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presented by

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M.A. degree in American Studies

  
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(DIS)CLAIMING WHITENESS: HOMER PLESSY, TIGER WOODS, AND  
RACIALLY-TRANSFORMED PARENTS

By

Joshua Carter Woodfork

A THESIS

Submitted to  
Michigan State University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Program in American Studies

1999

## **ABSTRACT**

### **(DIS)CLAIMING WHITENESS: HOMER PLESSY, TIGER WOODS AND RACIALLY-TRANSFORMED PARENTS**

By

Joshua Carter Woodfork

This thesis is a study of multiracial identity. It looks at claims and rejections of whiteness by exploring the boundaries of race and racial discourse. In the 1890s, Homer A. Plessy, of the *Plessy v. Ferguson* "separate but equal" case (1896), claimed that his multiracial ancestry should grant him access to whiteness. One hundred years later, golfer Eldrick "Tiger" Woods also wanted his multiracial ancestry acknowledged. Conversely, several recent books have been published describing the experiences of White parents of Black/biracial children. In these, the parents have rejected their whiteness, arguing that their racial identity has been transformed because of their children. Through examining these three specific cases, this thesis concludes that the recent attempts to utilize whiteness reinscribe similar racial constrictions found in the 1890s, like the "one-drop rule."

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In loving memory of my grandfathers,  
Saul Raphael Rotman and Nelson Carter Woodfork

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

Somehow working on this thesis in Michigan has allowed me to see how fortunate I am to have the love and support of my family in Massachusetts. I appreciate the constant encouragement of my parents, Ann and Nelson Woodfork, and my siblings Rebecca and Peter. My grandmothers, Patricia Rotman and Suewillla Woodfork, have been steady sources of wisdom and affection.

Along the way, I have been sustained by many, including my master's thesis committee: Dr. Dean Rehberger, Dr. Wilma King, and Dr. Gloria Randle. They have been a wonderful committee with each member challenging me in unique ways. Dr. Randle is truly an inspirational person who has taught me not only how to be a good teacher but, more importantly, how to be a better soul.

Friends proved to be invaluable to my progress. They allowed me to vent and told me when to let go of my thesis, which proved imperative to my completion. Thanks to Anthony Shiu, Chantalle Verna, Cecilia Samonte, Dr. Jan Arminio, and especially to my best friend Emily Heiss. While at Michigan State University, Dr. Richard W. Thomas and Dr. Darlene Clark Hine have been excellent mentors, exhibiting the finest qualities of character and professionalism.

I am indebted to Diana Irene Williams for giving me a copy of her Harvard University undergraduate senior thesis.

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## INTRODUCTION

Anyone who continues to believe in race as a physical attribute of individuals, despite the now commonplace disclaimers of biologists and geneticists, might as well also believe that Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny and the tooth fairy are real, and that the earth stands still while the sun moves.

Barbara Jeanne Fields<sup>1</sup>

In the above epigraph, historian Barbara Jeanne Fields explains that in the United States of America the fiction of race as a "physical attribute" is recognized. Although the concept of race may be fiction, race continues to have real consequences in the form of racism and discrimination. Often, people cannot define what "race" is or how it works; rather, they operate on stereotypes of racial groups to determine the race of others. Law professor Ian F. Haney López suggests, "Walking down the street, our minds consistently rely on pervasive social mythologies to assign races to other pedestrians." As a result of this lack of an ability to define race, observers utilize the "social mythologies" to categorize each other. In other words, which race a person belongs to is generally determined by how he or she looks. Despite President William Jefferson Clinton's recent dialogue on race, lay persons continue to categorize

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<sup>1</sup>Barbara Jeanne Fields, "Slavery, Race, and Ideology in the United States of America," *New Left Review* 181 (May/June 1990): 96.

A note on my use of race terms. I use "Black" and "African-American" interchangeably. I capitalize "Black" and "White" but do not capitalize "whiteness" because of the negative way it has been used as a tool of oppression.

each other by physical attributes; thus, as Fields suggests, "racial ideology" lives on.<sup>2</sup>

Although scholars continue to debate the biological and social constructions of race, the general public has not yet begun to question racial categories critically. Those who do not fit easily within the established racial categories threaten the historically simplistic understanding of race. This thesis explores some individuals who complicate current racial categories not only because of their physical appearance and experiences but also because they insist on speaking out about them and, most importantly, on challenging norms/status quo.<sup>3</sup>

Golfer Eldrick "Tiger" Woods presents an example of one who challenges the concept of race as it is currently understood. Woods's mother, Kultida, labels herself as Asian while his father, Earl, calls himself Black. Tiger Woods wishes to be seen as multiracial. Yet his logical argument has been met with resistance. Woods's call for recognition

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<sup>2</sup>Fields, "Slavery, Race, and Ideology," 96; Fields states, "If race lives on today, it does not live on because we have inherited it from our forebears of the seventeenth century or the eighteenth or nineteenth, but because we continue to create it today," 117; Ian F. Haney López, "The Social Construction of Race: Some Observations on Illusion, Fabrication, and Choice," *Harvard Civil Rights-Civil Liberties Law Review* 29, no. 1 (Winter 1994): 61.

<sup>3</sup>The scholarly debate on race as a social versus biological construction is highlighted in two opposing articles, Haney López's "The Social Construction of Race," and Walter Benn Michaels', "Autobiography of an Ex-White Man: Why Race is Not a Social Construction," (*Transition: An International Review* 73, vol. 7, no. 1, 122-43). This is a special issue, titled "The White Issue" reprinted by Duke University Press, 1998.



of his multiracial identity harkens back to Homer A. Plessy's undertaking in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896). Plessy wanted his seven-eighths White "blood" counted. As seen through Plessy and Woods, persons of multiracial ancestry have asserted the recognition of their full ancestry, including their whiteness, through various forms. For example, at one point, mulattoes were seen as a separate racial group because they possessed both Black and White ancestry.

In spite of claims like Plessy and Woods's to the prized title of whiteness, according to the rule of hypodescent, multiracial people with Black ancestry have been institutionally recognized solely as Black and often listed as Black on birth certificates, the census, and school registration forms. Indeed, many Americans continue to believe in the same racial constrictions that were alive in the nineteenth century, such as the "one-drop rule."<sup>4</sup>

In contrast to the desire of many people with mixed ancestry to have their multiracial identity recognized, a group of White writers who disclaim their whiteness exists. They believe that because of their biracial children they are no longer White. The notion that a parent's race can be based upon the ethnicity of his or her children is one of the areas examined with these parents. It seems odd that White

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<sup>4</sup>For the "one-drop rule" see F. James Davis, *Who is Black?: One Nation's Definition* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991); For a creative interpretation of the importance of the "one-drop rule" see Walter Benn Michaels, "The No Drop Rule," in *Identities*, eds. Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., 401-12, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995).

parents can lose their whiteness because of having children with a Black person. Recently, a group of whiteness scholars who call themselves "race traitors" has emerged. Race traitors advocate the abolition of the White race in order to eradicate racism. The White parents reviewed also dismiss their whiteness and I will explore whether they fall under this radical group.<sup>5</sup>

Although Fields would not be considered a race traitor, she suggests the need for a revision in the understanding of race. She continues her argument against race as a biological fact by presenting an example of the bizarre way race works, especially when it involves parents and children. The example Fields's uses is the "well-known anomaly of American racial convention that considers a white woman capable of giving birth to a black child but denies that a black woman can give birth to a white child." Fields' example demonstrates the problematic definition of biological race, and presents the mother-child relationship as a valid vantage point from which to understand race. The insistence of parents that they are no longer White (some of whom now claim to be people of color) is compared and contrasted with Plessy and Woods's declarations. Thus, rejections of whiteness are exhibited in chapter three of this thesis.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Noel Ignatiev and John Garvey, eds., *Race Traitor* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

<sup>6</sup>Barbara J. Fields, "Ideology and Race in American History," in *Region, Race, and Reconstruction: Essays in Honor of C. Vann Woodward*, eds. J. Morgan Kousser and James M. McPherson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 149.

In their important book, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*, authors Michael Omi and Howard Winant present their theory of "racial formation": "We define racial formation as the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed." The principal characters in this thesis—Plessy, Woods, and the racially transformed parents—are attempting to reformulate race. They have been chosen because they each have a stake in whiteness. I will explore whether the historical legacy of racial formation has inhibited these agents of change from altering the way race is generally understood by United States culture or if their own inability to complicate whiteness in more sophisticated ways has contained them.<sup>7</sup>

This study on racial formation opens chapter one with a look at Homer Plessy's 1890s legal claim to whiteness. This chapter is followed by one examining Eldrick "Tiger" Woods's social assertion of his multiracial identity. Chapter three explores five White parents of Black/biracial children who, because of their children, contend that they are no longer merely White. The background of this latter thesis rests on the recent critical race theory and whiteness studies. Haney López's definition of race ("I define 'race' as a vast group of people loosely bound together by historically contingent,

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<sup>7</sup>Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*, rev. 2d ed. (New York: Routledge, 1994), 55.

socially significant elements of their morphology and/or ancestry") is employed in this thesis.<sup>8</sup>

In her work with multiracial individuals, psychologist Maria P.P. Root discusses the experience for these people as living in "the borderlands." Root is describing the fluidity of racial identity in the lives of people with biracial/multiracial racial identity. She argues

The average American's limited ability to think about race results in a limited ability to converse about race. Our racial vocabulary provides border markers that are rigid reflections upon our history of race relations and racial classification. Without the experience of recognizing race in all its manifestations and shades, we can not [sic] shift its meaning, deconstruct it, or combine it.<sup>9</sup>

Shifting, deconstructing, and/or combining race are key strategies to understanding race better. Even if these steps lead only to the acknowledgment of the flaws of race, they might help to improve poor race relations and racial discrimination, which impair the United States.

Echoing Root, sociologist Paul Gilroy suggests the dangers of the continued obsession with racial purity. He states:

Against this choice stands another, more difficult option: the theorisation of creolisation, métissage, mestizaje, and hybridity. From this viewpoint of ethnic absolutism, this would be a litany of pollution and impurity. These terms are rather unsatisfactory ways of naming the process of cultural mutation and

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<sup>8</sup>Haney López, "The Social Construction of Race," 7.

<sup>9</sup>Maria P.P. Root, ed., *The Multiracial Experience: Racial Borders as the New Frontier* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc., 1996), xxii-xxiii.

restless (dis)continuity that exceed racial discourse and avoid capture by its agents.<sup>10</sup>

Gilroy illustrates that once "cultural nationalism" is discarded, there is a lack of language to discuss this unnamed racial territory.

It is my task to raise questions in this study that will prod readers toward a more comprehensive conception of race, in all its fluidity, reality, and fiction. At first glance, the people in this thesis offer a glimmer of hope that, in the spirit of Root and Gilroy, they have found new ways to engage with the idea of race and perhaps a reduction in racism. Despite some interesting maneuvers with language and racial terms, the persons studied here often reinscribe the same constrictions found in race since the 1890s. Nonetheless, they do offer creative ways of looking at race on a personal level, which affects the larger public discussions. Ultimately, they reveal that the category of whiteness is a bankrupt space for the advancement of racial understanding; instead, for those studied herein, whiteness has proven to be a place for identity politics and games.

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<sup>10</sup>Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 2.

## Chapter 1

WHITENESS: "THE MASTER-KEY THAT UNLOCKS THE GOLDEN DOOR OF OPPORTUNITY"<sup>11</sup>

Whiteness as the embodiment of white privilege transcended mere belief or preference; it became usable property, the subject of the law's regard and protection. In this respect whiteness, as an active property, has been used and enjoyed. Cheryl I. Harris, "Whiteness as Property."<sup>12</sup>

In her significant article, "Whiteness as Property," legal scholar Cheryl Harris discusses the value of being "White" in the United States. She analyzes the rise of whiteness as a marker of racial identity to the level of property. The epigraph, which is taken from Harris's essay, is critical to understanding whiteness. As Harris suggests, whiteness involves more than racial designation. It raises issues of exclusion and racial hierarchy, as well as the ability to determine who may benefit from the privileges accorded to Whites in the United States. Harris utilizes the *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) case to illustrate the protection

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<sup>11</sup>The title comes from "Brief for Homer A. Plessy by Albion W. Tourg  e" *File Copies of Briefs* 1895, VIII (October term, 1895) wherein he questions the worth of whiteness, stating: "Indeed, is it not the most valuable sort of property, being the master-key that unlocks the golden door of opportunity?", in Otto H. Olsen, ed., *The Thin Disguise: Turning Point in Negro History, Plessy v. Ferguson, A Documentary Presentation 1864-1896* (New York: Humanities Press, 1967): 83.

<sup>12</sup>Cheryl I. Harris, "Whiteness as Property," *Harvard Law Review* 106 (June 1993): 1734. Whiteness historian David Roediger judges that Harris's article is "perhaps the most important historical treatment of whiteness since W.E.B. Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction*." (David R. Roediger, ed., *Black on White: Black Writers on What It Means to Be White*, [New York: Schocken Books, 1998], 12).

of whiteness in law. Although Harris only briefly examines *Plessy*, an in-depth analysis of Homer Plessy's claim to the recognition of his White ancestry allows insights into contemporary debates about racial categories and whiteness.

Rather than summarizing the historical facts of the case, the focus herein is on understanding the questions raised by Plessy's demand for all aspects of his racial identity to be taken into account by the Supreme Court. In looking at Plessy's case one may ask what and who decides the racial make-up of an individual? The Supreme Court's ruling in *Plessy* illustrates that one's ancestry determines race.

However, Haney López argues:

Race is not hereditary; our parents do not impart to us our race. Instead, society attaches specific significance to our ancestry and appearance, and in that system of meanings lie the origins of our race.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, race is determined by one's subject position in society in conjunction with her or his physical appearance and lineage.<sup>14</sup>

On June 7, 1892, as part of a test case challenging Louisiana's Separate Car Act of 1890, thirty-year-old Homer Adolph Plessy boarded a train in New Orleans bound for Covington, Louisiana. Plessy, an "octoroon," sat in the car

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<sup>13</sup>Haney López, "The Social Construction of Race," 38.

<sup>14</sup>My account of the *Plessy* case derives primarily from these four sources: Keith Weldon Medley, "The Sad Story of How 'Separate But Equal' Was Born," *Smithsonian* (February 1994): 104-17; Olsen, *The Thin Disguise*; Charles Edwards O'Neill, "Separate But Equal," *America*, 1 April 1995, 13-4; Charles A. Lofgren, *The Plessy Case: A Legal-Historical Interpretation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

designated for "Whites Only." The conductor asked Plessy if he was "colored." When Plessy answered "yes," he was informed that he would have to move to the "colored" car. Plessy refused, was arrested by a private detective, and jailed. Thus, after extensive planning by a local New Orleans Citizens' Committee to challenge the law that segregated train cars, the famous case, later known as *Plessy v. Ferguson*, officially commenced.<sup>15</sup>

The Separate Car Act (1890) that Plessy was protesting required "equal, but separate, accommodations for the white and colored races" in coaches of passenger trains. The Citizens' Committee that constructed the test case consisted of many prominent "free persons of color," including some "Creoles." The Committee raised funds to challenge the Jim Crow legislation and enlisted the aid of author, former judge, and attorney Albion W. Tourg  e. One of the nation's greatest champions for the rights of Blacks at the time, Tourg  e an enthusiastic choice of the Committee, took the case for free.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>The Separate Car Act is also referred to as Act 111. Plessy was charged with violating Section 2; "Octoroon," meaning one-eighth "Black," while an offensive term in today's language, was used in Plessy's time, *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163. S. 537, 538 (1896); Historian Brook Thomas argues that the Committee's "challenge received some silent support from railroad companies, which did not like the added expense of providing separate cars. By prearrangement, the railroad conductor and a private detective detained Plessy when he sat in the forbidden coach," Brook Thomas, ed., *Plessy v. Ferguson: A Brief History with Documents*, (Boston: Bedford Books, 1997), 5.

<sup>16</sup>Thomas, *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 4; 5.



Before the Homer Plessy case, the group had tested another using the son of one of its leaders, Daniel F. Desdunes, also an octoroon. The prosecution dropped the Desdunes case because it involved interstate travel, thereby violating the "commerce clause of the federal constitution." Consequently, the Committee turned to Plessy to help them with their next legal challenge of the segregation statute.<sup>17</sup>

Since the Plessy case recently marked its centennial, there is a resurgence of interest in the legal ruling that formally established the "separate but equal" doctrine; however, little has been written about Plessy the person. Born in 1862, Plessy was a local shoemaker at the time of the case. Journalist Keith Weldon Medley offers the most revealing account of Homer Plessy in his 1994 *Smithsonian* article. Medley writes, "Apparently Plessy left no papers. City records, however, tell a good deal about him and . . . where he lived. He began making shoes in 1879, married Louise Bordenave in 1888 and attended mass." It is unclear how Plessy became involved with the Citizens' Committee; but he did participate in other civic organizations, which may have led to his involvement.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>Olsen, *The Thin Disguise*, 13.

<sup>18</sup>For the silence on the Plessy decision at the time it was rendered see A. Leon Higginbotham, Jr., *Shades of Freedom: Racial Politics and Presumptions of the American Legal Process* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 244 note 50; see also Samira Kawash, *Dislocating the Color Line: Identity, Hybridity, and Singularity in African-American Literature* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 94; and Lofgren, *The Plessy Case*, 196-99. For the recent resurgence of interest see the many conferences and commemorations held in observance of the centennial and whole

Medley suggests, "One of the reasons that Homer Plessy was picked for the job was that he had fair skin." In developing a strategy with one of the Committee members for the test case, attorney and journalist Louis A. Martinet, Tourgée suggested that a light-skinned Black person be used so that the arbitrariness of determining one's race could be highlighted. Clearly, Plessy was the type of person Tourgée had envisioned, as Plessy insisted "that the mixture of colored blood was not discernible in him." Therefore, Plessy phenotypically could have "passed" as White, explaining why he had to inform the train conductor of his race.<sup>19</sup>

Since Plessy's objections to the validity of the 1890 Act relied heavily on his phenotype, the deliberate choice to use a light-skinned or White-looking Black person needs to be further examined. Many scholars have cited this issue as a contentious one, especially in their notes sections. In a strategy letter from Martinet to Tourgée, Martinet writes, "Now as to your suggestions.[] 1. It would be quite difficult to have a lady too nearly white refused admission to a 'white' car." He then adds how difficult it would be for Tourgée to discern Whites from Blacks in a city as racially divergent as New Orleans. Thus, it seems as though

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journals dedicated to the topic including: "Racism and the Law: The Legacy and Lessons of *Plessy*," *Law and Philosophy* 16(3), (1997); And *Georgia State University Law Review* 12, no. 4, (June 1996); Medley, "The Sad Story of 'Separate But Equal' Was Born," 106.

<sup>19</sup>Medley, "The Sad Story," 112; Letter from "Louis A. Martinet to Albion W. Tourgée," October 5, 1891, Olsen, *The Thin Disguise*, 56; See *Plessy*, 163 U.S. at 538.

Martinet is in agreement with Tourgée over the use of a light-skinned Black. However, historian Otto H. Olsen writes, "He also reported his concern over accusations from darker Negroes that those involved in the test project were all 'nearly white or wanted to pass for white.'" In his endnotes, Olsen advises seeing another letter written three weeks after this one, "stating that Martinet was mistaken about the objections from darker Negroes." From this note, it is not clear whether Martinet was correcting himself or if Tourgée was disagreeing with him.<sup>20</sup>

Harris advances the argument by suggesting in her footnotes that "Black leadership objected that such a strategy, even if successful, would mitigate conditions only for those Blacks who appeared to be white." She also maintains that if Tourgée's strategy had prevailed, the hierarchy of light-skinned Blacks ahead of their dark-skinned counterparts would have continued the privileging of whiteness. However, Harris records legal scholar Jack Greenberg's opinion that if Tourgée's strategy had worked, the difficulty in administering the law because of people whose race was unclear might have caused its abandonment.<sup>21</sup>

In her creative essay on Plessy and "passing," English professor Amy Robinson asserts in her notes that "much of the black community of Louisiana . . . took issue with Tourgée

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<sup>20</sup>Olsen, *The Thin Disguise*, 56; 12; 29 note 14.

<sup>21</sup>Harris, "Whiteness as Property," 1747 note 179. See Jack Greenberg, *Litigation for Social Change: Methods, Limits and Role in Democracy*, (New York: The Association of the Bar of the City of New York, 1974): 13-4.

and Martinet's proposed case of strategic passing." Robinson's comment ends in agreement with Harris's remark about Black leadership's fear that using a light-skinned Black would only help light-skinned Blacks and would therefore create a three-tier caste system. My contention is not with her characterization of the sentiment of some members of the Black community but with how she measures the sentiment of what she calls "much of the black community of Louisiana." My understanding of the case is that the Committee was deeply involved but that the Black community in general was not stirred to action.<sup>22</sup>

English professor Saidiya V. Hartman maintains that Tourgée's strategy was more ambitious than one that would grant merely light-skinned Blacks the full sociocultural benefits of whiteness. She writes,

In arguing that the reputation of being white was property, that whiteness possessed pecuniary value, and that the current rules for its distribution were simply in service of maintaining black inferiority, Tourg[é]e overreached the simple demand for a more flexible and encompassing category of whiteness along the lines of that in the Caribbean and Latin America and instead demonstrated the degree to which race, class, and caste continued to be shaped by slavery.<sup>23</sup>

Hartman, agreeing with Greenberg, makes her point convincingly. Tourgée's strategy deserves scrutiny to the

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<sup>22</sup>Amy Robinson, "Forms of Appearance of Value: Homer Plessy and the Politics of Privacy," in *Performance and Cultural Politics*, ed. Elin Diamond, (New York: Routledge, 1996), 257 note 17.

<sup>23</sup>Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 195.

degree that it represented a leap from the Court's ideologies on race and therefore was unrealistic for the time. Yet, while his desire to assist only a particular group of Blacks was obviously restrictive, to condemn it out of hand is an overly simplistic reading of the case.

Tourgée's case relied on the Thirteenth Amendment's abolishing of slavery in 1865 and the Fourteenth Amendment adopted in 1868, which granted citizenship to all people born or naturalized in the United States. Through its clauses, the Fourteenth Amendment outlines federal rights of these citizens. In a brief for Plessy, Tourgée argued that Louisiana's Separate Car Act was unconstitutional because it conflicted with the Thirteenth Amendment. Tourgée believed that the Thirteenth Amendment not only abolished slavery but that "[i]t meant to restore to him the rights of person and property—the natural rights of man—of which he had been deprived by slavery." English professor Brook Thomas adds, "The assortment of people according to race, Tourgée argued, violated the Thirteenth Amendment by perpetuating the essential features of slavery." Overall, Tourgée maintained that the "Jim Crow" train law was slavery disguised and therefore illegal. In this particular instance, train conductors were the new masters, deciding who sat where; in essence, determining who was slave and who was free.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>Olsen, *The Thin Disguise*, 101; Thomas, *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 31.

In the majority ruling, the Court curtly dismissed Plessy's counsel's Thirteenth Amendment charge, stating "That it does not conflict with the Thirteenth Amendment, which abolished slavery and involuntary servitude, except as punishment for crime, is too clear for argument." The Court narrowly defined slavery, refusing to add racial distinctions in segregation to their definition. Instead, since Plessy was separated because of race, the Court could have interpreted the discrimination against Plessy as a continuance of slavery. <sup>25</sup>

In his Fourteenth Amendment plea, which was much longer and more detailed than his Thirteenth Amendment plea, Tourgée argued that Plessy's rights laid out in the clauses had also been violated by the Separate Car Act. Thomas asserts

In addition to pointing out how the law violated Fourteenth Amendment guarantees to equal protection and due process, Tourgée tried to establish . . . that the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments created affirmative rights.<sup>26</sup>

Affirmative rights might have persuaded the Court that Plessy had been wronged but the justices did not see this concept within the Amendments. Tourgée constructed a massive brief detailing the instances where Plessy's rights had been infringed upon. It is here that Plessy's legal claim to whiteness is exhibited.

The brief begins with a series of questions wherein Tourgée asks about the construction of race and the ability

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<sup>25</sup>Plessy v. Ferguson, 163 U.S. 537, 542 (1896).

<sup>26</sup>Thomas, *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 31.

of the State to determine who fits into particular racial categories. In the section "Points of Plaintiff's Contention," Plessy's claim to whiteness emerges. His attorneys write, "We shall . . . contend that, in any mixed community, the reputation of belonging to the dominant race, in this instance the white race, is *property*, in the same sense that a right of action or inheritance is *property*." The attorneys argued that since the 1890 Act empowered the train conductor to assign randomly a person's race, that the "due process" clause was violated because the person was being deprived of his or her property ("this reputation . . . has an actual pecuniary value").<sup>27</sup>

Tourgée furthered his argument about the significance of the reputation of being White by posing questions to the Court. He queried

How much would it be worth to a young man entering upon the practice of law, to be regarded as a white man rather than a colored one? Six-sevenths of the population are white. Nineteenth-twentieths of the property of the country is owned by white people. Ninety-nine hundredths of the business opportunities are in the control of white people. These propositions are rendered even more startling by the intensity of feeling which excludes the colored man from the friendship and companionship of the white man. Probably most white persons if given a choice, would prefer death to life in the United States as colored persons. Under these conditions, is it possible to conclude that the reputation of being white is not property? Indeed, it is the most valuable sort of property, being the master-key that unlocks the golden door of opportunity?<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>See "Brief for Homer A. Plessy by Albion W. Tourgée" in Olsen, *The Thin Disguise*, 83.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*

Tourgée keenly probes the value of whiteness. He demonstrates the importance of possessing a White racial identity to enable success in the United States. Tourgée wants the Court to understand the loss that Plessy sustained through the mere "eyeball test" of the conductor. Indeed, Plessy lost, at the same time, his reputation as a White man and his due process.

Tourgée presented additional key claims. He brought up a "slippery slope" argument that questions the point where racial segregation ends. He asked the Court that, if the State had the right to determine the race of its citizens, "Why may it not require all red-headed people to ride in a separate car? Why not require all colored people to walk on one side of the street and the whites on the other?" Tourgée was asking where discrimination begins and ends. He wanted to ascertain the extent of the State's power to make racial distinctions between its citizens. Tourgée admitted that "the gist of our case is the unconstitutionality of the assortment; not the question of equal accommodation." Thus, it was not the literal separation from Whites to which the Committee objected; rather, it was the State's ability, acting through the railroads, to separate Blacks from Whites based on their race.<sup>29</sup>

The Court's response to Tourgée's question regarding the parameters of discrimination is a solid example of the maintenance of white supremacy. It warrants a close reading.

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<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 97-98; 97.



The Court ruled that "police power must be reasonable, and extend only to such laws as are enacted in good faith for the promotion of public good, and not for the annoyance or oppression of a particular class." Further, the majority stated that 'reasonableness' can be determined "with reference to the established usages, customs, and traditions of the people." As Judge A. Leon Higginbotham, Jr. astutely queries, "by what rationale does one determine what is reasonable? There is no litmus test for reasonableness, as when one is distinguishing an acid from a base." Indeed, 'reasonable' varies according to the context and is even then difficult to determine.<sup>30</sup>

The subtext of the Court's statement was that the law was reasonable as determined by the standards of the White men on the Supreme Court. The statement regarding the "promotion for the public good" may be read as for the good of White people. As proven in the legal manipulations of the *Dred Scott* and *Slaughter-House* cases, the Court was clearly not taking the "good"—best interests—of Blacks into account. Its turning to "established usages, customs, and traditions," informs the reader that the laws during slavery and Jim Crow were used to determine what was 'reasonable.' Ultimately, the 'reasonable' response to Tourg  e serves to highlight the institutional racism of the Court.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup>See *Plessy*, 163 U.S. at 550; Higginbotham, *Shades of Freedom*, 114.

<sup>31</sup>*Dred Scott v. Sanford*, 60 U.S. (19 How.) (1857); *Slaughter-House Cases*, 83 U.S. (16 Wall.) 36 (1873).

Tourgée believed that in addition to the violation of the "Due Process" clause, the "Equal Protection" clause was also infringed upon by the Separate Car Act. Specifically, Tourgée referred to the inclusion in the Act of an exemption for nurses who took care of children that read, "[N]othing in this act shall be construed as applying to nurses attending children of the other race." Tourgée saw this exception as an indicator of the real motivation behind the Act: to maintain White supremacy. Accordingly, he argued,

They do not object to the colored person in an inferior or menial capacity—as a servant or dependent, ministering to the comfort of the white race—but only when as a man and a citizen he seeks to claim equal right and privilege.<sup>32</sup>

Tourgée made certain to state for the record his doubt that there were any White nurses for Black children, emphasizing the disguised racial intent of the Act.<sup>33</sup>

Plessy's legal team's creative stance on Fourteenth Amendment issues has been simultaneously heralded and denounced. In an engaging reading of *Plessy v. Ferguson* and Mark Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, Eric J. Sundquist calls Tourgée's argument regarding Plessy's whiteness "foolishness." Justice Henry Billings Brown, who delivered the majority opinion for the Court, also felt that Plessy's contentions were without merit. The Court ruled 7-1 that it was legal for the railroads to segregate without violating

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<sup>32</sup>"Brief for Homer A. Plessy by Albion W. Tourgée" in Olsen, *The Thin Disguise*, 99.

<sup>33</sup>See *Plessy*, 163 U.S. at 541.

any of the three clauses ("privileges or immunities," "due process of law," and "equal protection of the laws") of the Fourteenth Amendment. The Court responded to Tourgée's probing of the limits of discrimination by stating that the justices determined where and when it was 'unreasonable.'<sup>34</sup>

As to Plessy's whiteness reputation, the Court agreed that whiteness was indeed property but that Plessy was not White and therefore not entitled to this reputation. Simply stated, Tourgée was correct about the "master-key," yet Plessy was not allowed to use it. In fact, the Court suggested that Plessy had been fraudulently using the key. Likewise, Robinson states, "As a passing subject, Plessy's presence in a whites-only car could *only be recognized* as an act of appropriation and not as a 'legitimate' pursuit of entitlement." Despite his phenotype and White ancestry, Plessy was denied access to whiteness and its privileges.<sup>35</sup>

Tourgée's claim of Plessy's reputation as White not only derived from Plessy's visual appearance but also from his seven-eighths White heritage. Tourgée explained

The crime, then, for which he became liable to imprisonment so far as the court can ascertain, was that a person of seven-eighths Caucasian blood insisted in sitting peacefully and quietly in a car the state of Louisiana had commanded the company to set aside exclusively for the white race. Where on earth should he have gone? Will the court hold that a single drop of African blood is sufficient to color a whole ocean.

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<sup>34</sup>Eric J. Sundquist, "Mark Twain and Homer Plessy," in *The New American Studies: Essays from Representations*, ed. Philip Fisher (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 124; *Plessy*, 163 U.S. at 550.

<sup>35</sup>*Plessy*, 163 U.S. at 549; Robinson, "Forms of Appearance of Value," 243.

of Caucasian whiteness?<sup>36</sup>

Tourgée raises the issue of the amount of white "blood" necessary to determine one's race. Tourgée's questioning of the power of a single drop of Black blood invokes the idea of "hypodescent," also known as the "one-drop rule."<sup>37</sup>

Sociologist F. James Davis defines the "one-drop rule" as "[t]he nation's answer to the question 'Who is black?' has long been that a black is any person with any known African black ancestry." The tradition of classifying individuals according to the "one-drop" rule emerged from slavery so that slaveholders could increase their number of slaves. Thus, Tourgée was challenging whether the Supreme Court was going to allow states to continue defining Blacks by a remnant of a tradition of the now-outlawed institution of slavery.<sup>38</sup>

The Supreme Court, in fact, ceded to the state of Louisiana in determining Plessy's racial identity. Louisiana decided that Plessy's one-eighth Black blood usurped his seven-eighths White blood, making him completely Black. However, the amount of Plessy's White blood may have declared him White in other states. Such a discrepancy clearly displays the arbitrary nature of racial classification.

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<sup>36</sup>"Brief for Homer A. Plessy by Albion W. Tourgée," in Olsen, *The Thin Disguise*, 98; My use of the "blood" discourse in determining race is based on the racist notions in Plessy's time that "Black blood" was a possible contaminate of White blood and therefore a threat to White racial purity.

<sup>37</sup>Davis, *Who is Black?*, 5; See for an anthropological discussion of "hypodescent" Marvin Harris, *Patterns of Race in the Americas* (New York: Walker and Company, 1964), 37, 56.

<sup>38</sup>Davis, *Who is Black?*, 5;

Tourgée blasted the Court on the point of Plessy's troublesome classification, questioning, "Why not count every one as white in whom is visible any trace of white blood? There is but one reason to wit, the domination of the white race." Tourgée correctly saw that classifying Plessy as Black was a continuation of the "legalized caste-distinction among citizens." Consequently, the enforcement of the one drop rule limited access to whiteness.<sup>39</sup>

In her Harvard University senior thesis, Diana Irene Williams argues against reading Plessy as an assertion of whiteness. She claims, "*Plessy v. Ferguson* was not an octoroon's plea for whiteness; rather, it embodied a direct challenge to the logic of racial distinction." I agree with the second-half of her remark that Plessy represents a challenge to racial distinction. Williams' comment resonates with Greenberg and Hartman's contention that Tourgée's legal strategy of employing a light-skinned Black was an effort to undermine racial classification, with which I concur. Williams' first statement that Plessy "was not an octoroon's plea for whiteness" raises questions.<sup>40</sup>

Why does Williams suggest that the two issues are mutually exclusive? Rather than a dichotomy of an octoroon "selling-out" and trying to identity as solely White as opposed to a heroic objection to race, Plessy may be read as

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<sup>39</sup>"Brief for Homer A. Plessy by Albion W. Tourgée," in Olsen, *The Thin Disguise*, 85.

<sup>40</sup>Diana Irene Williams, "New Orleans in the Age of *Plessy v. Ferguson*: Interracial Unions and the Politics of Caste," Senior thesis, Harvard University, 1995, 50.

incorporating both. If successful with the Court, part of Tourgée's argument required the justices to view Plessy as having a legitimate stake in whiteness because of his seven-eighths blood. Therefore, Plessy was asserting an entitlement to his white ancestry as a means of gaining access to the reputation of whiteness.

My reading is based on the use of the two octoroons, Desdunes and Plessy, as test cases. Obviously, the legal strategy centered around getting a "Black" person with a substantial amount of White ancestry; or, the Committee might have used either a light-skinned Black with two Black parents, a mulatto, or a quadroon. The many references in the Plessy's legal briefs regarding his racial make-up indicate his desire to be seen as possessing some whiteness. Let me be clear in stating that, like Williams, I do not read Plessy's case as a mere plea to be White; rather, I see the two assertions outlined by Williams as inextricably linked.

Notably, there is some evidence that, in fact, Plessy did want to be seen as White. Historian Charles Edwards O'Neill suggests, "Some years after the U.S. Supreme Court decision of 1896, Plessy listed himself as white, for example in his 1923 voter registration, and as a member of the Democratic Party." Plessy might have been passing as White; or perhaps his racial identity was assigned to him. If, in fact, Plessy was passing, then my reading of Plessy

simultaneously claiming a value in his whiteness while desiring to dismantle the racial system is strengthened.<sup>41</sup>

Although the Court rejected Plessy's whiteness plea, it did comment on his multiracial identity. The majority stated

It is true that the question of the proportion of colored blood necessary to constitute a colored person, as distinguished from a white person, is one upon which there is a difference of opinion in the different States. . . . But these are questions to be determined under the laws of each State and are not properly put in issue in this case.<sup>42</sup>

Thus, the Court agreed with Plessy's counsel that a determination needs to be made about who fits into which particular racial group(s); however, it gave this power to the states to decide. Accordingly, State's Rights prevailed, signaling defeat for African-Americans, yet the Court's acknowledgment of the need for clarity regarding racial distinctions was significant.

The legal legacy of the *Plessy* case is still widely debated. Fifty-eight years after the "separate but equal" doctrine was formalized in the *Plessy* decision, the Supreme Court overturned it with *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954). Commenting on the foundation of the case, Higginbotham submits, "There can be no more deceptive approach than when a Court *improperly* cites and relies upon cases as having precedential significance in determining the case in issue." The *Plessy* decision is filled with the types of errors

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<sup>41</sup>O'Neill, "Separate But Never Equal," 14. Since I do not know the origin of O'Neill's source, I can only speculate on this action.

<sup>42</sup>*Plessy*, 163 U.S. at 552.

Higginbotham discusses. Thus, the case law of the decision is weak. According to the Supreme Court, Plessy was not entitled to whiteness, yet, as Harris suggests, the Court's ruling strengthened whiteness as a legitimate form of property.<sup>43</sup>

Following the Supreme Court decision on May 18, 1896, four years after the case began, Plessy faded from the public arena. Medley recalled, "On January 11, 1897, Homer Plessy returned to court for sentencing. . . . Plessy changed his plea to guilty, paid a \$25 fine and walked out into the brave new world of a segregated Louisiana." After the case, Plessy worked as an insurance salesman. O'Neill concluded, "Before and after the famous case he [Plessy] lived a quiet life. . . . He died in New Orleans on March 1, 1925." It is not known how Plessy felt about the decision or how it might have affected the quality of his life afterward.<sup>44</sup>

In assessing his legacy, historian Mary Frances Berry argues that "Homer Adolph Plessy is as much a part of the Black protest tradition as Rosa Parks." Historian Otto Olsen agreed when he wrote:

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<sup>43</sup>See Lofgren, *The Plessy Case*, 196-99; Barton J. Bernstein, "Case Law in *Plessy v. Ferguson*," *Journal of Negro History* 47, no. 3 (July 1962): 192-8; Also Justice Harlan's "Color-blind" dissent continues to praised and criticized, see for example, T. Alexander Aleininkoff, "Re-Reading Justice Harlan's Dissent in *Plessy v. Ferguson*: Freedom, Antiracism, and Citizenship," *University of Illinois Law Review*, no. 4 (1992): 961-77; *Brown v. Board of Education*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954); Higginbotham, *Shades of Freedom*, 113.

<sup>44</sup>Medley, "The Sad Story of How 'Separate But Equal' Was Born," 116; O'Neill, "Separate But Never Equal," 14.



The memory of Plessy will be properly recalled only to the extent that there are still those possessed of the conscience and the courage to fight for the causes that may not achieve respectability for generations and to resist injustices even when sanctioned by their own national leaders and law. Only so long as there are those to follow in the footsteps of a Plessy or Tourgée, a Martinet or Harlan, is there hope that other struggles, too, can eventually be won.<sup>45</sup>

It is a tribute to Homer Plessy and the other crusaders for justice that these two scholars grant such a positive legacy to a figure virtually abandoned in history. The case remains under review; yet beyond perfunctory comments about the key figure, Plessy is curiously absent. The *Plessy* case is often remembered for the "separate but equal" doctrine with Plessy's claim to whiteness unnoticed.

Tourgée cleverly offers a tactic in his brief for Plessy that required the Supreme Court Justices to consider seriously racial discrimination. Tourgée asked the justices to imagine themselves waking up transformed "with a black skin and curly hair" and facing Jim Crow. Tourgée suggests that the justices would be outraged after encountering the second-class citizenship which they would receive as Blacks in the 1890s. A hundred years after Tourgée questions the justices, political scientist Andrew Hacker writes about a similar experiment he conducted with his students whereby they were also transformed into Black people.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup>Mary Frances Berry, "Plessy V. Ferguson," *Emerge*, May 1996, 54; Olsen, *The Thin Disguise*, 27-8.

<sup>46</sup>"Brief for Homer A. Plessy by Albion W. Tourgée" in Olsen, *The Thin Disguise*, 102; Andrew Hacker, *Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile, Unequal*, new and rev. ed. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1995).

The students were offered compensation for having to face life as a Black person in the United States. Hacker relays the results:

When this parable has been put to white students, most seemed to feel that it would not be out of place to ask for \$50 million, or \$1 million for each coming black year. And this calculation conveys, as well as anything, the value white people place on their own skins. . . . The money would be used, as best it could to buy protection from the discriminations and dangers white people know they would face once they were perceived to be black.<sup>47</sup>

The significant amount of money that the students considered to be compensation for living as a Black person in the United States of America effectively illustrates the benefits of white privilege. Thus, one hundred years after Tourgée made his argument to the Supreme Court about the justices losing their whiteness, students feel that this same whiteness is yet worth millions.

The value of whiteness has remained the same or even increased. Legal scholar Derrick Bell, one of the first to examine whiteness as property, concludes

The law has mostly encouraged and upheld what Mr. Plessy argued in *Plessy v. Ferguson* was a property right in whiteness, and those at the top of the society have been benefitted [sic] because the masses of whites are too occupied in keeping blacks down to note the large gap between their shaky status and that of whites on top.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup>Hacker, *Two Nations*, 36.

<sup>48</sup>Derrick Bell, "White Superiority in America: Its Legal Legacy, Its Economic Costs," *Villanova Law Review* 33, (1988): 776.

Although I concur with Bell's suggestion that there is a hierarchy amongst Whites, the boundaries of race solidified in the *Plessy* case suggests that all Whites are intended beneficiaries of white privilege. Furthermore, Hacker's exercise proves that all Whites fear losing their status, not just those "on top." The maintenance of white privilege necessitates understanding exactly who benefits from it.

Accordingly, in order for Whites to maintain power and privilege, they must limit access to their group. One of the ways that the exclusivity of whiteness is maintained is through the one-drop rule. In articulating its history, Davis maintains,

The separate-but equal doctrine established in the *Plessy* case is no longer the law, as result of the judicial and legislative successes of the civil rights movement, but the nation's legal definition of who is black remains unchanged.<sup>49</sup>

The "judicial note" of who is Black that Davis argues the Supreme Court took in 1896 still remains. Despite *Plessy*'s plea, only Whites who are deemed "pure"—free of non-White ancestry—are allowed to benefit from whiteness. As discussed in the next chapter, even a multimillionaire like golfer Eldrick "Tiger" Woods cannot purchase whiteness: like other individuals of mixed racial heritage who possess some "Black

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<sup>49</sup>Davis, *Who is Black?*, 9.

blood," he remains bound by the same racial logic found in *Plessy*.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup>As recently as 1986, the Supreme Court refused to strike down the one-drop rule. The state of Louisiana's Susie Guillory Phipps case, where Mrs. Phipps who thought she was White was declared Black by the Court because of her 3/32 Black ancestry, is mentioned in Davis, *Who is Black?*, 8-11. See much of the legal critical race theory for the maintenance of whiteness. Also see whiteness studies: Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Roediger, *Black on White*; David R. Roediger, *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness: Essays on Race, Politics, and Working Class History* (New York: Verso, 1994); George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit From Identity Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998).

## Chapter 2

"I'M JUST WHO I AM": TIGER WOODS'S MULTIRACIAL IDENTITY<sup>51</sup>

Tiger, wake up. You're black. You're not green, you're not yellow, you're not purple, you're not Asian, you're not Cablasan [sic], you're black. Tiger Woods is fooling himself to think that just because he's Tiger Woods that he has transcended everything else here in society. This is the real world. In the—in the real world, the one drop rule still applies.

Terence Moore, *The Oprah Winfrey Show*<sup>52</sup>

Much has been written about the young golf phenomenon Eldrick "Tiger" Woods. Rather than focusing on his professional skills as a golfer, this chapter examines Woods's multiracial identity and his racial self-definition. Unlike Homer Plessy's legal claim to whiteness, Woods's racial identity assertion has been a social one. In other words, Woods has not gone to court for recognition of his White ancestry; rather, as a celebrity athlete, Woods has argued publicly for acknowledgment of his multiracial background. As evidenced in the above epigraph, despite Woods's popularity and wealth, many individuals refuse to respect his desire for recognition as multiracial and maintain that he is Black, a perspective similar to that which resulted in Plessy's dismissal. Thus, I am defining

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<sup>51</sup>In response to Oprah Winfrey's query of Woods's racial identity, Woods stated: "For me, I'm—I'm just who I am," "Tiger Woods," *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, 24 April 1997, 16. The quotations taken directly from the Winfrey transcripts include grammatical errors and misspoken words.

<sup>52</sup>Terence Moore, "Tiger Woods Race Controversy," *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, 29 April 1997: 8. Moore is a journalist with the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*.

Tiger's claim to whiteness through his desire for his entire ancestry to be recognized, including his whiteness.<sup>53</sup>

Although not always recognized, Woods's parents, Earl and Kultida (called "Tida"), are multiracial themselves. In his book *Playing Through*, Earl Woods writes, "Like me, Tida comes from a very mixed multiethnic heritage." Earl is half-Black, a quarter Native American, and a quarter Chinese. Tida is half Thai, a quarter Chinese and a quarter White. Although they have multiracial backgrounds, Earl refers to himself as Black, while Tida identifies herself as Asian. Yet because of their mixed ancestry, Earl writes, "No wonder we consider our Tiger a universal kid. We've got Africa, Asia, Europe, and America covered."<sup>54</sup>

Tiger Woods learned early that the multiracial identity of his parents, and in turn his own racial identity, marked him as different from Whites. In his biography of Tiger, Tim Rosaforte recounts Tiger's early years, noting:

They [The Woodses] were the only interracial family in an all-white neighborhood. Their home was pelted by limes and BB-gun fire while Tida was carrying Tiger. He was the only black child in his kindergarten class. The older white children once tied him to a tree.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup>See the many biographies written on Tiger Woods, including the ones I consulted: Tim Rosaforte, *Tiger Woods: The Makings of a Champion* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997); John Strege, *Tiger: A Biography of Tiger Woods*, (New York: Broadway Books, 1997). Since Eldrick "Tiger" Woods has been marketed as "Tiger" I alternate between referring to him by this and his last name, especially when I am distinguishing him from his parents.

<sup>54</sup>Earl Woods, *Playing Through: Straight Talk on Hard Work, Big Dreams and Adventures with Tiger* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1998): 56; Winfrey, "Tiger Woods," 24 April 1997, 9; Woods, *Playing Through*, 56.

<sup>55</sup>Rosaforte, *Tiger Woods*, 20.

While being interviewed on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, Tiger recalled the event Rosaforte notes affirming that on the first day of kindergarten he was tied to a tree, called monkey and nigger, and stoned. From a very early age Tiger understood he was seen as racially different from his White peers.<sup>56</sup>

Contrary to Plessy, Tiger's phenotype marks him as non-White and thus as a target for his White elementary school peers. Although he may look non-White to some, Woods's racial status has been a controversial national topic. During his first interview with talk show host Oprah Winfrey, the television host noted the racial make-up of his parents and asked Tiger how he identified racially:

**Mr. T. WOODS:** . . . a little funny thing is, growing up, I came up with this name. I'm a Cablinasian.

**WINFREY:** A Cablinasian.

**Mr. T. WOODS:** Ca, Caucasian; bl, black; in, Indian; Asian-Cablinasian.

**WINFREY:** That's what you call yourself?

**MR. T. WOODS:** Yeah.

**WINFREY:** Yeah.<sup>57</sup>

Later, in the same show, Winfrey returns to Tiger's racial identity and tells Earl Woods, " Although [Tiger] may [have] called himse—self [*sic*] a cabla-cablasia . . . Cablinasian,

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<sup>56</sup>Winfrey, "Tiger Woods," 24 April 1997, 7.

<sup>57</sup>*Ibid.*, 10. Since it has been criticized, I am including part of the dialogue after Winfrey's initial "Can we get this straight? What do you call yourself? Do you call yourself African-American?" questions. The dialogue is quoted directly from the Winfrey transcript and thus the "Mr." versus "Winfrey" construct is not my own.

when people see him, they see a black face." Winfrey uncomfortably grapples with the awkward term and changes the question from one of terminology to that of skin color.<sup>58</sup>

Winfrey offers some insight on racial politics when she suggests that despite Tiger's self-definition, his skin color, to most people, determines his race. Although Winfrey's logic is problematic since all African-Americans do not have dark skin, her racial assumptions are widely shared by others in the culture and raise the important question of who determines one's race. Can Tiger Woods call himself whatever race he wants, even a race that is not listed on the U.S. census? Or is race determined externally? And if it is determined by other's viewing, then does it change in various contexts?

In response to Winfrey's further inquiries regarding his race, Woods declares his racial identity. He argues, "I'm just who I am. . . . I'm—whatever you see in front of me—in front of you, that's what you got. It doesn't matter what's on the inside as far as my genetic code is." Tiger is just "who he is," however, his concession to others that "I'm whatever you see" displays an inconsistency regarding racial categories. Different people will see various races when they look at Tiger. Consequently, by allowing others to determine his racial identity with their visual perception, Tiger is relinquishing his own agency for self-identification, rendering his race an unstable element. Such

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<sup>58</sup>Ibid., 15.



capitulation enables people to see if Tiger fits neatly into their racial stereotypes of particular groups.<sup>59</sup>

In addition to explaining the racial designation Tiger uses to define himself, he also told Winfrey that he objects to being called African-American. He states, "They say pick one. I can't. I usually pick African-American-Asian, because those are the two households I was raised under." Despite his physical appearance, Woods wants to ensure that both his mother's Asian heritage and his father's Black heritage are recognized within him. Five days after Tiger's initial appearance on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, Winfrey did another show, entitled "Tiger Woods Race Controversy." The show focused on two controversies: first, on golfer Frank "Fuzzy" Zoeller's racist remarks directed at Tiger after Woods won the Masters golf tournament; second, on the uproar after Tiger called himself a "Cablinasian" and subsequent declaration of his objection to being labeled African-American.<sup>60</sup>

In an April 13, 1998, interview following Woods' Masters win, fellow-golfer Zoeller referred to Woods as a "little boy" and encouraged the media to tell Woods not to "serve fried chicken next year. . . . or collard greens, or whatever the hell they serve." (The winner of the Masters chooses the menu for the tournament dinner the following year.) Zoeller's "little boy" reference and his stereotypical

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<sup>59</sup>Ibid., 16.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., 16; "Tiger Woods Race Controversy, *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, 29 April 1997.

comments regarding food choices of African-Americans clearly attack Woods. Moreover, Zoeller's callous remarks once again reveal the attack on Woods to be motivated by his non-whiteness.<sup>61</sup>

The second "Race Controversy" of the show needs to be explored in depth. In her follow-up show, Winfrey defends Tiger's racial self-definition and plays the excerpt earlier discussed where Woods talks about his Cablinasian term.

After showing the clip, Winfrey tries to defend Woods:

OK. He does not say he calls himself that now; he said that he called himself that as a child. He was little. Here's what he did say, because I—I realized he was getting himself in a lot of trouble, so I went back and asked the question again. I realized he was in more trouble than he knew when he said it.<sup>62</sup>

Although the transcript does not support it, Winfrey contends that Woods only called himself a Cablinasian when he was younger and that he now sees himself as African-American and Asian-American. Yet Woods only said that he made the name up as a child, not that he has discarded it.

Winfrey rationalizes Woods's use of the term Cablinasian by suggesting that he was only a child and therefore was excused. Although for different motives, Winfrey follows Fuzzy Zoeller's lead and also reduces Tiger Woods to a boy. Winfrey makes Woods's racial transgression acceptable by passing it off as the foolishness of a child's play. The boundaries of acceptable race behavior and language are

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<sup>61</sup>Winfrey, "Tiger Woods Race Controversy," 29 April 1997, 3.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., 7.

exhibited in Winfrey's insistence to her audience that Tiger had erred as a youth. At this juncture, Woods had not suggested that he only used the Cablinasian as a child. In fact, Woods had made it clear that he was uncomfortable with being labeled "African-American." The public reaction to Woods' refusal to be labeled a single race may have caused him to redefine himself, or at least to discontinue the use of his term.

Also enlightening in Winfrey's defense of Tiger, is her statement—which she makes twice—that she knew Tiger was, "getting himself in a lot of trouble." It is not clear what kind of trouble and who exactly Woods is in trouble with-- Winfrey's audience or the Black and Asian-American communities who Winfrey asserts want to "claim" him? Although it is unclear who Woods might have offended, it is evident that Winfrey believes that there is some type of "racial police" who are offended by Woods' comments.<sup>63</sup>

Winfrey clearly felt that journalist Terence Moore was a person with whom Woods was "getting into trouble," as the talk show host features his comments after defending Woods. Moore's reaction to Tiger's racial self-definition stands as the epigraph of this chapter. Moore attacks Woods, arguing that he is in racial denial. As ammunition, Moore utilizes the previously discussed one-drop rule to demand that Woods "wake up" and realize that he is Black:

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<sup>63</sup>Ibid., 7.

In the—in the real world, the one-drop rule still applies. In the old days, there used to be laws in the book that if you had one drop of black blood in you, you were black. Well that's still unofficially the case in the minds of many in America. One drop of black blood, you're black. Tiger, you are black.<sup>64</sup>

Notably, Moore himself is Black, and may be a representative of the community which Oprah says wants to claim Tiger.

Ironically, Moore is clinging to the same racial logic which White slaveholders invented to oppress and increase the number of Black slaves. Writer Itabari Njeri blasts the theory Moore adheres to as she refers to it as "the little-dab'll-do-ya rule."<sup>65</sup>

In spite of his adherence to oppressive racial logic, Moore hardly stands alone in his criticism of Woods. An audience member agrees with Moore, stating, "Can I just say, Tiger, it is—it seems to be in self-denial." Winfrey defends Woods and disagrees with both Moore and the audience member. She challenges them by referring to Woods's pattern of checking the two boxes African-American and Asian, on forms that require racial background. However, the audience member stands by his convictions and retorts: "Once he started saying—he put the black in the middle. That's a kind of denial." Thus, this unidentified audience member thought Tiger Woods was not recognizing his racial identity because in his use of the term Cablinasian, "Bl" for Black comes in

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<sup>64</sup>Ibid., 8.

<sup>65</sup>Itabari Njeri, *The Last Plantation: Color, Conflict, and Identity: Reflections of a New World Black* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), 170.

the middle. Woods's refusal to adhere to hypodescent, where Black stands as the subordinate racial group and therefore takes precedence, causes this audience member to see Woods as a person denying his race.<sup>66</sup>

Journalist Isabel Wilkerson profiled Tiger in the 1997 *Essence* Men's Issue and offers commentary on Woods's racial self-definition. For the article, the journalist interviewed a Black female social worker attending her first golf match to see Woods. Wilkerson states, "This Cablinasian thing does not sit well with her." Similar to the Oprah show audience member, Wilkerson's interviewee also criticizes Cablinasian because "'It puts Caucasian first,' she says. 'I just hope he matures to see the world as it really is.'" One might ask if Woods had placed Black first in his term, would this have appeased these members of the "racial police?"<sup>67</sup>

It is apparent that the racial police have rules in the game and that Woods has broken them. The dismissal of Woods's use of "Cablinasian" by his critics illustrates the rejection of Woods to lay stake to his multiracial identity and therefore to the whiteness within this declaration. Furthermore, the two critics who objected to the construction of Cablinasian as placing whiteness first offer evidence to the rejection of Woods's claim to White identity. Wilkerson sheds light on the Black community's feelings over the issue.

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<sup>66</sup>Winfrey, "Tiger Woods Race Controversy," 29 April 1997, 11.

<sup>67</sup>Isabel Wilkerson, "The All-American," *Essence*, November 1997, 100.

Tiger "Told Oprah he didn't feel comfortable being called Black. It felt like a slight we had heard before, a sweet distancing from the rest of us." Wilkerson posits Woods as trying to escape from his Blackness. She criticizes Woods's use of the term Cablinasian, stating that its usage "made it worse by trying to fight one ill-fitting racial designation (Black or Asian) with an even more contrived one. It seemed both a naive plea for a color-blind, colorless America." Wilkerson offers more insight when she concedes that Woods may be ahead of his time in refusing to be limited by racial classification, but offers that Woods has also missed the point of Blackness as a "political statement, a cultural declaration."<sup>68</sup>

Wilkerson argues that Blackness is political and expands on her assertion by suggesting that, historically, by defining oneself as Black

. . . was turning the one-drop rule on its head and saying not only do we 'have some Black in us,' we are Black. Which is why 30 million people of 30 million different hues, including the Halle Berrys born of a White parent, call themselves Black or African-American when they know there is more than just that blood running through their veins.<sup>69</sup>

Although she concedes the political nature of Blackness, Wilkerson does not fully appreciate this point. In a commentary on the Clarence Thomas/Anita Hill hearings, sociologist Jacquelyn Johnson Jackson further explains Blackness as political. Jackson states

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<sup>68</sup>Ibid.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid.

Thus, it is fitting and proper that we recognize the fact that Native American Blacks are highly diversified by various physiological, psychological, sociocultural, and political factors. Our recognition of this diversity is long overdue, and, until we accept it we will falter by the road in just believing that because you are black you are committed to blackness.<sup>70</sup>

Blackness is more than membership in a race, as Jackson explains. The decision to commit to Blackness is a choice. Wilkerson wants Woods to follow in the path of other Blacks with multiracial ancestry who have chosen Blackness. She sees this route as his only choice.

Wilkerson, however, leaves out the valid possibility of a "multiracial movement," which is trying to create a separate "multiracial" category for people who have two racially different parents. Thus, some of the "Halle Berrys" like Tiger Woods have broken ranks and formed a new political stance. In refusing to accept the one-drop rule, they have chosen to identify simultaneously with both, or in some cases all, of their races instead.<sup>71</sup>

In her statement, Wilkerson alludes to the multiracial ancestry of Blacks when she mentions "more than just that blood." Wilkerson is referring to what Davis explains: "From

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<sup>70</sup>Jacquelyne Johnson Jackson, "'Them Against Us': Anita Hill v. Clarence Thomas," in *Court of Appeal: The Black Community Speaks Out on the Racial and Sexual Politics of Clarence Thomas vs. Anita Hill*, eds. Robert Chrisman and Robert L. Allen (New York: Ballantine Books, 1992), 103.

<sup>71</sup>For the multiracial movement see Root, ed., *The Multiracial Experience*; and Naomi Zack, ed., *American Mixed Race: The Culture of Microdiversity* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1995). Actress Halle Berry identifies as Black yet she has a White mother and a Black father.

75 to well over 90 percent of all American blacks apparently have some white ancestry, and up to 25 percent have Indian background." The large number of Blacks with White ancestry reaffirms the political nature of identifying as Black. Moreover, it strengthens Wilkerson's argument that although Blacks have White ancestry, they have historically defined themselves as Black.<sup>72</sup>

Wilkerson illustrates the schism in thought that exists between the two groups. She and Terence Moore stand on the one hand with tradition. On the other hand, Tiger Woods and the supporters of the multiracial movement desire new configurations of race. Both of these groups believe unabashedly that their interpretation of race is the key to the future. Njeri outlines the division, suggesting that "a bitter battle has been brewing for decades between the traditionally defined Black population and a new generation of *multiracial* Americans of partial African descent who do not want to be defined solely by their African ancestry."<sup>73</sup>

In his pioneering book, *New People: Miscegenation and Mulattoes in the United States*, historian Joel Williamson explains that historically, "mulattoes" were listed on the U.S. census as separate from Blacks or Whites from 1850-1920. Thus, multiracial people have a period to point to when they were defined as a distinct group. Additionally, the African-Americans who want Tiger to be part of the Black community

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<sup>72</sup>Wilkerson, "The All-American," 100; Davis, *Who is Black?*, 29.

<sup>73</sup>Njeri, *The Last Plantation*, 4.



because of the one-drop rule are also adhering to an historical legacy. Unfortunately, neither those who cling to the one-drop rule nor those who want to examine all the drops have advanced far beyond the days of Plessy in terms of racial thinking. The debate over Woods's race allows an examination of Winfrey's belief that "[e]verybody wants him to belong to their ethnic group now."<sup>74</sup>

Oprah refers to Tiger as "America's son" because of his multiracial heritage. Likewise, Wilkerson titled her article on Woods, "The All-American." The shift from a White body as the prototype of what it means to be an American to Tiger Woods standing as this representative should not be overlooked. After listing his parent's racial backgrounds, Winfrey argues that Woods is "America's son." Winfrey seems to be celebrating Woods's racial make-up in a ethnic melting-pot type sentiment. Winfrey's gesture may be seen as a signal of racial progress as the Black body has moved from the periphery to the center. However, Winfrey's claim of Woods as America's son is only possible when he becomes racially-neutral. Woods is America's son because he is seen as a non-threatening person of color, who like Winfrey in many ways, achieves success through alternating between highlighting and hiding blackness.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup>Joel Williamson, *New People: Miscegenation and Mulattoes in the United States* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995; Free Press, 1980); Winfrey, "Tiger Woods," 24 April 1997, 15.

<sup>75</sup>Ann duCille provides an excellent account of how former football star O.J. Simpson also had his race erased to become an "all-American." DuCille argues, "who gets to be

Earl Woods agrees with Oprah Winfrey that many ethnic groups compete for ownership of Tiger. When asked by Oprah about Tiger's race, Earl contends that Tiger belongs to the "human race." Earl's marketing-savvy response is idealistic at best and a cop-out at worst. Tida Woods is more honest about her feelings over Tiger's identity. As John F. Stacks reports, Tida "complains about press descriptions of Tiger as black when he's half Asian, but Earl's market-wise formulation is that when his son is playing in the U.S. he's black, and when he's playing in Asia he's Asian." Therefore, Earl's "human race" response may be coded as disingenuous because of his desire to utilize Tiger as a "chameleon" of sorts for financial profits.<sup>76</sup>

When Tiger appeared again on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* on August 19, 1998, the earlier controversy was discussed. This time Woods declared that he made up the term "Cablinasian" because

it's just one of those things when you're bored and you're having fun and you got nothing to do, you don't

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American is still very much a matter not only of race but of color. Why couldn't O.J. Simpson be all-American and black?" Ann duCille, "The Blacker the Juice: O.J. Simpson and the Squeeze Play of Race," *Skin Trade* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 162-163.

<sup>76</sup>John F. Stacks, "The Sound of Money: Tiger Woods Drops Out of College to Become a Multimillionaire—And the Tour's Best Golfer," *Time*, 9 September 1996, 61. For an essay on another superstar athlete's marketing and race see Leola Johnson and David Roediger, "'Hertz, Don't It?'" *Becoming Colorless and Staying Black in the Crossover of O.J. Simpson*," in *Birth of a Nation'hood: Gaze, Script, and Spectacle in the O.J. Simpson Case*, eds. Toni Morrison and Claudia Brodsky Lacour (New York: Pantheon Books, 1997), 197-239.

want to do homework. And so you write down stuff and kind of put things together and there's a name.<sup>77</sup>

Obviously, the criticism regarding Cablinasian had affected his use of the term. Instead of reasserting his use of Cablinasian, Woods allows his racial identity terminology to rest on Oprah's repeating of his earlier African-American and Asian-American identity, displaying a weakening of his whiteness claim.

Clearly, Woods's huge success at such a young age has contributed to his popularity. Yet not all golfers have to contend with statements written in the *Washington Informer* saying, "Wake up, Tiger! Whatever you do, you'll always belong to us, even if you don't think you're one of us." The comment dehumanizes Woods and reduces him to a piece of property that can be bought or possessed. As one of a few minority golfers, Woods understandably appeals to a sense of racial pride, especially within people of color, supporters and critics alike.<sup>78</sup>

On the August 19, 1998 *Oprah* interview, Winfrey spoke with entertainer Will Smith about Tiger Woods. After complimenting Woods on his golf skills and comparing him with former basketball star Michael Jordan, Smith says, "you know, and just being black, you just feel good." This is precisely what Tiger's marketing advisers—labeled "Team Tiger" by Earl—

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<sup>77</sup>"Tiger Woods and Tara Lipinski," *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, 19 August 1998, 9.

<sup>78</sup>Askia Muhammad, "Call Me Black! Not 'Multi-Racial'," *Washington Informer* 33, no. 33, 21 May 1997, 9.

want Black people to feel. The fact that Tiger plays golf, a traditionally elite White sport, may exacerbate his non-whiteness. Since there are and have been few Black golfers, some Blacks want to "claim" him as their representative in a sport that has historically excluded them; yet they are uneasy about recognizing that Woods's ancestry is more than Black.<sup>79</sup>

African-Americans who criticize Woods for not calling himself Black are receiving mixed messages through Tiger's marketing. As noted earlier, Tiger's image changes depending on geography. In addition, he waxes between the multiracial "everyman" and the African-American "trailblazer." In her book *Race Men*, scholar Hazel Carby begins her analysis by commenting: "In these days of what is referred to as 'global culture,' the Nike corporation produces racialized images for the world by elevating the bodies of Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods to the status of international icons." Indeed, Woods has become an international icon; and Nike, along with "Team Tiger," have used race to sell Tiger Woods's image. In an ironic turn, Tiger is simultaneously portrayed as the exotic "other" and the historical insider.<sup>80</sup>

In a 1997 *Newsweek* interview, Earl Woods mentions Tiger's rejection by some Blacks for not being "Black enough." Yet, the author's note, "If you push Earl far

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<sup>79</sup>Winfrey, "Tiger Woods and Tara Lipinski," 10; For racism in golf see Woods, *Playing Through*.

<sup>80</sup>Hazel Carby, *Race Men* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 1.

enough, though, he'll grant another side of the racial quandary. 'For marketing purposes,' [Earl] chuckled, Tiger's mixed heritage 'goes off the charts.'" Woods' multiracial identity allows his sponsors the flexibility to use different parts of his ethnicity to appeal to particular groups. Further, the "I am Tiger Woods" ads allow children of all races to "become" Tiger Woods since his race is so fluid.<sup>81</sup>

Nike has capitalized on Woods' appeal as a Black golfer, complete with advertisements that point out the racist restrictions at country clubs across the United States. Accordingly, it is probable that Team Tiger told Woods to drop the Cablinasian title from his vernacular because of its lack of mass appeal. For instance, supermodel Veronica Webb told *Newsweek*, "It's a lot easier marketing the next Jackie Robinson than it is to market a Cablinasian. A Cablinasian sounds like something Will Smith would be fighting in 'ID4'." Hence, Woods plays into the African-American golfer image. After winning the Masters, for example, he paid tribute to the Black golfers who had come before him.<sup>82</sup>

In his inflammatory article on Woods in *Gentlemen's Quarterly*, journalist Charles P. Pierce succinctly outlines Tiger's marketing. He writes,

The racial aspect of Tiger's gospel has always been the most complex part of it. At first he emphasized his multiracial background—after all, he is as much Thai as

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<sup>81</sup>John Leland and Gregory Beals, "In Living Colors: Tiger Woods is The Exception that Rules. For His Multiracial Generation, Hip Isn't Just Black and White," *Newsweek*, 5 May 1997, 58.

<sup>82</sup>*Ibid.*, 60. "ID4" stands for *Independence Day 4*.

he is American, and Earl is an authentic American ethnic stew. At the same time, Tiger and his management team were pushing him as a racial pioneer along the lines of Jackie Robinson, Muhammad Ali and Arthur Ashe, none of whom considered themselves 'multiethnic.' The Nike commercial pointed out the dissonance of the two messages.<sup>83</sup>

Despite his inappropriate "ethnic stew" remark, Pierce's analysis is helpful. The Nike commercial featured Tiger saying, "There are still courses in the United States that I am not allowed to play because the color of my skin." The advertisement is clever because it allows the Tiger to benefit from the status of both Black racial pioneer and victim of racism. Accordingly, the public is outraged over the fact that the multiracially-identified posterboy of racial conciliation could be forbidden access to any golf course in this nation.<sup>84</sup>

Woods' multiracial identity gives him stature because he is not just Black; he is multiracial--and therefore better in some people's eyes. Thus, his whiteness allows some to divert their racism. After receiving the multiple messages regarding Woods's identity from Nike and other corporate sponsors, it is not surprising that many ethnic groups wonder if he identifies with them. Yet others see him as another Black man because of his physical appearance. As a result, Woods has received death threats and hate mail, which he reads because he wants to know what people think of him.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>83</sup>Charles P. Pierce, "The Man. Amen," *Gentlemen's Quarterly*, April 1997, 248.

<sup>84</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup>Woods, *Playing Through*, 155.

Golfer Fuzzy Zoeller saw only Tiger Woods the Black golfer. His reference to Woods as a "little boy" is particularly significant since during slavery and Jim Crow African-American men were seen and treated like children and often called "boy" by Whites. Zoeller defended his stereotypical remarks about African-Americans as an attempt at humor. *Time* magazine's Jack E. White cleverly analyzes Zoeller's commentary and argues

[H]is real crime was not, as his defenders seem to think, merely a distasteful breach of racial etiquette or an inept attempt at humor. The real crime was falling behind the times. The old black-white stereotypes are out of date, and Zoeller is just the latest casualty of America's failure to come to grips with the perplexing and rapidly evolving significance of racial identity in what is fast becoming the most polygot society in history.<sup>86</sup>

Zoeller could only see Woods as either Black or White. Journalist White suggests that Zoeller's biting sarcasm was worse because the fellow golfer attacked Woods solely on his Blackness rather than his full racial identity. White's analysis is fascinating and its appearance in *Time* magazine illustrates the changing racial demographics and the hallmark that multiracial activists have achieved.

The fact that Zoeller defined Woods as Black and not Asian-American in his comments suggests that Woods's phenotype marks him as Black, as Oprah had suggested. Woods's appeal in the golf world is based on this Blackness,

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<sup>86</sup>Jack E. White, "'I'm Just Who I Am': Race is No Longer as Simple as Black or White. So, What Does This Mean for America?," *Time*, 5 May 1997, 33.

as there are other golfers his age who are as good but do not receive the same level of recognition. In his definition of race, Haney López includes "morphology" and "ancestry." He explains that within specific contexts "physical characteristics" are linked to race. Tiger Woods's brown skin, "dark skin" according to one writer, makes him valuable in the golf world.<sup>87</sup>

The uproar over Woods's desire not to be labeled as solely African-American came mainly from the African-American community. Whites—policing the whiteness border—already placed Tiger as Black, as Zoeller presents. Blacks flocked to Tiger because they saw him as one of their own, as Wilkerson suggests. Thus, Woods's declaration that he is multiracial "felt like a slight" because the distancing is the assertion of a hybrid identity when Woods's brown skin marked him as Black. Woods's claim to hybridity disrupts the normal Blackness/whiteness dichotomy because whiteness depends on Blackness for its existence. Therefore, Woods's altering of the terrain is unacceptable, even to Blacks who are disadvantaged by the system.<sup>88</sup>

"Cablinasian" is the epitome of hybridity and therefore cannot be accepted by either Blacks or Whites. Both groups lose their stake in race if they let go. In a fascinating exchange between scholars Jorge Klor de Alva and Cornel West, the same tension emerges. Klor de Alva argues for Black

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<sup>87</sup>Haney López, "The Social Construction of Race," 7; Stacks, "The Sound of Money," 61.

<sup>88</sup>Wilkerson, "The All-American," 100.



intellectuals "to stop participating in the insidious one-drop-rule game of identifying themselves as black." West responds,

If you're saying that we are, for the most part, biological and cultural hybrids, I think you're certainly right. But at the same time there's a danger in calling for an end to certain history if we're unable to provide other options.<sup>89</sup>

The danger that West is concerned about is represented in Woods' call for the recognition of hybridity. As Gilroy suggests, the danger is the lack of language currently in place to discuss the reality of the racial intermixture that exists in the United States. Admitting that racial purity does not exist is too risky for many who are comfortable with their position in the racial hierarchy. Honest discussion might require shifting of power, something Whites will not do easily and, as West illustrates, something Blacks are apprehensive about doing.<sup>90</sup>

After criticizing Woods' use of Cablinasian as "both a naive plea for a color-blind, colorless America," Wilkerson concedes in parentheses, "that one day may be seen as being ahead of its time." Scholars such as Root, Gilroy, and Zack suggest that the time has already come for a renegotiation of race and its boundaries. The response to Woods's assertion of his multiracial identity suggests that people are unwilling to deal with race in a more complicated way.

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<sup>89</sup>Jorge Klor de Alva, Earl Shorris, and Cornel West, "Our Next Race Question: The Uneasiness Between Blacks and Latinos," *Harper's*, April 1996, 58.

<sup>90</sup>Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, xi, 2.

Racial mixing may be less taboo but it still carries a stigma. Thus, the "options" that West needs before he stops defining himself as Black are not sufficient enough at this point; consequently, whiteness prevails. Nevertheless, some White parents see their whiteness as a barrier in their parent-child relationship. As a result, they reject it, as explored in the next chapter.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>91</sup>Wilkerson, "The All-American," 100.

### Chapter 3

#### WHITE NO MORE: WHITE PARENTS OF BLACK/BIRACIAL CHILDREN

Is there not something unseemly, in our society, about the spectacle of a white woman mothering a black child? A white woman giving totally to a black child; a black child totally and demandingly dependent for everything, sustenance itself, from a white woman. The image of a white woman suckling a black child; the image of a black child suckling for its life from the bosom of a white woman. The utter interdependence of such an image; the merging it implies; the giving up of boundary; the encompassing of other within self; the unbounded generosity and interconnectedness of such an image. Such a picture says there is no difference; it places the hope of continuous generation, of immortality of the white self, in a little black face.

Patricia J. Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*<sup>92</sup>

In the above epigraph, legal scholar Patricia Williams questions the dissonance between White mother and Black child in the United States of America. Williams captures the discomfort felt by many regarding the taboo subject of children born of interracial relationships. As Williams keenly analyzes, the connection between White mother and Black child presents a shifting boundary. The bond Williams mentions symbolizes the hybridity of American culture within the body itself. Within the recent works on racial identity specifically dealing with multiraciality and whiteness, a group of White parents has emerged. In contrast with Homer A. Plessy and Eldrick "Tiger" Woods's claims to whiteness, these White parents reject their whiteness. Exploring the

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<sup>92</sup>Patricia J. Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 226-7.

parents' negotiation of their racial identity offers insight on the fluidity of race.<sup>93</sup>

As explored in the previous chapters, in 1896 and in the 1990s multiracial figures have not been markedly successful in their quest for the recognition of their White ancestry. The legacy of the one-drop rule (among both Black and White Americans) has proven powerful enough to discredit the attempts of both Plessy and Woods. Although Plessy and Woods were contained by their "Black blood," some White parents (or their children writing about their parents' experiences) have recently suggested that they are no longer White because of their Black/biracial children. Many questions about race and agency may be raised by examining the rejections of Whiteness by these parents.

In a review of books by these White parents in the journal *Transition*, France Winddance Twine states, "The past decade has witnessed the birth of a new literary genre: the memoir by a white mother of black children." Twine argues that these women constitute an area of research in studies of whiteness, particularly as they relate to class issues. Although she is correct in her assessment, this chapter specifically focuses on the women's ability, and other parents', to redefine their racial identity because of their children. As previously noted, Tiger Woods has been attacked for denying his Blackness because he wishes to acknowledge

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<sup>93</sup>I am using "group" to demarcate similar stories and remarks by White parents of Black/Biracial children.

both his parents' races. In the same decade, are White parents of Black/biracial children similarly condemned for denying their Whiteness because they want to recognize their children or do they have more freedom to declare their race?<sup>94</sup>

Historically, in the United States, children have derived their race from their parents. In 1662, under slavery, a Virginia statute, *partus sequitur ventrem*, declared the child of a "negro" woman and "Englishman" should take the status of the mother. In his book, *A Completely New Look at Interracial Sexuality*, scholar Lawrence R. Tenzer argues, "This was a very important law because it established the legal precedence of *partus sequitur ventrem*, that is, the child follows the social status of the mother." A. Leon Higginbotham, Jr. and Barbara Kopytoff maintain that *partus sequitur ventrem* was contrary to English tradition, as children normally inherited the status of their fathers. Obviously, then, this statute was constructed in part to allow slaveowners to impregnate their slavewomen and produce more slaves.<sup>95</sup>

English professor Werner Sollors describes the larger impact of the law, stating that "Whiteness was thus

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<sup>94</sup>France Winddance Twine, "The White Mother: Blackness, Whiteness, and Interracial Families," *Transition: An International Review* 73, vol. 7, no. 1 (1998): 144.

<sup>95</sup>Lawrence R. Tenzer, *A Completely New Look at Interracial Sexuality: Public Opinion and Select Commentaries* (Manahawkin, NJ: Scholars' Publishing House, 1990), 58; A. Leon Higginbotham, Jr. and Barbara K. Kopytoff, "Racial Purity and Interracial Sex in the Law of Colonial and Antebellum Virginia," *Georgetown Law Journal* 77, no. 6 (August 1989): 1971, note 20. The statute also controlled White women's sexuality.

symbolically identified as the color of all possible origins (and freedom), blackness (into which interracial identity was often folded) as the source of only black origins (and slavery)." Therefore, in 1662, Blackness already had a negative stigma, while whiteness was positive. Sollors also reviews the strain that *partus sequitur ventrem* had on familial relationships. For instance, under the law, immediate relatives were often separated by race which could devastate interracial families.<sup>96</sup>

Similar to *partus sequitur ventrem*, F. James Davis traces the one-drop rule back to slavery but argues, "The one-drop rule did not become uniformly accepted until during the 1920s." Thus, which parent was Black and which was White and where a person was born determined the race and the status (slave or free) of a mixed race child. After the acceptance of the one-drop rule, one's birthplace and which parent was Black became irrelevant as mixed race children were declared Black. Recently, there has been a resurgence of the idea of reexamining the racial identity of multiracial children, so that both parents' races are recognized. It is under these current debates over the "multiracial movement" that these White parents are examined.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>96</sup>Werner Sollors, *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both: Thematic Explorations of Interracial Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 43.

<sup>97</sup>Davis, *What Color is Black?*, 31; For the "multiracial movement" see: Root, *The Multiracial Experience*; Zack, *American Mixed Race*; and Jon Michael Spencer, *The New Colored People: The Mixed-Race Movement in America* (New York: New York University Press, 1997).

In their recent book *Divided Sisters: Bridging the Gap Between Black Women and White Women*, authors Midge Wilson and Kathy Russell provide the relevant statistics on biracial children. In the section "Mothers and Biracial Daughters," the authors state:

Statistics derived from the 1990 census indicated that approximately four out of every thousand couples, or 211,000 marriages in the United States that year, were racially mixed, Black and White. Just twenty years earlier, only 1.5 thousand marriages were mixed this way. The number of biracial offspring has similarly risen, from an estimated 8700 births in 1969 to nearly 45,000 in 1989.<sup>98</sup>

The authors contend that the figures are probably wrong because "biracial babies born to unwed mothers are classified as monoracial." It should be noted that interracial marriage was prohibited in many states until anti-miscegenation statutes were declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in *Loving v. Virginia* in 1967. Although the statistics may be inaccurate, the point is that interracial relationships and the number of biracial children in the United States are increasing. Therefore, examining the views on race of White parents of Black/biracial children can only prove beneficial to the understanding of the phenomena and politics of whiteness and race in general.<sup>99</sup>

At least two White parents of Black/biracial children, Maureen T. Reddy and Jane Lazarre, have written books about

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<sup>98</sup>Midge Wilson and Kathy Russell, *Divided Sisters: Bridging the Gap Between Black Women and White Women* (New York: Anchor Books, 1996), 232-3.

<sup>99</sup>*Loving v. Virginia*, 388 U.S. 1 (1967).

their experiences. Reddy's *Crossing the Color Line: Race, Parenting, and Culture* and Lazarre's *Beyond the Whiteness of Whiteness: Memoir of a White Mother of Black Sons* provide detailed accounts of these women's parenting experiences of Black/biracial children. Additionally, since these two parents have written book-length accounts, they stand as the strongest examples of parents who argue that their race has changed because of their children.<sup>100</sup>

Reddy and Lazarre are both college professors who teach African-American literature and both identify strongly with White ethnic backgrounds--Irish and Jewish, respectively. Additionally, both Reddy and Lazarre are married to African-American men. Reddy published her book in 1994 while Lazarre's followed in 1996. Although the authors share many similarities, the books are different in form and, of course, in some aspects. In her review of the two works, Boyd Zenner states, "In contrast to the mixture of theory and personal example found in *Crossing the Color Line*, Jane Lazarre's *Beyond the Whiteness of Whiteness* is written in an almost purely autobiographical mode." The contrasting styles offer insight into the author's personal feelings regarding race from different standpoints. Reddy recounts anecdotes while drawing on theory of race and gender to analyze situations. On the contrary, Lazarre sets various scenes and recalls

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<sup>100</sup>Maureen T. Reddy, *Crossing the Color Line: Race, Parenting, and Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press 1994); Jane Lazarre, *Beyond the Whiteness of Whiteness: Memoir of a White Mother of Black Sons* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996).



communications within her family to question her own position in this racialized society.<sup>101</sup>

At the outset of the book, Reddy recalls a conversation with a Black woman who tells her that she, the author, has "assimilate[d] into the black community." In response, Reddy states, "'I'm still white. I think I stand on the color line itself, not on one side of it. Or maybe I'm like a bridge, stretching across the line, touching both sides, but mostly in the middle somewhere.'" Thus, at this point Reddy clings to her whiteness while asserting that as a "white woman married to a black man, a white mother of black children" she is a "bridge." Reddy's positioning herself as a middle link—a "bridge"—between Blacks and Whites is fascinating, especially compared with the idea of the "tragic mulatto."<sup>102</sup>

The "tragic mulatto" in African-American and American literature and film is the mixed Black and White figure who because of his or her racial identity is trapped between two worlds and therefore destined to misfortune. Reddy's assessment of her position as the "bridge" subsumes the role that society has marked for her children. The "what about the children" question often raised to suppress interracial relationships is turned on its head by Reddy's assuming this role. Contrary to the tragic mulatto, many key figures in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and still

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<sup>101</sup>Boyd Zenner, "Whiteness and Fairness," *Women's Review of Books* 14, no. 4 (January 1997): 7. Thanks to Zenner for recognizing the similarities in Reddy and Lazarre's backgrounds.

<sup>102</sup>Reddy, *Crossing the Color Line*, 5.

today believe that biracial children are the key to civil race relations. Reddy's commandeering of this role rather than her children signals a shift in the dynamics of racial politics.<sup>103</sup>

Later in the text, Reddy contends, "It was only when I stopped being white, in some sense, that I began to understand what whiteness means in America." Thus, Reddy suggests that her racial identity has changed; therefore, enabling her to better understand whiteness. Reddy compares the U.S. with South African apartheid and declares, "I think: the white partner, in learning what being black in America entails, learns what whiteness means and loses or abandons at least some of that whiteness." Reddy is referring to white privilege and the recognition of white as a racial category. Therefore, although Reddy does not claim to be non-White, she does suggest that her whiteness has been altered by the birth of her children. Moreover, Reddy believes that her new found recognition of the Black experience has caused her to reinterpret her own racial being.

Notably, it is not her interracial marriage to her husband Douglas Best which causes Reddy to interrogate her whiteness; rather, it is the birth of her children, Brendan

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<sup>103</sup>Many works in early African-American literature employ the "tragic mulatto." For a review of the concept see Sollors, *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both*, 220-245. Author Kathryn Talalay points out that African-American writer George Schuyler and his White wife Josephine "believed that the solution to America's race problems lay in miscegenation," in *Composition in Black and White: The Life of Philippa Schuyler* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), viii.

and Siobhan (called Sean and Ailis in the book). In a *Boston Globe* article about Reddy and the book, writer Irene Sege argues

In a society where, for all the barriers broken by the civil rights movement, race still divides, bearing Brendan and Siobhan catapulted Reddy across that border in a way that marrying Best did not. The innocents born to her transformed her into a racial fellow traveler in a way that exchanging wedding vows with the grown child of another mother did not.<sup>104</sup>

Reddy's care as a parent causes her to reject the way whiteness permeates society. Reddy wants what is best for her children and realizes that as non-Whites they are excluded from some of the benefits her own racial status provides her.

Reddy's book provides insight into the role of gender in interracial parenting as well. Reddy details the differences she feels when parenting her daughter as compared with her son because of their shared femaleness. In addition, Reddy reveals her son's struggle as a pre-teenager to come to terms with his own race by fluctuating between a Black and biracial identity. Reddy and her husband had assumed that their children would see themselves as Black and were unprepared when their son contends that he is both Black and White. In assuming that Reddy's Black husband would share the same racial identity with his children, the parents failed to

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<sup>104</sup>Irene Sege, "Color Her World: A White Mother of Bi-racial Children Sees Society in a Different Light, *Boston Globe*, 18 January 1995, 23.

recognize that their son possessed a racial identity unique from both of them.<sup>105</sup>

Reddy concludes that "White people cannot become black, but we can reject the privileges of whiteness, calling them what they are, and in that choice build a bridge across the color line." Reddy believes, "All of our lives depend on that bridge; without it we will surely drown." Since Reddy already calls herself a bridge, she seems to suggest that Whites are the key to race relations and to maintaining life. In the end, Reddy does not believe that she is Black. Instead, she sees herself as a bridge because of her children. In turn, she refuses to use her white privilege because her children are targets of the flip side of white privilege--racial discrimination.<sup>106</sup>

In contrast with Reddy, Jane Lazarre concludes that she is in fact a person of color because of her two sons, Adam and Khary. Lazarre writes:

For most of their growing up, Douglas and I defined our family as 'biracial.' But that is a term we now see as problematic--as if there were two neatly defined races;

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<sup>105</sup>Scholar Lawrence A. Hirschfeld provides insight on when and what children learn about race, explaining: Children . . . do not believe race to be a superficial quality of the world. Multicultural curricula aside, few people believe that race is only skin deep. Certainly few 3-year-olds do. They believe that race is an intrinsic, immutable, and essential aspect of a person's identity. Moreover, they seem to come to this conclusion on their own. They do not need to be taught that race is a deep property, they know it themselves already.

Lawrence A. Hirschfeld, *Race in the Making: Cognition, Culture, and the Child's Construction of Human Kinds* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1996), xi.

<sup>106</sup>Reddy, *Crossing the Color Line*, 173.

as if there were an indisputable entity called race; as if young men with brown skins can ever be considered 'part white' in America.<sup>107</sup>

Lazarre now sees herself as a member of a Black family and as a person raising Black sons. As soon as she became pregnant, Lazarre reflects, "I realized that I—my body and self—was no longer exactly white." Lazarre's memoir details her struggle to figure out who she has become and what that means in relation to her sons.

Much as Reddy had done, Lazarre posits whiteness as white privilege and offers candid accounts of her shame in benefiting from her racial status. Lazarre and Reddy differ in their comfort level with external views of their interracial unions. Reddy talks of "coming out" to people as the White mother of Black children and contends that she worries that her views on race will be discounted by Whites after they realize that she is involved with Blacks. Moreover, she has anxiety over, and hesitates with, "blacks, especially women, because I worry that coming out will diminish the possibility of connection." On the contrary, Lazarre states, "I feel neither guilt nor regret nor any sense of personal defensiveness for my choice of husband." Reddy and Lazarre's differing stances may account for the way they define themselves.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>107</sup>Lazarre, *Beyond the Whiteness of Whiteness*, xvii.

<sup>108</sup>Reddy, *Crossing the Color Line*, 147; Lazarre, *Beyond the Whiteness of Whiteness*, 7.

Although Reddy does not regret her choice of husbands, her language of "coming out" and fear of being seen as biased by other Whites indicates some level of discomfort with her position; however, attention needs to be paid to Reddy's ability to speak honestly about her concerns. In contrast, Lazarre's carefree attitude about other's views of her interracial marriage seems out of character when compared with her obsession with being accepted by her children and extended Black family. Both authors paint their relationships with their husbands and in-laws as idyllic, despite their racial differences. Reviewer Zenner queries whether their relationships are indeed that perfect and concluded that "if so, they must be superhuman."<sup>109</sup>

Lazarre, who clearly does not think of herself as superhuman, owns the shame of whiteness and recounts her guilt throughout her book. She worries that her sons will see her as "White" before "mother" and wonders if they regret her. Unlike Reddy's son, Brendan, who flirts with the idea of being biracial rather than Black, Lazarre's son Khary, who while a first year student in college, proudly declares, "I am Black. . . . I have a Jewish mother, but I am not 'biracial.' That term is meaningless to me. I reject the identity of the tragic mulatto." Lazarre tries to comfort her son by claiming that she understands, only to be rebuffed

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<sup>109</sup>Zenner, "Whiteness and Fairness," 7.

by his doubt that she as a White woman can truly understand.<sup>110</sup>

Lazarre agrees with Khary's decision to define himself as Black. Her own racial logic is dependent upon the visual and informs her understanding of her sons. She states, "As with any other identity, how one experiences oneself in the everyday world must become internal as well, or the mind splits, even sanity may slip, imbalance threatens." Thus, for Lazarre race is greatly tied to appearance. If Lazarre's sons had been lighter in skin color would she still hold the same beliefs? For example, if her sons looked like Homer Plessy would she still feel that they should identify solely as Black?<sup>111</sup>

As her memoir progresses, Lazarre relays how her understanding of the meaning of Blackness has "deepened and changed." She argues that her identity is hidden and, with it, is also hidden the perspective she now holds. Thus, Lazarre further complicates the understanding of a White parent with Black/biracial children by adding a deconstruction of the meaning of Blackness. An understanding of Blackness, coupled with her previously discovered knowledge of whiteness, signals a growth in Lazarre's development of racial understanding. She suggests that this makes her "no longer an ordinary white woman."<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>110</sup>Lazarre, *Beyond the Whiteness of Whiteness*, 24, 9; Reddy, *Crossing the Color Line*, 99-100.

<sup>111</sup>Lazarre, *Beyond the Whiteness of Whiteness*, xvii.

<sup>112</sup>*Ibid.*, 49.

Lazarre writes of politically aligning herself with Black people, thus revealing the political aspects of her new found identity. Ultimately, Jane Lazarre declares, "I am no longer white. However, I may appear to others, I am a person of color now. . . . Some color with no precise name."

Lazarre does not offer the critical interpretation needed to understand her declaration. Instead, she seems to be arguing that through her life as a White mother of Black sons she has become enlightened enough to have a change in her race. Yet has Lazarre's transformation occurred only within her personal inventory or is it for the external gaze as well? Since she prefaces her declaration by stating that she is "comforted by this thought" when she is in "racialized situations," it may be interpreted that Lazarre is arguing that her understanding of Blackness has removed her from the status of White within her mind. However, since Lazarre has previously defined race on the visual plane, it would have helped if she explained further her disregard of other people's views of her race in relation to her identity as a "person of color."<sup>113</sup>

Lazarre insightfully offers a key to understanding the position of White parents of Black children when she comments on the child-parent relationship.

There is a great false myth that while we create our children, they merely react to us, as if we were static creatures, finished and formed. The truth is more reciprocal. Like any passionate intimacy, they

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<sup>113</sup>Ibid., 135.



(re)create us at the same moment as we are creating and recreating them.<sup>114</sup>

Indeed, children and parents do affect each other in various ways. Historically, as earlier discussed, a parent's race has influenced the status of a child. Conversely, a child's race has also impacted upon his or her parents. For example, White women were punished for having "mulatto" children during slavery; however, the race of these White women was not altered. Children have never retroactively determined racial heritage of their parents before.<sup>115</sup>

A more recent example comes from biracial journalist Lisa Page, who is married to fellow journalist Clarence Page. Page writes of the experiences she and her parents had as an interracial family in an essay entitled "High Yellow White Trash." In her essay, Page recalls her parents' beliefs on race. She comments that her mother did not speak as freely as her father about race. Yet, she contends that her mother "knew that she had given up something by marrying my father." Page's recollection of her mother's experience the day Lisa was born reveals the impact upon a White person who conceives a Black child in Chicago in the 1950s.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>114</sup>Ibid., 129-30.

<sup>115</sup>See Kenneth James Lay, "Sexual Racism: A Legacy of Slavery," *National Black Law Journal* 13, no. 1&2 (Spring 1993): 165-83.

<sup>116</sup>Lisa Page, "High Yellow White Trash," in *Skin Deep: Black Women and White Women Write About Race*, eds. Marita Golden and Susan Richards Shreve (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 14.

Lazarre's discussion of the reciprocal relationship that parents and children share should be noted when reading

Page's passage:

The day I was born, in 1956, she was wheeled into the colored maternity section of what is now the University of Chicago Hospital. Because she was white, the hospital staff hadn't put her there initially, when she went into labor. After my arrival, they relegated her accordingly. My mother lost a piece of her identity that day: her status as a white woman, something she'd taken for granted throughout her life. Now she had given birth to a biracial baby. She was guilty by association; she was stained, privileged no more.<sup>117</sup>

Through her vivid description, she chronicles her mother's loss of status in a concrete fashion. The shift from whiteness to second-class citizenship occurs after the race of the baby is discovered. Page argues that the "stain" of giving birth to a child with Black ancestry changes the racial status of her mother.

Unlike the two feminist academics, Reddy and Lazarre, who have grappled with issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality, Page's mother does not deal with her white privilege until it is lost. Since an understanding of white privilege as something undeserved has become more common knowledge in society recently, the psychological aspects of the physical loss of standing that Page's mother underwent is difficult to contextualize. Of her mother Page says, "[t]o her credit . . . never let on how much this disturbed her while I was a child. It was only later, during my adolescence, that she revealed how much this had hurt her."

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<sup>117</sup>Ibid.

Page's parents divorced in 1963 and Page continued to live with her mother.<sup>118</sup>

Page's mother's angst over her identity plays itself out through her criticism of Lisa's burgeoning Black identity during the Black pride era. When Lisa and her sister start referring to themselves as Black, Page's mother objects. She questions the girls' self-definition and informs them that "Calling yourself black makes me feel like I'm invisible. Like I don't exist. Like I don't count." Page's mother also objects to her daughter's subscription to *Essence* magazine as well as her admiration of the beauty of Black women. Clearly, Page's mother feels erased by her daughter's Blackness. She is not prepared for her daughter to embrace any form of Blackness and would instead have her daughter emulate her whiteness.<sup>119</sup>

Lisa Page discusses the reaction to her mother's disapproval of her daughter's coming to terms with racial identity, explaining:

She saw this a rebellion, as ungratefulness. As her daughter, I was supposed to emulate and embrace her, not deny her. I didn't want to deny my mother. But I was different from her and I was trying to make sense of what those differences meant.<sup>120</sup>

Simultaneously, Lisa Page and her mother both attempted to deal with their respective racial stances and their

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<sup>118</sup>Ibid.; For "white privilege" see Peggy McIntosh, "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," in *Race: An Anthology in the First Person*, ed. Bart Schneider, 118-26 (New York: Crown Trade Paperbacks, 1997).

<sup>119</sup>Page, "High Yellow White Trash," 20-1.

<sup>120</sup>Ibid., 21.

relationship to one another. As Wilson and Russell point out, "White mothers may also suffer psychologically from having to give up their daughters to another racial identity, a phenomenon known as the White Mother Martyr Syndrome." The syndrome follows that when the White mother of a biracial daughter tells her daughter that the girl is Black, both she and the child may suffer emotionally. In the Page's situation, Lisa asserts her Blackness rather than her mother defining it for her. The duress of Lisa's not sharing the same race as her mother negatively affected Page's mother and their mother-daughter relationship.<sup>121</sup>

As an adult, Lisa Page can reflect on her experiences as a biracial person and her relationship with her mother. She writes, "I realize how much my mother struggled with her own identity. She thought she gave it up, in her marriage, or compromised somehow. She couldn't help her inability to empathize with my situation." Page understands that her mother was unable to offer support to Lisa because the mother was not comfortable with her situation. Thus, the relationship of Page and her mother illustrates the importance of the parent embracing her position as a White parent of biracial children if the child is to receive support with his or her own identity issues.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>121</sup>Wilson and Russell, *Divided Sisters*, 237; The "White Mother Martyr Syndrome" is discussed in Kathy Russell, Midge Wilson, and Ronald Hall, *The Color Complex: The Politics of Skin Color Among African-Americans* (New York: Anchor Books, 1992), 76.

<sup>122</sup>Page, "High Yellow White Trash," 22.

One White parent who wants to assist his Black/biracial children in their identity quest is exemplified by *Washington Post* journalist Walt Harrington. In 1992, after being married to a Black woman for ten years and fathering two children, Harrington published *Crossings: A White Man's Journey into Black America*. In his prologue, the author explains that he was inspired to take time off from work and away from his family to travel across the United States interviewing Black people after being told a racist joke at a dentist appointment. Although Harrington has previously heard many racist jokes, while listening to this one he has an epiphany: "This idiot's talking about my children!"<sup>123</sup>

This episode at the dentist's caused Harrington to question his own position and wonder what it is like to be Black. Prompted by the racist joke and afterthought, Harrington admits, "Only today, for the first time, have I crossed the line." The dental appointment prompts Harrington to think critically about race for the first time:

Thank the idiot in the dentist's office. His callousness had pierced my lifetime of distant intellectualizing about race and struck at the place where my hopes for my children reside, struck at my heart and not my head. In that instant, I was touched and humbled, converted. In that instant, I knew in my heart that I didn't know anything about race, that I never had. That I had to start again.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>123</sup>Walt Harrington, *Crossings: A White Man's Journey into Black America* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1992), 1.

<sup>124</sup>Harrington, *Crossings*, 2; 3.

As a White male, Harrington has not been forced to negotiate the tenuous position of the minority in the United States. Only through the realization that his children will have to deal with race in ways that he has not has Harrington discovered the relevance of race in his life. Despite his ten-year interracial marriage and birth of two children, it takes another White male's racist joke to trigger Harrington's conversion. Harrington's needs for a fellow White male's prompting to begin the author's own introspection on race suggests the element in whiteness of being a "member of the club."

Since Harrington's book primarily relates his meetings with Black Americans across the country, little is relayed about his specific family. He notes that his children describe themselves as "tan and bright tan." As he prepares to leave, he also mentions the irony in his trip: "And I think how strange it is that I'm about to leave this black woman behind so that I might learn more about black America." Harrington consoles himself by remembering that "I'm doing this for myself, my children, and the dentist with his racist jokes."<sup>125</sup>

After completing his extensive year-long trip, Harrington reflects on what he has learned and about his motivations for taking the trip. Harrington recalls his experiences with his father and then thinks about his own

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<sup>125</sup>Ibid., 1; 4.

parenting and the influences he possesses over his children.

Harrington sums up his newly acquired knowledge:

This kind of understanding changes everything. Only when I became black by proxy—through my son, through my daughter—could I see the racism I had been willing to tolerate. Becoming black, even for a fraction of an instant, created an urgency for justice that I couldn't feel as only a white man, no matter how good-hearted.<sup>126</sup>

Harrington's belief that he can become "black by proxy" resonates with Lazzarre's claim of being a "person of color." He contends that no matter how sympathetic, Whites cannot truly understand the position of African-Americans nor the need to change it.

Harrington's earlier talk of "crossing the color line" is similar to Reddy, who felt that she crossed the color line to be a bridge. Likewise, Harrington makes another contention that is reminiscent of Professor Andrew Hacker's previously discussed experiment with his students.

Harrington declares,

"It is absolute proof of our continued racism that no white person in his or her right mind would yet volunteer to trade places, become black, in America today." Hacker validates Harrington's statement through his discovery that his students wanted millions in compensation for becoming Black.<sup>127</sup>

At the end of his book, Harrington informs his readers:

"I wasn't a neanderthal on race when I took to the road; a

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<sup>126</sup>Ibid., 447.

<sup>127</sup>Ibid., 447; Hacker, *Two Nations*, 36.

mossback wouldn't have married a black woman in the first place." Thus, Harrington argues that his marriage to a Black woman grants him some type of informed perspective on race. Ultimately, he provides some newly gained information, positing: "I have learned this: We white people would be better off if we opened our hearts and our heads, listened more and talked less." Harrington's message seems idealistic since it ignores the structural issues involved with racism and discrimination, similar to Clinton's call for a dialogue on race. However, the fact that Harrington offers advice to fellow Whites that could alleviate race relations to some degree suggests that he believes Whites have a responsibility to understand people of other races.<sup>128</sup>

One realist regarding race, openly discusses her views as a White parent of Black children. In her memoir *How I Became Hettie Jones*, author Hettie Jones chronicles her transformation from a single Jewish woman Hettie Cohen to interracial married Hettie Jones, the wife of poet LeRoi Jones (later known as Amiri Baraka). The book provides an account of her parenting and experiences during the 1950s, including life as the former wife of LeRoi Jones. Further discussion of her thoughts on raising Black/biracial children come from Jones in a May 1994 *Essence* essay entitled "Mama's White." The *Essence* essay was published in conjunction with an essay by Hettie Jones's daughter, Lisa Jones, also using the same title, "Mama's White." The complementary essays

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<sup>128</sup>Harrington, *Crossings*, 447.



detail the experiences of the two women as (White) mother and (Black) daughter.<sup>129</sup>

Lisa Jones begins her essay declaring, "My mother is White. I am Black. This is how I choose to define myself, and this is how America chooses to define me." She comments on her mother's book and relays that her mother checks "other" in the census and writes in "Semitic-American mother of Black children." Lisa Jones credits her mother "for being strong enough in her own self to let me be who I was gonna be." Unlike Lisa Page's mother, Hettie Jones allowed her children to determine their own identity. In fact, Jones argues that "My pride in being a Black woman actually brings me closer to my (White) mom." Rather than stifling her daughters' Black identity like Page's mother, Hettie Jones helped to fuel this pride with her appreciation of African-American culture.<sup>130</sup>

In her article, Lisa Jones questions her mother about raising Lisa and her sister as Black rather than biracial. Accordingly, Hettie Jones responds: "I was not about to delude you guys into thinking you could be anything different in this country. And, frankly, I didn't think that being anything other than Black would be any more desirable." Hettie Jones's positive sentiments toward African-Americans

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<sup>129</sup>Hettie Jones, *How I Became Hettie Jones* (New York: Grove Press, 1990); Lisa Jones and Hettie Jones, "Mama's White," *Essence*, May 1994, 78, 79 (two separate articles).

<sup>130</sup>Lisa Jones, "Mama's White," 78; 80; 80; 80.

enabled her to feel comfortable in encouraging her daughters to identify as Black in the 1960s.<sup>131</sup>

In her own essay, Hettie Jones elaborates on mothering: "I encouraged my daughters to set their own terms and establish themselves independent of me." Although she lets her girls decide their racial identity, she informs them how the larger society would perceive them racially. Hettie reveals, "My mixed-race children were *Black*," as she accounts that they were Black in America and to America. Thus, Hettie and Lisa Jones offer similar analysis of Hettie's ability to support her children in their development of their own racial identity. Yet, Hettie, reviewing her own position, explains: "My daughters are grown, Black, strong. And I'm still White—but not quite. Not quite White isn't Black: I've got this straight. And no way to convert." Hettie Jones distinguishes her own "not quite White" identity from her daughters' Blackness. Thus, she does not claim to be Black herself.<sup>132</sup>

Jones reviews the experiences she and her daughters faced because they looked physically different from one another. The moments when people recognized the physical differences between the Jones women caused Hettie Jones to resolve: "If White remains how I'm seen, what's changed, what I mean by 'not quite White,' is how I see. It is more than perspective and hard to explain." Hettie alludes to

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<sup>131</sup>Ibid., 150.

<sup>132</sup>Hettie Jones, "Mama's White," 152; 152; 79; 151.

something deeper than perspective in understanding Blackness, yet she is unable to name it. Jones lacks the language to articulate exactly what the perspective is that she has gained. However, her view-through the lens of a mother of Black children-has altered her racial identity.<sup>133</sup>

Nevertheless, Jones does not have racial amnesia regarding her white racial privilege. She honestly critiques her experience and states:

I haven't forgotten, either, that walking down the street alone I've got White all over my face. Even with the thumping heart of my anger, without my children I'm anonymously White. In all-White rooms, I'm part of the crowd.<sup>134</sup>

Jones provides an informative account of her subject position. She recognizes her White appearance and alludes to the white privilege she possesses. Although Jones does not deny her White phenotype, she contends that she is "not quite White" in her comprehension.

In her book, *Racechanges: White Skin, Black Face in American Culture*, Susan Gubar defines "racechange":

The term is meant to suggest the traversing of race boundaries, racial imitation or impersonation, cross-racial mimicry or mutability, white posing as black or black passing as white, pan-racial mutuality.<sup>135</sup>

Racechange may be appropriate in discussing the racial transformations of the earlier-discussed White parents. The

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<sup>133</sup>Ibid., 151.

<sup>134</sup>Ibid., 152.

<sup>135</sup>Susan Gubar, *Racechanges: White Skin, Black Face in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 5.

White parents present a variety of descriptions of their racechanges from "stained," "black by proxy," "not quite White," "bridge" to "some color with no precise name." The White parents each contend that their children have granted them insight to issues of race with which they were unfamiliar or from which they had previously been detached.

Race has been personalized in unique ways to these White parents. Although none of the authors assert that he or she is Black because of his or her children, they do maintain that they are no longer White. The notion that a White person's race can change through having children with a Black person is a fascinating concept that demands expanded exploration. Moreover, it may be construed that these "no longer White" parents are arguing for a racial group outside of the categories currently recognized. Although their racial transformations challenge current understanding of racial groups, these parents do not dispute the concept of race in general. They condemn white privilege; however, they do not advocate the abolition of the White race. Therefore, they would not be considered in the anti-racist vein as "race traitors."<sup>136</sup>

These White parents can take self-inventories and reject their whiteness; however, as Hettie Jones points out, they remain White in the public arena. Thus, these parents inform the reader that, concurrently, race is both a public and a private event. The question of agency remains. Do these

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<sup>136</sup>Ignatiev and Garvey, eds., *Race Traitor*.

White parents have any more power in declaring their race than Plessy or Woods? It does not appear so; however, their challenging of whiteness offers potential for an advancement in racial thinking since Plessy. Although race remains limited by the same boundaries as it did at the end of the nineteenth, the parents' rejection of their whiteness displays a progression closer to admitting the creolization of American culture.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>137</sup>Hettie Jones, "Mama's White," 152.

## CONCLUSION

In 1993, the principal of a small town in Alabama canceled the prom. The principal made his decision after finding out that many students planned to attend the prom with dates who were "outside their race." During a meeting of the student body, the principal remarked, "How would that look at a prom, a bunch of mixed couples?" Writer Tod Olson reports that a single voice responded: "Junior-class president Revonda Bowen, daughter of a white father and an African-American mother, asked, 'Who am I supposed to take to the prom?'"<sup>138</sup>

Since the *Loving* decision (1967), there have no longer been any legal restrictions on interracial relationships. Nevertheless, the Alabama high school principal still thought that such couplings were socially taboo and required that he cancel the prom. The principal's attitude on interracial dating is clear; yet, who he felt should escort Bowen to the prom remains unknown. Bowen's question effectively pinpoints the racial quandaries that society currently faces. Artificial boundaries of race are becoming increasingly difficult to enforce. Bowen's 1993 story is similar to the question Albion W. Tourg  e raised on behalf of Plessy.

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<sup>138</sup>Tod Olson, "What is Race, Anyway?", in *Critical White Studies: Looking Behind the Mirror*, eds. Richard Delgado and Jean Stefanic (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), 499 (emphasis mine).

In referring to Plessy's train ride, Tourg e questioned the Court, "Where on earth should he have gone?" In 1896, the Court answered that Plessy belonged with Blacks. Currently, the answer probably would be the same, as Tiger Woods's experience displays. Multiracial people create a real dilemma for current racial classification. Moreover, they highlight the absurdity of trying to place individuals into superficial categories. In this race-obsessed climate, who Revonda Bowen attends the prom with is only discussed with politically charged comments, attesting to the same limitations of race that Plessy faced when he tried to sit so long ago. People are explaining that they wish to tango with and sit next to whomever they please, irrespective of race.

The issue of whiteness has been examined in this thesis by those claiming it and by others rejecting it. Ethnic studies professor George Lipsitz critiques whiteness, arguing,

[T]hat white Americans are encouraged to invest in whiteness, to remain true to an identity that provides them with resources, power, and opportunity. This whiteness is, of course, a delusion, a scientific and cultural fiction that like all racial identities has no valid foundation in biology or anthropology. Whiteness is, however, a social fact, an identity created and continued with all-too-real consequences for the distribution of wealth, prestige and opportunity.<sup>139</sup>

Lipsitz's analysis of whiteness correctly assesses the value of whiteness and its consequences. Yet I would suggest that non-White Americans are also encouraged to invest in

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<sup>139</sup>Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*, vii.

whiteness as well. In a society predicated on whiteness, its influences permeate the existence of all members. Plessy and Woods want their whiteness counted because of its prestige. The White parents claim that their race has changed but do not abandon their whiteness.<sup>140</sup>

In examining the attempts of Plessy and Woods to claim whiteness and the racially-transformed parents to reject it, the category of whiteness has proven to be a place for identity games and politics. Theorist Scott Michaelsen argues, "Whiteness, like masculinity (and, perforce, blackness and femininity), cannot be produced in a non-noxious variety, for the simple reason that identity itself is that which produces, grounds, and guarantees dominance." Michaelsen suggests that whiteness is a flawed theory. Although the white parents recognize issues of white privilege, they fail to address the greater problem of race and identity politics. The white parents remain comfortable with their racially altered whiteness without challenging the larger constructs of race.<sup>141</sup>

Even if Tiger Woods and Homer Plessy were more successful in their attempts to have their multiracial identities recognized, like the parents, they do not indict the large problems of identity politics and race. Nevertheless, examining Plessy, Woods, and the racially-

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<sup>140</sup>I am not suggesting that being a race traitor is the solution to solving the racial quagmire in the United States.

<sup>141</sup>Scott Michaelsen, "What's 'White,' and Whither?" *The Minnesota Review* 47 (Fall 1996): 78. This is a special issue entitled "The White Issue" published in May 1997.



transformed parents provides an understanding of the people trapped in the space which sociologist Paul Gilroy maps out. These individuals reinscribe race, albeit on different terms and with creative titles, yet they do not seriously contend with issues of power and oppression inherent in group identity. Instead, they fall back on close to a biological whiteness, almost similar to the racial thought operating in the *Plessy* era.<sup>142</sup>

The question of how much agency these people studied have in determining their race remains. Professor Ian Haney López suggests that people do have some choice in their racial identity. He qualifies his belief in the element of choice involved with race by submitting that choice comes within specific contexts. The racially-transformed parents offer evidence that Haney López is correct in his assessment. Haney López grants choice an even more important role in society than personal identity politics when he argues:

The agency of individuals and communities implied by the power of choice holds out the promise of racial remediation. Recognizing that race is in some sense a product of choices allows the hope that purposeful action can transform racial meanings.<sup>143</sup>

Haney López posits that the ability to choose race may be a path toward better race relations. This thesis has shown that people are not easily allowed to choose their race. On a personal level, people may call themselves whichever race they like. However, once they enter the public sphere others

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<sup>142</sup>Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 4.

<sup>143</sup>Haney López, "The Social Construction of Race," 52.

determine whether their racial choice is acceptable. Until people are more freely able to choose their race, Haney López's "hope that purposeful action can transform racial meaning" will not become a reality.

It is long past the time for the abandonment of the use of the one-drop rule for defining an individual's race. Concurrently, Gilroy has called for the naming and recognition of the hybridity and creolization of American culture. The persons studied in this thesis indicate a continued need to develop relevant and precise terminology to discuss honestly issues of identity and race. Although they may not complicate race in larger ways themselves, their public attempts at racechanges are, in a sense, a more nuanced interpretation of race. Beyond the rhetoric, the ramifications of living in a racist, race-obsessed, racialized society need to be further understood and acted upon so that defining, or not defining, oneself as White does not determine success in the ways it has in the past.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>144</sup>Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 4.

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