'You're something different. I don't know what - witch, devil, I don't care. Whatever you are, you just about brought a girl back to life when you came here last, and she wasn't even the one you came to help. You come out of nowhere and go back into nowhere. Years ago, I would have sworn there couldn't even be anybody like you. You're not natural!'" (205). Just as Dana cannot rationalize the inexplicable phenomenon of her spatio-temporal displacement, neither can Tom, Rufus, and others determine how to label Dana, resorting to the language of the supernatural to describe what the rational cannot.

Dana is not “natural” by the standards applied to her by other characters in each of the time periods she inhabits in *Kindred*. Her nineteenth-century kin, such as Tom Weylin, perceive her as otherworldly because of her apparent powers, and her twentieth-century family, specifically her aunt and uncle, consider her desire to marry Kevin a threat to the established racial order. Critic Gregory Hampton purports that Dana “is an unborn specter from the future trying to ensure its birth into a twentieth-century reality” (16), a tantalizing but flawed proposal; Dana does not haunt the novel’s other characters, nor is she a shapeshifter³³ or a disembodied spirit bent on inducing mayhem and misfortune. A more apt analysis comes from Robert Crossley, who notes, “the alien in much of fiction written by women has not been a monstrous figure from a distant planet but the invisible alien within modern, familiar human society” (272). At once familiar and unfamiliar, Dana epitomizes a key feature of trope of the African-American orphan, inhabiting the periphery of socially-constructed racial and familial communities. Dana has arrived to nineteenth-century, antebellum Maryland from a distance, not a “distant planet,” but a distant time, which generates an incongruity between how she perceives herself and how those around her see her. Her engagement to Kevin in the twentieth century represents the crossing of another kind of boundary, that of convention, which unsettles her aunt and uncle. In both epochs, though, she is an Other, an outsider whom kin are reticent to claim.

³³ While Dana is not a shapeshifter, the female protagonist in another of Octavia Butler’s novels, *Wild Seed* (1980) is just such a being. The novel, the fourth in Butler’s Patternist series, chronicles the experiences of Anyanwu, as she attempts to escape the clutches of another, older shapeshifter, Doro. Doro wants to use Anyanwu to breed more of their kind, and she changes form as she travels across space and time to avoid this exploitation. Eventually, Doro ceases this quest, instead taking on Anyanwu as a sort of partner who helps him identify other promising breeding mates.

Transversive Kinship and Incorporation Into the Family

The African-American orphan's longing for incorporation into a family is underwritten by the need for a safe haven in the midst of the hostile environment of White supremacy. *Kindred*, as a neo-slave narrative, applies a new feature to these dual desires: transversive kinship. Valerie Loichot defines transversive kinship in the following way: "Ancestors become children; the child becomes the ancestor ... The present becomes the parent of the past" (35). Valerie Loichot's formulation includes the reversal of genealogy and its impact on the linear transmission of ancestral knowledge. Butler superimposes this trait of transversive kinship on to the African-American orphan figure, transmuting the trope so that it becomes more expansive and better able to explore the ways that not only the vestiges of the past shape present African-American life, but also how contemporary African-American culture excavates, interprets, and influences perception of the past. In this way, *Kindred* achieves Butler's stated goal at the outset of her writing of the novel, namely to understand what previous generations of African Americans endured, and to supply a counterweight to the prevailing notion of the Black nationalist movements of the 1960's and 1970's that their ancestors' past subjugation was a source of shame. Through its deployment of transversive kinship structures, *Kindred* suggests that African Americans ought not look back to the period of enslavement with embarrassment, wishing to kill it off as Butler's classmate at Pasadena City College desired; rather, they should feel empathy for the circumstances in which their enslaved ancestors found themselves and derive pride from the perseverance they modeled in surviving those circumstances.

Dana establishes transverse kinship bonds early in *Kindred*. She deduces shortly into her travels to the Weylin plantation that she has to affiliate herself with the African Americans under Tom Weylin's ownership if she wants to survive. After witnessing Alice's father get whipped by patrollers on her second visit, Dana realizes, "I was probably less prepared for the reality [of the violence of slavery] than the child crying not far from me" (36). Dana eventually formulates a transverse kinship bond with Alice over the course of her time on the Weylin farm, and it is this and other transverse kinships that enable Dana to overcome her experiential illiteracy, that is, her lack of first-hand knowledge of the circumstances in which she finds herself. While Dana's formal education in the late-twentieth century imbues her with a degree of academic knowledge that far outstrips that of the enslaved people with whom she interacts, that type of knowledge has limited value to her in the antebellum South. In his close reading of *Kindred* as an example of a postmodern slave narrative, Timothy Spaulding writes, "Though Dana is most certainly aware of the history of American slavery before she actually travels in the past, her knowledge of the past is abstract and distant, obscured by the passage of over 100 years since the end of slavery" (47), and as such, Spaulding suggests that Dana lacks the practical skills necessary to endure or subvert the brutality of enslavement. By establishing transverse kinship bonds, Dana can achieve the experiential literacy lost to the African-American orphan figure because both the familial and cultural lines of intergenerational transmission have been cut. Unlike others I have considered thus far, Dana can actually recuperate lost knowledge through direct interaction with her forebearers, reconnecting those severed lines. The direction of transmission along this new circuit, though, becomes two-way, as Dana supplies a degree

of knowledge and understanding to her transverse kin that repositions her as a source of wisdom, practical skill, and maternal comfort to her ancestors.

One line of transverse kinship that Dana establishes is with Sarah, the enslaved cook on the plantation. As an alien to, and in, plantation life, Dana knows little about the workings of the cookhouse, but through her hard work and willingness to learn how to be an active participant in completing the daily tasks associated with plantation life, Dana earns the trust and respect of Sarah. In exchange for her efforts, Dana finds that the cookhouse is a sanctuary from the White oppression that pervades the Weylin farm. More significant than learning to cook, however, is the other kind of knowledge Dana gleans from her time spent in the cookhouse alongside Sarah. She narrates, “Sometimes old people and children lounged there, or house servants and even field hands stealing a few moments of leisure. I liked to listen to them talk sometimes and fight my way through their accents to find out more about how they survived lives of slavery. And without knowing it, they prepared me to survive” (94). The cookhouse, then, operates as a site of intergenerational knowledge transmission, filling gaps in Dana’s historical knowledge and making her more literate. For the African-American orphan figure, this kind of unwritten historical knowledge has been erased, yet for Dana, thrust into her ancestral past, these erasures can be recovered.

Butler couples Dana’s burgeoning experiential literacy acquisition with her literacy instruction of others throughout *Kindred*. Dana reads extensively to Rufus after he injures his leg, most notably *Robinson Crusoe*,³⁴ the fictional account of a man who

³⁴ *Robinson Crusoe*, written by English novelist Daniel De Foe in 1719, recounts the tale of Robinson Crusoe, a slave trader who is shipwrecked on a slaving voyage. His man, Friday, is actually an indigenous inhabitant of the island that Crusoe imprisons and then

“had been, after all, on a slave-trading voyage when he was ship-wrecked” (86). Stranded like Crusoe, or more aptly, like Friday, the enslaved man who accompanies the novel’s protagonist, Dana teaches her White ancestor how to read. Later in the novel, she teaches Rufus and Alice’s son, Joe, his letters, reversing the role of biological ancestor and progeny in the transmission of knowledge. While Dana chooses to leverage this literacy instruction to knit transversive kinship bonds with her White ancestors in an attempt to influence their behavior, it is in teaching the enslaved Nigel and Carrie to read in the cookhouse that establishes another choice, namely the choice to affiliate herself with the inhabitants of a primarily Black space. Ashraf Rushdy proposes that by choosing a family for herself from amongst multiple options in this way, the orphaned “Dana reclaims a reconstructed family which is based not on biological but social ties” (*Remembering* 117). As an apparent safe haven, the cookhouse is the logical place for Dana to instruct first Nigel and then Carrie, as it provides some measure of at least temporary freedom from Whites, but she is still reticent because of the grave risks associated with being caught in the act. She explains as much to Nigel and then asks if he understands what he is asking her to do. In response, Nigel “turned away from me, lifted his shirt in the back so I could see his scars. Then he faced me. ‘I know,’ he said. That same day, I stole a book and began to teach him” (98). Dana reads the marks on Nigel’s back as a sign that he does know the risk, having learned from experience the consequences of disobeying Tom Weylin. That he is willing to hazard such a beating again in exchange for literacy instills within Dana the courage to teach him.

converts to Christianity. Some scholars consider *Robinson Crusoe* to be the first published English novel.

In this act, Dana and Nigel (along with Carrie) become transversive kin; though not biologically related, they are part of the same race-as-family, and Dana imparts knowledge to her cultural ancestors in precisely the way Loichot describes in her definition of the concept. Yet, Angelyn Mitchell observes, “Dana is self-conscious about belonging, but her color - her sign - guarantees her belonging ... Dana consciously creates a place for herself in and accepts her responsibility to the slave community. At first, Dana’s motivation to join is utilitarian; her interest soon changes to one of true affection and affiliation” (“Not Enough” 67). Literacy instruction is a manifestation of this sense of responsibility and affection, as well as the keen desire to belong inherent in the African-American orphan figure. By transmitting valuable knowledge and putting herself in peril in the process, Dana disobeys her White ancestor to assist her African-American brethren. Her efforts are eventually thwarted when Tom barges into the cookhouse unannounced and discovers the reading lesson in progress. Tom beats Dana so badly that she fears she will die and is transported to her apartment in Los Angeles, but the seeds of literacy have been planted. Dana has made the cookhouse a space where she can impart wisdom to her ancestors and assuage her orphan’s hunger for incorporation into a family. Moreover, Dana has gathered practical know-how in the cookhouse and carved out a place for herself among the enslaved community, garnering the experiential literacy necessary to protect and eventually free herself.

In *Kindred*, the social construct of race countermands simple biological determinism as Butler foregrounds Dana’s divided kinship loyalties throughout the novel. Just as she teaches both her biological and her cultural ancestors how to read, so too does she forge maternal bonds with each. Throughout much of the novel, Dana functions as a

mother-figure to both halves of her direct ancestral lineage, Rufus and Alice. Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu explains in her analysis of how maternity operates in *Kindred*, “Dana is an unusual choice to mother - she has no children herself and her own parents are long dead - [but] she excels in the patience, the self-sacrifice, and the love that the job demands” (131), and as an orphan, Dana’s experiential illiteracy³⁵ extends to maternity. Yet as with her capacity to ensconce herself in the life of the cookhouse by dint of hard work and attentiveness to social cues, she develops the ability to enact some of the traditional duties associated with motherhood in her nurturing approach to Rufus and Alice. For instance, after Rufus’s fall from the tree that triggers Dana’s second trip back, Rufus wants Dana to stay with him while the doctor sets his leg. Dana narrates, “Rufus grabbed my arm and held it, obviously trying not cry. His voice was a husky whisper. ‘Don’t go, Dana’ ... If I could give him any comfort by staying with him, I wanted to stay” (66). Here, she is partially compelled by her desire to ensure Rufus’s and, by extension, her own survival, but her genuine concern for him, evidenced by her urge to supply him with “comfort,” transcends simple self-preservation.

Later in the novel, after Alice is mauled by dogs for assisting Isaac, her enslaved husband, to attempt an escape, Dana nurses her back to health. In the sequence describing this, Butler deploys the overt language of maternity to characterize not only Dana’s maternal care for Alice during her convalescence, but also Alice’s perception of Dana as

³⁵ The term “experiential illiteracy” is descriptive in nature. In my usage in this chapter, I intend it to mean Dana’s inability to “read” situations and her surroundings in the antebellum era correctly because she lacks the experiential framework necessary to properly interpret them. Her vast store of academic knowledge (and books, she reveals in the scene when she and Kevin unpack her library) is of limited use to her when she must quickly deduce a course of action in the face of adversity. This experiential illiteracy causes Dana to inadvertently place herself in danger or amplify the danger of already-threatening situations.

a mother-figure. Dana says, “Alice became a part of my work - an important part ... Alice was a very young child again, incontinent, barely aware of us unless we hurt her or fed her. And she did have to be fed, spoonful by spoonful. She called me Mama for a while” (153). As a surrogate mother, Dana takes care of Alice’s basic physical needs, and does so in such a way that she earns the moniker “Mama” from Alice. Mitchell analyzes the import of these two maternal bonds that Dana forms in the context of Dana’s own motherlessness, proposing that Dana “becomes, so to speak, her own ancestral mother” despite the fact that she is childless. This role imbues Dana with a burgeoning sense of her responsibility not just to her forebearers, but to “everyone on the plantation, family or not; therefore, the collective good of the enslaved community remains primary to Dana in the same way that a mother in similar circumstances might place the collective good of her family over her individual needs” (“Not Enough” 62). Orphaned and homeless, disjoined not only from her own deceased mother but from her own spatio-temporal existence, Dana must tend to the proverbial seeds of her own lineage. By engaging in maternal work with both Alice and Rufus, Dana enacts transversive kinships with them, parenting her ancestors while satiating her orphan’s longing for incorporation into a family.

However, Dana’s maternal work in *Kindred* presents a fundamental problem. By attending to Rufus, Dana is submitting to White patriarchal notions of gender roles within the context of family. Despite his age relative to hers, Rufus’s race and gender empower him to make demands of her that compromise her “maternal” authority and force her to be negligent in her duty to Alice. Butler casts this dilemma in stark relief when Rufus demands that Dana convince Alice to become his concubine. Despite her close

connection with Alice, Dana is compelled to obey in order to facilitate the conception of Hagar by coercing Alice to subject herself to rape. Alice knows that her options as an enslaved African-American woman are limited, and Dana reminds Alice of this reality when she says, “Well, it looks as though you have three choices. You can go to him as he orders; you can refuse, be whipped, and then have him take you by force; or you can run away again” (166). By laying out the options in such cold terms, Dana betrays the mother-daughter bond she has forged with Alice, yet Dana is trapped. To protect Alice would be to run counter to her own instinct towards self-preservation because it would violate the strict codes that govern power relations between White men and Black women in the antebellum South.

Dana’s outline of Alice’s options makes it clear which one Alice must select. Recently recovered from the injuries sustained when she and Isaac were captured, Alice is unprepared physically or psychologically to endure the violence associated with refusal of Rufus or a failed escape attempt, so she is coerced into submission to Rufus’s desires. When Alice does go to Rufus, Dana gives voice to her sorrow, declaring, “It was so hard to watch him hurting her - to know that he had to go on hurting her if my family was to exist at all” (180). What is notably absent from this, though, is an acknowledgement by Dana of her complicity in the repeated rape of Alice. The forced union does produce two children, Joe and Hagar, so Dana’s calculations have proven correct: The rape was necessary for her own eventual conception, several generations later. However, as Gerry Canavan points out in his 2016 literary biography of Butler, *Kindred* foregrounds the inherent contradictions of Dana’s position on the plantation, writing, “Dana is alive after slavery and despite slavery, but also because of slavery, a compromised and morally

fraught position that forces her to make deeply unpleasant choices in the name of preserving the circumstances that led to her own birth” (61). By compelling Alice to submit to Rufus, Dana has disavowed her surrogate daughter and racial kin, sacrificing Alice to the grinding mechanisms of slavery for her own benefit.

Dana grapples with this decision and her complicity in its consequences later in novel. When Alice kills herself after Rufus tricks her into believing he has sold away their children, Dana casts blame for the tragedy on Rufus. To be sure, Rufus is responsible, having sent Joe and Hagar to Baltimore in an effort to scare Alice into not attempting another escape. Yet Dana, too, is culpable, having triggered the sequence of events leading up to Alice’s suicide by encouraging Alice to couple with Rufus. Moreover, Dana is an accomplice in the orphaning of Joe and Hagar, rendering them motherless and activating the same traumatic loss for her transversive kin that she herself experienced as a child. In the aftermath of the tragedy, Rufus sends Dana to tell Joe that his mom is dead. “I remembered the pain of my own mother’s death - grief, loneliness, uncertainty” (258), and these painful recollections reopen Dana’s own wounds sustained at the onset of her orphanhood. That she has inflicted them on Joe and Hagar represents at best a failure to account for the consequences of her actions on her ancestors, and at worst a repudiation of familial and racial ties in favor of self-preservation. It is partially true, as Mitchell contends, that “Although [Dana] could be labeled an enabler, it would be more accurate to indict the real culprit: slavery” (“Not Enough” 59). However, to the degree that Dana’s experiential literacy has revealed the limited range of options available to Alice (and to herself) in the face of the overwhelming apparatus of slavery, Dana’s new knowledge has ensnared her, too, in its machinery. I contend that Mitchell’s

assertion avoids the central issue of Dana's willful collaboration with the system itself, predicated as it is on both racial and gender hierarchies designed to consolidate White, male power. The anxieties of belonging inherent in Dana's orphan-like condition lead her to subject herself and others to patriarchal oppression, triggering a series of losses.

The Trauma of Historical Knowledge

Loss permeates *Kindred*, and Dana's complicity in Joe and Hagar's maternal loss leads directly to the traumatic loss that opens the novel, that of Dana's arm. She narrates, "I lost an arm on my last trip home. My left arm. And I lost about a year of my life and much of the comfort and security I had not valued until it was gone" (9). The loss of her arm functions as a cost Dana must pay - the price for facilitating her own birth, but also the penalty for bringing catastrophe down upon the heads of her ancestral kin, familial and racial alike. Now a widower, Rufus wants to coerce Dana into concubinage just as he had done earlier with Alice. Dana refuses, and the two fight on her pallet, Rufus attempting to rape Dana, Dana defending herself against him. She stabs him twice, but as he dies and she, fearful of dying as well, gets transported back to her LA apartment, Rufus grabs Dana's arm, refusing to let her go. Dana is captured in a liminal position between the two time periods of her existence.

I was back at home - in my own house, in my own time. But I was still caught somehow, joined to the wall as if my arm were growing out of it - or growing into it. From the elbow to the ends of the fingers, my left arm had become a part of the wall. I looked at the spot where the flesh joined the plaster, stared at it uncomprehending. It was the exact spot where Rufus's fingers had grasped. I pulled my arm toward me, pulled hard. And suddenly, there was an avalanche of pain, red impossible agony! And I screamed and screamed. (261)

In this moment, as Dana engages in the process of what Rushdy describes as "disrelating herself from Rufus and the Weylin clan" ("Families" 146), she discovers that she cannot free herself fully from the past, her past. She carries the vestiges of the trauma of

orphanhood with her, the pain from her lost limb a visceral reminder of losses she has endured.

The trauma she has inflicted upon others in her quest to ensure her conception have redounded upon her, the end result of her efforts to navigate her divided maternal loyalties. Octavia Butler said in her interview with Randall Kenan, “Antebellum slavery didn’t leave people quite whole” (30), and for Dana, the absence of her left arm, “the empty space ... the stump” (10), according to Ruth Salvaggio, is “a kind of birthmark [of the] disfigured heritage” of slavery (33). In this light, the novel does not endeavor to assign fault, but rather to acknowledge the perils associated with the African-American orphan’s excavation of obscured or lost origin. The orphan does not know what s/he will unearth, what troubling truths will rise up from the past. In *Remembering the Generations*, Rushdy comments on the inherent contradictions of this task, widening the critical field of vision to include the nation and its relationship with its fraught past when he identifies both “the destructive potential historical excavation harbors for the contemporary African-American subject ... [and] the necessity of that excavation, both for the individual subjects and national histories” (108). Dana, then, is a direct literary descendant of the nineteenth and early-twentieth-century Black orphan figures, representative of African Americans’ collective efforts to gain incorporation into the nation-as-family without forgetting the injustices committed against them.

Through Dana, Butler fundamentally alters the Black orphan figure by refracting the anxieties of the post-Civil Rights era. No longer is racial affiliation an either/or proposition for the parentless African American. Dana must come to terms with the legacy of racial intermixture, and in so doing, she also becomes a stand-in for the nation

itself, which according to Benjamin Robertson “must acknowledge that, because it claims to be a nation, it must claim its own history ... [and] each individual within the nation must take on this history as an individual” (376). For Dana, what “tak[ing] on this history” means confronting the truth that racial purity is a fallacy. The commingling of Blacks and Whites that produced Clarence and Emily Garie, Iola Leroy, Clare Kendry, and others was and continues to be so common that acknowledging only one racial heritage is to ignore the complex reality of American history. In much of the Black nationalist discourse of the post-Civil Rights era, the fight against White oppression was concomitant with fidelity to one’s own Black identity, a loyalty that some hoped would lead to a recommitment to the politics of race-as-family and race-as-nation. Yet through *Kindred*, Butler troubles easy notions of racial authenticity. For African Americans more broadly, culturally orphaned and desirous of a home within the nation, the appeal of the configurations of race-as-family and race-as-nation was that it could provide a bulwark against White incursion. However, as Dana’s journey suggests, this protection cannot be supplied post facto.

Home

In *Kindred*, Dana’s notions of home and family evolve, and the multiple homes that Dana makes for herself operate to nullify the either/or proposition of race-as-family, one in which “family becomes a means of excluding some from the race ... in the name of establishing race-based nationalism” (Rushdy *Remembering* 111). In her present time, Dana has founded an interracial family and home through her marriage to Kevin, a White man; in prior incarnations of the African-American orphan figure, this choice would augur doom, as earlier chapters have demonstrated. But here, Kevin functions as a steady

and supportive, albeit imperfect, spouse. Butler seems to hint that, yes, interracial marriages and, more generally, integrated spaces within America have a particular set of challenges to overcome as a result of the nation's fraught racial history, but, no, these conjugal unions/communities are not destined to crumble beneath the weight of that history and end in violence or disavowal. The African-American orphan does not necessarily need to form an exclusively intraracial family and build a sanctuary apart from Whiteness, as in the past. Now, *Kindred* intimates, the parentless Black protagonist is free to locate a home for herself within the White world without losing her racial identity.

That is not to say that negotiating the parameters of such a home is simple. Dana's definition of home blurs as she shuttles back and forth between Los Angeles and Talbot County, Maryland. She retains her conception of home as a safe haven, but the site of home shifts frequently for her, implying that home is a place the orphan can choose to make, yet another kind of affiliation predicated on self-definition. At the outset of "The Fight," when Dana returns to her LA apartment in the midst of being beaten by Tom for teaching Nigel and Carrie to read, she ruminates on the nature of home: "I came out of the bathroom into the bedroom and looked around. Home. Bed - without canopy - dresser, closet, electric light, television, radio, electric clock, books. Home. It didn't have anything to do with where I had been. It was real. It was where I belonged" (115). Surrounded by her late-twentieth century possessions and inhabiting a secure space, Dana feels safe, that she is "where [she] belonged." When Rufus's fight with Isaac prompts another trek to the antebellum South shortly thereafter, Dana must get help for Rufus, who has been beaten badly, at the Weylin house. She walks back through the woods until

“the plain square house was before me, its downstairs windows full of yellow light. I was startled to catch myself saying wearily, ‘Home at last’” (126). For Dana, whose orphanhood expands to include being abandoned in an alien time and place, home as an assignation is transferable. While her LA apartment houses her things, the Weylin plantation harbors her kin, and it is the relationships that she has formed with them in that space, as thorny as they are, that compel her to consider it a home, despite its relative lack of security. Of this, Rushdy writes, “Home in *Kindred* is more than a place; it signifies the liminal site where one can lose or reclaim a modern self... Home and family are more than what we are born into; they are what our ancestors have made for us and what we come to occupy in an almost existential sense” (“Families” 140, 142). For Dana, an African-American orphan, home is the locus of recuperated connections to her ancestral past, however fraught and impure.

In the end, though, even that home is impermanent, and some of the links in the chain of Dana’s family history remain disjointed. After their final return to 1976 in the novel’s epilogue, Dana and Kevin travel to the site of the Weylin farm only to find that it has disappeared. Liberated from Rufus’s clutches, Dana can initiate a new lineage for herself with Kevin, much like the nineteenth-century emancipatory narrators post-escape. While Dana’s freedom following her emancipation from Rufus is not vulnerable in the same way that Douglass’s and Jacobs’s were, her past still unsettles her because she cannot recover the details of what happened to those she left behind, either from the empty land where the Weylin house once sat or from official, written records. Dana reports, “The only clue we found - more than a clue, really - was an old newspaper article - a notice that Mr. Rufus Weylin had been killed when his house caught fire and was

partially destroyed.... And in later papers, notice of the sale of the slaves from Mr. Rufus Weylin's estate." She notes that Nigel's and Carrie's names are absent from the list, leading her to deduce that Nigel set the fire to cover up her crime, protect the remaining enslaved Blacks on the plantation, and facilitate his and Carrie's escape. Hagar and Joe are also missing from the list, and neither her late-twentieth century knowledge nor her nineteenth-century experiential literacy enable her to discern the details of Hagar's upbringing after the fire that leveled the Weylin house. Instead, she is reduced to speculate on the possibilities; perhaps Margaret "might have taken both [Hagar and Joe].... Might have cared for them.... She might also have held them as slaves" (263). Though Dana has managed to negotiate certificates of freedom from Rufus for Joe and Hagar in the wake of Alice's death, they are no guarantee that the two were in fact manumitted, leaving important questions unanswered. Who raised Hagar? Was she emancipated or enslaved? Who taught her to read and write, paving the way for her to inscribe the family Bible? Like the phantom limb pain that haunts Dana at novel's end, these questions linger. While some of those knowledge gaps have been sewn together by dint of Dana's experiences, others remain open, laying bare the limits of historical knowledge for the African-American orphan figure seeking an originary story.

It is this characteristic of *Kindred* that speaks to the post-Civil Rights moment of its publication, one in which Black nationalism desired to create intraracial spaces and promote self-sufficiency and self-empowerment. Though these aims were a logical response to a long history of White supremacist subjugation, they did not take into full account the complicated nature of interracial familial and national histories, *Kindred* seems to indicate. Dana, true to her role as neo-slave narrator, gains control over her

experiences and those of her ancestors, Black and White, through the act of writing; like Douglass, Jacobs, and so many other African-American autobiographers of the antebellum era, she writes herself into being. And although, as John Ernest surmises, “Every published text, it seems, only emphasizes how much we do not know” (*Chaotic* 13), Dana is able to widen the scope of her understanding of her past despite its missing pieces, gleaned valuable new-found pride in the strength her racial forebearers, members of a community of enslaved African Americans, which was “persistently fractured ... through either the calculated strategy or the mere whims of their white controllers ... [but that] always patche[d] itself back together, drawing from its common suffering and anger a common strength” (Crossley 275). In exhuming her ancestral history, Dana is not forced to disavow either portion of her racial heritage. Instead, she accepts the tangled legacy she inherits, feeling no shame in either her identity as an African-American woman or her marriage to a White man. Dana is not hemmed in by the politics of race-as-family, and can choose her affiliations, exercising a degree of freedom previously unavailable to the African-American orphan figure.

CHAPTER 6

“DISRUPTING THE GROOVE:” THE BLACK MISFIT AS
 CULTURAL ORPHAN IN *THE WHITE BOY SHUFFLE*

Gunnar Kaufman, the protagonist of Paul Beatty’s 1996 novel, *The White Boy Shuffle*, is an unlikely choice to function as the next tropological revision of the African-American orphan because he is not parentless. However, the anxieties of belonging he demonstrates throughout the novel qualify him as orphan-like. As with previous incarnations of the Black orphan figure in nineteenth and twentieth century novels, Gunnar seeks a safe haven in an African-American community. Unlike those others, however, Gunnar is a misfit who struggles to affiliate himself with the Black inhabitants of his new locale. Even after he does gain a tenuous position in his environs, he recognizes the limitations put on him by his adherence to traditional markers of Black identity. In *The White Boy Shuffle*, Beatty plays with the figure of the African-American orphan, stripping it of its literal meaning as a parentless child in order to amplify its metaphoric representation as a cultural outsider. He deploys satire to highlight not only interracial but also intraracial pressures brought to bear on African Americans in what scholars term “the post-soul era.” Like Octavia Butler, a generation prior in *Kindred*, Beatty pushes back against the promotion of strict intraracial solidarity in *The White Boy Shuffle*. Nevertheless, while Butler exhumes the past to explore the stakes of multiple racial identities, Beatty uses the contemporary world of the late-twentieth century to suggest that the racial affiliation traditionally associated with Black orphan characters collapses on itself in the postmodern American landscape. While not offering proscriptive measures to ameliorate the orphan figure’s anxieties of belonging, *The White Boy Shuffle*

does gesture towards the formulations of belonging that transcend the race-as-family and race-as-nation rhetoric of its literary predecessors.

In a scene that best represents this tropological shift, Gunnar attends a party in his new, primarily Black and Latino neighborhood of Hillside. When he first arrives, Gunnar is reticent to take the floor, fearing exposure as a poor dancer. However, after encouragement from his friends Nick Scoby and Psycho Loco, he relents. Gunnar, as the novel's narrator, describes what happens next. "I had to fight the urge to be too loose-limbed, prevent my arms from flaying about my body uncontrollably in an epileptic paroxysm. After a few moments I'd settle into a barely acceptable, simple side-to-side step, dubbed by the locals the white boy shuffle. I wasn't funky, but I was no longer disrupting the groove" (123). An ironic send-up of racial stereotypes associating Black identity with rhythm, this vignette underscores the dual thrusts of Beatty's work, namely the persistence of cultural orphanhood in spite of efforts to assuage it through intraracial solidarity and the limitations imposed by prevalent notions regarding racial authenticity and African-American identity. Moreover, over the course of *The White Boy Shuffle*, Beatty himself disrupts the proverbial groove of the African-American novelistic tradition, using the orphan figure to subvert dominant discourse about the utility of Black leadership at the end of the twentieth century.

The Post-Soul Aesthetic and and Postmodern African-American Satire

The White Boy Shuffle falls squarely within the parameters of what recent critics have titled the "Post-Soul Aesthetic," defined in brief by Bertram Ashe as "art produced by African Americans who were either born or came of age after the Civil Rights Movement" (611). Post-soul writers of the last decade of the twentieth century stand on

the shoulders of the Black Arts Movement (BAM), alternately elevating and critiquing the BAM commitment to Black cultural nationalism during the transition from the Civil Rights Movement to the Black Power Movement in the late 1960's. Critics have identified some key components to the BAM. William Van de Burg writes that BAM artists saw "every cultural act [as] a political act" (189) and Harold Ramsby asserts that BAM discourse was necessarily "an affirmation of cultural heritage" (11). BAM authors sought to promote unequivocal race consciousness, pride, and unity through their works, according to Cheryl Clarke, in an effort to catalyze their primary objective, namely, "to make a revolution" (46). BAM theorists of the 1960's and 1970's expended significant energy in endeavoring to codify what precisely qualified a work as authentically Black, and although this proved too ephemeral and ultimately too elusive to pin down, they deemed racial authenticity paramount in the struggle to overcome the disappointments of the Civil Rights Movement, which succeeded in restoring several basic human rights by law, such as voting rights and equal access to education, but failed to stem the tide of systemic racial injustice perpetrated against Blacks by the mechanisms of White supremacy.

Family as a metaphor for race became the linchpin of this strain of cultural nationalism designed to precipitate both freedom *from* White oppression and freedom *to* advance Black self-determination, all predicated on what some theorists claimed was Blacks' shared, intrinsic possession of "soul," described by Van de Burg as "the folk equivalent of the black aesthetic ... a type of spiritual energy and passionate joy available only to members of the exclusive racial confraternity" (Neal 4). Some considered soul to be innate to African Americans, expressed through music, fashion, language, and even

walk. Alternately termed style or the black mystique, soul was something that Whites could not ever have, the *je ne sais quoi* that precluded Whites' full infiltration of Black life and denoted African-American racial authenticity. In short, because Blacks had soul, the veritable DNA test of Blackness, they were always already legitimized members of the race-as-family and, more broadly, the race-as-nation, countermanding the anxieties of belonging inherent to the cultural orphanhood induced by status as an African American. Of course, this claim carried forward the blood rhetoric of the nineteenth century, bringing with it antiquated notions of a genetic, biological Blackness and functioning to exclude people who did not meet the criteria, even if they were, in fact, African American.

On the other hand, due in part to the temporal distance separating them from the post-Civil Rights era, post-soul writers at the end of the twentieth century cast a more critical glance at the race-as-family and race-as-nation ideologies that undergirded the cultural nationalism of the BAM. In his introduction to *Post-Soul Satire*, Derek Maus contends that post-soul writers are “not afraid to satirize African-American life - Black Arts Movement writers did not do this because it might impact racial unity” (x). To be sure, post-soul works illuminate the continued oppression of African Americans by the larger institutions of American society, Maus affirms, but this is combined with an examination of “the multitude of ways in which African Americans have misused their hard-won freedoms and thereby hindered their own ascendance to equality” (xvii). In so doing, the post-soul era “challenges the long-standing mantra ... that African-American artists have to use their talents for ‘racial uplift’ and empowerment of the community as a whole.” They were expected to make sure that “house business,” that is, the communal

ills and internecine squabbles that could potentially be submitted as evidence of the theory of Black inferiority that anti-Black racist ideology purported, “is not revealed to the wider culture” (xvi).

The race-as-family and race-as-nation equivalences that spurred the racial uplift ideologies of nineteenth-century African-American activists like Frances Harper resurfaced as cultural nationalism during the Black Arts Movement. Erica Edwards writes extensively about how the skepticism and curiosity of post-soul writers caused them to deduce that this cultural nationalism, predicated on intraracial solidarity irrespective of other kinds of distinctions like economic status, gender, religious affiliation, etc, ultimately proves inadequate as “a political vision responsive to the complexities of life after segregation” (166). As such, Edwards advances, Black nationalism is eschewed by this generation of Black writers. Houston A. Baker has noted “generational shifts” like this one in the African-American literary tradition. In Baker’s paradigm, periodic generational shifts are “ideologically motivated movement[s] overseen by the young or newly emergent intellectuals dedicated to refuting the work of their predecessors and to establishing a new framework for intellectual inquiry” (67). The post-soul aesthetic is just such a shift, which takes aim at essentialisms of racial authenticity as delineated by the BAM and the consequent constraints this places on the lived experience of African Americans. Moreover, according to Claudia Tate, the post-soul aesthetic “revels in the contingency and diversity of blackness, and subjects the canon of positive images” proffered by the BAM and other prior generations of African-American writers “to subversion and parody” (Maus x).

Satire functions as the primary conduit through which post-soul writers such as Trey Ellis,³⁶ Colson Whitehead,³⁷ as well as Paul Beatty, can investigate a panoply of Black experiences heretofore omitted from African-American fiction. These include the plight of the Black geek³⁸ and the impact of consumerism on political and racial activism, both of which rupture through the surface of *The White Boy Shuffle*. Regardless of the specific targets of any particular work, however, some commonalities of form and theme do exist in post-soul satire. In his incisive analysis of African-American satire, Darryl Dickson-Carr catalogues the characteristics of the post-soul variety: “unremitting iconoclasm, criticism of the current state of African-American political and cultural trends, and indictment of specifically American forms of racism” (16). Previous generations of African-American novelists highlighted the cruelty and inhumanity of White supremacy enacted upon Blacks as a form of protest against anti-Black racism. Post-soul satire focuses on the ways that “American racism perverts African-American intellectual discourse” and “encourages African Americans’ seduction by materialism and ideological chaos as a substitute for the possibilities of true change” (32-3) by

³⁶ Trey Ellis (b. 1962) is an African-American post-soul playwright, screenwriter, and novelist most known for his novel *Platitudes* (1988), in which two fictional authors, Dewayne and Isshee, struggle to define Blackness.

³⁷ Colson Whitehead (b. 1969) is an African-American post-soul novelist. His most recent work, *The Underground Railroad* (2016), is a liberatory (or neo-slave) narrative, and it earned him the National Book Award for Fiction in 2016 and the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2017. His 2009 novel, *Sag Harbor*, is more in keeping with the post-soul aesthetic; it follows a Black teenager, Benji, whose family’s affluence affords him the opportunity to summer in Sag Harbor, an exclusive African-American beach enclave. Like Gunnar in *White Boy Shuffle* and Dewayne and Isshee in Ellis’s *Platitudes*, Benji wrestles with issues of racial authenticity over the course of the novel.

³⁸ Alexander Weheliye describes the Black geek as creating “avenues for imagining blackness that refuses to be contained by the mutually exclusive poles of assimilation and separation” (214). By virtue of his/her intellect, acerbic humor, and complexity, the Black geek is a “prototype for ‘a blackness to come’” (226), a figure that reflects Blackness with full humanity.

elevating the pursuit of individual wealth, notoriety, and security over collective or communal empowerment and self-determination. My argument is that through his protagonist Gunnar Kaufman, Paul Beatty can stage this kind of critique and elucidate how this “seduction” operates to distract African Americans from the pursuit of justice and equity.

Gunnar Kaufman: “The Whitest Negro In Captivity”

Beatty invokes the trope of the African-American orphan early in *The White Boy Shuffle*, when Gunnar complains about his supposed African ancestors before launching into a prolonged description of his family lineage. Unlike other Black orphan figures whose ancestry is erased, obscured, and/or misrepresented, Gunnar knows his family ancestry. Gunnar narrates, “I am not the seventh son of a seventh son . . . The chieftains and queens who sit on top of old Mount Kilimanjaro left me out of the will. They bequeathed me nothing, stingy bastards. Cruelly cheating me out of my mythological inheritance, my aboriginal superpowers.” The inheritance of which he has been deprived - authentic Blackness - haunts him because instead he is “preordained by a set of weak-kneed DNA to shuffle in the footsteps of a long cowardly queue of coons, Uncle Toms, and faithful boogedy-boogedy retainers” (5). He is cursed by “the grovelling Kaufman male birthright” (11) that he traces back over two hundred years for the benefit of Ms. Murphy’s class during Black History Month.

As becomes evident during Gunnar’s recitation of the litany of his family tree, he may have a vast array of Black ancestors, but he has none of whom he can be proud. There is the family progenitor, Euripides - “the brains behind the Boston massacre” (8), who dodges a musket shot intended as retribution for urinating on a British soldier’s

boots. The shot hits his friend, Crispus Attucks, inaugurating the American Revolution. Next is Sven, Euripides's grandson, "the only person to ever run away into slavery" (12), a dancer who conceives of the life of enslavement as a ballet to be performed for the delight of his masters. Sven's son, Franz, is the "constant companion and best friend" (17) of his owner, Compton Tannenbury.³⁹ For Gunnar, knowledge of his ancestors is not redemptive. Rather, it is a source of deep shame because they fail to act out of a sense of solidarity with their racial kin, submitting to forms of White control rather than risking their lives for communal liberation.

Gunnar's postbellum Kaufman forefathers do not rate much better. His great-great uncle Wolfgang "spent muggy afternoons under a splotchy painter's cap, painting and hanging the FOR WHITES ONLY and FOR COLORED ONLY signs that hung over the quasi-public spaces throughout Nashville" (18) in the 1920's, and his great-uncle Ludwig was "a manager of white acts that ripped off Motown rhythm-and-blues hysteria" (20) before infiltrating the Nation of Islam as an informant and precipitating the assassination of Malcolm X in the Audubon Ballroom in 1965. Gunnar's father, Rolf, is the final link in the long, unbroken chain of the "reprobate ancestry" (21) of the Kaufmans. As a teenager, Rolf participates in a drunken re-enactment of the murder of student voting-rights activists and wakes up the next morning with his body spray-painted white, his "skin tingling with assimilation" (22). He enlists to fight in Vietnam and later becomes a sketch artist for the Los Angeles Police Department. Gunnar's lineage in general, and his

³⁹ The name Compton Tannenbury has multiple resonances here. First, it gestures towards the Compson family of William Faulkner's *Absalom! Absalom!* (1936), which traces the family's interracial lineage across multiple generations in the South. Second, it appropriates directly the name of the neighborhood in Los Angeles, CA that was synonymous with West Coast "gangsta rap" in the early 1990's, made famous largely by the group N.W.A.

father in particular, render Gunnar orphan-like in his disconnection from Black community life. Descended from a long line of race traitors, “Gunnar’s own racial inauthenticity is inherited” (123), Sinead Moynihan notes, a circumstance only amplified by his life at the novel’s outset as a surf bum in primarily-White Santa Monica.

Yet Beatty subtly subverts his own portrayal of the Kaufman legacy as one of fawning over and capitulation to White authority. It is his own mother who encourages him to delve into his patrilineage, beginning with Euripides, whom she claims is “the first of a legacy of colored men who forged their own way in the world” (7). To Gunnar’s mother, the subjugation to which the Kaufmans submitted constitutes a legitimate means to survival. For the Kaufmans, victory is won by dodging their oppressors in the hopes of outlasting the oppression itself rather than losing their lives in pursuit of racial equality. In his examination of Gunnar as a case-study of African-American literary characters of the late-twentieth century, Daniel Grassian concludes, “Beatty largely absolves [the Kaufman lineage] of blame, and furthermore he illustrates how it is the racial environment in which they live that forces them to step on as well as over other African Americans in order to survive” (92). Gunnar’s mother has no knowledge of her own family tree, which leads her to draw some measure of pride from that of her ex-husband. Gunnar explains, “As a Brooklyn orphan who had never seen her parents or her birth certificate, Mom adopted my father’s patriarchal family history for her misbegotten origins” (6), opting to hew to Rolf’s imperfect ancestral line rather than none at all in an attempt to mollify her orphan’s longing for incorporation into a family. This motivation is confirmed when Gunnar’s sisters, Nicole and Christina, ask if they

were adopted, and their mother responds, ““If anyone is fool enough to tell you that they your parents, believe them, okay?”” (7).

Gunnar’s perception of his racial identity, established by his understanding of his family legacy, is reified by his experience of childhood as a cultural outsider in Santa Monica. He announces, “I was the funny, cool black guy. In Santa Monica, like most predominantly white sanctuaries from urban blight, ‘cool black guy’ is a versatile identifier used to distinguish the harmless black male from the Caucasian juvenile while maintaining politically correct semiotics” (27). The application of the combined modifiers “cool” and “black” to Gunnar ironically renders him even more racially inauthentic. To be deemed “the cool black guy” by White suburbanites evacuates the phrase of its intended meaning; those who apply it to him mean that he is safe and non-threatening in comparison to most other Black people. The phrase only highlights the gulf between Gunnar and his schoolmates at “Mestizo Mulatto Mongrel Elementary, Santa Monica’s all-white multicultural school” (28). Like his father, Gunnar is the only African American in his class, and his perceptions of color are warped by this cultural orphanhood.

A narrative sequence recounting afternoons on the beach with White friends, “filling in childhood’s abstract impressionism coloring books with our own definitions of color” (35) is telling in this regard. In the segment describing the color white, Gunnar says, “White was the expulsion of colors encumbered by self-awareness and pigment” (35) while referring to himself three times as “White Gunnar.” The opaquely expressed desire to be White embedded in this phrase has its counterweight in the following segment, in which Gunnar characterizes the color black in a much different tenor: “Black

was hating fried chicken before I knew I was supposed to like it. Black was being a nigger who didn't know any other niggers" (36). This passage measures the distance between his African-American racial identity and his lived experience surrounded by Whites, leveraging stereotype for ironic humor with the phrase "hating fried chicken" and the trauma of alienation as a Black child who knows no other Black people outside his family.

These are the narrative precursors to the deeply traumatic wounds of sexual assault inflicted upon Gunnar by his father, to which Gunnar hints later in the same sequence when he narrates, "Black was a suffocating bully that tied my mind behind my back and shoved me into a walk-in closet. Black was my father on a weekend-custody drunken binge, pushing me around ... Black is a repressed memory of a sandpaper hand rubbing abrasive circles into the small of my back, my face rising and falling in time with a hairy, heaving chest" (36). To Gunnar, Blackness is inexorably tied to loneliness, caused generally by his disjuncture from Black life and more specifically by the violence enacted against him by Rolf, an assault that survives as "a repressed memory." Gunnar only references his rape by his father one other time in the narrative, when he admonishes his sisters, both of whom are pregnant by then, to keep their children away from Rolf. But this experience has left its imprint on Gunnar, influencing his perception of his own racial identity, so that he equates Blackness with violence, disorder, and dysfunction.

It is with this as backdrop that Gunnar and his sisters head off to YMCA summer camp, and their lives are permanently disrupted. The other kids on the bus to camp, all of whom are White, chant, "Yeah, Y camp!" but the Kaufman children mishear this as "Yeah white camp!" (37). When they return home at the end of the day and reveal this to

their mother, she asks if they would prefer to go “to an all-black camp.” Gunnar reports, “We gave an insistent ‘Noooooo!’ She asked why and we answered in three-part sibling harmony, ‘Because they’re different than us’” (37). Horrified by the degree of racial disaffiliation that could prompt this attitude, Gunnar’s mother packs up the family and moves across town from White Santa Monica to East Los Angeles, specifically to the Black and Latino neighborhood of Hillside. This decision is an effort to undo the harm inflicted by their upward class mobility, as indicated by their residence in Santa Monica. Their economic ascendancy is thus depicted as a break with what critic Rolland Murray terms their “natal community” (11), the result of which is that Gunnar and his sisters are natively alienated.⁴⁰ Gunnar’s mother believes that he must undergo a reverse migration in order to recuperate his racial authenticity, or as L.H. Stallings phrases it, in order to be “rescued from his ‘blacklessness’” (106). Yet because “his racial indeterminacy is cultural rather than physical” (Moynihan 114), his cultural orphanhood does not dissipate when he changes zip codes. Rather, it transmutes in form, and he continues to be marked as an outsider because as a Black misfit, he lacks the *je ne sais quoi* or soul stereotypically associated with authentic Blackness.

Gunnar descends literally upon Hillside, a neighborhood “at the bottom of this great [concrete] wall” (45), as an alien. Much like Dana Franklin in *Kindred*, Gunnar is a border-crosser, and although he does not pass through time to arrive at Hillside as she does to reach the Weylin plantation, he does traverse geographical and racial boundaries in a fashion similar to hers. And like Dana, he too must quickly decipher the foreign landscape he observes and the inhabitants with whom he interacts to ensure his survival.

⁴⁰ For more on natal alienation, that is, the amputation from African ancestry endured by enslaved Blacks, see my discussion of Orlando Patterson’s conception of it in Chapter 1, pages 3-5.

Beatty accentuates this feature by deploying the language of science fiction when Gunnar recounts his first foray into Hillside's unfamiliar territory: "I found the front door, and like some lost intergalactic B-movie spaceman who has crash-landed on a mysterious planet and is unsure about the atmospheric content, I opened it slowly, contemplating the possibilities of finding intelligent life" (40). Unbeknownst to Gunnar, his mode of speech and dress mark him as foreign, a truth pointed out to him by "a boy about my age who wore an immaculately pressed sparkling white T-shirt and khakis" (41). When Gunnar asks the boy for directions to the nearest store, the boy replies, "'Damn, cuz. You talk proper like a motherfucker,'" followed by, "'Damn, fool. What's up with your loud-ass gear?'" (41). Along with Dana, Gunnar is marooned in strange environs, and is easily identified as non-native, his "gear," Vans sneakers and plaid shirt, a stark contrast to the other boy's garb, and his standardized speech distinct from his peer's use of African-American Vernacular English (AAVE).⁴¹ These differences and the discomfort they activate only exacerbate the anxieties of belonging embedded within Gunnar, which he emphasizes by announcing that he had "no friends yet... [and] no idea how to navigate ... this hardscrabble dystopia" (48). These narrative revelations unmask him as "a freak" whose "inability to walk the walk or talk the talk led to a series of almost daily drubbings" (52), that is, cause him to be subjected to intraracial harassment and violence. Formerly, Gunnar was the token Black in an all-White neighborhood, the self-described "whitest Negro in captivity" (52), imprisoned by and acculturated to Whiteness. Now, Gunnar is forced to acknowledge that the differences he exhibits in this new, intraracial

⁴¹ Geneva Smitherman defines AAVE as "a style of speaking words with Africanized semantic, grammatical, pronunciation, and rhetorical patterns" (3). It serves as a resistance discourse that uses oppositional semantics, and as a result, it functions as a coded language that is a mark of identity. For more on this, see Smitherman's *Word From the Mother: Language and African Americans* (2006).

environment also pose a significant hazard to him, his stereotypically White behaviors no longer a benign indicator of his assimilation but a sign of his cultural orphanhood.

Gunnar observes the behavior of the African-American populace who surround him and draws incisive conclusions that enable Beatty to comment on both intraracial community life and the stereotypes applied to such spaces. Like his namesake, the Nobel Prize-winning Swedish ethnographer Gunnar Myrdal, author of *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (1944),⁴² Gunnar proves to be a quick study of national racial dynamics. For Myrdal, the exercise was academic, but for Gunnar Kaufman, the stakes are much higher, as no less than his physical well-being is at risk. Moreover, language becomes a point of access into this unfamiliar culture. Gunnar notes, for instance, “Although I had only lived in Hillside for a few days, it was impossible not to pick up a few local catchphrases while running errands for Mother. Language was everywhere. Smoldering embers of charcoal etymology so permeated the air that whenever someone opened his mouth it smelled like smoke” (47), evidence that he is developing an appreciation for the AAVE to which his upbringing in Santa Monica never exposed him.

Gunnar also comments on the inhabitants of his new neighborhood more generally, stating, “The people of Hillside treat society the way society treats them. Strangers and friends are suspect and guilty until proven innocent. Instant camaraderie beyond familial ties doesn’t exist. It takes more than wearing the same uniform to be accepted among one’s ghetto peers” (53). Here, Gunnar injects himself implicitly into

⁴²Myrdal’s scholarly work as reflected in *An American Dilemma* was hugely influential; it was cited in *Brown v. Board* in 1954. While strongly critical of racial inequality in the United States, Myrdal concluded that African Americans could and would eventually achieve equal treatment.

the observational data he gathers, recognizing that despite their shared racial identity, Gunnar does not “wear the same uniform” - either literally or figuratively - as the other residents of Hillside. As a result, he is “suspect and guilty” in their eyes, stamped with a degree of Whiteness that elicits their distrust. His investigation of the neighborhood and its citizens leads him to the epiphany, ascertained on his first day at Manischewitz Junior High School, that “I’d never been in a room full of black people unrelated to me before ... In the middle of this unadulterated realness, I realized that I was cultural alloy, tin-hearted whiteness wrapped in blackened copper plating” (63). Gunnar’s skin tone does not confer “realness,” positioning him yet again as a cultural orphan, out-of-place in Hillside. Gunnar sees his Blackness as fraudulent, literally only skin-deep, and his desire to ingrain himself into the community of Hillside stems from an orphan-like yearning to belong, to perform a kind of cultural alchemy that might turn his identity as “alloy” into something he considers to be more solid, pure, and authentic.

Authentic Blackness and Post-Soul Racial Affiliation

Gunnar embarks on a quest to affiliate himself with his intraracial peers, to “become black(er),” according to Moynihan (113). Racial authenticity in the post-soul era requires more than following through on a pledge to act with loyalty towards the race-as-family and race-as-nation, a change from previous eras. Amy Abugo Ongiri writes about the ways that mid-twentieth century African-American “absurdist fiction” (9), authored by Chester Himes and Richard Wright,⁴³ was co-opted by the Black Power

⁴³ Richard Wright (1908-1960) and Chester Himes (1909-1984) were mid-twentieth century African American novelists. Wright’s most widely-read novel, *Native Son* (1940), imagined the end result of generations of systematic racism through his protagonist, Bigger Thomas: a young Black man who lashes out violently in a futile attempt to counter the unseen, oppressive forces at work against him. He murders two women - one White, one Black - and is convicted and sentenced to die at novel’s end.

Movement to demarcate the parameters of racial authenticity, based on a "valorized urban identity and street culture" (12). The BPM emptied these authors' works of their ironic intent to highlight the "Negro condition" in post-World War II America, instead revering them as exemplars of a kind of essentialized standard of racial authenticity. In *The White Boy Shuffle*, Gunnar is compelled to adhere at least superficially to this myopic and caricaturish rendition of Blackness, a set of constraints on identity that Beatty establishes only to then satirize. For instance, Gunnar relishes the moment in his introduction to Nick Scoby when Nick applies the signifiers of authentic Blackness to him.

"What's your name, cuz?"

"Gunnar. Gunnar Kaufman."

"You dark as fuck for someone with Teutonic blood."

"Naw, strictly Negro hemoglobins."

"Yeah, nigger. Let's get together later this week."

He called me "nigger." My euphoria was as palpable as the loud clap of our hands colliding in my first soul shake. (67)

Nick's attention to Gunnar's dark complexion and deployment of a racial slur as a term of endearment grant Gunnar entree into authentic Blackness, a fact cinched by the execution of a "soul shake." Furthermore, Nick "invokes blood quantum of racial discourse" (Moynihan 115), a gesture that points directly back to the nineteenth-century, signalling that he believes that Gunnar is of mixed heritage. Only when Gunnar invalidates the suspicion does Nick invite him to hang out.

Chester Himes wrote a series of novels, including *Cotton Comes To Harlem* (1965) that followed the exploits of two Black detectives, Gravedigger Jones and Coffin Ed, as they policed the streets of Harlem. Like Wright, Himes depicts scenes of brutal violence and characters whose actions and moral codes put them in conflict with mainstream American society.

This vignette foregrounds elements of what Ashe terms “the post-soul matrix,” which consists of the interplay between three related elements. The first, the cultural mulatto archetype, refers to a character like Gunnar who can identify with aspects of both Black and mainstream White culture and is comfortable navigating each.⁴⁴ The second is “Blaxploration,” which Ashe defines as a willingness “to trouble blackness ... in service of black people” (614), an allegiance to Blackness that does not preclude an earnest critique of it. And finally, the third feature is “allusion/disruption,” which includes specific references to the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements while also “prying [them] apart” (615). Beatty ironizes reductive notions of racial authenticity such as “blood purity” and knowledge of cultural-insider phenomenon like the “soul shake” to challenge the narrow view of what constitutes Blackness, leveraging Gunnar’s identity as a cultural mulatto to maximize the satirical effect.

But because skin tone and African ancestry are not enough to fully achieve realness or authenticity for Gunnar, he must prove his worth otherwise, a feat he performs in short order by signifying on *Othello* and *King Lear* at a middle-school Shakespeare competition to the delight of his African-American peers, and then dunking a basketball in his first playground game. In *Soul Babies*, scholar Mark Anthony Neal explores the performativity of Gunnar’s metamorphosis, pointing out, “Gunnar’s acceptance is predicated on the fact that he proves proficient in the kind of informal activities where young black males are allowed to share in masculine expression” (141), specifically word-play and athletics, respectively. Gunnar cements his new status as Black by

⁴⁴ Several other post-soul novels that deploy a character who falls under the category of cultural mulatto. *Caucasia* (1998), by Danzy Senna, for instance, is a coming-of-age novel that follows two multiracial sisters, Birdie and Cole, as they navigate multiple identity positions in 1970’s Boston. For other examples, see James McBride’s *The Good Lord Bird* (2013) and Colson Whitehead’s *Underground Railroad* (2016).

demonstrating fealty to his peers through acceptance of a paddling at the hands of Mr. Uyeshima as consequence for leaving school grounds to play in the game. He says, “I had taken my swats for friendship. Not for some orchestrated semper fi cultish fraternal bonding or a Huck Finn Nigger Jim ‘love the one you’re with’ friendship, but because I’d met a special motherfucker whose companionship was easily worth a middle-school beating” (75). Enduring physical violence on behalf of Nick and the other players, Gunnar earns their admiration by confirming his willingness to protect them rather than pass the blame. In his analysis of cultural trespassing in the works of post-soul writers, critic Alexander Weheliye contends, “Cultural trespassing relies on mastery of cultural and linguistic codes” (221). Gunnar fulfills this claim through this intraracial loyalty, his prodigious basketball talent, and his new speech patterns. Alongside the stylized diction of the above passage that also marks his narration up to this juncture - “orchestrated semper fi fraternal bonding” and the reference to Twain’s *The Adventures Of Huckleberry Finn* - is the usage of a curse word as a term of affection, something he has not done thus far but which is part of the linguistic code of AAVE.

This sequence catalyzes a major change in Gunnar’s behavior; offered the opportunity to “become black(er)” by his particular talents and his burgeoning friendship with Nick, Gunnar joins the race-as-family. Gunnar adopts the accoutrements of urban Blackness as he sees it, wearing plain white tees, purchasing expensive basketball sneakers, and getting a new haircut at a local barbershop. His passage into authenticity accelerates when he is befriended by Juan Julio, aka Psycho Loco, the Latino man who leads the Hillside gang known as the Gun Totin’ Hooligans, currently “home on parole for killing a paramedic who refused to give his piranha Esta Lleno mouth to mouth

resuscitation” (84). Gunnar learns from others that Juan Julio first gained notoriety as a gifted young singer in the church choir, but as a teenager he transformed himself into an intimidating criminal presence in the neighborhood, mirroring somewhat Gunnar’s own transformation.

Gunnar is frightened at first of Psycho Loco, but when Nick finds out that Psycho Loco likes Gunnar, he explains that Gunnar has no choice but become friends with the gang leader: “You know that saying, ‘Fate chooses our relatives, we choose our friends?’ ... Well, here in the street, that shit works in reverse. Fate picks your friends, and you choose your family. Everybody starts out an orphan in this hole.” According to Nick, Gunnar and everyone else in Hillside “starts out an orphan” and must soothe their anxieties of belonging by affiliating themselves with community members; this becomes one’s family. Resistance is futile, as Nick reveals when he states, “Gunnar, you gonna have to respect Psycho Loco ... If [he] says you’re his friend, there ain’t nothing you can do about it. You’re friends cause he says so. Now there might be some fool who lives on the other side of town who thinks you’re his arch-enemy simply because Psycho Loco like you. That is fate, black. ” (87). Through embedding himself in Psycho Loco’s circle, Gunnar will provide a safe haven for himself, much the same way that previous incarnations of the African-American orphan figure, from the Garie children and Iola Leroy in the nineteenth century to Irene Redfield, Clare Kendry, and Dana Franklin in the twentieth century attempt to do. But while those characters weigh factors such as heredity and marriage prospects in making their respective decisions, Gunnar’s kinship with Psycho Loco is based on the shared circumstance of residence in Hillside.

Despite Gunnar's successful integration into his new environment and kinship ties with both Nick and Psycho Loco, he cannot escape his cultural orphanhood status entirely. Gunnar's dad cruelly reminds of this when he pulls past the house in a police cruiser and throws a copy of the book *Heaven Is a Playground*⁴⁵ on the lawn, which Gunnar describes as a "treatise on a pack of inner-city Brooklynites ... scampering around a basketball court" (92) on the lawn. When Gunnar retrieves the paperback, he sees that his dad has inscribed it: "Read this and remember you're a Kaufman, and not one of the black misfits sociologically detailed herein" (92). Rolf's inscription is an inherent contradiction. The Kaufman lineage as outlined by Gunnar at the outset of *The White Boy Shuffle* is populated by men who could be categorized as "black misfits" but who managed to figure out how to survive in hostile territory, however troubling the means. Moynihan suggests that his "black-to-black racial passing" (117) reverses the flow of migration established by his forefathers, all of whom capitulated to Whiteness to carve out some measure of security for themselves, but the end result is the same. Like his ancestors, Gunnar obtains asylum by reading his circumstances accurately and choosing his affiliations accordingly.

Though Gunnar gains a partial foothold in the Black and Latino community and effectuates some measure of self-preservation through these kinships and his own basketball prowess, his passage into Blackness is incomplete and superficial until he is forced to transfer to El Campesino Real High, a primarily-White elite public school in the

⁴⁵ First published in 1976, *Heaven Is a Playground* is a first person work of non-fiction written by Rick Telander, a White man who spends time on the outdoor basketball courts in the Bronx amongst primarily African-American men and writes about his experiences. In 1991, a full-length, feature film of the same name was released. Beatty's use of it here is in keeping with his sharp, satirical style. Like Telander, Rolf seems to be implying, Gunnar is a cultural trespasser.

suburbs, in the aftermath of the unrest following the acquittal of White police officers accused of assaulting Black motorist Rodney King. The verdict triggers a visceral response in Gunnar, when his “pacifist Negro chrysalis peeled away, and a glistening anger began to test its wings” (131). This rage spurs Gunnar and his friends to seek an outlet, and they join in the looting of neighborhood stores, eventually absconding with a safe whose code Gunnar “cracks” by reading the label on its underside. He is caught by his dad, who agrees to not press charges as long as Gunnar acquiesces to the transfer.

The move to El Campesino orchestrated by Rolf to remove Gunnar from the perils of Hillside does not have the intended impact, though. Gunnar relates, “It was hoped that the reinfusion of white upper class values would decrease the likelihood of my committing another felony, but the two miserable years I spent at El Campesino had the opposite effect. If you want to raise the consciousness of an inner-city colored child, send him to an all-white high school” (153). In this turn of events, Gunnar transmutes into one of “the blackest niggers in captivity” (154), a stark reversal of his former self-characterization as “the whitest Negro in captivity.” At El Campesino, Gunnar enacts a different kind of Blackness than he had at Hillside, in response to his changed surroundings. Recognizing the subtle and not-so-subtle racial aggressions directed at him and his few African-American peers at El Campesino, Gunnar and his Black friends respond with their own form of satire, performing an ironized minstrelry predicated on the most widespread stereotypes of Blackness by metaphorically “rubbing burnt cork over our already dusky features.” According to Gunnar, this includes deploying exaggerated AAVE when speaking with teachers and extends to their interactions with White schoolmates: “We gave goofy white kids the soul shake, caught footballs, and sang

in the hallways” (154). The Whites at El Campesino are unaware that this is a send-up of their own expectations of African Americans, and as such, it becomes a sort of inside joke that the Black students are playing on them.

Later, during the playoff basketball game against his former high school, Phyllis Wheatley, Gunnar puts this on full display. When his name is announced during pregame introductions, he mimics the most egregious stereotypes of racial minstrelry to the delight of many in the crowd: “I lurched from the sideline, shuffling ... as slowly as I could, my big feet flopping in front of me, my back bent in a drooping question mark ... People rolled in the aisles with laughter.” Yet the audience does not understand the commentary behind the performance: Gunnar has deduced that his value to them, and to the school in general, is measured only by his success as an athlete, and that his ability to entertain mostly White crowds in a sport stereotypically associated with urban African-American youth culture troubles him in this regard. Moments after, removed from the game by his angry coach, Gunnar throws his “uniform in a pile ... [and] set[s] it afire” (164), essentially quitting the team in protest. This moment equates minstrel performance to playing basketball, representing a subversive critique of the deployment of Black bodies for White entertainment, Natalie Kalich concludes that Beatty “calls on signifiers of Black culture ... to show how these markets of popular culture are not necessarily a rebellion against the status quo but rather playing into it” (86). Basketball, while offering Gunnar the possibility of upward economic and social mobility, reifies the racial status quo; Gunnar’s Black body is subject to the White gaze and his worth is determined by White approval.

On his own in the school library, though, Gunnar finds works of literature that “raise his consciousness” and maintain his sanity in the midst of this racially-oppressive atmosphere. He states, “I buried myself in Senghor, Celine, Baraka, Dos Passos, decompressing and reacclimating myself to myself, like a diver just returned from a deep-sea sojourn” (156). This self- and situational awareness, based on the racialized environment in which he finds himself, represents a type of “realness” and authenticity that has eluded Gunnar up to this point. His acute sense of his racial identity compels him to connect to his cultural heritage through his choice of reading material as a means of assuaging the anxieties of belonging that continue to plague him. This enables him to reflect on the nature of his identity as an African American. Rather than reassuming the “white upper class values” his dad had hoped the transfer would cause, Gunnar develops a strong anti-assimilationist ethic. When an African-American recruiter for Harvard descends on his home, for instance, Gunnar deems him a race traitor and decides not to attend the school after the man says, ““The only reason me and my illustrious ilk pretend to help those [poor Black] folks is to reinforce the difference between them and us”” (159). In the iconoclastic fashion of African-American satire as delineated by Dickson-Carr, Neal, and others, Beatty here is “poking fun at . . . rather than revering” the racial uplift doctrine espoused by college-educated African Americans in the late- nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, mocking it as self-serving. Through Gunnar’s ability to sniff this out rather than be lured by the prospect of socioeconomic mobility and elitism, Beatty points to the potential exploitativeness of race-as-family and race-as-nation ideologies and their inadequacy to address the complexities of post-Civil Rights African-American existence.

Despite his growing racial consciousness, Gunnar is still beset by the cultural orphanhood of the Black misfit when he leaves home to attend Boston University. Gunnar's mom meets the decision with approval, telling him, "I like the sound of your going back to Boston to follow in the footsteps of ... Euripides. It's as if the Kaufman legacy has come full circle" (162). But the notion of an ancestral homecoming enfolded into this sentiment is a vestige of a previous generation for whom connecting with one's familial and racial heritage functioned as a source of strength. As Beatty's embodiment of the post-soul aesthetic, Gunnar retains no such delusions about the impact of his choice to attend BU or his appreciation of his racial identity. According to Neal, this aesthetic "renders many 'traditional' tropes of blackness dated and even meaningless ... it is so consumed with its contemporary existential concerns that such traditions are not just called into question but obliterated" (3). The belief of the BPM and BAM a generation earlier that pride in racial heritage could imbue people with a more authentic form of Blackness and sustain African Americans in a White supremacist country is one such tradition.

Beatty satirizes racial-identity politics through Gunnar's college experience, calling into question its motivations and goals. When Gunnar arrives on campus with his Japanese mail-order bride, Yoshiko (who in an unironic moment of cultural cross-pollination recites Run DMC lyrics as part of her wedding vows), he discovers a host of student affinity groups. The first is "Ambrosia," the Black Student Union, whose president, Dexter, dates only White women and is in the midst of planning a fashion show/literacy program at which "There'll be booty and learning for days" (185). Next is "Concoction ... an organization of mixed race kids who feel ostracized by both white and

colored students” (186). And finally is SWAPO, which stands for Spoiled Whites Against Political Obsequiousness, of which Gunnar is the only African-American member, albeit very temporarily. When they ask him to play either martyred South-African political activist Steve Biko or an African-American who marries “a white debutante in Nashville,” he quits the group, telling them, ““Colored people aren’t mascots for your political attitudes”” (187). Here, Beatty is not diminishing the need for such groups or the legitimacy of their concerns per se, but rather highlighting both the inherent contradictions they can harbor and absurd lengths to which they sometimes go to advance personal agendas.

Gunnar discovers that despite its academic prestige and its apparent left-leaning student and faculty population, BU is not that much different than El Campesino. He enters his Creative Writing classroom to find that both the professor and his fellow students idolize him, having read his two books of poetry, *Ghetto-topia* and *Watermelanin*. This only reminds him of his lingering sense that he is a perpetual outsider, evidenced when he says, “I felt like I’d been outed and exposed by my worst enemies, white kids who were embarrassingly like myself but with whom I had nothing in common” (179). Later, when Gunnar refuses to stand for the national anthem prior to a basketball game, explaining in a letter to Yoshiko, “You can’t put numbered uniforms on people and say this is ‘the group’ or say everyone born on this side of the fence is ‘the group’” (192), his suspicions are confirmed. Belonging requires identifying and villifying an out-group, a position Gunnar knows all too well. When members of the overwhelmingly White crowd at the game call him a ““Communist sonofabitch”” and tell

him, ““Love it or leave it, you black bastard”” (193), Gunnar is reduced at once to unwanted foreigner and racial orphan.

Dreams Of a Black Father: African-American Leadership in the Post-Civil Rights Era

The most firmly entrenched tradition that Beatty satirizes in *The White Boy Shuffle* is the hope for a Black messiah, a unifying African-American leader who will mobilize the populace and marshal them towards complete liberation from White oppression. Beatty plants the seed for his subversion at the novel’s outset, when Gunnar, narrating from a temporal position beyond the work’s concluding events, ruminates humorously on his stature in the Black imagination.

On the one hand, this messiah gig is a bitch. On the other, I’ve managed to fill the void in African-American leadership ... I didn’t interview for the job. I was drafted by 22 million hitherto unaffiliated souls into serving as a full-time Svengali and foster parent to an abandoned people. I spoon-feed them grueled futility, unveil the oblivion that is black America’s existence and the hopelessness of the struggle. In return I receive fanatical avian obedience. Wherever I travel, a long queue of black baby goslings flies behind a plastic wind-up bard spring-driven toward self-destruction, crossing the information super-highway and refusing to look both ways. (1)

Gunnar traffics in the language of parenthood in describing his hold over African Americans. He is “foster parent to an abandoned people” who “spoonfeed[s] them” and receives “obedience” in return from the masses, people whom he characterizes as “black baby goslings.” By painting his followers as orphaned children, Gunnar positions himself as their collective adoptive father, committed to soothing their anxieties of belonging and sheltering them from White supremacy. Yet through Gunnar, Beatty pokes fun at the desire for a unifying Black leader and the potentially self-destructive ramifications of blind allegiance to such a figure. Just as Gunnar’s own Black father violates his trust, Beatty seems to suggest, so to does such a leader have the capacity to misguide African

Americans uncritical of ideology, tactics, or, as Gunnar himself demonstrates near novel's end, ethics.

Beatty probes the issue of Black leadership through Gunnar's speech at a rally in Martin Luther King, Jr. Plaza on BU's campus. Community members are protesting the university's decision to grant "an honorary degree and a check for one million dollars to M'm'ofu Gootobelezi" (196), a corrupt African statesman, and Gunnar's notoriety inspires the rally's organizers to invite him to speak. Dexter introduces him to the crowd as "star athlete, accomplished poet, black man extraordinaire, voice of nation, Gunnar Kaufman" (198), but rather than inspiring the crowd with lofty rhetoric, Gunnar immediately launches into a diatribe, castigating them for their base motives in participating in the protest and in justice movements in general: "African Americans my ass. Middle minorities caught between racial polarities, please. Caring, class-conscious progressive crackers, shit. Selfish, apathetic humans like everyone else" (199). Despite the varying racial identities and altruistic motives that people in the crowd claim, according to Gunnar, they share one common, lowest denominator - selfishness.

Gunnar then recites the King quote affixed to the base of his statue in the plaza, "If a man hasn't discovered something he will die for, he isn't fit to live," and applies its sentiments to his own attitude towards freeing South Africa from apartheid control.

"Now, don't get me wrong, I want them niggers to get theirs, but I am not willing to die for South Africa, and you ain't either ... I'm just ready to die ... That's why today's black leadership isn't worth shit, these telegenic niggers not willing to die. Back in the old days, if someone spoke up against the white man, he or she was willing to die. Today's housebroken niggers travel the country talking themselves hoarse about barbarous white devils, knowing that those devils aren't going to send them to a black hell ... What we need is some new leaders. Leaders who won't apostatize like cowards. Some niggers who are ready to die!" (200)

Gunnar is no better than the crowd, he claims, unwilling to commit to true sacrifice for even a most worthy cause because it does not materially affect his daily life. Then he

critiques Black leaders in the same fashion, condemning them as “cowards” full of rhetoric but devoid of radical action that would put themselves at risk. Embedded in the passage is the phrase “ready to die,” which Beatty appropriates from the 1994 debut album of the same name by Notorious B.I.G.⁴⁶ The album in general, and the title song more specifically, is rife with morbid imagery and a pessimistic worldview, a perspective Gunnar adopts throughout his speech. Biggie recites in the song’s refrain, “I’m ready to die, no one can save me” and later, at the song’s conclusion, “Suicidal, I’m ready!” Gunnar asks who is “ready to die.” Though Gunnar is ostensibly asking who is prepared to sacrifice themselves for a cause, his words trigger a spate of “black people killing themselves indiscriminately across the United States” (201) in the day following the speech. Deeming themselves unable to live up to King’s call to revolutionary commitment and hence unfit to live, scores of African Americans commit suicide.

While some of Gunnar’s followers demonstrate their readiness to die through suicide at Gunnar’s apparent prompting, Gunnar cannot bring himself to do it. This signifies that, based on his interpretation of the necessary qualifications of Black leadership, he is unequipped to assume the role. Black suicide has been read by some as an emancipatory option, since “America’s treatment of black men [has been] invariably lethal . . . to take away the nation’s capacity to issue death is thus to reclaim the autonomy of the subject by rendering morbidity a possession that can be reclaimed” (Murray 228), an act of full agency in the face of White supremacy, what BPM activist Huey Newton once termed “revolutionary suicide” (Stallings 115). He tries to drown himself in the

⁴⁶ The Notorious BIG (1972-1997), whose given name was Christopher Wallace, was a New York-based, platinum-selling rapper of the 1990’s. Known for his vocal dexterity and storytelling ability, Wallace laced his fatalistic lyrics with a combination of bravado and anxiety. Wallace was murdered in a drive-by shooting in Los Angeles on March 9, 1997.

Atlantic Ocean, but cannot complete the task, his thoughts wandering back to his wife, Yoshiko, and their baby, Naomi Katsu Kaufman. He refuses to orphan his daughter, even if it means disappointing the masses who look to him for example. In keeping with the trope of the African-American orphan, Gunnar's actual goal is not to die, though, but rather to incorporate himself into a community and nullify his status as a misfit.

Gunnar cannot shake his fatalism, however. At the conclusion to *The White Boy Shuffle*, Gunnar convenes a "Bacchanalian Misery Fest" and calls on the United States government to carry out "Directive 1609: Kill All Niggers." Erica Edwards suggests that this sequence figures "post-Civil Rights black charismatic leadership as a joke" (158). But the joke is not a tragic one; rather, it highlights the prospect of a more diffuse African-American movement for racial justice and equity, one not beholden to a single leader or ideology. Cameron Leader-Piccone, in his consideration of representations of Black leadership in *White Boy Shuffle* and the comic strip, *Boondocks*,⁴⁷ asserts that this approach can serve as "a new organizing principle through which one might embrace the heterogeneity of black culture ... a necessary precondition for embracing a disaggregated black community leadership that is capable of progressing beyond nostalgia for anachronistic models rooted in the Civil Rights Movement" (139-40). Leader-Piccone goes on to suggest that the "negation of unquestioning support" (149) would be the hallmark of such a model, opening up points of access for critical engagement with

⁴⁷ This comic strip and eventual animated TV series was created by Aaron McGruder. It debuted in newspapers in 1999; the TV series followed six years later, in 2005. The series follows the Freeman family, who move to the White suburb of Woodcrest. Its content was highly satirical in nature, and it poked fun at a wide range of subjects, highlighting the absurdity of both anti-Black racism enacted by Whites and the intraracial squabbles extant in the African-American community.

various tactics and strategies in pursuit of racial justice and equity, rather than blind trust in a single, charismatic Black leader.

In keeping with this notion, Gunnar recedes from the public sphere after the Misery Fest, opting to devote himself to his role as actual father of Naomi instead of Father of the African-American People. In this maneuver, Gunnar advocates “strategic withdrawal” (Edwards 158) from the body politic, underscored in the novel’s epilogue.

It’s been a lovely 500 years, but it’s time to go. We’re abandoning this sinking ship, America ... Black America has relinquished its needs in a world where expectations are illusion, has refused to develop ideas or mores in a society that applies principles without principle ... Might as well kill myself, right? Why give you the satisfaction ... me and America aren’t even enemies. I’m the horse pulling the stagecoach, the donkey in the levee who’s stumbled, but I’m tired of thrashing around in the muck and not getting anywhere, so put a nigger out of his misery. (225-6)

Gunnar seems to be succumbing to the pressures associated with lacking a home within the nation, a place within the nation-as-family, bowing out rather than confronting the White supremacist underpinnings of the nation that work to prevent his full entry. Daniel Grassian even goes so far as to say that “Beatty suggests that [Gunnar’s] self-defeatist philosophy ultimately can be the death knell for African-American progress” (109). However, the “abandoning [of] America” can be read as a revolutionary act of defiance enacted against a corrupt system. Moreover, the decision to secede from “a society that applies principles without principle,” a country that refuses to live out in practice the egalitarian ideals upon which it claims to have been founded, lays the groundwork for exactly the kind of diffuse, leaderless movement that Gunnar’s former position as Black messiah precluded. Freed from the endless wait for a unifying leader like Gunnar to emerge and direct them, African Americans can move beyond what Edwards terms “the hauntology of black leadership” (154), the vestigial memories of leaders of prior eras and their palpable absence in the present, post-soul age. African Americans are free to cobble

together a movement that is more agile and elastic, and one that accounts for the full range of African-American experiences and identities. The work need not cease, but it need not be dictated from on high, either. Instead it should be orchestrated by the collective will of the people, this framework asserts.

On its surface, Gunnar's strategic withdrawal represents a failure to incorporate himself into what Stallings refers to as "the nation as macrocosm of family" (103), a formulation that gestures towards the ways that notions of family undergird the rhetoric of nationalism. Gunnar's strategic withdrawal from this community dooms him to be plagued by his Black orphan's anxieties of belonging. Yet perhaps this decision to abandon "this sinking ship" liberates Gunnar from the traumas induced by his cultural orphanhood and, more broadly, the epistemic violence sustained by virtue of being Black in America. True, this is a metaphorical "revolutionary suicide" of sorts. It also constitutes a transcendence of the very concerns that comprise another "hauntology" - namely the hauntology of kinlessness and homelessness that is the African-American orphan figure's inheritance. Now devoid of fear and liberated from the pressures of the mantle of Black leadership, Gunnar is free to do what so many Black orphan characters across the African-American literary tradition have done - found a new lineage.

CONCLUSION:

ECOLOGIES OF BELONGING

In his studies, Paul Gilroy has put pressure on the dominant modes of discourse around racial politics. In *Against Race*, published in 2000, Gilroy lays bare the uninterrogated elements of that discourse, troubling long-held notions about the ways that race as a social construct has reified itself and activated what he calls the “Crisis of Raciology.” According to Gilroy, the outcome of this crisis is that “black and white are bonded together by mechanisms of race that estrange them from one another and amputate their common humanity” (Gilroy 14). This fissure along the fault lines of racial identity has had wide-reaching consequences, catalyzing strife and discord as cultures, ethnic groups, and nation-states have sought to amass and maintain power, often at the expense of out-groups. To effectuate that, “ecologies of belonging” were formulated, borne primarily out of the “relationship between territory, individuality, property, war, and society” as introduced by modernity. This has led to, among other issues, “the emergence and consolidation of race-thinking” (Gilroy 55).

It is these theoretical “ecologies of belonging” that the African-American orphan figure navigates. As members of a historically oppressed racial group in America, Black orphan characters are set apart from multiple layers of belonging - familial, cultural, and national - and their travails on the periphery of community are metonymic for African Americans as a whole. Race thinking, that is, “the cultivation of bounded, ‘encamped’ national cultures” (Gilroy 328) superimposes itself on their lives; hemmed in by the apparatus of White supremacy and simultaneously desirous of the safe haven that race-as-family and race-as-nation ideologies offer, these kinless and homeless figures are often

compelled to choose from a limited menu of options for incorporation into a community. For the nineteenth-century literary characters included in this study, the prevailing option tended to be intraracial, domestic affiliation, despite the gendered limitations it imposed. The two orphan figures in *The Garies and Their Friends* illustrate this. Clarence's separation from his African-American heritage and surviving family precipitates his demise, while his sister Emily's attachment to Black family life, first through her informal adoption by Mr. and Mrs. Ellis and then by her marriage to their son, Charlie, preserves her life. The eponymous heroine of *Iola Leroy* models intraracial fealty, too, rebuffing the romantic entreaties of the White physician Dr. Gresham and marrying instead Dr. Latimer, a Black physician, before embarking on a life dedicated to racial uplift. Their choices, governed by the realities of White oppression and their own hunger for sanctuary in both home and heritage, are indicative of the ways that Black solidarity sought to countermand the devastating effects of White supremacy in the antebellum and post-Reconstruction eras. In the nineteenth century, racial self-preservation and self-determination, it seems, relied on the foundational belief in the efficacy of race-as-family even as it reinscribed hierarchies similar to those it endeavored to subvert.

Later, the Black orphan characters in the modern and postmodern literary periods of the twentieth century destabilize this notion of race-as-family as a conduit to liberation. In *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, theorist and author bell hooks writes, "The insistence on 'ethnic purity' is an inheritance of white supremacy, the refusal to acknowledge mixture and kinship" (192), and while the nineteenth-century characters Emily and Iola were aware of their inter-racial heritage, their complete affiliation with their Black identity represented a disavowal of half of their ancestry. To

be fair, this disavowal comes in response to the White denial of their basic human rights, but the attitude that they could wall out Whiteness engendered a sort of reactionary race thinking which proposed that freedom and upward socioeconomic mobility were only available within the bosom of Black life. In the third decade of the twentieth century, Nella Larsen places freedom in direct conflict with the security associated with elevated socioeconomic status in her novel, *Passing*, by granting the full-time passer, Clare, a degree of freedom denied Irene, despite her position in the Black middle-class. In the post-World War II era, both *Kindred* by Octavia Butler and *The White Boy Shuffle* by Paul Beatty complicate essentialist notions of racial identity and foreground the knotty politics of Black authenticity, ultimately proposing through their respective African-American orphan figures Dana Franklin, the alien time traveler, and Gunnar Kaufman, the Black misfit, that multiple modes of Blackness can coexist in a given space, place, and community. Both, then, deny the discourse of “ethnic absolutism,” which argues “that an identifiable pattern of bodily experiences and attributes can serve to connect blacks regardless of their wealth or their health, their gender, their religion, location, or political or ideological habits” (Gilroy 254). During the course of their particular journeys, Dana and Gunnar each acquire experiential literacy as they come to understand what their Black identity encompasses, to be sure, yet both are able to move beyond race thinking as the sole factor in mapping the trajectories of their lives. Dana returns for the final time to 1976 partially dismembered by White supremacy but still willing to be in relationship with her White husband, Kevin, while Gunnar, his racial consciousness now sharpened, still abdicates his position as Black messiah to lead a quiet family life with Yoshiko and their new baby. Both are connected to their Blackness but not held hostage

by race thinking. Instead, they are manifestations of what Gilroy terms “the hetero-cultural, post-anthropological, and cosmopolitan yet-to-come” (334). Gunnar and Yoshiko are the very embodiment of this ethos, grounded in but not held hostage by the politics of identity.

While future tropological revisions of the orphan figure in African-American novels have yet to unfold, the continued deployment of the figure itself is all but certain. Two award-winning novels written in 2016 are cases in point. Colson Whitehead’s novel, *The Underground Railroad*, winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, and Yaa Gyasi’s *Homegoing*, winner of the National Book Critics Circle’s John Leonard Award for best first book, both depict Black orphans in search of belonging. Cora, the protagonist in Whitehead’s work, is orphaned as a child; the novel plots her journey towards self-liberation and her unresolved anxieties over her mother’s apparent abandonment of her. Gyasi’s novel traces two strains of a family line - one becomes part of the royal family in what is now Ghana, while the other becomes enslaved in the United States. Each chapter follows a different member of this extended family, almost all of whom lose one or both parents and grapple with how to cope with the lingering trauma of that disjuncture. Both conform to the parameters of the trope: natal alienation, social ambiguity, reformulated kinships, concerted efforts to recuperate personhood, and unresolved anxieties associated with homelessness. Moreover, both gesture back towards the emancipatory narratives of the nineteenth century in their invocation of the orphan-like state endured by enslaved Africans and their descendants.

The trope of the orphan is a current that runs through African-American literature from the antebellum era through the present, reminding us that although the exigencies

faced by African Americans evolve over time, the impact of these exigencies continues to be a sense of displacement and liminality. As long as this reality persists, the Black orphan figure will likely maintain its position as a primary trope in the African-American literary tradition.

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