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MISSING PERSONS:
RACE AND APHANISIS
IN THE TWENTIETH-CENTURY AMERICAN NOVEL

by

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ABSTRACT

Missing Persons:
Race and Aphanisis in the Twentieth-Century American Novel

by

Martha Nell Sullivan

Through images of disintegration and disappearance, American narratives reveal the black subject’s problematic relationship to the (white) Other’s desire and the language of that desire. Jacques Lacan’s theories of subjectivity — especially the mirror stage and aphanisis, the subject’s disappearance behind the signifier — illuminate the impact of racist signification on black bodies in twentieth-century American novels, where epithets like “nigger” invoke the mutilation and disappearance of African American subjects.

Images of corporal disintegration reveal the reversal of the mirror-stage identification inaugurated by the 1896 Plessy v. Ferguson decision, lynching, and scientific and literary manifestations of Negrophobia. Post-Plessy novels often feature Jim Crow segregation and the “black” body’s destruction by the “white” voice. The Negrophobe rape plot infects James Weldon Johnson’s The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man (1912) after the anonymous narrator is called “nigger.” He chooses to “pass” for white after failing to project his disintegration onto his uncanny doubles. In Nella Larsen’s Passing (1929), Irene reenacts Lacan’s mirror stage by assuming Clare as her idealized image. But “Nig” — the signifier Clare’s white husband supplies — invokes Clare’s death and undoes Irene, whose final fainting is aphanisis. In William Faulkner’s Light in August (1932),
Joe Christmas’ homicidal violence and suicidal “shattering” represent capitulations to Yoknapatawpha’s insistence that he is a “nigger.”

Exemplary of the literary responses to racist signification since Brown v. Board of Education (1954), Toni Morrison’s progression from The Bluest Eye (1970) to Beloved (1987) charts the restoration of voice and body to historically “missing persons” effaced by cultural institutions designed to “teach” them their place. Schooled in the white standards of worth symbolized by the primer motif, characters in The Bluest Eye cannot resist aphanisis; in Beloved, however, characters combat aphanisis by refusing the masters’ prerogative to define them. This triumph over aphanisis also emerges in the reappropriation of the black body-in-pieces inspired by Jet magazine’s 1955 photographs of Emmett Till’s mutilated corpse. Till symbolizes African American integrity in works by Morrison, Gwendolyn Brooks, Madison Jones and others.
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...there are always
doors that will open
and even in the darkest places
your own voice will come back
to you.

Thanks for helping me find that missing person.
Table of Contents

Chapter 1
Race and Aphanisis in the Twentieth-Century American Novel 1
  *Plessy vs. Ferguson* 7
  The Mirror Stage 15
  Aphanisis and the Tyranny of the White Other 24

Chapter 2
Uncanny Doubles and Disappearance in
*The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* 41
  Narrative Models and Self-Definition 44
  The Tutelage in Racist Definitions 53
  The Return of the Repressed: The Rape Plot 64
  The Passing of a Colored Man 76

Chapter 3
Nella Larsen’s *Passing* and the Fading Subject 83

Chapter 4
Persons in Pieces: *Light in August* and Self-Shattering 109
  Signification and Subjectivity: Names and Words 112
  The Black Body as Sign 122

Chapter 5
Primers and Schoolteachers:
Resisting Aphanisis in *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved* 135

Conclusion
Re-Membering Emmett Till 171

Works Cited 185
Chapter 1
Race and Aphanisis in the Twentieth-Century American Novel

We might concede, at the very least, that sticks and bricks might break our bones, but words will most certainly kill us.
— Hortense Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” 68.

The subject is born in so far as the signifier emerges in the field of the Other. But, by this very fact, this subject — which, was previously nothing if not a subject coming into being — solidifies into a signifier.

In this dissertation, I will examine the power that naming has over bodies, specifically, the power that racist/racial naming has over “black” bodies. Using texts by both African American and European American authors, I will look at the ways in which many African American characters labeled pejoratively as such disintegrate — physically and emotionally — and disappear. My focus will be the manifestation of this phenomenon in the twentieth-century American novel, and my discussion of “race”¹ in this dissertation will be concerned with the division between Americans of African descent and Americans of European descent. Although issues of race certainly bear upon the Native American subject as well as other marginalized groups, I will not attempt to treat the Native American subject in the necessarily limited scope of this project.

Because desire initiates the twin processes of naming and destroying

¹ Following the convention of Henry Louis Gates, Jr. in his introduction to “Race,” Writing and Difference, I am placing “race” in quotation marks to signify the dubious nature of the category. Throughout this dissertation, I recognize “race” — even when not set off by quotation marks — as a psychological construct and not a biological category.
"racial" bodies, understanding its power to determine both subjectivity and narrativity is crucial. For the post-Freudian psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, desire and its associated concept — lack — provide structure for the human psyche (Lacan, FFC 29, see also 154). Who we are, in fact, is determined by desire (Lacan's "manque à être" or want-to-be), but not our own desires, for "man's desire is the desire of the Other" (Lacan, FFC 38). Not only does the subject desire the Other, but the Other — who is largely hypothetical, hence Lacan's capitalization — dictates all of the subject's desires: desire is "born in the field of the Other" (FFC 188). Moreover, just as desire structures subjectivity, it also structures narrative. In *Reading for the Plot*, Peter Brooks notes that narrative plot finds "its motor force in human desire" (90), and "this ultimately shows itself to be a desire for the end" (96). According to Brooks, narrative plot is a metonymic chain moving "toward totalization under the mandate of desire" (91). However, in modern narrative this desire for the totality of the end manifests itself ironically on the level of the individual character in what Leo Bersani has termed the "deconstruction of self" (5). In *A Future for Astyanax: Character and Desire in Literature*, Bersani notes the movement from a socially-defined self of the eighteenth century and a transcendent self of the nineteenth century to the contemporary phenomenon of "a scattered or disseminated self" (x). This modern self is manifested in "ghoulish forms," particularly in pornography where "putting 'persons in pieces'...becomes an appropriate image for the process of violently deconstructing the self" (xi). Desire, as Lacan notes, structures the subject around a lack, around what does not in fact exist; Bersani, after Lacan, finds in modern narrative the inevitable violent destruction of that precarious structure.
Although Bersani discusses contemporary French pornography as the epitome of this "scattered or disseminated self," the twentieth century American narrative of "race" is in fact filled with such "ghoulish forms" — with subjects who are structured by the desire of the (white) Other and ultimately deconstructed violently by that same desire. For at least the first half of this century, the *corps morcelé*, the body in pieces, has been the *sine qua non* of the American narrative of "race."

The desire of the white Other has been embodied in "white" racism, which, as Joel Kovel points out, is "a symbolic product, a set of fantasies...generated by the history of race relations and sustained by the rest of an organically related culture" (5). White racism ranges over a wide spectrum, from "dominative racists" like Faulkner's Percy Grimm, who "act out bigoted beliefs," to "aversive racists," or those who "merely" avoid contact with African Americans, to those who display no outward signs of racism but still unconsciously harbor these "mass fantasies" about the African American (54-55). Although their levels of conscious behavior and aggressivity differ, these three types of white racism nonetheless "float on the same pool of fantasies" (55). Thus the "desire of the white Other" has been a consistent set of racist fantasies corresponding to contemporaneous race relations.

Race relations have always occupied a prominent place in both American history and the American imagination, but they have been the most volatile in the last one hundred years — from the Wilmington (North Carolina) Race Riot of 1898 to the Los Angeles Riots following the Rodney King case of 1992. In *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, Eugene Genovese discusses what he calls the "hegemonic function of law" in regulating race relations (25).
to Emancipation, Genovese notes, the law was structured to sustain the
dominance of the white race. Extralegal activities such as lynchings or rioting
were unnecessary since the law had relegated the African American to an
inferior, servile position. Moreover, even though the legal system presumed
white supremacy, African Americans generally could depend upon due
process if they were accused of breaking the white man’s law. Such
proceedings, enacted within the white man’s legal system, were consistent
with and therefore no threat to the white hegemony (25-7). However, after
Emancipation, particularly after the passage of the Fourteenth Amendment
(1868), the formal legal system no longer literally sustained the white
hegemony because the African American subject was granted equality under
the law (34-5).

The change in the African American’s legal status has prompted the
eruption of physical violence in American race relations over the last
century, and this violence in turn has resonated in the images of the corps
morcelé so prominent in narratives of African American subjectivity. While
the historical bodies of slaves before the Civil War bore scars of mutilations
which were in fact traces of the masters’ legally-sanctioned desires, the bodies
of many “freedmen” after the Civil War and well into the twentieth century
were mutilated and destroyed in the lynching ritual, enacted extralegally to
impose the desire of the white Other on the entire African American
community. For instance, the fate of Robert Charles, the man who sparked
the New Orleans Race Riot of 1900 by holding a bloody stand-off with the
white police force for days, reveals the extent to which mutilation was used to
restore white hegemony. After Charles finally succumbed to multiple gun
shot wounds, a mob of angry whites kicked and stomped the corpse
repeatedly, and when the police placed his body in a wagon for transport to the morgue, the head was exposed so that the crowd could poke it with sticks (Hair 174-75):

His autopsy report listed thirty-four bullet holes in the torso alone, plus "three large openings undoubtedly due to volleys." Numerous other wounds were found in the arms and legs; the skull had been fractured and shattered "and almost beat to a pulp," wrote the coroner. His penis had been shot. Shortly after Robert's body arrived at the deadhouse (as many New Orleanians called the morgue) one of the attendants attempted to mold the battered face back into some semblance of humanity, but with no great success. (Hair 180)

The "shattering" of Robert Charles' body was the crowd's first response to a black man who would dare not only to kill white men, but would do so self-consciously, deliberately. One such crusader posed an infinite threat to the status quo; therefore, the white mob used Robert Charles' corpse as a symbol to counteract the potential symbolic value of his actions to other subversives.

As threats to white-domination grew, so too did the rigidity of definitions of "race." The "crystallization" of "the one-drop rule" coincided with the threat posed to the white hegemony by the rising Abolitionist sentiment in the North during the 1850s and by the imagined threats of slave rebellion and of rebellion by disgruntled wives of planters (Williamson, New 73-74). Although the one-drop rule had been embraced early by the upper South, where Africans (slave and free) constituted a minority, the lower South needed the mulatto class as a buffer between the white ruling class and the slave class, who constituted a majority. There, free mulattos were allowed "to pursue and achieve white culture" and in some cases would

2 That is, any African heritage, no matter how remote, makes one "black."
be treated legally as white when they acted in accord with the white
hegemony (2-3). But beginning in the 1850s, when that social and economic
hegemony was threatened from within and without, the entire South
"needed a structure to meet its fears and overcome them. It needed an
order...as tight as the tensions with which it had to cope" (73). That order was
a rabid racism fearing even the faintest “drop” of African blood.3 Even after
the slave holders’ worst fears were realized in Emancipation, “the white
South insisted on absolute demarcation between the two — black and white
— cultures. This dichotomy replaced the prewar one of slave and free”
(Kinney 25), effectively maintaining the structure of antebellum
relationships. And although the one-drop rule began in the South, James
Kinney notes that after 1920, even the United States Census accepted the one-
drop rule, for all mulattos were thereafter “classified as ‘Negroes,’ officially
creating a biracial America” (27). Because the “one-drop rule” fostered a
classification of race that moved from the visible (skin color) to the invisible
though essential (“blood”), naming or labeling the racial subject became all
the more crucial and dangerous. One could not always tell who had “black”
blood, but according to the “one-drop rule,” any black blood made a person a
probable threat to the structure of white-dominated society. By the twentieth
century, the United States was biracial, a “split” society increasingly obsessed
with maintaining the status quo, sometimes through intimidation of those
rumored to have black blood and sometimes through brutality and scorn.

Images of fragmented African American bodies in literature reflected
and became an effective metaphor for the disunity in the (now-biracial) body

3 See Joel Williamson on the organic nature of this new order (New 73). Also
see Joel Kovel on the consistency of racist fantasies in an organic society (5).
politic, disunity which was manifested in both the extralegal maneuvers of "dominative racists" and the attempts to restore the "hegemonic function of the law" through legislated segregation. The \textit{Plessy v. Ferguson} decision of 1896 epitomizes the latter phenomenon.

\textbf{Plessy vs. Ferguson}

"The problem of the twentieth century," W. E. B. Du Bois predicted in 1903, "is the problem of the color line" (13, 40).\textsuperscript{4} Du Bois referred to the line of segregation drawn arbitrarily, yet legally, between Americans of European descent and Americans of African descent. Du Bois published his announcement in the wake of the \textit{Plessy v. Ferguson} decision of 1896, which upheld the constitutionality of segregation and rigidified the "color-line." Although \textit{Plessy vs. Ferguson} dealt with the question of segregation ostensibly on interstate transportation, its "separate but equal" ruling was used as the legal basis for all public segregation in the United States. The decision was not overturned until the \textit{Brown v. Topeka Board of Education} decision in 1954, and enforcement of "Jim Crow" laws continued well into the 1960s in many places in the South while \textit{de facto} segregation still continues in housing and education in some areas of the United States today.\textsuperscript{5}

In the wake of the Rodney King and Reginald Denney cases, critics of our current criminal justice system might argue that there is also a separate but


\textsuperscript{5} According to Barbara Kantrowitz and Pat Wingert in a recent \textit{Newsweek} article, the move toward educational reforms in the 1980s paradoxically "turned [the nation's] focus away from integration" so that "most black and Latino students sit in classrooms with few or no whites." See "A New Era of Segregation," cited below.
unequal legal standard applied to African American plaintiffs and defendants. The *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision therefore defined American "race" relations not only for Du Bois' generation, but for most of the twentieth century as well.

The *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision mandated the legal separation of the races. In fact, the decision conferred reality on the very concept of "race." The team of lawyers and concerned citizens who wanted to challenge the constitutionality of Louisiana's "Jim Crow" railroad statutes purposely chose for their test-case Homer Plessy, a man who appeared "white" but who could be classified as a Negro according to the one-drop rule (Woodward, *American 219*). According to Albion Tourgée in his brief on Homer Plessy's behalf, the real question before the Court was "the right of the State to label one citizen white and another as colored" (quoted in Woodward 226, emphasis mine).

The decision thus confirmed racial difference as something that could be named, defined, and legislated, even if invisible, and therefore, as something with meaning. Toni Morrison in *Playing in the Dark* and Winthrop Jordan in *White Over Black* both discuss the meaning of race as a legacy of the negative meaning historically attached to "blackness" by European cultures. But while the meaning of "race" in the twentieth century United States has retained these connotations, it has become independent of color distinctions since the "one-drop" rule (underlying the *Plessy* decision) outweighed all consideration of skin color.

In fact, *Plessy v. Ferguson* simply upheld the master's right to name and define, a right unquestioned before Emancipation. In his dissent from the majority opinion in the case, Justice John Marshall Harlan compared the Court's decision to the *Dred Scott* decision of 1857 (Olsen 117), the case which
denied even freed men of African heritage rights as United States citizens. Harlan also disavowed the other Justices (notably Fenner and Brown) for their reliance on precedents established by various state courts prior to the Civil War:

I do not deem it necessary to review the decisions of State courts to which reference was made in argument. Some, and the most important, of them are wholly inapplicable, because rendered prior to the adoption of the last amendments of the Constitution, when colored people had very few rights which the dominant race felt obliged to respect. (quoted in Olsen, 120)

In Harlan's words, the "real meaning" of the Louisiana segregation statutes that the Court upheld in Plessy v. Ferguson was that African American citizens "are so inferior and degraded that they cannot be allowed to sit in public coaches" with whites (118). Harlan recognized that the statutes were designed to place "the brand of servitude and degradation upon a large class of our fellow citizens" (119-120), in other words, to return the antebellum status quo.

Harlan's criticism drew attention to the Plessy v. Ferguson decision as a return to the racist ideology of the antebellum period. In effect, the decision ignored the Civil War, the Emancipation Proclamation, and the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution. The Court's reliance on Justice Roger Taney's opinion in the Dred Scott case of 1857 was indeed "pernicious" (Harlan, quoted in Olsen 117). For as Eric Sundquist notes, Taney argued in essence that "the law of slavery was branded into African American being by 'indelible' marks that, having been already 'impressed' on blacks at the time the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution were drafted, could not, according to Taney's logic, be erased except by
Constitutional amendment" (To Wake 236). Since the Court in Plessy v. Ferguson drew on Taney's argument, apparently not even a Constitutional amendment was sufficient to erase these "indelible" marks. Indeed, these "indelible marks" were simply words, uttered by white authority, labeling those of African American descent as inferior. As C. Vann Woodward notes, the Jim Crow Statutes, protected and mandated by the Supreme Court in Plessy v. Ferguson, "put the authority of the state or city in the voice of the street-car conductor, the railway brakeman, the bus driver, the theater usher, and also into the voice of the hoodlum of the public parks and playgrounds. They gave free rein and the majesty of the law to mass aggressions that might otherwise have been curbed, blunted, or deflected" (Strange 93, emphasis mine).

The Plessy v. Ferguson decision, along with the political climate of Imperialism that fostered it, granted to Americans of European descent "permissions to hate" (Woodward, Strange 64). These "permissions to hate" made virulent white racism acceptable nationwide and allowed racism a respectable place in both scientific discourse and popular art. Such "scientific" treatises as Frederick L. Hoffman's Race Traits and Tendencies of the American Negro (1896), William B. Smith's The Color Line: A Brief on Behalf of the Unborn (1905), Robert W. Shufeldt's The Negro, A Menace to American Civilization (1897), and Charles Carroll's 'The Negro Beast'; Or, 'In the Image of God' (1900) all "enjoyed wide and receptive audiences" (Berzon 28) while reflecting "the current deterioration in race relations and new Southern attitudes" (Woodward, Strange 78). In the novel Black No More, George Schuyler parodies such scientific thought in the person of Dr. Samuel Buggerie, who has authored such spurious works as The Fluctuation of the
Sizes of Left Feet among the Assyrians during the Ninth Century before Christ (155) and The Incidence of Bittacosis among the Hiphopa Indians of the Amazon Valley and Its Relation to Life Insurance Rates in the United States (197). The latter title satirizes Frederick L. Hoffman, an insurance statistician who analyzed African American mortality rates to prove his hypothesis of white supremacy (Fredrickson 249). In Schuyler's novel, Dr. Junius Crookman, who himself offers cogent arguments against the reality of race as a category,\(^6\) discovers an electro-chemical process called Black No More that alters external traits such as skin color and hair texture, a process that will help further his efforts for a "chromatic democracy" (64). To safeguard the herrenvolk democracy embraced by the white supremacists,\(^7\) Dr. Buggerie begins an investigation to discern "pure whites from the imitation whites":

He claimed that such a nationwide investigation would disclose the various non-Nordic strains in the population. Laws, he said, should

\(^6\) Dr. Crookman tells his Black No More business associates, "Well, there are plenty of Caucasians who have lips quite as thick and noses quite as broad as any of us. As a matter of fact, there has been considerable exaggeration about the contrast between Caucasian and Negro features. The cartoonists and minstrel men have been responsible for it very largely. Some Negroes like the Somalis, Filanis, Egyptians, Hausas, and Abyssinians have very thin lips and nostrils. So also have the Malagasy of Madagascar. Only in certain small sections of Africa do the Negroes possess extremely pendulous lips and very broad nostrils. On the other hand, many so-called Caucasians, particularly the Latins, Jew and South Irish, and frequently the most Nordic of people like the Swedes, show almost Negroid lips and noses. Black up some white folks and they could deceive a resident of Benin. Then when you consider that less than twenty per cent of our Negroes are without Caucasian ancestry and that close to thirty per cent have American Indian ancestry, it is readily seen that there cannot be the wide difference in Caucasian and Afro-American facial characteristics that most people imagine" (31-32). Crookman's argument is comparable to those summarized in K. Anthony Appiah, "The Uncompleted Argument," 21-22.

\(^7\) For more on the concept of herrenvolk democracy, see George Fredrickson, The Black Image in the White Mind, cited below, and C. Vann Woodward, The Strange Career of Jim Crow, also cited below.
then be passed forbidding these strains from mixing or marrying with
the pure strains that had produced such fine specimens of mankind as
Mr. Snobbcraft and himself. (156-157)

Of course, Buggerie’s desire for racial purity backfires when his own
investigations uncover African “blood” in the lineage of all the First Families
of Virginia, including his own. He is subsequently lynched by a mob of
Mississippi essentialists who, adhering to Buggerie’s belief in racial purity,
allow one drop of African blood to negate Buggerie’s distinguished career as a
“professional Anglo-Saxon” (156). Schuyler thus illustrates in Black No More
the reducto absurdum of the “permissions to hate” granted by the American
legal system to the scientific community.

Perhaps more dangerous than the proliferation of “scientific” studies of
racial inferiority were the “artistic” portrayals of racist stereotypes marketed to
mass audiences. Arguably the most influential “artistic” rendering of white
racism was Thomas Dixon’s 1905 novel The Clansman, which was parlayed to
the masses by D. W. Griffith’s subsequent cinematic adaption The Birth of a
Nation (1912). Eric Sundquist has argued that the success of the novel and the
film would have been impossible without “the sociological and legal
underpinnings of Jim Crow” (To Wake 231). The bestial ex-slave Gus of both
the text and the screen version seems the incarnation of the “degradation”
Justice Harlan insisted Plessy v. Ferguson would mandate. Although Dixon
and Griffith were both sons of the South, the acceptance of Dixon’s message
was not merely a Southern phenomenon, for as Leslie Fiedler notes, Dixon
managed to translate his “‘redneck’ fantasies of nigger-hating and lynch law”
into “universal images” that appealed to the rich and poor Southerners and
white Northerners who now came into contact with African Americans in
their own cities (181). Thomas Dixon expressed in the most unsublimated form the Master's desire, those "mass fantasies" shared by white racists of all degrees. In both The Leopard's Spots and The Clansman, Dixon presents what would become, sometimes in inverted form, stock characters of American narratives of race: the Negro rapist and his white victim. The introduction of sexuality into racism was inevitable since, as Joel Kovel notes, sexuality "is most intimately connected with issues of power and dominance" (68). Thus in terms of racist ideology, Gus's rape of Marion Lenoir in The Clansman is really an attempt by an African American to master the white race. As Alex C. King told the Montgomery Race Conference of 1900, "the white race regards the rape of white women by Negroes" as "an attack on the integrity of race" (quoted in Fredrickson, 274). The Clan's capture and lynching of Gus represent the triumph of the white race, the return of the Master's dominance and the slave's subservience.

African American novelists of the twentieth century have necessarily had to react to the script that was pre-written for them by Thomas Dixon and other Negrophobes, the script that was made possible by the Jim Crow statutes and, reciprocally, gave credence to segregation. Richard Wright in Native Son, for instance, reveals that the "permission to hate" implicit in Jim Crowism worked both ways. In his introduction to the novel, Wright notes that he himself knew the rape plot "by heart"; he knew that "dramatic situation" was the one in which he must place his protagonist (xxviii). Through his depiction of Bigger Thomas, who plays the role of the "black beast,"\(^8\) Wright exposes the forces that have shaped Bigger and his hatred,

\(^8\) In fact, one of Bigger's friends is named Gus, and Mary Dalton's name, like Marion Lenoir's, recalls the Virgin Mary.
including the white master/black slave dichotomy permeating the novel. At the beginning of the novel, Bigger must kill a black rat whose “belly pulsed with fear” (9), clearly a foreshadowing of Bigger’s own fate given that “rat” was the slang term for a “member of the black folk or proletariat” (Berzon 65). Later, the Dalton’s white cat exacerbates Bigger’s feelings of paranoia; as Bigger begins to dismember Mary, “two green burning pools—pools of accusation and guilt — stared at him from a white blur” (90). And later at a gathering of photographers, when the cat pounces on his shoulders, he feels that “the cat had given him away, had pointed him out as the murderer of Mary” (190). More than thirty years after Dixon’s novel, Wright adapts the script to reveal how the hate and separation engendered by racist ideology lead ineluctably to the broken bodies: the rat, Mary Dalton, Bessie, and ultimately Bigger as well.

As C. Vann Woodward has argued, American race relations could have taken another course after the Civil War, but the Plessy v. Ferguson decision etched in stone the racist ideology that would shape race relations in the twentieth-century United States (Strange 47). Although “racial prejudice” might have persisted (and perhaps always will), racism — which George Fredrickson defines as “rationalized ideology grounded in what were thought to be the facts of nature” (2) — could not have continued to flourish without the force of law. The law gave racial prejudice “bite.” Plessy v. Ferguson insured that the label “nigger” would have not only a psychological, but a physical impact as well: the “namer” was legally sanctioned to exclude or separate “niggers” from (white) others and, by implication of statutory segregation, extralegally sanctioned to impose physical harm on “niggers” who tried to get too close — economically, socially, or sexually. The Supreme Court of the United States granted European Americans the right to “cut”
African Americans socially and physically. In the words of Eric Sundquist, the Court's rulings reduced African Americans “before the law, and at times literally in body, to human fragments” (To Wake 239).

The Mirror Stage

Because the series of Supreme Court decisions culminating in Plessy v. Ferguson had the ability to reduce African Americans literally or symbolically to “human fragments,” these decisions represented an assault not only on the legal status of African Americans, but on their psychological status as well. As Jacques Lacan suggests in his essay “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience,” corporal integrity is the index of subjectivity. The infant first identifies himself as “I” (Je), as a subject, after glimpsing the image of its body in toto in the mirror. The image of the integrated body suggests mastery and unity, qualities which the infant lacks but claims for its own by internalizing the image. For Lacan, the mirror image produces ambivalence in the infant since it both “symbolizes the mental permanence of the I” (2) and posits identity in that which is not actually the subject but merely a “Gestalt,...an exteriority” (2). Lifelong alienation of the subject results from this initial “mêconnaissance,” or misrecognition (6). In his theories of “self psychology,” the analyst Heinz Kohut focuses on the positive aspects of mirroring as a psychological function both during infancy and throughout life. “For Kohut, the mirror stage enhances the self's integrity and gives it strength” (Glass 42). According to Kohut's theory of self, mirroring is not limited to the specular image but includes any “reflection” from a self-object — such as parents —
that presents the self as whole, powerful, and loved; those who do not receive appropriate mirroring may regress to the stage of the “fragmented self,” the non-integrated subject prior to the mirror stage that is imagined retrospectively, after the mirror stage (Levin 194). Lacan, too, notes that images of “the fragmented body” may be manifested “in dreams when the movement of the analysis encounters a certain level of aggressive disintegration in the individual” (“Mirror” 4). For both Lacan and Kohut, the return of these images of the fragmented body signifies a fragile or disintegrating subjectivity. Moreover, if the subject is deprived of an initial image of power and mastery, s/he will never have the sense of an integrated and powerful self.

The mirror stage for the “racial” character is often reversed or otherwise problematized by what Judith Berzon calls “the crisis experience” (120). Applying the theories of the 1930s sociologist Everett Stonequist to the study of mulattos in American fiction, Berzon finds that “the crisis experience is the point in the mixed blood’s life when he becomes conscious of his own racial and social marginality” (120). This experience is portrayed in narrative as typically a “single shattering experience that irrevocably transforms the mixed-blood... He is faced with the existential crisis of redefining himself in terms of his social and psychological environment” (122). Although Berzon focuses on the crisis experience of the “mixed-blood,” this concept is applicable to all “racial” characters and often represents a reversal of the mirror-stage identification. As Berzon notes, the character often searches for visible signs of his marginality in the mirror (122). But the character faced with the shattering knowledge of “race” in the American context often also seeks in the mirror the once-cherished image of mastery and unity that has
been destroyed by racism.

The crisis experience, occurring within the racist context, represents an inversion of the mirror stage identification for a number of literary characters. Janie Crawford in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* has such an experience: when she is six years old and apparently has never seen an image of herself, someone points her out in a photo taken with a white family. “So when we looked at de picture and everybody got pointed out there wasn’t nobody left except a real dark little girl with long hair standing by Eleanor. Dat’s where Ah wuz s’posed to be, but *Ah couldn’t recognize dat dark chile as me.* So Ah ast ‘where is me? Ah don’t see me’ ” (9, emphasis mine). Janie does not joyfully accept the image of herself as her idealized self, the typical *méconnaissance* of the mirror stage; instead, Janie experiences a complete failure to recognize the image at all. She tells Pheoby that before seeing the photograph, “Ah thought Ah wuz just like de rest” (9), that is, white. The failure of the community to offer the very young Janie a positive mirror for her blackness, her difference, is compounded by the persistent naming and renaming she is subjected to by that same (white) community: “Dey all use ter call me Alphabet ‘cause so many people had done named me different names” (9). Thus she is denied the very things a young child needs to forge a strong identity: a permanent name and positive image of the self to associate with the “I.” Shortly after the episode with the photograph, Janie’s grandmother decides that they must move to their own home, away from the white Washburns, to remedy Janie’s newly-developed sense of shame, for “Nanny didn’t love tuh see me wid mah head hung down” (10).9

9 Janie Crawford’s crisis experience doesn’t have the tragic outcome that
Another character who experiences a problematized mirror stage is Shadrack from Toni Morrison’s *Sula*. After returning from the front in World War I, Shadrack has been psychologically shattered. Prematurely released from a military hospital, he is incapable of functioning on his own, particularly in a world hostile to young black men.\(^{10}\) Frustrated by his inability even to untie his own shoes, Shadrack fights “a rising hysteria”:

Suddenly without raising his eyelids, he began to cry. Twenty-two years old, weak, hot, frightened, not daring to acknowledge the fact that he didn’t even know who or what he was...with no many characters experience. Janie finds other ways to forge her own identity and in the course of the novel finds her own voice as well.

\(^{10}\) Black soldiers returning from foreign lands after war posed a new menace for whites who feared that their taste of martial power and egalitarianism would create unrest at home. According to Pete Daniel, racial incidents associated with black troops have occurred since the Civil War. These incidents increased in the twentieth century, for “the very uniform, the lack of servility, the pride, and, no doubt, the weapons blacks carried gave the white community pause” (60). Daniel notes especially the Brownsville, Texas, race riot of 1906, when black soldiers returning from duty in the Indian wars, Cuba, and the Philippines received summary dishonorable discharges for shootings and civil unrest which were actually perpetrated by some white townspeople, who planted incriminating evidence against the soldiers so that they would be removed from the Brownsville area (61). Daniel also mentions the Houston riot of 1917, which stemmed from a confrontation between black soldiers stationed nearby and the (white) Houston police force (62-3). Also see Faulkner’s rather unsympathetic depiction of Simon Struther’s malcontent son, Caspey, who returns from World War I ready for social equality in *Flags in the Dust*. According to Faulkner’s narrator, “Caspey returned to his native land a total loss, sociologically speaking, with a definite disinclination toward labor, honest or otherwise, and two honorable wounds incurred in a razor-hedges crap game” (62). Caspey’s dialogue represents confirmation of the worst fears that whites could have about these black veterans: “I don’t take nothin’ f’um no white folks no mo’...War done changed all dat...Yes, suh. And de women, too. I got my white in France, and I’m gwine git it here, too” (63, 67). Caspey’s boasts sound suspiciously like those of Gus in Dixon’s *The Clansman*, a novel given to Faulkner in 1905 by Annie Chandler, his first-grade teacher (Blotner, Faulkner 20). There was some basis for the white fear of and the African-American expectation of social and political equality resulting from military service, for as George Fredrickson points out, one reason Northern politicians reluctantly extended suffrage to freedmen after the Civil War was the sterling record of black troops in the war (184-185).
past, no language, no tribe, no source, no address book, no comb, no pencil, no clock, no pocket handkerchief, no rug, no bed, no can opener, no faded postcard, no soap, no key, no tobacco pouch, no soiled underwear and nothing nothing nothing to do...he was sure of one thing only: the unchecked monstrosity of his hands. (12, sic)

Shadrack's disintegration is evidenced by his apparent experience of his body in parts — by the "monstrosity of his hands" and "his aching feet." The crying represents an infantile reaction to the frustration he experiences, while the relentless negation of all the things that would be part and parcel of the soldier's daily experience — the pencils, the can openers, the soap, the tobacco pouches—represents the annihilation of a carefully constructed identity. The antidote to this disintegration is a mirror-stage identification with an image of unity and mastery; therefore, in the cell in which Shadrack has been jailed for "vagrancy and intoxication," he realizes that he wants "to see his own face":

He looked for a mirror; there was none. Finally, keeping his hands carefully behind his back he made his way to the toilet bowl and peeped in. The water was unevenly lit by the sun so he could make nothing out. Returning to his cot he took the blanket and covered his head, rendering the water dark enough to see his reflection. There in the toilet water he saw a grave black face. A black so definite, so unequivocal, it astonished him. He had been harboring a skittish apprehension that he was not real—that he didn't exist at all. But when the blackness greeted him with its indisputable presence, he wanted nothing more. In his joy he took the risk of letting one edge of the blanket drop and glanced at his hands. They were still. Courteously still. (13)

There before a toilet bowl in a jail cell, Shadrack reenacts the Lacanian mirror stage, complete with the joy he feels as he identifies himself as "real," as
"presence." His motor incapacity subsides as he manages to control the hands that previously had been troubling him as separate entities. But this mirror stage is problematic for a number of reasons, reasons that tend to underscore the ambivalence inherent in such moments of identification. First, Shadrack is twenty-two-years-old, not six months. The reenactment of the mirror stage reveals the extent to which his subjectivity has already been problematized by his experiences as soldier and as a black man in the white man's world. Second, Shadrack's "mirror" is a toilet bowl instead of a traditional looking glass. Shadrack's ideal image, then, issues from the place usually reserved for human waste, the unclean, that which cannot be permanently integrated into the human body; therefore, that image is already defiled. Finally, though the image he sees insures Shadrack that he is "real," it does not give him the sense of mastery and omnipotence experienced by the typical six-month-old. Rather, the reality links him inextricably to mortality and annihilation, for "he knew the smell of death and was terrified of it" (14). Thus, the post-mirror stage Shadrack returns to the Bottom to institute "National Suicide Day" (14), his own admission of impotence before the prospect of death.

As Janie Crawford's and Shadrack's experiences of subjectivity demonstrate, the African American has not always received appropriate mirrors for the formation of the ideal self. Even the very notion of the ideal self is problematic since, as Janie's experience reveals, the ideal self is often associated with a white self whereas the "black" self is unrecognizable, powerless, or defiled. In The Souls of Black Folk, W.E.B. Du Bois discusses his own crisis experience, the traumatic experience of his difference as stigmatizing rather than empowering. When a female classmate refuses the schoolboy Du Bois' card, he realizes "with a certain suddenness that I was
different from the others; or like, mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil” (2). From this incident, Du Bois derived his notion of the African American “double-consciousness.” In “a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other [white] world,” the African American subject must experience the self “through the eyes of others,” who look upon the subject “in amused contempt and pity” (3). In this compounding of alienation (double that of the typical mirror-stage méconnaissance), the subject experiences himself as divided, a “two-ness” of “an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (3). When that strength is dissipated, however, the experience of split-subjectivity can be overwhelming for the fragile subject who experiences two versions of himself. In the 1920s, the sociologist Howard Odum posited an even more dramatic alienation for the African American. If Du Bois suggested an African American “double consciousness,” then Odum suggested a quadruple consciousness. There were four separate selves for the African American: “what he is, what the white man thinks he is, and what he might be and what he desires to become” (Odum, quoted in Tischler, 13).

If, as Judith Berzon argues, the crisis experience is one in which the subject “becomes conscious of his own racial and social marginality” (120), then we could view the Plessy v. Ferguson decision and the implementation of Jim Crow statutes as a crisis experience for all African Americans, since Jim Crow laws literally pushed African Americans to the margins of society (to the back of the bus, to the edge of town, etc.) and undermined their access to
an idealized, integrated I. This failure of the integrated I has resulted in the proliferation of images of the corps morcelé, the body in pieces, in twentieth-century American narratives of race. According to Lacan, recurrent "imagos of the fragmented body" are often indicative of aggressivity toward others ("Aggressivity" 11), or of the disintegration of the self ("Mirror" 4). In the case of the "racial" subject, the aggressivity revealed by the images of the corps morcelé is turned inward, against the self, in answer to the desire of the Other. In Black Rage, William H. Grier and Price M. Cobbs share the very telling case history of the analysand "Roy," whose psychological and physical experience replicates this process of aggressive disintegration. Roy, happily married and economically successful as a professional painter, is injured on the job when he falls thirty feet. There is no permanent physical injury, but Roy begins to suffer from impotence and complains of various bodily pains. More tellingly, he begins to dream "of falling from a building and shattering on impact as though made of glass" (7). Grier and Cobbs find that the work-related injury was merely a catalyst and not the cause of Roy's symptoms, for "[h]is unraveling after the accident emphasized the fragility of his previous functioning" (7). As a black man in a white-dominated world, Roy unconsciously believes "the proper place in life for him was as an ineffectual, defenseless, castrated man, and that his brief period of competence was but a temporary violation of the natural order of things" (8, emphasis mine). If we recall Fredrickson's definition of racism as "rationalized ideology grounded in what were thought to be the facts of nature" (2), it becomes clear that Roy has internalized the white racism ("the natural order of things") that mandates his own destruction, the "shattering" he experiences in dreams.

In literature as in real psychoanalytic experience, the precarious nature
of subjectivity is underscored by the prominence of the *corps morcelé* as the trace of the desire of the white other. The “shattering” that the analysand Roy experiences in dreams becomes a reality for racial characters. In an eerie reversal of what Lacan calls the “jubilant” moment of the mirror-stage identification (“Mirror” 2), nominally “racial” characters are doomed to be broken into pieces either literally or figuratively. In Chester Himes’ *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, Alice Harrison, Bob Jones’ light-skinned fiancée, experiences the psychological equivalent of Janie Crawford’s painful discovery of difference. After a humiliating experience with Bob at an all-white restaurant (where Alice, had she been alone, could easily have “passed” without his dark presence), the couple is stopped and harassed by a white police officer. Alice is distressed by the incident, and Bob tries to comfort her with the knowledge that this kind of experience is common: “Don’t let it get you down, baby...You’re not just finding out you’re a nigger?” (64). She is, in fact, just realizing what it means to be a “nigger” (even in Los Angeles), so that she, like so many other African Americans, falls to pieces. The narrator emphasizes the shattering effects of Alice’s experience by telling us, “her face kept breaking apart like glass” (65). Since the activity of “putting ‘persons in pieces’” is synonymous with “the process of violently deconstructing the self” (Bersani, *Future* xi), Alice Harrison can experience metaphorically what Bigger Thomas of Wright’s *Native Son* experiences physically, for throughout the novel, he displaces his own fragmentation onto the bodies of those he mutilates. He pulverizes a black rat (an image of himself) with a skillet early in the novel, an act that leads inexorably to the trail of dead and mutilated bodies he leaves. After he dismembers and burns Mary Dalton’s body, he is haunted by “that lingering image of Mary’s bloody head lying on those
newspapers” (108). Before he crushes Bessie’s head with a brick, Bigger is again visited by the image “of Mary burning.” As he continues striking blows to Bessie’s skull, he “seemed to be striking a wet wad of cotton” (222); when he turns the light on her corpse, he sees disembodied pieces, the fragmented body of infancy: “Blood and lips and hair and face” (223). To underscore the relationship between the disintegrated bodies and Bigger’s dissolution, Wright depicts the coroner dramatically offering Bessie’s “raped and mutilated body” itself as evidence at Bigger’s trial (306).

Corporal disintegration—whether experienced directly by subject or projected by the subject onto the body of another—is the harbinger of the subject’s disappearance. Fragmentation and nothingness are both opposites of the totality the subject desires but is denied. Thus the 

\textit{corps morcelé} is the tell-tale sign of aphanisis, or disappearance.

**Aphanisis and the Tyranny of the White Other**

Lacan’s theories of subjectivity reveal the extent to which the subject is in effect tyrannized by the Other. Lacan emphasizes the structuring nature of desire (FFC 29), but, problematically, this desire is “born in the field of the Other” (FFC 188). Identity is thus a precarious construction, founded as it is on what is alien and external to the subject: the Other, a construct that has been internalized in the structure of the unconscious via images and especially language (that is, Lacan’s “imaginary” and “symbolic” orders):

...the subject as such is uncertain because he is divided by the effects of language. Through the effects of speech, the subject always realizes himself more in the Other, but he is already pursuing there more than half of himself. He will simply find his desire ever more divided, pulverized, in the circumscribable
metonymy of speech. (FFC 188)

Language, or the symbolic order, becomes an instrument for the tyranny of the Other. Appropriating Ernest Jones' term "aphanisis," Lacan redefines the term and uses it to describe the effect of signification on the subject: 11

Now, aphanisis is to be situated in a more radical way at the level at which the subject manifests himself in this movement of disappearance that I have described as lethal. In a quite different way, I have called this movement the fading of the subject.
...Hence the division of the subject—when the subject appears somewhere as meaning, he is manifested elsewhere as 'fading,' as disappearance. (FFC 207-208, 218)

Fantasies of disappearance — such as anorexia and daydreams of death — are, according to Lacan, commonly employed by children who attempt to wring recognition from the adult other. For the child, this recognition is linked inextricably with the Other's inscrutable desire. In dialogue, the child seeks this desire: "He is saying this to me, but what does he want?" (FFC 214). Ellie Ragland-Sullivan reformulates the child's question as, "What am I to you?" (48), a reformulation demonstrating the powerful link between language, the construction of identity, and the perceived desire of the Other. In Lacan's version, the child deciphers the words of the adult to determine the Other's desire, while in Ragland-Sullivan's, the child defines itself with the words of the other (the "I" in the child's question is both the subject of being and the

11 For Jones, "aphanisis" is the child's literal "fear of seeing [sexual] desire disappear" (Lacan, FFC 207), a fear that, for Jones, relates to castration anxiety, but does not focus on the phallus and is therefore more inclusive (Mitchell and Rose 15-16). It is important to note that Lacan maintains the presence of desire in aphanisis. For a discussion of Lacan's disagreement with Jones, see Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose, eds., Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the École Freudienne, cited below.
subject of language). Although in some senses the fantasy of disappearance works as a manipulation of the desire of the Other — the petulant “you’d be sorry if I were dead” — it also operates as a capitulation, in part to the desire of the Other and in part to the very structure of language (and hence the unconscious). Quite simply, according to Lacan, one cannot both mean and be simultaneously. Aphanisis is the resultant fading of the subject when the subject’s meaning for the Other eclipses being.

As Frantz Fanon notes in Black Skin, White Masks, “alterity for the black man is not the black but the white man” (97). When the black subject seeks the desire of the white Other, he finds his desire for recognition denied. For this subject, the answer to Lacan’s question, “what does he want from me?” is always, “Turn white or disappear” (Fanon 100). As André Bleikasten suggests in his study “Fathers in Faulkner,” recognition is precluded since the child is “doomed either to be absorbed or expelled” (141-142). Kovel notes that in Western cultures, the African American has “represented a form of symbolic guilt that cannot be assimilated,” what Kovel refers to as the “Ham Myth of Expulsion,” the myth of the “bad” son exiled from the kingdom (79). Daniel Singal verifies the perception of African Americans as “undisciplined children” at odds with the white culture (9-10). Cast as bad children, then, African Americans have been denied the recognition of the white Other, who often appears in the guise of the father. Such estrangement creates the feeling of “fatherlessness,” which involves feelings of “isolation and uprootedness” (Berzon 152). Hence, in the Reconstruction era South, many newly empowered African American men attempted to legislate paternal recognition by voting for state legislation that would legalize marriage between races and force white fathers to support
their illegitimate mulatto children both in life and after death through inheritance (Williamson, New 91). Through this type of legislation, African Americans sought to have their existence ratified by the absent fathers; in effect, they sought “mirroring” in the Kohutian sense.

But the fathers did not want to recognize their “dark” children; they simply wanted these children to go away. After the Civil War, the white community articulated in several forms its desire that African Americans “disappear.” In the decades following Reconstruction, serious proposals were put forth in Congress and in the academic community to remove the entire African American population through a process of colonization (Fredrickson 228-229). President Lincoln himself had originally endorsed similar colonization plans after Emancipation, but when these proved impractical, his administration deliberately adopted a quarantine policy “designed to keep the freedmen in the South” (Fredrickson 166). In the wake of Darwin’s Origins of Species (1859), a theory of the “peaceful disappearance” of the black population gained currency in the scientific community as ethnologists argued that African Americans were unfit for survival and would therefore suffer extinction. The Census of 1890 tended to confirm the gradual extinction of the African American population because an undercount of that population implied that it was growing at a much slower rate than the population at large (Fredrickson 246-247). Albion Tourgée, who recognized Plessy v. Ferguson as a struggle over the right of one segment of the population to name another (Woodward, American 226), also recognized the concurrent “belief in the Northern mind that the Negro would disappear beneath the glare of civilization,” a belief which revealed “a half unconscious feeling that such a disappearance” was indeed a desirable solution to the race
question (quoted in Frederickson, 237). The white community, however, could not wait for the excruciatingly slow process of “peaceful disappearance” through evolution; so they implemented segregation to make the black population disappear, if not from their world, at least from their view.

In literature of “race,” both assimilation (what Fanon calls “turning white” and Bleikasten, “being absorbed”) and expulsion (Fanon’s “disappear”) threaten corporal integrity — the very index of subjectivity — and are therefore tantamount to aphanisis of the subject.

In his study of white racism, Joel Kovel confirms the relationship between signification and disappearance that Lacan’s theory of aphanisis posits. Like the displacement inherent in the metonymic functioning of language (the signifying chain), white racism has associated blackness, African Americanness, symbolically with a chain of increasingly unassimilable elements, until the African American has been displaced into nothingness. After an in-depth Freudian analysis of the history of racism, Kovel reconstructs the chain of meaning that the white racist associates with blackness: “black man as father—> as child—> as body—> as penis —> as feces—> as inanimate thing—> as nothing, invisibility” (91). Kovel concludes, “We observe that with debasement goes abstraction, until the final point of nothingness is reached” (92). Disappearance of the African American subject is inevitable in this signifying chain where, like the Lacanian subject, he finds himself and his own desire “ever more divided, pulverized, in the circumscribable metonymy of speech” (Lacan, FFC 188). Moreover, as Grier and Cobbs point out, the African American subject internalizes through “the dynamics of black self-hatred” the same white racist fantasies that engender racist signification (198). Surrounded by the ambient race hatred and unable
to change the situation through aggression toward whites, the African
American subject "identifies with his oppressor psychologically in an attempt
to escape his hopeless position" (199). Ironically, this identification leads to
aphanisis, the disappearance of the "racial" subject behind the racist signifier.

Because Plessy v. Ferguson facilitated the white mandate for African
American disappearance, denied or otherwise problematized the "racial"
subject's development of an integrated I, and collapsed the elements of the
signifying chain that Kovel reconstructs, so that the black subject immediately
connoted nothingness, the decision granted incredible power to those who
wielded the racist signifier and, by extension, to the signifier itself. In a study
of William Faulkner's Light in August, T. H. Adamowski identifies the word
"nigger" as "le maître mot, le mot magique" [the master word, the magic
word] (241). With its implication of the presence of the (white) Other,
Adamowski's phrase "master word" is apt, for the word "nigger" and other
racial epithets are encoded with the racist ideology whose roots lie in the
system of slavery. After Plessy v. Ferguson, the word "nigger" or similar
epithets in the mouths of streetcar conductors and railway brakeman (and
other bearers of white culture) became powerful weapons and alibis for
coercion in the hegemonic struggle. These epithets in turn inscribed racist
ideology on the subject, for they no longer referred to the subject himself; they
referred to white supremacist ideology that named the subject. As Joel
Williamson notes, there was a movement from concrete referentiality toward
abstraction in racist thinking: by the turn of the century, "‘Negro' had
become an idea," sometimes dissociated from ethnic origins (New 108). But it
remained nonetheless an idea in the racist mind. In Gwendolyn Brooks'
novel Maud Martha, two characters discuss this abstraction after a white
saleswoman unself-consciously complains to Sonia Johnson, “I work like a nigger to make a few pennies. A few lousy pennies” (139). Mrs. Johnson explains to Maud Martha why she did not rebuke the saleswoman:

You know, why I didn’t catch her up on that, is—our people is got to stop feeling so sensitive about these words like ‘nigger’ and such. I often think about this, and how these words like ‘nigger’ don’t mean to some of these here white people what our people think they mean. Now, ‘nigger,’ for instance, means to them something bad, or slavey-like, or low. They don’t mean anything against me. I’m a Negro, not a ‘nigger.’ Now, a white man can be a ‘nigger,’ according to their meaning of the word, just like a colored man can. So why should I go getting myself all stepped up about a thing like that? (140-141)

Maud Martha’s refusal to comment confirms her skepticism while Mrs. Johnson’s protracted and rather defensive explanation reveals that she, too, recognizes the dangers inherent in the association of Negroes, “niggers,” and “something bad, slavey-like, or low.” Maud Martha and Mrs. Johnson, like Toni Morrison, know that the legacy of the American slavery system is an encoding, both legal and linguistic, of the “meaning” of racial difference (Playing in the Dark 49). And reciprocally, in a manner consistent with Plessy v. Ferguson, “racial” difference itself often becomes an arbitrary “function of discursive practice,” as it does in Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha world (Morris 228).

Aphanisis of the “racial” subject can be seen operating on a grand scale in American history in that the white hegemony called for the “disappearance” of the African American subject through prophesies of extinction, attempts at remote colonization, and ultimately social quarantine via segregation. Language itself, with its “master words,” was pressed into
service to facilitate these disappearances and so acted as what Louis Althusser calls an "Ideological State Apparatus," that which indoctrinates the subject in "submission to the ruling ideology" (144-145, 132). It was often behind the master word "nigger" that the streetcar conductor, the school principal, the college president, and the restaurateur asked the "racial" subject to disappear.

The word "nigger" is the source of aphanisis for many modern fictional characters.12 “Passing” is one manifestation of aphanisis. The

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12 Several critics have noted disappearance as a motif in African-American literature. For example, in *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature*, Houston Baker discusses the "rite of the Black (w)hole" as a part of the triumphantly subversive trickster tradition in African-American culture. Characters disappear as a retreat from white-dominated society only to reemerge with "ancestral" wisdom that facilitates the reintegration "with a difference" (Baker 153-154). In his recent dissertation "Race as Metaphor: 'Passing' in Twentieth Century African-America Fiction," Thomas Holmes suggests that passing (a mode of disappearance) is also triumphant: for the passer, "'race' is an imposed social construction, open to change and variations, but not a 'thing' in itself. The passing character shapes his or her identity by surpassing these barriers imposed by society, even when sometimes exiling himself or herself (seeking anonymity) in order to make a new identity" (2745-A). Yet contrary to the suggestions of Baker and Holmes, the disappearance of nominally African characters (wholesale or piecemeal in such works as *Light in August, Passing, The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, and *Beloved*) is not triumphant, but lethal. In *Black Fiction*, Roger Rosenblatt discusses disappearance as a common theme in African-American literature, a theme entailing the disappearance of the concept of "hero" in these novels as well. He views these disappearances as conscious attempts by the hero to "escape his rut or corner by vanishing" (185). Rosenblatt's argument, however, fails to take into account the number of involuntary disappearances chronicled in the literature of race.

Although these characters could be considered complicit in "[their] own elimination" (185), this complicity is limited since the motivating force is often the internalized desire of the (white) Other, a phenomenon Grier and Cobbs refer to as "the dynamics of black self-hatred" (198) through which the African-American subject "identifies with his oppressor psychologically in an attempt to escape his hopeless position" (199). Trudier Harris points out this phenomenon in her discussion of James Baldwin's *In Another Country* (*Exercising Blackness* 68). Barbara Christian also seems to confirm this internalization when she suggests that the theme of passing "offered vicarious wish fulfillment" for black audiences who would also like to disappear into the white world (*Black Women* 45). None of these critics, however, associates the disappearance of the "racial" subject with the structure of language.
character responds to the imperative "Turn white or disappear" by assuming a white identity, the alienated, idealized white I. George Schuyler's *Black No More* is the fictional account of an entire population's passing, a radical response to the imperative to disappear. But with rare exceptions (for example, Schuyler's parodic novel of passing), novels of passing almost always end in either the mysterious and violent death of the protagonist, as in Nella Larsen's *Passing* or Charles Chesnutt's *The House Behind the Cedars*, or the intense suffering of remorse that results in the passer's return to the black world, as in Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bun* or Walter White's *Flight*. In either case, the passer is "expelled" from the white world because in the essentialist view of the one-drop rule, internalized by many a passer, the concept of "race" is irrevocably real: an "imitation white" (Schuyler 156) is still black. When passing is impractical or impossible, the process of aphanisis accelerates as the subject is immediately and insistently labeled with racial epithets. This labeling invokes aphanisis as the subject is denied an ideal I, when the Other's response to his question, "What Am I to you?" is the last term in Kovel's signifying chain: "nothing, invisibility" (Kovel 91). The dissolution of the "racial" subject is often depicted in the subject's physical mutilation or in the projection of that mutilation onto the bodies of others. (These scenarios sometimes occur in novels of passing as well, as I will discuss later in chapters about Nella Larsen's *Passing* and James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. ) Whether or not the "racial" subject chooses to pass, the tell-tale sign of aphanisis in the novel is the imago of the *corps morcelé* engendered by racial labeling, indicative of the subject's regression to pre-mirror stage fragmentation.

For Rowena Walden of Charles Chesnutt's *The House Behind the
*Cedars* (1900), George Tryon is the white Other. When George breaks their engagement after discovering her African American heritage, she receives a devastating answer to the question implicit in her existence, "What am I to you?":

...she saw a face as pale as death, with starting eyes, in which love, which once had reigned there, had now given place to astonishment and horror....One appealing glance she gave—a look that might have softened adamant. When she saw that it brought no answering sign of love or sorrow or regret, the color faded from her cheek, the light from her eye, and she fell fainting to the ground. (140-141, sic)

The fainting Rena experiences initiates what Lacan refers to as the "lethal" fading of the subject (FFC 207-208). Once Tryon identifies her as "nigger," which he defines as "an excrescence, an alien element incapable of absorption into the body politic of white men" (252), and denies her recognition by giving "no answering sign," the identity she has constructed as "Rowena Warwicke" crumbles under the weight of debasement and abstraction. The fainting she experiences is a mere prelude to the mysterious and fatal "swamp fever" that consumes her in the last pages of the novel.

Charles Étienne St.-Valéry Bon, Charles Bon's son in Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), also contracts a fatal case of swamp fever, or "yellow fever" (*Absalom* 210), as though the miasma were a metaphor for aphanisis. Charles Étienne experiences the characteristic inverted mirror stage, as early on he is denied a glorified image of himself. Under the watchful gaze(s) of Judith and Clytie, he discerns their silent answer to his equally silent, "What am I to you?" In the trundle bed below Judith and above Clytie, he discovers that "he was, must be, a negro," which in turn
leads to his learning “the term ‘nigger,’ [he] who even had no word for it in the tongue he knew” (198). The French of his New Orleans birth has no such word, but the Sutpen dialect of English certainly does. Under the weight of that word, which neither Judith nor Clytie utters but which is thick in the air of Yoknapatawpha County, Charles Étienne must relinquish the glorious image of self from his Lord Fauntleroy infancy. At age fourteen he acquires a “shard of broken mirror” (199) in which, Mr. Compson speculates, he spends “hours of amazed and tearless grief...examining himself in the delicate and outgrown tatters in which he perhaps could not even remember himself, with quiet and incredulous incomprehension ” (199, emphasis mine). Before that broken mirror, which is itself fragmented, he experiences the méconnaissance of the inverted mirror stage, the tearing down of the idealized image he had previously internalized as I (or in his case, literally “Je”). But unlike Hurston’s Janie Crawford or Morrison’s Shadrack, whose mirror stage inversions I discussed above, Charles Étienne projects his dissolution of self onto physical bodies, starting knife fights with Negroes and provoking Judge Hamblin to ask, “What are you?” (203). He is, of course, what he intuits himself to be in the eyes of Judith and Clytie as he is suspended between them: “nigger.” Grandfather Compson’s well-meant but somehow already redundant advice to Charles Étienne, “go away, disappear” (204), simply underscores the power of the identification “nigger,” for the nigger Sutpen is doomed to the same fate as his father, Charles Bon: preemptory death and disappearance.13

13 The cameo appearance that Charles Étienne St.-Valéry Bon makes in Absalom, Absalom! represents Faulkner’s return to issues unresolved in his depiction of Joe Christmas in Light in August. Charles Étienne is a version of Joe
Allen Tate's *The Fathers* (1938), a novel that in some ways responds (although inadequately) to *Absalom, Absalom!*, literalizes the incest/miscegenation plot that Charles Bon's abrupt dispatch thwarts in Faulkner's novel. Early in the novel George Posey sells his mulatto brother, called "Yellow Jim." Later, during the tumult of the War, Yellow Jim returns to Posey's Georgetown house and enters the bedroom where Jane Posey, his half-sister, is sleeping. Although Tate leaves the ambiguity unresolved — we do not know whether Jim assaults Jane or whether she is simply undone by the "shallow hysteria" of her fear of "Negro men" (245) — he has Yellow Jim himself spouting Dixonian propaganda: "Hit's the Nigger in me," he tells Lacey Buchan apologetically (240). Yellow Jim, bearing throughout his life a pejorative name, acts out the identity he (along with Tate, perhaps) accepts as synonymous with "nigger." That identity is underscored rather than alleviated when George kills Semmes Buchan, who has killed Jim. "I never had any idea of killing that Nigger," George tells Lacey (258, *sic*) and then perfunctorily dumps Jim's body in the river. The attempt to sell Jim South, the appellations "Nigger" and "Yellow," and the hasty disposal of the body are all George's denials of kinship. Yellow Jim can never be a Posey because he is "Yellow" and "Nigger," which preclude his being white. He must disappear, a disappearance George orchestrates.

Finally, even Wright's Bigger Thomas must disappear behind the signifier "nigger," although throughout the novel he attempts to project his disintegration onto the bodies of others. During his flight from the police after mutilating the bodies of Mary and Bessie, he reads the headlines "HUNT

*Christmas contextualized immediately by the institution of slavery, represented by the Morganatic marriage (placage) of which he is born. See Chapter Four, below, for further discussion of both novels.*
BLACK IN GIRL’S DEATH” and “AUTHORITIES HINT SEX CRIME”; “Those words,” says the narrator, “excluded him utterly from the world” (227, 228). Later, while he awaits trial, he sees in print the very process of aphanisis: in a newspaper article he solidifies into a signifier as he literally becomes “that nigger Thomas” (261, emphasis mine). This solidification is appropriate since, as Barbara Johnson points out in “The Re(a)d and the Black,” his “racial” identity is inadvertently revealed in and by the ransom note he composes, although he himself remains invisible to Mr. Dalton and the detectives (Johnson 149): “Do what this letter say” (Wright 67, emphasis mine).

Aphanisis, the body in pieces, the reversal of the “jubilant” mirror stage identification: all of these things are the tearing down of subjectivity. Aphanisis occurs in and as a result of signification, and in many American narratives of “race,” the power of signification belongs to the white Other. Power, as Elaine Scarry finds in The Body in Pain, always “bases itself in another’s pain and prevents all recognition that there is ‘another’ by looped circles that ensure its own solipsism” (59). It is more than coincidental that physical torture is often an instrument of racial repression since the goal of both is to rob individuals of language and self. “In torture, it is in part the obsessive display of agency that permits one person’s body [the victim’s] to be translated into another person’s voice [the regime’s agent, the torturer], that allows real human pain to be converted into a regime’s fiction of power” (Scarry 18). Likewise, when the Plessy v. Ferguson decision “put the authority of the state or city in the voice of the street-car conductor” and other petty tyrants (Woodward, Strange 93, emphasis mine), the “racial” subjects so labeled by that voice of power were obliterated. The “fiction of power” is
maintained in race relations, just as it is in torture, by denying the repressed the status of "subject." Hence, every time a white racist invokes "Nigger," he makes a subject vanish with a sl(e)ight of voice. Physical torture and racist signification are both culprits in the historical abuse of African Americans, and nothing dramatizes the correlation between these two more profoundly than the brutal 1991 beating of Rodney King by (white) Los Angeles police officers. King testified that during the beating, the voice of one officer commanded, "Nigger, stay down" ("King" 8A). As Hortense Spillers puts it, "sticks and bricks might break our bones, but words will most certainly kill us" (68). Or as Jacques Lacan has said in theorizing the relationship between language and subjectivity, "the symbol manifests itself first of all in the murder of the thing" ("Function" 104).

At the outset of the history of American "race" relations, a sort of circular, self-perpetuating process was set in motion, whereby the desires of the white dominant culture became historical reality, and the psychic structures of both white and black Americans absorbed and internalized this reality, allowing the desires of the white Other to enter pervasively into the realm of fantasy and fiction. These fantasies and fictions in turn created new historical realities, which reinforced and regenerated those white racist fantasies, allowing the cycle to continue.

The fragmented black body became a metaphor in and for the segregated United States. It became prevalent in the works of both European-American and African American authors. But while some authors like Thomas Dixon used this image simply to perpetuate the historical reality it represented, other authors, aware of the process behind this disintegration,
have used the image of the black body in pieces to disclose racist ideology as merely the construct of a particular set of desires. The process of aphanisis inherent in racist labeling is more or less self-consciously exposed in the texts I examine in the remainder of this study. Chapters Two through Four explore manifestations of aphanisis in novels of the post-Plessy generation, while Chapter Five and the Conclusion explore contemporary responses to racist signification. In the wake of the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education decision, African American literature has restored the voice and the body to previously "missing persons."

In Chapter Two, I discuss James Weldon Johnson's The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man (1912), where the anonymous narrator's identification as black by a teacher (hence a voice of authority) reinforces his feelings of rejection by his (absent) white father and prompts other children to call him "nigger." Once identified as "nigger," his "autobiography" becomes infected by the Negrophobe rape plot made popular in Thomas Nelson Page's Red Rock and Thomas Dixon's The Clansman. Throughout the novel, the narrator projects his disintegration onto the bodies of others, but these projections cannot protect him from the implications of racist signification, so his career of successive "disappearances" culminates in his decision to "pass."

In Chapter Three, I examine the tyranny of the Other in Nella Larsen's Passing (1929), which begins with Irene Redfield's fear of exclusion from the segregated Drayton Hotel and ends in Clare Kendry Bellew's violent expulsion from the world. Although many critics assume Irene pushes Clare to her death, the key to Clare's "fall" is the signifier her white husband John Bellew supplies: "Nig." In the logic of racist signification, the name "Nig" makes Clare's death inevitable; it negates Irene's agency in Clare's death and,
to a degree, Irene herself. Whether their relationship is ruled by sexual jealousy or homoerotic attraction, Irene views Clare as an image of herself. Clare’s “glorious body mutilated” undoes Irene (240), whose fainting at the end of the novel mirrors Clare’s violent death as another manifestation of aphanisis.

In Chapter Four, I explore the ways in which “putting persons in pieces” becomes an “image for the process of violently deconstructing the self” (Bersani x-xi) for Joe Christmas in Faulkner’s *Light in August* (1932). Joe’s “shattering” ultimately relates to “nigger,” the word with which he is labeled insistently throughout the novel. In effect, Joe Christmas’ disintegration (the “deconstruction of self”) is the result of the signifier supplied for him by these (white) Others, because he constantly “vanishes” behind that signifier until the denouement, when he literally disintegrates as “face, body, all, seemed to collapse, to fall in upon itself” (440).

In Chapter Five, I examine Toni Morrison’s exemplary progression from *The Bluest Eye* (1970) to *Beloved* (1987), which charts the restoration of voice to African Americans, historically “missing persons” effaced by cultural institutions designed to “teach” them their place. Characters in *The Bluest Eye* are thoroughly indoctrinated in white standards of worth (symbolized by the school primer motif) and cannot resist their own disappearance in white signification. In *Beloved*, however, Morrison reveals the multivalent relationship between racial labeling (exemplified by Schoolteacher), disintegration, and the characters’ attempts to combat the effects of aphanisis through self-naming and renaming. With the help of the Bluestone Road community, Sethe ultimately denies Schoolteacher’s contention that masters are “the definers” and slaves “the defined.” She will learn, as Paul D says,
"You your best thing, Sethe, you are" (273).

The final chapter of this study explores the 1955 murder of Emmett Till in Mississippi, which became a focal point in the Civil Rights Movement. When Jet Magazine published photographs of Till's grotesquely mutilated corpse, the black body in pieces became, perhaps for the first time, an image of empowerment and the harbinger of the emergence of the African American voice. Till becomes a symbol of African American integrity in Gwendolyn Brooks' "A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi" and "The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmett Till," James Baldwin's Blues for Mister Charlie, and Morrison's The Song of Solomon and Dreaming Emmett (an unpublished drama).

In the novels I examine, the lethal power of racist signification determines the fate of the "racial" character — dismemberment, death, disintegration — all of which are literal or symbolic forms of aphanisis, the disappearance demanded by the white Other. These works all present "subjects coming into being" who, labeled with and transformed (de-formed) by "nigger" or other racial epithets, ultimately disappear behind these signifiers with varying degrees of violence unless, like Morrison's Sethe and Paul D (who were created after segregation ended), they have the resources to resist this signification.

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14 In Morrison's Beloved, for example, Schoolteacher uses "creature" with profound effects on Sethe and her children. "Creature" in Morrison's novel is far more insidious and pernicious than "nigger."
Chapter 2
Uncanny Doubles and Disappearance in
*The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*

Published anonymously in 1912, James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* is a novel of passing that passes for the autobiographical confession of an African American, the anonymous "Ex-Colored Man." When Johnson began work on the novel in 1905, Thomas Dixon had just published his (in)famous *The Clansman*, and the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision was less than a decade old. Once they saw the word "colored" in the title, then, the audience of 1912 could easily decipher the pertinent cultural codes, what Lionel Trilling has called "culture's hum and buzz of implication," the subtle evocations of the work's transitory cultural context (206). The "hum and buzz" of American racism resonates everywhere in *The Autobiography*, in the numerous train journeys the Ex-Colored Man makes, a club scene where the presence of white women raises eyebrows, and the Ex-Colored Man’s casual mention that his mother takes in sewing for other (white) women.

"All my life I have made it a principle never to 'Jim Crow' myself voluntarily," Johnson declared in *Along This Way* (1933), his actual autobiography (86). Nor does Johnson's Ex-Colored Man ever voluntarily Jim Crow himself, but his method of refusing segregation diverges widely from Johnson's. As the first African American admitted to the Florida bar, as an African American serving in the United States diplomatic corps, and as a founding member and the first black executive secretary of the NAACP, Johnson devoted his life to breaking down racial barriers, whereas his
fictional creation avoids the negative impact of racism simply by passing for white. On one such occasion when the Ex-Colored Man is traveling South to collect material to become, ironically enough, a great Negro composer, he listens to a dispute about the race question. A bigoted Texan explains his position: "Down here in the South we're up against facts, and we're meeting 'em like facts. We don't believe the nigger is or ever will be the equal of the white man, and we ain't going to treat him as an equal; I'll be damned if we will. Have a drink," says the Texan, whereupon everyone in the car, including the narrator, "partook of the generous Texan's flask" (120). With this gesture, the Texan (who represents the typical white Southerner) undermines his pretensions of knowing the "facts" of the American race question, since by sharing his flask — the redneck equivalent of the Grail — the Texan performs a sacred rite of communion with the "nigger" next to him. But even though Johnson and his audience can see the irony in this episode, the Ex-Colored Man is "sick at heart" (120), for he has internalized the racist beliefs espoused by the Texan. The narrator becomes in this scene a "mock Homer Plessy" (Sundquist Hammers 10) because he never declares his racial allegiance or takes a stand against racial injustice. Instead, he accepts the implications of the Texan's diatribe, as he does all the negative significations of "nigger," and eventually disappears by permanently passing for white.

Although many critics have dismissed The Autobiography in the merely cursory readings of omnibus criticism (where even complimentary readings are not altogether careful),¹ the novel is a seminal work of American

¹ Critics debating its merit have devoted sporadic attention to the novel. It has been completely dismissed by a few, including David Littlejohn, who contends
fiction because in it, Johnson reveals the impact of American race ideology and signification on his narrator's construction of identity. Language, according to Jacques Lacan, divides the subject, resulting in aphanisis, for "when the subject appears somewhere as meaning, he is manifested elsewhere as 'fading,' as disappearance" (FFC 218). Once labeled "nigger," the Ex-Colored Man will fade behind the meaning of the word as it is dramatized by his uncanny doubles in reenactments of white racist narratives like Dixon's *The Clansman*. While Johnson does not condone the narrator's decision to pass, he does reveal its inevitability as an acquiescence to aphanisis, the culmination of social and psychological imperatives to "turn white or disappear" (Fanon 100). *The Autobiography* is therefore a narrative of aphanisis, containing all those elements I recounted in Chapter One: the rejection by the white paternal figure, the pernicious racial labeling that reverses the mirror stage identification, the presence of the *corps morcelé*, and the ultimate disappearance demanded by the initial racial labeling.

that no "serious American Negro literature" was written before 1940 and that Johnson's novel is "an utterly artless, unstructured, unselective sequence of Negro life episodes written in a style as flat and directionless as the floor of an enormous room" (21, 26). Others mete out qualified praise. For example, Richard Kostelanetz and Arthur P. Davis cite Johnson as a precursor to later African American writing; Kostelanetz notes that Johnson's Ex-Colored man paved the way for Wright's Underground Man and Ellison's Invisible Man (19), and Davis praises Johnson as "a transitional figure who inspired changes in the development of Negro literature" (32). Robert Bone and Roger Rosenblatt commend what they seem to characterize as Johnson's precocity, suggesting that *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* is good for a novel written in 1912. Bone notes that *The Autobiography* reveals a "discipline and restraint hitherto unknown in the negro novel" (46), while for Rosenblatt, "it is extraordinary that a novel as complicated as *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* was produced as early as 1912" (174). Finally, a few critics, including Judith Berzon, Bernard Bell, and Howard Faulkner, read the novel on its own terms and applaud its penetrating psychological realism. Berzon finds the narrator's struggle for an identity "artistically satisfying" (150), Bell finds the novel a realistic psychoanalysis of race, and Faulkner finds that even the digressions in this "masterpiece of control" are designed to be "revelations of character" (148).
Narrative Models and Self-Definition

Presenting his novel as the narrator's autobiography allows Johnson to explore the process by which an African American constructs identity. Autobiography entails a set of rhetorical choices — what to include, what to leave out — choices that create or shape the subject for the reader. The Ex-Colored Man creates himself in and through narrative, and the narrative models to which he has access determine what he becomes. All narratives, Edward Said suggests, take their beginnings from some remote origin; some origins provide enabling “authority” to the writer, and some produce “molestation,” restraints on the writer’s creativity (83). As an African American author, the Ex-Colored Man faces the molestation of “the double audience,” the dilemma Johnson explains using Du Bois’ concept of “double consciousness”: “it is a divided audience, an audience made up of two elements with differing and antagonistic points of view. His audience is always both white America and black America” (“The Dilemma of the Negro Author” 477). The Ex-Colored Man begins with three narrative models: the African American first person narrative (including the slave narratives), the tragic mulatto narrative, and the Negrophobe rape plot. The problem of the “double audience” reflects the multiple origins from which the Ex-Colored Man begins, for his three models have “differing and antagonistic” ideological aims. He then suffers what might be called “narrative double consciousness,” for the authority he derives from one model is problematized
by the molestation of the competing models and divided audiences.

The authorizing narrative model for The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man is the African American autobiographical form, including the slave narrative, that enables the narrator to write his narrative by himself. The novel's title itself invokes this tradition. Throughout the novel, the narrator alludes directly to the narratives of Frederick Douglass (who is one the Ex-Colored Man's early heroes), Booker T. Washington's Up from Slavery, and W. E. B. Du Bois' The Souls of Black Folk. As James Olney has demonstrated, the rhetorical function of slave narratives — a function shared with later African American autobiographies — was foremost to make an "existential claim," beginning always with the modest claim, "I was born" (155). Even though his claim is prefaced by two paragraphs confessing his cynicism and dissatisfaction with his existence, the Ex-Colored Man also makes the requisite initial claim: "I was born in a little town of Georgia a few years after the close of the Civil War" (2). Once he makes the existential claim, he sticks closely to the slave narrative model throughout the first chapter, strewing his account with references to memory: "I remember...", "I can still recall...", "indelibly fixed...in my mind," (2) and so on. In From Behind the Veil, Robert Stepto notes another convention the novel borrows from the slave narrative; the Sherman, French & Company preface affixed to the 1912 version (reprinted in the contemporary editions but not in the 1927 edition) acts as an "authenticating text," seemingly verifying the Ex-Colored Man's historical existence in the way white abolitionists wrote prefaces for ex-slaves (98).²

² Benjamin S. Lawson contends that the 1927 edition of the novel, the first one published with Johnson's name, is "the major sequel to" to the original 1912
The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man, frequently characterized as an "ironic" novel,³ eventually takes on an ironic relationship to the African American autobiographical tradition. The narrator's existential claim is weakened by his negative self-definition; he is claiming to no longer exist, for "ex" modifies not only "colored," but "man" as well.⁴ For Stepto, the novel is "an aborted immersion narrative" since the Ex-Colored Man's pilgrimage into his Negro folk heritage ends in his repudiation of his African identity; moreover, the narrator never learns to read correctly either the historical contexts or "tribal texts" (such as Du Bois' The Souls of Black Folk) that his first person narrative invokes (114). Johnson's own intentional masquerading of the novel as "a human document" (Along 238) reveals a problematic aspect of the first person narrative that bears upon the Ex-Colored Man's existential dilemma, for as William Andrews notes, the white reading audience of 1912 showed "greater receptiveness" to autobiographies than to

³ Several critics have argued that the irony in the novel is directed at the Ex-Colored Man himself, for the audience's benefit; see, for example, Robert E. Fleming, "Irony as a Key to Johnson's The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man"; Joseph Skerrett, Jr., "Irony and Symbolic Action in James Weldon Johnson's The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man"; and Marvin P. Garrett, "Early Recollections and Structural Irony in The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man," all cited below. Robert Bone, however, contends in The Negro Novel in America that the narrator is being consciously ironic and cites the narrator's contention that his passing is "a practical joke on society" (48). Finally, Stephen Ross argues in his essay "Audience and Irony in Johnson's The Autobiography of An Ex-Coloured Man" that Johnson directs the irony at "a hypothetical white audience," whose values the narrator has adopted (199).

⁴ Similarly, Lucinda Mackethan notes, "Putting the 'Ex' in front of the label does not make the narrator white but only invisible" (142). Michael Cooke further notes that the narrator "is an ex-man more truly than an ex-colored man" (50).
novels written by African Americans (xvi). In 1912, it seems, there was residual resistance to African Americans in the role of god-like creators of art, a resistance which adversely affects the narrator's desire to become a great Negro composer.5

While the first-person narrative provided the African American "a personal, spiritual assurance of worth" (Baker, "There Is No More" 136), the "tragic mulatto" narrative tradition provided white audiences with assurances of the African American's worth. Common in works by both African American and European American writers in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the tragic mulatto constituted an "anti-stereotype stereotype," for as Nancy Tischler notes, the "tragic mulatto," whose whiteness and sentimental sufferings appealed to the white audience, was used as propaganda to "counteract the brute-Negro picture" common in white racist fiction and sociology (24, 86).6 Like the tragic mulattos in Frances Harper's Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted (1892) or Charles Chesnutt's The House Behind the Cedars (1900), the Ex-Colored Man is sensitive, intelligent, and light-skinned, embraces middle class values, and toys occasionally with the idea of "race uplift." In his struggle to find a place in society, the Ex-Colored Man certainly views his life as a series of "little tragedies" (Auto 1), as he says in an appeal to the sympathy of both white and black audiences. But

5 See James Olney's discussion of the slave narratives in ""I Was Born': Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature." Olney notes that white audiences often accepted the slave narratives only if they were presented as factual accounts, with no creative "emplotting." Creativity in a slave narrative was synonymous with "lying" for these audiences (150).

6 See also Judith Berzon, Neither White Nor Black, for a complete discussion of depictions of mulattos in American fiction. Berzon points out that Negrophobes characterized mulattos as particularly dangerous since they combined "the worst traits of both races," Anglo-Saxon cunning and African savagery (58-60).
his need to win the approval of the white Other is itself another molestation impinging upon his narrative.

But at the same time the Ex-Colored Man invokes his “tribal precursors” in the first-person narrative tradition and follows the tragic-mulatto pattern set in works by Pauline Hopkins, Frances Harper, and Charles Chesnutt, his narrative erupts with figures from a third narrative tradition: the post-Reconstruction Negrophobe novel. Sterling Brown suggested in 1937 that Johnson’s novel reacts in part to contemporaneous Negrophobe narratives like Thomas Nelson Page’s Red Rock and Thomas Dixon’s The Clansman (104-105), but this reaction includes incorporation of the “rape plot,” the most incendiary elements white racists used to define African American identity. Because the rape plot subverts the narrator’s self-creation by providing a destructive definition of “nigger,” this narrative model warrants a brief examination.

The Negrophobe characterization of African Americans is quite simple: there are “good niggers” and “bad niggers” (Ellison, Shadow 42), and both types adhere to the definition of “nigger” presented in Brooks’ Maud Martha as something “bad, or slavey-like, or low” (141). The first group includes

7 In The Autobiography, the narrator declares that African Americans can be “divided into three classes...in respect to their relations with whites” (55-56). The Ex-Colored Man’s classification contains the “desperate class,” analogous to the “bad niggers” of the Negrophobe narratives, and the “servant class,” analogous to the Tarquins and Aunt Cindys in Dixon and Page (56). The narrator adds a third class, of which he himself is a member, “the independent workmen and tradesmen, and...the well-to-do and educated colored people” (57). This class, the narrator notes, has little contact with the white world (57), most probably because its success contradicts the negrophobes’ doctrine that “upppy” African Americans must end badly. In A Spy in the Enemy’s County, Donald Petesch notes that the narrator’s classification is “from the perspective of the whites” (152); Petesch’s observation is certainly true of the first two classes the narrator discusses. But as Eugenc Levy remarks, the third class the narrator defined “challenges the Southerner’s image of himself” by revealing that African Americans could “rise out of the place assigned them by the
those who maintain a "slavey-like," obedient stance toward whites, whom they recognize as their rightful superiors. These characters, including Dixon’s Uncle Aleck and Aunt Cindy or Page’s Tarquin and Peggy, are so servile and self-effacing that they are hardly memorable. The second group includes the “repulsive savages” like Page’s Moses (the “trick-doctor”) and Dixon’s Gus, who are presented as grotesque caricatures of human beings. In Red Rock, Moses has “a pair of furtive eyes” that constantly dart about, while “the upper part of his face receded so much that the nostrils were unusually wide, and gave an appearance of a black circle in his yellow countenance” (292), while the villainous Gus in The Clansman is no less repulsive, “with an ugly leer, a flat nose dilated, his sinister bead-eyes wide apart gleaming ape-like” (304). These “brutes” attempt to rise above their station politically, socially, and sexually, fomenting Negro insurrection and attacking fair maidens. In fact, their evil most often manifests itself in the rape (or attempted rape) of white women. For example, in Robert Lee Durham’s The Call of the South (1908), John Hayward, an intelligent, refined mulatto much like the Ex-Colored Man, cannot withstand the restraint of a platonic marriage with the beautiful Helen and therefore rapes her. When Page’s Moses attempts to rape the horrified Ruth Welch, he gives “a snarl of rage and [springs] at her like a wild beast” (358). Although unsuccessful in this attack, he is later hanged by a mob in another state for committing “terrible,” “heinous,” and apparently unspeakable crimes (582). Dixon’s Gus achieves his notorious attack on Marion Lenoir with a “single tiger-spring, and the

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8 See the Oxford English Dictionary for the etymology of the word “villain,” derived from the Old French “villein,” or slave.
black claws of the beast sank into the soft white throat” (304). These three rapists all possess a threatening “animal-like” physicality and lust that coincides with their rebellious ambition. According to W. J. Cash, the implicit definition of “rape” was very broad for Southerners in the Reconstruction era and thereafter, since “any assertion of any kind on the part of the Negro constituted in a perfectly real manner an attack on the Southern woman” (119). Thus, John Hayward’s attempts to rise in the ranks of the White House, Gus’ gun-wielding as the “Captain of the African Guards” (327), and Moses’ pretensions of healing bodies and souls as a preacher and a doctor

9 The negrophobe’s use of animal imagery to describe African Americans is reminiscent of the rhetoric Iago uses to describe Othello and Desdemona’s marriage to Brabantio in Shakespeare’s Othello. Iago describes Othello as “an old black ram” and “a Barbary horse,” and describes Desdemona and Othello as “making the beast with two backs” (i.90-115). I am grateful to Professor Lucille Fultz for this observation.

10 Thus “rape” includes any unobsequious attitude toward a white woman by a male with African Heritage. The mulatto Silas Lynch, another of Dixon’s villains, has designs on Congressman Stoneman’s virginal daughter in The Clansman, and this affront marks Lynch as a potential rapist. Chester Himes depicts the tyranny of this broad definition of rape in If He Hollers (1945), where Bob Jones is framed by a white woman because he has spurned her advances. The most tragic instance of an absurdly inclusive definition of rape is of course the Emmett Till case, which demonstrated that for an African American male in Mississippi in 1954, whistling at a white woman was tantamount to raping her. For more on the Till case, see my discussion in the final chapter of the dissertation, below.

Although the African-American villains are often male, the woman can also be depicted as villainous. The African-American woman is depicted a highly sexual seductress, revising in these racist narratives the white master/black victim rape scenario. For example, in Dixon’s The Clansman, Lydia Brown, Stoneman’s mulatto mistress, is a “sinister figure” who “cast a shadow across the history of a great nation” (94). Dixon uses the same “tiger” metaphor to depict Lydia Brown’s hold on the nation that he uses for Gus’ rape of Marion Lenoir. Lydia rapes the nation vicariously through Stoneman, “who looked into her sleek tawny face and followed her catlike eyes was steadily gripping the Nation by the throat” (94). For a discussion of the white racist translation of the historical sexual exploitation of black women into the myth of black women’s sexual licentiousness and depravity, see Angela Davis’ essay, “Rape, Racism and the Myth of the Black Rapist,” in Women, Race, and Class, cited below.
all indicate their status as rapists. These rapists all share the same fate, too: they are all lynched. The Negrophobe novel, then, reveals that "good niggers" efface themselves by "staying down," while the "bad niggers" are ugly over-reachers whose errant social, sexual, and political desires are punished by death.

Johnson's and, ostensibly, the Ex-Colored Man's rhetorical decision to include racist stereotypes in the Ex-Colored Man's life story reveals a version of the self infected by the racist ideology of the time. To write an autobiography is to create the self for the reader, or as Lucinda Mackethan notes of the slave narrative, "a 'written life' was shaped to validate a 'lived life'" (123). The novel elicits the question of precisely what the Ex-Colored Man validates with the life he writes for himself. In his own autobiography Along This Way (1933), Johnson remarks on the impact of such an infection and his own luck in having escaped such a fate:

As an American Negro, I consider the most fortunate thing in my whole life to be the fact that through childhood I was reared free from undue fear or esteem for white people as a race; otherwise, the deeper implications of American race prejudice might have become a part of my subconscious as well as my conscious self. (78)

Johnson reveals those "deeper implications" in his narrator's subsequent indoctrination in pernicious white values through a process of naming. The word "nigger" contains for the Ex-Colored Man a complete, over-determined narrative. That is, once the Ex-Colored Man identifies himself as a "nigger," his story must inevitably contain those residuals of white racist belief even when he tries to repress this "knowledge" on his way to passing. Thus, the Ex-Colored Man frequently wears the mask of the self-effacing, servile "good
nigger” while he displaces aspects of the “bad nigger” behavior by projecting onto his doubles in the narrative, the black gigolo and the anonymous lynching victim. The resulting split prevents him from establishing an integrated identity, especially as a black man, since he is torn between what he wants to be as a black man and what he unconsciously believes himself doomed to become.

The white racist definition of “nigger” haunts the Ex-Colored Man, resonating in the experiences of the uncanny that plague the narrator and undermine his attempts to shape his identity. Freud defines the uncanny as that which induces terror but which “is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression” (“The ‘Uncanny’” 241). Such experiences occur whenever “infantile complexes which have been repressed are once more revived by some impression, or when primitive beliefs which have been surmounted seem once more to be confirmed” (249). In short, the uncanny is anything for the subject “which ought to have remained hidden but has come to light” (241). Although David Littlejohn has argued that The Autobiography “betray[s] only adolescent fantasies beneath the dull surface of prose” (26), the fantasies revealed are on the contrary those repressed “infantile complexes” and “primitive beliefs” that return in the form of the uncanny. Just at those points in The Autobiography where the narrator seems to establish the validity of his existential claim as an African American male — when he is the “Professor” of ragtime in New York and again when he is gathering material in Georgia for his effort to become a great Negro composer — the repressed returns violently in the respective forms of the black gigolo and the
anonymous lynching victim, who represent the "primitive beliefs" of white racism (beliefs touted in the novels of Dixon and Page) that the narrator has internalized as child.

The Tutelage in Racist Definitions

The narrator's relative isolation from actual experiences of blackness as a child facilitates his internalization of white racist fantasies. Eugenia Collier notes that the novel is the story of the narrator's "quest for his own racial identity" (366), but the narrator's identity is problematized by the fact that he has been raised as white and is completely cut off from the African American community until he is an adult.11 At the end of the novel, the narrator declares that he is sometimes "possessed by a strange longing for my mother's people" (153); such a longing is indeed strange since in the strictest sense, the narrator has never known "his mother's people," his mother's biological family. Within the first two pages of the novel, the narrator and his mother have already departed from their Georgia birthplace, the locus of "his mother's people." In Connecticut, the narrator and his mother remain effectively cut off from the African American community, which does exist but which the young Ex-Colored Man depicts as remote, different, other. The only women who visit his mother, a seamstress, are white customers. Occasionally his mother sings him beautiful spirituals, "some old Southern

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11 George Kent in "Patterns of the Harlem Renaissance" and Stephen Ross in "Audience and Irony in Johnson's The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man" each go so far as claiming that the narrator is incapable of being "black in any psychological or inescapable sense" (Kent 29) because of what Ross terms "the psychological legacy of whiteness he carries from his childhood" (Ross 200).
songs," but she usually plays “hymns from the book” (4-5). Robert Stepto
suggests that she is a “custodian of...aspects of black culture” (101), yet what do
we know of the narrator’s mother, her roots, her family, her people? While
she is generous with books for the narrator (17), she never shares with him
the personal, oral narratives that are part of the African American tradition.
Even when he learns of his African heritage at school and asks his mother
questions, she refuses to discuss the past or their identity with him: “No, not
now,” she says (12). Later, after a brief visit from his father, she becomes more
communicative; however, everything she says is “so limited by reserve and
so colored by her feelings that it was but half truth” (26). The narrator’s
mother fails to transmit the stories of their heritage that could help the Ex-
Colored Man form a positive vision of African American identity; she does
not, as Baby Suggs does for Denver in Morrison’s Beloved, serve as an
archivist of family history, a living link to the past. She is therefore complicit
in the narrator’s embrace of whiteness. As Robert Fleming notes, she not
only refuses to tell her son the truth until after he has learned a version of it
elsewhere, she even scrubs him “‘until [his] skin aches,’ as if to make him
even more white than he is,” suggesting that she herself embraces “the white
world’s value system” (“Irony” 86).

Because the narrator is not exposed to African American culture at
home, he inevitably absorbs the ambient belief in white supremacy as his
perceptions of African Americans are all gleaned from books, school, and the
opinions of other (usually white) people. The narrator states that he learns
“this difference” at school, where he develops a strong “aversion” to “these
black and brown boys and girls” (15). The difference is that these children are
“looked down upon”: “Some of the boys often spoke of them as ‘niggers.’
Sometimes on the way home from school a crowd would walk behind them repeating: ‘Nigger, nigger, never die,/ black face and shiny eye.’” (9-10). The prejudice he learns from the white children, he notes, they have in turn learned from their own parents (15). The Ex-Colored Man so identifies with the white children before discovering his own heritage that he himself takes part in their taunting of “niggers”\textsuperscript{12} and is outraged when one of the black children defends himself by hurling a slate, injuring one of the white tormentors (10). “We ran after them pelting them with stones until they separated in several directions” (10, emphasis mine), the Ex-Colored Man relates, revealing his psychological identification with the white tormentors rather than the “nigger” victims whose disintegration as a group resonates ambiguously with the suggestion of bodily disintegration, the stones causing them to “separate in several directions.” In high school, the narrator reads *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, and from Harriet Beecher Stowe he claims to learn what it means to be an African American: “it opened my eyes to who and what I was and what my country considered me; in fact, it gave me my bearing” (28-29). But this new revelation is not a positive one as he learns apparently for the first time about chattel slavery in the United States, for he says, “I took the whole revelation in a kind of stoical way” (29). It is not until he leaves Connecticut after his mother’s death and arrives in Jacksonville that the Ex-Colored Man becomes a “practicing” Negro: “I had formulated a theory of what it was to be colored; now I was getting the practice” (54). This statement reveals the dangerous absence of a coherent identity, for the theory he has formulated is based on the prejudices of his schoolmates, the silence of his

\textsuperscript{12} The narrator also confers the name “Shiny” on his classmate who is “black as night” (9).
mother, and the stereotypes (though well-intended) perpetuated by Harriet Beecher Stowe in a novel in which the only place imaginable for emancipated African Americans is, in fact, Africa. His need to "practice" being an African American reveals that he is consciously constructing an identity based on the white values he has internalized.

The negative version of identity the narrator learns at school is confirmed by his father's absence, which the narrator understands as rejection. Johnson's own autobiography begins in Haiti in 1802 with his white great grandfather, Étienne Dillet, loading Johnson's great grandmother Hester Argo and her children aboard a ship, presumably to send them to safety during a time of political unrest (3-4). Dillet does not, however, reclaim his mulatto family. Early in The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man, a similar scene occurs when the white father ships his mistress and son (the Ex-Colored Man) to Connecticut, ostensibly to protect himself from the wrath of his new white bride. The father does send money and on one occasion even visits his mulatto family in Connecticut. However, so estranged are the two that the father must ask the narrator how old he is (23), and Ex-Colored Man himself finds it "impossible to frame the word 'father'" (24). After the narrator plays a Chopin waltz, his father embraces him, and the narrator states, "I am certain that for that moment he was proud to be my father" (24, emphasis mine). "That moment" is brief; although he promises to return for another visit, the father, like Johnson's own great grandfather, severs all ties.

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13 The primary position that Johnson gives to his white great grandfather Dillet suggests that Johnson views him as the origin, the beginning of Johnson's own narrative. This primary position of the white father may confirm Addison Gayle's accusations of Johnson's "assimilationism." See The Way of the World (95-96).
to his mulatto family, never extending the formal recognition that his son needs. The move to Connecticut then becomes banishment, for as Joel Kovel explains in his discussion of the “Ham Myth of Expulsion,” the African American represents “a form of symbolic guilt that cannot be assimilated”; the narrator, another version of Ham, is the “bad” son exiled from the kingdom (79). This refusal to recognize, and hence legitimize, the narrator is linked inextricably with the African blood that the narrator inherits from his mother. The father’s inability to recognize his son increases over time as the narrator reaches adolescence, suggesting the Ex-Colored Man’s possible status as a sexual being exacerbates the situation. When the narrator’s mother is on her deathbed, she has the narrator, who has just graduated from high school, “write a long letter to [his] father” because for some time “she had heard from him only at irregular intervals.” The father’s rejection this time is unequivocal: “we never received an answer,” the narrator says (34). Ten years later while attending a performance of Faust at the Paris Opéra, the narrator realizes that his father and his half-sister are sitting next to him. Although he recognizes his father, his father cannot (must not) recognize him in return. The narrator’s reaction is physical and immediate, reflecting the psychological murder his father commits by failing to acknowledge the Ex-Colored Man’s existence: “I felt that I was suffocating” (98). Although the father’s failure to recognize his son does not by itself precipitate aphanisis, it undermines the existential claim implicit in the autobiographical form and thus creates the environment in which the racial labeling will have the most

14 The father gives his son the ten dollar gold piece with the hole in it before sending him North and a piano before breaking all ties with him. As Robert Fleming notes, the father merely substitutes “material gifts for overt recognition” (“Irony” 86).
devastating effect.

The Ex-Colored Man’s lifelong experience of paternal rejection thus provides the context for his traumatic labeling as a “nigger” at school. In a scene which dramatizes the reality of segregation even in an integrated classroom, the school principal enters the Ex-Colored Man’s classroom and says inexplicably, “I wish all of the white scholars to stand for a moment” (11). When the Ex-Colored Man rises with the white students, his teacher rebukes him, “You sit down for the present and rise with the others” (11). The narrator does not comprehend her, since he thinks of himself as white at this point, so she must repeat her command. This moment is the narrator’s “crisis experience” (Berzon 120, 122) because he now learns that like the “black and brown boys and girls,” he is different, marginal (Auto 15). Despite the fact the teacher does not identify the narrator specifically as being a “nigger,” the Ex-Colored Man and his taunting classmates soon interpret “others” (10) to mean “niggers”: “A few of the white boys jeered at me, saying: ‘Oh, you’re a nigger too’” (11). His acceptance of this classification is demonstrated by the wording of the agonized question that he asks his mother after the incident, which, according to Roger Rosenblatt, demonstrates his grasp of the “reality” of American racism (177): “Mother, mother, tell me, am I a nigger?” (12). Unconvinced by his mother’s feeble assurances that he is not black, the narrator accepts the identification implicit in the teacher’s designation of him  

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15 See Chapter Five for a discussion of Toni Morrison’s depiction of the educational system’s role in inculcating white racism in the black subject. Although the Ex-Colored Man’s school teacher is not intentionally malicious, she performs the same role of “definer” that Morrison’s Schoolteacher does in Beloved. Tellingly, the narrator refers to the teacher’s tactless revelation “a sword-thrust...which was years in healing” (12). The image of the sword-thrust brings to mind the violence and mutilation that Schoolteacher inflicts on the Sweet Home slaves in Beloved.
as one of the "others" because in her position as the purveyor of knowledge, she is "the subject who is supposed to know" (Lacan, FFC 232). Although the Ex-Colored Man looks white and has been raised as white, his blackness takes on a "psychological reality" once he has been assigned a negative racial identity at school (Lawson 94-95).

Because the narrator is forced at this moment of crisis to reformulate his version of self, he rushes home and returns to the mirror, where, as Lacan tells us, the infant originally identifies himself as a whole and powerful subject. Instead of the infant's "jubilant" reaction to the mirror image (Lacan, "Mirror" 2), the narrator displays a growing fear and disgust:

> I rushed up into my own little room, shut the door, and went quickly to where my looking-glass hung on the wall. For an instant I was afraid to look, but when I did, I looked long and earnestly. I had often heard people say to my mother: "What a pretty boy you have!" I was accustomed to hear remarks about my beauty; but now, for the first time, I became conscious of it and recognized it. I noticed the ivory whiteness of my skin, the beauty of my mouth, the size and liquid darkness of my eyes, and how the long, black lashes that fringed and shaded them produced an effect that was strangely fascinating even to me. I noticed the softness and glossiness of my dark hair that fell in waves over my temple, making my forehead appear whiter than it really was. How long I stood there gazing at my image I do not know. (11-12, emphasis mine)

It seems the narrator has stared at himself in the mirror before, but now, after learning the he is a "nigger," he perceives that his whiteness is an optical illusion created by his very dark hair, which makes his forehead "appear whiter than it really was" (12). Because his specular image is no longer white to him, it is no longer a fitting image of mastery for him; instead, it is flawed and distorted. Later in the novel at a Pullman Porters' rooming house, where
he stays during his first visit to the South, he sees another mirror that confirms this new image, for it is "a looking-glass that would have made Adonis appear hideous" (38).

Moreover, as the narrator describes the effects of the teacher’s disclosure, he speaks in terms of physical wounding and punishment, suggesting the shattering power racist words have over "racial" bodies. The teacher, the narrator says, "gave me a sword-thrust that day in school that was years in healing" (12). The "sword-thrust" carries overtones of the threat of castration, so that the teacher plays the role associated with the father, not only in her rejection of the narrator but as potential castrator. The narrator also refers to the "harsh, heart-piercing word" (13) that he remembers from the incident (the taunting boys' "nigger"). But the most telling aspect of the narrator’s memory of this crisis experience is that he associates it with his very first memory of the "terrific spanking" (2) he received as a toddler in Georgia: "Like my first spanking, it is one of the few incidents in my life that I can remember clearly" (13). The incident, like the original spanking, causes him great pain but also instills a sense of guilt in the narrator. These associations of his traumatic naming with physical pain and punishment certainly point to the inevitable effect that the word "nigger" has on his body and emotions.

Further, the traumatic identification creates an immediate psychological splitting in the narrator, which the narrator describes in terms borrowed from Du Bois' discussion of "double consciousness" in The Souls of Black Folk (Stepto 113). As I noted above, the narrator had been thoroughly indoctrinated in whiteness prior to the schoolroom incident; believing
himself to be white, whiteness is his frame of reference. After the incident, when he knows he is of African descent, he must alter his vision:

And so I have often lived through that hour, that day, that week, in which was wrought that miracle of my transition from one world into another; for I did indeed pass into another world. From that time I looked out through other eyes, my thoughts other eyes, my thoughts were colored, my words dictated, my actions limited by one dominating, all pervading idea which constantly increased in force and weight until I finally realized in it a great tangible fact.

And it is the dwarfing, warping, distorting influence which operates upon each and every colored man in the United States. He is forced to take his outlook on all things, not from the viewpoint of a citizen, or a man, or even a human being, but from the viewpoint of a colored man. (14, emphasis mine)

The "dwarfing, warping, distorting influence" of this new consciousness is the same effect produced by the mirror in Pullman Porters' rooming house, where the narrator first experiences the second class nature of Jim Crow accommodations. The splitting of consciousness shatters or otherwise "dwarfs" or "distorts" the image of omnipotence that previously "symbolize[d] the mental permanence of the I" during the mirror stage identification (Lacan "Mirror" 2). Thus, from the moment he is identified as a "nigger," the narrator is doomed to become "ex" as the existential claim or the mentally permanent I fades behind the signifier "nigger."

In light of the narrator's identification as an African American, much of his behavior can be seen as attempts to please white men; the narrator's

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16 Eugenia Collier notes that the Ex-Colored Man is "psychologically white" and that throughout the novel he "gives no racial designation to white characters but labels instead the black ones" (366). As Lucinda Mackethan points out, the Ex-Colored Man readily "accepts the white perception that to be black is to be defective" (141).
relationship to white men often takes on the dynamic of the master-slave bond as he acts out the benign meaning of "nigger." For example, his early relationship with his father is governed by the cash nexus. He remembers that on those evenings when his father visited the little cabin in Georgia, his "duty" was to bring his father's slippers, for which he received a tip. His father also gives him a gold coin with a whole drilled in it to wear on a string about his neck; the narrator confesses that he has "worn that gold piece around my neck the greater part of my life" (3), as if his father had purchased him and the coin were a manacle or a badge of slavery. Later, when the father comes to Connecticut, the father and son address each other respectively as "boy" and "sir" (23). This is, of course, after the Ex-Colored Man learns he is a "nigger." During the narrator's young adulthood, the white millionaire replaces his absent father, and the enslavement aspect of this relationship is still more striking. At one point, the narrator refers to the millionaire as "master" (85), and he plays ragtime under an exclusive contract with the millionaire, under the terms of which he is occasionally "loaned" to some of the millionaire's friends (88). When the millionaire decides to tour Europe, he takes the Ex-Colored Man instead of his valet, Walter (91). On one occasion the narrator reveals that the millionaire sometimes inspired in him "an unearthly terror," for he "seemed to be some grim, mute, but relentless tyrant, possessing over me a supernatural power which he used to drive me on mercilessly to exhaustion" (88). However, the narrator suppresses his own rebellious thoughts about their relationship, noting that these feelings of

17 The obsequious behavior he exhibits before his father and the white millionaire (his surrogate father) has been noted by many critics, including Stephen Ross (202-03, 206) and Robert Fleming ("Irony" 86-92).
terror were rare and that the millionaire paid "liberally." Moreover, the narrator rationalizes, "There at length grew between us a familiar and warm relationship, and I am sure he had a decided personal liking for me" (88).\footnote{In describing bonds of affection with both his father and the white millionaire, the narrator prefaces his claim with an assertion of certainty: "I am certain that for that moment he was proud to be my father" (24) and "I am sure he had a decided personal liking for me" (88). In both these instances, however, the master-slave dynamic provides doubts for the Ex-Colored Man. He is in fact insecure about the affection of these white men, and his claims to the contrary are examples of his protesting too much.}

The narrator further renders himself benign by neutralizing his body. Because excessive physicality is associated with the villains of the Negrophobe novel, the Ex-Colored Man dwells on the negative aspects of physical experience. As Michael Cooke notes, the narrator's seeming materialism, "evident in relation to gold coins and pianos and his avowal that a fine meal realizes one of his dreams of Southern life, takes its rise less from sensuality than from sensibility, from fear of pain and a feeling for aesthetic refinement" (48, emphasis mine).\footnote{In "Early Recollections and Structural Irony in The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man," Marvin Garrett also comments upon the narrator's "extreme sensitivity to pain and excessive concern with security and self-protection" (7).} As if to prove he is not a lusting brute, the narrator goes into great detail about physical discomfort, describing with disgust the shabbiness of the Pullman Porters' boarding house in Atlanta (38), the disagreeableness of the food at a Jim Crow restaurant (41), the deplorable food and lodging in rural Georgia (123), and the inconvenience of riding Jim Crow with "offensive Negroes" (59). Significantly, all this discomfort occurs when he is consciously attempting to live as a black man. The most striking description of the Ex-Colored Man's physical discomfort is the passage recounting his train ride from Atlanta to Jacksonville while confined in a porter's locker, an allegory of Jim Crow.
I may live to be a hundred years old, but I shall never forget the agonies I suffered that night. I spent twelve hours doubled up in the porter's basket for soiled linen, not being able to straighten up on account of the shelves for clean linen just over my head. The air was hot and suffocating and the smell of damp towels and used linen was sickening. At each lurch of the car over the none-too-smooth track I was bumped and bruised against the narrow walls of my narrow compartment. I became acutely conscious of the fact that I had not eaten in hours. Then nausea took possession of me, and at one time I had grave doubts about reaching my destination alive. (46-47, emphasis mine)

Certainly, the claustrophobic experience of traveling in a cramped enclosure for several hours would be unpleasant for any one. But the Ex-Colored Man's labored and vivid description of this episode — far more specific, indeed, than even the description of his allegedly happy marriage (153) — reveals his need to prove that being in a black body is uncomfortable, even torturous. As Joel Kovel notes, the middle term in the signifying chain that moves from "black man" to "nothing, invisibility," is "body," the term that immediately precedes "penis" (91). To prevent the inevitable negative association with penis (the sign of the threatening black rapist), the Ex-Colored Man must refine himself out of physical existence, eschewing reminders of the body and bodily contact.

The Return of the Repressed: The Rape Plot

At the moment when the Ex-Colored Man seems to accept his existence as a black man and allows himself to experience physical desires, including sexual desire for a white woman, a double emerges who represents the return of the Ex-Colored Man's repressed knowledge. As a habitué of the "Club," the narrator begins playing "ragtime," which he soon "masters," and becomes
known as "the best ragtime-player in New York," winning friends, accolades, and the title "professor" (84). During his tenure of playing the "barbaric harmonies" of ragtime at the Club (72), he becomes acquainted with a beautiful white woman:

one of these [white women] in particular attracted my attention; she was an exceedingly beautiful woman of perhaps thirty-five; she had glistening copper-colored hair, very white skin, and eyes very much like Du Maurier's conception of Trilby's "twin gray stars." When I came to know her, I found that she was a woman of considerable culture; she had traveled in Europe, spoke French, and played the piano well. She ... was soon followed by a well-set-up, very black young fellow. He was always faultlessly dressed; one of the most exclusive tailors in New York made his clothes, and he wore a number of diamonds in about as good taste as they could be worn by a man. I learned that she paid for his clothes and his diamonds. I learned, too, that he was not the only one of his kind. ...I have devoted so much time to the pair, the "widow" and her companion, because it was through them that another decided turn was brought about in my life. (79, emphasis mine)

With her "very white skin," "glistening copper-colored hair," and gray eyes, the widow bears a remarkable resemblance to the Southern sentimental heroine, only, perhaps, a little older. She "attracts" the narrator's attention — and that attraction is sexual. But the narrator can project his feelings onto the widow's gigolo, the "very black young fellow," who is both other ("very black") and same ("fellow" implies kinship). The narrator remarks, "I shall never forget how hard it was for me to get over my feelings of surprise, perhaps more than surprise, at seeing her with her black companion; somehow I never exactly enjoyed the sight" (79, emphasis mine). Robert Fleming notes that the narrator's disapproval of the couple "reveals a psychological whiteness" ("Irony" 92), but the narrator must maintain, at the
conscious level, his posture of "good nigger." The possibility that he envies, even enjoys, the sight is contained in the telling admission that he could not get over his feelings of surprise, "perhaps more than surprise" (79). Surprise arises from the uncanny confrontation with his own secret, repressed sexual desires. The other emotion, the "more than surprise," is perhaps the vicarious — hence safe — pleasure he can enjoy by watching his double with the widow. The Ex-Colored Man's projection allows him to claim, in an repressive statement of denial, that he recounts so much detail about the couple only because they "brought another decided turn" in his life and not because they secretly fascinate him.

The narrator's continued discussion of the widow suggests that he moves beyond a vicarious relationship to direct involvement with her. The narrator notes that at the Club, there were a number of women who "made no secret of the fact that they admired me as much as they did my playing" (89). The widow is foremost among these women, and "her attentions become so marked" that the Ex-Colored Man is warned "to beware of her black companion, who was generally known as a 'bad man' " (89). The narrator resolves "to stop the affair before it should go any further" (89). His wording here is particularly interesting, suggesting that their flirtation is an affaire de coeur, perhaps even a sexual liaison. Yet his resolve to break with the widow is weak, as the narrator goes on to explain, "the woman was so beautiful that my native gallantry and delicacy would not allow me to repulse her; my finer feelings entirely overcame my judgment" (89). Once again, he rationalizes his behavior, excusing his physical desires in terms of chivalry, describing the attraction as "finer feeling" or sensibility rather than sexuality.

The narrator's desires — those repressed and those acted upon — may
account for both the widow's fate in the narrative and his own guilt feelings about that fate. She provokes powerful, irresistible desires that confound the narrator's sense of how he should conduct himself. For the consummation of desire and the disposal of the troubling object of desire (the two things he cannot perform), the narrator can rely upon his uncanny double, the gigolo who represents with some variation the figure of the black "rapist." The scene of the widow's murder reveals the role played by the "very black young fellow." One evening while the narrator is sharing some champagne with the widow at her table, the gigolo enters the Club:

His ugly look completely frightened me. My back was turned to him, but by watching the "widow's" eyes I judged that he was pacing back and forth across the room. My feelings were far from being comfortable; I expected every moment to feel a blow on my head. She, too, was very nervous; she was trying hard to appear unconcerned, but could not succeed in hiding her real feelings. I decided that it was best to get out of such a predicament even at the expense of appearing cowardly, and I made a motion to rise. Just as I partly turned in my chair, I saw the black fellow approaching; he walked directly to our table and leaned over. The "widow" evidently feared he was going to strike her, and she threw back her head. Instead of striking her he whipped out a revolver and fired; the first shot went straight into her throat. There were other shots fired, but how many I do not know. (90)

Several elements in this scene are reminiscent of the rape scenes in Dixon's *The Clansman* and Page's *Red Rock*. The black young fellow has an "ugly look" which frightens the spectators, and he "pac[es] back and forth across the room," like a caged tiger, the metaphor of choice for the Negrophobes. Further, the narrator has already characterized the gigolo as a "bad man" (81). When the man does attack, he goes for the throat, not with his "claws," as
Gus does in *The Clansman*, but with his revolver.

In his guilt-ridden reaction to the murder, the Ex-Colored Man exposes his identification with the black *fellow* who actually fires the shots. He flees the scene "instinctively," as though in "a horrible nightmare" (90). The "nightmare" quality of the scene indicates that he has entered the territory of the unconscious. The narrator confesses his feelings of culpability that his flight implies: "I somehow could not rid myself of the sentiment that I was, in a great degree, responsible for the 'widow's' tragic end" (92), and perhaps he is responsible not only because he provokes the black fellow's jealousy, but because the black fellow is in fact his alter ego. The white millionaire, who just happens upon the scene and rescues the narrator, assures him not that he is innocent in the affair, but "that no charges could be brought" against him. Before whisking the narrator off to Europe where he cannot be prosecuted, the millionaire adds, "But of course you don't want to be mixed up in such an affair" (90), suggesting that the narrator's actions (or perhaps just his racial identity) could implicate him.

Although the narrator identifies with the gunman, his inability to escape the memory of her mutilation suggests that he identifies with the widow as well. He is unnerved and haunted by the sight of the widow's torn body: "but still I could see the beautiful white throat with the ugly wound. The jet of blood pulsing from it had placed an indelible red stain on my memory" (91). The widow becomes a reminder of the *corps morcelé*, the image of the fragmented body that problematizes subjectivity and, as Lacan notes, returns specifically in regressive moments when the subject experiences "aggressive disintegration" ("Mirror" 4). Like Mary Dalton in *Native Son*, the widow becomes the site of the black subject's displaced
aggressive disintegration. For the Ex-Colored Man, the “nightmare” of his uncanny double’s bringing to light what ought to remain hidden initiates disintegration, for the gigolo’s action confirms for the narrator the negative definition of self contained in the word “nigger,” while the widow’s gaping wound, with its pulsing blood, reminds the narrator that bodies really can fall apart. As he loses his own sense of mastery in the encroaching negative sense of self, the narrator knows that he, too, could disintegrate. The Professor of ragtime no longer, he flees the Club, never to return.

The narrator, however, is not quite ready to relinquish his existential claim as a black man. In Europe, where he has fled with the millionaire, the narrator realizes, “Here I am a man, no longer a boy, and what am I doing but wasting my time and abusing my talent? What use am I making of my gifts? What future have I before me following my present course?” (104). At this crucial moment, with his significant repudiation of “boy” (with its connotation of subjugation), the narrator decides to become a great Negro composer, “to go back into the very heart of the South, to live among the people, and drink in my inspiration firsthand” (104). Predictably, the millionaire argues vigorously against the narrator’s plan, in terms that elucidates Johnson’s own decision to present The Autobiography as a work of nonfiction: “I doubt even a white musician of recognized ability could succeed there [in the United States] by working on the theory that American music should be based on Negro themes” (105). In other words, white audiences will accept neither the Negro artist nor the Negro art form. The narrator, to his credit, does not falter before the millionaire’s logic and returns to the United States, traveling to Georgia to gather materials for his project. After hearing “Singing Johnson” perform spirituals there, the narrator is
“full of enthusiasm...in that frame of mind which, in the artistic temperament, amounts to inspiration. I was now ready and anxious to get to some place where I might settle down to work, and give expression to the ideas which were teeming in my head” (133). He begins to act upon his artistic impulse once again, using his talents to proclaim his existence in an act of creation.

Yet there remains the unpunished and therefore unresolved murder of the widow, which may be a closed episode in terms of the linear plot but not in terms of the psychological development of the narrator himself. As Peter Brooks notes, repetition in narrative takes many forms; textual moments may be bound together “in terms of similarity and substitution rather than mere contiguity” (101). The widow’s “defilement” is bound metonymically to this seemingly unrelated lynching by the Negrophobe rape plot, which dictates that each crime against white womanhood be answered by a lynching. Given lynching’s ideological rather than juridical function, the identity and the guilt of the lynching victim are incidental to the lynchers; any black man will do. Although the deceptively picaresque plot of The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man leads many readers to assume that each episode is somehow hermetically sealed, it is no coincidence that the Ex-Colored Man stumbles upon a “nigger burning” just when he is most committed to an African American identity that such a spectacle will sabotage (as, indeed, lynchings were ideologically designed to do). Contrary to Robert Fleming’s claim that the lynching “surprises both the protagonist and the reader” (Johnson 27), in psychological terms the lynching surprises neither, because as another of the narrator’s experiences of the uncanny, the sight is actually “familiar and old-established” (Freud “Uncanny” 241); only through
repression has the narrator insulated himself from knowledge that the entire African American community shared in the South. The narrator's companion, for example, knows what is about to happen and does "all in his power to dissuade" the narrator from venturing outside (135), yet the narrator goes out nonetheless. Robert Stepto argues that the spectacle of lynching represents a "psychological whipping" for the narrator, and Stepto is right, but the whipping is not for the "transgression against black cultural and spiritual forms" the narrator presumably commits by exploiting spirituals in order to compose classical music (Stepto 101). The lynching spectacle is the eruption of the uncanny, the punishment for both the narrator's "complicity" in the widow's death and his pretensions to greatness. The anonymity of both the lynching victim and his crime allows the narrator to make this identification. In fact, in revising the manuscript, Johnson deleted specific references to the nature of the crime (Fleming, Johnson 23); the narrator states in the published version only that "we vaguely caught the rumor that some terrible crime had been committed" (135). Because, as W. J. Cash observes, the white Southerner conflates rape and ambition (119), the "terrible crime" is obviously the Ex-Colored Man's own.

When Trudier Harris claims that Johnson "makes the burning incidental" (Exorcising 185), she misreads the crucial role of the lynching in the definition of blackness for both Johnson and his fictional creation. The

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20 Both Robert Stepto and Eric Sundquist indict the narrator for his exploitation of Negro cultural forms. Stepto deplores the narrator's "misdirected attempts to approach, let alone embrace, black American culture" (101). Sundquist notes the narrator's peculiar use of imperialist metaphors, such as when he "strikes out into the interior" of Georgia. According to Sundquist, the narrator's "travel to rural Georgia is, in fact, an imperial incursion of sorts" (Hammers 12).

21 Early in the novel, the narrator compares himself to "the un-found-out criminal" (1).
vagueness of the charges leveled in the Georgia lynching allows the narrator and the reader to interpret the lynching as the symbolic punishment for the narrator's "criminal" involvement with the widow, but of course, Johnson, the narrator, and the audience of 1912 all knew the purpose of lynching. Ostensibly, lynchings avenged murder and rape; however, as Anne Moody points out in *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, lynchings declared that white people could kill African Americans just for being black (121-127). Johnson's account of his own "near-miss" experience with lynching in 1900 reveals that he shares Moody's realization. After being seen in a Jacksonville park with a young woman who appeared white, Johnson was seized by a mob who tore his clothes and screamed, "Kill the damned nigger! Kill the black son of a bitch" (Along 167-69). Johnson and the young lady were released after explaining the biological facts of the case, but it was not until twenty years later, when Johnson went to work lobbying on behalf of the NAACP for the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill, that he was able "to liberate [himself] completely from this horror complex" (Along 170). The centrality that Johnson gives to this scene in his own autobiography suggests that the lynching scene in the novel, which Johnson began writing some fifteen years before he had mastered the "horror complex," is hardly gratuitous, but rather, represents Johnson's "repetition compulsion," his attempt to master a trauma by repeating it in symbolic form. Although Harris claims that "a slap in the face from a white person might well have produced a similar reaction" in the narrator (*Exorcising* 185), Johnson and the narrator know that embarrassment

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22 See Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1919) for a discussion of the repetition compulsion, which Freud theorized when working with shell-shocked veterans of World War I.
alone cannot undo the psyche. The historical reality of the mutilated black body destroys what Lacan calls "the mental permanence of the I" (Lacan "Mirror" 2), and even when it is merely a vague threat or spectacle instead of an immediate experience, mutilation endangers subjectivity.

And so the narrator's subjectivity is shattered by the lynching he witnesses. The anonymous lynching victim becomes another distorting mirror, like the one in the Pullman Porters' rooming house. Although Sundquist states that the narrator unwittingly identifies with the lynchers in his silent "spectatorship" (Hammers 43-44), his initial identification is with the victim, his uncanny double who, by making manifest the repressed infantile experience of the corps morcelé, "becomes the uncanny harbinger of death" (Freud "Uncanny" 235):

... a chain brought and securely coiled around the victim and the stake. There he stood, a man only in form and stature, every sign of degeneracy stamped upon his countenance. His eyes were dull and vacant, indicating not a single ray of thought. Evidently the realization of his fearful fate had robbed him of whatever reasoning power he had ever possessed. He was too stunned and stupefied even to tremble. Fuel was brought from everywhere, oil, the torch; the flames crouched for an instant as though to gather strength, then leaped up as high as their victim's head. He squirmed, he writhed, strained in his chains, then gave out cries and groans that I shall always hear. The cries and groans were choked off by the fire and smoke; but his eyes, bulging from their sockets, rolled from side to side, appealing in vain for help. ...I was fixed to the spot where I stood, powerless to take my eyes from what I did not want to see.

23 Sundquist says, "The unnamed lynching victim is the unnamed narrator's inverted double, his mirror image, for it is in the act of witnessing that he most becomes an 'ex-coloured man,' inadvertently as savage a spectator as the others who flock to the public ritual" (Hammers 43-44). However, the Ex-Colored Man's silent spectatorship on some levels presages Walter White's later investigations of lynchings in the South. Because White was light skinned, he "passed" for white to perform such investigations throughout the South.
It was over before I realized that time had elapsed. Before I could make myself believe that what I saw was happening, I was looking at a scorched post, a smoldering fire, blackened bones, charred fragments sifting down through coils of chain; and the smell of burnt flesh—human flesh—was in my nostrils. *(Autobiography* 136-137, emphasis mine)

In this repetition of Johnson’s near-lynching experience, the spectators yell, “Burn him!” instead of “Kill the damned nigger!” (136). Nonetheless, the Ex-Colored Man intuits their meaning as “Kill the damned nigger!” and knows that he, too, could be undone since he is also a “nigger.” If the chain is “securely coiled around” the anonymous victim, so too is the narrator “fixed to the spot where [he] stood, powerless to take [his] eyes from what [he] did not want to see.” So too, in this hideously distorted mirror, the narrator sees the reversal of the “jubilant” assumption of the specular image as I, for the victim “squirmed,...writhe...straining,” just like the body of the pre-mirror stage infant who suffers motor incoordination. Performing an enterprise that begins with the assertion, “Here I am a man” (104), the narrator witnesses the dehumanizing of his double, who becomes “savage,” “degenerate,” “stunned,” “stupefied,” and “a man only in form and stature” (136). Finally, the narrator sees the (significantly) “blackened bones” and “charred fragments”; in effect, he sees the black body in pieces, the reversal of the mirror stage identification of the subject as the body in toto. These fragments are symbolically the narrator’s, for he feels “as weak as a man who had lost blood” (138). Rendered impotent and immobile, he is the victim of this vicious lynching, for the burning kills not one “colored man,” but two. That very night he becomes the “Ex-Colored Man,” suffering the aphanistic effect of the racist definition of “nigger.”
Sundquist’s recognition of the narrator’s partial identification with the lynchers is important here, for the scene reveals discrepancies in the narrator’s and Johnson’s views of lynching. As in the scene of the widow’s murder, the narrator’s identification vacillates between the victim and the perpetrator. The narrator confesses his feelings of “shame at being identified with a people that could with impunity be treated worse than animals” (139), but he feels this “shame” after the fact, after his initial symbiotic powerlessness. His ultimate identification with the lynchers is therefore comprehensible because, as Grier and Cobbs note, when it is hopeless for the black subject to oppose oppression with force, “he identifies with his oppressor psychologically in an attempt to escape from his hopeless position” (199). The narrator’s question, “Have you ever witnessed the transformation of human beings into savage beasts?” (136), reveals his ambivalence. Although the narrator’s description of the victim suggests that the victim is the beast, in Johnson’s account of the 1917 lynching of Ell Persons in Memphis, the lynch mob is bestial:

While the ashes were yet hot, the bones had been scrambled for as souvenirs by the mobs. I reassemble the picture in my mind: a lone Negro in the hands of his accusers, who for the time are no longer human; he is chained to a stake, wood is piled under and around him, and five thousand men and women, women with babies in their arms and women with babies in their wombs, look on with pitiless anticipation, with sadistic satisfaction while he is baptized with gasoline and set afire. ...I tried to balance the sufferings of the miserable victim against the moral degradation of Memphis, and the truth flashed over me that in large measure the race question involves the saving of black American’s body and white America’s soul. (Along 317-318)

From Johnson’s perspective, Ell Persons is a martyr baptized in fire while the
lynchers are "pitiless," "sadistic," and "no longer human." The difference in perspective here is that Johnson, unlike the fictional Ex-Colored Man, experiences neither feelings of impotence produced by an uncanny identification with the victim's "guilt" nor internalization of white values that prompt the guilt feelings. Johnson instead experiences righteous indignation that galvanizes his efforts to procure passage of the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill. Although the bill did not pass, Johnson and the NAACP succeeded in changing the perception of lynching as an essentially just action used to avenge heinous crimes (Along 373). Johnson the man recognized the role of lynching in safeguarding white ideology. The Ex-Colored Man, on the other hand, saw only blackened bones, charred flesh, and a fragmented body to confirm that ideology; because the Ex-Colored Man acquiesces in the ideology that unmans him, he, unlike Johnson, becomes its unwitting victim.

The Passing of a Colored Man

The narrator's response to the lynching is to obey literally the racist imperative, "Turn white or disappear." The narrator decides to "pass" for white: "I would change my name, raise a mustache, and let the world take me for what it would" (139). The narrator pretends to be playing a "capital joke" on the white race, but when he meets his future wife, the notion of passing becomes "the most serious question" of his life (144). He begins to doubt his "ability to play the part" before this white woman, who might detect "an indefinable something which marked a difference" in the narrator (146). His description of the woman makes her almost a parody of whiteness: "She
was almost tall and quite slender, with lustrous yellow hair and eyes so blue as to appear almost black. She was as white as a lily, and she was dressed in white. Indeed, she seemed to me the most dazzling white thing I had ever seen” (144). She is endowed with many gifts, but as the narrator’s wording suggests, the fact that she is “the most dazzling white thing” makes her the irresistible object of his veneration in the wake of his recently repudiated blackness. The narrator attempts to make her the antidote to his shattering experiences with blackness at the Club in New York and at the lynching in rural Georgia, for her effect on him seems to be one of restoration: “She had never been anything but innocent; but my innocence was a transformation wrought by my love for her, love which melted away my cynicism and whitened my sullied soul and gave me back the wholesome dreams of my boyhood” (146-147, emphasis mine). “Sullied” by the fall-out of the lynching and his hidden “black” blood, the narrator seeks to be “whitened” by her “dazzling” whiteness. His insistence that his wife somehow “gave back” his “wholesome dreams of boyhood” suggests that she managed to mend the distorted and flawed image of himself created by his identification as a “nigger” and by his subsequent exposures to the fragmented body. Although the woman initially rejects the narrator because of his confessed racial heritage, she eventually accepts his marriage proposal. The narrator’s hidden

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24 Earlier in the novel, the narrator has a similar reaction to a young girl who turns out to be his half-sister: “I cannot describe her either as to feature, or color of her hair, or of her eyes; she was so young, so fair, so ethereal, that I felt to stare at her would be a violation; yet I was distinctly conscious of her beauty” (98). The narrator sees nothing of this young girl’s appearance except that she is white, “so fair, so ethereal,” but that is enough to render a woman beautiful and worthy of being “worshipped” (98). For a discussion of this scene’s similarities to the Charles Bon plot in Absalom, Absalom!, see Ladell Payne, Black Novelists and the Southern Literary Tradition, cited below.
blackness, however, haunts him in the form of a "dread...that she would discover in [him] some shortcoming which she would unconsciously attribute to [his] blood rather than a failing of human nature" (153).25 That dread is the narrator's projection of his own feelings of unworthiness, for even while passing he is ever cognizant of the meaning of "nigger."

In his original manuscript of *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, Johnson ended the novel with the narrator and his wife living happily-ever-after (Fleming, *Johnson* 24), but Johnson changed the ending to include the wife's convenient death while giving birth to the Ex-Colored Man's son (153). While the wife's death adds a sentimental dimension (the "sacred sorrow" of the narrator's life), it is also consistent with the Negrophobe narrative. Between the time Johnson began drafting the novel in 1905 and the time the revised version was published in 1912, Robert Lee Durham's *The Call of the South* (1908) was published. In Durham's novel, Helen, the President's daughter, goes insane when her visibly Negro child is born. Helen's madness, like Marion Lenoir's suicide in Dixon's *The Clansman*, is an appropriate response (in the white racist mind) to the "defilement" of miscegenation. Despite James Kinney's claim that for the narrator and his

25 The narrator's anxieties in the presence of his wife invoke those of Tom Driscoll (Valet de Chambre) after Roxy reveals his true identity to him in Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson*:

When Rowena, the dearest thing his heart knew, the idol of his secret worship, invited him in, the "nigger" in him made an embarrassed excuse and was afraid to enter and sit with the dread white folks on equal terms. The "nigger" in him went shrinking and skulking here and there and yonder, and fancying it saw suspicion and maybe detection in all faces, tones, and gestures (75).

Tom's self-consciousness produces a change in his behavior to which others respond, but he interprets their actions as responses to his being a "nigger" rather than to the radical changes in his behavior.
wife, "the fact of miscegenation is simply unimportant" (208), the Negrophobe novel teaches that white women who couple with black men, whether voluntarily or involuntarily, do not end happily. Miscegenation literally causes the death of the "dazzling white thing," since she dies in childbirth. Johnson's revision of the novel is therefore consistent with the other manifestations of the Negrophobe plot in the text. This revision further reveals how the narrator's unconscious beliefs diverge from Johnson's own, for it is clear in both the section devoted to the widow and the one devoted to the narrator's wife that these women freely choose to love the Ex-Colored Man even though they know of his African heritage. This aspect of the text explodes the myth perpetuated in novels like The Clansman and The Call of the South that white women are repulsed by blackness and by sexuality, and it also exposes the irrationality of the narrator's guilt feelings since he is clearly a requited lover, not a rapist.

It may also be consistent with the narrator's psychology that in his narrative, all the women who love him — his mother, the widow, and his wife — die untimely deaths. The narrator has internalized the belief that to be black is to be "bad" and therefore unworthy of love. At the same time, the narrator has spent the entire novel attempting to repress the malignant racist beliefs he has unconsciously internalized, so that the deaths of the women who love him are convenient in that these women "know" his blackness, and when he buries them, he can also bury the knowledge of that blackness.  

26 Lillian Smith discusses the placing of white women on pedestals as method of repressing their sexuality and as a manifestation of the white racist's unconscious fear that white women might prefer black men. See "Three Ghost Stories" in Killers of the Dream, 114-137.

27 The darker mother can create trouble for the passer. For example, in Chesnutt's The House Behind the Cedars, Molly Walden's claims on Rena result in
In the same way, the narrator buries his Negro identity along with the papers he has collected on Negro music inside the locked box that becomes his "cryptic casket" (Cooke 51). Eric Sundquist remarks the "cultural forgetting" required by assimilationism (Hammers 38). For the Ex-Colored Man, that forgetting requires the disposal of everything that holds knowledge of the past, including people.

The narrator’s decision to pass is simply the culmination of his many retreats or temporary disappearances in the face of crises related to his racial identity, beginning with the original disappearance orchestrated by his father when the narrator boards the train for Connecticut. The first time the narrator is called "nigger" at school, he withdraws emotionally. He does not want to "classed with" the "black and brown boys and girls" (15), so he suffers a "forced loneliness" that results in his retreat into books and music (16). As an adult, the narrator flees "instinctively" to Europe after seeing his uncanny double put a bullet through the widow’s throat. The smaller traumas of rejection by his father at the Paris Opéra and by his future wife cause the narrator to seek an alcohol-induced oblivion. Finally, after watching another version of himself being burned alive in Georgia, the narrator flees geographically to New York, but retreats even further emotionally, into the cover of whiteness. Even though he expresses some ambivalence about his choice (his fear that he may have "chosen the lesser part"), he does not renounce his decision to pass; his children, he claims, keep him "from

the disclosure of Rena’s racial heritage, leading to the breaking of her engagement to George Tryon and her eventual death. In Fannie Hurst’s Imitation of Life (1933), Peola rejects her visibly black mother. In the novel of passing, then, there seems to be a necessary transference of the white father’s rejection of the child onto the black mother.
desiring to be otherwise" (154). Johnson’s narrator is so radically mobile, both physically and psychologically, that it seems he hears the same message that Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man receives from the white world: “Keep This Nigger-Boy Running” (33). As Howard Faulkner observes, the Ex-Colored Man “spends the novel making himself invisible” (148), but unlike Ellison’s protagonist, he does not use his disappearance as a “covert preparation for more overt action” (Invisible Man 13). Instead, invisibility is the narrator’s only imaginable alternative to corporal disintegration. To be a visible “nigger,” like the “very black young fellow” or the lynching victim, is to invite destruction. Although the narrator cannot escape the definition of “nigger” he has internalized, he can escape the ramifications of that definition by passing.

Ultimately, The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man presents a bleak outlook for African Americans because as the narrator’s experiences demonstrate, white values and white definitions impinge upon the black subject’s construction of identity. In spite of his claims to the contrary, Johnson himself may have found it impossible to exclude “the deeper implications of American race prejudice” from his own mind (Along 78). Donald Petesch argues that Johnson’s early attitudes included a “derogation of the culture — and thus the lives — of the black masses” (147), an attitude that finds utterance in the Ex-Colored Man’s distaste for the black population of Atlanta. Addison Gayle, Jr., claims that Johnson was at heart an assimilationist, that for Johnson, “Anglo-Saxon truth was the truth for all men, and the Anglo-Saxon definition concerning art, values, and morals, having survived the ages, was one which African peoples might well accept even at the expense of losing their own identity” (96). Gayle’s accusations
find confirmation in Johnson’s curious observations about feminine beauty in *Along This Way*, where he remarks, “the perfection of the human female is reached in the golden-hued and ivory-toned [but not dark brown or black!] colored women of the United States, in whom there is a fusion of the fierceness in love of blond women with the responsiveness of black” (75). Certainly, the racial and gender stereotypes revealed in this passage are disturbing as Johnson seems to be reinscribing the white virgin/black whore myth originated by white racism, but these stereotypes may provide the key to Johnson’s inability to imagine a “happy” ending for his protagonist. And perhaps there could be no happy endings for “colored men” so long as the beautiful and the good excluded blackness *by definition.*
Chapter 3
Passing and the Fading Subject

...Irene Redfield wished, for the first time in her life, that she had not been born a Negro. For the first time she suffered and rebelled because she was unable to disregard the burden of race. It was, she cried silently, enough to suffer as a woman, an individual, on one's own account, without having to suffer for the race as well. It was a brutality, and undeserved. Surely, no other people so cursed as Ham's dark children.
—Nella Larsen, Passing, 225.

Although many critics have accused Nella Larsen of using race as a pretext for examining other issues,1 Passing (1929), her second novel, is profoundly concerned with racial identity. In the groundbreaking essay “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism,” Barbara Smith cautions critics about the danger of ignoring “that the politics of sex as well as the politics of race and class are crucially interlocking factors in the works of Black women writers” (170). For Larsen, too, “race” is inextricable from the collateral issues — including class, gender, sexuality, and rivalry — that bear upon the formation of identity. “Passing,” of course, alludes to the crossing of the color line that was once so familiar in American narratives of “race,” but in Larsen's novel the word also carries its colloquial meaning, death. Thus Passing's title, like the title of Larsen's earlier Quicksand, hints at the subject's disappearance in

1 For example, Deborah McDowell gives priority to the lesbian aspects of the text in her introduction to Quicksand and Passing, cited below. Hiroko Sato claims that the novel devolves into “a case study of woman's jealousy” (88). Claudia Tate suggests that “racial issues...are at best peripheral to the story” (143). Mary Mabel Youman claims that Irene's motivation in Passing is “class, not race” (237). Finally, Charles Larson argues that Passing is not about racial identity, but marital instability, an argument he supports with evidence of the disintegration of the Larsen-Imes marriage during the composition of the novel (82-86).
the narrative, the possibility of aphanisis. As in James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, a double emerges in Larsen's novel to objectify the internal conflicts surrounding racial identity. As images of each other, Irene Westover Redfield and Clare Kendry Bellew, the "twin" protagonists of the novel, also represent at a symbolic level Larsen's repetition and working through of her own anxieties about the rejection she experienced as a result of her racial identity.

Her hazy origins and almost traceless "disappearance" differentiate Larsen from the other authors of this study, but not from the characters. Until the publication of the 1994 biography by Thadious Davis, Nella Larsen's life was shrouded in silence; not even the year of her birth was certain.\(^2\) Davis' project was "to remove the aura of mystery" from Larsen's life (xix), an aura that often resulted in critics' presentation of Larsen as inscrutable Other.\(^3\) But with the details unearthed in her extensive research, Davis reveals that Nella Larsen was deeply scarred by the reality of racism; her seeking of celebrity as a writer was in fact a symptom of the need for recognition and validation, something which she never received as a child and only tenuously as a young adult (Davis, *Nella Larsen* 10). As the daughter of the Danish immigrant Marie Hansen and the African American Peter Walker,

\(^2\) For a discussion of the confusion surrounding Larsen's birth-year (1891 vs. 1893), see Ann Allen Shockley's biographical sketch of Larsen in *Afro-American Women Writers 1746-1933* (432, 439n4). Also see Thadious Davis, *Nella Larsen, Novelist of the Harlem Renaissance*.

\(^3\) See, for example, Mary Helen Washington's early article on Larsen, first printed in *Ms.* Magazine. Washington originally entitled the article "Nella Larsen: Mystery Woman of the Harlem Renaissance," but renamed the essay "The Mulatta Trap: Nella Larsen's Women of the 1920s" in her *Invented Lives: Narratives of Black Women 1860-1960*. The shift in titles represents perhaps Washington's realization that her earlier title, with its implications of the exotic Other, fell into the "mulatta trap."
Larsen was already doubly marginalized in American society, but when her mother remarried a white man (also a Danish immigrant), Larsen found herself so excluded from the family that her mother did not even report her existence to census takers in 1910 (Davis, *Nella Larsen* 27). The Larsens orchestrated their dark daughter’s absence from their Chicago home by sending her to the Fisk Normal School in Nashville when she was only fifteen, and when the money ran out a year later, Marie Larsen apparently asked the sixteen-year-old Nella (then Nellie) to make her own way in the world. Larsen vanished temporarily, resurfacing three years later at the Lincoln Training Hospital in New York City as a student nurse, where, according to Davis, she began her ascent into the black middle class all alone (*Nella Larsen* 66, 70-72).

Larsen’s childhood rejection was seemingly reiterated in her 1919 marriage to Elmer S. Imes, which ended in a much-publicized divorce in 1933. As Ann Allen Shockley explains, the deterioration of the marriage was accelerated by the overt antipathy felt by Larsen’s light-skinned mother-in-law and, significantly, by Imes’ indiscreet affair with Ethel Gilbert, a white staff member at Fisk University, where Imes taught physics (438). "He liked white women," several of Imes’ friends remarked to Thadious Davis in explanation of his betrayal of Nella Larsen (*Nella Larsen* 362). It is hardly incidental in Larsen’s construction and subsequent dissolution of identity that the rivals for her husband’s affection were both “white” women, and that she could therefore attribute the second major rejection in her emotional life to her

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4 Mrs. Larsen’s refusal to admit giving birth to Nella is reminiscent of Thomas Sutpen’s refusal to recognize Charles Bon as the son of his first, racially-mixed marriage to Eulalia Bon.
inability to be sufficiently white. Although there were many problems in the Larsen-Imes union, the divorce contains the hint of another command to "turn white or disappear." In effect, the rejections by her family and by her husband, exacerbated by the "problem of authorship" stemming from charges of plagiarism in the "Sanctuary" affair (Dearborn 56), destroyed the identity Larsen consciously cultivated during the 1920s and provoked her disappearance from public life.

Perhaps because Larsen discovered Imes' affair with Ethel Gilbert during the composition of Passing (Davis, Nella Larsen 324), her desire for recognition and fear of rejection surface in the characters Clare Kendry and Irene Redfield. In Chapter One, I spoke of the tyranny of the (white) Other that leads ultimately to the racial character's aphanisis, or disappearance. In Passing, Irene and Clare are tyrannized by the Other's desire, and though their relationship is complicated by issues of gender and sexuality, the dynamics of white racism and the demands of assimilation dictate the lives of the two women. White racism ultimately defines their lives in the word "nigger," and that definition determines the limits of their lives; in other words, it over-determines their ends — narratively and otherwise.

The need for recognition is paramount in the lives of Clare and Irene, just as it was in Larsen's own. Recognition is always bound to the Other's inscrutable desire, for "man's desire is the desire of the Other" (Lacan, FFC 38).

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5 Shockley characterizes Ethel Gilbert as "vivacious" and "white" (438); these two attributes return in Larsen's characterization of Clare Kendry, whom Irene views as a threat to her marriage with Brian Redfield.

6 Emotional rejection was exacerbated by the questioning of Larsen's "authority" in the charges of plagiarism stemming from the similarity of her short story "Sanctuary" to Sheila Kaye-Smith's "Mrs. Adis." Mary V. Dearborn suggests that this "problem of authorship" motivated Larsen's subsequent literary silence (56).
Thus, Irene accuses Clare — “exquisite, golden, fragrant, flaunting”— of a “deliberate courting of attention” (203), while she herself spends an inordinate amount of time dressing throughout the novel. The desire for recognition necessitates a visually pleasing presentation, which is bound up inextricably with an appearance of wealth and whiteness in the bourgeois milieu of Passing. Irene “passes” in Larsen’s novel not by adopting a white identity as Clare does, but by adopting white values, including white standards of beauty. Thus, Thadious Davis explains Irene’s “attraction to Clare” as an “aesthetic attraction to whiteness,” a “logical extension of her black bourgeoisie life-style and ideology” (326). Clare becomes intimately associated with the word “desire” and the act of desiring throughout the novel, as Pamela Caughie notes (779), but she also becomes in Thadious Davis’ words an “icon” of whiteness and therefore a desired object rather than a desiring subject (326). While Clare claims Irene as her link to blackness, Irene reciprocates by mediating the desire of the Other, specifically the white Other, through Clare. With her “ivory face under bright hair” (Passing 161) and her marriage to a white financier, Clare becomes Irene’s vicarious connection to the white world. In dialogue, the subject must determine the desire of the Other, or as Ellie Ragland-Sullivan writes, the subject implicitly asks the Other, “What am I to you?” (48), a question that Irene asks not only of Clare, but through Clare. As I will argue, Clare becomes an image of Irene’s

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7 Cheryl Wall (98) and Mary Mabel Youman (235) have both noted that Irene’s adoption of white middle class values is tantamount to passing. Addison Gayle, Jr., notes that Irene possesses “the symbolism of the white world” in her social status so that she “has little reason to completely adopt its images” (113).

8 According to Barbara Christian, the very prevalence of the novel of passing during the early part of the twentieth century suggests that passing “offered vicarious wish fulfillment, as well as amusement for those blacks who would pass if they could” (Black Women Novelists 45).
self; Clare’s definition in the eyes of John Bellew will then become Irene’s definition of herself. When that meaning literally eclipses Clare’s being, Irene, too, will suffer aphanisis.

Before deciding to pass for white, Clare lived an African American identity, not as Irene does as a member of the black middle class, but first as an impoverished daughter of an alcoholic janitor and then as the orphaned niece of two white great-aunts who treat Clare as if they were ugly step-sisters in the Cinderella tale, exacting her servitude. Clare describes to Irene an upbringing commensurate with the ideology her Aunt Grace and Aunt Edna borrow directly from the slavery apologists of the Old South:

I was, it was true, expected to earn my keep by doing all the housework, and most of the washing. But do you realize, ‘Rene, that if it hadn’t been for them, I shouldn’t have had a home in the world? ...Besides, to their notion, hard labour was good for me. I had Negro blood and they belonged to a generation that had written and read long articles headed: “Will the Blacks Work?” Too, they weren’t quite sure that the good God hadn’t intended the sons and daughters of Ham to sweat because he had poked fun at old man Noah once when he had taken a drop too much. I remember the aunts telling me that that [sic] old drunkard had cursed Ham and his sons for all time. (158-159)

The aunts echo nineteenth-century paternalist pro-slavery arguments by pronouncing the curse of Ham upon Clare, assigning her a subservient, menial position in the family, and intimating a moral degradation that only hard work and “white” guidance can correct. In a rare moment, Clare confides to Irene that the economic and psychological impact of the aunts’ beliefs drove her to discard her black identity and become white. She “wanted things,” she tells Irene, and clearly she means not only material goods but love and emotional comfort, as well, for she wants “to be a person and not a
charity or a problem, or even a daughter of the indiscreet Ham” (159). The 
aunts’ definition of blackness robs Clare of her humanity, so she must shed 
that black identity to be human. To do so, she must literally turn white by 
passing, accepting the demands of assimilation to avoid the ramifications of 
what Joel Kovel refers to as the “Ham Myth of Expulsion” (79).

Aphanisis threatens Clare in the novel when her “light” name (Clare 
means “light”) is supplanted by her dark name: “Nig,” the uncanny 
appellation provided jokingly by her husband John Bellew, the racist ignorant 
of her African heritage.9 He explains the nickname to her tea party guests, 
Gertrude and Irene, who also have disguised their African American 
identities for Bellew’s benefit: “When we were first married, she was as white 
as—as—well as white as a lily. But I declare she’s gettin’ darker and darker. I 
tell her if she don’t look out, she’ll wake up one of these days and find she’s 
turned into a nigger” (171). Bellew’s naming makes present the identity that 
Clare strives to hide (but it eventually makes Clare herself absent).10 He 
explains to the three disguised Negroes precisely what “niggers” are:

“I don’t dislike them, I hate them....They give me the creeps. 
The black scrimy devils....And I read in the papers about them. 
Always robbing and killing people. And,” he added darkly, 
“worse.” (172)

With the sinister implication of “worse” here, Bellew hints obliquely at the

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9 Larsen originally intended to entitle her second novel “Nig,” but editors at 
Knopf thought this title too risky for a new and still relatively unknown novelist 
(Davis, Nella Larsen 287, 306-307).

10 See Freud’s discussion of the fort-da game in Beyond the Pleasure 
Principle, cited below. Freud notes the child’s game is a use of language to control 
the mother’s presence and absence. In Passing, as I will discuss below, Bellew’s 
invocation of “Nig” and “nigger” manipulates Clare’s bodily presence/absence.
Negrophobe rape plot that Johnson's Ex-Colored Man unconsciously internalized as part of his self-definition. Because Gertrude and Irene must protect Clare's secret, they cannot challenge her husband's stereotypes. Despite all its trappings of urbanity, this tea party becomes a microcosm of American racism: a white male who exudes "the impression of latent physical power" (170) discourses upon the meaning of "nigger" while three African Americans wearing self-protective masks must silently listen, powerless to challenge his version of the truth.\footnote{Between Bellew and his interlocutors is a case of what Lyotard calls "the differend," for the three women are "divested of the means" to make their case by the very conditions of that case (Lyotard 9). That is, they cannot argue against Bellew's stereotypes without revealing that they are African Americans, and such a revelation would be harmful to them — especially to Clare — because of the nature of Bellew's racist beliefs. See The Differend: Phrases in Dispute, cited below.}

Uncontested beliefs soon become accepted as "truth"; with her temporary white identity and enforced silence, Irene is in danger of internalizing Bellew's "truths" as a form of unconscious ideological assimilation. His views on "black scrimy devils" provoke in Irene an hysteria figured as uncontrollable laughter, which she at first attributes to the irony of the situation; however, the hysteria goes beyond an amused response to an absurd situation. It marks a loss of control, the beginning of a mental deterioration that plagues Irene throughout the novel. African origins here are tied to a false, but nonetheless powerful definition, one that is shared by the white world depicted in the novel.\footnote{Jacquelyn McLendon notes the "fear of humiliation" associated with "acknowledging origins" for both Clare and Irene in the Chicago tea party scene (163).} When Bellew pronounces the casual "Hello, Nig" (170), he dredges up the memories of Clare's childhood humiliations and creates for Irene an anxiety about possible humiliations, humiliations intimated by his public proclamation of exclusion: "No niggers
in my family. Never have been and never will be” (171). This sentence — Bellew’s reiteration of Noah’s curse — causes the nearly implacable Clare an unhappiness she betrays in an expression “so dark and deep and unfathomable” as though in “the eyes of some creature utterly strange and apart” (172).

Although the scene at the tea party like the rest of the novel is narrated in the third person, the narrative consciousness is Irene’s. The use of the word “creature” appears innocent in this context, but later the word “creature” resurfaces in the narrative in an overtly negative sense, revealing how Irene has already aligned herself with the white racist signification embodied by John Bellew. At the breakfast table in her own New York home, Irene recounts to her husband Brian her secret humiliation at Clare’s party and her refusal ever to suffer such humiliation again: “I’m really not such an idiot that I don’t realize that if a man calls me a nigger, it’s his fault the first time, but mine if he has the opportunity to do it again” (184). Within a few paragraphs of this confession, the maid enters to serve breakfast, and again, the perspective is Irene’s: “Zulena, a small mahogany-coloured creature, brought in the grapefruit” (184). In spite of Irene’s admission of the humiliation of being called a “nigger,” the narrative consciousness that reflects her own performs a gesture of dehumanization in describing the maid as a “mahogany-coulored creature” — for “coulored” connotes

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13 Bellew’s declaration verbalizes the rejection of Nella implicit in Marie Hansen Larsen’s refusal to admit giving birth to a black child. This sentiment is also expressed in Larsen’s first novel, _Quicksand_, where Helga Crane is turned away from her Uncle Peter’s front door by his new wife, who tells Helga, “And please remember that my husband is not your uncle. No indeed! Why, that, that would make me your aunt!” (29). The rejection is later formalized by Uncle Peter in a letter in which he informs Helga, “I must terminate my outward relation with you” (54).
"creature" at the depths of Irene's unconscious.

The unselfconscious use of dehumanizing language to describe dark-skinned or economically-disadvantaged African Americans indicates the triumph of racist signification in Irene’s own thinking, a signification that will eventually demand her obliteration, as well. The invocation of "nigger," "nig," "creature," "boy," and other racial slurs results in the aphanisis of the subject, for the meanings assigned these words eclipse the being of the "racial" subject so named. Lacan refers to this eclipse as the "fading of the subject" behind the signifier (FFC 208), and this "fading" is manifested in the fainting that plagues Irene at both the beginning and the end of the novel. Part One of the novel, "Encounter," recalls the circumstances of Clare and Irene's reunion in Chicago. Under "a brutal staring sun," Irene sees a man fall to the pavement in "an inert heap":

Was the man dead, or only faint? someone asked her. But Irene didn't know and didn't try to discover....Suddenly she was aware that the whole street had a wobbly look, and realized she was about to faint. With a quick perception of the need for immediate safety, she lifted a wavering hand in the direction of a cab parked directly in front of her. The perspiring driver jumped out and guided her to his car. He helped, almost lifted her in. She sank down on the hot leather seat. (146-147)

The anonymous man's collapse is answered by Irene's own fainting and "sinking down" in the cab. Unaware of Irene's African American heritage, the cab driver takes her to the exclusive Drayton Hotel. From the discomfort of the August heat, Irene then moves to the oppressive atmosphere of segregation, for at the Drayton, she knows, the discovery of her African American identity would automatically result in her expulsion. Her anxious consciousness of the racially-hostile environment charges the scene, as Irene
becomes aware of the intent stare of the woman seated nearby. After assuring herself that her clothes and make-up are not mussed, Irene experiences “a small inner disturbance, odious and hatefully familiar” as she assumes that the piercing gaze is attributable to her racial origin: “Did that woman, could that woman, somehow know that here before her very eyes on the roof of the Drayton sat a Negro?” (150). Mary Dearborn suggests that Irene’s discomfort here issues from her inexperience as a passer (60), but her discomfort becomes overt only when she believes she has been “discovered.” Unaware that the woman is her childhood friend Clare Kendry, Irene experiences an escalating fear, not because she is “ashamed of being a Negro,” she thinks, but because “being ejected from any place, even in the polite and tactful way in which the Drayton would probably do it, …disturbed her” (150). The fainting that brings her to the Drayton in the first place creates the possibility of an even more violent form of “disappearance,” the forced exit resulting from the Jim Crow policy of the white world. When she discovers that the intent gaze is the friendly one of Clare, a fellow “passer,” Irene finds relief in their kinship. (There is safety in numbers.) However, the relief is short-lived; her original fainting and the fear of expulsion that it leads to will be answered at the end of the novel when Irene faints a second time, in response to a far more violent expulsion.

In describing the narrative voice of Passing, Jacquelyn McLendon speaks of “the disguised ‘I.’” Although told in the third-person, the narrative is “personal” because it is exclusively Irene’s and thus could easily be told in the first-person (McLendon 159); this “disguised I,” however, stresses Irene’s repression and reinforces the theme of “passing” as disguise in the novel (159). McLendon’s insights on the “disguised I” are suggestive of another
thematic concern of the novel, the problematic I. The first person would be inappropriate for Irene's story because the "I" as an empowered, integrated subject position is always elusive for Irene. She must always define herself through the desire of the Other, and thus an unmediated representation of her voice would be incongruent with her essential lack. Desire is of course a symptom of lack, so Irene's desire for security throughout Passing is evidence of the instability of the "I." In Chicago, she equates her faintness with "a need for immediate safety" (147). Moreover, she realizes "that, to her, security was the most important and desired thing in life...She wanted only to be tranquil" (235). As her propensity for fainting demonstrates, this desire is prompted by "the menace of impermanence" (229) she actively experiences, a menace which she attributes variously to Brian's desire to move to Brazil and to Clare's disruption of her household (187, 229). In effect, her sense of permanence, her conception of herself as a stable, integrated "I," is always in jeopardy. There is always for Irene a feeling of impending doom or some sort of tension, even in Chicago before Clare reenters her life. This tension is symptomatic; it signifies the inevitability of disintegrating subjectivity.

Because Irene experiences a problematic I, she seeks an idealized image to represent herself. In "The Mirror Stage," Lacan discusses the role of the idealized image in subjectivity. The infant first identifies herself as "I," as subject, after seeing her image in the mirror. That image is unified and masterful and therefore represents "the mental permanence of the I" for the subject (2). As Lacan further suggests, the assumption of the idealized image always involves méconnaissance, or misrecognition, because the image is not the self (6). Early in Passing, Irene adopts Clare as her idealized image, and that méconnaissance tellingly transpires before the mirror. Some critics stress
the fact that key scenes between Clare and Irene happen in Irene’s bedroom, but they fail to note more precisely that these scenes take place while Irene sits at her dressing table, before her mirror. The place where Irene applies make-up is indeed a far more intimate space than her bed. In the first of these scenes, Clare arrives uninvited after Irene has refused to answer her letters. After telling Zulena to admit Clare, Irene “[a]t the mirror...dusted a little powder on her nose and brushed out her hair” (193). While she performs her hasty toilet, she rehearses the rebuff she intends to give Clare:

But that was as far as she got in her rehearsal. For Clare had come softly into the room without knocking, and before Irene could greet her, had dropped a kiss on her dark curls.

Looking at the woman before her, Irene Redfield had a sudden inexplicable onrush of affectionate feeling. Reaching out, she grasped Clare’s two hands in her own and cried with something like awe in her voice: “Dear God! But aren’t you lovely Clare!” (194).

If the mirror were not implicitly present in the scene and if there were no elision of identities, the “kiss,” the “inexplicable onrush of affectionate feeling,” and Irene’s expression of awe might all be read exclusively as signs of an erotic attraction between two women. However, Irene is looking in the mirror when Clare enters, and the mirror’s presence makes ambiguous the phrase “looking at the woman before her.” Is that woman Clare or Irene herself? Moreover, Irene’s reaction to Clare’s entrance is consistent with the infant’s “jubilant assumption” of her mirror image that Lacan notes in “The Mirror Stage” (2): like the mirror-stage infant, Irene reaches out to the image and exclaims with joy. Her “awed” exclamation, “Dear God! But aren’t you

14 For example, Deborah E. McDowell claims in her introduction to the novel that the erotic subplot “explodes in Irene’s own bedroom” (xxvi).
lovely Clare!” indicates that the image she sees in Clare is superior to the one she nervously fussed over before Clare’s entrance and is therefore a better image to represent the “mental permanence of the I” (Lacan 2). As if to stress the identification between the two, Clare even seats herself in Irene’s “favorite chair” (194). While Irene’s reaction includes erotic overtones, it also contains narcissistic ones. The scene confirms the oscillation between Irene’s “desire for Clare and identification with her” that Helena Michie has noted (151). Irene sees in Clare an “image of her futile searching” (Passing 200) for permanence, and as the novel continues, she has difficulty separating “individuals from the race, herself from Clare Kendry” (227).15

As it becomes clear to Irene that she cannot “master” Clare, the identification between the two women becomes more problematic.16 The beautiful, idealized white image is denied Irene when she begins to suspect that Clare is trying to seduce her husband Brian and that the two plan to betray and abandon her. When this suspicion crystallizes, also before the mirror, Irene experiences a temporary eclipse of being: “The face in the

15 Several critics have noticed at least a partial identification between the two women. For example, Jonathan Little notes the “by the end of the novel, Irene has a hard time distinguishing herself from Clare” (177). Mary F. Sisney (179) and Deborah McDowell (xxix) each discuss Clare’s death as Irene’s expulsion of disruptive aspects of herself that she has been unable to repress.

16 As Freud’s discussion of the fort-da game in Beyond the Pleasure Principle illustrates, language is the child’s consolation for the painful knowledge of the mother’s separateness. Lacan’s work in “The Mirror Stage” further suggests that before the child enters the symbolic, through which the child negotiates the separation, the child adopts the mirror image as an image of a puissant self. The mirror image is another consolation for the painful differentiation of the mother. In Passing, Irene exhibits an infantile frustration at her family’s differentiation; she “wanted only to be tranquil. Only, unmolested, to be allowed to direct for their own best good the lives of her sons and her husband” (235). When Irene realizes that Clare, too, is dangerously beyond her control, the mirror image, which in her case involves extreme méconnaissance, ceases to be either a consolation or a source of power, but rather a reminder of impotence.
mirror vanished from her sight, blotted out by this thing which had so
suddenly flashed across her groping mind” (217, emphasis added). When the
face finally reappears in the mirror, it is “her dark-white face” (no longer
purely white), one which she meets not with joy, but with “a kind of
ridiculing contempt” (218). Later in the novel when Irene and Clare meet
before the mirror for the last time, Irene experiences fear and guilt over her
sin of omission; she knows but fails to tell Clare that Bellew, having seen
Irene out with the brown-skinned Felise Freeland, probably suspects Clare’s
racial identity. “Irene passed a hand over her eyes to shut out the accusing
face in the glass before her. With one corner of her mind she wondered how
long she had looked like that, drawn and haggard and — yes, frightened”
(233). As Irene becomes more and more incapable of controlling either Clare
or herself, she experiences a diminution of the “loveliness” in the mirror.
The image is no longer one of mastery, but one of impotence and fear.

Like the Ex-Colored Man in James Weldon Johnson’s novel, Irene
begins to feel ambivalence about her African heritage, and that ambivalence
is associated with Clare as Irene begins to wish “for the first time in her life,
that she had not been born a Negro” (225). Irene is “on the verge of total
mental disintegration” (Tate 143), and like Johnson’s Ex-Colored Man, she
will project her disintegration onto her double, Clare. Irene’s subjectivity is so
troubled that she must destroy even the idealized image of herself. Jacquelyn
McLendon observes that Irene performs “a number of subtle destructive acts”
that foreshadow Clare’s death (163), acts that issue in what Jonathan Little
refers to as the “imagery of fragmentation” associated with Clare (179).
Although Clare represents Irene’s ideal physical image, she maintains only a
precarious hold on her own white identity, as evidenced by her refusal to
have black servants (who might "discover" her identity) or to give birth to another child because the "hellish strain" of anxiety about the child's coloring would be too much for her (168). When she says "Really, Rene, I'm not safe" (210), she means not only that she is dangerous because of the risks she takes, but that she is always already in danger of destruction. Fragmented things become metonymies for Clare, and since Clare is a version of Irene, they represent Irene herself, even when she is consciously performing the fragmentation. As Lacan demonstrates in the "The Mirror Stage," corporal integrity is fundamental to subjectivity, so that corporal disintegration is a prelude to aphanisis, the subject's disappearance. The symbolic mutilation that Irene performs on Clare presages aphanisis for both women.

The first fragmentation involves Irene's destruction of two separate letters from Clare at different points in the narrative. From Irene's perspective, Clare's letters are always a little obtrusive; like Clare herself, her letters are "furtive, but yet in some peculiar, determined way a little flaunting," "out of place and alien," and "mysterious" (143). Significantly, both letters revive for Irene the memory of John Bellew's racist invective along with the presence of Clare. The first of these is the note Clare sends Irene to thank her for attending the tea in Chicago. But the letter only reminds Irene of the humiliation of listening silently to Bellew's racist diatribe, so she destroys it:

With an unusual methodicalness she tore the offending letter into tiny ragged squares that fluttered down and made a small heap in her black crêpe de Chine lap. The destruction completed, she gathered them up, rose, and moved to the train's end. Standing there, she dropped them over railing and watched them scatter, on tracks, on cinders, on forlorn grass, in rills of dirty water. (178)
In destroying the letter, the first overture of friendship, Irene symbolically attempts to rid herself of Clare as “Nig.” She tears it into “tiny ragged squares,” then scatters the pieces in a gesture of riddance, a forced disappearance of Clare’s asserted presence that brings with it John Bellew’s hatred of “niggers.” Irene then thinks that if Clare shows up in person, she “had only to turn away her eyes, to refuse her recognition” (178). Unconsciously, she is mimicking the behavior of the white racist, willing Clare’s disappearance through a refusal to recognize. The second letter, which Irene receives in New York two years later, revives again the memory of shame, “bringing a clear, sharp remembrance, in which even now, after two years, humiliation, resentment, and rage were mingled” (145). Later, she “tear[s] the letter across” and flings “it into the scrap-basket” (191), acting out both her anger at Clare and the disintegration she feels as the memory of Bellew’s hatred.

The tearing of the two letters happens before Irene and Clare merge in the mirror. But after Irene identifies with Clare in the mirror and then loses that image after forming a suspicion about Brian and Clare, Irene will act out another destruction of Clare, the smashing of the white china teacup (221). When she becomes enraged at seeing Brian apparently paying court to Clare at yet another tea party, Irene either drops or hurls the teacup to the ground with “a slight crash. On the floor at her feet lay the shattered cup. Dark stains dotted the bright rug. Spread. ... Before her, Zulena gathered up the white fragments” (221). The broken teacup immediately suggests Irene’s own disintegration or loss of control, but to cover her confusion, Irene tells Hugh that she has broken the cup purposely, for it “was the ugliest thing...the
Confederates ever owned” (222). The seemingly offhand remark here is deceptive, for the white teacup is yet another version of Clare, who has descended from the same white ancestors and made her way in the world not through a direct route, but through a subterfuge and deception akin to the “underground” by which the teacup comes North (222). The broken teacup brings to Irene a realization that she “had only to break it” and be “rid of it forever” (222). Clearly the shattering of the teacup with its attendant “white fragments” foreshadows Clare’s impending death.

Clare’s death occurs in the appropriately-named “Finale” section of the novel, where all the elements of the narrative of aphanisis converge as racist signification impacts literally on the body. Chapter Four of “Finale,” the chapter in which Clare dies, begins tellingly with the Redfields’ dinner-time discussion of lynching. Ted asks, “Dad, why is it that they only lynch coloured people?” and Brian responds, “Because they hate ‘em, son” (231). Brian’s response echoes Bellew’s declaration, “I don’t dislike [Negroes], I hate them” (172). The observations on lynchings disconcert Irene, possibly reminding her of the humiliation of Clare’s Chicago tea party two years earlier, and she upbraids Brian for speaking of the subject before their sons. Irene thinks she can insure her sons a happy childhood by keeping “the race problem” from them, but Brian knows better. He asks, “What was the use of our trying to keep them from learning the word ‘nigger’ and its connotation? They found out, didn’t they? And how? Because somebody called Junior a dirty nigger” (231-232). As in the scene where he refuses to avoid discussing sex with Ted and Junior, he insists on telling his sons all the facts of life, including the ugly fact of racism. This dinner table argument further establishes the disharmony in Irene’s marriage, but it also sets the scene for
Clare’s death by emphasizing the extent of racism’s infringement on African American lives. Virulent white racism is not limited to the South or to the lynchers; innocent school boys up North are called “dirty niggers” for no reason. With its shattered bodies and dehumanization, lynching is one of the “connotations” of “nigger” from which Irene tries in vain to protect her sons and herself. But as Clare’s death reveals, the epithet “nigger” brings with it “the glorious body mutilated,” a mutilation inevitably preceding the disappearance that the word “nigger” invokes.

When the bigot Bellew discovers his wife’s secret Harlem life, he bursts in on her at the Freeland’s party. The prophecy contained in his pet name for Clare — “Nig” — is fulfilled, and so will be the displacement of Clare by the signifier (the diminutive of “nigger”) that demands her disappearance. Bellew repeats the gesture performed by Junior’s unnamed tormentor at school, for he calls Clare the very name revealed in the Redfields’ dinner-table discussion: “So you’re a nigger, a damned dirty nigger!” (238). The chain of events that transpires after this utterance has been hotly debated by the critics, but we know with narrative certainty that the chain begins with Bellew’s invocation of “nigger” and ends with Clare’s plunge from the window, her body conspicuously absent from the scene by the time Irene descends to the street level. Whether Clare jumps or Irene pushes her, Bellew’s “so you’re a nigger, a damned dirty nigger” inaugurates Clare’s

17 Most critics view Irene as guilty of murdering Clare. See, for example, Bernard Bell, The Afro-American Novel and Its Traditions (110); Deborah McDowell, Introduction to Quicksand and Passing; Mary Sisney, “The View from the Outside: Black Novels of Manners” (177-179); and Jonathan Little, “Nella Larsen’s Passing: Irony and the Critics” (174), all cited below. A notable exception is Claudia Tate, who compares the scene of Clare’s father’s death to the final scene in order to show that Clare might have committed suicide. See “Nella Larsen’s Passing: A Problem of Interpretation” (145-146), cited below.
disappearance from the window. In the Lacanian version of aphanasis, the subject disappears behind the signifier in dialogue with the Other, always while trying to determine the desire of the Other with the question, "He is saying this to me, but what does he want?" (Lacan, FFC 214). Frantz Fanon notes that in the black subject’s dialogue with the white Other, the answer must always be "Turn white or disappear" (Black 100). To both women, Bellew’s "damned dirty nigger" implies his desire for Clare’s expulsion. Thus Clare, who is denigrated in Bellew’s mind for consorting with Negroes, must die,¹⁸ even if Irene catalyzes that death:

One moment Clare had been there, a vital glowing thing, like a flame in red and gold. The next she was gone.
There was a gasp of horror, and above it a sound not quite human, like a beast in agony. “Nig! My God! Nig!” (239)

Clare’s fall is a vanishing act, a sort of now-you-see-her-now-you-don’t, where the signifier “Nig” seems literally to make Clare’s body disappear in a high stakes version of the infant’s fort-da game described in Freud’s Beyond the Pleasure Principle (13-15), for Clare is “…there, …gone” (239). Significantly, her disappearance is punctuated by Bellew’s final, double invocation of “Nig,” her uncanny nickname; her destruction is commensurate with the racist meaning of that word.¹⁹ As the bystanders try to determine what happened,

¹⁸ In “Miscenagation and ‘The Dicta of Race and Class’: The Rhinelander Case and Nella Larsen’s Passing,” Mark Madigan notes that the protagonists of Larsen’s novel, like the historical inhabitants of New York during the 1920s, were “bound by... ‘the dicta of class and race’ ” and that for Clare, death is the only possible escape from these inflexible strictures, which she has transgressed (528).

¹⁹ Larsen’s description of Bellew is particularly interesting in that it turns the tables on the “black beast” metaphor used by the Negrophobes. Bellew’s cry is “a sound not quite human, like a beast in agony.” However, the word “agony” suggests that Bellew, in spite of his racism, mourns Clare’s loss. Like George Tryon in Chesnutt’s The House Behind the Cedars, Bellew experiences love/hate
Ralph Hazelton surmises that Clare “Fainted, I guess” (241), an assumption that on the surface seems to be a sexist stereotyping of women's responses to crises. However, in Lacanian terms Hazelton is right, for Clare, like Irene, experiences a problematic subjectivity that leads to her fading, or aphanisis, in the narrative. Her death confirms the lethal relationship Lacan posits between signification and subjectivity since the word Nig “manifests itself... in the murder of the thing” ("Function" 104).

When Bellew confronts Clare about her racial identity, the identification between the two women creates an equation in Irene's mind; both women are in danger of losing their husbands because they are not quite white enough, a repetition of the situation which Larsen faced in her own marriage. When the narrator says, “She couldn’t have Clare Kendry cast aside by Bellew” (239), that imperative reflects two imperatives within Irene's psyche: “I can't have Brian casting me off,” and “I must have the Other's recognition.” At issue is a chain of displacement, for if Clare is displaced as Bellew's wife, she might then take Irene's place as a better, brighter version of self; Bellew's repudiation of Clare would allow her to “take” Brian from Irene, a prospect which would be ruinous to Irene's bourgeois lifestyle (her version of "passing for white"). However, “damned dirty nigger” — Bellew's negative response to Clare's “What am I to you?” — also reflects on Irene, for physically, Clare is her idealized image. The denigration of Clare is therefore her own, so that Irene runs a double jeopardy of losing both her husband and the regard of the white Other if Bellew should repudiate Clare.

Although Irene has throughout the novel indulged her desire to tear and shatter Clare through displaced aggressions toward letters and teacups, a

ambivalence toward Clare when he discovers her racial identity.
Irene herself will shatter once Clare actually experiences corporal disintegration, for she cannot "separate...herself from Clare Kendry" (227). At the end of the novel, when Clare has fallen to her death, Irene experiences nausea when she imagines that Clare might have survived. The nausea stems not only from "fear" (as most critics believe who assume her guilty of Clare's murder), but from the "idea of the glorious body mutilated" (240). "The glorious body" is not exclusively Clare's, but a shared, idealized image of self, and thus Irene replicates Clare's death in a fainting spell mirroring the one that eventually led to her re-acquaintance with Clare two years earlier. Helena Michie notes that Irene's descent from the Freelands' apartment and subsequent fainting "mimic" Clare's fall (154). After Clare falls, Irene slowly descends the stairs, grasping "the banister to save herself from pitching downwards....How she managed to make the rest of the journey without fainting she never knew" (240). In fact, when she does finally arrive on the scene, every one assumes that "she had fainted or something like that" (241). Aphanasis is imminent for Irene, too, because the fainting that threatens her (and has threatened her throughout the novel) is complicated by a "hideous trembling" and a concern about the meaning of Bellew's absence that overtake her as the others question her about Clare's fall (242). The "trembling" and "quaking" that she experiences reveal that she is about to shatter, to fall apart. As she tries to exculpate Bellew, her unstable subjectivity fractures: "'No, no!' she protested. 'I'm certain that he didn't [push Clare]. I was there, too. As close as he was. She just fell, before anybody could stop her. I—'" (242). Significantly, the utterance of the "I" undoes Irene, for as she says it,
Her quaking knees gave way under her. She moaned and sank down, moaned again. Through the great heaviness that submerged and drowned her she was dimly conscious of strong arms lifting her up. Then everything was dark. (242)

Irene faints while uttering her last and most problematic word, “I—” (the incompletion of the utterance is indicated by Larsen’s use of the long dash). Her fainting, the “darkness” that swallows up I, is another instance of aphanesis in the novel, the mirror of Clare’s violent death. The narrative ends here, in keeping with the fact that Irene’s consciousness — the one that drives the narrative — dims and then fades completely. Her obliteration completes and therefore halts the narrative.20

In his study of the various editions of the text, Mark Madigan notes that in the first two printings of Passing, Irene’s blackout is followed by a paragraph ending with an anonymous man’s words, “Death by misadventure, I’m inclined to believe. Let’s go up and have another look at that window.” This final paragraph was omitted from the third printing in accordance with Larsen’s instructions, apparently to add ambiguity and suspense to the ending (Madigan, “Two Endings” 522). Larsen’s crucial revision allows Irene’s fainting to be aligned more closely with Clare’s death. By ending with “Then everything was dark,” Larsen suggests once again “the curse of Ham,” which is codified by the Plessy v. Ferguson ruling and allows

20 In A Spy in the Enemy’s Country, Donald Petesch finds a parallel between the fates of Clare, Irene, and Helga Crane of Quicksand: “the violence done to the self in Quicksand becomes the violence done to the other in Passing, and Helga Crane’s sinking into quicksand becomes Clare Kendry’s fall to her death. The wrenching of racial ambivalence and desire are violently stilled” (194). Petesch’s observation suggests that Irene’s violence is like Helga Crane’s self-destructiveness. Though projected externally, Irene’s actions still end in her own destruction, since they issue from her own internal conflicts.
the white Other — figured variously as Noah, Bellew, and the monolithic staff of the Drayton Hotel — to demand the black subject’s expulsion. 

*Everything* is dark at the end of the novel, including Irene, and this *denigration* 21 identifies her with Clare once again via Bellew’s invocation of “damned dirty nigger” and “Nig” during Clare’s exit. The racist epithets that Bellew interjects as Clare plunges to her death similarly darken Irene and exclude her from the world.

Just as Irene does not consider lynching to be polite dinner conversation, delicacy dictates that this novel of manners refrain from showing explicitly the *corps morcelé*. There is no direct narrative representation of Clare’s corpse; Irene only imagines but does not see the “glorious body mutilated” (240). Like Charles Bon’s in Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!*, Clare’s body is summarily whisked away. Instead, the narrative presents versions of a broken Clare — shattered teacups, torn letters, and fainting friends. Both the prospect of the mutilated corpse and the irrevocable loss of Clare that the missing body signifies have dire implications for Irene, who can no longer avoid the fainting that has threatened to overwhelm her throughout the novel. That she is apparently implicated in Clare’s death does not free her from its ramifications. Indeed, that complicity only reveals the extent to which she has been infected by white ideology ironically even while conscientiously playing the role of a “good race woman.” If she does in fact push Clare, that action is merely a conditioned

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21 See Michael Awkward’s *Inspiriting Influence: Tradition, Revision, and Afro-American Women’s Novels* for a different use of the term “denigration” in the discussion of African American literature. Awkward uses the term to signify the genesis of authentically African American writing. I use the term self-consciously here to indicate the white Other’s enforcement of the negative definition of “nigger.”
response to the white voice of authority pronouncing "nigger," which, in accordance with the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision, entails an act of expulsion or exclusion.\textsuperscript{22} Clare's death merely fulfills the expectation of expulsion that Irene has felt since sitting on the roof of the Drayton.

In the sense that Clare's death and Irene's fainting respond to a narrative expectation of expulsion and represent the aphanisis implicit in white racist signification of "nigger," the end of Larsen's *Passing* is not a "false and shoddy denouement," as Robert Bone contends (102). Bellew — the bellows of white authority — decrees early in the novel, "No niggers in this family. Never have been and never will be" (171); Clare's death fulfills that law. With the exception of Hugh Wentworth, Larsen's thinly-veiled version of Carl Van Vechten, all the white characters in the novel work to exclude African Americans from the human family. Because *Passing* is Larsen's reworking of her own experience as an African American woman in the twentieth century, there is nothing too exaggerated or melodramatic about the ending. The novel represents symbolically the reality that Larsen knew in 1929. It also represents the reality that Larsen still knew as late as 1963, when she made a trip to California in an attempt to see her white sister, Anna Larsen Gardner. According to Thadious Davis, Larsen was

\textsuperscript{22} In *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, C. Vann Woodward notes that the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision located the state's authority in the voices of white railroad employees, white ushers, and other petty tyrants (93). Larsen shares Woodward's recognition of the power of the voice in racist ideology. Bellew's name recalls "bellow," suggesting that his voice is somehow his most important characteristic.
rejected once again by her sister, who had not invited her into her home because Nella Larsen Imes was so obviously a black woman and Anna Gardner was white and without any visible connections to people of color. Later, Gardner denied knowing of Nella Larsen's existence: "Why, I didn't know I had a sister." (Nella Larsen 448).

Nella Larsen died in 1964, less than a year after the failed attempt to see her sister. It is easy to imagine Larsen, having been refused acknowledgment by her only living relative, sharing Clare Kendry's deepest desire "to be a person and not a charity or a problem, or even a daughter of the indiscreet Ham" (Passing 159).
Chapter 4
Persons in Pieces: *Light in August* and Self-Shattering

He turned the pages in steady progression, though now and then he would seem to linger upon one page, one line, perhaps one word. He would not look up then. He would not move, apparently arrested and held immobile by a single word which had perhaps not yet impacted, his whole being suspended by the single trivial combination of letters in quiet and sunny space, so that hanging motionless and without physical weight he seemed to watch the slow flowing of time beneath him...
—William Faulkner, *LIA* 112.

It would be easy for you to write Joe Christmas into a separate novel, but the anthologist can't pick him out without leaving bits of his flesh hanging to Hightower and Lena.

In 1905, Miss Annie Chandler gave eight-year-old William Faulkner a copy of Thomas Dixon's *The Clansman* (Blotner, *Faulkner* 20). Miss Chandler was Faulkner's first grade teacher; *The Clansman* was the primer of white supremacy. Either out of respect for Miss Chandler or appreciation of the novel itself, Faulkner kept the copy, which was in his Rowan Oak library at the time of his death (Blotner, *William Faulkner's Library* 27). The significance of Miss Chandler's gesture — the teacher transmitting the sacred cultural text to the student — should not be overlooked, nor should the influence that Dixon's novel had upon the images reverberating in Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha novels and even his nonfiction rhetoric. Indeed, in the infamous 1956 interview with Russell Howe, which Faulkner later repudiated, he declared that he would oppose enforced integration "even if it meant going out into the street and shooting Negroes" (260-261). This
statement evokes the Dixonian fantasy of armed Negro invasion supported by the Federal government, with Faulkner himself as the loyal son of the South, defending his homeland after the fashion of Ben Cameron in *The Clansman*. Statements like those he made in the Howe interview suggest that in spite of his critical role in reinterpreting the region's history, Faulkner was "caught up in the collective mind of the South" (Peavy 48).

In *Sanctuary*, *Light in August*, *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Go Down, Moses*, Faulkner struggles, much as Johnson's Ex-Colored Man does, with the Negrophobe narrative as he self-consciously revises the Dixonian romance of the Negro Rapist and the White Avenger. Of these four novels, *Light in August* (1932) is the one in which Faulkner reckons most fully with the consciousness of a putatively African American character, even though that consciousness is carefully contained inside narratives of white voices.

Regina Fadiman's study of Faulkner's composition process suggests that Joe Christmas emerged gradually from early drafts. Faulkner wrote the Christmas flashback material (chapters 6 through 12) after writing the material involving Lena Grove, Byron Bunch, and Gail Hightower. Christmas' crime was originally a vehicle to bring together the lives of these other characters, but Christmas became so compelling that Faulkner kept adding episodes to his early life in the flashback (Fadiman 24-25, 64).¹ The shift of dramatic emphasis from Lena, Byron, and Hightower to Joe Christmas reveals Faulkner's recognition of the Negrophobe myth at the heart of the (white) Southern consciousness. Moreover, Faulkner's revisions of earlier

¹ David M. Toomey argues that Gail Hightower, not Christmas, is the center of the novel and "Reverend Hightower is paranoid schizophrenic, and that the entire narrative represents his interior monologue"(452). See "The Human Heart in Conflict: *Light in August*'s Schizophrenic Narrator," cited below.
drafts reinforced the arbitrary nature of the Negrophobe definition of
"nigger," for as Fadiman also notes, Faulkner deleted all definitive references
to Christmas' racial origins (42). The uncertainty surrounding his origins
("these country bastards are likely to be anything," says Max) reveals the
extent to which "racial" identities are ideological and psychological
constructions rather than biological facts.

Like Larsen's Irene Redfield and Johnson's unnamed narrator, Joe
Christmas is subject to the legal, social, and psychological ramifications of the
Jim Crow statues that his very name echoes. The fragmented black body
once again becomes a metaphor for the segregated United States. Joe's
meditations, "All I wanted was peace" and "Something is going to happen to
me" (112, 104, Faulkner's italics), reveal the precarious nature of his psyche,
for he is racked with tension that issues in broken bodies. His presence in the
novel explains the narrative fragmentation, for his instability destabilizes the
narrative. The stories of Lena, Joe, Hightower, Stevens, and the furniture
merchant are all "formally distinct pieces" (Kreiswirth 56-57) that cohere in a
radically unstable bond, "a six-plots-in-one-chaos" (Parker 20). The novel's
"willfully centrifugal movement" (Millgate 32) suggests the forces
threatening to destroy Joe. Although Faulkner also uses multiple narrators
in *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying*, this technique has a different
effect in *Light in August*. While Caddy Compson and Addie Bundren are
objects of desire in the narratives which revolve around their absence, Joe
Christmas is a disruptive presence that the narrative refuses to incorporate/

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2 Eric Sundquist is one of many critics who remarks the connection between
"Joe Christmas" and "Jim Crow." See "The Strange Career of Joe Christmas" in
Sundquist's *Faulkner: The House Divided*. 
integrate in the spirit of racial segregation.

In spite of critical doubt about the efficacy of *Light in August* 's structure, the novel-in-pieces is the fitting narrative form for the body-in-pieces. Leo Bersani notes the prominence of fragmentation in the modern narrative, and particularly in contemporary literature, where “putting ‘persons in pieces’...becomes an appropriate image for the process of violently deconstructing the self” (Bersani, Future x-xi). *Light in August* anticipates the kind of narrative Bersani discusses, for unlike Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, where mutilated bodies are narratively peripheral, and Larsen's *Passing*, where Clare’s “glorious body mutilated” is mysteriously preempted before Irene sees it, Faulkner’s narrative of aphanisis foregrounds both broken bodies and the process by which human beings are reduced to fragments. The violent deconstruction of the self is another manifestation of aphanisis — what Lacan defines as the eclipse of the subject by a signifier — because falling to pieces or alternately putting other persons in pieces is intimately connected to racist naming and defining, especially the ugly signifier “nigger.” In *Light in August* as in many other early twentieth-century narratives of African American subjectivity, corporal disintegration precedes the disappearance implicitly demanded in racist naming.

**Signification and Subjectivity: Names and Words**

Byron Bunch comments upon the radical disjunction between the word and the thing in *Light in August*: “It was like me, and her, and all the other folks I had to get mixed up in it, were just a lot of words that never
even stood for anything, were not even us, while all the time what was us was going on and going on without even missing the lack of words" (*LIA* 401-02). For Byron, Lena’s pregnancy and her lover’s existence are unreal until he hears the baby’s cry. Until then (and some would argue, even afterward), Byron, Lena, and *all* the residents of Jefferson are caught in a web of signifiers, what Faulkner calls “the lack of words” in uncanny anticipation of Lacanian rhetoric. According to Lacan, “the subject appears first in the Other, in so far as the first signifier… emerges in the field of the Other and represents the subject for another signifier, which other signifier has as its effect the *aphanisis* of the subject” (*FFC* 218). The subject is eclipsed in his dialogue with the Other by the signifier that represents him. For Byron Bunch as for Lacan, the symbolic realm, the world of words, mediates the Real for the subject and mediates the subject for the Other. But for Joe Christmas, the dilemma of being represented by a signifier for yet another signifier is more dire than for Byron, who steps back from the web of signifiers after hearing the baby’s cry and discerns the reality he envisions as independent of words. When Joe reads his detective magazine on the morning of Joanna’s murder, “his whole being [is] suspended by the single trivial combination of letters” on the page (112), a metaphor for the suspension of being he experiences in the word “nigger,” a word that eventually leads to the violent discontinuity of body and being when Percy Grimm hacks away at him with bullets and knives. “The lack of words” for Joe is not merely their absence (although Joe himself is hardly loquacious), but the absence they create within him, as him: Lacan’s *manque-à-être*, the want-to-be. Although James Snead claims that “*Light in August* depicts how Joe Christmas resists signification” (88), arbitrary signifiers in fact have a very
real impact on his physical being. And as T. H. Adamowski notes, "le maître mot, le mot magique" for Joe Christmas is "nigger" (241).

All the characters in *Light in August* are linked in a rigid social structure whose cornerstone is race. This structure becomes apparent in Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha fiction even as early as 1930 in the short story "Dry September," where Faulkner demonstrates the concomitance of the Southern definitions of "lady" and "nigger." In this short story, there is a radical disjunction between words and reality, but there is a rigid pattern in the relationship among the signifiers. To reclaim her status as Southern lady, Minnie Cooper must be defined in relation to a "nigger rapist," so she accuses Will Mayes. To secure their own definitions as white *men*, the members of McLendon's lynch mob sacrifice Mayes even though they recognize that the real person signified by "nigger" did not perform the acts of which he has been accused. When someone questions whether the rape really happened, McLendon cries with disgust, "Happen? What the hell difference does it make? Are you going to let the black sons get away with it until one really does it?" (171-72). In *Light in August*, a similar juxtaposition with an accused Negro rapist allows Lena Grove and Joanna Burden to be reassimilated by the society whose codes they have transgressed and allows Percy Grimm to establish his manhood, if not his humanity. Throughout Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha narratives, all definitions are relative to the term "nigger," even though that word, like all others, "never stood for anything" (LIA 401-

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3 For further discussion of the power of words in *Light in August*, see Richard Godden, "Call Me Nigger!: Race and Speech in Faulkner's *Light in August*"; James Leo Spenko, "The Death of Joe Christmas and the Power of Words"; and Judith Lockyer, *Ordered by Words*, all cited below.
Perhaps because those surrounding Christmas have no concrete proof of his racial heritage, they label him insistently with the epithet "nigger," which appears in various forms 135 times in the novel (Capps 1036). When he is a small child at the orphanage, the other children (prompted by Doc Hines) holler "Nigger! Nigger!" at him when he attempts to play with them (371). Breaking with her role as nurturer, the dietitian calls him "little nigger bastard" when she fears he will reveal her sexual indiscretions to the matron (122). The dietitian's verbal barrage sets the tone for all Christmas' intimate relationships, for he will have the epithet hurled at him by friends and lovers throughout his life. Bobbie Allen, the waitress/prostitute with whom he has his first love affair, screams out her anger at him, "Me f•ing for nothing a nigger son of a bitch" (218, sic), an interjection accompanied tellingly by the physical blows with which Bobbie's male friends pummel Christmas, though her hateful words are perhaps the deadlier weapon. While Joe Brown (Lucas Burch) otherwise attempts to imitate Christmas' dress and behavior, he resorts to the inevitable racist naming when angry, telling Christmas he is "damn niggerblooded" and "a nigger" (103-104). Even Joanna Burden, who is too polite to say "nigger," relishes calling him "Negro" in bed and lets him know in other subtle ways that she wants him to play that role. For example, when she leaves food out for him in the kitchen instead of dining with him in the house, he understands her meaning: "set out for the nigger. For the nigger" (238). Eric Sundquist's contention that "white nigger" is Joe

4 Eric Sundquist discusses the fear of "internalization of black within white" pervading Jefferson in Light in August. This fear of contamination is, as Sundquist points out, simultaneous with the need for the black as the defining Other. See Faulkner: The House Divided, 79.
Christmas' "true, schizophrenic name" (Faulkner 73) reveals the power of insistent naming to shape the identity of the one so named, for no one — not the critics nor even Christmas himself — knows whether Christmas has African heritage.

In Yoknapatawpha County, where the white population controls the official discourse, the word "nigger" has an entrenched, tacitly-accepted meaning. As Charles Nilon argues, Faulkner in Light in August explores "the social responses of an individual and the people around him" to those connotations (73). One such connotation is crime, so that the Sheriff automatically attempts to complete the crime scene by adding a "nigger" to it. Even before Christmas is suspected of killing Joanna, much less of having black blood, the Sheriff says, "Get me a nigger," and the deputy promptly returns with a randomly-selected man to interrogate (291). The townspeople indulge in familiar, if pointless, racist rituals, beating the anonymous black man to obtain information that they, in fact, already possess: "It's that fellow Christmas, that used to work at the mill, and another fellow named Brown,' the third man said. 'You could have picked out any man in Jefferson that his breath smelled right and he could have told you that much'" (293). Using a logic similar to the sheriff's, Lucas Burch plays the "race" card when he fears that he is a suspect in Joanna Burden's murder, deflecting all suspicion from himself simply by identifying Christmas as a "nigger."  

Because they said it was like he had been saving what he told

\[5\] For a presentation of case against Lucas Burch, see Stephen Meats' essay, "Who Killed Joanna Burden?" cited below. See also John Duvall, Faulkner's Marginal Couple, for a discussion of whether Joanna Burden's death qualified as "murder" under Mississippi statutes of the 1920s. Duvall argues that Joe's actions would have been considered self-defense if all of the facts of the case (including Joanna's firing of the gun) had been made known (20).
them next for just such a time as this. Like he knowed that if it come to a pinch, this would save him, even if it was almost worse for a white man to admit what he would have to admit than to be accused of murder itself. "That's right," he says. "Go on. Accuse me. Accuse the white man that's trying to help you with what he knows. Accuse the white man and let the nigger go free. Accuse the white and let the nigger run." (97-98)

Once labeled "nigger," Joe Christmas becomes a magnet for guilt and suspicion because the idea of blackness "becomes an almost magic fomenter of sexual fantasies and male violence.... Pronounce the word nigger and Joanna Burden's murder becomes a rape; the white men's behavior moves into satisfying ritual" (Weinstein 50-51). Even Joanna Burden indulges in these fantasies while intimate with Christmas, fantasies which convert her into a Medusa figure who, with "wild hair, each strand of which would seem to come alive like octopus tentacles" screams, "Negro! Negro! Negro!" (260).

The racist fantasy of black sex crimes creates cohesion in the white community and even allows the "nigger-lover" Joanna Burden to be posthumously recuperated by the town, for once Joanna Burden's death is ruled a black-on-white crime, the townspeople of Jefferson all "become characters in a play defending the honor and virtue of the white woman" (T. Davis, Faulkner's Negro 148-149). Even Percy Grimm expresses doubt that Joe Christmas raped Joanna Burden when he describes her as having "taken down [her] pants to" Christmas (464), but "nigger" connotes rapist, and Grimm needs such a "nigger" to verify his own ideas of racial supremacy, in

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6 Ironically, Weinstein himself falls into this trap when he assumes that Joe's mother, Millie Hines, was raped by the circus man (102). Byron's account in Chapter 16, however, suggests that Millie sought the relationship with Joe's father.

7 See Maxwell Geisler, Writers in Crisis, for a discussion of Faulkner's "twin Furies, the odd conjunction in the Faulknerian epic of the Negro and the Female"(145).
essence to fill his own lack. He believes "that the white race is superior to any and all other races and that the American is superior to all other white races and that the American uniform is superior to all men, and that all that would ever be required of him in payment for his belief, this privilege, would be his own life" (451). Serving this belief as a member of the National Guard "saves" Grimm (450), who, born between wars, has no other outlet for what Faulkner later suggested were fascist impulses (Gwynn and Blotner 41).8

Gavin Stevens, Jefferson's own Phi Beta Kappa and Harvard graduate whom Faulkner later described as "representing the best type of Southern liberals" (Cowley, quoted in Polk, 131), reduces the Burden murder and Christmas' subsequent behavior to a contest of his noble white blood and his cowardly black blood; Stevens' blood rhetoric in Chapter 19 confirms the one-drop rule as an essentialist view granting reality to the signifier "nigger." His version of Christmas' behavior is only slightly more sophisticated than that of Doc Hines, who equates Negro heritage with "Bitchery and abomination" (370) and "the black curse of God Almighty"(374). From the most ignorant — Doc Hines and Percy Grimm — to the most educated — Gavin Stevens — all the white citizens believe that black "blood" contaminates its bearer with moral depravity or evil, and that belief in turn stabilizes their own identities in the Yoknapatawpha play of signifiers.9

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8 In one of his sessions at the University of Virginia, Faulkner stated that Grimm "was a Nazi Storm Trooper, but then I'd never heard of one then, and he's not prevalent but he's everywhere. I wouldn't say that there are more of him in the South, but I would say that there are probably more of him in the White Citizens Council than anywhere else in the South..." (Gwynn and Blotner 41).

9 In "Faulkner and the Black Shadow," Irene Edmonds discusses "the theme of Negro blood as a source of defilement," which is presented in Faulkner's novels as "an abomination in the collective psyche of the South" (193). Philip Weinstein notes that every time Christmas is called "nigger," "someone's (or some group's)
Ultimately, Joe is unable to resist the signification of the word "nigger" because he, too, has learned its definition, and almost exclusively from a white perspective. As Lee Jenkins points out, Joe cannot "conceive of himself without reference to racial identity" (46). The Christmas flashback beginning in Chapter 6 opens with the statement, "Memory believes before knowing remembers" (119), suggesting the unconscious nature of Christmas' indoctrination in white supremacy. At the critical formative age predating conscious memory when Christmas should be receiving the adoring gaze of his mother, Doc Hines is present in his sphere, bestowing on Christmas his malevolent gaze:

He knew that he was never on the playground for an instant that the man was not watching him from the chair in the furnace room door, and that the man was watching him with a profound and unflagging attention. If the child had been older he would perhaps have thought He hates me and fears me. So much so that he cannot let me out of his sight With more vocabulary but no more age he might have thought That is why I am different from the others: because he is watching me all the time He accepted it. (138, sic, Faulkner's italics)

Typically, the recognition of difference is crucial in the child's development of individuality, but according to André Bleikasten, this traumatic

integral identity is under pressure or found lacking" (113). Thadius Davis notes that many of Faulkner's novels, including Light in August and Absalom, Absalom!, depend "significantly upon notions of blacks as counterpoints to whites" (64). Edmonds, Davis, and Weinstein imply the white community's use of the negative connotations of "nigger" to ensure its own positive construction of identity.

10 Walter Taylor notes that Faulkner's use of the mulatto figure allows him to "isolate what blacks learned about their identity from whites. Such a man would have no knowledge of what it meant to be black except what the whites taught him" (66-67). Similarly, Irene Edmonds finds that Faulkner "usually approached his Negro characterizations from the outside and seldom worked from the inside outwards" (205).
differentiation “marked the beginning of [Christmas’] schizoid sense of himself as self-estranged and heralded a future of isolation, alienation, and fragmentation” (“The Closed Society” 83). Hines’ hateful watching is reiterated in the distrustful gazes of many characters.¹¹ For example, Simon McEachern is incensed by his adoptive son’s ability to commit lechery “beneath my eyes” (201), eyes which Faulkner describes as “ruthless, cold, but not unkind” (150). The Puritanical gazes of Hines and McEachern are ironically duplicated in Bobbie Allen’s ferocious, “screaming eyes” in her last meeting with Christmas (217). Joanna Burden further reinforces the meaning of “nigger” and Christmas’ childhood experience of alienation by insisting that Christmas eat alone in the kitchen and that they conduct their affair in secrecy, apparently to heighten her enjoyment of the fantasy of violation. Finally, when all other methods fail, the community resorts to violence to force its meaning of “nigger” upon Christmas. Outraged by Christmas’ refusal to act like either “a nigger or a white man” during his capture in Mottstown (350), Halliday beats Christmas more in retaliation for this failure to play the stereotypical role than for his alleged murder of Joanna Burden: “he had already hit the nigger a couple of times in the face, and the nigger acting like a nigger for the first time and taking it, not saying anything” (350).

As a child, Christmas struggles to understand the meaning of the identity others foist upon him, so he turns to the only other person in his

¹¹ In “Joe Christmas: The Tyranny of Childhood,” T. H. Adamowski discusses the importance of the gaze in the development of Christmas’ psyche. Adamowski notes that Joe is “objectified by Hines....Involved with Hines’s gaze is the name by which the other children taunt Christmas. Again, ‘nigger’ ” (241). Adamowski argues that Joe ultimately murders Joanna “to avoid becoming her object” (245).
realm who seems to share that identity, the yard man at the orphanage. (Significantly, this anecdote is provided by Doc Hines and is not presented in the flashback. Apparently, Christmas repressed the painful memory of this event.) When Joe asks the man, “How come you are a nigger?” (383), he is simply trying to grasp what he does not understand. The yard man, however, takes the question as an insult, telling Joe that he is “worse than” a nigger. When Joe asserts the knowledge of race he has learned from Doc Hines — “God ain’t no nigger” — the man responds with a reminder of Joe’s indeterminate origins: “I reckon you ought to know what God is, because dont nobody but God know what you is” (384). The man’s cruelty to a child of no more than three or four years old is at first incomprehensible, but Faulkner uses this episode to reveal the African American self-hatred that psychiatrists Grier and Cobbs describe in Black Rage as the inevitable internalization of ambient white racism. The yard man, himself the object of the white man’s scorn and hate but powerless to strike out against the real source of his rage, refuses Joe sympathy and instead spews vitriol about Joe’s bastardy. Thus Joe finds himself excluded from both the white and the black worlds. In the hours shortly before the adult Christmas kills Joanna, he thinks about God once more: “He could see it like a printed sentence, fullborn and already dead God loves me too like the faded and weathered letters on a last year’s billboard God loves me too” (105, Faulkner’s italics). The image of the Sunday-school maxim as a still-born infant (“fullborn and already dead”) reveals that he has internalized the white community’s hatred

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12 This episode is perhaps the exception to Walter Taylor’s criticism of Faulkner’s black characterization in Light in August, a criticism implicit in the title of Chapter 6 of his Faulkner’s Search for a South: “How to Visit the Black South Without Visiting Blacks.”
so well that even God’s love seems foreclosed to him; any hope of redemption for himself must be “faded,” “weathered,” and “already dead.” What Alan Rose refers to as “Christmas’s total acquiescence to the social idea of his blackness” (113) and David Minter, “Joe’s secret affiliation with the world that pursues and mutilates him” (132), is the culmination of years of learned self-hatred, enforced by the white community and reinforced by his few encounters with the black community. “The American image of the Negro lives also in the Negro’s heart,” James Baldwin writes in Notes of a Native Son, “and when he has surrendered to this image life has no other possible reality” (38).

The Black Body as Sign

In his reading of Intruder in the Dust, Wesley Morris notes that Faulkner “tells again of bodies that cannot be buried, erased, repressed, of identities that cannot be exchanged, disguised, or supplemented. Associated with the world of symbolic order are the violences on the body that put Lucas’ life at risk ‘not because he was a murderer but because his skin was black’” (225). The aim of this body-threatening symbolic order in Light in August, however, is precisely to erase bodies, at least “black” ones.\(^\text{13}\) The invocation of negative racial epithets precedes a violent shattering, which in turn brings about the disappearance of the subject, the erasure of self and body.

\[^{13}\text{Morris discusses Vinson Gowrie’s corpse in Intruder in the Dust and Addie’s in As I Lay Dying. Gowrie’s and Addie’s bodies, however, are white bodies. “Black” bodies like Christmas’, Charles Bon’s, and Samuel Worsham Beauchamp’s tend to stay in their caskets, underground, less likely than Addie Bundren to “corrupt the symbolic order” (Morris 163).}\]
As I discussed in Chapter 1 of this dissertation, Jacques Lacan suggests in “The Mirror Stage” that subjectivity is grounded in corporal integrity. Because corporal disintegration subverts the subject’s image of mastery and unity, the prominent display of the mutilated black body during lynchings served to destabilize the subjectivity of African Americans and reinforce the myth of white supremacy. In the Oxford, Mississippi, of Faulkner’s childhood, the black body was used to “tell the story” of white supremacy and the inflexibility of Southern racial codes. Nelse Patton, a black man accused of murdering a white woman, was violently transformed from a subject to a signifier to be read, bearing literal marks of the white community’s rage and violence. According to the Lafayette County Press report of September 9, 1908:

…the limp and lifeless body of the brute told the story....This morning the passersby saw the lifeless body of a negro suspended from a tree—it told the tale, the murder of white woman had been avenged—the public had done their duty. (Quoted in Cullen, 96, emphasis mine)

In The Body in Pain, Elaine Scarry notes that torture involves “an excessive display of agency that permits one person’s body to be translated into another person’s voice, that allows real human pain to be converted into a regime’s fiction of power” (18). Racially motivated lynching is torture as spectacle, meant to force the white “fiction of power” upon the entire African American community. As John Cullen recalls in his account, anonymous Oxfordians shot Patton, then threw him from the jail, “cut his ears off, scalped him, cut his testicles out, tied a rope around his neck, tied him to a car, and dragged his body around the streets. Then they hanged him to a walnut-tree limb just outside the South entrance to the courthouse” (Cullen
91-92). In a curiously belated act of humanity or censorship, Cullen’s father, who was sheriff at the time, “brought a new pair of overalls and put them on [Patton’s corpse] before the next morning” because Patton’s clothes had been torn off during the lynching (92). But Sheriff Cullen did not remove the body from public display, perhaps because, like the sheriff in Light in August, he was heavily invested in the ideology dictating abuse of the black body in relation to a crime. At that time Faulkner was eleven years old, and although he may not have been one of the “passersby” who saw the body the next day, the image of Nelse Patton’s mutilated corpse resonates throughout Light in August. At the end of the novel, Joe Christmas’ body, like that of the historical Nelse Patton before him, is made to “tell the story” when Percy Grimm castrates him, declaring, “Now you’ll let white women alone, even in hell” (464).

Christmas becomes the passive medium for Yoknapatawpha’s white voice, telling the story as a sign rather than a writing or speaking subject, and the novel’s narrative structure facilitates this transformation. John Duvall notes that a community is defined by an I and a you sharing “a code or circuit of communication,” and in this circuit the third person is always the excluded “other” (Faulkner’s Marginal Couple 26). Within the flashback, Christmas is I, but in the frame, he is third person, the excluded other whose voice is forbidden to intrude. For example, Faulkner refuses to represent verbatim Christmas’ message to the sheriff, inscribed “on the white insides” of “an empty cigarette container”: “It was addressed to the sheriff by name and it was unprintable — a single phrase — and it was unsigned” (326, emphasis mine). Elsewhere in the novel, however, Faulkner prints (albeit under partial erasure) Bobbie’s bon mot, the forbidden wordsymbol “f*king” (218,
sic). Just as Larsen employs third-person narration in *Passing*, Faulkner refuses to allow Christmas his own voice in the frame narration, so Christmas' voice, like his body, is carefully contained in the narrative. Indeed, the key moments of his consciousness — Joanna's death and his own — are omitted from the narrative: Joanna's murder occurs "between paragraphs" (Parker 88) and the third person narrator recounts Joe Christmas' death from the perspective of his white witnesses.

Disintegration is the *sine qua non* of American narratives of race, so inevitably the novel revealing what Charles Nilon calls "the connotative meanings of 'Negro'" (73) becomes littered with the body in pieces. Because Christmas perceives his self-image only "through the hate-filled eyes" of whites (Bleikasten, "Closed Society" 87), he is deprived of the initial image of power and mastery mirrored in the mother's adoring gaze and is therefore already vulnerable to psychological disintegration. The insistent racist naming leads to a fragmentation that infects even the way Joe Christmas sees the world, a vision that precedes his violence to Joanna and the violence ultimately done to himself. When he curses Joanna, for example, his

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14 See Chapter 3, where I discuss Jacquelyn McLendon's essay on Larsen's use of the "disguised I" in *Passing*.
15 James Snead notes the number of metaphors throughout *Light in August* that suggest Christmas is a "background for society's 'writing'": Christmas' skin is "parchment colored," his body like a "kodak print" or "a picture in chalk being erased from the blackboard" (Snead 91-92).
16 For this Kohutian insight into Joe Christmas' plight, I am indebted to the participants of the "Faulkner and Psychoanalysis: Minding the Gap" session of the 1992 Midwest Modern Language Association Meeting: Karen R. Sass, William Veeder, Susanne Skubal, Brent Keever, and Paul J. Emmett. Professor Emmett's response to an early version of this essay, presented at the M/MLA, was particularly helpful in my subsequent revisions of this essay.
17 The disintegration that Christmas experiences in the novel seems to emanate from him to the other characters, even retroactively to characters like the long-dead Mrs. Hightower, who precedes her own suicide with a symbolic gesture:
words invoke the image of a “drowned corpse in a thick still black pool of more than water” (107). As a youth, Joe learns but cannot accept the fact of menstruation; in response to this knowledge, he shoots a sheep and then kneels, “his hands in the yet warm blood of the dying beast, trembling, drymouthed, backglaring” (185). Even among the mundane scenes of Jefferson, Christmas injects the suggestion of lethal violence. Taking the path from Jefferson to the Burden place on that fatal day, his “pacing dark legs died among long shadows bulging square and huge against August stars: a cotton warehouse, a horizontal and cylindrical tank like the torso of a beheaded mastodon, a line of freight cars” (116, emphasis mine). This latent violence also operates when he is at work at the mill, where Byron watches Christmas “jabbing his shovel into the sawdust slowly and steadily and hard, as though he were chopping up a buried snake (‘or a man,’ Mooney said)” (40).

Inevitably, Joe projects his disintegration upon the bodies of others. His irrational violence becomes apparent in his youth, when he beats the young black girl with whom his friends have arranged a sexual encounter. Joe kicks her, strikes her “with wide, wild blows,” and ends in a mêlée with the five other boys (157). Tellingly, when McEachern inevitably whips Joe for fighting, “the sentient part of [Joe] mused like a hermit, contemplative and remote with ecstasy and selfcrucifixion” (160, emphasis mine). The same vacillation between sadism and masochism occurs when Joe “tricked or teased white men into calling him negro in order to fight them, to beat them or be beaten” (225). Once, during the altercation in which Brown calls Christmas “niggerblooded,” he reaches for his razor to kill Brown but does

“The police found her rightful name where she had written it herself and then torn it up and thrown it into the waste basket” (67).
not use it, realizing, "This is not the right one" (103-104, Faulkner's italics). While confronting a group of blacks on the night of the murder, he finds the same razor in his hand, but he does not open it because these men are also the wrong ones: "'What in hell is the matter with me?' he thought. He put the razor back into his pocket and stopped and lit a cigarette...In the light of the match he could watch his own hands shake" (118). As his trembling hands suggest, Christmas' other-directed violence is but a symptom of his own disintegration; these episodes of violence (or near-violence) are what Bersani would call staged "spectacles of pain" through which Christmas experiences "a masochistic identification with the suffering object" (Freudian Body 40-41). The movement from passivity to aggression in Christmas' litany, "Something is going to happen to me. I am going to do something," verifies this identification.

Ultimately, violence is Joe's response to Joanna's insistence that he accept a Negro identity, an identity which connotes sexual prowess, but social impotence, alienation, disintegration, disappearance, and, in Calvin Burden's words, "the weight of the wrath of God" and sin-stained "blood and flesh" (247-248). When she summons him after a long hiatus, Joe naively assumes that she desires a reconciliation, and his romantic delusions reveal touchingly that in spite of his traumatic childhood and youth, he perhaps remains capable of love: "all that damn foolishness. She is still she and I am still I..." (272). That Joe's existence as I depends upon his relationship with Joanna is both very dangerous and very telling, for he seeks the affirmation of his worth, the mother's adoring gaze, from a woman whose remorseless theology is the same as Doc Hines' and McEachern's. Her response to Joe's implicit query, "What am I to you?" (Ragland-Sullivan 48), destroys Joe's
delusion. She desires to send Joe to "a nigger school," not to renew their relationship:

"But a nigger college, a nigger lawyer," his voice said quiet, not even argumentative; just promptive. They were not looking at one another; she had not looked up since he entered.
"Tell them," she said.
"Tell niggers that I am a nigger too?" She now looked at him. Her face was quite calm. It was the face of an old woman now.
"Yes. You'll have to do that. So they wont charge you anything. On my account." (276-77)

Joanna expresses in this exchange her desire for Joe Christmas to attend segregated schools, to announce himself to be what she has decided he is. Her invocation of Jim Crow provokes a doubleness in Joe, a division of self indicated by the disconnection between body and consciousness: "his mouth said," "his voice said," and "it was as if he said suddenly to his mouth: 'Shut up. Shut up that drivel. Let me talk' " (276-77, emphasis mine). He also experiences this self-division during their final meeting moments before he murders her: "his body seemed to walk away from him" (282). Joanna's desires, then, prompt Joe's disintegration, and thus she teaches him that he is not "still I."18

Joe's psychological tension, his precarious I, manifests itself gruesomely in Joanna's murder, which is, as Robert Dale Parker notes, "committed between paragraphs" (88). Like Joe's message to the sheriff, the murder is obscene (Bersani might say "shattering") and therefore unprintable. We get the aftermath, or the echo, of the act as Byron reports it to Hightower:

18 Faulkner's language here suggests W. E. B. DuBois' notion of African American "double-consciousness," which I discuss in Chapter 1 of this present study. See "Of Our Spiritual Strivings," in The Souls of Black Folk.
She was lying on the floor. Her head had been cut pretty near off; a lady with the beginning of gray hair. The man said how... he was afraid to try to pick her up and carry her out because her head might come clean off...And he said what he was scared of happened. Because the cover fell open and she was lying on her side, facing one way, and her head was turned clean around like she was looking behind her. (91-92)

Byron's words, "What he was scared of happened," literally echo Christmas' refrain, "Something is going to happen to me." What Joe expects and the narrative itself anticipates finally happens. The images of the "drowned corpse," the "beheaded mastodon," and the slaughtered lamb are all fulfilled in Joanna's decapitation with the razor, for she is apparently the "right" victim — or at least one of them. What Michael Millgate calls the novel's "willfully centrifugal movement" (32) now finds persons literally in pieces.

Joanna's murder is both Joe's attempt to avoid his own disappearance and his partial acquiescence to it. He realizes belatedly that Joanna had loaded the gun with two bullets, intending murder and suicide: "For her and for me," he says twice (286). He finally determines to hasten the denouement by allowing himself to be captured. "Yes I would say Here I am I am tired I am tired of running of having to carry my life like it was a basket of eggs" (337). Realizing his own fragility (like "a basket of eggs"), Joe asserts the self "I am I am...I am," only to relinquish it.19 Byron says of Hightower that he "had

19 Walter Slatoff notes "the incredible states of tension or torment" in which many of Faulkner's characters exist (68). According to Slatoff, Joe Christmas is "conceived as tension between white and black blood and between conflicting needs to hurt others and to be hurt himself" but "gains no release through his violent actions" because he is his own enemy (70).
given over and relinquished completely that grip upon the blending of pride and hope and vanity and fear, that strength to cling to either defeat or victory, which is the I-Am, the relinquishment of which is usually death” (393). Joe, too, has given over “that grip upon blending” which constitutes the integrated self, the “I-Am,” or simply the subject’s I. As he nears the end of the “street which ran thirty years,” he senses the “mark...ineradicable of the black tide creeping up his legs, moving...as death moves” (339). Faulkner’s language echoes the Dred Scott decision of 1857, where Justice Roger B. Taney wrote that “the unhappy black race” was “separated from the white by indelible marks, and laws long established” and upon whom had been “impressed such deep and enduring marks of inferiority and degradation” (quoted in Sundquist, To Wake 236). Cited as a precedent for segregation in the Plessy decision, the Dred Scott decision found that the “indelible marks” excluded African Americans from citizenship; the mark “ineradicable” will similarly exclude Joe Christmas from humanity. Joe’s I fades, eclipsed by “nigger,” the Other signifier whose mark is black and ineradicable and lethal.

The very idea of fading, or vanishing, pervades the novel. Characters seem to fade in and out of Christmas’ vision, as when the Negroes he passes on the night of the murder “dissolve and fade” after he confronts them or when Joe Brown “vanished from the fall of light...clattering to earth in complete disintegration” beneath the force of Christmas’ blows (117, 274). The third person narrator also describes Percy Grimm and Christmas alternately “vanishing” from sight during the chase scene (460-61). Disappearance is a condition of existence for Christmas, dating from his earliest childhood. When he was three, his friend Alice “vanished, no trace of her left, not even a garment” (136). At first, he considers her “grown heroic at the instant of
vanishment beyond the clashedto gates, fading without diminution of size into something nameless and splendid" (136-137, sic). He later learns that this “vanishment” is rather routine at the orphanage, so when Doc Hines kidnaps him, he believes that his turn to disappear has come. Because Doc Hines is both the agent of this disappearance and the instigator of the children who call Joe “nigger,” the infantile fantasy of disappearance is linked inextricably with his identification as “nigger.” Just as Hines is present in the primal scene of vanishment, he is also present during Christmas’ surrender in Mottstown thirty years later, claiming the “right to kill the nigger” (351). This association between vanishing and the word “nigger” is reinforced for Joe by the dietitian, Bobbie, and ultimately Joanna, all of whom identify him as a nigger and reject him violently, expressing the desire for his disappearance.

After some thirty-five years of prompting, Christmas facilitates his own disappearance. He no longer waits for something to happen but takes the initiative (ironically, to be the masochistic victim) as he sets out “to passively commit suicide” (443) at the hands of the vigilante Grimm:

He just lay there, with his eyes open and empty of everything save consciousness, and with something, a shadow, about his mouth. For a long moment he looked up at them with peaceful and unfathomable and unbearable eyes. Then his face, body, all seemed to collapse, to fall in upon itself, and from out the slashed garments about the hips and loins the pent black blood seemed to rush like a released breath. (464-465)

This moment of castration and disintegration marks Joe’s ironic apotheosis to nigger: “upon that black blast the man seemed to rise soaring into their memories forever and ever” (465). The sigh of blood (“like a released breath”)
marks his final acquiescence to the identity that shatters and destroys him. The “something” which happens to Joe is the most violent form of aphanisis, his lethal mutilation in the service of white Southerners’ definition of “nigger.”

If Joe Christmas dies and disappears, the memory of the “black blast” lives on, for his witnesses are “not to lose it.... It will be there, musing, quiet, steadfast, not fading and not particularly threatful, but of itself alone serene, of itself alone triumphant” (465, emphasis mine). Ironically, in death Joe finally achieves the heroic vanishing he envisioned for his friend Alice at the orphanage, “grown heroic at the instant of vanishment beyond the clashed to gates, fading without diminution of size into something nameless and splendid, like a sunset” (136-137).

Like the witnesses of Christmas’ death, Faulkner himself could not forget; hence in Absalom, Absalom! (published four years after Light in August), he reincarnates Christmas as Charles Etienne St.-Valery Bon, Charles Bon’s son. Eric Sundquist characterizes the transition between the two novels as Faulkner’s inevitable turning “from the tragedy of Jim Crow to the tragedy that made it possible” — slavery (Faulkner 100). For Charles Etienne, slavery’s legacy is a double disinheriance, since his grandfather Sutpen’s racially-motivated repudiation of Eulalia Bon is reiterated in Charles Bon’s own willingness to reject Charles Etienne’s octoroon mother in order to marry Judith Sutpen. His traumatic education in race begins at Sutpen’s Hundred where he learns that he is legally a Negro and where Clytie scrubs him “with a repressed fury as if she were trying to wash the smooth faint tinge from his skin as you might watch a child scrubbing at a wall long after the epithet, the chalked insult, has been obliterated” (Absalom 198). The
"epithet" is, of course, "nigger." Both Judith and General Compson encourage Charles Etienne to go North and pass for white, but they believe — and he intuits — "Better that he were dead, better that he had never lived" (205, Faulkner’s italics). He dies conveniently of "yellow fever" (perhaps an ambiguous reference to his racial designation) and is buried in the Sutpen family cemetery with his "black" father Bon and "white" grandfather Sutpen. The only trace of Charles Bon's line at the end of Absalom is the disembodied howling of Jim Bond. Although Shreve associates Quentin's hatred of the South with Bond’s continued presence as the "one nigger left" (378), the "one nigger left" has been reduced to pure sound (no body): "there was only the sound of the idiot negro left" (376). Bond’s disembodied howling thus evinces the siren’s "unbelievable crescendo" that accompanies and mimics the "black blast" of Christmas’ evisceration in Light in August (465), for both are inarticulate sounds heralding the erasure of a troubling black presence in their respective novels.

After Christmas’ death in Light in August, Gavin Stevens promises Mrs. Hines that he will attend Christmas’ corpse to the train station, where Christmas will be Jim Crowed for the last time. As the servant of the law, Stevens has sworn to uphold the Jim Crow statutes. Metaphorically, then, his overseeing of the burial of Christmas’ corpse is an extension of his juridical function in the novel. It is no accident that in Go Down, Moses, Stevens plays the very same role by arranging the shipment of Samuel Worsham Beauchamp’s corpse, by rail, from Chicago. (And no accident that in Intruder in the Dust, Chick Mallison doesn’t ask for his Uncle Gavin’s help in disinterreing the white body of Vinson Gowrie to prove that Lucas Beauchamp — Stevens’ black client — is innocent. Stevens is very good at burials and
plea bargains, but not at resurrections and acquittals.) While Christmas will rise in the memories of his Jeffersonian witnesses, he will nonetheless be contained corporally and narratively, and therefore to some degree he will be dismissed, exorcised, forgotten. The attempt at narrative forgetting is signified by the furniture merchant’s recounting of Lena and Byron’s comic courtship. Lena’s path from Alabama to Tennessee, “My, but a body does get around,” is open-ended since Lena is free. Her body and her voice seem to extend beyond the confines of the novel. At any rate, she literally has the last word. By contrast, Joe is both inscribed and circumscribed. His circle, the circle he cannot get outside, is ultimately the grave.
Chapter 5
Primers and Schoolteachers:
Resisting Aphanesis in Toni Morrison’s The Bluest Eye and Beloved

She could neither resolve nor dismiss. There were these scraps of baffled hate in her, hate with no eyes, no smile and — this she especially regretted, called her hungriest lack — not much voice.
—Gwendolyn Brooks, Maud Martha 176.

In African languages...each thing is separate and different; once you have named it, you have power.
—Toni Morrison, in an interview with Thomas LeClair 375.

Had Faulkner lived productively for another century or so, he might have been able to complete the unfinished business of Light in August, Absalom, Absalom!, and Go Down, Moses. However, he did not have the extra thousand years that his character Ike McCaslin claimed were necessary to bring about the end of racial inequality (GDM 361). Fraught with fears that changes were occurring too quickly in the South, Faulkner did not live to see the de facto end of Jim Crow before he died in 1962, nor is it clear that he was in fact ready for it. It would take other writers from later generations to complete the overthrow of the Dixonian ideal, the novel as ideological state apparatus for the white herrenvolk. It would take a writer like Toni Morrison finally to reintegrate the pieces of the broken black body in American literature.

"I am not like Faulkner," Morrison declared in an interview with Nellie McKay, chafing at the comparison of her novels to those of Faulkner (408). Clearly such a comparison inevitably contains an accusation of derivativeness or dependence. (Flannery O'Connor once called Faulkner the
"Dixie Limited" for this very reason. However, Morrison read the works of Faulkner and found him a formidable enough force to devote at least part of her Master's thesis to his work, so many critics have catalogued comparisons. Influence can, of course, be either positive or negative. In our integrated culture, hermetically sealed canons are no longer possible. Morrison knows Faulkner's work, and in dealing with some of the same issues in her own work, she does manage to highlight the ways in which Faulkner's narratives of race went wrong. Like Faulkner, Larsen, and Johnson, Morrison depicts the mutilation and disappearance of black bodies in conjunction with white racist signification. Yet because she both depicts the corps morcelé in her novels and returns the power of naming to the African American subject in Beloved (1987), she deals with her precursors, including white ones like Faulkner, via what Henry Louis Gates, Jr., calls "tropological revision" (Signifying xxv). Beloved revises aphanisis of the racial subject as it has been shown in the American novel throughout the twentieth century.

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1 According to O'Connor, in her essay "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction," "The presence alone of Faulkner in our midst makes a great difference in what the writer can and cannot permit himself to do. Nobody wants his mule and wagon stalled on the same track the Dixie Limited is roaring down" (818).

2 For example, in his "Introduction" to Toni Morrison, Harold Bloom states, "Faulkner's mode of narration is exquisitely modulated by Morrison, but the accent of Faulkner always can be heard in Morrison's narrators..." (3). See also David Cowart, "Faulkner and Joyce in Morrison's Song of Solomon," John Duvall, "Authentic Ghost Stories: Uncle Tom's Cabin, Absalom, Absalom!, and Beloved", and Duvall, "Doe Hunting and Masculinity: Song of Solomon and Go Down, Moses," all cited below.

3 See John Leonard's remark that Morrison "ate Faulkner for a snack," in his essay "Jazz" (37), cited below.

4 In The Signifying Monkey, Gates distinguishes between "motivated signifying," which includes parody, and "unmotivated signifying," which includes pastiche (xxvi). In relation to Faulkner's work, Morrison uses elements of motivated and unmotivated signifying.
Having said this, I would like to begin my discussion of Morrison by looking at the way she has reached back to a black female precursor, Gwendolyn Brooks. It is tempting to view Morrison’s use of Gwendolyn Brooks’ *Maud Martha* as the symptom of what Gilbert and Gubar call “the female affiliation complex,” the tendency of women writers to seek out female precursors as proof that women can write (*No Man’s Land* 168). Morrison’s revision of Brooks might be identified as evidence of a variation of this complex, the search for black female precursors as proof that black women can write. However, Morrison does not seem to need authorization for her creativity, as the Gilbert and Gubar model would suggest. What is at stake here in her turning to a black woman precursor is the discovery of an appropriate model to help her overturn or, more mildly, revise depictions of African American subjectivity. Such an overturning precludes dependence on white models and on white validation. As Morrison told Christina Davis in 1986, “I’m not sure that the other Renaissance, the Harlem one, was really ours. I think in some ways it was somebody else’s interest in it that made it exist....So maybe this [current flowering of African American art] is really our Renaissance for the moment, rather than entertaining or being interesting to the Other” (420). Morrison inherits from Brooks not only an infusion of lyricism in the narrative, but a recognition of the danger of existing to satisfy

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5 This complex is an updated version of their earlier “anxiety of authorship,” discussed in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, itself a revision of Harold Bloom’s “anxiety of influence” paradigm.

6 In *Race, Gender, and Desire*, Elliott Butler-Evans uses Gilbert and Gubar’s paradigm of feminist revolt against “patriarchal discourse” to describe black women writers’ relationship to the Black Aesthetic Movement of the early 1970s (40–41). Michael Awkward also invokes Gilbert and Gubar to discuss Morrison’s relationship to the tradition of black authorship (175), which Morrison herself discusses in her essay “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation.”
the (white) Other, a problem Brooks confronts in her novel *Maud Martha*.

In Chapter One, I cited Gwendolyn Brooks' *Maud Martha* (1953) as one of the few novels to articulate explicitly the danger inherent in the white invocation of "nigger" and its connotation as something "bad, or slavey-like, or low" (141). In the same novel, Brooks further explores the process by which that signification renders the subject *unrecognizable*, literally someone whom the (white) Other refuses to recognize. When Maud Martha and her husband Paul attend a movie in a downtown theater, the two secretly dread being rebuffed by the all-white crowd: "They hoped they would meet no cruel eyes. They hoped no one would look intruded upon" (78). Being something "bad, or slavey-like, or low" in the white mind puts the subject beneath recognition, even existence. So when Maud Martha takes her daughter Paulette to visit Santa Claus at Marshall Field's, Santa's refusal to accept her child with the same affection he lavishes on the white children constitutes a rejection of Maud Martha, herself. Because he is "unable to see either mother or child," he refuses to enter a dialogue with the child, so Maud Martha must prompt him: "Mister,...my little girl is talking to you" (173). She recognizes the situation as a potential "crisis experience" for her daughter Paulette, an experience that, according to Judith Berzon, shatters the child's self-image by revealing the child's marginality (Berzon 120). Santa Claus, or Father Christmas, is obviously a figure for the white father in Brooks' novel. His implicit rejection of Paulette, a small black child, is based on her racial heritage, and not, as a child schooled in Santa lore would expect, on Paulette's failure to conduct herself as a good girl. A victim of what Joel Kovel calls the "Ham myth of expulsion" (9-10), she is always already a "bad girl" since she has inherited "symbolic guilt" along with her skin color.
In the lexicon of the white father, blackness signifies unworthiness. And so the Santa incident becomes Maud Martha’s crisis experience, evoking in her both a rage at her marginality and a sense of impotence: “She could neither resolve nor dismiss. There were these scraps of baffled hatred in her, hate with no eyes, no smile and—this she especially regretted, called her hungriest lack—not much voice” (176). In her reaction to the figurative white father’s refusal to recognize her, Maud Martha experiences a partial dissolution, figured as the “baffled hatred” for the other and for herself, and enacts a partial disappearance by effacing eyes, smile, and voice. When signification belongs to the Other, a lack is created — “the hungriest lack”—the absence of voice, the exclusion of the subject in dialogue, or aphanesis. Maud Martha ironically recognizes in herself this lack, a figure of Lacan’s manque-à-être, the want-to-be. But paradoxically, by naming it as such herself (“called her hungriest lack”), Maud Martha shifts the axis of power in signification. In naming her lack, Maud Martha takes the first step in creating, recovering, or simply discovering that voice.

From Brooks, Morrison adapts this recognition of lack, of voicelessness. Like the other novelists of this study, Morrison recognizes the danger of racist signification; however, she focuses more on the system of language (langue) that fosters such racist signification rather than the individual racist speech acts (parole) that cut the characters. As her novels demonstrate, the specific epithets invoked have power only because the system of language is controlled by the Other. The “hungriest lack” is the black subject’s relationship to that white system of signification represented by the primer in The Bluest Eye and Schoolteacher himself in Beloved. Even in Sula, where the white world is peripheral, Morrison shows the formal
education system abetting the destruction of black subjectivity when Sula uses her school slate as a cutting board for her self-mutilation. Morrison’s use of the icons of the schoolroom — schoolteachers, primers, and slates — demonstrates that the education system itself is what Louis Althusser calls an “Ideological State Apparatus,” an institution or structure that reproduces ideology so that the dominant culture can inculcate its values and maintain its hegemony (132). (The legal branch of the N.A.A.C.P. implicitly recognized the role of formal education in racial repression when it sought to overturn Plessy v. Ferguson by challenging school segregation during the 1940s and the 1950s.) In her novels, Morrison reveals how racist signification, perpetuated in part by the system of education, can be lethal for the “racial” subjects, causing dismemberment, death, disintegration — all of which are literal or symbolic forms of Lacanian aphanisis.

Early in her own career, Toni Morrison depicted her characters succumbing to the power of the white Other, acquiescing in aphanisis. In Morrison’s first novel, The Bluest Eye (1970), Claudia displaces onto her white baby doll the fragmentation that she feels, reenacting the lynching ritual on the symbol of white beauty: “Break off the tiny fingers, bend the flat feet, loosen the hair, twist the head around” (14). Claudia confesses that she later transfers her aggression to the white girls, whom she hated: “But dismembering of dolls was not the true horror. The truly horrifying thing was the transference of the same impulses to little white girls. The indifference with which I could have axed them was shaken only by my desire to do so” (15). In his reading of The Bluest Eye, Michael Awkward compares this scene to Bigger Thomas’ murder and dismemberment of Mary Dalton in Native Son (186). As I noted in Chapter One, Bigger displays
symptoms of aphanisis when he displaces his disintegration onto the bodies of Bessie and Mary. Claudia's displacement is likewise a manifestation of aphanisis since her fantasies of the broken white bodies result from her own problematized subjectivity.

Claudia's confessions serve as a preamble to her telling Pecola Breedlove's story. But for Pecola, aphanisis is immediate (not displaced onto others) and irrevocable. "The damage done was total," Claudia tells us (162); Pecola will never find the voice to tell her own story as Claudia does. After humiliating experiences of violence and ostracism, Pecola has increasingly horrifying hallucinations stemming from her very real desire to turn white, to be like Shirley Temple or the sticky-sweet blond who graces the wrapper of her favorite Mary Jane candy. Even in the eyes of Mr. Yacobowski, an aged white shopkeeper from whom she buys her beloved Mary Janes, she perceives "the total absence of human recognition — the glazed separateness" (36). From Mr. Yacobowski's suspended gaze, she concludes that "the distaste must be for her, her blackness....And it's the blackness that accounts for, that creates, the vacuum edged with distaste in white eyes" (37). Thus, his accusatory "Christ. Kantcha talk?" (37, sic) is purely ironic since he excludes Pecola from dialogue by refusing to recognize her in the first place.

Pecola's madness — her mental disintegration — grows ineluctably from the rejection she reads in the eyes of those around her. She hears daily the imperative "Turn white or disappear" (Fanon, Black 100), whether in the form of Mr. Yacobowski's "glazed separateness," the schoolboy's menacing taunts of "Black e mo. Black e mo. Yadaddsleepsnekked" (50), or Geraldine's withering command, "You nasty little black bitch. Get out of my house" (72). Since Pecola can perceive in herself no whiteness, which she equates with
beauty and worthiness, she seeks to disappear piece-by-piece, one body part at a time:

"Please, God," she whispered into the palm of her hand. "please make me disappear." She squeezed her eyes shut. Little parts of her body faded away. Now slowly, now with a rush. Slowly again. Her fingers went, one by one; then her arms disappeared all the way to the elbow. Her feet now. Yes, that was good. The legs all at once. It was hardest above the thighs. She had to be real still and pull. Her stomach would not go. But finally it, too, went away. Then her chest, her neck. The face was hard, too....Only her tight, tight eyes were left. They were always left. (33)

Pecola desires the "pretty blue eyes" (34) of Shirley Temple, but even in her fantasies of oblivion, she is unable to obliterate her own dark eyes, which she believes are the source of her "ugliness." Like Charles-Etienne St. Valery Bon and the Ex-Colored Man, Pecola spends long hours "looking in the mirror, trying to discover the secret of ugliness, the ugliness that made her ignored or despised at school, by teachers and classmates alike" (34). And because she cannot will her eyes to turn blue, she must disappear into a world in which an imaginary friend assures her that her eyes are "much prettier than Alice-and-Jerry storybook eyes" (159).

But Pecola is not the only black citizen of Lorain beset by self-loathing born of misappropriated desires. In Black Rage (originally published in 1968, just two years before The Bluest Eye), Grier and Cobbs discuss the inevitability of black self-hatred in an atmosphere "perfused with the idea of white supremacy" (198). The black subject finds aggression against the white oppressor futile:

As it is hopeless for him to consider righting this wrong by force,
he identifies with his oppressor psychologically in an attempt to escape from his hopeless position. From his new psychologically "white" position, he turns on black people with aggression and hostility and hates blacks and, among blacks, himself. (199)

C. Vann Woodward's observation that the American system of segregation granted whites "permissions to hate" blacks (Strange 64) could be extended, for blacks were granted permission to hate themselves. Pauline Breedlove points out that ironically the perfusion of white supremacy is exacerbated in the North because white folks "was everywhere — next door, downstairs, all over the streets — and colored folks few and far between" (91). And although Claudia originally focuses her aggressions on whites or their surrogates (baby-dolls), she, too, eventually succumbs to the ambient pressure of white supremacy and internalizes white desires: "It was a small step to Shirley Temple. I learned much later to worship her, just as I learned to delight in cleanliness, knowing, even as I learned, that the change was adjustment without improvement" (16). Even the boys who taunt Pecola mercilessly with "Black e mo" do so out of "their exquisitely learned self-hatred" (50).

The young Cholly Breedlove turns his hatred on Darlene, his fellow victim, when he is powerless to protect her from the gaze of the armed white men who stumble upon the lovers. As Michael Awkward points out, even Geraldine's invective against Pecola is motivated by her fear that Pecola represents the "dreadful funkiness" (Bluest 64), those aspects of herself that she hates and suppresses (Awkward 194).

The white desires and standards of beauty are instilled in the black residents of Lorain through many cultural institutions, not the least of which is the system of formal education. There has been much critical debate about
the efficacy and the meaning of the “Dick and Jane primer” that Morrison uses in *The Bluest Eye* to introduce the narrative as a whole and the individual chapters recounting Pecola Breedlove’s history. Doreatha Mbalia, for example, finds the primer material a “structural crutch,” one which “distract[s] the reader from concentrating on the narrative itself” (35). Michael Awkward contends that Morrison’s “manipulation of the primer is meant to suggest, finally, the inappropriateness of the white voice’s attempt to authorize or authenticate the Afro-American text or to dictate the contours of Afro-American art” (180). Although the primer material does have a purpose, contrary to Mbalia’s claim, it is not simply to show the inappropriateness of white definitions of beauty, art, and life, as Awkward suggests. We do infer this inappropriateness from the glaring disparities between the world of the primer and the world that Claudia and Pecola inhabit. However, Morrison undoubtedly uses the primer to show that the self-hatred of the characters in the novel is written within the context of the Dick-and-Jane world, that their self-hatred is, as Grier and Cobbs note, the effect of the internalization of white desires propagated by the Dick and Jane primer. As Donald Gibson notes, the primer material “implies one of the primary and most insidious ways that the dominant culture exercises its hegemony, through the educational system,” which oppresses and teaches “the victim to oppress her own black self by internalizing the values that dictate standards of beauty” (160). Gibson continues:

The implication of the novel’s structure is that our lives are

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contained within the framework of the values of the dominant culture and subjected to these values. We have all (there is reason to believe the author does not exclude herself nor anyone else) internalized those values, and to the extent that we have, we are instruments of our own oppression. (162)

Thus the primer demonstrates the role language plays in making the subject complicit in his or her own destruction and disappearance. Even as the African Americans in The Bluest Eye learn to read, Morrison suggests, they are learning to efface themselves in the same way the primer effaces them. Ultimately, Pecola’s desire to disappear, to dis-member herself, to disintegrate, is constructed within the context of white modes of signification, of which the primer is representative. The black inhabitants of Lorain are powerless because they have acquiesced in signification; everything is always already named and defined by the white Other. Although Michael Awkward cites Morrison’s use of the primer as her rejection of the white authenticating voices used by the authors of the slave narratives (180), Morrison is instead revealing the reliance on this authentication by the black citizens of Lorain, who cannot escape definition by white modes of signification represented by the primer.

In fact, the primer in The Bluest Eye is actually Morrison’s version of what Hortense Spillers refers to as an “American grammar.” According to Spillers, that grammar was never rewritten after Emancipation:

dominant symbolic activity, the ruling episteme that releases the dynamics of naming and valuation, remains grounded in the originating metaphors of captivity and mutilation so that it is as if neither time nor history, nor historiography and its topics, shows movement, as the human subject is “murdered” over and over again by the passions of a bloodless and anonymous archaism, showing itself in endless disguise. (“Mama’s Baby” 68)
Pecola Breedlove is "murdered" by that same "ruling episteme," wielded not only by the white dominant class, but ironically by the African American community Pecola marginally inhabits. For example, to avenge the apparent murder of her cat, Geraldine "kills" Pecola with a string of epithets, "You nasty little black bitch" (72), five little words whose overwhelming negative connotations contain a world of hurt. How did this constellation of words ever become aligned in Geraldine's mind? Why is the use of these words as a weapon her immediate response? Geraldine and women like her, the narrator tells us, "go to land-grant colleges, normal schools and learn how to do the white man's work with refinement" (64). Geraldine, Maureen Peal, Pauline Breedlove, and the tormenting schoolboys have all learned the lessons of the American grammar too well. Geraldine's invective is simply one speech-act (parole) within an entrenched system of language (langue). In an early essay on Morrison, Cynthia Davis remarks, "Power for Morrison is largely the power to name, to define reality and perception" (7). But in *The Bluest Eye*, the characters have access only to the words that have already been defined for them. Hence Claudia and Frieda fetishize words to no avail: "if we planted the seeds, and said the right words over them, they would blossom, and everything would be all right" (3, Morrison's italics). Contrary to their expectations, Claudia and Frieda's words contain no magic, they have no power to save Pecola, at least not in the way Geraldine's words have the power to destroy her. The American grammar overwhelms every individual speech act within the novel.8

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8 Barbara Hill Rigney notes in *The Voices of Toni Morrison* that Morrison "writes both from and about a zone that is 'outside' of literary convention, that
No one in *The Bluest Eye* manages to resist the tyranny of the white Other. Pecola and Claudia share with Brooks’ Maud Martha the inability to change the signifying system which marginalizes them, renders them unrecognizable (as “lack”). Morrison herself views Pecola’s figuration as lack in *The Bluest Eye* problematic, as she explains in “Unspeakable Things Unspoken”:

The shattered world I built (to complement what is happening to Pecola), its pieces held together by seasons in childhood and commenting at every turn on the incompatible and barren white-family primer, does not in its present form handle effectively the silence at its center. The void that is Pecola’s “unbeing.” It should have had a shape — like the emptiness left by a boom or a cry....She is not seen by herself until she hallucinates a self. (22-23)

Morrison here pronounces Pecola’s silence as a figure for “unbeing”; like Brooks, she sees the absence of voice as “the hungriest lack.” This “unbeing” or nothingness is in fact the last term in the white racist signifying chain that begins with “blackness” (Kovel 91). By her account, then, Morrison’s novel collapses her characters into “unbeing,” illustrating the aphanistic effect, the disappearance demanded by the language of the white Other. The primer and the education system it represents are abstractions too big for individuals to wage war against; the “perfusion” of white supremacy in *The Bluest Eye* is not incarnated in a person or people who can be fought against and defeated.

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disrupts traditional Western ideological confines and modifies patriarchal inscriptions” (1). Rigney’s observations are apt; however, Morrison’s critique of “Western ideological confines” in *The Bluest Eye* requires that the characters themselves be trapped within those parameters.

9 Morrison’s reflection on Pecola Breedlove recalls Lacan’s observations on silence: “Rupture, split, the stroke of the opening makes absence emerge—just as the cry does not stand out against a background of silence, but on the contrary makes the silence emerge as silence” (FFC 26).
Moreover, the system has already indoctrinated almost all of Lorain’s African Americans. For them, “it’s much, much, much too late” (Bluest 164).
Ultimately to depict the overthrow of the power of white signification, Morrison must work her way back in American history to the period of slavery, the period in which the American grammar originates. In Beloved, Sethe’s resistance to Schoolteacher constitutes her attempt to render such a change.

Like The Bluest Eye, Beloved foregrounds the African American community, this time the Bluestone Road community outside of Cincinnati. But as in Morrison’s first novel, the proximity of the white community allows them “to enter the yard” whenever they want, to wreak havoc. Moreover, as the novel winds its way back with flashbacks into the days of slavery, the menacing presence of the white Other becomes ineluctable.
“‘There is no bad luck in the world but whitefolks’” (89), says Baby Suggs. And Sethe explains to her daughters, “anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn’t like yourself anymore. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn’t think it up” (251).

Ultimately language, the ability to define, allows the whites to have “the world done up the way white folks love it” (188). Morrison dramatizes the linguistic mastery of the (white) Other which precipitates aphanisis of the “racial” subject in both Beloved’s antebellum and postbellum scenes. For example, when Sixo, driven by hunger, cooks a Sweet Home shoat for himself, he attempts to justify what Schoolteacher calls “stealing” by employing the traditional strategy of “Signifying,” which Henry Louis Gates
calls “double-voiced” (Signifying Monkey xxv).10 Morrison characterizes Sixo as a trickster figure in the tradition of the Signifying Monkey, which, as Gates notes, is frequently used in the African American tradition to subvert white authority. According to Lovalerie King, Sixo’s signifying demonstrates that Schoolteacher’s version of truth is not the only one, but that often truths are “specific to discourses” and do not “travel between discourses” (“Resistance”). Schoolteacher therefore cannot recognize the “truth” of Sixo’s explanation, for doing so would be to let Sixo usurp the master’s prerogative: “Clever, but schoolteacher beat him anyway to show him that definitions belonged to the definers—not the defined” (190). The disparity between Schoolteacher’s definitions and Sixo’s signifyin’ is what Jean-François Lyotard calls “the differend,” for the rules of the discourse by which Sixo argues (or “Signifies”) cannot be reconciled with the rules of the discourse by which Schoolteacher judges and condemns him (xi). Because Sixo is methodically “divested of the means to argue” by the infliction of silencing violence, he becomes a victim of the differend; the wrong done to him cannot be signified in Schoolteacher’s competing (and triumphant) idiom (Lyotard 9). Signification clearly belongs to the white Other, and thus Sixo will later refuse to speak English “because there was no future in it” (25). It is through another medium — laughter and his own language — that Sixo will later communicate to Paul D his final subversion of the master’s authority, his reincarnation in the child Thirty-Mile Woman carries to freedom in her womb: “He laughs. Something is

10 See Henry Louis Gates, Jr., The Signifying Monkey, cited below, for a complete discussion of “Signifying” as a traditional form of subversion in the African American tradition. It is interesting to note that Gates’ characterization of Signifyin’ as “double-voiced” makes Signifying the verbal equivalent to Du Bois’ “double-consciousness,” discussed in The Souls of Black Folk (3).
funny. Paul D guesses what it is when Sixo interrupts his laughter to call out, ‘Seven-O, Seven-O!’” (226). But Schoolteacher also refuses to let Sixo evade the effects of racist signification by creating an alternative language; Schoolteacher’s posse shoots Sixo “to shut him up. Have to” (226).

Nor does Morrison allow us to believe that only the “bad” masters claim the right to assign meaning. Garner, the “good” master, labels his male slaves “men,” and Paul D worries long after Emancipation that his manhood exists only in the “naming done by a whiteman who was supposed to know” (125):

he wondered how much difference there really was between before schoolteacher and after. Garner called and announced them men — but only on Sweet Home, and by his leave. Was he naming what he saw or creating what he did not? [...] What would he have been anyway — before Sweet Home — without Garner? In Sixo’s country, or his mother’s? Or, God help him, on the boat? Did a whiteman saying it make it so? Suppose Garner woke up one morning and changed his mind? Took the word away. (220)

Paul D’s anxieties here reflect the effects of aphanisis. His question, “Did a whiteman saying it make it so?” echoes the question that Ellie Ragland-Sullivan finds implicit in every dialogue with the Other: “What am I to you?” (48), or for Paul D, “what am I to the white man?” Paul D’s anxieties about his manhood reveal the extent to which his being has already been eclipsed by the signifier, whether Garner’s “man” or Schoolteacher’s “creature.” Only by Garner’s desire (“by his leave”) is Paul D a “man,” and both Garner and Schoolteacher have the power to “take the word away.”

Schoolteacher’s dual role as schoolmaster and slavemaster underscores the relationship between signification and racial repression. Just as the world
posed in the primer effaces the African Americans in *The Bluest Eye* by excluding them by definition from the world, so Schoolteacher in his position as the master of knowledge — Lacan’s “the subject who is supposed to know” (FFC 232) — writes and disseminates a version of the world that excludes Sethe and the other slaves from humanity, effectively silencing them. The text book he writes about the Sweet Home slaves becomes more and more menacing, from the “questions that tore Sixo up” (37), to the scene of Sethe’s rape that Schoolteacher supervises, “watching and writing it up” (70). When Sethe tells Mrs. Garner about the nephews’ transgression, Schoolteacher orders the nephews to whip Sethe so hard that she bites off the tip of her tongue. The white men not only expect Sethe’s silence, they enforce it so brutally that she becomes a version of Philomela, the Greek maiden whose tongue is cut out so that she cannot accuse her rapist.11 Sethe’s sense of violation is compounded by the ironic fact that she herself made ink with which Schoolteacher writes; as she laments at the end of the novel, “He couldn’t have done it if I hadn’t made the ink” (271). Ultimately, Sethe and the others choose to flee Sweet Home because “Schoolteacher was teaching us things we couldn’t learn” (191), including their erasure as human beings.12

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11 In “Lady No Longer Sings the Blues: Rape, Madness, and Silence in *The Bluest Eye*,” Madonna M. Miner describes Pecola Breedlove as a Philomela figure since she too becomes enclosed by silence after her rape. Schoolteacher and his nephews similarly attempt to enclose Sethe in silence by beating her savagely and causing her (unlike Philomela) to bite her own tongue.

12 Schoolteacher becomes a figure for the “whitemale” responsible for forming the American literary canon, whom Morrison discusses in “Unspeakable Things Unspoken.” In that essay, Morrison contends that the pertinent question is not why the African American is absent from the American literary canon, but “What intellectual feats had to be performed by the author or his critic to erase me from a society seething with my presence, and what effect has that performance had on the work?” (210-211). To erase the African American subject, Schoolteacher himself indulges in strategies ranging from willful blindness to physical violence.
While Schoolteacher writes Sethe's rape with the ink she has made, the master also reserves the right to inscribe the word in blood directly onto the body of the black subject. As Mae Henderson observes, "it is the white man who inscribes; the white woman, the black man, and the black woman may variously read, but not write" (69). Many characters in the novel bear the master's mark in which they read their own "meaning." As a young child, Sethe is taught to recognize her mother by the circle-and-cross brand that marks her as property. Pointing to the brand, Sethe's mother conflates her identity with the mark, telling Sethe, "This is your ma'am, this" (61). These "cruel hieroglyphics" are the only traces of her mother left in Sethe's memory (Fultz 37), so that Sethe, too, eventually conflates her mother with the mark, which supersedes her mother's name (Christian, "Somebody" 340). Sethe can only comprehend them (retroactively) after a brutal whipping ordered by Schoolteacher, when her own back bears the inscription of the master's definition, or, what she is to Schoolteacher. The torturer, Elaine Scarry explains, inflicts pain to destroy "a person's self and world"; torture simultaneously aims to destroy the victim's capacity for language so that the victim can no longer "express and project the self" out into the world (35).

American slaveholders apparently shared this recognition of language as an expression of subjectivity since they outlawed slave literacy for fear of mass insurrection after Nat Turner's violent assertion of self (Williamson, Rage 9). An attribute of mastery, literacy granted the power to define that the enslaved must per force be denied. The enslaved in Beloved are forbidden to voice their own pain and desires, and instead find their bodies inscribed with marks of the master's self and desire.

and the excision of self-assertive slaves, such as Sixo.
While Sethe's mutilated back bears a painful inscription of Schoolteacher's desire, the most destructive manifestation of the master's prerogative to name and define is Schoolteacher's discursive dissection of Sethe and the other slaves. When he instructs white students to list the slaves' "animal" and "human" characteristics in separate columns (193), Schoolteacher performs a stunning intellectual feat that suppresses black subjectivity at Sweet Home. In her reading of *Beloved*, Mae Henderson finds "the dismemberment of schoolteacher's method" analogous to "the dismemberment of slavery," that is, "the dis-membering of slaves from their families, their labor, their selves" (70, *sic*). In fact, though, Schoolteacher's right to enslave, his right over the bodies of his slaves, originates in the right of naming, of defining: language gives him power over bodies. Like the Lacanian subject, Sethe and her family are "ever more divided" (both as a unit and as individuals) by the effects of Schoolteacher's language; they find their own desires "pulverized" by the demand of the (white) Other (FFC 188), as Schoolteacher denies them subjectivity by identifying them as "animals" and reducing them to their pre-mirror stage fragments. The impact of the master's language on racial bodies is dramatized by Sethe's physical revulsion at the moment she comprehends Schoolteacher's method, as she feels the first tinge of disintegration, the sensation of someone "sticking fine needles in [her] scalp" (193). Ashraf Rushdy discusses the prevalence of what he

13 In "The Telling of *Beloved,*" Eusebio Rodrigues notes, "Interlinked words, pieces, parts, sections, warn a slave about the lack of a unitary self. The slave is a bundle of pieces, of names, food, shelter provided by changing masters; a collection of fractured parts, outer and inner, that have been defiled" (155).

14 See Sander Gilman's essay "Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth Century Art, Medicine, and Literature," cited below, for a discussion of Schoolteacher's historical precursors in racist physiology and phrenology.
terms the "primal scene" in *Beloved*, the "critical event (or events) whose significance to the narrated life becomes manifest only at a secondary critical event" (Rushdy 303). Surprisingly, Rushdy does not identify Schoolteacher's discursive mutilation as such a scene. This scene, however, is crucial to Sethe's recognition of the dangerous desire of the (white) Other; in fact, the trauma of this discursive violence — and not the whipping — causes Sethe to take her own daughter's life. Her vain attempts to explain her actions to the revenant Beloved reveal Schoolteacher's "discursive method" as the cause: "And no one, nobody on this earth, would list her daughter's characteristics on the animal side of the paper. No. Oh no" (251).

Schoolteacher's discursive mutilations in *Beloved* underscore the precarious nature of African American subjectivity and reverberate in the prominent images of the *corps morcelé*, the body in pieces. Corporal disintegration — whether of the subject herself/himself or projected onto the body of another — is the harbinger of the subject's disappearance.¹⁵ In an eerie reversal of what Lacan calls the "jubilant" moment of the mirror-stage identification in which the infant assumes the powerful image of the integrated body as *I* ("Mirror Stage" 2), characters in the novel are broken into pieces either literally or figuratively. There are, for example, several real counterparts to Schoolteacher's discursive mutilations. Sethe passes on her journey from Sweet Home "those boys hanging in the trees. One has Paul A's shirt on but not his feet or head" (198). Years later, Sethe is still haunted by "undreamable dreams about whether the headless, footless torso hanging in

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¹⁵ As noted in Chapter One, several critics have recognized disappearance as a common motif in African American literature, including Houston Baker in *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature* and Roger Rosenblatt in *Black Fiction*, cited below.
the tree with a sign on it was her husband or Paul A" (251). The torso with the sign on it is in fact the sign of the master's desire, the sign that recalls those images, long repressed in Sethe's "rememory," of her own mother's mutilated and dehumanized body, which no longer bears the identifying mark but in the process of decomposition is itself translated into a sign: "By the time they cut her down nobody could tell whether she had a circle and a cross or not, least of all me and I did look" (61). Sethe's experience is by no means anomalous, for later in the novel, Stamp Paid must reevaluate his treatment of Sethe when he finds for himself the sign of the desire of the white Other: "a red ribbon knotted around a curl of wet woolly hair, clinging still to its bit of scalp" (180). These mutilations are not always literal, however. Buglar finally runs away from 124 when "merely looking in a mirror shattered it" (3); the spiteful baby-ghost undermines Buglar's security by destroying his mirror image, which, according to the Lacanian model of subjectivity, symbolizes an integrated, empowered identity. For Paul D, the most destructive manifestation is the figurative one, when Schoolteacher and his fellow slaveholders discuss Paul D's price, "the dollar value of his weight, his strength, his heart, his brain, his penis, and his future" (226). This reduction of Paul D to a pre-mirror stage fragmentation leads to his envisioning himself as being in pieces, for throughout the novel, he imagines his "red heart" removed from him, locked in a tobacco tin.

But the most striking example of the corps morcelé engendered by Schoolteacher's signification is Beloved herself. She disappears not once, but twice in the narrative. Ironically, Sethe slits her throat to prevent Schoolteacher from symbolically mutilating her, yet Beloved's death and reincarnation dramatize aphanisis since her first death nonetheless does
result from Schoolteacher’s racist signification. Seemingly without a given name, she is “crawling already? baby” to Sethe. Only after her death does she become “Beloved,” the word inscribed on her tombstone. Although Jean Wyatt argues that Sethe’s inability to talk about the baby’s death is a refusal “to replace that baby with a signifier, to accept the irrevocability of absence by putting the child’s death in words” (“Giving” 477), Sethe does replace the baby with a signifier — “Beloved” — the word “she paid the stonemason for” (208). The name “Beloved,” like the tombstone it is written on, marks the baby’s absence, her disappearance. So when Beloved is miraculously reborn in the flesh, she must struggle daily with her fear of disintegration. Even a loose tooth can inspire fears of annihilation and prompt the reversal of the mirror-stage identification:

Beloved looked at her tooth and thought, This is it. Next it would be her arm, her hand, a toe. Pieces of her would drop maybe one at a time, maybe all at once. Or on one of those mornings before Denver woke and after Sethe left she would fly apart. It is difficult keeping her head on her neck, her legs attached to her hips when she is by herself. Among the things she could not remember was when she first knew that she could wake up any day and find herself in pieces. She had two dreams: exploding, and being swallowed. (133)

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16 In Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Freud discusses the “fort-da” game as the infant’s linguistic attempts to control the mother’s absence and presence by “staging the disappearance and return of objects within his reach” (14). The word “Beloved” that Sethe has inscribed on her child’s tombstone works at first as a marker of absence, but later, the word becomes a name and so invokes the presence of the child (now an adult). Yet, as Lacan notes in The Four Fundamental Concepts, the fort-da game illustrates the alienation of the subject, or the mechanisms of aphanisis. Instead of mastery, the repetition of the game acts out the “radical vacillation of the subject” as the signifier seemingly invokes the object’s disappearance (239). Similarly, the epitaph “Beloved” supplants the real (dead) baby. The novel ends with the word “Beloved”; with that name, Morrison again evokes the irrevocable loss of the real subject the word merely represents.
Beloved’s fantasy emphasizes broken and detached body parts, the disembodied teeth, arms, hands, toes, legs, and head of the *corps morcelé*; however, this passage clearly demonstrates that unlike Pecola Breedlove, who wants to disappear piece-by-piece and so acquiesces in aphanisis (*Bluest* 33), Beloved desires to hold herself together and thus consciously resists disintegration. When the white Other returns to 124, this time in the guise of the benevolent Mr. Bodwin, her immature intellect cannot comprehend that her mother is trying to protect rather than abandon her, but she does know that the white man, “the man without skin” who “is looking at her” (262), is a threat. As Sethe attempts vainly to rectify Beloved’s first death by turning her violence this time on the white Other,17 Beloved does fly apart, “explod[ing] right before their eyes” (263), “erupt[ing] into her separate parts” (274).

Beloved’s monologue in Part Two of the novel also reveals the dynamics of aphanisis. As Jean Wyatt notes in “Giving Body to the Word,” the monologue conflates Beloved’s own experiences with those “Sixty Million or more” who disappeared in the Middle Passage.18 Recalling her

17 In claiming the Heritage, Missy Dehn Kubitschek notes that under the conditions of slavery and the definition of motherhood it specifies, Sethe has only the option of turning her violence against her own children. Under the condition of freedom, however, Sethe can redefine motherhood so that the violence can be directed at the source of the threat, this time the perceived threat of Mr. Bodwin (175). Kubitschek’s point is well-taken, but unfortunately Beloved reads both actions — the original murder and the belated defense — as forms of desertion.

18 In her reading of the novel, Elizabeth House attempts to force Beloved to conform to the demands of realism: “for evidence throughout the book suggests that the girl is not a supernatural being of any kind but simply a young woman who has herself suffered the horrors of slavery” (17). House suggests that Beloved’s references to the Middle Passage can be explained by the fact that Beloved herself literally experienced transport in the Middle Passage. This reading, in its adherence to strict principles of realism, does not take into account all of the supernatural phenomena in the novel. Moreover, since legal African slave trade to the United
bloody mutilation with a handsaw when Sethe must "hold her face so her head would stay on" (251), Beloved says "I am going to be in pieces" (212), and thus the striking images in her monologue include those of the *corps morcelé* as Beloved focuses on parts — faces, teeth, mouths, eyes, legs, backs — of those in Middle Passage. These terrifying images of the fragmented body, then, link Beloved to all those who endured slavery and the Middle Passage, since, as Deborah Horvitz notes, the enslaved share the fear of disintegration, the fear of the "body exploding, dissolving, or being chewed up and spit out" (164). When Stamp Paid approaches 124 and overhears the voices which are later transcribed in the novel as Sethe's, Denver's, and Beloved's monologues, he knows their source: "This time, although he couldn't cipher but one word, he believed he knew who spoke them. The people of the broken necks, of fire-cooked blood and black girls who had lost their ribbons" (181). Moreover, even the visual representation of the monologue underscores Beloved's disintegration since, as David Lawrence suggests, "the gaps on the printed page suggest the danger of the disintegration of [Beloved's] being" (196). In contrast to the disintegrating Africans, the white men are throughout Beloved's monologue "men without skin." While the Africans in Middle Passage lose their power and their subjectivity in the

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States was closed by 1808 (Genovese, *The World the Slaveholders Made*, 97), at least forty-five years before Beloved's birth, it is unlikely that she was physically present in the Middle Passage.

19 Linda Anderson has a much more optimistic interpretation of this conflation of Beloved's experiences with those of the Middle Passage. According to Anderson, "The language of both experiences is the same because they both reach from dissolution and loss of identity towards the possibility of a new identification through finding and joining with 'the face that was going to smile at her' " (140). While I agree that the language reveals "dissolution and loss of identity," the rest of the novel reveals the dangers inherent in the "new identification" Beloved reaches for in joining with (vampirizing) Sethe.
process of losing corporeal integrity, the white men metaphorically become omnipotent by being boundless, by having no skin. This metaphorical boundlessness mirrors the kind of totality Beloved seeks in joining with Sethe, a totality that quickly becomes in Barbara Schapiro’s words “a mutually destructive, frighteningly boundless narcissism” (203). To combat the disintegration common to all the enslaved, Beloved mimics the behavior of those powerful “men without skin.” As Trudier Harris explains, Beloved acts the part of “an insatiable, exacting slave master who feels entitled to service,” while Sethe must revert to her role of “acquiescent slave” (“Escaping Slavery” 337).20

If Beloved’s being is made tenuous by the disintegration she experiences literally and metaphorically, if she is a figure of lack, she nonetheless has an overwhelming, insatiable desire to exist. For Ernest Jones, aphanisis is the child’s “fear of seeing desire disappear” (Lacan, FFC 207), a fear which is related to the castration complex, but Lacan asserts the presence of desire in aphanisis, for desire itself can never disappear; it can only be repressed (like Beloved herself) to return in other forms. Beloved poignantly embodies the double meaning of Lacan’s manque-à-être, the unassuageable, structuring desire or lack (29), which is both the want-to-be and the lack-of-being. As the narrative suggests, her desire to be overrides even the laws of nature, for her resurrection is inexplicable in biological terms. She embodies desire, she impels the narrative forward, but her lack of being, the fact that

20 In “Escaping Slavery But Not Its Images,” Harris cites the images of ownership and possession that recur throughout Beloved, even in the postbellum scenes. According to Harris, the novel is a caution to masters and freed slaves, alike: “Making another human being one's own ‘best thing,’ then, is ultimately to devolve into a condition worse than slavery and into a transference of devotion from the source of life to its image” (340).
she already is not (her name is her epitaph), precludes her independent existence. Throughout the novel, then, she literally takes her being from Sethe. In reenacting the master/slave dynamic, Beloved causes Sethe’s aphanisis: “The bigger Beloved got, the smaller Sethe became; the brighter Beloved’s eyes, the more those eyes that used to never look away became slits of sleeplessness….Beloved ate up her life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it” (250). While she fears disappearance, Beloved, unlike Pecola Breedlove, never desires to disappear. Hence she clings more fiercely to Sethe, who has her face: “she took my face away/ …I am gone/ now I am her face/ …I want to be the two of us/ …Sethe’s is the face that left me” (212-213).

As Jean Wyatt notes in both her essays on Beloved, Sethe and Beloved each seek a pre-oedipal fusion in Part Two of the novel.21 The pre-oedipal child is inarticulate, but as Wyatt notes, “through the stratagem of the ghost story, which bestows on this infant revenant a body equipped for speech, Morrison gives voice to pre-oedipal desire” (Reconstructing 196). However, Beloved has already experienced Sethe as being separate from herself, as one who can leave her. Instead of finding a way to master Sethe’s absence linguistically, as in Freud’s fort-da game, Beloved “began inching down Bluestone Road further and further each day to meet Sethe and walk her back to 124. It was as though every afternoon she doubted anew the older woman’s return” (57). While Beloved’s desire to fuse with her mother has been frustrated, she has yet to complete the mirror stage, which would supply her with a powerful image of herself as a separate yet integrated entity even before her entry into the verbal stage of development (Lacan, “Mirror”).

21 See also Barbara Hill Rigney, The Voices of Toni Morrison (17-18).
When she looks into the water, she sees Sethe's face, not her own: "Sethe's is the face that left me/ her smiling face is the place for me/ it is the face I lost/ she is my face smiling at me" (213). The very effort she must make to hold the "pieces" of herself together indicates that she has in reserve no image of her totality, no ego or "I" that is separate from the mother yet powerful: "Among the things she could not remember was when she first knew that she could wake up any day and find herself in pieces" (133).

Because Beloved's intellect is arrested forever at the pre-verbal stage of development, she has no means of effectively resisting aphanisis. But other characters in the novel attempt to seize the reins of language. For example, Sixo's attempts at his own kind signification, though thwarted by Schoolteacher's bullets, represent his refusal to be mastered by language. Other characters, too, attempt to combat the effects of aphanisis through self-naming and renaming. Citing the example of Olaudah Equiano and his several slave names (Michael, Jacob, and Gustavus), Hortense Spillers remarks the master's "unlawful prerogative" of renaming slaves as part of the ownership of bodies ("Mama's Baby" 69). Joel Williamson in A Rage for Order notes the changing styles of African American names after Emancipation, as "black people began to invent given names that were not at all in the language of the whites" (179). Similarly, James Olney finds the changing of names a standard feature of the slave narrative, both for the practical reason of avoiding capture and the symbolic one of asserting existential freedom (153). Thus the characters in Beloved seek to overcome the tyranny of the Other and proclaim their own presence through self-naming and renaming. Stamp Paid rejects "Joshua," the name his master called him, renaming himself "Stamp Paid" to reflect his freedom (232).
Moreover, as he tells Paul D, the act of renaming replaces the act of killing of the wife his master has stolen from him (233); the changing of names is a non-violent yet nonetheless subversive assertion of self. Sethe’s mother gives Sethe “the name of the black man” that she loved freely but refuses to name her other children, who were fathered by the rapacious masters. Baby Suggs keeps the name her long-gone husband called her; she repudiates the “Jenny Whitlow” that Garner tells her is on her original bill of sale and therefore (ironically) more suitable for a freed Negro. Like the many authors of the slave narratives (Olney 153), Baby steadfastly refuses to call “herself some bill-of-sale name,” but unlike those same authors, she does not name herself after the abolitionists who befriended her, the Bodwins; instead, she promptly introduces herself to first person she meets on free soil as “Suggs,...Baby Suggs” (142-143).

But creative naming alone cannot resist aphanisis; Sixo is murdered, and the original Sethe (the progenitor), Halle, and Mr. Suggs all disappear conspicuously from the text. Aphanisis is merely symptomatic of the tyranny of the Other that the “racial” subjects have been forced to internalize. The antidote, then, is a reintegration of self made possible through communal and self-love. Sixo’s integrity, what Paul D recognizes as his “manhood,” is fostered by his relationship with Thirty-Mile Woman. He tells Paul D, “She is a friend of my mind. She gather me, man. The pieces I am, she gather

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22 In *The Wretched of the Earth*, cited below, Frantz Fanon discusses violence as form of self-assertion for the black subject who is often denied other forms of expression by (in this case) the white colonial presence. But in the second half of the twentieth century, renaming and self-naming have become equally prominent forms of self-assertion for the African American subject, as in the case of Malcolm X or Amiri Baraka (formerly Leroy Jones). Also see Cynthia Davis’ “Self, Society, and Myth in Toni Morrison’s Fiction” for a discussion of *The Song of Solomon*, where dogged renaming asserts black presence (10).
them and give them back to me in all the right order” (276). Sixo’s imagery suggests that Thirty-Mile Woman serves as what analyst Heinz Kohut calls a “self-object”: she restores his sense of self by reflecting a version of Sixo that is whole, powerful, and loved (The Restoration of the Self). 23 It is important to note that Sixo’s images of a healthy love with Thirty-Mile Woman differ dramatically from Beloved’s images of her own obsessive love for Sethe. While Thirty-Mile woman mirrors a complete Sixo, Beloved’s images, as evidenced in her monologue in Part Two of the novel, are of Sethe’s taking away her face and “chewing” her, that is, fragmenting her. 24 Buglar, Howard, and Denver all share this version of Sethe, whose “too-thick love” inspires them to tell “die-witch! stories” to prevent Sethe from decapitating them (19, 205).

If aphanisis operates through language, an important form of resistance to aphanisis in Beloved also takes place through language, for language can have healing power. As Elaine Scarry notes, actions that restore voice also restore humanity, and one person can temporarily serve as another’s voice:

An act of human contact and concern...provides the hurt person with worldly self-extension; in acknowledging and expressing another person’s pain, or in articulating one of his nonbodily concerns while he is unable to, one human being who is well and free willingly turns himself into an image of the other’s psychic or sentient claims, an image existing in the space outside

23 For a concise discussion of Kohut’s “self-psychology,” see Jerome Levin, Theories of the Self, 93-98, cited below.

24 Jean Wyatt refers to Melanie Klein’s theory of “the bad breast” to describe Beloved’s fear of being devoured by Sethe (Reconstructing Desire 197). Barbara Schapiro similarly notes “a preponderance of oral imagery” throughout the novel (198). Schapiro uses the theories of Klein, Winnicott, and Kohut along with Jessica Benjamin’s “intersubjective theory.”
the sufferer’s body, projected out onto the world and held there intact by that person’s powers until the sufferer himself regains his own powers of self-extension. (50)

In this sense, Morrison herself performs an act of healing in writing Beloved, as she restores voices to African Americans who have been silenced throughout history, particularly during slavery. With the characters in Beloved who acquire voice and use it to help others regain their “powers of self-extension” (Scarry 50), Morrison revises the African American voicelessness that has ranged from Joe Christmas’ taciturnity and Jim Bond’s inarticulate howl, to Maud Martha’s “hungriest lack.”

Throughout the novel, Baby Suggs performs restorative acts of sympathy, such as when she lovingly bathes the ragged Sethe “in sections.” But Baby performs her most important restorative function as “a woman of words” (Harris, Fiction 173), calling her congregation to the clearing and serving as their voice. Baby Suggs, Holy, enjoins her friends to practice communally a sort of narcissism:

...we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don’t love your eyes; they’d just as soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face ‘cause they don’t love that either. You got to love it, you!... (88)

Baby’s sermon serves as a corrective for all the images of the corps morcelé presented throughout the novel, especially those disturbing images of the
Middle Passage contained in Beloved’s monologue. And although Baby herself experiences a “fading” after Beloved’s murder, one signaled by her insistence on studying colors, the fading and defeat are mitigated later in the novel when Baby intervenes from beyond the grave to save Denver and Sethe. Typically, it is as a woman of words that Baby restores Denver’s damaged psyche. Transfixed upon the porch and terrified of leaving the confines of 124, Denver hears Baby Suggs’ laughter and then her voice commanding: “You mean I never told you nothing about Carolina? About your daddy? You don’t remember nothing about how come I walk the way I do and about your mother’s feet...I never told you all that? Is that why you can’t walk down the steps?...go on out the yard. Go on” (244). Her words, like the anonymous inscription “Corragio!” inside the torture victim’s matchbox (Scarry 50), literally give Denver the courage necessary to enter the world, to project herself into the world so that she and Sethe can survive.

Jean Wyatt suggests that Denver’s salvation comes through her initiation into the symbolic order: “she goes straight to the place of verbal nurturance, the house of Lady Jones, who had taught her to read....Denver takes the normal route to separation, substituting signifiers for a physical connection with the mother’s body” (Reconstructing 200). But because this symbolic order is one of “maternal nurturing” (Wyatt 200), it is very different, indeed, from the one Schoolteacher controls. Yet I would suggest that this is not necessarily an exclusively maternal symbolic. For when Denver sees Nelson Lord at the end of the novel, the young man uses language to help

25 In “‘Circling the Subject’: History and Narrative in Beloved,” Valerie Smith also finds that Baby Suggs “preaches the word to restore the bodies of those battered by their enslavement” (346).
restore her place in the world:

It was a new thought, having a self to look out for and preserve. And it might not have occurred to her if she hadn't met Nelson Lord leaving his grandmother's house as Denver entered it....All he did was smile and say, "Take care of yourself, Denver," but she heard it as though it were what language was made for. (252, emphasis mine)

Karla Holloway discusses Morrison's use of the West African concept of nommo: "Nommo ('word') is life-force and has sustained this powerfulness in African American cultures. Its power can be destructive or sustaining — but its power seems to be held best by women who have remembered it creative potential" (41). Nelson Lord's "Take care of yourself, Denver" performs the restorative function that language, or nommo in its positive form, "was made for." Access to this concept of the sustaining, nurturing aspect of signification is perhaps the reason that many characters in the novel, including Denver, can successfully resist aphanisim. At the end of the novel, Denver tells Paul D that she is learning "book stuff" from Miss Bodwin, that Miss Bodwin is "experimenting on" Denver and wants her to attend Oberlin College (266). Paul D immediately thinks, "Watch out. Watch out. Nothing in the world more dangerous than a white schoolteacher" (266). But Oberlin, a liberal private college, is not one of the land-grant colleges that the "sugar-brown Mobile girls" attend in The Bluest Eye, nor is Denver, who has been made whole by the sustaining power of nommo invoked by Baby Suggs and Nelson Lord, at the mercy of Miss Bodwin's good intentions in the same way the Sweet Home men were at the mercy of Schoolteacher and his definitions.

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26 Morrison herself viewed Beloved as the successful (positive) invocation of nommo. See "Unspeakable Things Unspoken" (33).
Ultimately, the women of the community also invoke *nommo* to empower Sethe to exorcise the ghost of Beloved, which she can only do by turning her aggression this time against the white Other, Mr. Bodwin, the perceived source of the threat. That same community also intervenes to prevent her from wrongfully harming Bodwin, who is not really threatening Sethe and her family. But Sethe’s raising the ice pick against Bodwin, whom she mistakes for Schoolteacher, is another signal that the processes involved in aphanisis have been thwarted in *Beloved*. By directing force outward, Sethe asserts herself against the Other. In *The Bluest Eye*, Cholly Breedlove is unable to turn his hatred against the white men who threaten and humiliate him and Darlene, so he turns that hatred on Darlene, just as Sethe originally turned her handsaw on Beloved (albeit in a very different spirit). Morrison states that eventually Cholly learns to turn his hatred upon the white men, “but not now” (*Bluest* 118); the narrative, however, never reveals Cholly focusing that aggression on anyone other than himself and his “loved ones.”

In Morrison’s second novel, Sula must slice off her own fingertip in order to frighten the white boys who menace Nel: “If I can do that to myself,” Sula asks them, “what you suppose I’ll do to you?” (*Sula* 54-55). Although this violence empowers Sula briefly against the white other, it is telling that the

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27 The end of the novel sees four acts of restoration that make amends for past acts. Baby Suggs’ encouragement of Denver is her making amends for abandoning her calling in the Clearing after “the misery.” Nelson Lord’s “Take care of yourself, Denver,” is the righting of his grade-school question that caused Denver to become deaf and abandon school. The Bluestone women’s invocation of *nommo* to save Sethe from Beloved is their attempt to make amends for their original failure to warn Sethe of Schoolteacher and the slave catcher’s approach. And finally, Sethe’s attempt to stab Mr. Bodwin with the ice pick is her rewriting of the past, since she mistakes him for Schoolteacher and is therefore aiming her aggression at the predator (Schoolteacher/Bodwin) instead of the prey (“crawling already? baby”/Beloved).
violence must be used to mutilate the self. Similarly, Sethe’s murder of Beloved does what she has been unable to do otherwise; it forces Schoolteacher and his nephew to retreat in the same way that Sula’s self-mutilation thwarts the would-be rapists: “The nephew, the one who had nursed [Sethe] while his brother held her down, didn’t know he was shaking. ...Schoolteacher beat his hat against his thigh and spit before leaving the woodshed. Nephew and the catcher backed out with him. ...The sheriff wanted to back out too” (Beloved 150-151). But when the price of empowerment is the dismembering of the self, or for Sethe, “all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful” (163), the price negates the empowerment.28 In claiming the right to self-defense against the (perceived) aggressions of Bodwin, a white man, Sethe finally makes the powerful existential claim, “I am; I will not disappear.” And she is empowered by voices of women of the neighborhood, who found “the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words” (261).

Though Beloved and the untold millions of the Middle Passage “disappear” and thus are “disremembered and unaccounted for” (274), Sethe and Paul D prevail because they learn to love themselves and each other. At the end of the novel, it is telling that both Paul D and Sethe consider the

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28 Although I agree with Susan Willis’ claim in Specifying that self-mutilation in Morrison’s novels “represents the individual’s direct confrontation with the oppressive social forces inherent in white domination” (103), I strongly disagree that self-mutilation is further portrayed as “liberational and contrasts sharply with all the other forms of violence done to the self” (103). Self-mutilation is shown in Sula and Beloved as a last resort, what Sula and Sethe are forced to do under the circumstances. Since Willis’ essay was written before the publication of Beloved, she, of course, could not take into account the way mutilation figures as a symbol of oppression in that novel, and the way that all self-mutilation simply becomes more evidence of the hopelessness that causes the black subject to identify with the white oppressor, turn “on black people with aggression and hostility,” and hate “blacks and, among blacks, himself” (Grier and Cobbs 199).
prospect of being in pieces. Paul D recalls Sixo's reverie on Thirty-Mile Woman's ability to gather and return in the right order "the pieces I am," hoping that Sethe can do the same for him (273); Sethe wonders if Paul D will bathe her in sections, as Baby Suggs once did, and wonders, "if he bathes her in sections, will the parts hold?" (272). Paul D returns to 124 to make a life with Sethe because he realizes she alone helped him retain his "manhood"—his integrity—in the face of racism's atrocities. In turn, he will help her work through her own grief to overcome the tyranny of the other and "for the first time to see herself as subject" (Hirsch 271). With Paul D, she will learn, "You your best thing, Sethe, you are" (273).

Although tentative and interrogative, Sethe's last words in the novel, "Me? Me?" (273) reveal that she is establishing her voice and her sense of self after overcoming the tyranny of the Other, embodied first in Schoolteacher and then in Beloved. Paul D's desire "to put his story next to hers" (273) indicates that the two of them, like Denver, have overthrown Schoolteacher's signification and that they will write their own (hi)stories from now on. With the restoration of their bodies and their voices, they have assuaged the "hungriest lack" that has assailed so many characters in narratives of "race." Yet this restoration does not, and must not, minimize the irrevocable loss of Beloved, who like Pecola Breedlove, is a powerless victim. As a figure for all those who suffered and died as a result of America's various systems of racial repression, Beloved must be remembered. The final chapter of the novel asserts that Beloved was forgotten "like a bad dream" (274). But this statement is belied by the last whispered word of the narrative, which standing alone and separate, reminds us of an absence: "Beloved." "Myth is the wound we leave in the time we have," states the poet Eavan Boland in a
reflection on the ways in which History's repressed always return in subversive forms. Beloved, the story of a family with scars of their own, becomes the revisionary wound that Morrison leaves on the history that would all-too-willingly forget Beloved and those like her, if not for the scar, the trace, the absence that (this time) has a shape chiseled as in stone: Beloved.
Conclusion:
Re-Membering Emmett Till

...She tried, but could not resist the idea
That a red ooze was seeping, spreading darkly, thickly, slowly,
Over her white shoulders, her own shoulders,
And over all of Earth and Mars.

— Gwendolyn Brooks, “A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi.”

Throughout the first half of the twentieth-century, black activists had been challenging the “separate but equal” policy that the Plessy v. Ferguson ruling upheld in 1896, but in a succession of cases beginning in the 1930s, the NAACP Legal Defense Fund challenged the Plessy decision with an assault on segregation in universities and public schools. In 1954, some twenty years after the first of these cases, the Supreme Court rendered a decision in a group of cases consolidated in Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, which effectively overturned the earlier Plessy decision. In the two decades following the Brown decision, the waning (white) order made many attempts to maintain control. The political response was the formation of white Citizens’ Councils, whose naming was a nostalgic nod toward the days of the Dred Scott decision when, of course, only whites were recognized as citizens. But the activities of these councils often coincided with violence against the lives and property of African Americans, violence that took the form of bombings, assassinations, and lynching. Although racist terrorism was nothing new in Dixie, these terrorist acts came under increasing scrutiny in the 1950s and 1960s. Lynchings and other forms of extralegal white violence were always meant to be seen, specifically by the threatening black subject, and
these acts were in their very visibility calculated to mean *something*, but what they came to represent changed dramatically after the twentieth century reached its half-way mark. As the post-*Brown* era progressed, white assaults on blacks were recognized by the general public as political actions rather than as morally justifiable acts of retribution. Beginning with the Emmett Till case of 1955, the propaganda of the black body-in-pieces would be turned against those who attempted to build their own power upon those pieces. Till's murder was the "logical terminus of Jim Crow" (Whitfield 107) not only because it represented the *reductio ad absurdum* of Southern race codes, but because it galvanized African American resistance to segregation and other forms of oppression.

Emmett Till was a fourteen-year-old Chicago youth visiting cousins in Mississippi during the late summer of 1955. During his visit, he entered Roy Bryant's Money, Mississippi, grocery store to buy bubble gum. When leaving the store, he reportedly "wolf whistled" at Carolyn Bryant, Bryant's wife, and said "Bye, baby." Three days later, Bryant and his half-brother J. T. Milam kidnapped Till from his cousin's home in the middle of the night. The next day Till's family filed a missing-persons report. Till's body was recovered from the Tallahatchie River a few days later, with a bullet hole in his crushed skull, one eye missing, and a seventy-five pound cotton-gin fan tied around his neck with barbed wire. Although the cotton-gin fan served to weight the body down, its symbolism was not incidental for the murderers, who used it to convey a clear message to blacks in the Delta about their "proper" place in society and in the economy. The water-logged corpse was already decomposing, so Sheriff Harold Clarence Strider of Tallahatchie County ordered that the body be buried immediately. When Mrs. Mamie Bradley
insisted that her son's body be sent back to Chicago for burial, Sheriff Strider relented, but only after he and the mortician signed an order requiring that the casket remain sealed.\(^1\) It seems that the Mississippi authorities literally did not want Emmett Till to be seen again. Till's murder thus contained all the iconography of the narrative of aphanisis: the representative of the Law orders the disappearance of yet another mutilated body, tied conspicuously to the symbol of Jim Crow existence in the South.

In Yoknapatawpha County some ninety years earlier, another casket was nailed shut forever. In *Absalom, Absalom!*, Charles Bon dies because he dares Henry Sutpen to define him in terms of the Negrophobe rape plot: "*I'm the nigger that's going to sleep with your sister. Unless you stop me, Henry*" (358, Faulkner's italics). Henry does stop Bon, killing him "dead as a beef" (*Absalom* 133). But as Rosa Coldfield describes him, Bon curiously lacks corporeality in death even as in life:

> You see, I never saw him. I never even saw him dead. I heard an echo, but not the shot; I saw a closed door but did not enter it; I remember how that afternoon when we carried the coffin from the house...— I remember how as we carried him down the stairs and out to the waiting wagon I tried to take the full weight of the coffin to prove to myself that he was really in it. And I could not tell. I was one of his pallbearers, yet I could not, would not believe something which I knew could not but be so. Because I never saw him. You see?" (150-151, Faulkner's italics)

Rosa's speech suggests Bon's retroactive disappearance as she realizes she

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“never saw him.” Did he ever have any corporeality? What remains of Bon is in writing, his letter to Judith, which has neither salutation nor signature and thus lacks all trace of the personal. Bon emerges for Judith (and for Quentin and Shreve) in writing, in the letter he sends her. But in *Absalom, Absalom!* writing is, as Alexandre Leupin suggests, “always menaced by that sense of absence which permits its ghostly manifestation” (233). The letter then becomes the signifier that simultaneously re-presents and eclipses Bon. Judith gives the letter to Quentin’s grandmother, either to prove Bon’s existence or keep his memory alive, but his missing body and signature override Judith’s attempt to confer reality upon him. While Faulkner recognizes Bon’s absence as problematic, he can imagine no alternative for Bon. Nor is Bon the only twentieth-century character who suffers this dilemma, for the image of the closed casket resonates in many narratives of African American subjectivity, in the locked box containing the narrator’s manuscript in Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (Cooke 51), in the locked and rusted tobacco tin containing Paul D’s heart in *Beloved*, and in the various caskets containing black “criminals” that lawyer Gavin Stevens sends or receives at the railroad terminal in *Light in August* and *Go Down, Moses*.

In both reality and fiction, the sealed coffin was indeed an appropriate symbol for the victim of racially motivated violence, for “the customary fate of black victims of Southern white mobs,” Stephen Whitfield notes, “was oblivion and anonymity; it was scarcely newsworthy, and national memory faded quickly” (147-148). Indeed, three other Blacks had been killed by whites in Mississippi earlier in 1955, including two activists pressing for black suffrage, but their deaths had caused scarcely an outcry (Whitfield 60). Had
Mrs. Mamie Bradley, Till’s mother, obeyed Sheriff Strider’s order, Emmett Till’s death would have been just another example of racial aphanisis, a disappearance behind the signifier “(dead) nigger” in dialogue with at least two white Others. When Mrs. Bradley insisted upon an open-casket funeral, however, she did what neither Rosa Coldfield nor Judith Sutpen could do for Charles Bon: she insisted upon the reality of her son’s body and proved the reality of his being, even if only in the past tense. She asserted his bodily presence in the act of memorializing him and thereby refused to allow his (absent) “body to be translated into another person’s voice,” the very translation that, according to Elaine Scarry, the torturer — and thus the lyncrher — seeks (Scarry 18). This re-membering of Emmett Till was a symbolic gesture with implications for all African Americans, especially the hundreds of thousands who became Till’s witnesses. They viewed his body at the Chicago memorial service, or in the pages of Jet magazine, where graphic photos of the Till’s body — lying in the open casket — were published with Mrs. Bradley’s approval, for she “wanted ‘all the world’ to witness the atrocity” (“Nation Horrified” 9). The photos of Till’s distorted face are humanized by the photographs (published in Jet, the Chicago Defender, and elsewhere) of Till’s bereft mother, prostrate before the casket at the railroad terminal. Images of her grief side-by-side with those of Till’s mutilated corpse proclaimed the magnitude of her loss and affirmed that, in spite of Mississippi’s double attempt to render him absent, Emmett Till remained a person.

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2 I borrow the term “re-membering” from Mae G. Henderson, who uses it to discuss the revenant Beloved in Toni Morrison’s novel. See “Toni Morrison’s Beloved: Re-Membering the Body as Historical Text,” cited below.
The blues singer Jelly Roll Morton remembered the implicitly subversive "Robert Charles Song," commemorating Robert Charles, the black man who held New Orleans police at bay for days in 1901: "That song never did get very far....I once knew the Robert Charles Song... but I found out it was best for me to forget it and that I did in order to go along with world on the peaceful side" (Quoted in Hair 179). But instead of forgetting Emmett Till, contemporary writers have made a gesture analogous to, and indeed made possible by, the one that Mamie Bradley made when she defied the Sheriff's order and opened Till's casket to the world.

In his play *Blues for Mister Charlie* (1964), James Baldwin rewrites the Till case with an adult version of Till, Richard Henry, who returns to his hometown after hitting bottom with a heroin addiction in New York. Richard acts self-consciously, rebelling against the racism that confronts all his family. Throughout the play, Baldwin reveals this racism as the product of white hysteria and self-delusion, for all the sexual desire in the play is fixated upon a series of four black, not white, women: Juanita, with whom Richard and several other male characters fall in love; Richard's mother, who was pushed to her death by white men whose advances she rebuffed; Pearl, the first love of Parnell James, the lone white Race moderate in the play; and Willa Mae, a black women with whom Lyle Britten had an affair and whose husband, Old Bill, Lyle killed in an argument over her. Indeed, Richard Henry calls Josephine Britten, Baldwin's version of Carolyn Bryant, a "tired White chick" (75), and in a flashback scene Baldwin shows her desperation in marrying the backward Britten, her fear of being an "old maid." At her wedding, she silently beseeches her new husband, "Love me. Please love me. Look at me! Look at me! He wanted me. He wanted me!" (82-83, Baldwin's
The charges that Richard tried to rape her are false; Lyle Britten kills Richard Henry not because his wife’s honor is at stake, but because “Niggers was laughing at me for days. Everywhere I went” (75). If Richard’s presence disconcerts whites, his death inspires the black members of the community to a new militancy, symbolized by Reverend Meridian Henry (Richard’s father) keeping a gun “[in] the pulpit. Under the Bible. Like pilgrims of old” (120).

The Till murder also inspired Toni Morrison. In her Song of Solomon (1977), the men at Tommy’s Barbershop ponder what motivated Emmett Till to breech Southern racial codes by whistling at a white woman:

“He was from the North,” said Freddie. “Acting big down in Bilbo country. Who the hell he think he is?”

“Thought he was a man, that’s what,” said Railroad Tommy.

“Well, he thought wrong,” Freddie said. “Ain’t no black men in Bilbo country.”

“The hell they ain’t,” said Guitar.

“Who?” asked Freddie.

“Till. That’s who.” (81)

In response to such atrocities, a group of black avengers form a secret society called the Seven Days, and each of its seven members is responsible for avenging any racist atrocities that occur on his day by executing a randomly selected white victim. Guitar Bains, who credits Till with being the only black man in Mississippi, is the Sunday man. He and Milkman Dead disagree about the morality of the Seven Days. For Guitar, “knocking off white folks” becomes a means of changing what he calls his “slave status” (161). But for Milkman, Guitar’s membership in the Seven Days is “crazy”: “If you do it enough, you can do it to anybody. You know what I mean? A torpedo is a torpedo, I don’t care what his reasons. You can off anybody you don’t like.
You can off me" (162). Of course, Guitar eventually does turn on Milkman, as his murderous pursuit of Milkman at the end of the novel indicates. Thus Morrison demonstrates in Song of Solomon both the temporary liberating effect of turning violence upon the white other and the simultaneous boomerang effect of that hate, that eventually turns back upon itself. In Morrison’s 1986 play Dreaming Emmett (as yet unpublished), Emmett Till himself is a character. In this play, his spirit returns, only to be confronted eventually by a black woman, who angrily questions Till’s desire for white women. Whereas Song of Solomon is concerned with racist implications of Till’s murder — how to be a “man” among brutalizing white men — Dreaming Emmett suggests some of the sexist implications of the Till case, namely the problematic relationship between black men and black women.3

As in Baldwin’s Blues for Mister Charlie and Morrison’s Song of Solomon, the black body-in-pieces provokes black militancy in Madison Jones’ 1971 novel, A Cry of Absence. Otis Stevens, Jones’ version of Emmett Till, is a black activist who is murdered for “stirring the trouble up” (12) during a desegregation hysteria in the fictional Cameron Springs, Tennessee.4 The year is 1957, and Hester Glenn, one of the novel’s two centers of consciousness, fiercely opposes the threat of integrated public schools, striving blindly to “preserve our heritage” through her activities in the Heritage

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3 For more information about Morrison’s play, see Margaret Croyden, “Toni Morrison Tries Her Hand at Playwriting,” and Harlow Robinson, “Dreams of a Prophetic Past,” both cited below.

4 In using the name “Cameron” as the name of the murderer, the town, and Hester’s ancestors, Jones invokes (with irony) Ben Cameron, the original literary Klansman from Dixon’s The Clansman.
Society. Stevens is stoned to death while chained to a tree, as it turns out, by Cameron Glenn, Hester's youngest son. It is Ames Glenn, Cam's older brother and the novel's other center of consciousness, who witnesses the gruesome discovery of Stevens' corpse, whose description closely resembles that of Emmett Till's: "Unearthed from the dirt bank behind it, the corpse lay on its back, half naked, with one stiff hand and arm grotesquely lifted at its side. Ames could see that an eye socket was full of dirt and, next, despite the smear, a deep, black gash in the temple" (17). According to Lacan, the defining moment for the subject, the moment when the infant becomes a unified I, occurs when the infant glimpses his or her body in toto, in the mirror ("The Mirror Stage" 2); Cam Glenn's vicious act represents his attempt to reverse Otis Stevens' mirror stage identification by literally tearing him apart.

As Jones suggests in the remainder of the novel, Cam's original motives — the undoing of Otis Stevens' manhood and, by extension, all African American subjectivity — ironically turn back upon him when Stevens' broken body is reflected in the shattered Confederate monument later in the novel, which black youths blow up in retaliation for the murder. Again, Ames is the witness to the broken body:

On top of the high pedestal stood the fragments of two legs, broken off at the ankle and at the knee, while just above them, beams from the four spotlights down on the grass converged in a bright nimbus of empty air....Ames had stopped at the edge of the circle. In front of him, scattered on the grass and on one of the narrow concrete walks, lay chunks and shards of the soldier. Its head lay under a cannon. (111)

The sight of the desecrated monument unnerves Hester, who believes, "Its absence was somehow like an impairment to her clarity of thought. Broken
stumps where legs had been" (113). This shattering of the symbolic Southern white body (the Confederate soldier) effectively reverses the mirror stage identification of Cam and his mother Hester, whose latent racism, after all, tacitly grants Cam the permission to hate and to kill. The return of the images of the fragmented body, says Lacan, suggests "a certain level of aggressive disintegration in the individual" ("Mirror Stage" 4). It is telling, therefore, that when Cam commits suicide — a moment marking the culmination of his disintegration and but only the mid point of Hester's — Hester sees only pieces of him: "she thought that maybe she was dreaming it. She was a long time understanding that what she saw hanging from the partly opened door of his car was a real arm with stiffened fingers reaching shy of the concrete floor" (199). When Hester herself commits suicide after revealing Cam's guilt to the sheriff, Ames finds her body, and again he, too, fixates upon her hands: "only her arms, to the elbows, were naked, angling from her shoulders down into the tub...Except on her wrists where the vivid slashes were, and on her hands, there was not much blood" (277). The hands, the metonymy for Cam's and Hester's respective blood guilt, become symbolically separated from the bodies. With this revocation of the mirror stage identification, Jones suggests that the lack so often posited in black being, the "absence" referred to in his title, actually exists in the hearts of the whites who project that absence upon others. That absence is finally inescapable for Hester and her son Cam, but Jones suggests that there is still hope for Ames, who shrinks from the horror of his brother's crime.

While Baldwin, Morrison, and Jones emphasize the political or sexual maturity of the victim in their respective representations of Emmett Till, Gwendolyn Brooks emphasizes Till's status as a child in the narrative poem
“A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon” (1960), where she imagines the aftermath of the Till murder from the perspective of Carolyn Bryant, the woman for whom, ostensibly, the murder was committed. Like Madison Jones, Brooks reveals the inversion of the process whereby black subjectivity is undone by a forced identification with the image of the broken or absent body. In “A Bronzeville Mother,” she “re-members” Emmett Till through her act of negative capability, becoming Carolyn Bryant and imagining the undoing of white bodies and white psyches in response to the “hacking down” (l. 20) of the putatively villainous Till.5 In this poem, the white woman identifies increasingly with the broken body of Emmett Till, introjecting the disintegration and projecting it onto the bodies of her two sons and her husband.

The woman in the poem imagines the Till case as a version of the “ballad” she learned in school, another manifestation of Negrophobe rape plot, with herself as the “milk-white maid,” Till as the “Dark Villain,” and her husband as “the Fine Prince.” Then something goes awry with the ballad: “But there was a something about the matter of the Dark Villain./He should have been older, perhaps” (ll. 18-19). The lines “her composition/Had disintegrated” (ll. 47-48) refer both to the dissolution of the ballad, undone by its lack of correspondence to reality, and to the dissolution of the “milk-white maid” herself: “The breaks were everywhere. That she could think/ Of no thread capable of the necessary/ Sew-work” (ll. 48-51). The woman cannot

5 In 1960, acclaimed actress Ruby Dee’s moving presentation of “A Bronzeville Mother” on WCBS (New York City’s CBS affiliate) introduced the poem to a wider audience, many of whom wrote to Brooks (Kent, A Life of Gwendolyn Brooks 152).
reconcile her own situation with the ballad because she begins to conflate the slain Till and "her baby-child," who becomes "the small and smiling criminal" when he misbehaves at the dinner table (ll. 94, 91). When her husband slaps him, she realizes she can no longer protect her youngest child and imagines that he begins to disappear, blotted out by the blood:

She could think only of blood.
Surely her baby's cheek
Had disappeared, and in its place, surely,
Hung a heaviness, a lengthening red, a red that had no end. (ll. 95-98)

Nor can the woman protect herself. Her nascent "Fear/ Tying her as with iron" (ll. 107-108) invokes the image of Till's corpse submerged in the Tallahatchie River, weighed down by the cotton gin fan tied to his neck. In her relationship with her oppressive husband, the woman identifies with Till the victim. And so the Fine Prince's hands wound her with ironic stigmata:

...She looked at her shoulders, still
Gripped in the claim of his hands. She tried but could not resist the idea
That a red ooze was seeping, spreading darkly, thickly, slowly,
Over her white shoulders, her own shoulders,
And over all of Earth and Mars. (ll. 112-116)

The magnitude of Roy Bryant's crime expands in his wife's imagination as the blood on his hands flows to obliterate all of the places suspected of having life in 1950s: Earth and Mars, whose red color is now ascribed through an act of imagination to the spilling of Till's blood.

Moreover, the "maid mild" projects the disintegration she experiences onto the Fine Prince, who dissolves into parts: "his mouth, wet and red" that "would not go away" (ll. 123, 129) and his hands, which he looks at twice,
“almost secretly” (ll. 65, 67), the hands which slap the baby-child (l. 92), grab the woman’s shoulders (l. 109), and “hack down” Till himself (l. 42). Moreover, as in A Cry of Absence, the white hand becomes the sign of blood guilt, so “the Hand” of the Fine Prince becomes a monstrous character of its own in the ballad, signified by Brooks’ capitalization of the word at the end of line 92.6 The disintegration that issues at the level of the body also undoes the woman’s marriage, and this is perhaps Brooks’ most prescient stroke, predicting the emotional divorce of the Bryants:

But a hatred for him burst into glorious flower,
And its perfume enclasped them — big,
Bigger than all magnolias. (ll. 133-135)

The Fine Prince aspires to totality when he identifies himself with “Mississippi” and as “Big Fella” (ll. 78-79), but the woman’s hate, “Bigger than all magnolias,” renders both Big Fella and Big Mississippi impotent.

In The Strange Career of Jim Crow, C. Vann Woodward notes that the Plessy decision granted white Americans “permissions to hate” black Americans (64); as Brooks’ interpretation of the Till case suggests, that permission now turns on the segregationists. “Nothing and nothing could stop Mississippi” (“A Bronzeville Mother” l. 82) — nothing, Brooks suggests, but its own hatred infecting and poisoning all its inhabitants.

Ultimately, grief and loss are perhaps beyond narration. Thus Brooks’ “The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmett Till,” her sequel to “A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi,” is not a narrative poem. Instead, it is a brief imagist poem that relies heavily on understatement. While the

6 Maria K. Mootry also notes the “metonymic references to the husband’s hands” (185).
lines, "She kisses her killed boy./ And she is sorry," cannot fully convey the unutterable loss Mrs. Bradley suffers, the last two lines of the poem suggest the sorrow and outrage her son’s murder produce:

Chaos in windy grays
through a red prairie.

Brooks returns us once more to the power of the images published in 1955 — photos of Mrs. Bradley’s grief, of Emmett Till’s horribly disfigured face, and of the crowds who gathered at Till’s funeral in Chicago and at Bryant and Milam’s murder trial in Sumner, Mississippi.

Roy Bryant and J. T. Milam were acquitted of Till’s murder by their all-white jury, and Big Mississippi did not to ratify the Thirteenth Amendment — the Amendment that outlawed slavery — until March 16, 1995, some 130 years after it was first introduced and long after every other state in the Union had ratified it. Yet the Till case became a motive force in the Civil Rights Movement, which brought to the South either temporary chaos or a new order, depending upon one’s perspective. And far from becoming another anonymous lynching victim, another missing person, Emmett Till himself became a symbol of resistance to the invisibility and disappearance demanded of “niggers” by white segregationists. Toni Morrison, Madison Jones, Gwendolyn Brooks, and James Baldwin all invoke Till in their literary works, re-membering his broken body in order to resist and refuse the aphanisis of the African American subject in white racist signification.
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