

## ABSTRACT

Easterling, Vonda M. *In the Shadow of Her Ancestry: The New Tragic Mulatta*. (Under the direction of Joyce Owens Pettis)

This thesis examines the plight of the infamous tragic mulatta. Because of the mulatta's lack of black features and her close resemblance to the white race, she was labeled by white society as the privileged of the black race. She was also referred to as the most tragic of all beings and elevated by white society over the darker skinned blacks. Thus, the mulatta found herself in a peculiar position in a race oriented, black-white society. Isolated from the black community and rejected as a part of the white community, the mulatta's existence was then considered tragic.

Over the years, social and emotional change has occurred within the mulatta community. No longer considered the taboo of transgression, the mulatta still suffers from many of the same injustices as her ancestral mulatta. This research examines the psychological and emotional effects depicted in the 1959 film of Fannie Hurst's *Imitation of Life* with sections of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and events from actress Dorothy Dandridge's life. The research also analyzes *Passing*, Nella Larsen's complex novel of the 1920s, to interrogate the strategy that many unidentifiably mulatto people mastered in order to achieve social and financial mobility. Lastly, the research explores the experience of the contemporary mulatta through Rebecca Walker's memoir, *Black, White and Jewish: Autobiography of a Shifting Self*, in order to explore the issues of the newly termed bi-racial person. The research explores the lineage between the historical mulatta figure and the new bi-racial persons to defuse the theory of the tragic mulatta as a mythical allusion.

**IN THE SHADOW OF HER ANCESTRY: THE NEW TRAGIC MULATTA**

by  
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Chair of Advisory Committee

## DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to the strong Black women in my life. You had strength even when you thought that you were weak.

To my grandmother, the late Julia Margaret Graham Nicholson, I live and breathe the spirit of your strength and wisdom.

To my grandmother, the late Amelia Odessa Lockhart Easterling, your love was a blessing. And though your face sometimes escapes my memory, the warming presence of your soul is always felt.

To my mother, Brenda Easterling Campbell, you inspire me more than you will ever know.

With eternal love and appreciation,

Kwanzaa

## **BIOGRAPHY**

Vonda M. Easterling was born in Laurinburg, North Carolina May 22, 1971, daughter of Brenda Easterling Campbell. She is a 1995 honors graduate of Saint Augustine's College with a Bachelor of Arts in English. During her studies at North Carolina State University, Vonda had the opportunity to study abroad in two African countries, Ghana West Africa and Tanzania, East Africa. After graduating from North Carolina State University in 2004, Vonda plans to pursue a doctorate degree in either African American Literature or Africana Studies. She also plans to one day make her home in Africa where she can pursue her dream of teaching and dedicating her time to the continued growth and development of the African continent.

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## **Introduction**

*For the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line. W.E.B. DuBois*

Since the discovery of light skinned Negro children in the plantation slave quarters, white society has strategically labeled mulatto people the “privileged” ones of the black race. Because of the mulatto’s light milky complexions and other distinctly European features such as narrow, pointed noses, blue eyes, and straight hair, the mulatto community reined superior to their darker skinned brothers and sisters who possessed wider, flat noses and coarser textured hair that more closely resembled the Africans of unadulterated blood. Although the mulatto has been considered the privileged of the black race, scholars, critics, authors, and Hollywood have long attempted to defuse this idea with the theory of the “tragic mulatto.” The product of a white father and a black mother, the mulatto’s conception was often tragic as white slave masters raped their black female slaves, resulting in the birth of an illegitimate and unwelcome new race of light complexioned blacks. As white society continued to deny miscegenation, black people became lighter in complexion; consequently, the mulatto population continued to grow, revealing what many whites continuously tried to deny: “Every mulatto was proof that the color line had been crossed” (Pilgrim 4).

Unable to hide the mulatto children who were constantly being born onto the slave plantations to the white slave masters, white society soon found another capacity for the mulatto aside from the laborious tasks of the mulatto’s darker skinned brothers and sisters. Mulattos were often taken into the plantation houses and used in the domestic capacity rather than as field hands. With mulatto slaves now living side by

side, essentially, with their white brothers and sisters, mulattos were exposed to the more cultured white society. These mulattos learned to speak properly and many were taught to read and to write. Many became cultivated blacks. In some instances mulatto children were acknowledged as the children of their slave masters; some were freed and even educated. The few who were privy to such advantages were looked upon as the “privileged” (Reuter 378). These instances were few and still mulattos were placed in a peculiar situation being descendants of both a black and a white ancestry. Even with the advantages of these so-called privileges, white society still refused to fully accept mulattos because of their “one-drop of Negro blood.” Mulattos also found themselves cast off by the black community through the implanted idea by white society that light skinned blacks were superior over the darker skinned blacks.

David Pilgrim, in “The Tragic Mulatto Myth” believes that the plight of the tragic mulatto exists more in myth than in truth. He opposes the theory that supports the idea that mulattos, because of their white blood, were snubbed by their darker kinspeople. However, Gregory Howard Williams, a mulatto without any recognizable black features, writes his compelling autobiography detailing the scrutiny and hardships of growing up a mulatto in an all black community. Living the first six years of his life as a white person in Virginia, he discovered his black heritage when his white mother abandoned him and his brother with their also unidentifiably black father. Until then, Williams had lived his white life with his white family as a white person. Falling on hard times, his father then returned to Indiana to relive the black past that he had once tried to escape. Williams recalls one of his first encounters as a black person as his father gave him a harsh reality of what the future held for him: “This is the Projects, boys. Colored families live on this

side of Madison, and crackers on the other. Stay outta there. If the crackers learn you're colored, they'll beat the hell out of you. You gotta be careful here, too. Coloreds don't like half-breeds either" (38).

Charles Chesnutt, known as the "pioneer of the color line" and America's first black literary author, introduced the mimicking of middle class white values by blacks through his creation of the Blue Vein Society (Soken 52). The Blue Veins were an assimilated group of mulattos whose complexions were so light that you could see their blue veins through their skin. The Blue Veins were considered the bourgeoisie of black society and alienated themselves from the darker skinned blacks. They snubbed darker skinned blacks and created a community within itself for the purpose of purifying the mulatto race. To do so, the mulattos married within their community to preserve the race and to weaken the strain of black blood that separated them from the white community. Like Gregory Howard Williams, Charles Chesnutt also lacked identifiably black physical traits and was capable of passing in white society although he consciously identified himself as a Negro. Chesnutt believed that "total assimilation was the only solution to the race problem" (Soken 52). Through his writings, however, he criticized the practices of the Blue Vein mulattos. The Blue Veins, the first assimilated group of Americans, still held to the belief that white social values reigned supreme (Soken 52). The Blue Vein mulattos failed to see that the white value system was inhumane and not a system that included all Americans. Therefore, Chesnutt satirized the mocking of white values by the Blue Veins and tried to convey to America that the issues of the color line not only separated blacks from whites, but they also divided black people of varying skin tones.

Indeed, the life of the mulatto seemed destined to be tragic more than being comfortably aligned with being “privileged.” The mulatto, having difficulty identifying with either race, would find it hard to fit into a world that was absorbed by nothing other than issues of race superiority and dominance.

For the mulattas, life was a double-edged sword. Not only were they already burdened with the afflictions of being born to two worlds and tottering between the lives of privileged and tragic, mulatta women were also being labeled as promiscuous sexual beings. Because of the black blood that mingled in their veins, mulattas were associated with being animalist and savage (Pilgrim 5). Mulattas were exploited as sexual predators who were constantly on the prowl to seduce innocent white men into fits of passion, when historically, it was the slave masters who raped and sexually abused female slaves: “It is well known that during slavery the white slave master constructed an image of black female sexuality which shifted responsibility for his own sexual passions onto his female slaves” (McDowell xii).

The tragic mulatta became one of the most famous literary and cinematic figures for both black and white writers and audiences. Along with her quadroon and octoroon counterparts she became a literary novelty for authors such as Fannie Hurst, Nella Larsen, Toni Morrison, and Lydia Marie Child. Outwardly depicted as some of the most strikingly beautiful women, their inner selves were plagued by the emotional longing to be loved and accepted. Typically scarred by the early abandonment of her white father, the mulatta would always be in search of the affections of a white man to supplement what was presumably missing from her life. Because of her desperate attempts at love

she was often subjected to physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. For all of these things she was considered to be the most tragic of all black beings.

Chapter One, “Reel to Real: The Cinematic Mulatta” examines Hollywood’s depiction of beauty and the impact that these idealized images of white beauty had on black women and girls during the 1920’s through the 1950’s. The famous Hollywood silvercreens were graced with the enchanting beauties of Greta Garbo, Vivian Leigh, Claudette Colbert, and Lana Turner. These were prototypes of the white woman’s beauty. As black girls and women flocked to theaters to see these Hollywood images, black women had no images on the screens that looked like them depicting images of black beauty. Who were black women left to emulate? Unfortunately, for the black community, many young black girls were lost through idolizing and accepting the white allusions of beauty as their own while rejecting and losing their own self identities.

Chapter One will combine the timeless classic of author Fannie Hurst, *Imitation of Life*, with sections of Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, and events from real life tragic mulatta, Dorothy Dandridge, to examine the emotional and psychological effects that Hollywood played in shaping the ideal image of beauty in black society.

Chapter Two will use *Passing*, one of two novels by author Nella Larsen, as the foundation for exploration into the 1920’s practice of “passing.” “Passing” was a strategy that many unidentifiably mulatto people mastered in order to achieve social mobility within white society. It was an epidemic among blacks and “the practice of passing for white reached its ‘all-time’ peak by 1925” (Gosselin 2). *Passing* is the story of two mulatto women both capable of ‘passing’ within white society but who held different ideologies on the practice of passing. Clare openly admits that she chooses to

‘pass’ in order to afford her what she considers a “better” life filled with riches and worldly travel. She marries an unsuspecting yet extremely prejudiced white man, and though she fears the exposure of her black ancestry because she has a daughter, she maintains a psychological attachment to the black community. Irene, in contrast to Clare, chooses not to ‘pass’ or she says that she does not ‘pass,’ except “for the sake of convenience, restaurants, theatre tickets, and things like that” (Larsen 227). Interestingly, Irene has created a middle class life based on middle class white values.

Chapter two will look closely at the two different relationships between the two mulatta women and examine how their differences merge. It will also examine the multi-layers of passing that Larsen reveals through the two characters of Clare and Irene. It will explore Irene’s binary personality that subsequently causes her to remain in conflict with herself and with Clare who represents Irene’s repressed desires. In addition, this chapter will show how white social values contributed to the shaping of middle class black social standards represented in the 1920’s.

The last chapter will explore the experience of the new mulatta. Rebecca Walker, daughter of African American novelist, Alice Walker, writes about her life as a black, white, and Jewish child reared during the 1970’s when the black political movements and black pride were at their height. Chapter Three, “As Time Goes By: The New Tragic Mulatta” will investigate the problems and issues that surround the newly termed, bi-racial person as she walks in the shadows of her ancestral mulatta figure. Using Rebecca Walker’s autobiography as a foundation, Chapter three will examine if and how much change has occurred for the mulatta over the progression of time. Lastly, chapter three

will examine how today's society views and accepts or rejects the mulatta or progressively termed, bi-racial person.

## Chapter I

### Reel To Real: The Cinematic Mulatta

*How do you explain to your child that she was born to be hurt? Imitation of Life, 1959*

Probably one of the most remembered scenes in classic movie history is the heart-wrenching scene in the film version of Fannie Hurst's *Imitation of Life* as mulatta character Sarah Jane Johnson tears through a throng of black mourners at the funeral ceremony of her black mother, Annie Johnson. Sarah Jane, a mulatta light enough to pass as white, attempts to do so while her black "mammified" mother tries to persuade her that she cannot be what she is not and that she should accept what she is. One of the most profound lines in the movie *Imitation of Life* comes when mother, Annie, laments, "How do you explain to your child that she was born to be hurt?" That one line represents the emotional and psychological plight of the mulatta caught in the cross fires of being a product of two races and trying to survive and establish a place of acceptance within a world governed by white supremacy.

Based upon a best selling novel by white Jewish author, Fannie Hurst, *Imitation of Life* first appeared on film in 1934 and was then remade in 1959. It was one of the most profound and important black films of the 1930's (*Toms, Coons* 57). Although the storyline varied from the novel with each film version, the ultimate plot remained the same. The storyline was twofold; two women, one white and the other black, were both left to raise young daughters. The white woman's search for success causes her to neglect her daughter, and they both have a love interest in the same man. The second storyline, the one strongly followed by black audiences, lay in the story of the black

mother and her mulatta daughter, originally named Peola in the 1934 film and later remade as Sarah Jane in the 1959 version. Sarah Jane “wants to live without the stigma of being Black” (Pilgrim 2). Her ambitions to live and interact as a white person are often deterred by her dark-skinned black mother. In her efforts to cross the colorline she rejects being black, thus rejecting her black mother. She runs away, leaving her mother to die of a broken heart (*Toms, Coons 59*).

Audiences, Black and White (and they were separate), hated what Peola/Sarah Jane did to her mother—and they hated Peola. She is often portrayed as the epitome of selfishness. In many academic discussions about tragic mulattoes the name Peola is included. From the mid-1930’s through the late 1970’s, Peola was an epithet used by Blacks against light-skinned Black women who identified with mainstream White society. A Peola looked White and wanted to be White.

During the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement, the name Peola was an insult comparable to Uncle Tom, albeit a light-skinned female version (Pilgrim 3).

Sarah Jane, like so many literary and cinematic mulatta characters, suffers from the “tragedies” that stem from being of mixed race heritage. “Depression, self-hatred, loathing of other blacks” were all classic signs of the “tragic mulatto” (Pilgrim 1). Even as the white society elevated the mulatta community above their darker skinned counterparts, white society still did not fully embrace mulattas as a part of white society: “Any person with a known trace of Negro blood was Negro, and, as such, was inferior to White persons. Only 100 percent White ancestry would permit legal entrance to the White race” (Sterkx 247).

With the formalities and legalities that classified white persons as only persons consisting of one hundred percent white blood, what now was to become of the mulattas who had come to accept themselves as an equal part of the white race? For the 1959 cinematic mulatta Sarah Jane, it meant being transformed into a bitter young girl at an early age, one which understood the benefits of a white privileged society. Capable of passing for white, she does so with every opportunity. Scenes from the movie reveal a distressed Sarah Jane when mother, Annie, finds that she has mistakenly been placed in the all white classroom. “They didn’t ask me, why should I tell them”(*Imitation* 1959)? Unwilling to accept her mother’s explanation of why she should not be ashamed of being black and the moral degradations of allowing people to believe that she is white, a remorseless Sarah Jane flees from her mother’s sympathetic plea.

Sarah Jane would continue to reject the one-drop rule all the while exploiting her white mask charade. Because Sarah Jane does not look black, she feels as though she shouldn’t have to suffer the injustices placed upon black people. Her ideology will bring her a life of emotional and physical suffering at the hands of white men with whom she attempts to establish relationships based on the false pretensions of her white appearance. She will be beaten and left in an alley by her white boyfriend after he discovers that her mother is a “nigger”(*Imitation* 1959). Annie will later find Sarah Jane working as an entertainer in “low-life” sleazy bars under an assumed alias as a white woman. Sarah Jane’s only hope in successfully securing a life as a white woman is at the expense of separating herself from the community that knows her as a black woman. She will isolate herself from her down trodden and broken-hearted black mother.

“The mulatto’s life was indeed tragic. She was ignorant of both her mother’s race and her own” (Pilgrim 1). In Sarah Jane’s case, there is only one reference throughout the movie about her estranged father and that scene comes when mother, Annie, clarifies that she is *Mrs. Johnson* and that her husband was “nearly white.” There are no other references to him, and this is the only one that subtly infers that he was not a full blooded white man but “nearly white.” Adrienne Gosselin explains that Sarah Jane as a mulatta represents the “sexual taboo” of miscegeny. Annie’s clarifying that Sarah Jane’s father is not a white man relinquishes the stigma of “sexual taboo” from Annie and Sarah Jane (3).

Sarah Jane’s lack of paternal guidance aligns her with the typical tragic mulatta who has been branded by the taboo of sexual transgression and is then abandoned by her white father. Even with Annie’s attempt to defend Sarah Jane’s “light skinned” appearance as being the product of a near white father and not the product of a miscegenist union, Sarah Jane still physically represents the many years of transgression perpetuated, as she is a living symbol of her paternal grandfather’s transgressions multiplied two or three times over (Arbery 397). Therefore, the transgression of Sarah Jane’s grandfather makes her a tragic mulatta by default. “[Sarah Jane] was a cinematic tragic mulatta. A big screen testament to the commonly held belief that ‘mixed blood’ brought sorrow” (Pilgrim 3).

Peola/Sarah Jane is a complex character who carries a binary message in her cinematic portrayal. Perceived through Hollywood as the epitome of the tragic mulatta, Bogle in *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, & Bucks* opposes the tragic mulatta image of the classic Peola:

Peola became a character in search of a movie. Peola was a password for non-passive resistance. She seemed to be crying out that she simply wanted the same things in life other people enjoyed. Peola was the New Negro demanding a real New Deal (59).

Bogle's theory is that Peola does not represent the tragic mulatta doomed because of her one drop of black blood. Peola represents the struggle for equality in an unequal system. Because Peola/Sarah Jane is able to recognize at an early age that there are injustices brought upon black people because of the complexions of their skin, she rebels against the norms of society and rallies for equality. She refuses to conform to what society would confine her to as a result of the one-drop rule. Instead she infiltrates the white system to obtain better jobs outside of the service industry and a better education than what would be afforded to the blacks in her community.

Annie, however, does not refute the system and fills her role as the motherly, caretaking, and mammified black-woman stereotype. She takes her place in the back storeroom of the "cold water flat apartment" without any hesitation. Sarah Jane, with the tongue of a child but with the wisdom of society, rebels: "I don't wanna go in the back. Why do we always have to sleep in the back?" (*Imitation 1959*)? Bogle further explains that while Peola/Sarah Jane's cry is for equality, Hollywood interprets her rebellion as her wanting to be white.

The explanation of Peola's rebellion is that she wants to be white, not that she wants white opportunities. Her weeping by her mother's casket was Hollywood's slick way of finally humiliating her, its way of finally making the character who had run away with herself

conform to the remorseful mulatto type (*Toms, Coons* 60).

Hollywood not only confines Peola to the role of the tragic mulatta, but also forces her to submit to the stereotype by deviating from Hurst's original ending. In the novel, once Peola has rejected her mother, she leaves never knowing of her mother's death. "But in Stahl's directorial version, Peola returns for the most heart-wrenchingly memorable scene of the film, wailing in grief and remorse over her mother's casket" (Kroeger 206). By adding this scene to the movie Stahl has evoked the spirit of the traditional remorseful, devastated mulatta. Bogle and Kroeger alike understand this tactical device as a ploy in Hollywood's plot to place Peola as the "status quo" mulatta figure. Peola has decided to take her rightful place among black society and give up her fight as her mother always wanted (Kroeger 206).

Silverscreen Hollywood images of beauty depicted in the 1930's, 40's and 50's consisted of blue eyes, blonde-hair, and fair complexions. The impact that Hollywood images made on black society was fundamental in the emotional and psychological development of young black girls who viewed white starlets to idolize as images of beauty.

Toni Morrison is instrumental in uncovering the societal conditioning behind these idolized images of Hollywood beauty in her novel *The Bluest Eye*. *The Bluest Eye* is a heartbreaking story of a young black girl, Pecola Breedlove, who wishes for blue eyes in order to feel accepted by society and by her family.

Conditioned by white society to believe that they are inherently ugly, the black female characters in *The Bluest Eye* look towards the Hollywood film industry for their idea of beauty (McDaniel-Carder 1). Women accounted for the majority of the movie-

going audiences during the 1920's and 1930's. As a result Hollywood's interpretation of beauty was transferred to its black and white female viewing audiences, affecting black women to the point of self-contempt. There were no black women in leading roles and the black women who did grace the silverscreens were on two far extremes of the beauty spectrum. Black women in movies were either the fair skinned, green-eyed mulatta portrayed in sexual tragic roles or the very dark skinned happy-mammy images (McDaniel-Carder 9). *The Bluest Eye* uncovers these allusions for the travesties that they were and the emotional and psychological scarring dealt to black women and girls as a result of consuming the white theory of beauty.

In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola is mistreated and neglected by her mother and others who correlate her blackness to ugliness. "As long as she looked the way that she did, as long as she was ugly, she would have to stay with these people. Long hours she sat looking in the mirror, trying to discover the secret of the ugliness, the ugliness that made her ignored or despised at school, by teachers and classmates alike" (Morrison 45).

Because Pecola associates whiteness with her ideas of beauty, she is unable to assess her own beauty that lies within her blackness. Her mother, Pauline, also serves as a catalyst in the demoralization of Pecola's self worth and beauty as a black girl. Nicole McDaniel-Carder explains in her article "Hollywood's Conception of Feminine Identity in *The Bluest Eye*," that the black women in Morrison's novel lose sight of their own identity because of the idealized and illusory ideas about beauty, family, and society (1). She also says that as a result of Pecola's mother, Pauline, conforming to the ideas of white societal beauty and the images of Hollywood that she then transposes her ideas of

what she perceives as beautiful onto Pecola by naming her after the mulatta Peola in *Imitation of Life*.

Although not a mulatta, Morrison places Pecola's circumstances parallel to the plight of the tragic mulatta. Pecola embodies the tragic mulatta spirit as a being unable to find acceptance into any particular place. "Pecola can also be understood as marginalized in society because she lives between worlds. Her circumstances are thus very similar to the complicated situation of the mulatto figure" (McDaniel-Carder7).

Unaware of the relationship of her name to the famous mulatta, Pecola is informed by her "high-yellow dream child" classmate of the implications behind her name:

"Pecola? Wasn't that the name of the girl in *Imitation of Life*?"

"I don't know. What is that?"

"The picture show, you know. Where the mulatto girl hates her mother cause she is black and ugly but then cries at the funeral. It was real sad. Everybody cries in it. Claudette Colbert too."

"Oh." Pecola's voice was no more than a sigh.

"Anyway, her name was Pecola too. She was so pretty."

The implied message to Pecola by her classmate is that Pecola is more closely related to the black and ugly mother rather than to the pretty mulatta who happened to be played by black actress Fredi Washington, who was often mistaken as a white woman.

Another traditional characteristic of the tragic mulatta is her constant search for love and acceptance not only within white society but also in particular within the arms and affections of white men. Feminist critic bell hooks believes that as young girls

women are taught by a patriarchal society that they are not worthy of being loved. “The female’s first lesson in the school of patriarchal thinking is that the female must earn love” (*Communion* xiv). “Rejection and abandonment by fathers and mothers is the space of lack that usually sets the stage for female desperation to find and know love” (*Communion* xv). As a victim of rejection, the mulatta’s quest for love leaves her vulnerable and an easy target of abuse and more rejection. In Sarah Jane’s quest for acceptance within white society she would reject the affections of black men whom she viewed as nothing more than butlers and chauffeurs and would seek the love of white men who carried more financial and social worth. These relationships often ended in disaster once her true identity as a black woman was revealed.

Hollywood’s most famous rendition of a real life tragic mulatta came in the form of the strikingly beautiful Dorothy Dandridge, “Hollywood’s first authentic black sex symbol” (Leavy 102). One of the most beautiful and most glamorous black actresses to ever grace the screens in Hollywood, Dandridge was the epitome of the “tragic mulatta woman” as her beauty and sexual appeal seemed to go hand in hand with each tragic event of her life. “Dorothy Dandridge lived out and apotheosized the role she was always best at, the doomed tragic mulatto” (*Toms, Coons* 175). Her life was so intriguing and often pondered by others that Hollywood recently reintroduced the life of the tragic star in a 1999 made for television film, *Introducing Dorothy Dandridge*, played by mulatta actress Halle Berry.

Dorothy was born to Ruby and Cyril Dandridge; Ruby left Cyril just a few months before Dorothy’s birth, ironically setting the course for what would turn out to be a devastating and tormented life for Dorothy (*Dorothy Dandridge* 1). Although clearly

identified as a black actress, Dandridge's dark wavy hair and café complexion revealed the traces of a break in her black heritage. Her paternal grandmother, Florence Dandridge, looked "completely Caucasian" (*Dandridge* 5).

Dandridge was majestic on the screen and her skin "would take to lights, camera filters, and makeup extraordinarily well" (*Dandridge* 18). The product of a dark skinned, largely structured black woman and a half white looking black man, her mother was pleased that her daughter would not have to endure the racial discrimination plagued by being a dark skinned black person as she did. However, with a life consisting of "two failed marriages, an abortion after an affair with white producer/director Otto Preminger, a child who suffered brain damage, a loss of a fortune in bad investments, and finally a death due to an acute drug overdose," Dorothy Dandridge's life assembles in the long line of tragic mulattas (Leavy 102).

Just as Peola and Sarah Jane are deprived of the affections of a father figure, so is Dandridge. His absence added to the longing and emotional and physical suffering that Dandridge endures at the hands of her mother's special friend Geneva Williams. "On many occasions, Dottie[Dorothy] and Vivi[Vivian, a sister] huddled together, frightened and confused, and wondered why their father didn't rescue them" (*Dandridge* 17).

Charles Chesnutt, an African American author who often wrote of the abused and misused mulatta, uncovers the emotional, mental, and "psychological torment" the mulatta suffers within her life as a result of the absent father figure (Soken 56). In Chesnutt's short story, "The Sheriff's Children," is the example of a mulatto man in search of his white father who sold him and his mother on the auction block to pay off his debts. "The Sheriff's Children" tackles the issue of the white father depriving his

mulatto child of meaningful relationships and the psychological impact as a result of the non-existent father.

Known for her numerous failed relationships with white men, the psychological torment that led Dandridge to seek love and acceptance within the arms of various men can be attributed to her being deprived of a stable father figure. “Men openly took advantage of her trust and generosity” (Leavy 106). Dorothy’s romantic rendezvous with white producer Otto Preminger was the result of an adulteress affair and an unwanted pregnancy ending in abortion. Her second marriage to another white man, restaurateur, Jack Denison, who close friends say was “the most disastrous and destructive element in Dorothy’s life” also attributed to her life of grief and tragedy as she found herself in financial straits and nearly penniless after numerous bad investments (Leavy 106). Not all of Dandridge’s misfortunes are attributed to her relationships with white men, obviously not, when her first marriage to a black performer also ended in heartache, though it was speculated that Dorothy was “attracted to white men only” (*Toms, Coons* 175).

Her choices in men that led to bad relationships can be attributed to her lack of a positive male figure in her upbringing. Without the presence of a secure male figure in her life, Dandridge had nothing to emulate in order to produce a successful male-female relationship. Her mother, Ruby, had left her father months before her birth and Dandridge watched for years as her mother and father fought legal issues over the custody of her and her sister Vivian. When Dandridge’s primary caretaker, Geneva Williams, migrated into the Dandridge household, it was also by way of a bad marriage. When Geneva arrived in Dandridge’s life it was speculated that she was hiding out from

her estranged husband (*Dandridge* 15). Ruby and Geneva never remarried and their constant display of resentment towards men can partially be blamed for Dandridge's fears of sexual intimacy resulting in the demise of Dandridge's first marriage.

Dandridge is the tragic mulatta prototype that searches for love in one meaningless and abusive relationship after another. Not understanding her own worth, Dandridge relied on others to define her worth. bell hooks blames this type of behavior on the upbringing of girls in the patriarchal society that sends mixed messages to young girls not to seek liberation within themselves but within others. hooks also says that females live in a constant state of fear of being abandoned and not loved (*Communion* xvii). For Dandridge, there had been one case of abandonment after another: first by her father, later in two failed marriages, and then numerous failed romantic relationships. The final tragedy was in her undetermined death; "Authorities never determined whether the actress' death was an accident or suicide" (Leavy 106).

A compelling fictional character, Peola/Sarah Jane Johnson personifies real life issues of beauty, race, racial acceptance, social acceptance, and self-acceptance in a society consumed and shaped by the pre-constructed ideas of beauty depicted by Hollywood images. Bombarded with images of the ideal woman who looked nothing like them, black women were caught between being who they truly were and being who society wanted them to be (McDaniel-Carder 11). As a result Peola became the trademark image of black rejection and Dandridge a victim consumed by her screen image.

Dandridge was not alone as a victim of her looks. During the 1934 casting of Peola, the legendary, green-eyed beauty of a black actress, Fredi Washington, was cast as

the tragic mulatta. Though Washington possessed all the idolized traits of the contrived Hollywood starlet, ultimately, she was black. Like Dandridge her roles were limited to black girls passing for white or the light-skinned Harlem slut (*Toms, Coons* 60). “Her features were sharply defined, her hair long, dark, and straight, and her eyes a vibrant green. Columnists were quick to relate the problems she had because of her white looks” (*Toms, Coons* 60). Later when *Imitations* would be redone in the 1954, the casting of Peola/Sarah Jane would consist of white actress Susan Kohner, which was a problematic situation for black audiences.

With the creation of the silverscreen, Hollywood was able, ultimately, to project and immortalize their image of womanly beauty to the world with nothing more than a reel and a tape. The problem with Hollywood’s interpretation of beauty was that its scope was limited and marginalized to fit only one image, the white woman’s image. At the same time, this depiction of beauty not only was problematic for the black actresses who were typecast because of their white appearances but also for the thousands of black women and girls who comprised the viewing audiences of Hollywood movies. These images created the trademark for beauty. Since the world does not completely consist of light-skinned, straight-haired, green or blue-eyed people, the idea was damaging for those who possessed none of these physical traits. In the instance of little Pecola, it was easier to hate herself than to love herself in a world that rejected her because of her dark skin and coarse hair. And though the fictionalized character, Sarah Jane, and the real life Dorothy Dandridge possessed the societal image of beauty, their beauty alone was not enough to infiltrate the criterion of white acceptance.

And though many stereotypes still exist in Hollywood roles for black women, the strides that have been made to break the sexual stereotypes of the mulatta can be seen in more substantial roles being played by mulatta actresses such as Vanessa L. Williams, Lisa Bonet, and Oscar winner, Halle Berry. As well as the black woman's determination to defuse Hollywood's distorted image of beauty as only being defined in such limited hues as white and café, more leading Hollywood roles are casting dark-skinned beauties such as Angela Bassett, Alfre Woodard, Lela Rochon, Gabrielle Union, and Nia Long. However past experiences have tried to dampen the essence of black beauty, there is hope with the overwhelming explosion of black talent gracing the entertainment arena that the spirit of "black is beautiful" will remain resurrected.

## Chapter II

### To 'Pass' or Not to 'Pass': The Multi-Layered Practice of 'Passing'

*Passing*, one of two novels by Nella Larsen, deals with the practice of racial 'passing' in the 1920's. By the 1920's the subject of "passing" had been interrogated many times over by African American authors such as Jessie Fauset, Frances E. W. Harper, Jean Toomer, Charles Chesnutt and other African American authors before and during the time of the Harlem Renaissance. *Passing*, similar to Larsen's first novel, *Quicksand*, explores the issues of racial identity, female sexuality, and the consequences of being born a member of the mulatto world. Jennifer Devere Brody, defines the conflict of "passing" as exposing the "true colors" that lie beneath the "white mask" of "mulatto-ness" (1053). Being a mulatta in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries meant walking the color line and reinventing one's "self" in order to achieve social mobility at the expense of denouncing one's blackness. Traditional and stereotypical character traits of the tragic mulatto tend to confine the role of the mulatta woman so that her plight plunges her into the depths of despair and wandering while she longs for social and intimate acceptance on a quest for self identity. "Larsen's fullest attempt to trace out the social and psychic dilemmas of 'passing' can be found in her novel *Passing*" (Baldwin 53).

In *Passing*, the two female protagonists become working variables in the theme of the tragic mulatta character. In one instance, Larsen has created Clare, a mulatta who openly admits to the reading audience that she 'passes' in white society as a white

woman for the advantageous benefits of belonging to white society. Clare's character and position on passing are countered by Irene's ideas of passing.

"Tell me honestly, haven't you ever thought of 'passing'?"

Irene answered promptly: "No. Why should I."

And so disdainful was her voice and manner that Clare's face flushed and her eyes glinted" (Larsen 160).

Passing not only encompasses the physical and the material but also includes the psychological and mental dispositions of the person participating in the act. Although Irene claims that she does not physically 'pass' in white society purposely or routinely, it becomes evident in *Passing* that Irene is conditioned by white society and ultimately participates in acts of passing either consciously or unconsciously. Her middle-class lifestyle reflects a layer of passing that she is unwillingly able to admit shapes her life to a standard of white social behavior. Chapter One of *Passing* lulls the reader into a false sense of truth as Irene narrates the events of the novel. In "The Recurring Conditions of Nella Larsen's *Passing*," Kate Baldwin finds Irene's recollection of events to be incredible because of Irene's inability to be truthful to herself about her inner desires to pass. "If our access to the truth of the story is limited to 'all that Irene remembered,' then we must ask where are the gaps, the untruths, according to Irene's memory?" (61). Because Irene denies her inner desires, she undercuts her credibility as a reliable source of recalling the events that describe the events of 'passing' up until Clare's death. Our first encounters with Irene find her being mistaken as a white woman and 'passing' in an all white tearoom of the Drayton Hotel (Larsen 147).

Although Irene's views of 'passing' waver between acceptance and disapproval, she is able to transition comfortably between the black world and the 'passing' world. When the taxi driver mistakes Irene for a white woman and suggests the Drayton Hotel for tea, Irene neither hesitates, seems surprised, nor is offended, nor does she correct his mistaking her for a white woman. Irene's fears are not of 'passing' in the Drayton Hotel, as she is elevated above the masses of people scurrying below on the hot streets; in fact, she is relieved to find refuge in the all white world of the Drayton Hotel (Larsen 147). Fear only seizes Irene when she realizes that a woman whom she believes to be a true white woman is staring at her, and only then is she made to feel uncomfortable under the other woman's gaze (Larsen 149). Even then, Irene's fear stems from the embarrassment and inconvenience of the "forced exit required by Jim Crow policy of the white world," should she be discovered passing (Sullivan 337). Ironically and contrarily to Irene's claimed position as a representative for the black race, the 1920's was an era that evoked a sense of black power and black pride. The 1920's was a time in which sit ins, black movement, and marches for black power were prevalent and reflective of racial uplifting. It was not uncommon during this time in places such as Chicago and Harlem for a black person to take a position to demonstrate the racial inequalities of segregation at a hotel such as the Drayton. Being "ejected" would have signified a badge of power and race pride.

Irene's fear of being "ejected" as a result of being black does not reflect the movement that was happening around her at the time and suggests a lack of self esteem brought on by living in a white supremacist world (*Black Looks* 10). Feminist critic bell hooks cites that blacks living in a world dominated by white supremacist attitudes tend to

adopt low self-esteem and inferiority complexes brought on by negative messages received throughout society and the media. hooks also believes that those blacks who do embrace healthy self-esteem attitudes tend to be targets for racist attacks (*Black Looks 10*). Irene has been molded by society and understands the consequences of being black and passing as a white woman.

Each encounter with Irene reveals the binary opposition or double-sidedness in her character's constant struggle between her bi-racial heritages. The two bloods of black and white heritage struggling within Irene's body are symbolic of the outer struggle of black and white America that Irene should be equally a part of. Irene's interior struggle causes her self-deception into believing that she is not a part of the 'passing' society that every one else who passes is a part of. She considers her passing justified, whereas others do it only for selfish reasons: "I do, but not for the reason you think. I don't believe I've ever gone native in my life except for the sake of convenience, restaurants, theatre tickets, and things like that. Never socially I mean, except once. You've just passed the only person that I've ever met disguised as a white woman" (Larsen 227).

This passage is an example of Irene's delusional perception of her life as well as an insightful discovery into Irene's mental capacity to perceive her life differently as compared to other mulattas. What part of Irene's reasoning makes her more justified in passing than Clare and Gertrude who openly participate in the passing game (Larsen 168)? Clearly, none of the reasons that she gives justify her sanctimonious attitude towards passing nor does her attitude act in her favor. This level of thinking ideally casts Irene as the "double-sided trope."

Larsen uses the “double-sided” trope as a technique to uncover the concocted reality of Irene’s carefully contrived middle class life. Irene maintains that her actions are for the good of the black community and that she works only for the uplifting of the race (Larsen 198). Although Irene insinuates that she is, unlike Clare, connected to the black race, her true actions place her relatively outside of the true social consciousness of “black life” or the black community: “No, Clare Kendry cared nothing for the race. She only belonged to it. There had been, even in those days, nothing sacrificial in Clare Kendry’s idea of life, no allegiance beyond her own immediate desire. She was selfish, and cold, and hard” (Larsen 182; 144).

However, Irene is physically located within the black community as opposed to Clare who has removed herself from the black world and now wishes to re-enter. When Irene tries to label racial authenticity by locality and loyalty, she again undercuts herself as an authority on racial credibility. If Irene is trying to measure her and Clare’s racial authenticity against what she considers race worthy attributes, it is Irene who would fall short of true racial authenticity. Based upon hooks’ theory of authenticity, it is the “loving of blackness” in a “white supremacist culture” that reflects true racial authenticity (*Black Looks* 9). Irene does not show true devotion to embracing her black heritage. Instead, her life is void of everything black and reflects the life style of middle class white America. Her house is decorated with German furniture and family conversation is not allowed to include the racial uprisings engulfing the world around her. She tries to shelter her boys from the history and heritage that will affect them as black men and argues with her husband about exposing them to racism at such an early age, when in fact, educating them on the realities of the world will better prepare them for life since

they are perceived as black men and not identified as a part of the white world. Realities of the world are hard for a person like Irene who lives in a fantasy world.

Irene's persistence that her husband Brian remain and practice medicine in New York instead of pursuing his dreams of traveling to Brazil is Irene's conforming to the pressures of white society. Her fear of losing social status pressures Brian to conform to black middle class society, a life he dislikes (Larsen 187). Larsen's reference to Brian's wanting to "go off to Brazil" suggests his compatibility to Marcus Garvey's back-to-Africa movement. This movement encouraged African Americans to return to Africa, debunking the ideas of assimilating into white America.

It is true that Brazil's history and participation in the trans-Atlantic slave trade is similar to America's, but the difference between the two countries lies within Brazil's "lack of racial hatred that characterizes the United States" (Skidmore 1393). The population of black Brazilians can be attributed to the excessive number of black slaves imported from Africa into Brazil during the 1700's. Skidmore points out that America and Brazil differ in their perception of mixed raced persons: "In Brazil, by contrast, racial attribution depended on how the person looked and on the particular circumstances of that person" (Skidmore 1391). With this theory in mind, Irene, as a mulatta with few black features, would have been able to thrive in Brazil without being hindered by the "one drop rule" which applied to her in American society. Since the "one drop rule" was a North American phenomenon, Irene was spiting herself with her refusal to leave the country with her husband and explore opportunities outside of North America. During this time in America of heightened racial tension, many blacks and mulattos had traveled abroad and had found refuge in countries that had embraced black people as human

beings. Black artists such as Josephine Baker and Nina Mae McKinney had found fame, success and acceptance in cities like Paris and Greece where color was not the prevailing determinate of a person's character. The "one-drop" rule seemed only to dominate in the North American society as reflected throughout America's history. "Brazil may have imported more African slaves than America, the feeling went, but it had not created a society that created excuses (political belief as well as race) for dehumanizing measures of exclusion (Skidmore 1393).

Brian's ideas would remove him and Irene from the white world of comfort to which Irene has grown accustomed. Brian's back-to-Africa representation does not fit into Irene's bourgeoisie middle-class life. Not only does Irene's conventional way of thinking and fear of being rejected debunk her theory of racial authenticity, it keeps her subjected and joined to a life of limitations based on the "one drop rule."

Many of the values that Irene possesses are values that have been adopted from the white norm or the white value system of society (Brody 1055). Irene is the product of the middle-class black bourgeoisie, the "Blue Vein Society." The Blue Veins shunned those blacks who were not light enough in complexion to be a part of their exclusive community as well as mulattos who did not meet particular social class status in positions of political power and acquiring financial worth. Assimilating into white society was paramount for the blue vein society and in order to do so, blue veins practiced marrying only within the mulatto community in order to preserve the purity of the mulatto race (Chesnutt 545). Wallace Thurman's novel, *The Blacker the Berry* uncovers the issues of color biases within the black community and the consequences suffered by a young girl born too dark for her mulatto family. Emma Lou Brown, the main protagonist of the

*Blacker the Berry*, is a brown-skinned girl born into a family of light-skinned mulattos. The product of a passable mulatta mother and a non mulatto black father, her white-looking family and the surrounding white community scoff at Emma Lou because of her dark brown skin. Wallace explores the social trials as well as the personal trials suffered by Emma Lou as a result of revered white values by the black middle class. Larsen incorporates these same Blue Vein ideologies into Irene's character to further reveal her multi-layered identity.

Irene's insistence that she and Clare are two opposite people with completely different ideologies about passing only draws closer attention to their similarities. Clare tends to reflect the inner desires of Irene, which in turn causes Irene and Clare to constantly battle against one another for a place in both black and white societies. Irene reflects:

Actually they were strangers. Strangers in their ways and means of living. Strangers in their desires and ambitions. Strangers in their ways and means of living. Strangers even in their racial consciousness. Between them the barrier was just as high, just as broad, and just as firm as if in Clare did not run that strain of black blood (Larsen 192).

If there is a barrier that exists between Irene and Clare, it is one designed by Irene to disassociate herself with that which she finds intimidating in Clare. Irene's dislikes of Clare tend to stem from Clare's "selfish desires and ambitions" (Larsen 182). As Clare and Irene are compared, however, it becomes apparent that Clare reflects the mirrored image of Irene. If Clare is symbolic of the mirrored image of Irene, then it is not Clare

whom Irene dislikes but in truth, herself. Because of Irene's repressed internal desires, Clare becomes threatening to her, as she is an open representation of Irene's internal fixation with passing and securing status in the white world: "It's a funny thing about 'passing.' We disapprove of it and at the same time condone it. It excites our contempt and yet we rather admire it" (Larsen 186). Not only does Clare represent what Irene covets, but also Clare represents the part of Irene that Irene would like to destroy, the blackness within her. "Clare embodies a symbolic black world of earthy bodiliness that Irene, as the opposite image of Clare, has to suppress" (Baldwin 55). Critics such as bell hooks argue the ambiguous ending of *Passing*, where it is left unclear whether or not Clare leaps to her death or is pushed. In *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, hooks suggest that with the death/killing of Clare comes the killing of a black race for Irene (18).

In addition to Clare being symbolic of Irene's inner desires, Clare also represents the rejected product of the black middle class bourgeoisie, the Blue Veins of her community of which Irene is a part. Irene's first description of Clare is nothing less than desirable, "A pale small girl sitting on a ragged blue sofa, sewing pieces of bright red cloth together, while her drunken father, a tall, powerfully built man, raged threateningly up and down the shabby room, bellowing curses and making spasmodic lunges at her" (Larsen 144). Clare in her past life is excluded as a member of the black bourgeoisie circle and is remembered only as the daughter of the drunken janitor: "Clare had never been exactly one of the group" (Larsen 154). Upon Clare's resurfacing into Irene's life, however, she has achieved wealth as well as status as a white woman, surpassing Irene's black bourgeoisie social status. Brody parallels Clare's ability to adapt into the upper-

echelons of white society with that of author F. Scott Fitzgerald's main protagonist, Gatsby, and his assumed social status (1056).

The rejection of the black bourgeoisie forces Clare to reinvent herself in order to achieve a place in society. "I used almost to hate all of you. You had all the things I wanted and never had had. It made me all the more determined to get them, and others" (Larsen 159). Not only does Clare have to reinvent herself for the sake of surpassing the status of the black bourgeoisie but also she has to reinvent herself as a white woman in order to succeed in white society. Upon her father's death she finds herself at the mercy of her religious white aunts and because of the "one drop rule," she is destitute as a servant in a race-based society dominated by white values. "Besides, to their notion, hard labour was good for me. I had Negro blood. Too, they weren't quite sure that the good God hadn't intended the sons and daughters of Ham to sweat" (Larsen 158). Clare's aunts take literally the Biblical reference of the story of Noah and the curse upon his son Ham and his descendants to be forever subservient, and they employ the curse upon their black niece in the name of Christianity.

Clare is binary and double-sided; nevertheless, she does not evoke the same negativity that Irene exudes while in essence they share the double-sided character traits. Although Clare represents the inner desires of Irene, Clare is also symbolic of Irene's desperate attempts to flee her blackness. Clare's ability to reflect Irene's desires is also demonstrated and made apparent in the mirror scenes where Irene can no longer clearly see her own image because of Clare's imposing, purely white image invading the glass (Larsen 194). As Irene fusses in the mirror to prepare for Clare's arrival, she is startled when Clare enters her room unannounced. At the sight of Clare's reflection in her

mirror, Irene remarks, “How lovely she is.” Does she mean how lovely Clare is or how lovely her own reflection is? Nell Sullivan analyzes this scene as Irene seeing Clare’s image as an image more superior than her own image. Clare’s white image is the image Irene envisions and desires as her own (Sullivan 378). Sullivan also refers to Irene’s suspicions that Clare is having an affair with her husband. The image in the mirror then becomes distorted and ugly. “The face in the mirror vanished from her sight, blotted out by this thing which had so suddenly flashed across her groping mind. She dusted a little powder on her dark-white face and again examined it carefully, and with a kind of ridiculing contempt” (Larsen 217, 218). In this scene Irene’s own reflection is no longer beautiful but dark and despised.

Larsen’s depicting of Irene and Clare as doubles of each other extends in another pattern. Larsen aligns the characters in *Passing* so that Irene is aligned with Clare’s racist husband, John Bellew, and Clare is aligned with being black. In doing so, Larsen brings further attention to Irene’s wavering position between being black and her true inner desires to be white. Although she maintains her dislike of John Bellew because of his racist remarks about blacks, Irene later aligns herself with him as well as comes to his defense and rationalizes his actions. While contemplating the issue of Clare’s deception to her husband, Irene feels sympathetic towards Bellew as the deceived white victim. As ridiculous as it may seem for Irene to align herself with the open racism of John Bellew, her position only further illustrates the social conditioning that many slaves acquired at the hands of white society and perpetuated even after emancipation. Slaves had been conditioned to accept that slavery had been for their advantage. After years of physical slavery when emancipation was placed in front of the slaves, many were still

psychologically conditioned to believe that it was their duty to remain loyal under the supremacy of the white man. Here, Irene positions herself in the same role of the loyal and devoted slave, trying to protect the master from the other evil blacks who were intent to do harm.

Clare, though physically separated from the black community, still remains psychologically connected with her past black identity more than Irene. Bellew says that Clare's refusal to have a black maid in the house is because of her dislike of blacks. This statement reflects his feelings towards blacks and his ignorance about his wife's ethnic identity. There are several factors that contribute to Clare's refusal to employ black servants, none of which support her husband's theory. Because Clare remains psychologically attached to her black roots, she still feels an obligation to the black community; therefore, her conscience will not allow her to employ black people and expose them to abuse by her racist husband in a form of domestic slavery. Also Clare carries the psychological abuse of being the poor janitor's daughter, consequently resulting in her being alienated by the Blue Veins. Lastly, for Clare the possibility exists of being detected by another black person, just as Irene was able to sense the strain of blackness in Clare's provocative smile, which proves to be a reoccurring issue for Irene.

Clare represents the black girlhood of the two women, and with each smile and laugh she recreates the past from which Irene has tried to separate. Clare's smile makes Irene suspicious of the unknown woman as her smile reveals a slight seduction not usually associated with white women and more commonly attached to black women.

A waiter was taking her order. Irene saw her smile up at him as she murmured something-thanks, maybe. It was an odd sort of smile.

Irene couldn't quite define it, but she was sure that she would have classed it, coming from another woman, as being just a shade too provocative for a waiter (Larsen 149).

Judged by a standard of white values, Clare's seductive smile is indicative of her "animalistic" black blood; and assuming that the waiter is black, Clare's smile as a white woman would have been inappropriate and uncommon.

The sound of Clare's laugh finally makes Irene recognize that the woman is Clare Kendry, a black memory of her past. "The woman laughed, a lovely laugh, a small sequence of notes that was like a trill and also like the ringing of a delicate bell fashioned of a precious metal, a tinkling" (Larsen 151). Clare's smile and laughter are not reserved but high-spirited, lively and seductive, traits typically associated with the "emotional urgings" of black people (Brown 145). Because Irene tries so desperately to disassociate from the poorer blacks, Clare's smile and laugh combined make for a haunting reminder of Irene's black past. Although Clare is clearly not the poor janitor's daughter any longer and has never outwardly possessed any black features, she does possess and retain the physical attributes of her smile and laughter, which connect her to her black roots and disturb Irene's comfort level.

Clare has uniquely adapted the ability to remain psychologically connected with the black community and shows little to no fear of being "found out." The only time that Clare shows any true concern with being exposed is during the time that she is pregnant with her daughter. Clare expresses her concerns about her pregnancy:

I nearly died of terror the whole nine months before Margery was born for fear that she might be dark. Thank goodness,

she turned out all right. But I'll never risk it again. Never!

The strain is simply too-too hellish (Larsen 168).

In this respect, Clare's perceived selfishness can be representative of her maternal duty to protect her child. A product of mixed worlds and subjected to suffering at the hands of both worlds, Clare's selfish behavior not to want a dark child or to give birth to another child for fear of its being dark is her defense strategy used to protect her child from a world of racial torture.

Through the theory of divide and conquer white society has been able to remain a dominating factor in the psychology of black society. With the creation of the mulatto race came the idea of a more liked and more accepted group of blacks, but in practice only a fully white person would ever be fully accepted by white society.

*Passing* reveals the physical and the psychological destructions of the "divide and conquer" theory that white society was able to affix to the minds of black society. Larsen has designed *Passing* to encompass multiple dimensions that reflect the multiple layers involved in the practice of passing. Irene and Clare both represent the struggle of racism not only within society but also within themselves. Irene's contrived white values represent the white portion of the mulatta's ancestry and Clare's provocative smile and laughter represent the black portion of her mulatta ancestry. Each *Passing* chapter reveals the true person hiding behind the white mask of her mulatta ancestry.

Larsen has altered the audience's view with the depiction of two women representing opposite dynamics of the mulatta spectrum, when, in fact, the two women come together to create one being. The double-sided trope that Larsen uses exposes the mulatto's inability to fit into either society and illustrates how both black and white

identities are needed to produce the whole to survive. Belonging to both worlds, the mulatta can find peace in neither because of her struggle to isolate one side in order for the other to flourish.

Both black bourgeoisie and white supremacy created a division among blacks, pitting them against one another in their striving to achieve white acceptance. Herein lies the tragedy when mulatta, quadroon, or octoroon, who might look no different from a white man or woman and who might be educated in the same way, was no closer to real equality than a full Negro (Sollors 393).

## Chapter III

### As Time Goes By: The New Tragic Mulatta

*I am not a bastard, the product of a rape, the child of some white devil.  
I am not tragic.* Rebecca Walker

Rebecca Walker, daughter of black novelist Alice Walker and white Jewish father, Mel Levanthal, recounts her compelling and sometimes painful experiences of growing up as a child of mixed race heritage during the heightened era of black pride and black movements. The product of a loving interracial marriage, Walker does not consider herself to be the stereotypical tragic mulatta who had traditionally been conceived through malicious acts of violence. “I am not a bastard, the product of a rape, the child of some white devil. I am not tragic” (Walker 24). Although Walker’s conception is the product of a loving union, she is not exempt from the trials and turmoil associated with being a mixed race child. Her autobiography gives an account of the plight of the new mulatta living in the shadows of her ancestral tragic mulatta.

*Black White and Jewish: Autobiography of a Shifting Self* is Walker’s testimony of life existing on the borders of three worlds and feeling a part of none. Chapter three of this research includes events and occurrences taken from Walker’s autobiography that explore the foundational idea of Walker as the new mulatta. Chapter three will use the events of Walker’s life to explore how the new mulatta parallels the ancestral mulatta seen in chapters one and two and how Walker’s struggles as the new mulatta differ, if any, from the historical plight of the tragic mulatta. This chapter will also use Walker’s life events to expose the similarities that bind the new mulatta with the old figure.

Walker describes the 1967 union between her black mother and white Jewish father as defiance against laws and rules that dictated who should love whom and what

should be the biological makeup of a family (Walker 23). One of the most defining aspects of American history is the division of black and white societies and the “300-year-long tradition of legislation, jurisdiction, protest, and defiance” rooted deeply in the attempt to prevent and prohibit black and white, interracial relations, marriages, and descendants (Sollors 3). *Interracialism: Black-White Intermarriage in American History, Literature, and Law*, edited by Werner Sollors, discusses the “paradox in American society, idealizing the concept of family while destroying certain families” (3).

Though Walker does not go into great detail about the demise of her parents’ marriage, she does reflect on the era in which they were married. The Walker-Levanthal union suffered the same racism and bigotry that had divided blacks and whites three hundred years prior to their union. Not only was their marriage plagued by the outside forces of society but it was also infiltrated with prejudices from within their own families. Walker can recall her estranged relationship with her white Jewish great-grandmother and the rejection she endured by her when she was just a child. “Great-grandma Jennie doesn’t talk to me when I am in her house. It’s like I am just a little girl in the chair by the kitchen door” (Walker 33).

Historically, there have been factors that preempted the triumph of the Walker-Levanthal union. Probably the most controversial story of miscegeny and forbidden love in American history is the story of America’s founding father and third president, Thomas Jefferson, and his slave mistress Sally Hemings. The story of Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings is one of the most argued and debated stories of miscegeny throughout American history. Jefferson was a slave owner and at his death “manumitted only the slaves of the Hemings family” (Levine 238). As a result of his longtime affair

with his slave, Sally Hemings, Jefferson is believed to be the father of at least one of the five children of Hemings (Levine 14). The debate over the existence of Jefferson's black descendants has carried over as recently as 1998 when DNA testing was conducted to prove that Jefferson did father Hemings' youngest son, Eston (1808-1852); thus he could have been the father of some of her other children as well (Levine 16). There has been much controversy over the man considered to be one of the founding fathers of the country and his waywardness in his commitment to freedom.

Contrary to his personal affairs, in 1786 Thomas Jefferson drafted a bill that declared marriage between a free person (white) and a slave (black) to be null and void:

A marriage between a person of free condition and a slave,  
or between a white person and a negro, or between a white  
person and a mulatto, shall be null. 1786 Virginia bill, drafted  
by Thomas Jefferson (Sollors 3).

Although bill 86 presents Jefferson as a hypocrite because of his alleged extramarital affair with Sally Hemings, by some he is still considered to be a "visionary Founding father who, despite being influenced by the sectional and racist ideologies of his day, championed humankind's inalienable rights to freedom and equality" (Levine 238).

Similarly, the 1970's championed the rights to freedom and equality, but by way of black power and black awareness. The Walker-Levanthal union, refuted by the restrictions of white society and white racism, was now also met with the pressures of a more empowered black social consciousness. Walker explains that her parents met in their efforts to construct civil rights for blacks as well as all people. Ironically, as black awareness heightened, it placed a strain on their interracial relationship.

Black on black love is the new recipe for revolution,  
mulatto half-breeds are tainted with the blood of the oppressor,  
and being down means proving how black you are,  
how willing to fight, how easily you can turn your back  
on those who have kept black folks enslaved for so long.  
My father, once an ally, is, overnight, recast as an interloper.  
My mother, having once found refuge in a love that is  
unfashionable, may no longer have been willing to  
make the sacrifice (Walker 60).

The Walker-Levanthal marriage was seemingly pre-destined for failure and denial by a society that perpetuated the idea of restricted love based on the principles of one's skin being black or white.

Miscegenation laws were among the longest lasting of American racial restrictions. They spanned from the 1660's through the 1960's (Pascoe 182). Between 1980 and 1996 the U.S. Bureau of Census had on record that interracial marriages between black women and a white men had risen from 45 to 117 marriages; and black men and white women marriages were from 122 to 220 (Sollors 461). The phenomenon of interracial marriages was growing and was no longer a coerced affair although the idea of interracial marriages and interracial children were still looked upon as taboo and with curiosity (Walker 12).

Walker now found herself not only a child suffering from the stigma of being of mixed race but also burdened with the ill effects of divorce. The Walker-Levanthal split propelled their already socially stigmatized, mixed-race child into yet another spiral of

social and emotional despair. Neither understanding nor fully evaluating the repercussions of their decision to allow their already detached child to establish any type of “normal relationship,” Alice Walker and Mel Levanthal requite themselves romantically into their old and familiar ways of life.

My father returns to the life that was expected of him,  
marrying a nice Jewish girl he met as a kid in summer  
camp, and my mother falls for a Morehouse man,  
an old sweetheart from her Spelman days. For them  
there is a return to what is familiar, safe, expected”(Walker 116).

For Alice Walker and Mel Levanthal, the return to the familiar is safe and free from the public scrutiny and hate glares of a race conscious society. Life however, would not be as safe and familiar for their interracial daughter as she is compelled to “shift” from a black environment to a white Jewish environment while never feeling completely accepted in either.

Walker’s parents’ divorce forced her to spend part of her life hovering the borders of her mother’s Afro-centric world and the other part of her life hovering the borders of her father’s traditional Jewish world. “My parents decide that I will spend two years, alternately, with each of them. What their decision means is that every year of my life I have to move, change schools, shift” (Walker 116).

Walker uses the word “shift” to describe the transition in her life not only as a reference to her shift in locality but also as a reference to the shift in each phase of her black-white life. The idea of shifting is closely related to the practice of passing. Passing, discussed in chapters one and two of this research, is the practice in which many

of Walker's ancestral mulatta counterparts participated for the advancement of social and financial mobility. Fundamentally, the same in theory, passing and shifting are used with different ideologies with respect to the present time and era. In chapter one the practice of passing takes place in the 1920's. Clare, in Nella Larsen's, *Passing*, uses passing as a tactic to advance in a time when blacks are considered inferior and are openly discriminated against. Fifty years later, however, times have advanced; and although there are more opportunities available for blacks, racism still prevails in American society.

In keeping with the traditional plight of the rejected mulatta, Walker shifts between the perceptions of black and white identities in order to be accepted by others as a means of survival in a non-accepting world. Although Walker early in her autobiography tries to disassociate herself from the concept of being tragic, she does recognize that her birth as a mulatta has spawned years of identity conflicts for pre-existing mulattas, therefore, forever attaching her mulatta identity with the concept of the tragic mulatta. "That makes me the tragic mulatta caught between both worlds like the proverbial deer in the headlights. I am Annie's near-white little girl who plunges to her death screaming, 'I don't want to be colored, I don't want to be like you' in the film classic *Imitation of Life*"(Walker 13).

Subsequently, very few elements separate Walker from the mold of the infamous tragic mulatta and shifting is paramount in bridging her circumstances with the theme of being tragic. Her ability to shift her personality without ever being able to acquire her own individual identity is central to the plot of passing and shifting. Just as Sarah Jane in *Imitation of Life* constantly shifts her identity with each new city in which she attempts to

establish a foundation, so does Walker's identity shift with each move from D.C. to San Francisco to New York.

Now as I move from place to place, from Jewish to black, from D.C. to San Francisco, from status quo middle class to radical artist bohemia, it is less like jumping from station to station on the same radio dial and more like moving from planet to planet between universes that never overlap. I move through days, weeks, people, places, growing attached and then letting go, meeting people and then saying goodbye. Holding on makes it harder to be adaptable, harder to meet the demands of a new place. It is easier to forget, to wipe the slate clean, to watch the world go by like a film on a screen, without letting anything stick (Walker 117).

Aligned with real and fictional mulattas, the majority of Walker's life centers on shifting to accommodate society's perception of who she should be. "It is jarring to think that most of my life I have been defined by others, primarily reactive, going along with the prevailing view" (Walker 74). Black society labels her as "acting like a white girl;" therefore, she must shift to the demands of black society not to be subjected to physical abuse. In the black schools she must wear the façade of a tough girl and not appear to be weak and cowardly, attributes that the other black kids associate with being white (Walker 95).

Shifting and passing both come with their rewards and consequences. In the politics of passing or shifting, when one race is embraced by the mulatta, the other half of the race has to be rejected. In *Passing* when Clare, for personal and financial gain, chooses to pass, she has to disassociate herself with all previous ties that she has with the

black community. Years later, when Clare wants to re-establish a relationship with her blackness, she is met with resentment from Irene and consequently, death when her charade is discovered by her white husband.

When Walker fails to shift from the contrived white persona into the expected black persona during junior high, she is met with resentment from other black students who view her as a betrayer of the black race and an embracer of the other. “When I answer all the questions correctly in math class, it does not occur to me that I am taking something away from the other, darker-skinned girls, that I am doing something to them that feels like betrayal” (Walker 41). However, when she is unable to shed the tough façade acquired during her stint within the black community, she is perceived by the white world as too abrasive and white girls and teachers are subsequently “too afraid of black girls half their size, a quarter of their age, black girls who are hardened and angry” (Walker 99).

In the black world where Walker is too light in complexion and often labeled the “yellow bitch” who thinks that she is better than everybody else, Walker is subjected to an intra-racial prejudice brought about by white social conditioning. Walker is experiencing the repercussions of the psychological enslavement that is perpetuated in black society as a result of the privileged black syndrome, stereotypes, and other negative images that have been inflicted upon black society from as early as slavery. The idea of the privileged light-skinned black is one of the stereotypes that black society continues to inflict upon itself. bell hooks points out that as a result of this type of self inflicted racism within the black community it is not an issue of “us” against “them” but more of an issue of “us” against “us” (*Black Looks* 4).

Unfortunately, this type of self-inflicted racism is not an uncommon occurrence within the black community. It is seen in the days of slavery, in the days of the Blue Vein Society, and for Walker, as late as the 1970's. However, in order to advance and shift the paradigm of negative black imagery to a positive and unified image, the black community must break the mold and stop perpetuating the negative images that have been created by white society. And although black pride was at a heightened awareness during the 1970's, many blacks were still psychologically enslaved to believe that the white complexion ranked superior over their darker complexion. By continuously reinforcing the idea of one group of blacks being superior to the rest, the black community will forever remain at odds with each other, therefore, never considering the idea of forging an alliance with each other to usurp the ideologies of white supremacy. As a result, Walker and her bi-racial kindred will suffer in the black community at the hands of those who find them a threat because of their light-skinned complexions. The divide and conquer technique will remain a stronghold on the black community.

Yet, while the mulatta community finds themselves at odds with their black kindred, there is still yet another flaw within the mulatta superiority concept that also keeps the mulattas in conflict with the white community. The same initial problem that circumvented the conceptualization of the mulatta community separating from the rest of the black community and merging into the white community would be the same issue the mulatta would face two hundred years later. Assimilation into the white community would never be a realistic goal. As the black community viewed the mulatta as a threat and not black enough to be a full member of the black community, the white community viewed the mulatta as simply being black. The one-drop rule that plagued the mulatta in

the 1660's would be the same dilemma to plague the mulatta in the twentieth century. Even after the demise of miscegenation laws, only one hundred percent white people would be considered white by white society.

When Walker lived with her white Jewish father and her younger white siblings in New York, she was often mistaken for the kind and capable nanny (Walker 230). Walker's golden complexion and curly dark hair was too white for the black community but compared to her white father, white stepmother, and white siblings, her café complexion was darker than their pale skin and her hair was too curly compared to the straightness of theirs. She was unable to fit into their white Jewish suburban world and her attempts to explain her frustration to her white father go unrewarded. "I tell him I think Larchmont, the suburban community, is too white. When I tell him that I'm miserable he tells me that I'm exaggerating" (Walker 218).

In *Black Looks*, hooks explains that for many white people, the idea of "white privilege" is a foreign concept (10). With the various forms of racism and discrimination that exists, many white people still are unable to conceive of white privilege as a prevailing force in today's society. In Walker's case, her father although Jewish and possibly the recipient of racial prejudices, as well as a civil rights attorney in the southern state of Mississippi, is unable to identify with the racial suffering Walker endures as a bi-racial child. Moreover, when Walker comes into her own being as a teenager and decides to change her white Jewish name and take on her mother's black name, her father feels betrayed:

He is quiet for a few moments after I tell him, sitting at the center of an angry silence. When he does speak, he suggests that my choice has

something to do with my own anti-Semitism, with wanting to distance myself from the Jewish in me. When he says that, questioning my motivations, oblivious to my reality, I feel like I have been hit in the stomach, betrayed in the deepest place. I react defensively, asking why I should want the name of the man who disowned my father when he was only eight years old. Why I should carry the name of the man who beat my grandmother and has refused to this day to see me or any other of his son's children. When I change my name I do so because I do not feel an affinity with whiteness, with what Jewishness has become, and I do feel an affinity with blackness/ I do not see how I fit into his life, or that I want to (Walker 313).

Resentful of the dynamics that make her an outcast as a bi-racial person, Walker would soon come to lash out at her white suburban family and cause friction in the lives of her white family. "I leave Larchmont in a rage. I have literally pushed my stepmother into a mirror, cursed her to her face, and all but stopped speaking to my father"(Walker 229). Her hatred would mainly be directed towards her white stepmother whom she faulted for taking her father into a world of whiteness that she viewed as a plot to kill her and "wipe away all traces of my blackness or to make me so uncomfortable with it that I myself will it away" (Walker 206).

Possibly Walker's rage is misdirected towards her white stepmother. Her true anger is not meant for her stepmother but more likely for herself. The same contrived theory that Walker applies to her stepmother's ploy to make her so uncomfortable that in essence she "wills her blackness away" is the same example of hatred and resentment that

Irene feels for Clare in *Passing*. The death/killing of Clare represents the killing of the black race for Irene and though Walker suggests that it is her white stepmother who is trying to wipe away Walker's blackness, in truth it is Walker who has issues with owning her blackness. Again, this display of self-hatred of the black image is not entirely Walker's fault. Walker's self-hatred is related to issues linked to the black society's interpretation of self-love and acceptance in a white supremacist world. Though Walker is young, she is capable of assessing the dynamics of white and black as it relates to her dual existence in society.

In Walker's autobiographical section titled, *Morphology*, she recalls an event with a little white boy named Bryan on whom she has a childhood crush. When Bryan tells her that he does not like black girls, it is in this instance that she realizes that she is black and that black is how the world views her. Until then, it had not dawned on her that outside of the haven of her home, her color matters to the world. Even with the episodes with her great-grandmother she had been shielded by her father and grandmother to believe that her great-grandmother's resentment was towards something other than herself.

And I think, with this big whoosh that turns my stomach  
upside and almost knocks me over, is that what I am,  
a black girl? And that's when all the trouble starts,  
because suddenly I don't know what I am and I  
don't know how to be not what he thinks I am.  
I don't know how not to be a black girl (Walker 69).

After this turning point in her young life, Walker makes a conscious effort to prove to this white boy that she is not a black girl but just as white as he is. She purposely showcases her white stepmother and her white grandmother when they come to pick her up from school (Walker 69). She emulates the white icons of Hollywood, the all-American white family of the *Brady Bunch*, by brushing her hair a hundred times a night like Jan Brady to make her hair straight before going to bed (Walker 70). Walker, like Pecola of *The Bluest Eye*, embraces the projected white images of beauty that don't include images of black beauty. The straightness of blonde hair and the bluest of eyes were both Hollywood depictions of beauty, attributes that Pecola nor Walker possessed.

However, as Walker suffers and takes out her aggressions on her family, there is one crucial factor that does separate her from many of the literary and historical tragic mulattas. It is Walker's ability to recognize that her three worlds will never merge and her ability to shift to accommodate the two preeminent worlds of her life. "When I climb into the backseat of the car across the street, it is like I am entering another world, a world I know my father and stepmother and baby-sister can never enter" (Walker 101). In her ability to gain control of a situation dictated by a world obsessed with race, she is able to re-assess certain aspects of her life that must be formulated to withstand societal pressures. And though the term "trained" sounds demeaning, she has in essence "trained" herself to know when not to break the code, not to say something that will label her too white around black people or too black around white people (Walker 271).

*Black White and Jewish: Autobiography of a Shifting Self*, is an exploration of the new mulatta. It is Walker's account of a divided life moving from culture to culture from city to city, not only physically but also emotionally in an effort to bridge a gap in

the racial issues that pervaded her childhood. Though Walker does not like to categorize herself and her life experiences along with the traditional mulatta figure, she falls victim to the same circumstances that plague and shape the image of the tragic mulatta. She is a victim of the same racial abuse from both black and white societies, she finds herself in unrequited relationships with white boys and men, and there are times that she is humiliated, ashamed, and embarrassed about her blackness. Although these are all symptomatic problems of the infamous tragic mulatta, what sets her apart from the traditional tragic mulatta is her competence to recognize her situation, to identify the problem, and to make a change in her life before leading her to the fate of the traditional tragic mulatta, devastation and death. When Walker is an adult, her mother tells her that her conception and her life had been purposeful as Walker had never felt as though she had been at home in her own body. "Not in its color, not in its size or shape" (Walker 255).

Having survived from innocence to experience, now Walker likes to think of herself as "a border crosser, a human bridge" (Walker 244). She is the new mulatta that brings to life the myth of the tragic mulatta with a new ending and progressive transformation into a bi-racial individual, a person. And though there are some critics such as David Pilgrim who think that the tragic mulatta is merely the creation of the white mind, Walker is proof that the tragedies of the mulatta are real. However, she is determined to defuse the myth that the word tragic must always precede the word mulatta.

## Conclusion

The theory that the mulatta is both tragic and privileged has been an ongoing discussion among writers, critics, and scholars. The mulatta's close physical resemblance to white and her membership in two cultures and acceptance by neither has been a primary part of her designation as tragic. Her inability to comfortably migrate into either world has been one of the most memorable trademarks in her tragic-privileged existence. Additionally, her difficulty with self-acceptance and her emotional devastation in unfulfilling romantic relationships has also been major components in her life. Labeling the mulatta privileged, primarily because of her white appearing features, thus proves to be a shallow designation that misunderstands or ignores her many psychological layers, layers that date back to her ancestors, many of whom were conceived in the violence of rape.

In various ways film and fiction have depicted the mulatta as tragic or privileged, and they have questioned the beauty ideals that often trouble the mulatta's social acceptance or rejection. In Hollywood's depiction of the mulatta, tellingly illustrated in the 1959 version of Fannie Hurst's novel *Imitation of Life*, and in the life lived by America's premier black sex symbol and screen star, Dorothy Dandridge, art and life interestingly intersect. Popularized in *Imitation of Life*, the phrase "Peola" became a trademark slur in the 1930's for mulattas perceived by black society as those who wanted to reject their blackness for the sake of acceptance into white society. However, Hurst demonstrated in her novel (and it was repeated in the film) that rejecting one's black identity and transitioning into white society came with emotional, physical and psychological consequences. Such consequences are reflected in the real life of Dorothy

Dandridge, according to her autobiography. Her real life experiences reflected a lack of self worth and seeking acceptance through romantic liaisons with white men, both of which resulted in heartbreak and an untimely death.

Toni Morrison's 1970s fiction of a young black girl traumatized and eventually driven mad while obsessing over the impossible, to acquire blue eyes, delivers a powerful message about the ongoing influences of white social values and self-acceptance for a black woman. Pecola's black features are overshadowed by the projected images of Hollywood's standards of beauty, features that do not include the dark skin and kinky hair of the majority of the 1930's viewing audience. Black women attempted to emulate the white Hollywood icons while rejecting their own natural beauty. Becoming victims of their looks, mulatta actresses Dorothy Dandridge and Fredi Washington, who fit the image of the white Hollywood starlet, were never able to crossover and be fully accepted into white Hollywood's embrace. Their looks caused them to be typecast into the stereotypical seductress roles given to mulatta women, subsequently; forcing the women to live out the lives of the roles they had once played.

Nella Larsen's 1920s depiction of the tragic and the privileged mulatta uncovers the multiple layers that may comprise the mulatta woman. With the creation of Clare and Irene, Larsen is able to explore the multiple sides and complexities of passing in both black and white societies. She uncovers the elements in the practice of passing. Often thought of as just a two-sided component, Larsen reveals that the practice of passing goes beyond the physical elements of the black and white features that are viewed by society and extends to the emotional and mental aspects of each passing individual. Larsen depicts passing as a type of attitude that one conveys about the way of life he or she lives.

Although Irene appears to be the more connected of the two mulatta women to her black roots, on the contrary, it is her elitism and ways of thinking that isolates her from black society and differentiates her from Clare's modest attitude.

Although the mulatta has characteristically been perceived as the devastated and the emotionally fragile woman in search of love without first loving herself, the spirit of the ancestral mulatta is now challenged by the presence of the new mulatta. Rebecca Walker demonstrates in her compelling 2001 autobiography that the old associations of the tragic figure have now been transformed into a more positive, stable bi-racial person. Walker's journey to this position, interestingly, traverses much of the terrain of the ancestral mulatta. Walker's autobiography illustrates that time and space are the only true elements that separate her from her ancestral mulattas. Although the semantics have changed with the passing eras, the psychological layers with which the mulatta must contend still exist. The term passing has faded with the present era but the idea still exists and is demonstrated in Walker's ability to shift in her different environments as a means of survival. Her shifting unmask the prejudices and stereotypes that still persist in the black mentality, manifested since the days of slavery. Walker's work, in fact, bridges the past with the present and merges history with the here and now.

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