

Narratives of Genealogy: Return, Race, and the Body in the Black Imagination

by

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to the Fly, Fabulous, and Opulent memory of D. Hutchinson.

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Abstract

Narratives of Genealogy: Return, Race, and the Body in the Black Imagination explores how African-American writers and thinkers in the 20th and 21st centuries narrativize genealogy and its relationship to race as a socially constructed vs. biological framework. I pay particular attention to how these writers understand and negotiate racial formation, the national, gender, and subjectivity through these narratives. I close read the novels *Of One Blood* by Pauline Hopkins, *Quicksand* and *Passing* by Nella Larsen, and the PBS television show *Finding Your Roots*, hosted by Henry Louis Gates Jr.

I ask how my interlocuters imagine and represent the concept of “return” to a homeland. What kind of meaning and insights do African-American subjects derive from these imaginings? How does belonging (or not belonging) to a homeland that one was forcefully taken from shape narratives of a shared Black history and future? I also explore how ideas about genealogy have been shaped by discourses of biological race in multiple ways, from the language of “blood” to the growing popularity of direct-to-consumer DNA ancestry testing. I explore if and how DNA testing has changed test taker’s own narratives of race, the process of racialization, and their understanding of race as a social construct. I draw upon the theories laid out in Hortense Spillers’s essay “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book” to consider how African-Americans have been excluded from the category of the “human,” and how genealogy has been used by African-Americans to negotiate this exclusion.

Chapter 1 Introduction

Slavery made your mother into a myth, banished your father's name, and exiled your siblings to the far corners of the earth. The slave was as an orphan, according to Frederick Douglass, even when he knew his kin. "We were brothers and sister, but what of that? Why should they be attached to me, or I to them? Brothers and sisters we were by blood; but *slavery* had made us strangers. I heard the words brother and sister, and knew they must mean something; but slavery had robbed these terms of their true meaning." The only sure inheritance passed from one generation to the next was this loss, and it defined the tribe. (Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*)

We very sorry to be parted from one 'nother. We cry for home. We took away from our people. We seventy days cross de water from de Affica soil, and now dey part us from one 'nother. Derefore we cry. We cain help but cry. (Oluale Kossolo, a.k.a. Cudjo Lewis, from *Barracoon* by Zora Neale Hurston)

Every aspect of black American¹ life has been shaped by slavery in some form; genealogy is no different. For many black Americans, genealogy has been a mysterious subject filled with questions and silences. The origins of these questions and silences go back to the beginnings of slavery, to the moments when Africans were kidnapped from the continent, put on slave ships, and had their names, languages, and families stripped from them.² The workings of

¹ Throughout this dissertation I most commonly use the term "black" or "black Americans" when referring specifically to black people who live in the United States, or descend from enslaved Africans in the Americas. My rationale is best described through the words of Vinson Cunningham who writes, "For all the word's problematic history, I like "Black" as a shorthand for African-descended people everywhere precisely because of its indefiniteness, its fluidity, its fealty to no nation. It is as fleeting and symbolically rich as the color image it brings to mind, and is always flirting with and escaping strict classification. It brings me joy. It tends, on its best days, to grow." (62) I generally use the term "African-American" when describing books/literature by black writers, or the field of African-American literary studies since this is the common convention.

² For firsthand accounts of the middle passage, see *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* by Olaudah Equiano, or *Barracoon: The Story of the Last "Black Cargo"* by Zora Neale Hurston. For secondary sources, see *Dreams of Africa in Alabama: The Slave Ship Clotilda and the Story of the Last Africans Brought to America* by Sylviane A. Diouf

chattel slavery then continued to separate and destroyed families, causing cultural knowledge and memories of families to be lost.

I come to this project through my own observations and experiences as a black person who has had their own fair share of interactions with the world of genealogical exploration; elder family members who recite family lineages and myths, handwritten family trees, and aunts, cousins, and sisters who excitedly reveal DNA ancestry test results. I've always been curious about the meaning and significance people take from these practices. What does it mean for black Americans to name their ancestors or claim ancestry from particular regions in Africa that are foreign to them and, in all likelihood, they will never visit, while at the same time finding out about the autosomal markers which link them to Europe? Does it change the way they see themselves, their family history, or their racial identity? Which pieces of information stay with them, and which pieces of information can't be incorporated into the story they tell about themselves? Do DNA ancestry results change the way they see their blackness? These personal observations and curiosities have facilitated my desire to use literary and cultural texts to think through these questions.

In light of this background, this dissertation explores narratives of genealogy and race within African-American literature and culture from the early twentieth century to the early twenty-first century in order to understand how black Americans have attempted to make sense of the connection between their family genealogies and racial identities. My project demonstrates that genealogy, both as a practice and as a conceptual terrain, is central to black Americans' narratives of their own racial identity, their relationship to U.S. citizenship, and their continuing survival of the trauma and violence of enslavement, white supremacy, and dehumanization. The following chapters close read texts that engage with the exploration of genealogy and race as

central concerns, namely the novels *Of One Blood; or, The Hidden Self* by Pauline Hopkins, *Quicksand* by Nella Larsen, and the television show *Finding Your Roots* hosted by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. What does genealogy mean for black Americans, and why is it such an enduring topic of interest?

As an outgrowth of the exploration of genealogy, my project finds that genealogy is not only closely tied to an individual's racial identification, but the idea of "return." I ask how my interlocutors imagine the concept of a return to a homeland, and what difficulties arise for them as they try to negotiate these imagined returns. How does belonging (or not belonging) to a homeland shape the vision of a shared Black past and future? Furthermore, what do my interlocutors hope return can accomplish for black American subjects in the aftermath of the middle passage? I examine return to Africa as a literary fantasy within the work of Hopkins in chapter one. For Larsen, the subject of chapter two, the concept of return engages transatlantic travel to Denmark, as well as different locations within the United States. In this case, I try to think through the implications of return when the place one returns to is not African, and when the black subject has white ancestry. In chapter three, I leap forward in time to the twenty-first century to examine Henry Louis Gates's television show *Finding Your Roots*. I critically examine the show to think through how the theory and practice of genealogy shape racial identity in the contemporary moment.

Historical Periods

In this dissertation I focus on two periods of time, the early 20th century (1902-1929), and the early 21st century. These periods mark important moments in which discourses on the relationship between race and science are intensified in new and important ways, often in service of reifying race as a biologically grounded concept which can serve racist agendas. The works

that I examine, attuned to these dynamics, retool the relationship between race and science for their own purposes, demonstrating that race is socially constructed, and that science can be used in the service of anti-racism.

Early 20th century black writers responded to the rise of eugenic and social Darwinist discourses by engaging scientific ideas and questions within their works, pushing back against notions such as racial purity³ or the idea that race signifies different subspecies of human beings. In contrast, the early 21st century has seen black Americans engage with race and genetics to argue that genetics prove humans of all racial backgrounds are more biologically similar than different, even though DNA can be used to identify genetic ancestry. The juxtaposition of these two time periods allows for this project to consider how particular discourses around science and race have endured, while others have changed in nuanced ways.

Key Terms, Concepts, and Frameworks

Genealogy

In this dissertation, I use the term “genealogy” to refer to the practice of tracing one’s ancestors backwards in time in order to name them, remember them, and hand down those memories to future generations. It also refers to the concept of ancestors that one biologically descends from. I use this definition in accordance with what Jade C. Huell terms “popular genealogy,” which “reflects a concept of genealogy more readily accessible to the general public” (112). This is not intended to privilege these as the only valid definitions of genealogy. These definitions are articulated as such in order to consider how these vertical relationships

³ George Schuyler’s *Black No More* challenges the idea of racial purity through a plot device in which a scientist develops a way to turn black skin white, which then begins to reveal how much hidden African ancestry white Americans have.

operate within the logic of biological generation and ancestral/lineal descent. As such, this dissertation also pays close attention to how bodies factor into the construction of narratives of genealogy, both from the perspective of the biological and the visual.⁴

Given the history of black Americans, the practice of genealogy is difficult work, since “Black genealogies have not always been discoverable or uncoverable within the same documents and archives as white genealogies have been. Nor are lines of Black inheritance always written in historical records in the same ways. At times they have been deliberately obscured, even erased. To trace them requires innovative work, sometimes even fabulation.” (Fielder 790) Because the gaps particular to black history require innovative ways of conceptualizing genealogy, I consider imagined dimensions as well as historical. My use of genealogy allows me to explore how black Americans have imagined and searched for those whom are lost, unknown, and “uncoverable”. Who is imagined to fall under the category of ancestor? What do the choices that go into claiming ancestry teach us the nature of genealogies as “always and everywhere cultural contrivances” (Palmié 213)?

In this dissertation I use “kinship” in contrast to the term genealogy. My use of kinship is similar to Brigitte Fielder’s use of “black genealogies,” which emphasizes that “Black genealogies reach beyond litanies of begetting and into other kinds of (biological and nonbiological) relation,” (“Literary Genealogies” 790) and “Black genealogical reproduction is an involved process in modernity, encompassing mechanisms from the bodily to the aesthetic to the technological, resisting normalized teleologies of descent, and extending its branches into

⁴ See Kim Tallbear’s *Native American DNA* for a discussion of how “morphological data was used both to delineate the biophysical markers of races and to categorize individuals and their body parts within those categories. In the nineteenth century, it was a widespread belief that the brains of different races were inherently different, contributing to the production of different civilizations, indeed different levels of civilization, and thus guaranteed different potentials in the different races.” (35)

complex webs that emerge within Black futures and help to produce them.” (“Literary Genealogies” 789) In emphasizing how black genealogies can be nonbiological and resist “normalized teleologies of descent,” Fielder also shows how they can work outside of a heteronormative framework, thus “queering” genealogy. The uses of genealogy that I examine are decidedly not queer. Instead, these manifestations of genealogy see the body as a site of reproduction of the family and the citizen.

Lastly, I follow the methods of Alys Eve Weinbaum who uses genealogy as a “self-reflexive methodological tool” that allows her to “unpack the dependence of racist, nationalist, and imperialist thought on notions of descent, kinship, and the reproduction of racial differences that more conventional ideas about genealogy naturalize or consolidate.” (Weinbaum 8) As I explore the terrain of genealogy in my research, I interrogate how genealogical knowledge is produced and then deployed in social, political, and historical contexts over time.

The Body/Flesh and Citizenship

This project is deeply influenced by the distinction between “body” and “flesh” as articulated by Hortense Spillers. Spillers argues that in the wake of the Middle Passage the distinction between “body” and “flesh” is “the central [distinction] between captive and liberated subject-positions. In that sense, before the “body” there is the “flesh,” that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse.” (Spillers 67) In Spillers’s estimation, the black woman occupies a unique position in U.S. society in which her inclusion into both the categories of “woman” and “human” has always been contested, contingent upon the moment in which violence made “body” (the terrain of the human) and “flesh” (the terrain of the non-human) distinct through the Middle Passage. This articulation of

body/flesh is a generative lens through which I see my subject matter and sets of questions, and my close readings are deeply influenced by it.

As Spillers describes it, the metaphoric distinction between flesh and body, made through the Middle Passage, holds throughout time, past the Middle Passage and slavery:

The captive body, then, brings into focus a gathering of social realities as well as a metaphor for value...Even though the captive flesh/body has been ‘liberated,’ and no one need pretend that even the quotation marks do not matter, dominant symbolic activity, the ruling episteme that releases the dynamics of naming and valuation, remains grounded in the originating metaphors of captivity and mutilation so that it is as if neither time nor history, nor historiography and its topics, shows movement, as the human subject is ‘murdered’ over and over again.” (Spillers 68)

Spillers’s argument in this section is that the “dominant symbolic activity” of slavery is so pervasive within white supremacist American society that the metaphor of captivity attached to the black body/flesh persists long after formal de jure captivity has ended.⁵ Though it may be debatable whether or not the Black body has been liberated, the lack of temporal and historical movement for the Black subject caused by the rupture of the flesh suggests ontological sedimentation within the U.S. I use the distinction between body/flesh to not only inform how I understand the practices of genealogy and return, but the process of racialization in the U.S.

Following in the steps of Spillers’s conception of the black body, afropessimists such as Frank B. Wilderson argue that blacks are “erroneously locate[d]...in the world—a place where they have not been since the dawning of Blackness” (37). In other words, the rupture of body

⁵ See Calvin Warren’s “Black Time: Slavery, Metaphysics, and the Logic of Wellness.” in *The Psychic Hold of Slavery*, edited by Soyica Diggs Colbert, Robert J. Patterson and Aida Levy-Hussen.

from flesh has taken blacks out of the realm of humanity completely. Using this theory as a guide, I argue that the trauma of the Middle Passage, articulated through the body/flesh split, informs the value of genealogy and return for black subjects because genealogy is a route through which black Americans can become citizens of the nation and thereby enter back into humanity.

Race as narrative

In the U.S., people of color are routinely asked questions like, “where are you from?” or even, “What are you?” This is a way of asking someone for their racial and ethnic history, which they are expected to be able to describe as if the information is owed to strangers. This type of interrogation speaks to the way in which race is narrated; it is brought into being by stories of genealogy.

One of the main arguments of this dissertation is that genealogical practices produce race *through and as* narrative. Since race is socially constructed, the body fails to be a completely reliable source for communicating racial identity, thereby making narrative the site where race comes into being. Because this narrative can be so unstable, it must be continually repeated in order to achieve coherence. Susan Gillman notes that blood as a metaphor for race functions in this way within *Of One Blood*, arguing that its repetition, “becomes one of the novel’s fundamental narrative strategies: by proliferating an excess of meanings within the terms of racial discourse, Hopkins demonstrates their internal contradictions, their volatility, and, ultimately, their unexpected potential for oppositional uses.” (Gillman 46) Race’s narrative nature also accounts for the ability of racial categories to shift over time, hence the role of *Finding Your Roots* in the dissemination of the multiracial discourse.

As Brigitte Fielder brilliantly argues in *Relative Races*, race-as-fiction can be literal and literary:

If race itself might be understood as a fiction of social construction, the literary is an apt site for examining racial construction's inner workings. As countless scholars have shown, race literature both reflects and constitutes the surrounding cultures of racialization from which it emerges. We might therefore regard the racialized genres of captivity and fugitivity as literary genealogies of race. This is to say that the stories we tell about race are, themselves, processes of racialization." (*Relative Races* 57)

I close read with this theory in mind, mining texts for the narratives of race that they both convey and simultaneously produce.

Return

Saidiya Hartman writes: "return is what you hold onto after you have been taken from your country, or when you realize that there is no future in the New World, or that death is the only future. Return is the hunger for all the things you once enjoyed or the yearning for all the things you never enjoyed." (*Lose Your Mother* 99) Simply put, return is the sustenance required to survive another day. Despite its ability to keep the diasporic subject moving towards the future, it does so by looking towards the past. As many scholars have noted, "we can only summon our version of the past, not actually travel back to it" (Wright 82). Despite this reality, genealogical narratives present an avenue through which memory and storytelling attempt to bring the past into the present.

The fantasy of returning to an ancestral home in Africa has been an enduring theme in black literature. Return has been imagined in a fantastical manner, but has also been literally practiced by black Americans throughout the history of the diaspora. I argue that for black

Americans, seeking return in some form or another is a mode through which they try to repair the trauma of the Middle Passage. My dissertation questions what return looks like, what it accomplishes, and how the concept has been imagined or practiced at different moments.

In the 21st century, return is intimately related to DNA ancestry testing. Michelle Commander writes:

The stitching together of ancestral histories by reappropriating the very apparatuses developed to bolster racial science that ostensibly evidenced their inferiority is a decidedly controversial shift in the Afro-Atlantic imaginary. However, in the reimagining of the purposes of genetic science that follow, there is the possibility of charting an effective path of return that is marked by a desire to show reverence for the past and the promotion of revolutionary potential for the present and future.” (Commander 226)

While this dissertation takes a more skeptical view of the role of genetic technologies to facilitate return for black Americans, Commander’s characterization of these technologies represents an optimistic vision that many black American DNA ancestry test takers share. Importantly, some scholars argue that the search for particular ethnic markers cannot be “separated from the politics of citizenship and nation” (Wailoo et al. 326). My examination of return seeks to demonstrate how DNA testing (and genealogical practices more broadly), are intimately tied to citizenship and nationalist sentiment.

Chapter Summaries

In chapter one I close read Pauline Hopkins’s novel *Of One Blood* in order to think through how narratives of genealogy have been used to challenge notions of race and racism in the United States. I argue that while the novel imagines Ethiopia as a possible homeland for black Americans, it ultimately presents return skeptically because returning black characters

have been fundamentally changed by the experiences of the Middle Passage and come to Africa with western ideas and values.

In chapter two, “Dissatisfactory Returns in Larsen’s *Quicksand* and *Passing*,” I close read *Quicksand* as my main text and *Passing* as a secondary text. I argue that in Larsen’s works, return to a particular location is impossible for her tragic mulatta characters, but return(s) can be a dynamic and continuous process which values movements towards places, rather than places themselves.

In chapter three, “Contemporary Narratives of Genealogy and Race,” I examine the television show *Finding Your Roots* in order to close read instances in which genealogical research and DNA ancestry testing come together to create revised histories of race in the U.S. I argue that host Henry Louis Gates Jr. presents a multiracial view of black genealogical history, and that DNA ancestry testing works to biologize race in the narrative of the show.

Chapter 2 Of Bodies and Blood in *Of One Blood*

Introduction

Of One Blood serves as a fascinating site of complex competing theories of black genealogy, kinship, and race within African-American women's writing at the turn of the twentieth century. I further argue that if we read *Of One Blood*'s preoccupation with the metaphor of "blood" through the lens of "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," paying attention to the particular ways that Spillers's essay theorizes the rupture of body/flesh and the destruction of kinship relations, we can understand Hopkins's novel as an attempt to reunite body/flesh through the return to an African ancestral homeland. However, despite Hopkins attempts to imagine fulfilling returns within her novel, these returns are only physical. Cultural and psychological returns never emerge, and the broken bonds of kinship are not restored. Though the discourse on "return" often implies that the end goal is physical relocation to a lost homeland, Hopkins's work demonstrates that a physically return does not mean that the returning subject is free from the aftereffects of enslavement, trauma, and loss of culture, or that the subject can reconnect to the cultural aspects of life in Africa.⁶

This chapter's reading of *Of One Blood* also allows for sustained attention to another key theme that runs throughout the dissertation, the role of remembering, forgetting, and fabricating

⁶ It's potentially useful to think about Jessie Redmon Fauset's ideas about black nostalgia in relation to Hopkins, as there are similarities. Brent Hayes Edwards notes that in Fauset's portrayal of black nostalgia for Africa, black Americans are a people culturally distinct from Africans in Africa and "unable to translate—to carry over into a new context—the African cultural inheritance." (Edwards 142)

within narratives of genealogy.⁷ Hopkins plays with multiple uses of this triad within the text in order to interrogate the cultural norms of racial identity in the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century. Though the novel's subtitle is "the hidden self," which suggests an activeness on the part of hidden blackness, we can also think about the ways in which the novel highlights a forgotten self that characters must work towards remembering. The work of remembering, forgetting, and fabricating within the genealogies of the text demonstrate how race and genealogy are forms of narration, not simply at the level of the fictional text, but within American culture; importantly, I hope that this chapter shows that while race and genealogy are always forms of narration, the role this narration plays in black life has been especially crucial because of the ongoing subjugation of blackness in the United States.

Of One Blood: Or, the Hidden Self was serialized between 1902-1903 in the *Colored American Magazine*.⁸ In the first half of the novel, Reuel Briggs is a white passing black American doctor contemplating suicide. One day he uses his powers of "magnetism" (Hopkins 33) and knowledge of "spiritualistic phenomena" (4) to bring a young woman named Dianthe Lusk back to life. Dianthe's memory is gone and though Reuel knows her identity and the fact that she's black (even though she can pass for white), he keeps both pieces of information from her and convinces her to marry him. In the novel's second half, Reuel travels to Ethiopia on an archival expedition to "unearth buried cities and treasure." (58) While abroad he's told that Dianthe has died in a tragic accident, but in reality the accident has erased her memory again. This time it's Reuel's friend Aubrey Livingston who keeps her identity from her in order to

⁷ Here I'm in conversation with Stuart Hall, who argues "the past continues to speak to us...it is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative, and myth" (qtd. in *Commander* 114)

⁸ Hopkins worked at the magazine for five years and served as editor in chief for a time, though she was eventually forced out. See Lois Brown's *Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins: Black Daughter of the Revolution* for more information on her tenure at the publication.

seduce her away from Reuel. Meanwhile, Reuel discovers a hidden city, Telassar (part of an Ethiopian kingdom) and learns that through his African ancestry he's the heir to the throne. The kingdom is the source of his mystical powers, and teems with rich culture, wealth, and history that predates ancient Egypt. Eventually Reuel learns that he, Dianthe, and Aubrey are all the children of an enslaved woman named Mira and her "master", exposing a set of unknown incestuous relationships.⁹ Dianthe is poisoned by Aubrey and dies a tragic death. Aubrey dies by his own hand, a form of justice meted out by Ai, high priest of Telassar.

Even though Reuel is welcomed into Telassar as its long lost king, the novel lacks resolution because this can't be seen as a "return"; while the subject of the return, Reuel (a stand in for the black American subject) may be marked by the sign of his heritage (the mark upon his breast, itself a stand in for the racialized black body), the subject cannot rid itself of the "undecipherable markings on the captive body...a kind of hieroglyphics of the flesh whose severe disjunctures come to be hidden to the cultural seeing by skin color." (Spillers 67) In the end it is Reuel who cannot see past the trauma written upon his body and soul. We learn that he "spends his days in teaching his people all that he has learned in years of contact with modern culture...but the shadows of great sins darken his life, and the memory of past joys is ever with him." (Hopkins 193) Rather than ending the novel with Reuel learning about the knowledge, culture, and history of ancient Ethiopia, Hopkins has Reuel teach "modern culture" (a loosely coded phrase for white western culture and religion) to the people of Telassar. While he has "returned" in physical form, his psychological state has been permanently engrained with

⁹ Though I hesitate to offer such a long summary, I feel it's important to establish the bizarre plot points early on.

western ideals and values. Though lost genealogical connections are restored, the transference of trauma is eternal.

What does it mean for black people in the United States to narrate their genealogical lines of descent, especially in light of black women's history of sexual assault at the hands of white men? How do genealogical practices privilege notions of *biological kinship* as the primary form familial relationships? In what ways does this privileging of notions of biological kinship produce race as a biological construct?

The Lens of Genre

The strangeness and singularity of the novel set it apart not only from Hopkins's three other novels, but have made it difficult to classify in terms of its genre. Claudia Tate classifies it as a "domestic novel" (Tate 5) and argues that black women writers of the post-Reconstruction era used domesticity as "a site of female political negotiation." (21) Maisha L. Wester takes Tate's classification of the novel as domestic to note that, "In light of the history of slavery, the domestic space literally becomes a gothic enclosure." (Wester 76)

In more recent scholarship, the trend has been to recognize the multiplicity of genres that work together and in tension with one another. In that vein, Yogita Goyal reads *Of One Blood* "as a diasporic travel narrative...Teasing apart the diverse, and apparently conflicting, thematic and formal strains that run through *Of One Blood*, I suggest that Hopkins's domestic allegory argues for the acceptance of racial mixture, while her African romance relies on racial purity." (*Romance, Diaspora and Black Atlantic Literature* 20) In this reading, the novel's formal tensions are indicative of "conflicts that find no resolution." (57)

While Melissa Asher Daniels also understands the novel through the lens of multiple genres, her reading emphasizes the way in which they work together. She writes, “To be sure, the novel draws from several romantic traditions—the gothic, adventure, utopian genres—and adopts a bifurcated plot line—one American, one African—that splits the novel into two separate narratives... Together, both the American and African sequences form a "realistic" and "romantic" meditation on blood, genealogy, and fantasies of racial difference.” (Daniels 158) Daniels argues that the two separate narratives within the novel ultimately work together and “Hopkins destabilizes race by overturning genre.” (Daniels 159)

While my ultimate goal in this chapter is not to neatly define the novel’s genre, I believe that this brief overview highlights how genre functions as a fulcrum on which many readings rest. Approaching the novel through a formalist lens is an attempt to stand on stable ground when it often feels as if the novel’s ideological impulses are on shifting quicksand. Despite this, or perhaps because of it, my reading centers the metaphor of “blood,” taking into account its myriad meanings and uses. “Blood” functions as metaphor for family connections, the fraught tension between racial identity as biological versus social, and Hopkins’s insistence that all of humanity belongs to a singular species (the theory of monogenesis). Without understanding how “blood” functions within the text, it’s impossible to understand the novel’s commentary on genealogy, race and the nation. The text offers few answers for the difficult questions and contradictions that Hopkins raises, but it’s these very features that make it endure.

The Meaning of Blood

Jennie A. Kassanoff provides an excellent overview of the ways in which the language of “blood” functions within the novel. Though I don’t agree with her second characterization, I find

it useful to cite the others. She identifies the four “competing discourses” (Kassanoff 165) as such:

First, “blood,” in Hopkins’s vocabulary, can justify amalgamation by referring to the monogenist doctrine of racial origins: all people, according to this theory, spring from a common racial ancestry and therefore can intermarry with impunity. Second, however, “blood” also marks a pure African heritage that requires vigilant protection from further dilution...Third, “blood” metonymically signifies the bonds of kinship...Finally, “blood” serves as a marker of gender difference: because women are the reproductive source of future African American bloodlines. (Kassanoff 165)

I read “blood” according to the first and third definitions that Kassanoff supplies, but differ on the second. I argue that Hopkins doesn’t advocate for a “vigilant protection from further dilution” of African “blood”; she isn’t interested in protecting an idea of purity, nor does she advocate for amalgamation. Though the novel’s incest plot and “tragic mulatto” characters may suggest a route through which one could reach the conclusion that Hopkins is concerned with the dilution of African heritage, these aspects speak most directly to questions bodily autonomy, sexual trauma, and the perversions of sexual norms.

The text is ambivalent towards dilutions in the sense of racialized biology. Hopkins asks, “who is clear enough in vision to decide who hath black blood and who hath it not? Can any one tell? No, not one; for in His own mysterious way He has united the white race and the black race in this new continent.” (Hopkins 178) The appeal to the “mysterious” wisdom of god in this textual aside points to a resignation towards the reality of racial “dilution”, even if the reason behind it is incomprehensible. The novel’s final paragraph expounds on this point further: “these truths depicted in this feeble work may seem terrible,—even horrible. But who shall judge the

handiwork of God, the Great Craftsman!” (193) “Dilution” itself is not the issue, but the violent manner under which it occurs. The text dreams for a future in which “blood” is not a “hieroglyphics of the flesh.”

Some scholars see Reuel’s fantasy of “a dynasty of dark-skinned rulers, whose destiny should be to restore the prestige of an ancient people” (139) as evidence of the anti-amalgamation orientation of the text. In this vein, Julie A. Fiorelli writes:

In one version of Hopkins’s titular “one blood,” she adopts her period’s pure blood logic to solidify black identity in the union of Reuel and Candace. Applying something like a one-drop rule that valorizes blackness, Hopkins has Candace’s darker skin essentially darken Dianthe’s and Reuel’s partly white blood. This blood logic is reinforced by the lotus-lily birthmark’s linkage of external form and supposed internal essence...the birthmark helps to ensure the continuity and cyclicity of history and the pure reproduction of race. (Fiorelli 465)

In Fiorelli’s reading, a “one-drop rule that valorizes blackness” aligns with Kassanoff’s reading of African heritage that needs protection from dilution. The union of Reuel and Candace’s “blood” produces a reverse of amalgamation in which “blood” is saturated with blackness: we can’t know what someone’s race is in the United States because of sexual assault under slavery, but if black Americans reunite with Africans by returning, they can be restored to the way that they’re supposed to look. Though it may be argued that this reverse amalgamation is happening on a literal level through the assumed forthcoming “dynasty of dark skinned rulers”, I argue that the context in which this moment occurs suggests that Reuel’s desire for a dark dynasty can’t be inflated with a textual valorization of undiluted “pure African heritage.”

The fuller context of the “dynasty of dark-skinned rulers” quote is as follows:

...it seemed the most natural thing in the world to be sitting here among these descendants of the ancient Ethiopians, acknowledged as their King, planning a union with a lovely woman, that should give to the world a dynasty of dark-skinned rulers, whose destiny should be to restore the prestige of an ancient people. Verily, if the wonders he had already seen and heard could be possible in the nineteenth century of progress and enlightenment, nothing was impossible. Dianthe was gone. The world outside held nothing dear to one who had always lived much within himself. The Queen was loving, beautiful—why not accept this pleasant destiny which held its alluring arms so seductively towards him?” (Hopkins 139)

In this moment Reuel is situated in significant contrast to the novel’s opening in which he contemplates suicide. Crucially however, this moment is also the last scene in which he’s uninformed about the major truths of his life; he’s ignorant of the relationship between himself and his siblings, ignorant of the incest he’s committed, ignorant of the betrayal enacted against him by Aubrey. For the first time in the novel, his future is teeming with positive possibilities that fill him with optimism, but his ignorance of the reality around him means that this “destiny” is a fantasy of a future that will burst into flames before it comes to fruition. The fantasy of the “dynasty of dark-skinned rulers” who can “restore the prestige of an ancient people” is ultimately pushed aside by Hopkins’s ending. Alisha Knight argues “Hopkins ends her novel with an ambivalent characterization of Africa. If Telassar’s civilization is superior to the United States’, why does Reuel need to teach them about Western culture?” (Knight 71) I echo this question and add, if the novel is really invested in the concept of “blood” purity for Africans as a whole and a race of dark-skinned rulers for Telassar, as Kassanoff and Fiorelli argue, why does the novel end

on a note of *cultural amalgamation*? How does this cultural amalgamation square with the “dark-skinned” dynasty that Reuel fantasizes about?

Taking into account the way that “blood” is deployed in the monogenist manner, as well as the cultural amalgamation, I believe that Hopkins tries to come to a vision of black life that celebrates Africa as a place of ancestral origins, but is still fundamentally foreign to black Americans. While it might be a place of return, black Americans will have to mold Africa to fit their needs as a people who have experienced cultural changes in the wake of the Middle Passage that are now crucial to black identity, hence Ai’s readiness to have all of Telassar accept Christianity because it’s Reuel’s religion. While “blood” variously represents the discourses of racial purity, kinship, and monogenism at different points in the text, all of these meanings ultimately reinforce Hopkins’s resignation to the reality that racial mixture has linked black Americans to western culture, however unwillingly, and that these “blood” linkages have always been a part of the human story. “Blood” links all humanity through a vertical monogenist logic in which all humans are derived from Africa at some point in time, while it also links humanities different races through horizontal relations of racial mixing. These linkages call into question the meaning of racial identity, as well as the feasibility of “return” for black Americans.

It’s (not) Written on the Body: Race as Narrative

While the novel uses the metonymy of “blood” as a stand in for genealogical descent, racial purity vs. racial mixing, and kinship, the body is another site where we can see these themes explored. Though Hopkins’s writing questions whether the body is a text which one can use to confidently read race, she also calls attention to the hypervisibility of black bodies, even when those bodies are indecipherable objects. Hopkins uses racialized language in a manner that is consistent with early 20th century American racial constructs and categorizations in order to

hint at the surprise revelation of Reuel's black identity. These markers of blackness are the novel's first gesture towards the "hidden self" of the title.

As I've already noted earlier in the chapter, the inability to use visual knowledge to determine racial identity is connected to American racial norms at the turn of the century, particularly that of the one drop rule. The history of the "one drop rule" in the U.S. is far too complex to describe here, but in general, it held that anyone with even a single "drop" of "black blood" in their veins (meaning having a black ancestor at any point down the ancestral line) was classified as black, even if the majority of their ancestry was white.¹⁰ Though states had not begun to use the doctrine of the "one drop rule" at the time of *Of One Blood*'s publishing in 1902-03, by the 1920's it was codified in law in multiple states and would eventually be the ruling ideology of racial classification in the United States, a framework that still dominates racial logics today. Through this framework, the enmeshed/contorted branches of racial origins are pruned for more palatable consumption in a society which uses the distinction between white and 'other' (most notably black), to determine what rights are afforded to particular sets of people.¹¹

The visual decipherability of race and its intersection with the "one drop rule" is brought to the foreground through the figure of the tragic mulatto. Hazel Carby's reading of the figure from 1987's *Reconstructing Womanhood* remains foundational. Arguing against the idea that the mulatto figure represented a desire for blacks to mix themselves into whiteness through reproduction and thus eventually disappear, she claims that "use of mulatto figures engaged with

¹⁰ For an in depth history of the "one drop rule", see *Hypodescent: A History of the Crystallization of the One-Drop Rule in the United States, 1880-1940* by Scott Leon Washington

¹¹ See Frank B. Wilderson's *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* for one theory on the triad of black, white, and other.

the discourse of social Darwinism, undermining the tenets of “pure blood” and “pure race” as mythological, and implicitly exposed the absurdity of theories of the total separation of the races.” (140) In this reading, the mulatto figure throws the system of American racial identification into question. Scholars such as JoAnn Pavletich argue that in addition to the work that the tragic mulatta does to upend notions of racial purity, Hopkins uses the figure to critique the usefulness of emulating normative gender roles in the struggle for black women’s liberation. Pavletich argues:

even a figure as malleable as the tragic mulatta did not afford the kind of agency necessary to address the severe racial injustice of the period in literary conventions that operated within the paradigm of true womanhood...the vehicle of the mulatta was inseparable from the ideology of true womanhood, and thus incapable of successfully contesting the gender ideologies that had brought it into being. (Pavletich 659)

Taken together, these critiques show how the “tragic mulatto” was both central to the project of racial equality in post-Reconstruction black women’s writing, while also severely limiting the ability of authors to deploy successful critique of gender norms. In my reading of the tragic mulatto, I emphasize that despite the figure’s ability to question notions of racial purity and situate black women as subjects of true womanhood, the figure reifies the hypervisibility of the black body and challenges the ability of black women to effectively function within the framework of true womanhood.

The novel’s opening is one place where the tension between hypervisibility and indecipherable bodies is at work. Reuel’s physical appearance is described in great detail in the first few pages of the novel and his body operates as text:

No one could fail to notice the vast breadth of shoulder, the strong throat that upheld a plain face, the long limbs, the sinewy hands. His head was that of an athlete, with close-set ears, and covered with an abundance of hair, straight and closely cut, thick and smooth; the nose was the aristocratic feature, although nearly spoiled by broad nostrils, of this remarkable young man; his skin was white, but of a tint suggesting olive, an almost fallow color which is a mark of strong, melancholic temperaments. (Hopkins 3)

Hopkins does not reveal at this point of the novel that Reuel is black, but instead describes his body in an admiring tone, emphasizing physical strength and attractiveness that even reaches “aristocratic” heights. However, something is not quite right with this seemingly straightforward description. His nose is almost, but not quite, “spoiled” by “broad nostrils”, and though his skin is white its “olive” tint and “fallow color” signal the possibility of emotional instability. These physical descriptions serve as racially coded clues for blackness which suggest that appearances may not be what they seem. Reuel’s nose and skin color suggest that upon close inspection his blackness has always been marked upon his body in a negative way, though the marks are not clear enough for the clues to be read in a conclusive manner.

I argue that this description of Reuel is set up in such a way that the hidden phenotypical clues which suggest blackness force the reader to interpret Reuel’s body in line with the “one drop rule” practice of race in which any black ancestry, or “black blood,” automatically makes one socially black. While the novel as a whole may argue that all of humanity is “of one blood” and race can’t always be known just by looking at someone, this reliance of phenotypical racial characteristics which potentially expose the “hidden self” show how blackness is always hypervisible. Perhaps what the novel really teaches its readers is that while you can’t always

know if someone is truly white, if you look hard enough, you can always see blackness hidden beneath the surface.

The “hidden self” of the subtitle is easy to forget or oversimplify in terms of meaning. Most literally, the “hidden self” is African ancestry: it’s intentionally hidden by Reuel, completely unknown to Aubrey, and forgotten by Dianthe. More importantly though, it stands in for the lie of white racial purity at the center of American society. African ancestry is not just hidden in Reuel and his siblings, but potentially within many white American’s genealogical past.

Hopkins upends the logic of visual knowledge as a reliable tool for racial classification in the United States. As Joshua Lam argues in terms of Dianthe’s memory loss:

Dianthe cannot recall her past, so her pale skin leaves her unaware of her racial heritage. If race is not perceptible, the novel suggests, it is a construction of memory and history; the suppression of the latter enables Dianthe to unwittingly and unintentionally pass as white. If the possibility of passing already suggests the perceptual precarity of racial identity, amnesia completes the erasure of Dianthe’s identity by separating her from knowledge of her own individual and cultural history. (Lam 482)

As Lam brings attention to in his reading of Dianthe’s amnesia, race can’t be known just by looking at someone, because anyone could unexpectedly be black or white due to legal and social classifications of race at the turn of the century. Dianthe’s amnesia isn’t just a loss of discrete facts, such as name and birthday, but a loss of one’s “individual and cultural history,” which is another form of a story one tells about themselves. What we think we know about racial origins is just a story, a narrative that is repeatedly told, revised, and treated as fact.

The narrative nature of race that Lam alludes to is further touched upon by Hopkins in the scene in which Dianthe is introduced. Upon learning that Dianthe's singing troupe has white passing women in it, Aubrey jokes that at his family's plantation, "They range at home from alabaster to ebony...The results of amalgamation are worthy the careful attention of all medical experts." (Hopkins 12) Aubrey's joke calls attention to the fact that not only is there a range of skin colors among the enslaved (due to white paternity), but society intentionally looks the other way as if its cause is a mystery of the body that only medical doctors could solve. This comment underscores what Lam calls "the perceptual precarity of racial identity" and ironically, it not only applies to the white passing women, but to Aubrey himself. Aubrey thinks that he has an edge in the game of racial identification, laughing at the members of society who refuse to speak the truth of racial mixing at the hands of white men who assault black women, but he neither recognizes that he is the result of this history, nor that he'll perpetuate it by raping Dianthe and keeping her memory from her.

If you tell a story often enough, you make it true. This fact is at the center of race in American society and has been noted as an aspect of Hopkins's work by her readers and critics. Dianthe, Reuel, and Aubrey's identities (including their racial ones), are made possible through false narratives that shape their pasts and futures. In his analysis of the visual perceptibility of race, Lam argues that Hopkins demonstrates race is a "construction of memory and history" through the use of the body. I would further argue that the combination of these cultural constructions means race is a fictional narrative passed on through genealogical storytelling, which is always subject to intentional revisions and erasures. Indeed, what makes race such a compelling combination of memory and history is that revisions and erasures are essential to these narratives because our cultural definitions of racial categories are continuously in flux.

Therefore, the meaning and significance we ascribe to race as a concept, as well as the deployment of particular categories of racial identity, must constantly be rearticulated and reinscribed upon the body. We can return to Spillers's passage on the hieroglyphics of the flesh to think through this further:

These undecipherable marking on the captive body render a kind of hieroglyphics of the flesh whose severe disjunctures come to be hidden to the cultural seeing by skin color.

We might well ask if this phenomenon of marking and branding actually "transfers" from one generation to another, finding its various *symbolic substitutions* in an efficacy of meanings that repeat the initiating moments?...This body whose flesh carries the female and the male to the frontiers of survival bears in person the marks of a cultural text.

(Spillers 67)

Here Spillers asks whether or not violence and trauma are transferred to the body of the black subject symbolically through cultural, psychological, and physical violence enacted across time. These transfers must be acted out or performed on each generation, and the meaning must continue to be symbolized in some manner; the hieroglyphics of the flesh were initiated through acts of physical violence as a result of the Middle Passage, but ultimately these symbols change depending on the historical moment and as such must continue to be legible to its subjects as a deeply intimate yet traumatic cultural text. This is not only about the transfers of violence and trauma, but the writing and rewriting of race on and through the body. Every generation must find its own way of reading the flesh and race in order to assign meaning and value to that reading.

Return

Thus far, this chapter has demonstrated how the concepts of “blood” and “body” are used by Hopkins to interrogate the meanings of race, identity, and genealogy at the turn of the century. I argue that the third significant way in which Hopkins interrogates these concepts is through the fantasy of return. Although Hopkins clearly questioned racial identification and categorizations, black culture and history are inarguably important values within *Of One Blood*. Her interrogation of race is intimately tied to her work of imagining alternatives to the racist ideology of early twentieth century U.S. culture.

The alternatives are presented through her fantasy of black American return to an Africa which is rich in history and culture. Through the emphasis on Ethiopia’s past greatness, Hopkins creates a story which emphasizes the value of black culture and peoples. As Hanna Wallinger notes in her biography of Hopkins, her version of Ethiopia didn’t correspond to any actual historical period. Despite this, Wallinger contends that her depiction was useful to an “agenda of correcting the view of African Americans as an inferior, good-for-nothing, ignorant people born to be enslaved. This is another example of discursive displacement, Hopkins's strategy to move action in time and space away from contemporary America in order to criticize prejudice and injustice. (Wallinger 216) Daniels adds that “[Hopkins] replaces the more mimetic narrative of post-Reconstruction racial violence with a mystical counternarrative that looks towards Africa and its past as a source of ancestral pride.” (Daniels 159) Gordon Fraser argues that in light of Hopkins’s view that all humanity shares one blood, the novel “seems at odds with it promotion of African greatness” (Fraser 380) and ultimately concludes that, “Livingston’s death, like Lusks, points ultimately to the novel’s skepticism about its own ostensible ideology.” (380) I want to complicate these interpretations by considering how ‘ancestral pride’ is negotiated and

limited by spatial and national boundaries which affect how Hopkins is able to construct her anti-racist project. Can racial pride only be achieved within the boundaries of fictionalized spaces, pasts and genealogies, or does Hopkins identify political strategies that can be used to counter white supremacy within the United States? What utility comes from imagining such a fantastical vision of return?

One way in which the text tries to answer these questions is through Reuel and Candace's relationship. Many critics have noted the problematic depictions of gender within the novel, especially as it pertains to its female characters. However, I want to turn our attention to how the text speaks to men's particular imagined gender roles. I argue that *Of One Blood* imagines Telassar as a place where heteronormative gender roles and sexuality can be restored for black subjects, especially men. In Telassar, Reuel can become a patriarchal figure in ways that he couldn't ever be in the United States because his body, like that of the black woman, is also "ungendered"¹² within the national boundaries.¹³ Reuel's masculinity is feminized in the United States. Every indication the books give suggests he lives as a chaste lifestyle, and despite the incest of the plot, even his marriage to Dianthe is desexualized. We never learn if they have sex, and if they do, it's a perversion because they're siblings.

Candace is a seductive figure who represents Reuel's dreams for social mobility and prominence. Hopkins writes that when they meet, "Reuel felt himself yielding readily to her

¹² See "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" for a discussion of "ungendering".

¹³ Interestingly, the scene in which Reuel discovers that there is a bride waiting for him recalls another text in the field of black Americans' imaginings of Africa, *Coming to America* with Eddie Murphy. Murphy's character Prince Akeem is waited on hand and foot by sexually available women (like the line of Candaces). When his royal parents attempt to marry him off, the potential bride supplicates herself to Prince Akeem by obeying his every request, no matter how ridiculous (she is even instructed to bark like a dog in a test to see how far she'll go in her acquiescence). These Candace-like African women, perpetually available to their black male ruler for service and sex, represent a fantasy of return that is invested in heteronormativity and patriarchy. It also suggests that for black American men, part of the fantasy of returning to Africa is about inhabiting the role of the patriarch.

infinite attractiveness. In the azure light and regal splendor of the fragrant apartment, there was rest and satisfaction. All the dreams of wealth and ambition that had haunted the feverish existence by the winding Charles, that had haunted his days of obscure poverty in the halls of Harvard, were about to be realized.” (Hopkins 138) Though all of Telassar impresses Reuel, it is only when he sees Candace that he begins to feel truly fulfilled. Candace validates his masculinity in ways that his professional life in the United States doesn’t. Meanwhile, Candace lacks agency or personality throughout the text.

While Alex Zamalin argues that the novel “stressed women’s political rule through a matrilineal society and the queen of Telassar,” (41) thereby reading the character of Candace with a feminist orientation, I argue that the matrilineal society and female rule are present to show the way in which normative gender roles in Telassar have become skewed because of their male patriarch’s enslavement. The Candaces are stand ins for proper male rulers, ready to be replaced at any moment.¹⁴ Hopkins may show women’s political rule, but the function of the Candaces is to facilitate the eventual continuation of proper male rule.

Inheritance

One confusing aspect of the novel is Reuel’s relationship to inheritance and race. While the novel advocates for embracing African heritage and shows that heritage to be valuable in terms of the cultural knowledge it contains, one aspect that is commonly ignored is the possibility that Reuel’s powers of hypnosis, which importantly set the story in motion, may be inherited from his white father. The powers Hopkins’ depicts in the novel include magnetism, mesmeric phenomena, trance-state, and seeing into the future. While each of these are distinct

¹⁴ It’s also worth noting that the Candaces are replaced once they are no longer in peak childbearing years, indicating that their primary purpose is to be ready and available wombs.

mystical practices, they are represented as related strains of relatively unexplored scientific fields in which Reuel is the chief practitioner and expert. Importantly, the representations of science in the novel serve as crucial frameworks for understanding the ways in which genealogy and inheritance function. While Reuel is a dedicated student of the “absurdities” of supernatural phenomena or *mysticism*,” (Hopkins 2) his expertise is not simply a result of study, but his cultural inheritance. When he arrives in Telassar, he recalls that, “It was a tradition among those who had known him in childhood that he was descended from a race of African kings. He remembered his mother well. From her he had inherited his mysticism and his occult powers. The nature of the mysticism within him was, then, but a dreamlike devotion to the spirit that had swayed his ancestors; it was the shadow of Ethiopia’s power.” (126) He does not stumble upon his expertise; it is the inheritance of his status as king of Telassar. Hopkins explicitly makes claims for epistemologies of African origin that surpass white European ones in their expertise in the areas of mesmeric science. Although he has read the essential books concerning mysticism from American and European sources, assiduously studying all that the Western canon can offer him, the fact that he has gone further than any of the published experts in actually being able to raise humans from the mesmeric state that comes before death, which no one else has been able to achieve, explicitly acknowledges that his mother’s abilities have been passed on to him.

While it is clear at this latter part of the novel that the mystical abilities are a “shadow of Ethiopia’s power,” even suggesting that there are further heights of mystical knowledge Reuel has not reached yet, Hopkins creates a convoluted plot around the origins of the mysticism which, though confusing in its twists and turns, ultimately allows readers to ask pressing questions about the nature inheritance and race. After reviving Dianthe from the brink of death in her “mesmeric sleep” (49) through his advances in “magnetism”, Reuel and Aubrey attend a

party where Reuel is asked to regale the attendees with the story of his medical miracle. Before he can tell his story though, the boisterous Aubrey hijacks the spotlight and tells his own instead. He states, “My father was Dr. Aubrey Livingston...and he owned a large plantation of slaves . My father was deeply interested in the science of medicine, and I believe made some valuable discoveries along the lines of mesmeric phenomena...Among the slaves was a girl who was my mother’s waiting maid, and I have seen my father throw her into a trance-state many times when I was so small I had not conception of what he was doing.” (50) At this point in the novel, readers do not know the parentage of any of the siblings, so it seems that this display of power executed by Dr. Livingston is that of a white man manipulating a Black woman through scientific and/or medical control.

However, given the fact that we later learn Mira herself possesses mystical powers, Aubrey’s memory of this scene must be re-read through a different lens. First of all, was Dr. Livingston actually manipulating Mira into a trance state? If so, how did he get these powers? Do white people have their own histories of mysticism to tap into, or was Dr. Livingston’s discovery actually a theft of African cultural knowledge gained through his ownership of Mira and un-consensual access to her body? Or was Mira performing a prophesy based on knowledge she had gathered through her own mystical practices, making Dr. Livingston believe he has power and knowledge he didn’t actually possess, therefore allowing Mira herself to maintain some form of agency in their interactions? Additionally, when Aubrey shares this memory, the novel has not yet revealed that Reuel, Aubrey, and Dianthe are all the children of Mira and Dr. Livingston Sr. Nor do we know that Mira and Dr. Livingston are half siblings themselves. There is a connection in the text between the performance of mystical powers and the incestuous relationships between sets of siblings. Though the powers likely derive from the family’s African

ancestry, it's possible that the white Dr. Livingston possesses powers which he uses on his half-sister Mira, mirroring the incest/mysticism manipulative paradigm of Reuel and Dianthe. These possibilities would radically alter how one reads the novel's commentary on African ancestral inheritances. Whichever of these scenarios explain this scene, acknowledging the textual ambiguity that Hopkins weaves into the text opens up different possibilities for understanding the role of inheritance in the novel.

These tensions within the novel gain further thorniness when read alongside the incest plotline that lies at the heart of the novel's preoccupation with race and inheritance. This convoluted incest plotline serves multiple purposes for Hopkin's arguments about racial mixing and raises many questions. First, the incest between siblings that occurs over two generations over allows Hopkins to argue that slavery and racism create lies of necessity and survival, which ultimately threaten to pervert the norms of family structures. Secondly, these lies continue the idea that race itself is a fiction with no biological basis by showing how easily parentage can be hidden. There is no way to distinguish the children of Mira and Dr. Livingston from children with completely white ancestry, so they pass into society unnoticed by actively hiding their backgrounds (Reuel), forgetting through amnesia (Dianthe), or by having the rights that come from being the legal heir of two white parents (Aubrey). Third, the confusion caused by the secret incest make it unclear where Reuel's mystical powers come from.

Early in the novel readers are told that Reuel has studied the essential readings of mystical and medical thought. However, later in the novel we learn that Reuel remembers his mother's use of the same powers and "From [his mother] he had inherited his mysticism and his occult powers." (Hopkins 126) If we assume that inheritance is the source of his powers, rather than his studies, then what can he have learned from these Western medical texts, and how does

his knowledge, which draws upon these two sources, come to extend far beyond anyone else? I would suggest that as much as Hopkins is invested in claiming Africa as a source of value, greatness, and cultural knowledge, crucially the form of ethnic pride that she espouses is not a purist one. The gathering of knowledge from different sources, i.e. his mother's Ethiopian powers, and the Western knowledge explored (if not successfully practiced), by white men like his father, is combined in Reuel for a more successful amalgamation of mysticism than anyone else has ever achieved. While the incest plotline of the novel is certainly problematized by Hopkins, I find it curious that it serves as the novel's catalyst for the chain of events that ultimately allow Reuel to discover his heritage and liberate Telassar. Though a clear problem for the characters of the novel and society at large due to its effects, incest becomes a useful mechanism/argument against overtly simplistic readings of race, genealogy, and inheritance.

Conclusion

There is a long legacy of "blood" being used as a stand in for genealogy, race, family, and the interrelatedness of all humanity.¹⁵ The metonymy of blood as a stand in for the complete truth of ancestry and race is not created by Hopkins. Instead, within the novel she provides a fictional rereading "blood" logic in order to expose its limits and inherent contradictions, while at the same time taking it up for her own purposes. Hopkins argues that not only can you not tell someone's race just by looking at them, but you can't rely on race to tell you anything or mean anything. What Hopkins values is genealogy, ancestry, and black cultural knowledge and practices.

Within *Of One Blood* the United States fails to be a space where black Americans can be recognized as fully human or fully citizen. Alisha Knight argues, "Hopkins's treatment of the

¹⁵ See *Blood Talk: American Race Melodrama and the Culture of the Occult* by Susan Gillman

success archetype set her apart from many of her peers for its consistency in criticizing United States policy toward blacks and promoting agitation rather than integration. Hopkins's writing responded to white oppression by criticizing and revising the success myth and also by offering African Americans an alternative model for success." (Knight xii) The American dream fails them, so the fantasy of returning to Africa becomes the most viable option for living a fulfilling life, even if that vision is limited by the desire to adhere to gender norms, or fails to reproduce an authentic African homeland. I suggest that by choosing to depict an Ethiopia that is fully of the imagination, rather than reality, Hopkins is staking out a position which rejects adherence to any nation. Black Americans can't become a part of the body politic because they are always cast as foreign to the body of the nation, despite the history of black labor that was used to build its wealth.

Spillers argues that "Those African persons in "Middle Passage" were literally suspended in the "oceanic"...removed from the indigenous land and culture, and not-yet "American" either, these captive persons, without names that their captors would recognize, were in movement across the Atlantic, but they were also *nowhere* at all." (Spillers 72) Through returning Reuel to his Ethiopian homeland, Hopkins thinks through this process of uprooting, un-naming, and displacement in order to interrogate the practices of genealogy and return. If the Middle Passage represents a moment in which kidnapped Africans were "nowhere at all", and the United States is a hostile home, it should come as no surprise that the concept of "return" holds such appeal.

If the split of body/flesh represents a kind of psychic and mental death, I argue that Reuel's ability to reanimate the dead is a metaphor for the hope that reconnecting with African culture and knowledge will allow black Americans to one day turn flesh back into body. Of course, this would mean that the African black Americans return to would have to be fully

liberated and whole in its own right. As Goyal points out, “the mythical underground city is not a real homeland, but a grave or “magnificent Necropolis””. (“Gender” 95) Telassar is a city suspended somewhere between life and death, a city that waits for someone to reanimate it back to life. In Hopkins’s rendition of the relationship between black Americans and Africans, black Americans need Africans to heal their wounds of slavery, but in an imperialist twist, Africans need black Americans to pull them out of the ancient past they are perceived to be stuck in. For a novel which promotes the concept of being “of one blood” and explores deep genealogies in order to return its main character to his ancestral homeland, kinship remains elusive. Hopkins’s characters can discover lost family members, and even return to a homeland, but neither act can fully repair the destructiveness and trauma of enslavement.

Chapter 3 *Quicksand* and Thwarted Returns

Introduction

In my second chapter I turn from the fantastically imagined diasporic returns of Hopkins to the dissatisfactory returns of the Harlem Renaissance, putting Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928), and to a lesser extent *Passing* (1929), in conversation with critiques of multicultural studies. In the case of Nella Larsen's work, a return to a homeland is conceptualized differently compared to other black American writers, artists, or activists who advocate return. Generally, when black Americans speak of returning to a homeland, Africa is the assumed location. For Larsen however, return primarily leads to Europe, and to a lesser extent previous homes within the United States. In this chapter I propose that we examine characters such as Helga, Irene and Claire not as bi- or multi-racial individuals, but black passers, therefore resisting placing them into new identity categories which threaten to rewrite African-American literary history or remove Larsen out of the category of "black" writer. With the concept of black passers, I evoke the ability of these characters to move in and out of various racialized and classed social groups, spaces, and locations.¹⁶

¹⁶ I use the terms "black passer", mulatta, and tragic mulatta (when referring to the trope). With the term "black passer", I'm not simply trying to find another way to name a mulatta/biracial/multiracial/mixed figure. For me, the black passer is less an identity than an attempt to signify people who deploy their privileged positionality to navigate spaces or access services that darker skinned black people often can't access. I would relate this term to Sami Schalk's use of "transing" within Larsen's work, which Schalk argues "should not be read as a singular act moving toward a dominant identity, but rather as a form of *transing*: an active movement "that takes place within, as well as across or between" race, gender, sexuality, and class lines." (Schalk 149)

In my examination of Larsen's works, I posit that her novels explore "return(s)" as opposed to "return"; my reading seeks to tease out the ways in which return(s) are a dynamic and continuous process that is repeated depending on the level of fulfillment that previous return(s) have given to the returning subjects, as well as the number of possible sites of return that Black subjects identify. While Hopkins literalizes return to an African ancestral past within the present as a means of exploring the possibility of futures not circumscribed by the violence and discrimination of American life, Larsen explores return(s) in which escaping from white supremacy is impossible; return(s) to places therefore fail. Her works interrogate the concept of "return(s)" for Black Americans by asking *where* one returns to, *what* return(s) accomplishes, *how* one returns, and whether or not "return(s)" can be oriented towards something other than space and/or location, such as a person or a previous articulation of blackness.

While my examination of Hopkins explores the ability of, and mechanisms through which narrated genealogies try to repair the body/flesh divide, this chapter asks what happens when there is no attempt to repair that divide. Rather than repair the rupture, I argue that Larsen produces affective realms in which her characters capitulate to racialized melancholic pain.¹⁷ For Larsen's characters, there is no redemption in looking towards ancestral pasts, no rise in racial or cultural pride that acts as a balm for the wounded psyches of Black subjects. While chapter three

¹⁷ Helga's depressed resignation to her life (bearing child after child in a loveless marriage) and Clare's probable suicide reminded me of Weheliye on the question of agency. He writes, "I wondered about the very basic possibility of agency and/or resistance in extreme circumstances such as slave plantations or concentration camps. The initial inquiry, then, led me to broader methodological questions facing minority discourse: Why are formations of the oppressed deemed liberatory only if they resist hegemony and/or exhibit the full agency of the oppressed? What deformations of freedom become possible in the absence of resistance and agency." (Weheliye 2) Larsen's character's relationships to agency are difficult to categorize. At times they seem to actively resist the oppression they face, while other times they don't. In a larger sense though, I'm interested in how Larsen's novels skirt questions resistance or repair, and instead portrays the attempts of characters to *survive* their traumas through genealogical practices or return(s).

of this dissertation explores how naming an ancestral home within Africa has historically been impossible for black Americans due to the Middle Passage and chattel slavery (both events severed ties to ancestral histories, languages, and knowledge), this chapter examines fictional instances in which black Americans migrate and/or travel within the United States or Europe in search of ancestral homelands or more stable racial identities. These travels allow characters to rethink the significance of ancestry and return(s), as well as how they are respectively influenced by the received narratives about them.

I posit that *Quicksand* and *Passing* theorize return(s) as a process that deepens racial melancholia even as it stabilizes a cohesive racial identity for the returning subject. These returns are complicated by the fact that the main characters are black passers. In *Quicksand* Helga Crane travels across the Atlantic to her Denmark, her mother's birthplace, in order to reconnect with her Danish family and escape her feelings of internalized self-hate and shame caused by the oppressed status of Black Americans. The novel deals with the melancholia of return(s) to Denmark, a place which might be thought of as a site genealogical origin for Helga, but which fails to live up to her expectations because of the racializing lessons she receives through her travels. In *Passing* estranged childhood friends Clare Kendry and Irene Redfield reunite after a chance meeting, thereby returning to each other in ways that force each woman to rethink her relationship to black culture. I argue that we must consider how Larsen's work stakes out the position of the black passer within narratives of genealogy and return. I use the term *black passer* in order to avoid interpreting Larsen's work as a multiracial text. Michele Elam argues

...multiracial advocates have begun a problematic reinterpretation of African American literary history by redefining authors previously identified (or self-identified) and anthologized as "black" according to the racial discourses of the day, ascribing to them a

new multiracial identity. Through this presentist gesture—imposing contemporary values and designations onto past events and people—many of these writers and their texts are being “saved,” redeemed and relieved of their blackness, celebrated and canonized through a process in which bi- and multiraciality become an index of heroic self-definition in the move to define some lost mixed race literary tradition. (Elam 43)

These moves from multiracial advocates create ahistorical reinterpretations of African-American literary history.¹⁸ With this view in mind, I interpret Larsen’s characters through the lens black identity or mulatta identity. In evoking the term black passer, I mean to highlight how Larsen does the work of articulating how the diverse bodies of black people engenders different experiences and relationships to blackness. Whereas Hopkins is interested in destabilizing racial categories, Larsen’s work is interested in thinking through the expansiveness of particular racial categories. Through this chapter, I consider how her work uses the figure of the mulatta to examine the different positionalities that exist within blackness.

Theoretical Groundings

In this chapter I use a combination of affect theory, black feminist theory, and discourses on the black subject’s place within American citizenship and categories of the human to consider how the processes of racialization effect the affective lives of Larsen’s characters. I examine the affective outcomes of racialization on Larsen’s characters and consider how this relates to their attempts to engage their own genealogy or origins, as well as their place within the body/flesh binary.

Anne Cheng argues that “melancholia also presents a particularly apt paradigm for elucidating the activity and components of racialization. Racialization in America may be said to

¹⁸ Work such as Jared Sexton’s *Amalgamation Schemes* would also align with this argument.

operate through the institutional process of producing a dominant, standard, white national ideal, which is sustained by the exclusion-yet-retention of racialized others. The national topography of centrality and marginality legitimizes itself by retroactively positing the racial other as always Other and lost to the heart of the nation.” (Cheng 10) Not only can we understand racialization in the terms Cheng uses here, as a process by which the non-white Other is hopelessly “lost to the heart of the nation,” but as a physical presence shaped by the melancholy of racialized affect which causes deep affective ruptures in the 20th century that resemble Spillers’s rupture between body/flesh during the Middle Passage. Furthermore, not only are these ruptures just as important as those of body/flesh, they serve as an example for my argument that the hieroglyphic symbols proposed by Spillers change over time. Helga, Irene, and Clare are figures who either recognize in themselves, or are recognized by others, as less straightforward manifestations of legible flesh.

Notably, *Quicksand* is one of the few works of African American literature to chronicle a Black character traveling to Europe, and certainly the only one I can think of where the character is visiting European family. When we think of the tragic mulatto/a, the character is usually the product of a black woman’s rape by a white man. *Quicksand* deviates from this type of tragic mulatto figure by 1) centering a woman whose parents had a consensual relationship, 2) who has the ability to claim her white family for her economic and social benefit, 3) and whose white ancestry comes through the maternal line; these distinctions allow for novel narrative possibilities.¹⁹ The maternal link to Denmark allows Helga to quite literally escape U.S. racism, unlike other tragic mulatta heroines. Of course, we see that it doesn’t mean an escape from racism itself. Helga becomes acquainted with a different style of racism through her Danish

¹⁹ These facts mimic those of Larsen’s own life, as found by George Hutchinson in his 2006 biography *In Search of Nella Larsen*.

family members, but still, being an expatriate offers advantages: money, a home, family, stability, marriage and security.²⁰

Helga's attempts at return fail because all returns are inevitably dissatisfying for Black American; there is no "return" because to be black is to be excluded from full recognitions of citizenship and the cultural body. Just as Reuel can't return to a real African society in *Of One Blood* (hence the creation of the Telassar fantasy), Helga can't return to a European one. Cheng's use of the metaphor of haunting is particularly useful in thinking through the quandary of return. She argues that, "More than a haunting concept in America, the minority subject presents a haunted subject. Denigration has conditioned its formation *and* resuscitation. Not merely the object of white melancholia, the minority is also a melancholic subject, precisely because he or she has been enjoined to renounce him/herself." (Cheng 104) While Cheng uses this metaphor to call our attention towards how the minority subject is haunted, we can also use the metaphor of haunting to consider how the United States is the haunted house that the haunted subject occupies. After all, haunted subjects occupy haunted spaces. We can view the United States as a haunted house that African-Americans have built through coerced and exploitative labor; in spite of its ghoulishness, the feeling of "home" can't be found elsewhere.

Quicksand is also a unique site for understanding the how the idea of returning to a homeland is complicated by notions of biracial identity and racial melancholy, further rendering "return" impossible. Larsen's work continually explores the precarious social status of the biracial black subject in ways that firmly claim her character's Black identity while also highlighting how that Black identity (both biracial and not) are a distinctly American creation defined by its location within a unique social, cultural, and flesh matrix. Race's social

²⁰ For a discussion of the experiences black American expatriates had abroad in the early 20th century, see Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* or Brent Hayes Edwards's *The Practice of Diaspora*

construction comes into focus as Helga's constant movement (southern uplift school, Chicago, Harlem, Denmark, and the American South) fails to open up a route towards a fulfilling home that represents less oppression, individuality, and racial authenticity. Helga can't find this home because it is one which is predicated on inclusion within the world of white humanity.

The Space of the Tragic Mulatta

Though it might be out of fashion to talk about the mulatta trope, you can't get around her as an enduring and central figure of African American lit. There is a fear that if we speak of her, we highlight the figure's importance over others and reify her place as the iconic Black woman figure.

However, she's worth paying attention to because she is so troubled, and nowhere else do questions of race's social construction coalesce in such a potent manner. The fact of her contentious status is revealing in and of itself because it highlights the problem of colorism, in which light skinned Black people are favored over dark-skinned black people (women in particular), both inside and outside of Black society. While light skinned individuals experience a relative degree of privilege over their darker skinned counterparts, their proximity to whiteness has often come with the assumption that, when possible, light skinned Black people will try to ingratiate themselves within white society (a fair assumption given the prevalence of passing within U.S. history). Despite this history, Sherrard-Johnson argues that, "Larsen's novels warn us against dismissing the mulatta as an obvious aping of Eurocentric beauty and womanhood." (Sherrard-Johnson 862) From this viewpoint, Larsen writes against a preconceived notion of the mulatta as a mere copycat of white womanhood; if she does not perform "an obvious aping", then what form of mimicry is she engaged in? How do Larsen's characters use their proximity to whiteness?

Larsen novels depict tragic mulattas who have complicated relationships to their blackness, as well as to whiteness, and therefore critically examine social norms around gender, sexuality, class, and family histories. In highlighting the mulatta's troubled place within black culture, Larsen troubles the very structure of American social life.²¹ While the tragic mulatta is pervasive, Larsen's work shows how the figure can be used in a multitude of ways. Helga is a truly unique figure in African-American literature and her uniqueness opens up novel questions around race and return, deepening our ability to understand how the origins of current trends in DNA ancestry testing/family trees is a part of a larger trajectory of Black American's long history. While Helga isn't trying to find origins she wasn't aware of, she is trying to figure out what her relationship is to those family members and the part of her racial background that they represent.

One way in which Helga operates uniquely as a black passer within African-American literature is that the United States becomes a place of return. After traveling to Denmark, Helga becomes homesick for the United States. Larsen writes:

Until recently she had had no faintest wish ever to see America again. Now she began to welcome the thought of a return. Only a visit, of course. Just to see, to prove to herself that there was nothing there for her. To demonstrate the absurdity of even thinking that there could be. And to relieve the slight tension here... I'm homesick, not for America, but for Negroes. That's the trouble. (*Quicksand* 122)

There is no "returning" to Denmark for Helga: she can visit, but she can't tap into a feeling of rootedness that is implied by the term. The only possible place for "return" is the U.S., not

²¹ See Jared Sexton's *Amalgamation Schemes* for critiques the idea that biracial people have a "unique perspective". I'm not arguing that mulatta figures are special or can see things in a unique way. Rather, I'm trying to get at the idea that they, like all people, develop outlooks through their particular positions.

because she was born there or has citizenship status, but because of the magnetic ties of kinship which link her to black Americans rather than her biological (white) relations. Further, Larsen highlights that there is no “home” for black subjects; however, one can be homesick for the people in one’s community. The return is oriented towards blackness. Larsen also puts “America” and “Negroes” in opposition here, highlighting the exclusionary nature of American citizenship to black Americans; though black Americans may reside within the bounds of the nation, they are not “of” the nation.²² “Negro” operates in a conceptual terrain that resists the logic of national belonging. Helga’s return to the United States from Denmark represents the eternal contradiction of Black culture in America: America is not a welcoming place for Black people, but it is the place where Black culture and *flesh* were created, and therefore the only place most can feel something akin to belonging.

This moment desire for other black people leads Helga to a rare moment of clarity which causes her to understand her relationship to her father in a new way:

For the first time Helga Crane felt sympathy rather than contempt and hatred for that father, whom so often and so angrily she had blamed for his desertion of her mother. She understood, now, his rejection, his repudiation, of the formal calm her mother had represented. She understood his yearning, his intolerable need for the inexhaustible humor and the incessant hope of his own kind, his need for those things, not material, indigenous to all Negro environments. She understood and could sympathize with his facile surrender to the irresistible ties of race, now that they dragged at her own heart.

And as she attended parties, the theater, the opera, and mingled with people on the

²² Citizenship for black Americans had only become codified into law with the passing of the 14th Amendment in 1868, a mere 60 years before the publishing of *Quicksand*. Black citizenship was still a novel concept, one that some people could still remember a time before. For Helga to dream of return is to think of people, not citizenship or the possession of physical space.

streets, meeting only pale serious faces when she longed for brown laughing ones, she was able to forgive him.” (122)

Helga’s resentment towards her father stems from the fact that he left her and her mother at an early age. Although Helga was raised by her white family and never had contact with her father’s black family, she was raised in Chicago, a city with a significant black population, and then taught at Naxos, an all-black school. Her social world had consisted of black environments, or black and white environments, so she has never had to contemplate how belonging to a black community sustained her emotionally (in her childhood home she was the only black member, and as a child she traveled to Denmark, but in her adulthood she had not been in all white spaces). This moment of nostalgia for black Americans is the first time Helga seems to consider what her father must have experienced as a black man in an interracial relationship with a white woman.

Birthright, Class, and Eugenics

Genealogy is enmeshed with questions of inheritance, property rights, and the right to one’s own labor. Helga’s alienation from her white Danish family is not simply an emotional loss, but a financial one as well. Helga is rejected by Mrs. Nilssen, Uncle Peter’s new wife, who exclaims while meeting her for the first and only time, “Well, he isn’t exactly your uncle, is he? Your mother wasn’t married, was she? I mean, to your father?...my husband is not your uncle. No indeed! Why, that, that would make me your aunt!” (61) Mrs. Nilssen feigns an incredulous disavowal of Helga’s relationship due to her Blackness and assumed illegitimacy, factors which are then used to justify the aunt’s desire to prevent any financial support. Helga later thinks to herself that Whites are, “Sinister folks, she considered them, who had stolen her birthright”. (77) Furthermore, social and economic opportunities are at the heart of the matter when it comes to

Helga's desire to capitalize on her Danish/white heritage. Denying familial ties to black relations is not only about distancing white individuals from blackness, but about denying them access to money, resources, and other hereditary claims. As noted in chapter one, the "one drop rule" worked to racialize individuals with African ancestry as socially black. Significantly, there was also the doctrine of *partus sequitur ventrem*, in which slave status was an inherited trait passed on through the mother. These two doctrines worked in tandem to prevent the enslaved from having any social or legal claims to the property of their white fathers in addition to the fruits of their own labor.

Helga remembers her mother as "a fair Scandinavian girl in love with life, with love...risking all in one blind surrender." (56) The "risk" refers to her willingness to pursue a relationship with a Black man. With the benefit of hindsight and experience, Helga realizes that her mother's idealistic pursuit of love was naïve given that "some things the world never forgives" (56), aka interracial love/sex/children. In my reading of Larsen, this passage serves to highlight the idea that while interracial relationships may be portrayed by some as noble pursuits that buck against social norms for the members involved, biracial children are often made to unwittingly pay the social cost of their parents' decisions. While Helga's mother, as a white woman, may have "risk[ed] all" (which we can read to mean her social and economic position), for Helga, the price was even higher.²³

The language of hereditary ownership and rights used by Larsen in *Quicksand* calls attention to the differing sets of consequences faced by white and blacks who violate the racial norms of social place. White people are explicitly characterized by Helga as, "Sinister folk...who had stolen her birthright. Their past contribution to her life, which had been but

²³ This is one dimension of her status as a "tragic" mulatta.

shame and grief, she had hidden away.” (77) While Helga’s mother may have “risked all”, we don’t have evidence that she actually lost anything. After Helga’s father leaves, her mother is able to glide back into white society (if we can say she even left it in the first place) through marriage to a white man.

As for Helga, the price she pays for her parent’s choices is an ongoing tension that drives the plot of the novel: how will Helga materially survive in the world? What price is she willing to pay for economic stability? Helga’s relationship to whiteness is couched in further economic terms when she muses on her memories of childhood. In retrospect, she now has sympathy for her mother’s decision to marry a white man, as she understands it was an economic necessity: “That second marriage, to a man of her own race, but not of her own kind...she now understood as a grievous necessity. Even foolish, despised women must have food and clothing; even unloved little negro girls must be somehow provided for.” (56) Her own trajectory in the novel is similar; economic necessity makes her consider marrying the Dane Axel Olsen. However, unlike her mother, the consequences of marrying a white man would have radically altered Helga’s life, and she easily realizes that marriage to Olsen is not a possibility. We also see that Helga’s relationship to whiteness is complicated by the painful memories of being the proverbial ‘ugly stepchild’, which in this case, is simply due to her blackness. We learn that she faced savage unkindness” from her stepsiblings, and harbored her own “jealous, malicious hatred of her mother’s husband. (56)

Despite Helga’s criticism of the way that whiteness has prevented her from inheriting her “birthright”, Larsen critiques black middle-class society, particularly its investment in Social Darwinist ideals about breeding and genealogy. In a conversation with James Vayle, a black man

who comes from “people of consequence,” (41) Vayle casually reveals his eugenicist views on having children. He states:

Don’t you see that if we—I mean people like us—don’t have children, the others will still have? That’s one of the things that’s the matter with us. The race is sterile at the top. Few, very few Negroes of the better class have children, and each generation has to wrestle again with the obstacles of the preceding ones: lack of money, education, and background. I feel very strongly about this. We’re the ones who must have the children if the race is to get anywhere. (132)

For Vayle there’s a social and moral obligation for “Negroes of the better class” to have children. Helga sharply rejects the idea that she should have children for “the cause” (132) of racial uplift. Her disdain for black bourgeoisie’s eugenicist thinking has been interpreted in various ways by critics “because she rejects the pro-eugenics philosophy of African-American elites and yet shows the protagonists trapped as a result of uncritical marriage and pregnancy decisions.” (Rutledge 78)²⁴ In my reading of Larsen, the ending of the novel doesn’t negate Larsen’s critique of eugenics. Rather, I read the ending through the lens of Cheng’s racialized melancholia to argue that Helga’s hopelessness is not brought on simply by bearing children, but by her status as a black passer who must constantly be in motion in order to relate positively to her racial identity.

In the novel’s last chapter, Helga is in the midst of a deep depression after birthing her fourth child. She thinks to herself:

For in some way she was determined to get herself out of this bog into which she had strayed. Or—she would have to die. She couldn’t endure it. Her suffocation and shrinking

²⁴ See “From Tragic Mulatta to Grotesque Racial Horror: Epic/Exceptionalism and Larsen’s *Quicksand*” by Gregory E. Rutledge for a short history of this scholarly conversation.

loathing were too great. Not to be borne. Again. For she had to admit that it wasn't new, this feeling of dissatisfaction, of asphyxiation. Something like it she had experienced before. In Naxos. In New York. In Copenhagen. This differed only in degree. (Larsen 160)

The metaphor of the bog and quicksand speak to the way in which becoming part of a place traps Helga. It's not motherhood itself, but the contours of her life as a respectable wife of a preacher trapped in a small southern town. Helga must constantly move among locations, social groups, and relate to people in changing racial contexts in order to feel that she's upon solid ground. Rather than imagining specific locations as able to heal the trauma of black life, Larsen argues that movement is the source of healing for the black passer.

Larsen depiction of Helga's social place reveals that class and family pedigree are mutually constitutive of one another in Harlem society.

Negro society, she had learned, was as complicated and as rigid in its ramifications as the highest strata of white society. If you couldn't prove your ancestry and connections, you were tolerated, but you didn't "belong." You could be queer, or even attractive, or bad, or brilliant, or even love beauty and such nonsense if you were a Rankin, or a Leslie, or a Scoville; in other words, if you had a family. But if you were just plain Helga Crane, of whom nobody had ever heard, it was presumptuous of you to be anything but inconspicuous and conformable. (43)

In Helga's view, Black society was too rigid in the importance it placed on family name and background. As in many societies, kinship ties represent an important vector for the transmission of social class and opportunities. However, Larsen chooses to dwell on this social norm in order

to show how the importance placed on family ties or name is hypocritical for Black society to value, which is why she pairs that observation with a comparison to white society.²⁵

Though slavery's destruction of Black families had created a different way of looking at family structures and kinship ties, the growth of the Black middle-class in the early 20th century, along with the burgeoning and assertive "New Negro" ideal, emphasized social and class hierarchies within the Black communities. I would even argue that part of Harlem's status as the pinnacle of Black American culture and society is due in part to Black residents' proximity to whiteness and money that Harlem evoked, despite its distinct and undeniably unique Black culture. In many ways, the cultural values that Harlem was upheld for were often the same as those of the dominant white society. Helga is a "tragic mulatta" because of her proximity to whiteness. Her childhood, in which she was raised by a white mother and a white stepfather, has given her an intimate insight into the ways of white cruelty and bias. Her relationship to Black society is fraught because, while she wants to belong, she doesn't have the tools to fit in with the black middle-class she mingles with. Helga wants her experience of blackness to be as far from that of whiteness as possible, which isn't possible when her middle-class social network of upwardly mobile New Negroes have the same values as white culture.

One way that the intersection between class hierarchies and blackness plays out in the novel is through Larsen's critique of Naxos, an all-black "uplift" school modeled after Tuskegee. When Dr. Anderson, a school administrator, praises her for "having dignity and breeding." (54) Helga responds by pointing out she was born in "a Chicago slum", which leads Dr. Anderson to reply, "That doesn't at all matter, Miss Crane. Financial, economic circumstances can't destroy tendencies inherited from good stock. You yourself prove that." (55) In the logic of this

²⁵ See *Aristocrats of Color: The Black Elite 1880-1920* by Willard B. Gatewood

conversation, “tendencies inherited from good stock” are seen as biological, therefore indestructible and unalterable. This is juxtaposed against “economic circumstances,” which can be destroyed or altered, and are therefore social rather than biological. The idea of “good stock” reinforces eugenicist racial theories of the early 20th century, but as we see, these ideas circulate in Black culture, not just white. The inherited tendencies (personality and habit), fall in line with the same types of ideas that undergird the logic of white supremacy. Further, this logic relies on a genealogical notion of inherited moral traits.

Larsen further gestures towards the problematic view of racial uplift in the Naxos community by showing how the school’s mission is non-threatening to white racists, and therefore playing into the structures of white supremacy. The novel opens with Helga contemplating the speech a white preacher has just given to the students and teachers of Naxos. The preacher’s blatant racism and classism, and Naxos’s complicity in them, serve as the springboard for Helga’s dissatisfied travels and attempts at return. Helga recalls the preachers remarks as such:

...he had said that if all Negroes would only take a leaf out of the book of Naxos and conduct themselves in the manner of the Naxos products there would be no race problem, because Naxos Negroes knew what was expected of them. They had good sense and they had good taste. They knew enough to stay in their places, and that, said the preacher, showed good taste. He spoke of his great admiration for the Negro race, no other race in so short a time had made so much progress, but he had urgently besought them to know when and where to stop.” (37)

This paternalistic compliment reveals how the principles of racial uplift are built upon a framework in which African-Americans are outside of the civilized realm, even though by

comparison benevolent yet still racist whites can claim that no other race “in so short a time had made so much progress”. (37) African-Americans are expected to emulate white normativity, though not to the extent that they step outside of “their places” i.e. try to step above whites within the racial hierarchy. The preacher identifies a racial matrix in which white, Black, and non-black people of color occupy different, yet mutually constitutive, positions within the racial matrix of American culture. The white preacher’s narrative of black people progressing as a race, read alongside Dr. Anderson’s comments about “good stock”, further enhance the novel’s critique of black eugenicist thought working in tandem with the dominant structures of white supremacy.

A second aspect of Helga’s critique of Naxos is that in striving for white approval, it erases the individuality of its students and teachers. For Larsen, a monolithic notion of black culture which values complete coherence, sameness, or similarity presents a false front, not just because it risks wiping out individuality, but because it tries to recast blackness and black culture as uniform. Helga observes that the nature of Naxos as an institution has changed from its former self. Helga feels that Naxos “had grown into a machine...Life had died out of it. It was, Helga decided, now only a big knife with cruelly sharp edges ruthlessly cutting all to a pattern, the white man’s pattern. Teachers as well as students were subjected to the paring process, for it tolerated not innovations, no individualisms.” (39) Throughout *Quicksand*, Larsen repeatedly critiques New Negro values that urge uniformity as a method for unifying the community against racism. In other words, the “machine” of Naxos quite literally creates a culture that forms its practices of blackness as a response to white culture.

On Passing, Racial Borders, and Whiteness as the Floating Signifier

Though this chapter takes *Quicksand* as its primary text, I find it useful to consider how Clare fits into the framework of the black passer. *Passing* interrogates the moment when a static conception of racial identity becomes dynamic; the moment when the Black subject moves out of the historicity of blackness as a social position inherited at birth, and into a potential future of whiteness and upward mobility. Passing requires individuals to erase their personal, familial, and cultural histories, as this is what fundamentally separates them from whiteness. Without a history, mulatta subjects can become socially white (though the threat of conceiving children who call that into question is ever-present).²⁶ Clare can leave her history and identity behind, moving from object to subject, agentless to agent, oppressed to oppressor. If you can fake it, you become it.

Historically, American whiteness has been willing to shift its borders, incorporating ethnic whites as needed in order to neutralize the possibility of ethnic whites becoming co-conspirators to black Americans. Of course, this calls into question: can it move the other way? Can white become black? Though some people have tried (Rachel Dolezal comes to mind in the modern moment), American culture has answered with an overwhelming no. If these binaries are challenged, making it possible for black women to become white women, why can't white women become black? Before answering this question, it's important to note that, as Stuart Hall argues:

race works like a language. And signifiers refer to the systems and concepts of the classification of a culture to its making meaning practices. And those things gain their

²⁶ To this point, Clare admits, "I nearly died of terror the whole nine months before Margery was born for fear that she might be dark. Thank goodness, she turned out all right. But I'll never risk it again." (Larsen 197)

meaning, not because of what they contain in their essence, but in the shifting relations of difference, which they establish with other concepts and ideas in a signifying field. Their meaning, because it is relational, and not essential, can never be finally fixed, but is subject to the constant process of redefinition and appropriation. To the losing of old meanings, and the appropriation and collection on contracting new ones, to the endless process of being constantly re-signified, made to mean something different in different cultures, in different historical formations, at different moments of time. (“Stuart Hall: Race - the Floating Signifier”)

Hall conceives of race as “a language” made of shifting signifiers. These shifting signifiers highlight the “relations of difference” within the field of race. The concepts of “white” and “black” are entangled within one another through these “relations of difference,” engaged in a constant historical and ontological push and pull of meaning, significance, and power. Hall’s argument not only highlights the socially constructed nature of race, but significantly for the purposes of my argument, its unfixed nature. If the race is unfixed, subject to different meanings and forms of significance based on its historical moment, then racialized subjects can also be unfixed and move within the field of race’s meaning, subject to whatever the norms and rules of the “shifting relations of difference” that are at play in that moment.

Following this line of logic, we can understand that Clare and Irene are able to pass into whiteness by “looking white”, as well as by abandoning their social and familial associations.²⁷ Whiteness is the dominant cultural force that controls and structures U.S. American life; whether or not one cares to know whiteness, one is forced to interact with it in the wider world. However, when it comes to blackness, one cannot simply “move” into its realm by trying to look the part.

²⁷ Of course, Irene only does this temporarily.

While blackness has also been socially constructed, it is not the dominant cultural force that controls and structures life in the United States. Though blackness is an important part of the larger American popular culture, it contains nuances cultural identities, practices, and meanings that can't be learned by someone who has not been a part of the culture since birth.

The fundamental difference here is that while race is a “floating signifier,” the meaning and function of blackness has been historically *overdetermined*, even as it experiences fluidity, while whiteness does not, and has never, had a fixed meaning. Whiteness has historically defined itself in contradistinction to the history and ontology of people of color, especially and most distinctly, black people's experiences, culture, language, labor, etc. Though there may be “shifting relations of difference” within the field of race which allow non-white people to move into whiteness at particular historical moments, there has yet to be a historical moment in which these “shifting relations of difference” have not cast/understood blackness in a way that was not shaped by the historical “rupture” (Spillers) of the middle passage. A white subject cannot simply take on the identity of Blackness because it is not so much “identity” (as in “to identify as”), as much as it is an overdetermined subject position informed by the legal history of chattel slavery, “the one drop rule”, and the doctrine of *partus sequitur ventrem*.

We can also connect Hall's observations on the “shifting relations of difference” in the semantic field of race to the question of queer desire in the text. I argue that when we view Clare and Irene as black passers, we can unify queer readings of the text with readings that emphasize the “desire for a community” (Sherrard-Johnson) rather than queerness (thereby downplaying the queer desire as peripheral or not really about queer *sexuality*). An example of one such reading of the later comes from Sherrard-Johnson who argues:

While queer readings provide a more nuanced vocabulary with which to discuss Clare and Irene's mutual attraction, they do not adequately explain Irene's desire not so much for Clare as for the idea of inhabiting Clare's alluring "white" body and devil-may-care attitude. Conveyed through eroticized language, the desire between Clare and Irene masks a desire for a community in which economic and social parity does not require an erasure of culture—a space, that is, where women's creative or artistic work is not subsumed by or restricted to reproduction as it is in *Quicksand*. Irene's turmoil, conveyed by her progressively unhinged observations, demonstrates the slipperiness of these overlapping desires.” (850-851)

I argue that it is both mutual attraction and “the idea of inhabiting Clare's alluring "white" body and devil-may-care attitude”, because a queer desire doesn’t always distinguish between sexual desire and the desire to “inhabit” an alluring body. In my reading of the relationship between Clare and Irene, Clare’s white passing body and social position open up a space for queer desire that Irene won’t allow herself to see in a black one. While queerness may be taboo/unspoken within the text, the fetishization of whiteness in black culture is not. Furthermore, Clare’s ease in inhabiting whiteness is alluring to Irene. There are parallels between the experience of being “in the closet” and “passing” which we can see through Irene’s experiences. I don’t want to suggest that the struggles and oppression of black people mirrors that of queer people; gay is not the new black.

Rather, I suggest that for both the black and the queer subject, the pressure to move towards an embodiment that is whiter and/or straighter produces a dilemma/confusion of entangled desires: do I want to be her, or do I want to be with her? Irene desires Clare’s body, in all its sexed and unsexed qualities. Eurocentric standards of beauty create a vortex of queer

desire since the black body can never become the white one. Racism creates an odd situation in which whiteness is inseparable from desire. Irene's desire to embody Clare is the exact place where "we start to discern the limitation of insisting on the pure distinction between subject and object, oppressor and the oppressed, agency and the agentless," (Cheng 124) as neither Clare nor Irene neatly fall into these categories when we consider the temporal, locational, and historical situatedness of their racial identities.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter I aim to demonstrate how we can examine Nella Larsen's mulatta figures in order to explore a concept of return that doesn't imagine or long for the stability of rootedness or settling down, but envisions return as a process or mode of inhabiting space in which the black passer moves in and out of locations, social groups and classes, in order to practice return(s).

Helga moves from one location to another in the novel and her motivations for doing so are often opaque. Money, a sense of belonging, a place in society, authenticity in her social circles; all at one point or another emerge as motivations for Helga's travel. For Clare, the concept of the black passer tries to articulate how return to a place is not the ultimate goal; she seeks return(s) to a person, Irene, and the black community as a whole, as a way of trying to negotiate the parts of her life she has lost through passing as white. While various motivations can be ascribed to Helga and Clare's movements, they are all aspects of desires to *return* to spaces(s) or positionalities that promise to help characters better mediate their conflicted relationships to their racial identities and the way the world interprets their racial identities. However, for the figure of the black passer, return as a singular act fails to integrate the

character's psyche. Only through the process of return(s) can the black passer attempt to find cohesion.

Chapter 4 : *Finding Your Roots* and Contemporary Narratives of Genealogy and Race

Introduction

In the current moment, tracing your own family tree has exploded as a popular pastime. Anyone with an internet connection and a small amount of discretionary income can become an amateur genealogical expert. Ancestry.com, one of the most popular websites for genealogical research, claims it's users can access "more than 3 billion international birth, marriage, death, census, military, church and other records" ("Subscribe") and has a user base of over 15 million users as of 2019 ("Ancestry Surpasses 15 Million DNA Customers." 23andMe, another large player in the direct-to-consumer DNA ancestry testing industry, claims to have sold over 12 million test kits around the world ("About").²⁸ In light of these facts, in this chapter I close read the PBS television show *Finding Your Roots* (sometimes cited as *Finding Your Roots with Henry Louis Gates, Jr.*) as an entry point for examining how DNA ancestry testing is used by black Americans, alongside traditional modes of genealogical research, to shape narratives about racial identity, genealogy, and history in the contemporary moment.²⁹

I further interrogate how notions of racial identity are shaped by DNA ancestry testing through the collapse between the concepts of genetic ancestry and race. This chapter also explores how the show uses DNA ancestry testing for each guest alongside traditional forms of genealogical research even though, as I argue, the inclusion of DNA ancestry testing fails to

²⁸ I draw these figures directly from Ancestry.com and 23andMe.com at the time of writing. It's worth noting that Alondra Nelson writes "Reliable figures are hard to come by, but by 2015 the industry was estimated to have served close to two million customers." (*The Social Life of DNA* 4)

²⁹ *Finding Your Roots* is currently in its seventh season. When I began researching and writing this chapter, season 1-4 had aired. My analysis focuses on early episode from seasons one and two.

create compelling or interesting genealogical narratives for its guests and audience. I'm interested in how the use of DNA ancestry testing in *Finding Your Roots* (*FYR*) tells a story about ancestry that is often a racial narrative. Though DNA ancestry testing supposedly helps users find out about their ancestral pasts, I believe one of its important effects in the show is to cement race as biological. However, this functions in ways that are crucially different from previous periods in the U.S. history in which race was seen as biological. *FYR*'s mode of treating race as biological is not focused on ferreting out difference, but on advancing the narrative that the United States is a multiracial and multicultural society in which black Americans can invest themselves in the mythos of American history by finding European ancestry in their DNA and moving themselves closer to whiteness. While Dorothy Roberts argues "Most African Americans are not interested in finding out what race they are—they are pretty sure they are black and that there is racial mixing somewhere in their heritage. Instead, they want to know more about their ancestors in Africa," (Roberts 230) in my reading of *FYR* I find that the show's use of DNA ancestry testing does little to teach black guests about their ancestors in Africa. Rather, the show often subtly questions the guest's black racial identity, pushing them to consider a hybrid or "multiracial" black identity by focusing on the supposed amount of non-African DNA (usually European) that is found in autosomal tests.

In this sense, though the show doesn't explicitly call for black guests with significant amounts of non-black DNA markers in their admixtures to consider themselves no longer black, it does suggest that they are *more than black* and therefore positions them closer to whiteness. By positioning black guests with significant amounts of European DNA markers as closer to white, it also positions them as more genuinely American because (as all U.S. Americans know

on some level whether they can articulate it or not) whiteness is the default for what it means to be American.

The structure of the show portrays the methods and assumptions behind genealogy with a naturalness that does not question why and how genealogy is traced. The search for certain outcomes, e.g. DNA that traces back to Africa, is a teleological given that is often presumed before the research takes place. However, this is not the only concern behind the racial politics of the show. While Roberts argues that most African-Americans aren't looking to confirm their racial identity, I question what happens when we read *FYR* with attention towards our current moment in which multiracial identity advocates revise history and literature through the lens of a supposed multiracial past that was there all along.³⁰ While it's obvious that in order to be African American one must have African ancestry, the moments in which non-black ancestry is highlighted show genealogies that are constructed through particular narrative choices.

Through analysis of the show's genealogical methods, structure, use of language, and interactions with guests, this chapter will demonstrate the subtle ways that DNA ancestry testing has facilitated a turn toward biological notions of racial identity. In the logic of the show, race becomes no longer just a social construct, as has been the prevailing view of race in the late 20th and early 21st century United States, but a concept that is both biological and social.³¹ Although DNA ancestry testing companies concede that their tests can only tell a partial story about a person's ancestry, given the way that popular American discourses on race, ethnicity, and geographical origin function, the complex historical, cultural, and scientific realities that

³⁰ See the work of Sexton and Elam.

³¹ See *Racial Formation* by Omi and Winant, "Rethinking Racism" by Bonilla-Silva, and "Rethinking Racial Formation Theory" by Feagin & Elias, Crenshaw for an overview of the conversation on race as social construct.

distinguish these concepts from one another become invisible through the lens of DNA.³²

Ethnicity and geographical origin are collapsed under the umbrella of race because race is the catalyst through which the United States most forcefully articulates these differences.³³

In light of the loss of cultural and genealogical history during the Middle Passage and slavery, it makes sense that DNA ancestry tests are appealing to black Americans since finding any information about one's African ancestors before slavery is exceedingly difficult to do, if not impossible. I argue that *FYR* encourages Black consumers to turn to direct-to-consumer DNA ancestry testing to inform and revise their narratives of ancestry and racial identity from "black" to "black *and*", emphasizing the supposed inherently "mixedness" inherent to most black American's DNA ancestry. This is made evident not only through the corporate sponsorship of *FYR* by Ancestry.com, which also does the show's DNA ancestry testing, but through the strikingly similar language that Gates and Ancestry.com deploy. Ancestry.com displays the following on its website:

As your family research uncovers new connections to people and societies around the world, you'll be rewriting your own legacy. AncestryDNA can be the first step in your

³² Ancestry.com and 23andMe generally use the language of "geographic origins" to describe their test results, there advertising sometimes portrays the results as confirming nationality or race. See the page www.ancestry.com/dna/ (accessed July 2021) for an example of an advertisement that reads, "You could be Irish. More specifically, Munster Irish. AncestryDNA® doesn't just tell you which countries you're from, but also can pinpoint the specific regions within them, giving you insightful geographic detail about your history."

³³ As Dory Fox notes in her article on the YouTube genre of "DNA reveal videos" and Jewish identity, "[Genetic Ancestry Tests] have attracted widespread critique from both scientists and STS scholars. Charmaine D. Royal, et al., have warned of the imprecision in treating races, ethnicities, or ancestry groups as "bounded biological entities," especially since GAT results often show a greater sense of certainty about the distinctiveness of genetic ancestry categories than can yet be known scientifically. According to Aaron Panofsky and Catherine Bliss, population genetics researchers "proliferate and combine logically distinct classification systems to describe and compare human populations," sometimes conflating racial, ethnic, national, regional, or continental categories. And while to some extent genetic ancestry technology might be able to illuminate the artificial link between race and ancestry, Royal, et al., suggest that "paradoxically, [this technology] is equally capable of giving credence to the idea that humans subdivide into distinct biological races and implying that there are the clear-cut connections between DNA and specific geographic regions or ethnic groups." In other words, GATs have the potential to reify racial categories through the information that the companies disseminate to their users." (Fox 69)

journey of discovery as you reforge those connections, reclaim your family heritage, and perhaps even honor the same traditions that your ancestors held dear, generations ago.
(DNA Heritage)

The phrasing “rewriting your own legacy, “reforge...connections, “reclaim your family heritage”, and “honor the same traditions that your ancestors held dear generations ago,” are all calls through which descendants of enslaved Africans could easily be interpellated as potential customers. *FYR* often uses similar language, such as in the introduction to one episode in which Gates states, “To uncover these long-lost family members, we’ve used every tool available. Genealogists help stitch together the past using the clues their ancestors left behind, while geneticists utilize the latest advance in DNA analysis to reveal secrets hundreds of years old” (“In Search of Our Fathers” 0:42). The language of “uncover...long lost family”, “stitch together the past”, and “reveal secrets” echoes that of Ancestry.com’s website. While this may be unsurprising given the company’s sponsorship of the show, I question why Gates uses such language but does not focus on finding African ancestors if the show has the same motivations for using DNA tests that Roberts argues most black Americans have (i.e. finding out more about ancestors in Africa).

Modern Origins: Race & Science in 19th C. U.S.

An assumed connection between race and biology has been central to Western culture’s justifications for slavery and white supremacy. The framework of inherently biological racial differences was cultivated in the scientific imagination from at least the 18th century. Scientists in the early fields of medicine, anthropology, and biology sought to taxonomize human beings, proposing that the human body could be studied for differences across races in order to clearly

sort humans into the major racial categories of “negroid,” “mongoloid,” and “caucasoid”.³⁴

These theories in turn led to a rise in eugenic practices in the 20th century, such as the sterilization of African Americans and other people of color, who were deemed unfit to reproduce because of their inferior genetics.³⁵ While social scientists have compellingly argued for understanding race as a social construct, in 2001 the Human Genome Project announced that it had finished its first draft of the human genome map. (Mukherjee 13) This “spurred ongoing disagreements among scholars in the social and biological sciences about whether genetic markers can and should be used to distinguish human groups. One fulcrum on which this debate has hinged is the questions of the epistemological status of ‘race’.” (“Bio Science” 759)

Where our ancestors came from is now something that DNA ancestry companies purport to tell us with relative certainty (at least, assuming consumers aren't looking at the fine print of their DNA testing products, as most won't). This perception of certainty about our biological origins, in which ethnic and racial origins are sometimes explained to consumers within the logics of national borders, has created a collapse in distinctions among race, ethnicity, and nationality. This collapse threatens to re-popularize the racial blood classifications created to uphold slavery and white supremacy in the antebellum United States. The language of blood arose to unambiguously classify individuals as white, black, or Native, thereby creating a distinct social hierarchy that upheld enslavement as a social condition passed on through biology. The specific language of blood quantification, with identities such as black, mulatto, quadroon, octoroon, black, white, etc., was created out of the idea that one's “blood” (here a sort of stand in

³⁴ See the entry “Racism: Scientific” in *Encyclopedia of Race and Racism* for an overview of the different practices which tried to classify racial groups.

³⁵ See *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* by Dorothy Roberts for a discussion of how African Americans, other people of color, disabled people, criminalized people, and those seen as sexually deviant, such as sex workers, were also targets for sterilization.

for the way that we might understand DNA in the current era) was inherited in equal amounts from both parents. Therefore our biological materiality can be measured, including our race.

These ideas have a powerful persistence in the American imagination despite the fact that scholars and scientists have recognized race as a social construct for decades. The growing popularity of DNA ancestry testing forces us to examine the current state of American thinking on the intersection between race and science and presents an “opportunity to explore the ways in which post-eugenic genetics, acutely sensitive to the charge of racism, reproduced or reformulates ideas of the body, gender, origins and biological or other forms of human difference and relatedness.” (Nash 3) Will race continue to be regarded as a social construct? Does DNA ancestry testing open up new ways of thinking about race in the United States, or does it simply reify the white supremacist thinking of the past? Dorothy Roberts argues that “Geographic ancestry has not replaced race—it has modernized it,” (Roberts 77) and I use this idea to consider how this modernization has taken place through narratives of genealogy.

Why Finding Your Roots?

Though *Finding Your Roots* is only one source that explores DNA ancestry testing in American culture, I see it as a useful site for performing close readings of DNA narratives because of the relatively consistent structure deployed across episodes, as well as the show’s use of more traditional modes of family genealogical research done in conjunction with DNA testing. These aspects of the show allow me to do two things. First, I’m able to identify common narrative arcs in family histories that run through the stories black guests share with Gates. In each episode, Gates asks his guests to tell him what they know about their family history in order to identify what might be interesting and worth further investigation. If you become a regular viewer of the show you start to see common narrative themes emerge

from episode to episode, such as the lack of knowledge of relatives and family histories past great-grandparents, a mythic Native ancestor in a black family's past, southern roots one or two generations past, ancestors who passed, or a white slaveowner as someone's not so secret biological father.

Secondly, the show tries to contextualize the DNA test results, unveiled at the end of episodes, through archival information. Professional genealogists comb through the types of archival material traditionally used in building a family tree.³⁶ By revealing the DNA ancestry tests results at the very end of the show, often while explicitly explaining the hope that the DNA results will close gaps in the research, *FYR* creates narratives in which the secrets of the past are expected to be revealed in DNA if nowhere else. The show is also more than just an investigation of DNA or identifying the names and locations of the guest's ancestors. Each guest's segment constructs a narrative about the lives of these identifiable ancestors in an attempt to teach the audience about significant historical moments or facts. In this way, the particular details of John Legend's paternal fifth great-grandfather's life are deployed not only restore an important memory to Legend's family narrative, but to teach the viewers about the abuses the Fugitive Slave Act inflicted on African-Americans, both enslaved and free. By connecting personal history to national history, the show ties its guests and their ancestors to the body of the nation.

Episodes generally follow a reliable structure. First, Gates introduces his guests, usually three per episode, with short biographies of their accomplishments and claims to fame (guests are always celebrities or public figures). Next, Gates will have a conversation with the guests to discern what they know about their family histories and what they want to know more about. The show then moves to researching historical records such as birth, death, and marriage certificates,

³⁶ This work is largely done offscreen, so viewers mostly see the results of the research, not the specifics of the process.

census, property, and military service records, newspapers, and bills of sale or property records when specifically searching for enslaved people. If records can't definitely establish the parentage of a particular ancestor, the show will occasionally compare the guest's DNA to known living descendants of the suspected ancestor (usually possible distant cousins, etc.). Lastly the show moves to DNA and traces autosomal DNA, and sometimes mtDNA or Y-DNA to connect the guest to particular geographical regions, nations, or ethnic groups.³⁷ Throughout this process Gates attempts to create a narrative about genealogy that is grounded in stories about individual ancestors and larger historical moments.

In season one through three, DNA serves as a neutral and reliable source of evidence within the narrative Gates creates. While there's nothing inherently nefarious about using DNA ancestry results to investigate aspects of one's genealogy, the lack of candor about the choices involved in creating a particular narrative is troubling. The show fails to acknowledge that the narrative they give is one of many potential ancestral narratives that exist. Other interpretations of DNA could be given, other ancestors researched, and other conclusions could be drawn. Beginning in season 4 the show address this by stating at the beginning of episodes, "The findings presented in this series are based on professional guidance and research. The discovery of additional sources or interpretations may affect the conclusion." ("The Impression") This disclaimer is extremely vague: which findings? which conclusions? why might the conclusion change? Viewers aren't told if the science behind the DNA testing is the issue, the archival research, or something else entirely, though I think it's fair to assume the DNA is at issue.³⁸ In

³⁷ See www.ancestry.com/lp/autosomal-dna-testing for the information on autosomal DNA testing the company provides to consumers.

³⁸ Season 4 originally aired in October of 2017, which is the same year that DNA ancestry testing experienced significant accelerated growth. I speculate that the spike in massive popularity came with an increasing amount of questions about the technology itself. See

light of this vague disclaimer, I question how viewers might interpret the information they're given and offer potential interpretations based on the way the show presents and contextualizes DNA testing.

Apart from the show's structure and methods, another significant reason I'm interested in this particular piece of media is Henry Louis Gates Jr., the series writer and host. Gates holds a named chair at Harvard University and is the Director of the Hutchins Center for African & African American Research at Harvard, a MacArthur Fellow, an Emmy and Peabody award winner, and has produced and hosted more than 20 documentaries. ("Henry Louis Gates Jr.") In short, Gates is the most prominent scholar of African-American literature and culture in the United States, and an indisputable public intellectual. Since Gates is a literary scholar and the credited writer of *FYR*, I believe it's worth considering how the show functions as a singular text that makes implicit and explicit claims about black culture, history, and genealogical practices. Furthermore, I'm interested in *FYR* because, frankly, I find it surprising to see how someone like Gates falls into the trap of using DNA ancestry testing alongside historical records to revise black history, particularly that of enslaved women, in troubling ways as I'll demonstrate later in the chapter. How does this show, using the reputation and pedigree of one of the U.S.'s most well-known public intellectuals, create a perception of clear-cut facts and knowledge regarding ancestry, when in fact the show oversimplifies what DNA ancestry testing can do for African American participants? How does Gates go from writing of Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, "she charts, in great and painful detail, the sexual exploitation that daily haunted her life—and the life of every black female slave," ("To be Raped, Bred or Abused") to "Many slave masters fathered children with their slaves...It's almost impossible to know for sure

www.technologyreview.com/2018/02/12/145676/2017-was-the-year-consumer-dna-testing-blew-up/ for more information.

the circumstances under which these children were conceived, but rape was common.” (“Born Champions”)? I theorize that the difference between these statements made by Gates is due to the form of the genealogical narrative as a genre; while Jacob’s story is a testimony of her own life experiences, the unknown stories of ancestors could theoretically be told in a multitude of ways, thereby giving Gates the opportunity to open up the possibility of consensual sex between enslaved people and their enslavers. This ambiguity allows Gates to recast history so that white ancestry can be claimed, and black Americans with white ancestry can their relationship to the nation.

The Allure of DNA

Affect

The affective uses of DNA testing are apparent in the seventh episode of season one, in which Gates visits Middle School 51 in Brooklyn, New York. Some of the students at this school are part of a program called the Continuum Project which is described as “A nine-week program that explores African-American identity and uses DNA testing to look for genetic links across the Atlantic deep into the past.” (“Samuel L. Jackson” 43:46) In the part of the program that FYR depicts, the students are given a map printout of the continent of Africa while a smiling young black woman with braids (perhaps a teacher), dangling earrings in the shape of the African continent, and a black shirt that reads “Senegal: know your roots”, asks them to take an “educated guess” (43:22) about where their ancestors came from.³⁹ The map is titled “Map of AFRICA PopQuiz” and has national borders drawn in, but no country names. It seems that the students are already familiar with the countries from the work of the project. They then use

³⁹ See Tanisha Ford’s *Liberated Threads* to consider the politics of this fashion choice

stickers to mark the country they think their ancestors might be from. After the students make their guesses, they get their cheeks swabbed for a DNA ancestry tests. The same woman from before enthusiastically tells them, “This is the moment that you are going to reconnect your family to a part of their ancestry that they don’t know.” (43:37) In this scene we can see how the process of ancestry testing has important affective dimensions for black users.

In order to establish this affective work, the DNA test must first be contextualized for the students, hence the use of the map. While viewers are told by Gates in a voiceover that using the map is part of a game, the game instructs the students in a pedagogical process that I call affective attachment making. In other words, the game is meant to get the students *excited* to learn about Africa as a geographic region so that reconnecting to their African ancestors is emotionally imbued with meaning. Viewers aren’t shown any particular information that the students are supposed to base their “educated guess” off of. Are they descendants of enslaved black Americans who clearly wouldn’t know where their African Ancestors are from? Are they children of recent African immigrants and therefore able to name a country they know their parents immigrated from? The very fact that this is presented as a game, along with the framing of the show, suggests that the former is more likely.

In the next scene with the students, it becomes even clearer how strongly linked affective attachment making and DNA ancestry testing are. While the student’s map game played on the excitement of guessing, the actual revelation of their tests results ups the ante considerably. The DNA results aren’t revealed in their classroom during a normal school day, but during “a special evening where friends and family gather to watch as the students learn for the first time about their genetic links to Africa.” (46:48) Students are shown singing and dancing on stage in front

of the audience in a celebratory atmosphere. This DNA reveal is not just a special event, but a celebratory ceremony.

Students are called on stage individually to receive their results from a man (likely a teacher) dressed in a loose fitting African inspired tunic, hat and hat, along with the woman from the earlier scene, who is now wearing a simply black dress and heels, paired with a wide beaded necklace in an African inspired print, and the same pair of earrings of the African continent. When a student joins the two on the stage, they're sometimes accompanied by family members; this party is not just about the individual, but the community. When the teacher reads their results, he phrases the information as sharing ancestry with particular people in particular contemporary nations. With one student he even exclaims, "so we're actually related" (47:21) after he discovers that they both share ancestry with the same ethnic group. Each reveal is accompanied by congratulations, clapping, cheers, sometimes even excited screams. In my reading of the DNA results scene, I emphasize the way in which the ceremony is made into a highly charged and emotional moment between members of an actual community (school and neighborhood), as well as an imagined community of African descended peoples throughout the world.⁴⁰ The fashion choices of the teachers, the excited "we're actually related," and the test results themselves all attempt to link the students, their families, and the wider community together in a pan-African family and nation.

When the students are interviewed by Gates after the reveal ceremony, he asks, "did your ancestral DNA give you a legacy, do you think?" ("Samuel L. Jackson" 47:52). An exchange with one student goes as follows:

⁴⁰ Here I take Benedict Anderson's concept of the nation as "an imagined political community" (6) to theorize how black Americans who descend from slaves might imagine themselves as a part of a cohesive political, cultural, and racial group within the United States, as well as a larger one made of blacks globally.

Student: It's one thing to say that you're black or you're African-American, but to actually know your African ancestry, instead of being distant from them, you feel like you're connected.

Gates: Now all of a sudden, a bridge was built, instead of a barrier?

Student: Yes, mmhmm, I want to go and visit and stay for a while so I can meet the people and like, experience their culture, because it's my culture now.

When the girl speaks, she smiles and seems emotionally touched by the DNA reveal experience. The results have given her a feeling of ownership over her African roots. For many black Americans, as we can see with this student, partaking in DNA ancestry tests is about embracing an afro-centric version of black American identity in order to lay claim to an imagined African community. The student feels that she is now a part of the culture her test traced her ancestry too, even though practically speaking it's a culture she's unfamiliar with. This lesson for the students, as a part of the school curriculum, seeks to directly connect these ideas about blackness into a pro-black learning environment. The DNA testing might be a way for students to gain self-esteem and a pride for their black identities. There's a positive affirmation not just of blackness, but the "ancestral worlds and cultures that predated such categorizations." (Commander 227)

What's interesting about this exchange is how it speaks to the affective dimensions of the project's use of DNA testing. These scenes at Middle School 51 present testing in ways that differ from the show's regular uses but does demonstrate how DNA testing by black Americans is understood by scholars such as Alondra Nelson, who argues that in a different Gates hosted television show, *Faces of America*, DNA test revelations "deliver moments of high drama and genuine emotion." (96)

Some scholars see the turn to genetic science as opening up subversive potential, such as Michelle Commander who writes:

The stitching together of ancestral histories by reappropriating the very apparatuses developed to bolster racial science that ostensibly evidenced their inferiority is a decidedly controversial shift in the Afro-Atlantic imaginary. However, in the reimagining of the purposes of genetic science that follow, there is the possibility of charting an effective path of return that is marked by a desire to show reverence for the past and the promotion of revolutionary potential for the present and future. (Commander 226)

The possibility for return in the name of “revolutionary potential” speaks to how powerful the affective allure of DNA can be for black Americans, despite the more conservative multiracial perspective of *FYR*. For the young student who told Gates that she wants to visit the region of Africa her DNA connected her to in order to experience the culture, the connection has the potential to create transatlantic bonds between far flung members of the African diaspora. While these scenes at the school don’t explicitly address the legacy of slavery, it seems fair to assume that the students have been taught about it in connection with the project. Tracing the student’s DNA is a way to make a connection to their ancestry that is reparative; the injury of slavery’s intergenerational trauma is supposed to be mitigated by the reveal.

Multiracialism and National Belonging

FYR walks a fine line between embracing black identities versus multiracial ones, particularly as it relates to black inclusion within the state. When black identified guests are found to have black and European ancestry, Gates often chooses to weave a narrative in which he pushes guests to now think of themselves *more than black*. Roth and Evemark refer to this revision as the “*genetic determinism theory* of identity formation in which people who discover

their genetic ancestral origins view it as decisive proof of who they are and incorporate that information into their ethnic or racial identities.” (Roth and Evemark 154) This nudge towards the multiracial is then used to highlight the black guest’s identity as a true American with deep roots in the United States, not just from a physical standpoint, but from the perspective of citizenship. Black inclusion within the state is portrayed as fundamentally good and assumed to be valuable to the identity of the black guest.

One striking example of this is the episode with Samuel L. Jackson. Jackson and his maternal cousins share with Gates the family rumor of a white slave owning ancestor who was a judge. Through an investigation of archival records, the show is able to locate a judge whose name matches that handed down through Jackson's family's history (though the judge's uncle was the actual owner of Jackson's third great-grandmother). After revealing this information, Gates comments, “if Joel Branham is Sam's ancestor, a former Black Power militant from Chattanooga, Tennessee, has far deeper roots in the white establishment than he probably ever could have imagined.” (“Samuel L. Jackson” 28:37) The supposed shock of the juxtaposition between Jackson's identity and that of the successful white judge is strangely framed by Gates. The idea that a black American's white slave owning ancestor gives them “roots in the white establishment” is nonsense considering the historical position that Jackson's maternal ancestor had in relation to the white man that fathered her child.⁴¹ By collapsing Jackson's white ancestry into a claim of “roots” in white culture, Gates erases the historical significance of the socially constructed nature of race in the U.S. during slavery. Though this instance isn’t spurred by DNA test results, but archival research, it does the same work as DNA testing on *FYR*. It facilitates the revision of U.S. racial histories in order to promote an anachronistic and ahistorical narrative in

⁴¹ I use the concept of fatherhood in a strictly biological sense and don’t wish to imply that there was a relationship of social kinship.

which the one-drop rule and the enslaved status of Jackson's ancestors don't factor into the multiracial agenda of the program.

This scene also speaks to the ways in which the practice of genealogical research in the United States can be used to bolster nationalist sentiment and patriotism. As Jared Sexton notes of the melting pot mythology, "For blacks to query the multiracial *ethos*...is to impede the business of nation-building." (Sexton 134) When revealing Jackson's probable white ancestry, Gates informs the audience that Jackson is a "former Black Power militant." Why is this particular detail about Jackson worth mentioning at this moment in the episode? Gates highlights this information as if it's an ironic twist; a militant black man who is surprisingly part white himself. Is Jackson meant to rethink the meaning of 1960's liberation movements with this information in view? Are viewers? Gates then tells Jackson, "If family stories are true, it means that you are eligible to be a member of the Sons of the American Revolution." ("Samuel L. Jackson" 29:04) Jackson merely laughs at this news, though whether he assigns the same significance to the possibility as Gates is unclear.

I argue that Gates's reading of the historical significance of Revolutionary War veteran heritage is steeped in classist and white supremacist ideals. The Sons of the American Revolution is a fraternal society for men "who can prove blood lineal descent from a patriot of the American Revolution" and describes itself as "a non-profit, non-partisan organization dedicated to promoting patriotism, preserving American history, and promoting education to our future generations...SAR is very active in supporting active duty military personnel." ("About") Interestingly enough, their website also specifically states "We are on the razor's edge of allowing DNA proof to be used to prove descent for those with unclear roots." ("About")

While it's not clear in the scene with Jackson whether or not Gates is speaking in jest about joining the SAR, a later episode makes it clear that Gates was speaking seriously. After discovering that one of his own black ancestors was an American soldier during the Revolutionary War, Gates states, "I could think of only one way to pay my respects." ("John Legend" 34:39) The scene then cuts to Gates' 2006 induction into the SAR. At his induction ceremony, Gates makes a speech in which he says "Above all else, John was a patriot, a Black patriot, an American patriot. And that is why my family and I are here today, to commemorate his life and sacrifice by joining the SAR. All I can say is, God bless America" (34:55). Gates takes his connection to the American Revolution as a badge of honor. Implicit in Gates's interpretation of this news is the idea that a black American's ability to trace their descent to the founding of the United States is something to be proud of. When he learns that some enslaved people who served in the war and were eligible for freedom almost had their right to freedom taken from them at the end of the war by masters who went back on their word, but were stopped from doing so by the legislature, Gates muses, "So the cause of patriotism trumped the economic interests of slavery?" (36:32) Of course, this perspective doesn't align with the fact that the economic interests of slavery ultimately triumphed in the new United States (hence the compromise of allowing slavery in some states). However, Gates chooses to highlight the individual narratives of exceptional circumstances over the structural realities. This perspective which ignores structural racism, also allows portray the Revolution War era as "full of promise for African-Americans," (33:46) even though in the aftermath of the war, slavery was legal for over 80 more years in the United States. This highlights how genealogical searches operate within the individualist framework of the U.S., rather than a collective one in which structures of power are examined and critiqued.

FYR's embrace of the state further allows Black Americans to identify with state power structures in order to feel as if it is not unjust for them to be targets of state violence because after all, they have undeniable roots in the state themselves.⁴² Of course, this tactic has been tried by Black Americans with white ancestry before (merely take a look at colorism, the history of passing, etc.). In the past, the binary between white and black was rigidly maintained, so benefitting from one's white ancestry was much more difficult. Now however, multiracialism and the myth of post-racialism makes it possible to celebrate one's connections to the founding of the American state. The desire to be close to whiteness and its privileges is simply newly expressed through the exploration of DNA that makes multiple ethnic identities coexist more peacefully beside one another.

The suggestion that a former black power militant would join the Sons of the American Revolution by virtue of a white ancestor would not only confirm the right of black Americans to embrace patriotism, but confirm their assumed *desire* for patriotism and incorporation into the body of the nation. In her critique of the a priori concept of the British nation as an already constituted cohesive whole before imperialism Antoinette Burton writes, "in our attempts to understand [the nation's] historical significance, we need to pay more attention to the question of who needs it, who manufactures the 'need' for it, and whose interests it serves." (Burton 234) If we turn this set of questions towards the United States and genealogical practices, Gates' choice to juxtapose Black Power militancy with SAR becomes less elusive. As I've already argued, the use of DNA ancestry testing on *FYR* promotes a version of history in which black Americans have always already been a part of the nation's social, political, and historical fabric by virtue of the European ancestry that Gates makes a point to constantly emphasize. However, if black

⁴² See Lauren Berlant on "the capacity for suffering and trauma at the citizens core" (636) in their essay "Poor Eliza", as well as Jodi Melamed's *Represent and Destroy*.

Americans need the nation in Gates's version of genealogy, the nation also needs black Americans. Specifically, it needs black Americans to envision themselves within the founding myths of the United States so that the nationalist and patriotic renditions of history in which the United States is a melting pot and land of opportunity make sense. Genealogical research legitimizes the presence of black Americans (with white ancestry) in the narrative of American greatness and exceptionalism through the discourse of multiracialism. Black Americans, no matter how militant or radical their political views, have the opportunity to finally be embraced by the state if they just look towards their genetics. The practice of genealogy makes the question of "where are you from?" seem answerable from archival and/or scientific perspectives that 'recover' forgotten pasts. In reality though, this past has never been forgotten. Black Americans have always been aware of the fact that they may have white ancestry (as in the case of Jackson). However, in a world in which post-racialism and multiracialism are guiding ideologies through which one can understand ancestry, neoliberal ideas of racial progress, alongside DNA ancestry testing, open up new ways for black subjects to understand themselves as close to whiteness in an uncritical embrace acceptance of white supremacist logics that undergird the state.

The Limits of DNA

Narrative Choices

One aspect of the show that hints at the limit to DNA ancestry testing are the moments in which certain genealogical findings are emphasized over others in order to make narrative choices that fit with the particular episode's themes. In the case of Brown University President Ruth Simmons's episode, the theme is loosely based around trying to locate rumored white ancestors, as well as connect the guests to their African roots through ancestry testing. After testing Simmons's maternal DNA (which is how the show traces other guests back to Africa in

this episode), Gates says “Ruth’s mother’s line surprisingly, has been rooted in the Americas for thousands of years.” (“Samuel L. Jackson” 49:54) The surprise here is that for once, a self-identified black American can *actually* trace their roots to Indigenous Americans, a community that black Americans have often claimed descent from without any hard evidence.⁴³ Though this discovery was in and of itself interesting to Simmons, for the purposes of the show, it was not the expected result, and was therefore not explored further. The important goal here was to find African DNA markers and as Gates says, “for Ruth, we had one last hope for finding a link to Africa- her father’s line.” They subsequently test her brother’s Y-DNA sequence in order to find the missing link. Rather than examining the unexpected indigenous connection in depth, the pursue of an expected connection to African ancestry suggests that no matter the show’s interest in promoting multiracial narratives, it’s still imperative to center black and African identity. Nevertheless, this emphasis on tracing Simmons’s DNA back to a particular place in Africa shows how the project of genealogy is shaped by the desire to find particular outcomes, which thereby leads researchers to create particular narratives at the expense of others.

False Objectivity

Not only does the show construct particular narrative, but the very science behind DNA testing is made through a series of choices shaped by the historical, geographic, and racial narratives held by the scientists and companies who create DNA ancestry tests. For the average person, the phrase “DNA testing” might evoke images of rigid scientific analysis influenced by popular television shows such as CSI, or even an DNA paternity test reveal of a tawdry daytime

⁴³ Most black Americans know some version of this claim as a joke. Gates even says to Simmons, “You actually the only black person I know whose great-great-great-great-grandmother was a Cherokee princess!” (“Samuel L. Jackson” 49:44) One reason black Americans might claim Native identity is to explain away European features, such as light skin or loose curl patterns, rather than acknowledge the painful histories of sexual assault at the hands of white men.

talk show. In these instances, “DNA testing” usually refers to comparing a sample of one person’s DNA to another to establish identity or a relationship between two people. These are presented as straightforward tests, which might then influence perceptions of what DNA ancestry testing means.⁴⁴

Though users may assume that DNA ancestry tests are neutral and based on objective scientific principles due to the way in which they are portrayed on television, one way on which that subjectivity of the tests become clear is through the “reference panels” that companies use to generate their results. Each company has a propriety reference panel and method for testing. For example, Ancestry.com’s FAQ page explains why its customers ethnicity estimates have changed in the following way: “While your DNA stays the same, our science is constantly improving to provide more precise and informative ethnicity estimates. We have two major enhancements powering this update: More samples in our reference panel, which expands the number and diversity of populations we can compare your DNA to...An updated algorithm that better compares your DNA to our reference panel...Overall, you may see an improvement in your estimates as percentages change due to these updates.” (“AncestryDNA”) This FAQ suggests that many users have been confused by the fact that their results have changed over time, perhaps because they were not aware of the existence of the reference panels, or understood how they work. The attempt to explain the changed results as better science exposes how subjective the process of tracing ancestry really is.

As many scholars have argued, the construction of these reference panels involves many assumptions and guesses about human populations and history. Ann Morning, noting the choices that scientists make in constructing reference populations, argues “Choices about whose DNA to

⁴⁴ Nelson calls this phenomena DNA spillover, in which “an individual’s experience with one domain of genetic analysis informs his or her understanding of other forms of it.” (*The Social Life of DNA* 80)

sample and which types of genetic data to analyze, as well as assumptions about how different populations are related to each other and decisions about what statistical techniques to employ, all bear on scientist's conclusions about the genetic "clusters" that ostensibly characterize our species." (Morning 190) Other critics of DNA ancestry testing note that the population groups "comprise relatively small groups of contemporary people. Those groups sampled may have migrated over several centuries, and thus these researchers must make many untested assumptions in using these contemporary groups to stand as proxies for populations from centuries ago." (Duster 107) Roberts notes the particular biases that go into sampling population in Africa, as scientists erroneously assume ethnic groups have been immobile when in reality "peoples across Africa have migrated and mixed extensively." (Roberts 247) Additionally, when selecting populations for reference panels, "Northern and eastern Africans are never selected to represent the continent because they do not fit the profile of "black" Africans—they have mixed too much with Europeans, Arabs, and other non-Africans." (65)⁴⁵

In addition to the faultiness of the reference panels, test users often misunderstand the meaning of the information they receive. Christine Scodari argues that in the case of DNA television show reveals, participants "clearly regard autosomal and some haplogroup classifications as analogous to racial ones—the implication being that all are biological certainties." (Scodari 214) Despite the fact that there is a significant contextual background

⁴⁵ This bias in sampling African populations also points to the problem with assuming "purity" among populations. Roberts writes that "The measure for 100 percent racial purity, in turn, is derived from a statistical analysis of allele frequencies in DNA data sets...Researchers never sampled the world's populations in either a systematic or random fashion. Small, isolated groups that do not represent most of the continental populations were preferred over groups that were more likely to have migrated and mixed with others." (Roberts 228) I find it interesting that the monogenetic argument that Hopkins makes in 1903, that all of humanity is of "one blood", provided an accurate rebuttal to the idea that an individual's race can be measured and quantified.

needed to correctly understand what DNA ancestry testing can and cannot tell an individual about their racial and ethnic identities, these television shows often flatten the scientific background in favor of the giving viewers narratives that are easily digestible. This collapse of DNA markers into racial or ethnic identity plays out in Gates's investigation of Anna Deavere Smith. In this case, the show contributes to the misunderstanding of the test when Gates states "we compared Anna's DNA results with those of modern day Africans, allowing us to look back thousands of years and pinpoint her ethnic groups in Africa, long before the middle passage." ("Our American Storytellers" 50:29) The phrase "her ethnic groups" implies that the test confirms her own racial identity, not the possible identity of some of her ancestors. Smith then interprets the results in exactly such a manner and states "I'm from the Igbo tribe." The show presents an uncomplicated narrative about racial identity, thereby feeding into the idea that DNA ancestry testing can determine racial identity, despite the social factors that determine race in the United States and the world.

Reading Ambiguously

This chapter argues that DNA ancestry testing is used to confirm the place of black Americans within the affective terrain of American citizenship through claiming white ancestors and an emphasis on the presence of European DNA marker in black American's DNA. In order to successfully do this, *FYR* has to recast coercive sexual relations under slavery as possibly consensual, which is a part of the larger logic and strategy of multiracialism. Sexton argues:

It is here that the two central aspects of the critique of multiracialism converge: to return historicity to race is to understand it as a production of bodily (not biological) difference at the nexus of violence and sexuality, where the heuristic distinction between the latter terms is often difficult to retain at the level of lived experience. That is to say, racial

difference *issues* from direct relations of force—the scales of coercion—and it is only elaborated or *institutionalized* within relations of power—the scales of consent. What establishes race, what positions one within racial formation, is the relation one suffers and/or enjoys with respect to the state-sponsored social organization of violence and sexuality.” (Sexton 9)

Through this distinction between bodily and biological difference, we can return to Spillers’s theory of body/flesh: the Middle Passage turned the body into flesh, a rupture which is reproduced in the present form by the inheritance of racial identity, which in the case of black Americans, functions through the “one drop rule.” This is a “bodily (not biological) difference at the nexus of violence and sexuality.” While race is a social construct, it has also always been *biologized* if not actually biological. The distinction between bodily/biological made through violence and sexuality turns our attention to the way in which sexual relationships between the enslaved and their enslavers could never be consensual, because as Hartman compellingly explains “not only does the extremity of power and the absolute submission required of the slave render suspect or meaningless concepts of consent and will, but also the sheer lack of limitations regarding the violence “necessary” to the maintenance of slave relations—that is, black submission—unmoors the notion of “force” (“Scenes” 81). While the issue of consent is addressed by *FYR*, it casts sexual assault as a *possible* explanation for sexual relationships between the enslaved and their enslavers.

The possibility of consensual relationships is repeatedly brought up by Gates throughout the series. In the season one episode “Samuel L. Jackson/ Condoleezza Rice/ and Ruth Simmons,” white ancestry thematically unties the guest’s genealogical narratives. As the first chapter of this dissertation shows, the narrative of the unknown white master who fathers a child

with an enslaved woman is an enduring cultural legacy. The guests have “long heard rumors that at least one white man, a slave owner, fathered one of their enslaved ancestors.” (“Samuel L. Jackson” 1:51) Sexton argues that “contemporary multiracial discourse returns in patterned ways to the southern states of the colonial and antebellum periods, revisiting and revising the primal scene of sexual encounter between master and slave.” (Sexton 85) Gates follows this formula in *FYR*, though he doesn’t identify himself as a multiracial advocate. However, his rhetoric on the show repeatedly utilizes the same talking points as multiracialist discourse, from how he pushes his guests to identify sympathetically with white male “ancestors,” to how he jokes about being 57% European.⁴⁶ Gates wonders, “Does a hidden history need to stay hidden, or can the truth, in the words of the scripture, set us free,” (“Samuel L. Jackson” 37:30) but to reveal that there is a white ancestor isn’t much of a hidden history because, as we can see from the work of Hopkins, the knowledge of the trauma of sexual assault during slavery has never been forgotten. It has always been in integral part of the memory of enslavement for black Americans.

When Derek Jeter appears on the show, he discovers that his enslaved third great-grandmother, a woman named Charity, had children by her slave master. This master then gave land to his Charity’s son. Gates acknowledges that “rape was common,” (“Born Champions” 24:59) but then undermines his commentary by asking Jeter what he thinks of the relationship. Jeter responds, “It was not consensual I would guess”, but then Gates, playing the devil’s advocate, states, “But on the other hand, he obviously...he took care of his son,” (25:12) thereby trying to rehabilitate the reputation of the slave master⁴⁷ despite the fact that, as Sexton points

⁴⁶ Here I mean to distinguish between a biological “ancestor,” versus someone you share kinship with, such as when black vernacular evokes “the ancestors.”

⁴⁷ Dorothy Roberts notes that in cases in which paternity wasn’t formally or informally recognized, “Surely, Southern slave owners were well aware that the children they fathered with enslaved women were racially mixed and intimately related to them. Yet their response was to pass laws guaranteeing that

out, “A man can be a rapist and then decide to pursue a paternal relationship with his offspring because “desire” or “affection” does not equal “consent”.” (Sexton, *Amalgamation* 114) These rhetorical moves made by Gates are troubling, as he implies that affection on the part of the master towards his slave must retroactively indicate a consensual or romantic relationship. In this way, the show works to minimize sexual trauma under slavery in order to black Americans to recast their present identities in a multiracialist framework in which European ancestry from the time of slavery can indicate that they are, in the present moment, not just black.

Although this season two episode with Jeter explicitly mentions rape, curiously, the earliest episodes of the show don’t mention rape of sexual assault, but merely allude to it. In Condoleezza Rice’s segment, the figure of the black woman ancestor is evoked in terms so ambiguous as to make it impossible for critical discussion of the gender and racial politics of enslaved Black women’s experiences to occur. After revealing Rice’s DNA results, which shows European markers, Gates muses, “You have to assume that some of it, of course, came from the most traumatic and painful experiences of slavery.” (“Samuel L. Jackson” 36:41) Rice responds, “I think that my female ancestors probably suffered a lot...I’ve always thought that this is the kind of unhealed wound in America that we have trouble talking about, what really happened during slavery. We have trouble talking about the scars of that. That’s the unspoken and the unfinished business of race in America.” (36:49) Though Gates and Rice talk about women’s trauma and pain during slavery, the specifics of this are never named. Viewers would have to infer the subtext of the conversation in these early episodes.

Though the segments with Jeter and Rice are troubling for recasting these sexual relationships as possibly consensual, the narrative constructed around Ruth Simmons’s white

their offspring would have the status of slaves,” (229) indicating that the biological European ancestry black Americans have did not constitute a basis for kinship relationships in the past.

ancestry is perhaps even more shocking because of the way that it centers white perspective on slavery. For this segment, in order to confirm whether or not Simmons descends from the white man who owned her great-grandfather, her DNA is compared to a known white descendant of the slave master (named Beasley). When the DNA indicates that the two women are third or fourth cousin and therefore have a common Beasley ancestor down the line (though the exact ancestor can't be determined), Gates tells Simmons, "You and [your cousin] share an ancestor since 1800...we just don't know who did the deed, but the deed was done by a Beasley." (40:47) The flippancy of Gates's language here ignores the probability that the sexual interaction between Simmons's female ancestor and the white male Beasley ancestor of the white cousin wasn't consensual. By calling the sexual act that results in Simmons's maternal descent "the deed," Gates has effectively downgraded what was almost certainly rape into consensual sex, even laughing over his own phrasing of "the deed."

Simmons and her relatives then meet the Beasley descendant in a scene that is truly bizarre in terms of the lengths that were taken to avoid recognizing the likelihood of rape, thereby somewhat legitimizing the familial relationship between the black and white branches of the ancestral tree. When if she had any qualms about giving her DNA to test against Simmons's, the Beasley descendant says, "No, um I, well, yes and no. I think it's wonderful to have that richness in the history, because I think that the people that actually started [stutters while making crossing motions as if she's sharpening a knife with her two index fingers] the cross, it meant something to them." (41:45) Simmons looks visibly bothered after this, as if she wants to respond, but doesn't. The show has an opportunity to have a dialogue with a white person (and therefore the audience) about the likely violence her ancestor committed, but the moment goes completely examined in the narrative of the show. Her ambiguous answer fluctuates from a no,

to a yes, and back to a no, as if she is searching for an answer she thinks her black interlocuters want to hear; despite agreeing to be on the show its clear that she is not fully comfortable with what her DNA could reveal. She attempts to cast the encounter between her ancestor and Simmons's in a consensual light. "The cross, it meant something to them," is language which shows that in her mind, the sexual encounter between these two figures was consensual, intentional, and meaningful in terms of its racial "cross." In this narrative, the mulatta child that resulted from the sexual encounter has been turned into a sign of post-racialism. There is no critical engagement with her comment. It is left to stand unquestioned, thereby legitimizing this view as a reasonable reading of the past. The suggestion that the sexual encounter between Simmons' female ancestor and her white master flies in the face of basic understandings of consent. Furthermore, even if one could somehow prove that the relationship was consensual, Simmons's "cousin's" interpretation of the event is ahistorical in its understanding of race. The phrase "the cross" not only suggests the sexual encounter, but a resulting "mixed-race" child. In her reading the child was deliberately conceived and can be understood as mixed-race. Reading racial mixing as an intended act meant to thwart the dominant racial/social order is simply ahistorical. The attempt to explain the past in this manner avoids a truth that is too violent and unpleasant for some people to stomach, so history is instead rewritten in order to fit the narrative of multiracialism, which can be easily understood by a contemporary audience.

As a result of the way in which *FYR* recasts the history of sexual assault, the narrative around slavery becomes one in which a black person's white ancestors can be understood as benevolent slave owners. In the segment on John Legend, it's discovered that one of Legend's ancestors was freed by his master upon his death. A master freeing his slaves is taken to be a subversive and radical act by Legend, which he frames through the language of love. Gates asks,

“Why do you think he would treat your family members that way?” Legend replies, “well, you know, even in the, uh depths of this awful institution, these are still human beings, you know? And the owners are still human beings...I think he grew to love them probably.” (“John Legend” 19:07) Love is a revolutionary act here, as if feelings of love towards one’s slave can bring about justice (it’s not considered whether true love or justice would have meant a master freeing a slave before his death and paying reparations for the harm caused to them). As history has shown us, plenty of white slave owners regarded their slaves with a mix of what they may have questionably called love and affection.⁴⁸ Though love as a radical act has a long history within radical and antiracist discourse, explaining the slave owner's choice in this manner is pure conjecture. Similar to the ways in which Simmons’s white cousin tried to explain the sexual encounter between their ancestors as meaningful, in this scene Legend (who I will note, has been prompted by Gates), attempts to expunge the unsavory historical narrative from the genealogical one by reconsidering slave owning white men in a sympathetic light.

Conclusion

My close reading of *Finding Your Roots* argues that the show doesn’t significantly revise or challenge the common assumptions and narratives that black Americans have about their African genealogy and history (even if individual guests learn unexpected information about their particular ancestors). Rather, the show’s overarching narrative emphasizes well-worn themes such as racial hybridity, the United States as a melting pot, the resiliency of the enslaved, and the slave-master/enslaved woman “romance.” The areas in which the show is most consequential is in its engagement of multiracial discourses and black inclusion within American nationalist history through the exploration of genealogy.

⁴⁸ The figure of the “mammy” operates within this framework as well.

In an interview with NPS's Terry Gross from 2019, Gates had this to say about *Finding Your Roots*:

...I think that one of the mottos of finding your roots is that there is no such thing as racial purity, that these people who have fantasies, these white supremacists, of this Aryan brotherhood, you know, this Aryan heritage that is pure and unsullied and untainted, that they're living in a dream world. It doesn't exist. We're all admixed. You know, no matter how different we appear phenotypically, under the skin we're 99.99 percent the same. And that is the lesson of "Finding Your Roots." The lesson of "Finding Your Roots" - we're all immigrants. Black people came here - not willingly, of course. They came in slave ships. But they came from someplace else. Even the Native Americans came from someplace else about 16,000 years ago. So everybody who showed up on this continent is from someplace else. And under the skin, we are almost identical genetically. And that is the strongest argument for brotherhood, sisterhood and the unity of the human species. And I make it every week over and over with *Finding Your Roots*.”
(“Historian”)

Much like the show itself, in this interview Gates emphasizes that DNA ancestry testing proves a monogenist theory of evolution that finds all humans share the majority of their DNA and are related, as well as the idea that racial purity doesn't exist. He significantly ties it to the idea that all Americans are immigrants, which in turn casts all Americans, including black Americans, as equally a part of the fabric of the nation. This chapter argues that taken together, these two themes in *FYR* leads Gates to emphasize that most black Americans have significant amounts of European DNA, and are therefore “just as American” as anyone else.

Though I argue that one of *FYR*'s goals is to promote a multiracial vision of the United States, the show tries to do this with a framework that celebrates African ancestry. Despite the attention the show gives to its black guest's European ancestry, black guests are most interested to find out about their black ancestors, particularly enslaved ones. As Ruth Simmons states in her episode on the show, "there is a certain longing, you know, that you always have to know where you came from." ("Samuel L. Jackson" 51:46) The idea of longing to know where one comes from is talked about as if it is innate and natural, but I posit that it is a culturally constructed and created response to American citizenship, and for black Americans, a response to slavery and the way in which the nation has constantly "othered" them and made them foreign to the imagined community of the United States. Given these circumstances, the drive towards genealogical practices is somewhat born out of a response to white supremacy. Africa represents an origin, history, repair, and respite from racism. Additionally, DNA ancestry testing can add the contours of nation and ethnic group to the dream of Africa. While white Americans name, (sometimes incorrectly) the nationality of their ancestors, allowing them to emotionally connect to motherland through ethnic celebrations or practices (celebrating St. Patrick's Day, eating paczkis on the day before Lent, or wearing a kilt to a wedding), there is no particular practice which ties descendants of enslaved Americans to a particular country on the continent of Africa. In the understandable desire to disavow the white supremacy that is woven into the fabric of American identity and culture, the turn towards DNA ancestry testing is undeniably appealing. It offers the promise of identifying specific African communities to be claimed as one's own, along with their cultural, religious, and spiritual traditions. Learning about and embracing these African roots serves as a way to try and erase the toxic nature of American whiteness in favor of ethnic or racial bonds that connect individuals to the communities they believe their ancestors

originated from. Of course, DNA tests can't create kinship ties to Africa for black Americans, since kinship is "the constructed knowledge of relatedness, a classical locus of nature/culture, of interwoven biological and nonbiological information." (Marks 251) Kinship cannot be established by a DNA ancestry test or a trip to Ghana, despite the show's continuous representation of it as biological. Nevertheless, DNA ancestry testing is now a significant part of American genealogical and racial discourses and will continue to shape it in the future.

Chapter 5: Coda

The status of the past, whether figured as “life in Africa when we were free” or embodied by an African parent or grandparent or an unviolated natality (against the natal alienation of enslavement) or as an understanding of the self in relation to the millions gone and/or those on the other side of the Atlantic, is experienced most significantly in the terms of loss and discontinuity. This past cannot be recovered, yet the history of the captive emerges precisely at this site of loss and rupture. In the workings of memory, there is an endless reiteration and enactment of this condition of loss and displacement. The past is untranslatable in the current frame of meaning because of the radical disassociations of historical process and the discontinuity introduced into the being of the captive as he is castigated into the abstract category of property. The Middle Passage, the great event of breach, engenders this discontinuity. Thus the reiterative invocation of the past articulated in practice returns to this point of rupture. In this instance, memory is not in the service of continuity but incessantly reiterates and enacts the contradictions and antagonisms of enslavement, the ruptures of history, and the disassociated and dispersed networks of affiliation. It is by way of this reiteration or differential invocation of the past and by way of this memory of difference that everyday practices are redolent with the history of captivity and enslavement. This working through of the past is a significant aspect of redress. (Saidiya Hartman, from *Scenes of Subjection*)

Throughout this dissertation I have attempted to demonstrate that the desire for return to a homeland outside of the United States has been central to the collective imagination of black Americans throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. The desire for return constitutes a way of looking toward the past that shapes how black subjects dream of the future. As Saidiya Hartman argues, in engaging with the past and historical memory, black subjects are continuously brought into contact with the “point of rupture” of the Middle Passage and the “history of captivity and enslavement” in an attempt to rectify the past. For black subjects, there is no way to avoid engaging with the past without interacting with loss, trauma, and pain. In articulating how the memory of the past evokes these types of affective responses, Hartman further calls attention to the ways in which captive Africans were turned into an “abstract category of property,”

removing them from the category of the human, an ontological position that Hartman argues black American lives are still informed by today.

In connecting the historical positionality of enslavement to the current positionality of black American life, it becomes clear that the relationship of blackness to the human is embedded in a logic of genealogical linkages and inheritance. In other words, you can't think about the meaning and function of blackness without thinking about the importance of genealogy and inheritance as frameworks through which blackness is made and unmade. In this dissertation I've tried to demonstrate how narratives of return and genealogy have functioned as sites through which black Americans claim their humanity and rights to citizenship, as well as articulate their racial identities. The project's engagement with black Americans' relationship to claims of humanity and citizenship have been informed by afro-pessimist theories of the ontological status of blackness, which emphasize how blackness has remained outside of the human.

Though engaging with the past through genealogy can be a reparative act, this dissertation is attuned to the ways in which genealogy and return can fail to generate repair, reproduce white supremacist thinking, and reify race as a biological concept. In other words, the practice of genealogy is an imperfect route for thinking through black American imaginings of repair and return. Genealogy is full of questions, silences, absences, fabrications, forgetting, and revising, and is political as well as personal. It can be used to fit different purposes in different moments, as can be seen from the different time periods explored in this dissertation. Hopkins's use of genealogy attempts to show readers a version of Africa with a rich historical past that black Americans can take pride in, but at the same time suggests that black Americans need to teach African society western ways in order to modernize it. Larsen's characters find that return is impossible to enact, depicting the present as a bleak terrain of unescapable racial trauma.

Gates turns to the past in the hope that it can uncover hidden histories of black American life, but these attempts at recovery reveal a multiracial revision of history in which the issue of consent is obscured. The presence of European genetic markers in the DNA of black Americans is recast as a type of discovery which should change how black Americans understand their histories and racial identities, even though white ancestry has never been an unknown part of black history. Despite the limitations of genealogy and return, they remain enduring concepts within the collective black American imagination for the potential repair they offer.

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