

CROSSING *the Line*

*Racial Passing in
Twentieth-Century
U.S. Literature
and Culture*

GAYLE WALD

Duke University Press

Durham and London

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PREFACE

Like race, one of the central concerns of this book, academic knowledge is a social product mediated by the very histories and cultures that it also translates and interprets. This study of U.S. cultural representations of racial passing is no exception. In the several years that I have been working on this book since its origin as a Ph.D. dissertation, “racial passing” has emerged as a site of knowledge-production within academic institutions, as measured by a proliferation of recent academic conferences, anthologies, and scholarly publications that touch on this theme. Moreover, many of the primary sources for this study—most of them previously obscure, hard to find, or out of print—have become so readily accessible and even familiar that it is easy to forget that their visibility is still quite novel.

Evidence of the rise of racial passing to prominence as an object of academic study is offered by the recent history of Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929), a book whose reputation had languished prior to its 1986 republication (in a single-volume edition with Larsen's novella *Quicksand*) by Rutgers University Press as part of its American Women Writers series. *Quicksand and Passing* was introduced to readers by Deborah McDowell, whose re-reading of Larsen's work helped to broaden its appeal within feminist literary studies, American literary studies, and gay and lesbian studies. In the decade that followed, the book became the best-selling title in the history of the press. By 1997 it had sold a remarkable seventy thousand copies, generating enough revenue to finance the republication of other forgotten American women writers' texts.¹ That same year, in response to what was apparently a burgeoning market for Larsen's work, Penguin Books lent its Twentieth-Century Classics imprimatur to a new edition of *Passing*—this time notably published without *Quicksand* as a companion text.

If the "canon wars" of the last several decades have taught us anything, it is that texts acquire or lose status based on needs and interests extrinsic to their existence as aesthetic objects. In light of this observation, we can locate *Passing*'s rise to prominence at the crossroads of several trends: primarily, the efforts of black feminist scholars to counter the cultural amnesia that has affected the reputations of so many African American women writers, but also the rise to prominence of race theory as a field of scholarly production, the burgeoning of multiculturalism as a political and theoretical concern, the expansion of African American literary and cultural studies in higher education, and the training of an unprecedented number of scholars in the field who are not themselves African American. Each of these trends has a complicated history tied to distinct institutional, economic, political, and cultural factors. Yet their coincidence suggests that the emergence of racial passing as an object of academic interest cannot be separated from the complex and multivalent institutional histories of American and African American literary and cultural studies.

Crossing the Line interrogates twentieth-century cultural representations of the fluidity of identities across the "line" of race, arguing that racial identities have been—and continue to be—important sites of negotiation and struggle in a society that vests enormous power in the fictions of race and in the notion of stable, embodied racial difference. In

my analyses of racial passing narratives I establish the pliability and instrumentality of race, as it is lived through other, intersecting categories of identity. In particular, I highlight the enterprise of “crossing the line” as a strategic appropriation of race’s power, emphasizing the stakes of such appropriation for racially defined subjects.

The findings of this study help to explain ongoing investments in “identity” at the turn of the twenty-first century. Indeed, for readers who bring to this book expectations shaped by a notion of the “free play” of individualized selves across socially produced lines of difference, *Crossing the Line* will inevitably prove disappointing. Such interest as this study has in issues of identity, moreover, cannot be separated from questions of my own position as a white female scholar working in the fields of African American literary and cultural studies. I was made particularly aware of this position several years ago, when after delivering a paper based on research that eventually became a part of this book, I was asked whether there was anything self-referential about my work on racial passing. Although there are a number of possible ways to interpret this question, as I understood it then, the questioner was asking me to clarify my personal stake in a project that seemed so intimately bound up with an experience of racial oppression that I presumably could not share. Implicit in this question were related questions about institutional practices, given that I was at a graduate student conference organized around the theme of African American studies.

My response to the questioner touched on the necessity of interrogating the work of identities, including “white” identities—an explanation that, in retrospect, strikes me as germane and yet also inadequate. The histories of whiteness and blackness as metaphors for different human “selves” are intricately and intimately interwoven, and I would hardly be the first to claim that in order to unpack these metaphors we need to understand “race” from the point of view of its beneficiaries, not merely those whom it defines. For me, part of the interest of narratives of racial passing lies precisely in their ability to demonstrate the failure of race to impose stable definitions of identity, or to manifest itself in a reliable, permanent, and/or visible manner. Yet in inquiring into how subjects have negotiated race, we cannot lose sight of the power of race to define. This means acknowledging “whiteness” as a means and an effect of racial transcendence that often enables its bearers to cross social and institutional lines.

I do not believe that these contradictions are easily resolvable; yet neither do I believe that they need to be disabling. Rather, we can use them to raise the important questions of affinity and solidarity, parasitism and gain, self-criticism and self-aggrandizement, that haunt our own theoretical praxis, particularly given the rise of the new “whiteness studies” as one of the “futures” of critical race theory. By the same token, though we should not be surprised that “racial passing” has come to visibility *now*—at the contradictory moment when race retains its power even as, in many quarters, the racial binary is increasingly subject to critique—neither should we forbear asking what the emergence of passing discourse brings to visibility, what it conceals. Of course, the project of “deconstructing” race is not a sure path to liberation from racial discourse. Yet neither is it clear that critiques of the black/white binary cannot contribute to the erosion of the authority of race, and hence to conditions that might allow us to live in a more just and equitable society.

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culture; and while he offered ideas as well as friendship, he also encouraged me to see the value in finishing a dissertation.

At Princeton, too, I benefited from the examples and brilliance of my wonderful teachers, especially Kimberly Benston, Diana Fuss, and Wahneema Lubiano. Toni Morrison, who agreed to lend her time to a tutorial on “race” and American literature, read and commented on the seminar paper that eventually turned into a dissertation proposal. At the same time, much of the serious learning that I did in graduate school took place in the company of my peers. In particular, Gwen Bergner, Joanne Gottlieb, Janet Gray, Lisa Lynch, and Erin Mackie shared food and ideas in our feminist/Marxist reading group, and along with Judith Jackson-Fosset and Lee Talley shared their friendship outside of it. During and after those years in Princeton, Timothy Cottrell was unwaveringly supportive of all my efforts; and Sandra Yarock’s encouragement was an anchor.

First at Trinity College and now at the George Washington University, I have benefited from the generosity, personal kindness, and intellectual camaraderie of my colleagues, especially of Maxine Clair, Miriam Dow, Jennifer Green-Lewis, Jeffrey Melnick, Jim Miller, Faye Moskowitz, Judith Plotz, Jon Quitslund, Ann Romines, Chris Sten, and Claudia Tate. As chairs of the English Department at GW, Chris and Faye have unfailingly supported my efforts as a scholar and teacher. Constance Kibler and Lucinda Kilby deserve my gratitude for their patience, assistance, and invaluable knowledge of the university. A GW Junior Scholar Incentive award provided funding that helped me through the summer of 1998 when I was working on revisions.

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INTRODUCTION

*Race, Passing,
and Cultural
Representation*

Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* and *them*. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge.

—GLORIA ANZALDÚA, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*¹

We make our customs lightly; once made, like our sins, they grip us in bands of steel; we become the creatures of our creations.

—CHARLES W. CHESNUTT, *The House behind the Cedars*²

A benefit and a disadvantage of looking white is that most people treat you as though you were white. And so, because of how you've been treated, you come to expect this sort of treatment . . . falsely supposing that you're treated this way because people think you are a valuable person. So, for example, you come to expect a certain level of respect, a certain degree of attention to your voice and your opinions, certain liberties of action and self-expression to which you falsely supposed yourself to be entitled because your voice, your opinion, and your conduct are valuable in themselves.

—ADRIAN PIPER, "Passing for White, Passing for Black"³

In “White Like Me,” one of his most popular skits from the television show *Saturday Night Live*, African American comedian Eddie Murphy conducts a mock-serious experiment in which he transforms himself into “Mr. White”—a brown-haired, Silly Putty-complexioned character who wears a conservative suit and carries a tan briefcase—and ventures out into New York City, endeavoring to “actually experience America as a white man.” Beginning with sequences that depict Murphy being made over in a backstage dressing room and preparing for his role (primarily, it turns out, by watching the TV show *Dynasty* and reading “a whole bunch of Hallmark cards”), the skit follows him over the course of a single day, as he gradually uncovers evidence of a “secret world” of whiteness. First a white newsstand clerk insists on giving him a complimentary copy of the newspaper over his objections, and later, on a city bus, he finds himself amid a group of white passengers who celebrate the departure of the last black bus rider by partying to the song “Life Is a Cabaret,” the music provided by an obliging white driver. In a final episode in which he applies for a loan at Equity National Bank, Murphy’s character is rescued from rejection by a friendly white bank employee, who reverses the decision of an impartial black loan officer and immediately proffers Mr. White wads of free cash despite his lack of collateral, a current bank account, or even a valid ID.

Playing himself once again at the end of the skit, Murphy cites these results of his “experiment” as proof of the as-yet-unfinished promise of American democracy. Above all, he tells the audience, spending the day disguised as Mr. White has taught him that “we still have a very long way to go in this country before all men are truly equal.” Then, without skipping a beat, Murphy follows up on this rather unremarkable observation with a more radical suggestion: racial passing as an answer to America’s “race” problem. Reentering the dressing room where he was made over as Mr. White, Murphy reveals a row of black men and women undergoing similar “white” disguise. America may not be a land of equal opportunity, Murphy tells his audience, “[b]ut I’ve got a lot of friends, and we’ve got a lot of makeup.” Then, with the familiar strains of “My Country ’Tis of Thee” welling up in the background, he delivers the skit’s memorable punch line: “So the next time you’re hugging up with some really super groovy white guy or even a really great super keen white chick, don’t be too sure . . . they might be black.”⁴

First aired in December 1984, at a time of waning public support for

“race conscious” social policy such as affirmative action, “White Like Me” functions as a hilarious send-up of race in a putatively color blind America.⁵ Updating and revising *Black Like Me* (white journalist John Howard Griffin’s 1961 best-selling account of passing for black through the segregated South of the late 1950s), the skit gently spoofs African Americans’ expectations of white entitlement and racial fraternizing by imagining such ridiculously improbable scenarios as the one in which a white loan officer eagerly dispenses cash to Mr. White. Yet as Murphy insinuates through his staging of these scenarios at politically resonant locations such as a bus and a bank—the former an icon of southern civil rights struggle, the latter a site of activism in the post-civil rights era—“White Like Me” also speaks to the realities that inform such expectations. Ironically, the skit’s conceit of “undercover” exposé calls to mind the actual strategies of investigation used by civil rights organizations and public agencies to monitor industries (such as banking and real estate) that persistently have discriminated against racial and ethnic minorities. In pretending to catch white people engaged in various hyperbolic displays of what George Lipsitz has called a “possessive investment in whiteness,” Murphy’s character thus calls attention to the pervasiveness of both race and color consciousness.⁶ He also humorously dramatizes how in a society structured on racial hierarchy, a “valorization of whiteness,” as Cheryl I. Harris terms it, may inform even the most routine of social and economic exchanges.⁷

Yet “White Like Me” is not only a satire of racial hierarchy and hidden racial entitlement; it is also, especially in its narrative frame, a pointed inquiry into the visual protocols of racial classification. In the dressing room sequence that opens the skit, for example, Murphy moves beyond familiar racial burlesque to examine the assumptions about racial appearances written into the notion of color blindness itself. Dramatizing the process by which he “becomes” Mr. White, he displays how whiteness is symbolized through an array of seemingly embodied signs, from “white” skin color to “white” ways of walking and talking. At the same time, by demonstrating the ease with which “whiteness” may be appropriated for his own interests, Murphy suggests that these signs of race may not be as secure or as reliable as they appear. Such critique of the fallibility of the racial sign becomes particularly pointed in the skit’s closing scene, which conjures the fluidity of racial appearances as a threat to the stability of “white” racial authority itself. Here “White

Like Me” brilliantly evokes the radical possibilities of the body’s failure to manifest, in its outward aspects, the “truths” that race would seem to represent. What if, as Murphy’s parting shot and the very title “White Like Me” suggest, racially defined people were capable of appropriating “white” likenesses or appearances? How might “not being able to tell” — a prospect alluded to in the image of future Mr. and Ms. Whites — unsettle the social and representational authority of “race”?

The questions raised in a humorously contrived fashion by “White Like Me” resound in the “real life” performances of Adrian Piper, an African American artist and philosopher who has explored themes of racial passing in her creative and scholarly work on race. As a way of challenging the beliefs and prejudices of people who assume she is white, Piper had calling cards printed up, which she distributed to people who openly displayed racist attitudes they likely would have concealed from her had they drawn a different assumption about her racial identity. “I am black. I am sure that you did not realize this when you made/laughed at/agreed with that racist remark,” Piper’s card begins. “In the past, I have attempted to alert white people to my racial identity in advance. Unfortunately, this invariably causes them to react to me as pushy, manipulative, or socially inappropriate.” Reversing the dynamics of racial passing, by which Piper has been made to pass involuntarily while her interlocutor has assumed his/her identity to be both stable and inviolable, the card concludes by establishing Piper’s displeasure at having been witness to an “off-color” racial joke or comment: “I regret any discomfort my presence is causing you, just as I am sure you regret the discomfort your racism is causing me.”⁸

Like “White Like Me,” a prerecorded skit broadcast live before a national television audience, Piper’s public and improvised performance impels us to scrutinize the work of racial boundaries in maintaining a certain racial “order.” Capitalizing on her own experiences of being drawn into the circle of “whiteness” that Murphy’s skit contrives to expose, Piper challenges the terms of racial representation, holding a mirror to others’ assumptions about and *presumptions* of her and their “whiteness.” Using her calling cards to call into question the stability of white identities, Piper furthers Murphy’s critique by demonstrating how the racist joke/comment/remark functions as a means of white social bonding. By calling attention to the acts of or collaborations with racism that others allow to “pass,” as it were, Piper’s performance offers

an interpretation of the dependence of “whiteness” on racist projections of the degraded “other.” Finally, by underscoring the arbitrariness and frangibility of racial signs, Piper not only debunks the stability of race, but highlights her own ability to “disorder” the terms of white racial authority and privilege.

Contemplating Murphy’s and Piper’s performances, we are reminded simultaneously of race’s power and of the possibility that subjects may undermine, question, or threaten this power through practices that mobilize race for various self-authorized ends. In both cases, race is represented in terms of its authority to define (that is, to ascribe identity, to assign the subject to a stable “place” in the racial order); and yet in both, too, the means of racial definition are shown to be susceptible to appropriation and rearticulation by those who are “normally” defined *by* race. Dramatizing their respective deployments of racial identity, Murphy and Piper portray race as both authoritative and unstable, dominant and yet usable. In short, each portrays a means of using race to challenge and complicate the social mechanism of racial definition.

Like “White Like Me” and Piper’s calling card pieces, this study examines how subjects have sought to defy, rewrite, or reinterpret the scripting of racial identities according to the socially dominant narrative of the color line. As W. E. B. Du Bois famously prophesied, first in his address before the 1900 Pan-African Congress in London and later in his 1903 work *The Souls of Black Folk*, the fiction of this line has been of urgent concern to racially defined subjects throughout the twentieth century (and into the twenty-first), exploiting the notion of their visible, corporeal “difference” from a “white” norm to sustain and enforce social relations of white supremacy.⁹ Arbitrarily ascribing race in accordance with the changing needs and interests of white supremacy, the color line has long served a variety of specific “territorializing” functions through its ability to impose and regulate social inequality.¹⁰

Yet as this study demonstrates, inasmuch as it depends on race to be stable, transparent, and visibly embodied, the very authority of the color line must also give rise to possibilities of racial transgression, or “crossing the line.”¹¹ Such possibilities emerge, that is, to the degree that the dominant racial discourse insists on both the naturalness and the obviousness of what is essentially a social and cultural production. Exercising a “real” authority in the realm of social and material relations, the color line differs from a line drawn in the sand, a mark easily washed

away by the changing tides. Yet its tenacity is not a sign of its absolute power. Indeed, the investment of the dominant racial discourse in the authority of a “line” that eludes stable or consistent representation is necessarily generative of contradictions that are also opportunities for challenging, appropriating, or unveiling its chimerical and arbitrary nature.

This book examines how such opportunities are both manifested and negotiated in racial passing, a practice that emerges from subjects’ desires to control the terms of their racial definition, rather than be subject to the definitions of white supremacy. As implied in the African American colloquialism for passing that also lends this book its title, to pass is to transgress the social boundary of race, to “cross” or thwart the “line” of racial distinction that has been a basis of racial oppression and exploitation.¹² It is also, as this study argues, to capitalize on the binarism of the dominant racial discourse to negotiate the multifarious needs, fantasies, and aspirations that are mediated and expressed through the racial sign. Passing entails, then, not racial transcendence, but rather struggles for control over racial representation in a context of the radical unreliability of embodied appearances.¹³

As the foregoing definition of “crossing the line” implies, this study contributes to the emerging, multidisciplinary project of anti-essentialist racial critique through its focus on the *instability* and *fluidity* of racial representation.¹⁴ I argue that racial passing can “work,” in other words, only because race is more liquid and dynamic, more variable and random, than it is conventionally represented to be within hegemonic discourse. Even at close of the century that Du Bois predicted would be beset by the “problem of the color line,” race is normatively thought to describe (rather than to construct) apparently observable (not actively “visibilized”) markers of difference. As Robyn Wiegman explains, it is widely assumed that “even the inconsequential minutiae of the body speak the truth that race supposedly, inherently means.”¹⁵ The contradiction here is that race requires metaphor and thus is neither obvious nor unmistakable. Moreover, the social “effectuality” of race is largely determined by its ability to shape epistemologies of racial identity.¹⁶ Or as Gayatri Spivak has argued in another context, racial “names”—names we are given and which we also put to our own uses—have histories that are not “anchored in identities but rather secure them.”¹⁷

My project in the chapters that follow is to investigate how this insta-

bility and fluidity of race is negotiated in various exemplary cultural representations of racial passing. In particular, through readings of literary and cinematic texts that center acts of “crossing the line,” I explore how the transgression of the black/white racial boundary is expressed in the form of cultural narrative. Such a focus on narratives of passing serves my contention, following the work of diverse literary and legal scholars such as Hortense J. Spillers, Dana Nelson, and Patricia Williams, that race itself must be continuously narrativized, or reproduced as a “true” fiction, in order for it to be made “real.”¹⁸ It also enables me to use methods of narrative analysis to illuminate the ruptures in racial discourse that are exploited, interrogated, and recuperated through racial passing. I am most particularly concerned with how passing narratives produce the sense of an ending or narrative resolution in the context of the contradictions that the subject-who-passes must inevitably confront in appropriating that stability on which the fluidity of “race” depends. In addition, in reading how these subjects negotiate the desire to pass, a desire that would seem to require their valorization of racial discourse (if not necessarily of “whiteness” or “blackness” itself), I endeavor to illuminate those “openings” which might also allow them to imagine new narratives of identity, agency, and subjectivity. In reading these narratives, I explore various imagined alternatives to the color line, even if these alternatives sometimes end up being no alternative at all.

In representing the enterprise of racial passing to be contradictory, self-defeating, or otherwise impracticable, the cultural narratives I examine actively grapple with the circumscribed efficacy of crossing the line as an “actual” mode of political or ideological critique. The instability of racial passing as a means of negotiating racial oppression and segregation is illustrated, for example, in two different works by Langston Hughes. In the first, a short story titled “Passing,” Hughes critiques passing as an individualized practice that fails to address the collective nature of racial discourse, which derives authority from its ability to unite people of disparate origins and identities under a single “badge” of color.¹⁹ Through the representation of the narrowly self-interested motivations and hurtful effects of one young man’s decision to cut off ties to his mother and siblings in pursuit of a “white man’s” success, Hughes satirizes passing as worship of whiteness as an emblem of social and class mobility. Even if the protagonist’s decision to cross the line had been differently motivated, Hughes’s story implies, the efficacy of passing as

a mode of agency is undermined by constructions of color that render it beyond the purview of the “choice” of his family members. Whereas “Passing” represents race to be a fiction of identity,²⁰ it also suggests that the status of this fiction cannot be disengaged from a critical recognition of the impossibility of passing for the great majority of racially despised and degraded people. Because of this conditioning of the agency to pass on the “evidence,” crossing the line of the visible body remains the private and individualized “dream” of the narrator.²¹

On the other hand, as Hughes observed in a 1958 *Chicago Defender* column, stories of passing might be sources of enjoyment and gratification to African American readers who could imaginatively revel in the prospect of “fooling our white folks.” As Hughes makes explicit through his use of the possessive pronoun “our,” the consumption of passing narratives—in the form of gossip and family lore, as well as in the more “official” forms of newspaper articles and fictional representations—also entailed the contemplation of owning that prerogative to name and possess usually assumed by whites. Moreover, insofar as racial passing was conditioned on white supremacy, it could be a resourceful—even morally justifiable—response to circumstances beyond one’s individual choosing. As Hughes observed, “Most Negroes feel that bigoted whites deserve to be cheated and fooled since the way they behave toward us makes no sense at all.”²²

Notwithstanding the qualification of passing as a political project, following Hughes this study remains invested in the notion that cultural narratives of passing are productive sites for interrogating not only the dualism of the dominant discourse of race, but also the instrumentality of race to a wide range of projects, ambitions, and intentions. As I have begun to suggest, these representations do not simply reflect racial ideology, and yet they are intimately and inevitably bound up with it. Neither wholly subversive nor wholly complicit, they mediate desires that disrupt the crude opposition of racial power and racial resistance. In so doing, moreover, they encourage us to draw a line in our own critical and theoretical practice between the celebration of individualized acts of racial transgression and the discovery of a “way out” of white supremacy. Indeed, they illuminate the precise manner in which the color line operates as a collectivizing discourse that also encourages subjects’ investment in national narratives of individual social and class mobility.

In contrast to recent arguments that conflate race and class—thereby

problematically privatizing gender as a term of consideration in the analysis of U.S. social structures—my contention in this study is that racial, class, and gender discourses are mutually reinforcing and inextricably linked. Without white supremacy and racial patriarchy, I argue, racial passing would lack that particular “economic logic,” as Harris puts it, with which it has been invested through “the historical and continuing pattern of white racial domination and economic exploitation” (277). For example, the raced and gendered class aspirations of Hughes’s narrator in “Passing,” or of the nameless protagonist in James Weldon Johnson’s fictionalized *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, would be illegible outside of the social structures that authorize the economic authority of white men within the public sphere of socially legitimated work and commerce. Similarly, the desires of the female protagonist of the 1949 film *Pinky* are legible in the context of the history of the exploitation of the labor of African American women—a history primarily embodied in the visual frame of the film through the figure of Aunt Dicey, a washer woman who is also Pinky’s grandmother. The argument I am proposing here presumes, moreover, the securing of U.S. class structures through what Spillers has ingeniously called the “American grammar” of race. As U.S. history readily demonstrates, the myth of a classless society, in which hard work and self-reliance may be depended on as the keys to individual success, is itself predicated on the racialization of African Americans as a “class” of non-citizens whose labor could therefore be exploited and appropriated.

The texts I have chosen to illustrate and explore these arguments date from the era of the New Negro to the early years of the civil rights movement, encompassing categories of high, low, and middlebrow culture. Mediated by the ignominious histories of racial segregation and racialized violence in the twentieth century, they force us to reckon with the ways that race historically has been used to manage and discipline *particular* (that is, gendered, classed, and raced) bodies. Equally important, they ask contemporary readers to consider their own political, theoretical, or ideological interests in race as a site of identification and political or cultural investment, its fictional qualities notwithstanding. I see this as a particularly urgent challenge today, in light of the emergence of arguments seeking to appropriate anti-essentialist racial critique to question the social relevance of race. In the academy, for example, literary critic and theorist Walter Benn Michaels has been

among the most outspoken proponents of this view, arguing in a recent article, “Autobiography of an Ex-White Man: Why Race Is Not a Social Construction” (the title riffing on that of Johnson’s *Autobiography*), that contemporary social constructionist critiques have perpetuated racial distinctions that might otherwise disappear were we to summon the collective will to renounce race as a philosophical basis of identity.²³ Asserting the logical impossibility of passing if we affirm that race has no biological basis, Michaels urges readers to “give up the idea of race altogether.” “Either race is an essence,” he declares, “or there is no such thing as race” (125).

Yet as this study endeavors to show, such arguments are only possible if we neglect the *dialectics* of identity, through which subjects appropriate “race”—a discourse they do not control—for their own needs, wishes, and interests. Furthermore, they are predicated on the notion that we may choose our forms of resistance to race, rather than face the necessity of constructing our choices and our agency out of the material of racial discourse itself.²⁴ Such investment in the “purity” of our resistance to race ironically contrasts the impurity of the racial binary, as well as, therefore, the practice of racial passing as a strategy of deploying this impurity to various “impure” ends. My point here is not merely to register the inevitable complicity of resistance, but to suggest that we focus on how this complicity is itself negotiated through social and cultural practices and texts. As I demonstrate in the following section, which explores the basis of passing in the “one-drop rule,” the “problem” of the color line has always required that subjects produce resistance in the context of the narratives that define them.

ONE “DROP” OF BLOOD

As this study’s opening epigraph from Charles Chesnutt suggests, race has the power to “grip us in bands of steel.” Upon closer inspection, however, these “bands” are revealed to have been forged in history rather than nature, allowing them to change and adapt over time. Like the borders that both define and circumscribe the nation, the “boundary” of race is subject to ongoing contestation and mutation. Yet as both Chesnutt and Gloria Anzaldúa imply, these boundaries impose social distinctions whose power supersedes the fluidity and arbitrariness of

racial representation. Indeed, it is precisely *because* it operates through representation that race acquires its authority to define.

It is with these insights in mind than we can begin to understand the significance of the “one-drop rule,” the set of social and legislative practices that condition racial passing as both a social enterprise and a subject of cultural representation. Codified in the late nineteenth century, particularly in the years following Reconstruction, this rule designated as “black” any person seen as possessing even a single “drop” of “black blood,” as determined by ancestry extending back (in theory, at least) an indeterminate number of generations.²⁵ According to the one-drop rule, for example, Chesnutt, a writer of diverse African and European ancestry (his paternal grandfather was a white slaveholder and his grandmother a free “person of color”) and a man who was often taken for “white,” was thus grouped together with people of dissimilar ancestry under the badge of “Negro” or “colored” identity. Although Chesnutt maintained that he belonged to a separate category of “mixed blood” citizens distinct from what he called “true Negroes,”²⁶ the binary logic of the one-drop rule mandated that if he were not “white,” then he had to be “black.” Such contradiction was of enduring creative as well as personal interest to Chesnutt, who never passed but whose work—including his novel *The House behind the Cedars*, from which the epigraph is taken—repeatedly centers the question of racial “customs” and their transgression.

In this novel the protagonist John Walden has a conversation with Judge Straight, a “white” slaveholder who traces his roots to some of North Carolina’s first European settlers, on the subject of John’s racial identity. The question under discussion is what constitutes “proof” of race: the visible “evidence” of John’s complexion, which he displays by turning back his sleeve and extending his exposed arm to the judge, or the “customs” of North Carolina, according to which, as the judge paraphrases, “one drop of black blood makes the whole man black.” By illustrating how Judge Straight’s definition prevails in categorizing John, Chesnutt reveals how the will of the state (as embodied in the judge) ultimately trumps the “proof” of the visible body. Chesnutt’s point is not exactly that John wishes not to be “black,” but that he desires the opportunities denied him on account of the one-drop rule’s fundamental asymmetry, by which a “drop” or even a preponderance of “white

blood” doesn’t render a person “white.” Denied the sort of intermediate racial status that Chesnutt himself advocated (and which had flourished in certain parts of antebellum Louisiana, as well as in the slaveholding societies of the Caribbean and South America), John is thus defined according to a false standard of “white” racial purity, such standard casting his own identity as “impure.”²⁷ Such definition turns out to be of urgent practical value for John, a shrewd and self-aggrandizing character whose chief desire—superseding bonds of personal loyalty to his mother or sister—is for wealth and social status.

As Chesnutt’s novel demonstrates, the one-drop rule is a biologicistic paradigm, enlisting the authority of scientific discourse to enforce the state’s interests; yet formally as well as informally, it continues to structure racial discourse in the United States even as the dominant culture began to abandon “scientific” standards of racial definition beginning in the 1920s.²⁸ In the period under study here, the one-drop rule is crucially important to the enforcement of de jure racial segregation, which persisted until passage of national civil rights legislation in the mid-1960s. Indeed, the indispensability of the one-drop rule to Jim Crow practices was explicitly written into *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the case that became the national litmus test for the right of states to regulate the geographical, economic, and social mobility of those it deemed “black.” In its 1896 *Plessy* decision, the U.S. Supreme Court not only found the defendant, Homer Plessy, guilty of having violated Louisiana’s statute requiring the physical separation of white and “colored” “races” during rail travel (the statute in question being brazenly titled “An act to promote the comfort of passengers,” which of course meant *white* passengers), but it also found Plessy—a man who in court had refused to identify himself as “colored,” and who was described in court papers as having a “mixture” of “Caucasian” and “African” blood that was “not discernible in him”—to be legally declared colored under state law.²⁹ Hence the case that gave official license to the nefarious tactics of “separate but equal” also tacitly decided Plessy’s identity, overriding his objections that employees of the Eastern Louisiana Railway were incapable of enforcing the Louisiana statute based on the simple visual inspection of passengers. (“We are not prepared to say,” conceded Justice Henry Billings Brown for the majority, “that the conductor, in assigning passengers to the coaches according to their race, does not act at his peril.”)³⁰ Demonstrating the power of official rhetoric to paper over contradictions in public policy