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**MAPPING THE LIMINAL IDENTITIES OF MULATTAS IN AFRICAN,
AFRICAN AMERICAN, AND CARIBBEAN LITERATURES**

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Abstract

In twentieth-century African, African American, and Caribbean literatures, mixed-blood women are often misread as figures frozen in tragic postures. Such unrealistic portraiture replicates the traditional white-authored pathologizations of racial hybridity. Drawing on the theoretical framework of liminality, this study investigates how mulattas negotiate their identities in specific socio-cultural environments, times, and places. Four writers of African descent and dissimilar socio-historical backgrounds are studied: Abdoulaye Sadju from Senegal, Bessie Head from South Africa, Mayotte Capécia from Martinique, and Nella Larsen from the United States.

The study is divided into five chapters that deal with the experiences of mulattas in autobiographical writing, sexuality, madness, racial passing, and expatriation. Thematic and stylistic discrepancies in the works examined are ancillary to the common liminal strategies of de-marginalization and self-reconstruction of female heroines. Their attempts at self-assertion appear in the ways in which they resist the constrictions of patriarchal and racist regimes. Their construction of spaces of agency is interwoven with ambiguity, ambivalence, and contradictions, which are emblematic of the discontinuities of their lives and paradigmatic of their intricate search for identity. In the works, the liminal experiences of mulattas are framed within the quests for social visibility, the affirmation of humanity, the renegotiation of space, and the anomic straddling between oppositional boundaries and statuses. Through their striving to rise above the limitations imposed on their gender and race, mulattas commit acts of transgression and dissemblance, and disrupt racial taxonomy. I demonstrate that liminality is a major unifying thread that runs through all the narratives and argue that it creates alternative

existential paradigms for mixed-blood women. Liminality is an appropriate tool that challenges monolithic views of identities through the re-articulation of cultural meanings.

My main contribution is twofold. First, I extend the traditional cartography of liminality, which is usually based on small-scale societies where individuals have loyalty to their primary communities. Second, I suggest new vistas for race criticism in diasporic studies.

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Chapter One

Monoracial, Biracial, and the Entre-Deux

Introduction

Colonialism and slavery have been instrumental in the creation of a web of racial complexities in Africa, the Americas, and the Caribbean. The blending of whites and blacks led to the emergence of biracial people known as mulattos. Since the eighteenth century, these people of mixed heritage have straddled racial borders and grappled with searing and unresolved tensions rooted in the desire for self-definition and self-identification. Race mixing produces biologically and culturally hybrid people whose inheritance of an unclear and unstably defined identity makes them ambiguous. The figures of mulattos have long been and are still associated with the tragic by virtue of their liminal position. Their ambiguous situation generates inner clashes rooted in their contradictory and warring identities.

Nineteenth-century French thinkers such as Arthur de Gobineau and Gustave Le Bon associate miscegenation with degeneration, danger, decadence, and sterility. In *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (1995), Robert Young shows how “racial difference became identified with other forms of sexual and social perversity as degeneracy, deformation or arrested embryological development” (180). Western theorists often demonized mixed-bloods because they threatened the teleological paradigms of their civilization or the supposed progression of evolution, which was sometimes believed to rest on the inheritance of acquired characteristics. However, it is worth specifying that the monolithically and stereotypically negative representation of mulattos is the product of Western conceptualizations of racial difference. The

pathologization of racial difference produces the situation that defines racially mixed people as excluded from the Western epistemological order. In *The Biological and Social Meaning of Race* (1971), Richard Osborne argues that “persons are likely to be treated not according to what they are as individuals, but according to the stereotypes of the group to which they belong” (15). These stereotypes appear in many media, especially literature, which has served as a disseminator of Western attitudes toward miscegenation.

William Cohen’s *The French Encounter With Africans: White Responses to Blacks* (1980) and Pierre Loti’s *Le roman d’un spahi* (1974) exemplify the undesirability of racial intermixture. Cohen describes “interracial sex [...] as the violation of the distance between two species” (235) and Loti’s spahi, Jean, a French soldier in the Senegalese colonial cavalry, wishes he did not have his “dignité d’*homme blanc*, souillée par le contact de cette chair noire” (208) [“white man’s dignity soiled by contact with [Fatou Gaye’s] black flesh”].¹ However, such colonial discourse on miscegenation was rejected by anticolonialist writers from the colonies. For example, the Senegalese author Ousmane Socé, in his novel *Mirages de Paris* (1937), considers *métissage* as a challenge to European mono-ethnicism (147). Others like Léopold Sédar Senghor ascribe to *métissage* the political function of erasing differences (“Le problème culturel” 1-3). The meaning of hybridity changes with locality. In North America, it is often glossed as multiculturalism, in Latin America, as *mestizaje*, and in the Caribbean, as creolization. Édouard Glissant and Antonio Benitez-Rojo are prominent creolization theorists who view hybridity as a contestation of dominant cultural inscriptions and a ceaseless process of possibilities.

¹ All translations are mine unless otherwise specified.

Anthropologists, historians, psychologists, and cultural geographers have addressed the identity issue for mulattos in a variety of ways that rely quite often on demographic data, surveys, or interviews. Although such approaches to learning about the situation of the mulatto are useful, literature offers a particularly privileged window on the subject because it enables the reader to understand the motivations, the nuances, and the textures of the lives of these people as recreated from the experiences, observations, and imaginations of the authors. Literature also links together various disciplines such as history, sociology, cultural studies, and psychoanalysis. In her plenary address at the American Comparative Literature Association Conference at Princeton on Friday, March 24, 2006, Toni Morrison rightly contended that “art summons what other disciplines describe.” Depending on the specialty and interest of scholars, works of literature can be examined from different perspectives. While specialists in other fields can document certain aspects of the lives of mulattos, literary authors convey unique and insightful portrayals of their condition. The contribution of writers of fiction is especially valuable because they are often best situated to provide answers to questions about mulattos: What is blackness? What is whiteness? Who is black? Who is white? How do mulattas live their ‘twoness’? How do mulattas react to blackness and whiteness? How do mulattas negotiate their identities through the liminal experiences of autobiographical writing, sexuality, madness, racial passing, and exile? Are they frozen in tragic postures?

The purpose of this thesis is to propose answers to these questions by analyzing the works of four writers from different cultural, historical, linguistic, and social backgrounds who offer captivating portraits of mulattas. These writers are Abdoulaye Sadjji (Sénégal), Bessie Head (South Africa), Mayotte Capécia (Martinique), and Nella

Larsen (United States). My choice to study mulattas in literature is prompted by the particularity of their experiences as women marked by the limitations of gender. In contrast with male mulattos, mulattas bear the additional burden of their femaleness, which increases their vulnerability and impacts the negotiations of their identities within patriarchal and racist regimes. My interest in mulattas is also justified by the need to revise the overinvoked stereotype of the tragic mulatto, which smothers the complexity, dynamism, and richness of mixed-race representation. As Gregory Stephens contends, “[the] tragic nature of mixed-race people has lived on— in oral tradition, in literature and in film” (25). An important tool in my analysis of their situation, as portrayed in literature, is the concept of liminality. This term is useful for understanding both mulattos and mulattas, but it is especially valuable for grasping the ways in which mulattas rise above the limitations of their gender, race, and class through the creation of alternative models of existence.

The approach will be comparative through the lens of cross-cultural scholarship. My goal is to seek answers to some of the questions listed earlier and to examine the condition of mixed-blood women via the framework of liminality. Throughout human history, as anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep revealed in *The Rites of Passage* (1960), liminality has been a state, a situation, or a condition that human beings experience in their unavoidable movements or transitions toward novel stages of life, including birth, adulthood, marriage, and death (3). Ostensibly, transitions are often marked by destabilization, anxiety, and ambiguity for subjects who are caught between the renunciation and relinquishment of previous states of being and the assumption of new identities. In the postcolonial era, anthropologists, cultural theorists, psychologists,

theologians, scholars of popular culture, poets, and other writers have shown a growing interest in these threshold positions in their diverse forms. Illustrations of liminality can be found in Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994), Mihai Spărosu's *The Wreath of Wild Olive: Play, Liminality, and the Study of Literature* (1997), Wolfgang Iser's *The Fictive and the Imaginary: Charting Literary Anthropology* (1993), and Nathan Schwartz-Slant and Murray Stein's *Liminality and Transitional Phenomena* (1991). However, seldom is liminality deployed as an analytical framework in literary criticism for exploring the identities of mulattas. In contrast to the *mestizaje* conception of such prominent Chicana feminists as Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga, who, according to Suzanne Bost, "imagine mestiza identity as a radical incorporation of differences, a fluid shifting between languages, races, nations, and cultures" (2003, 19), this study analyzes literary representations and reflections on how marginal subjects, in particular mulattas, affirm their humanity and seek visibility amidst patriarchal and racial impositions.

The concept of liminality is very useful for the study of culture and society. It draws on a vast array of areas and disciplines, including anthropology, science, literature, and cinema. It prioritizes the idea of *locations* within cultural and literary spaces, redefines the dynamics of margin and center, and challenges the essentialism of dominant cultural inscriptions. In *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (1982), Victor Witter Turner writes: "[l]iminality is a temporal interface whose properties partially invert those of the already consolidated order which constitutes any specific cultural 'cosmos'" (41).

In anthropology, the notion of liminality is associated with ceremonies accompanying the “rites of passage,” as described in Gennep’s *The Rites of Passage*. He attributes rites of passage to prescribed forms and acts which accompany every change of place, state, social position, and age. Gennep employs liminality to describe rituals associated with seasonal changes and individual or communal life changes in small-scale societies. His study underscores the series of transformative valences of “being” in a marginal and liminal time and space.

Rites of passage mark the transitional period, which is the liminal interval characterized by the individual’s movement from a previous familiar condition or situation to a new and unfamiliar one. Ostensibly, such changes are not devoid of predicament and anxiety for the person whom Turner in *The Ritual Process* calls the “initiant” or the “neophyte.” Like Gennep, Turner distinguishes three stages in all rites of passage: “separation, margin (or *limen*, signifying ‘threshold’ in Latin), and aggregation” (94). In Gennep’s conceptualization, the liminal stage stands between “separation” and “aggregation.” Consequently, it appears to be a *temporary* space of negotiation, what Jill Gladys Morawski, in *Practicing Feminisms, Reconstructing Psychology: Notes on a Liminal Science* (1994), describes as “a particular space/time in rituals, a phase in a rite of passage between the ritual separation of the initiates from the community and their eventual reaggregation in their new place in society” (53-54). Gennep’s theory alerts the reader to the “not here-not there,” the in-between, and the paradoxical features of liminality, but does not reveal the transformative processes taking place in the liminal terrain and how these affect “neophytes.”

The liminal space has affiliations with in-betweenness or what Bhabha terms the “third space.” Both spaces are transitional stages which are fraught with ambiguity, and which also challenge dominant conceptions of the “unity and fixity” of identities (*Location of Culture* 37). Liminality is a key term of postcolonial theory used by theorists such as Bhabha to describe the in-between spaces of cultural ambiguity which stem from the contact zones between migrant and diasporic identities. Several cultural theorists including Turner (*The Ritual Process*) and Spariosu (*The Wreath of Wild Olive*) revalorize threshold positions and affirm them as a privileged space of cultural renewal. Spariosu considers that liminality “may open access to new worlds” by transcending the dialectics of margin and center” (39). These theories are especially useful for understanding the mulattas portrayed in the novels analyzed in this study, who are motivated by an urge to enter new spaces of contestation that slip through unitary classificatory paradigms. Marked by ambiguity and ambivalence, their heterogeneous identities are emblematic of their desire to change.

The third space represents an uncomfortable and unhomely space where such marginal people as racial hybrids, exiles, or immigrants construct their identities in endless negations and negotiations. The third space reaches its apex in the postmodern world, an era of disruptions and instabilities where individuals constantly negotiate rifts between the local and the global, and grapple with the dystopian realities of nation-states. The third space presupposes marginality, which implies uniqueness and difference. It fosters the indeterminacy of postcolonial subjects as immigrants, expatriates, and exiles “in an age of ceaseless migrations of people seeking refuge at various border places or

adrift on different oceans as ‘boat people,’ detained on island-prison camps or blockaded” (Davies 113).

Valérie Orlando, in *Nomadic Voices of Exile: Feminine Identity in Francophone Literature of the Maghreb* (1999) locates francophone Maghrebian writers in the third space because they seek their identity in the boundary between their cultural, historical, and geographical departure point and their land of exile. These authors’ exile is construed as a third space which “embraces new beginnings and becomings because it is constructed within a marginalized space” (11). Hence, the third space and the liminal space favor the transformation and the unfinished process of re-construction of identities. Like the third space, the liminal space triggers uncertain identity transformations. Marginal people seem to work against the grain by breaking the domination/subjugation paradigm and by destabilizing Western discursive epistemological parameters. The unrepresentability of this space—it is located neither here nor there—reflects the unrepresentability of marginal people who dwell in what Foucault calls *a-topia* in his introduction to *The Order of Things* (1970). In particular, mulattas are *unrepresentable* within the monadic and organic discourse of scientific racism.

The nineteenth-century thinker Arthur de Gobineau, sometimes considered to be the father of racism, viewed racial hybridity as an “anomaly.” In *Race and History* (1953), the twentieth-century social scientist, philosopher, and ethnologist Claude Lévi-Strauss underscored Gobineau’s feeling toward the phenomenon of métissage: “[l]a tare de la dégénérescence s’attachait pour lui au phénomène du métissage” (10) [“[d]egeneration resulted from miscegenation” 95)]. The loathing of interracial mixing

exemplified by Gobineau contributed to the tendency to conceptualize hybridity as deterioration, monstrosity, and degeneracy.

In the introduction to her book *Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-Portraiture* (1989), Françoise Lionnet rightly disparages Western racial essentialism as a fallacy “born of the West’s monotheistic obsession with the ‘One’ and the ‘Same’” (9). I would also argue that the West is anxious about the recognition of difference which threatens its position of power. The scientific substantiation of racial taxonomy was dispelled by a wide range of twentieth-century scholars, from W.E.B. DuBois in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) to Kwame Anthony Appiah in “The Conservation of Race” (1989) who contended that race is not a scientific but a socio-historical concept. This theorization of race finds significance in the grammar of racial construction in the United States of America. Before Emancipation and Reconstruction, race was not necessarily the issue because in differentiating blacks and whites their identities were also hierarchized in terms of slaves and slaveholders. In the latter part of the nineteenth century and the twentieth century, after the demise of slavery, the conceptualization of black/white and other differences was further shifted to race. This accounts for DuBois’s statement in *The Souls of Black Folk* that “the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line, the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea” (17). In post-slavery America, the race issue became crucial because whites were in search of self-definition through novel forms of identification. DuBois’s specification of the “color-line” points to the complex problem of miscegenation which overshadows black/white racial dynamics.

The bipolar construction of race is undoubtedly complicated by racial hybridity. Racial hybridity, I argue, creates people who are torn in between two cultures and whose identities are a combination of bothness and otherness. Robert Stam's "Palimpsestic Aesthetics: A Meditation on Hybridity and Garbage" (1999) emphasizes the agonistic dimension of hybridity which "has never been a peaceful encounter, a tension-free theme park; it has always been deeply entangled with colonial violence" (60). The tension regarding hybridity resides in the searing indeterminacy of the mixed-bloods who grapple with their blending of and separateness from races and cultures. However, in postcolonial and postmodernist parlance, hybridity is recast in a more epistemologically powerful mold which can be given many inflections by theorists who adapt the concept to their particular cultural, historical, and political realities. While Stam spells out the agonistic dimension of hybridity, José David Salvidar places hybridity in the modern Mexican-U.S. borderland as an "only liminal ground which may prove fertile for some and slimy for others" (21).

In this study, I use liminality to unlearn the monolithic and tragic representation of mixed-blood women and open up new avenues for critical engagement about racial hybridity. Undoubtedly and unavoidably, the definition of the identities of mulattas is incredibly complex. In the novels under examination, they defy nomenclatures and taxonomies of race because they are *both* black and white and *neither* black nor white. They incessantly straddle opposing racial categories, yet create new forms of identification via various modes of redefinition. Unlike Genep, whose traditional theorization of liminality includes class (1) but does not include race, and mostly focuses on the linear rites of passage in the lives of individuals, I give greater attention to the

liminality of mulattas by looking into the experiences related to the negotiations of their identities. Gennep's tribal liminality concerns the whole society and includes ceremonies "of birth, childhood, social puberty, betrothal, marriage, pregnancy, fatherhood, initiation into religious societies, and funerals" (3). By contrast, the liminal experiences of autobiographical writing, sexuality, madness, racial passing, and exile examined in this study are not steeped in the homogeneity of values and behavior of mulattas and their communities, or loyalty to tradition and kinship. Faced with gender and racial exclusion in either patriarchal or racist societies, these mulattas are alienated from their socio-cultural environments and use transgression so as to create new existential paradigms. Their survivalist enterprises bring to mind Turner's idea of anti-structure, which situates liminal entities outside normative social structures. Their search for de-marginalization and their assertion of humanity leads to the crossing of boundaries from the private to the public, silence to speech, invisibility to visibility, sexual prohibition to sexual agency, racial authenticity to racial performance, and sedentarism to renegotiation with space. However, class, color texture, and socio-historic determinisms influence the nature or form of liminality. For instance, lighter-skinned mixed-blood women from Africa, the United States, and the Caribbean are more prone to pass for white than are darker-skinned mulattas. Their racial passing is simultaneously a sign of privilege and of anxiety.

The different liminal experiences of mulattas as portrayed in the texts to be analyzed are pregnant with possibilities. Although rife with ambiguities, complexities, and discontinuities, the modes of rearticulation of their identities proffer significant psychological and situational moves from previous agonistic conditions to alternative

existential paradigms. These paradigms bring complementary interpretations to Genep's theory of "postliminal rites or rites of incorporation" (11) which include only the traditional rites of passage such as marriage and motherhood. In the present study, incorporation is individually-based and only includes sanity or mental recovery. What Genep conceives of as incorporation takes shape here in quite different forms of liminality for mulattas whose redefinition processes blur the limits of racial taxonomies and transcend spatial boundaries.

In *The Ritual Process*, Turner likens the temporary indefinition of the initiands in Ndembu society in Zambia, where he conducted his anthropological studies of ritual performance, to "death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon" (95). Each of these images shows the extent to which liminality is a catalyst for rebirth. The imagery of dissolution and gestation associated with liminality is very important for understanding the transformative process through which the liminal subject, and, more precisely, the initiand, goes, thanks to his/her transition to adulthood. Camara Laye's *L'Enfant noir* (1953) makes a link between the young narrator's circumcision rite and his rebirth (124). Like Laye's narrator, who cannot retrieve his pre-manhood status and condition, the mulattas' previous socio-cultural statuses are transformed by their renewing experiences. Indeed, the heroines in the books examined in this study transcend the overinvoked tragic mulatto stereotype.

Mulattas experience liminality in varying degrees. My analysis of liminal identities will examine what Chandra Talpade Mohanty calls "common differences" in her path-breaking book, *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (1991). I will

frame the different experiences of mulattas within their common desire to rise above the limitations of their gender and race. As the texts will reveal, geographical locations, historical determinisms, organizational and hierarchical structures, and the scale of values of societies all impact the experiences of mulattas. Colonialism and slavery, which have been the major catalysts for racial mixture, are the roots of the sociopsychological responses of mulattas to their various predicaments. In Africa and the Caribbean, the assimilationist policies of colonialism colonize the minds and demeanor of the colonized. In *Le discours antillais* (1981), the Martinican theorist Edouard Glissant underscores the psychological effects of colonial domination on Martinicans in the period before World War II. Assimilation was so deep-seated in their minds that they tended to reject their “Africanness” for “Frenchness.” They conceived of the word African as an insult (16).

The rejection of black values and culture is substituted in the post-World War II period by the liberating ideas championed by Frantz Fanon and Aimé Césaire, who accepted and revalorized their cultural heritage. At the end of Césaire’s *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal* (1956), the *nègre* stands up, free from his chains literally and metaphorically: “Et elle est debout la négraille/ la négraille assise/ inattendument debout/ debout dans la cale/ debout dans les cabines/ debout sur le pont/ debout dans le vent/ debout sous le soleil/ debout dans le sang/ debout et libre” (31) [“And the ‘poor-old-Negro’ is standing up/ the seated ‘poor-old-Negro’/unexpectedly standing/ upright in the hold/ upright in the cabins/ upright on the bridge/ upright in the wind/ upright under the sun/ upright in the blood/ upright and free” (133-35)]. Blacks and mulattos in the colony of Martinique became full French citizens after the change in status of the island to an Overseas Department of France on January 1, 1948.

In the novels examined in this study, the rejection of black values is rooted in the culture of colonialism. Abdul JanMohamed in *Manichean Aesthetics: The Politics of Literature in Colonial Africa* (1983) insists on the depersonalization and the confusing situation of the colonial subject, who is “deprived of his own culture and prevented from participating in that of the colonizer” (5). In the United States, much of Africa, and the Caribbean, mulattas experience an alienation from their black heritage because of their internalization of the negative stereotypes associated with black identity.

The rejection of blackness occurs most often in light-skinned and near-white mulattas in the books analyzed. Their color “privilege” generally endows them with a false sense of superiority and self-importance. Not only do they despise and look down upon their darker-skinned sisters, but, above all, they seek to gain admittance and authority in white social circles. Class considerations exacerbate the divisions among mulattas. Near-white mulattas in the novels by Abdoulaye Sadjı and Nella Larsen are upper-class and are set in opposition to the darker and lower-class mulattas. This overt hierarchical classification of mulattas diversifies their experiences of liminality. For example, sophisticated mulattas who have an elevated sense of their social status are more prone to seek ways to climb the social ladder.

For the analysis of the diversity of conditions that mark the lives of mulattas in fictional portrayals, the present study is organized into five chapters. The introductory chapter articulates the meanings attached to blackness, whiteness, hybridity, and liminality. The four sites that feature in the analysis of liminal identities of mulattas are the United States of America, West Africa, South Africa, and the Caribbean. In the first part, special attention is given to the evolution of the racial categories of blackness and

whiteness across time, their particularisms contingent upon societal and cultural realities, and their intersections with class factors. The subsequent segment on liminality deals with the stages of separation, liminality, and aggregation, as suggested in Genep's theorization of the subject. Current approaches to liminality as well as assessments of their applicability to the experiences of mulattas are described.

The second chapter analyzes the ways in which autobiographical writing enables the two racially-mixed writers to come to terms with their biracial heritage. Bessie Head's *A Question of Power* (1973) and Mayotte Capécia's *Je suis martiniquaise* (1948) are peculiar novelized autobiographies, written away from their authors' native lands and illustrating their yearning and search for rootedness. Deeply suffused with the painful legacy of the horrors of racial segregation in apartheid-ridden South Africa, Head's fictionalized autobiography is not only a liminal genre used to consider the interactions between race and gender, but is also a means to exteriorize interior demons. As for Capécia's work, the use of the name Mayotte for the protagonist raises questions about the relationship between the narrator and the author, as Beatrice Stith Clark's research on the author's life casts doubt on certain aspects of her autobiographical account. I argue that in the case of both Head and Capécia, their autobiographical writings are, and record, liminal experiences contributing to the re-creation of their identities.

The third chapter charts the complex sexual negotiations of mulattas by virtue of the interweaving of the socio-historical determinisms of colonialism, the Harlem Renaissance, and sexuality. The alienating repercussions of the colonial machine on the mixed-blood women in Sadjji's *Nini, mulâtresse du Sénégal* (1954) and Capécia's *La négresse blanche* (1950) account for their insatiable desire for marriage to white men.

The racially constructed stereotypes of black female hypersexuality in Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928) encourage the heroine to repress her sexuality for the sake of social respectability. The focus is on the interrelatedness of race, history, gender, class, and sexuality.

The fourth chapter addresses how madness in Head's *A Question of Power*, and racial passing in Larsen's *Passing* (1929), constitute strategies for increased social visibility. Although thematically unrelated and operating in different spheres, both enterprises open up alternative paradigms for the redefinition of mulattas. In these works, madness and racial passing may both be viewed as forms of mental alienation. They lead to the transgression of the boundaries delineating the normal and the abnormal in *A Question of Power* and the boundaries of racial taxonomy in *Passing*. Moreover, the blurring of these boundaries by the heroines, who oscillate between two oppositional states, disrupts Western epistemology.

The last chapter addresses the liminal transformation of mulattas through the poetics of expatriation. Relocation to the metropolitan center of France is rooted in the socio-historical determinisms of colonialism and is indicative of geographical, psychological, and epistemological changes. Exile unshackles Sadji's mulatta from her agonistic relationships with her Saint-Louis community and the pangs of class antagonisms that oppose the darker-skinned inhabitants to those who are lighter-skinned. Exile equally liberates Capécia's racially mixed heroines from the anxieties of their social exclusion in post-World War II Martinique. However, when expatriation becomes mixed with nostalgic gazes, as in *Je suis martiniquaise*, the border crosser grapples with the

dialectics of exile and nationalism. The focus will be on the alternative reinvention of the identities of mulattas and on their complex becomings.

Black/White Polarization

La tribu-race n'existe qu'au niveau d'une race opprimée, et au nom d'une oppression qu'elle subit: il n'ya pas de race qu'inférieure, minoritaire, il n'ya pas de race dominante, une race ne se définit pas par sa pureté, mais au contraire par l'impureté qu'un système de domination lui confère. (470)

[The race-tribe exists only at the level of an oppressed race and in the name of oppression it suffers: there is no race but inferior, minoritarian; there is no dominant race; a race is defined not by its purity but rather by the impurity conferred upon it by a system of domination. (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 379)]

In “Micropolitics and Segmentarity,” a section of their book *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1987), Deleuze and Guattari underscore the “segmentarity” of human beings whose lives are governed by the principle of duality (208). This remark is channeled through the Manichean existence of good and evil on earth as well as the original binary categorization of humans according to their sex and gender, among other characteristics.

This statement by Deleuze and Guattari is useful for the problematization of Western racial theories. The two theoreticians unravel the limitations of the binaristic classification of races, as seen in eighteenth-century Euro-American discourse, according to criteria of purity and impurity. Discursive power willfully dis-places and garbles the

ontological racial configuration. A welter of complexities surrounds the concept of race, which is too complex and multi-faceted to be reduced to a single definition.

In *Anthropology* (1923), A. L. Kroeber articulates the conundrum of the origin of races. He points out the inaccuracy and incompleteness of anthropological studies concerning the history of races, their subdivisions, and differentiation processes. The general assumption is that races derive from a single species known as *Homo sapiens*. However, I argue that many gaps need to be filled in order to understand how and under what circumstances the general assumption of the common ancestry of mankind engenders concepts about different races. Prior to the nomenclature of race, the human population was classified in smaller groups, each more or less united by a distinctive repertoire of cultural and physiological traits. In the pre-racial world, as Taylor explains, culture and physiology were distinguishing factors among people, irrespective of the racial paradigm:

The ancient Greeks, for example, are well known both for distinguishing themselves from the “barbarians” who inhabited other lands (as we see in Aristotle) and for the wealth of quasi-ethnographic description of the appearance and behavior of these other peoples (as we see in Herodotus). (Taylor 21)

The absence of race-thinking does not preclude the notion of hierarchization. The assumed superiority of the Greeks and the marginalization of non-Greeks partake of the two-fold logic of difference. The exclusion of the barbarians from the “civilized” universe of the Greeks results from their cultural, physical, and geographical difference. Ethnocentrism and ethnography have defined the relations between Greeks and barbarians.

The absence of racial difference is equally evident in the chronicles of early modern European exploration, conquest, and colonization. During this era, geography was primarily the main marker of difference, not physical appearance. The geographer and historian Richard Hakluyt described Norway after the supposed conquest of the country by King Arthur, saying that the savagery of Northern Europeans was determined by their geographical difference: “[t]hese people were wild and savage, and had not in them the love of God nor of their neighbors, because all evill commeth from the North” (6-7). White racial identity was constructed and reinforced through contacts between non-white people as a result of exploration and colonization. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, nationalistic and religious criteria defined whiteness. Winthrop Jordan underscores how the Englishness, Christianity, and freedom of the English settlers determine their supremacy: “[f]or Englishmen planting in America, then, it was of the utmost importance to know that they were Englishmen, which was to say that they were educated, Christian, civilized, and free” (45-46). The transformation from colonies to nation-states shifts the focus to a complex and pluralistic American national identity which incorporates different immigrant nationalities, races, and ethnicities. The main question is to distinguish between Americans and non-Americans. Aboriginal Native Americans, English merchants, and African slaves are all components of the population. It is important to specify that slaves, blacks coming from Africa, and also white indentees from other European ethnicities were regarded as inferior to the English, who were considered the “unsullied” white race. American whiteness is therefore essentially a white English colonial male creation.

In early anthropological studies, physical traits were the fundamental characteristics from which racial groups were constructed. Using hair form, nose shape, and head shape as criteria of distinction, Kroeber classifies three main races: Caucasoid, Mongoloid, and Negroid, commonly referred to as white, yellow, and black (49). In *Who is Black? One Nation's Definition* (1991), James F. Davis explains the relationship between race and phenotype, and corroborates Kroeber's ostensibly scientific principle for establishing discrete racial categories. I find this racial configuration uncomplicated by such socially constructed factors as color and class, as seen in contemporary racial discourse, that augment the complexity of racial discourse. One can sense the incompleteness and limitations of this definition with respect to the evolution of the human species. The uniformity and fixity of features evoke the simplistic and essentialist bent of those practitioners of physical anthropology who tend to exclude difference. However, racial definitions are not only premised upon physiological features. The Senegalese thinker Cheikh Anta Diop in *Nations Nègres et Culture: De l'antiquité nègre égyptienne aux problèmes culturels de l'Afrique noire d'aujourd'hui* (1955) has the same classification as Kroeber, but goes beyond him by evoking the issue of racial mixing in a footnote: "[I]a race jaune serait elle-même le résultat d'un croisement de noirs et de blancs à une époque très ancienne de l'histoire de l'humanité" (60) [the yellow race would result from interbreeding between blacks and whites at a very remote time of human history].

The ideas of the evolution and unequal development of the several races on earth became reinforced in the Enlightenment, when polygenicists such as Kant, Hume, Hegel, Montesquieu, and Voltaire disapproved of the belief in the common ancestry of human

beings and firmly supported the superiority of the white race. In his essay “Of National Characters” Hume evinced an overt sense of racial superiority:

I am apt to suspect the Negroes and in general all other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds) to be naturally inferior to the whites. There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation. No ingenious manufacturers amongst them, no arts, no sciences. On the other hand, the most rude and barbarous of the whites, such as the ancient GERMANS, the present TARTARS, have still something eminent about them, in their valour, form of government, or some other particular. Such a uniform and constant difference could not happen [...] if nature had not made an original distinction betwixt these breeds of men (208).

Hume’s remark about the “Negro” race was grounded in his theory of human nature. He believed that the “Negro” does not possess the specific mental abilities needed to produce science and culture. The pseudo-scientific racial taxonomy created by such white supremacists as Hume has been criticized by Afrocentric and Americentric scholars such as Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze and Henry Louis Gates. Gates locates the “usages of race [...] in the dubious pseudoscience of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries” (“Race” 4) and Eze argues that “Enlightenment philosophy was instrumental in codifying and institutionalizing both the scientific and popular European perceptions of the human race. The numerous writings on race by Hume, Kant, and Hegel played a strong role in articulating Europe’s sense not only of its cultural but also racial superiority” (5).

The sense of racial superiority that Europeans of the Enlightenment and other eras have felt over non-Europeans leads to many reactions among critics. Paul Taylor's *Race: A Philosophical Introduction* (2004) ascribes the dichotomized and hierarchical classification of human beings to "modern racialism" (17). I contend that the association of blackness with negativity is specifically grounded in purely racist ideology. Naming and categorizing are Western ideological devices meant to perpetuate hegemony. One of the books that reveal the biased Manichean distinction of blackness and whiteness is Jordan's historical study *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (1968), which addresses the behavior of early North Americans towards blacks and explains the extent to which the black/white contrast is deeply seated in English culture. Indeed, "racial purity" fills monologic and hegemonic Western discourse: "[w]hite and black connoted purity and filthiness, virginity and sin, virtue and baseness, beauty and ugliness, beneficence and evil, God and the devil" (7). The oppositional schema in this statement overtly expresses racial binarism in terms of Manichean aesthetics. I argue that Western racial definitions conflate with racist feelings and thus obliterate the subjectivity of the other-not-me.

The ideological production of the civilized European subject and his barbarous other appears in many works of Western literature, such as, to cite one well-known example, William Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Othello: The Moor of Venice* (1622), where Othello, though he is a proud black military officer of the Venetian state and white Desdemona's husband, cannot escape racist stereotypes. In his conversation with Desdemona's father, Brabantio, Iago, the deceitful villain in the play, evinces his racist feelings toward Othello: "an old black ram is tugging your white ewe" (4). Beyond the

racial split, the animal metaphors emphasize the victimization of the white female by the sexually “voracious” black male. The image of lecherousness of black Africans dates to the Middle Ages and persists in twentieth-century African, African-American, and Caribbean literature. Frantz Fanon’s path-breaking work *Peau noire, masques blancs* (1952) examines the Western perception of blacks as oversexualized creatures, incapable of control and restraint on account of their “savage” instincts. The dichotomization of blackness and whiteness is not solely incumbent upon phenotypical difference, but upon “naturalized” racial performativity, that is, sets of cultural and societal practices that are imposed onto racial categories.

Recent criticism has recognized that blackness and whiteness are less biologically oriented than socially constructed. Appiah in “The Conservation of ‘Race’” corroborates this idea by attributing the concept of race to a biological fiction (38), arguing that the sociological dimension of race supersedes and overpowers physical appearances. But should we limit ourselves to Appiah’s statement? What about the historical and psychological dimensions of race? I believe that races are historically constructed and subjected to internal differentiation. In *White Women, Race Matters* (1993), Ruth Frankenberg conceives of whiteness as a “location of structural advantage, of race privilege [...] It is a ‘standpoint,’ a place from which white people look at themselves, at others, and at society [...] ‘Whiteness’ refers to a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed” (1). Frankenberg’s statement reveals the double bind of whiteness, which is transitive with regard to its racialization of others and intransitive by virtue of its self-reflexivity. This latter criterion shows the limitations and inconsistency

of the philosophy of whiteness which makes itself invisible by asserting its normalcy and transparency, in contrast with the marking of others on which its transparency depends.

The deconstruction of the basic assumptions of white racial superiority starts in the nineteenth century with the minstrel and plantation traditions. According to Teresa C. Zackodnick, blackface minstrelsy, with its performances of stereotyped blackness, reached its climax from the 1840s through the 1850s (xxv). In his article “Parody and Double Consciousness in the Language of Early Black Musical Theatre” (1995), David Krasner writes that “[b]lack theatre emerged in a state of opposition, creating a form of ‘hidden transcripts.’ [...] Parody surfaced as a performative subversion of white authority, undermining and destabilizing racist stereotypes” (318). The “hidden transcripts” Krasner talks about echo Gates’s theorization of Signifying, the African American trope grounded in indirection, repetition, and reversal. These “hidden transcripts” are the unnoticed signifying gestures that are not understood by those who do not “possess the mastery of reading” (*Signifying* 77). The dismantling of the hegemonic construction of the white race also appears in American literature with the publication of Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick* (1851), which explores the dualistic rhetoric of white supremacy through the symbolism of the whale. In particular, the chapter “The Whiteness of the Whale” exposes oxymoronic representations of whiteness as simultaneously appealing and appalling, pure and fearsome, good and evil. In “Defamiliarization and the Ideology of Race in *Moby-Dick*” (1992), Marsha Vick writes:

In “The Whiteness of the Whale,” the narrator defamiliarizes the trope of whiteness as an essence by describing it as “the visible absence of color.” [...] He tries to break down the stereotypes associated with whiteness by enumerating its

symbolic meanings in American and other cultures, thereby taking away any single meaning of good and evil [w]ith the oxymoronic phrase “dumb blankness” [...] he dismisses whiteness as a symbol of superiority. (337)

The narrator’s dismissal of “whiteness as a symbol of superiority” in Melville’s work undermines the narcissistic, solipsist, and mostly essentialist construction of whiteness. Whiteness can maintain its existence and supremacy only with the existence of blackness. The extolment of black cultural specificities by Harlem Renaissance figures such as W.E.B. DuBois, Booker T. Washington, Countee Cullen, and Claude McKay in the 1920s and the championing of the philosophy of *Négritude* in the 1930s by such figures as Léopold Sédar Senghor, Aimé Césaire, and Léon-Gontran Damas, are landmarks of black resistance to white supremacist ideology.

From the 1980s the deconstruction of whiteness, mostly among African American scholars, lays the groundwork for a myriad of racial discourses. The “racelessness” of whites in terms of their colorlessness put forth since the early twentieth century by Kroeber in *Anthropology* has prompted many cross-disciplinary scholars, such as Richard Dyer (1993), bell hooks (1997), Thomas Nakayama and Robert Krizek (1995), to theorize its invisibility. Dyer in his article “White” (1993) explains: “[i]n the realm of categories, black is always marked as a colour, and is always particularizing; whereas white is not anything really, not an identity, not a particularizing quality, because it is everything—white is no colour because it is all colours” (127). The impossible association of whiteness with color *per se* prevents it from being a racial category. Dyer reveals the vacuum and meaninglessness of the white race through its colorlessness. He

problematizes the contradictoriness in the construction of whiteness as simultaneously everything and nothing.

In the 1990s a new cartography of race came into existence. Scholars, cultural critics, and artists such as David Roediger (1994), Ruth Frankenberg (1993), Theodore Allen (1994), bell hooks (1992), Toni Morrison (1992), and Howard Winant (1994) rethink the discourse of white racial identity along the lines of the social spectrum. They show how whiteness has been historically modeled according to white self-definition and self-representation at the expense of racial “others.” Morrison reveals how writers of American literature privilege the white reader to the exclusion of non-white modes of interpreting and reading texts. hooks, in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (1992), critiques the dominance of white representations of blackness over black representations of whiteness. She argues that whites are besotted in their fantasized and solipsistic visions of whiteness as the embodiment of goodness. hooks disrupts this idealistic configuration of whiteness by divulging what she sees as its real character. Recalling a childhood memory marked by the exactions of racial discrimination in an Apartheid-ridden place, she associates whiteness with terror: “[t]hey were strangers [...] they terrorized by economic exploitation. What did I see in the gazes of those white men who crossed our thresholds that made me afraid, that made black children unable to speak?” (170). hooks unmask the face of the oppressor, arguing that the gaze of whites is dreadful because it epitomizes violence, dominance, and subjugation. For these black children, who are often vulnerable, facing whites is tantamount to seeing the monstrous and ruthless machine of oppression. The interesting aspect of the statement concerns the juxtaposition of terror

with economic exploitation, as she reinforces the view that the marginality of blacks has more to do with economic than racial reasons.

Colonialism and slavery were political and economic tools of Western domination. The *mission civilisatrice* of whites and slaveholding practices were based on religious and aesthetic arguments—whites regarded themselves as well-intentioned because they sought to salvage the supposedly backward and uncivilized black natives from the quicksands of ignorance and underdevelopment. The means used mattered less than the attainment of mean and selfish goals. V. Y. Mudimbe in *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (1988) dismantles the rationale behind the colonial enterprise. He attributes Western colonialism to three factors: “the domination of physical space, the reformation of *natives*’ minds, and the integration of local economic histories into the Western perspective” (2). I argue that the transformation of the non-European world into a European construct perfectly suits Western systems of domination, which thrive on exploitation and subjugation. Western systems of economic development have all the characteristics of “primitive accumulation,” a phenomenon that presupposes the accumulation of capital based on the production of surplus-value by laborers divorced from their means of production. White colonizers were not simply agents of power. Colonialism has not only been a source of power, but also a token of dependency of whites on black native populations, as JanMohamed points out in discussing the ambivalence of the white colonialist:

For while he sees the native as the quintessence of evil and therefore avoids all contact because he fears contamination, he is at the same time absolutely dependent upon the colonized people not only for his privileged social and

material status but also for his sense of moral superiority and, therefore, ultimately for his very identity. (1983, 4)

Indeed, JanMohamed's theory of "Manichean aesthetics" spells out the ambivalent rhetoric of colonialism which triggers a Manichean double vision in the colonizer as well as in the colonized. Fanon's idea of "Manicheism delirium" in *Peau noire, masques blancs* explains the binaristic black/white categorization. This logic of differentiation undergirds the relationships of the two races in Africa, the United States, and the Caribbean. In the United States, the Supreme Court decision *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) fosters the construction of race as visible and public, materialized in the policy of segregation which publicly marks a black/white racial difference. Homer Plessy (1863-1925), who was one-eighth black, was jailed in 1892 for sitting in a Louisiana railroad car designated for white people only. Since his colored blood was not discernible, he appealed his case to the U.S. Supreme Court, and claimed the recognition, rights, and privileges accorded to the white race, but the court decided against his claim. In the 1950s, the phenomenon of desegregation engenders a reconceptualization of race in which blackness becomes located in the private space of individual psychology. The emergence of the "Black Aesthetic" in the 1960s develops a distinctly black psychology and personality.

A great body of literature by African Americans articulates the difference between blacks and whites, including DuBois's *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) and Zora Neale Hurston's "Characteristics of Negro Expression," which first appeared in Nancy Cunard's *Negro: An Anthology* (1934). However, the problem of African Americans resides in the unbridgeable rifts between race and nationality. DuBois explains that a

double consciousness is central to Afro-American identity: “[o]ne ever feels his twoness—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” (215). The “twoness” Afro-Americans experience has to do with the excruciating ways in which they negotiate their identities by virtue of their search for integration into American society. As blacks, they grapple with their exclusion from the dominant society. In *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition* (1987), Bernard Bell clearly explains the inherent contradictions in the lives of black Americans and the characteristics of double-consciousness:

The historical pattern of contradictions between the ideals of white America and the reality of black America has resulted in what I prefer to call ethnically rather than racially different cultural heritages and a complex double-consciousness, socialized ambivalence, and double vision which are a healthful rather than pathological adjustment by blacks to the rigors of the New World. (5-6)

The “dogged strength” in DuBois’s statement and the adjective “healthful” in Bell’s comment show the extent to which double-consciousness is not a psychopathological response of black Americans to the racial and cultural domination of the white American majority, but rather a complex sociopsychological process whereby black Americans develop a survivalist strategy against white supremacy. However, some black writers underscore the magnetism that the American dream has wielded on some black Americans. In *The Black Aesthetic* (1971) Addison Gayle states:

They were, in the main, anxious to become Americans, to share the fruits of the country’s economic system and to surrender their culture to a universal melting

pot. They were men of another era who believed in the American dream more fervently than their white contemporaries. (xvii-viii)

If “becoming American” implies cultural surrender, how can the black person preserve a distinct black American identity? The processes of inclusion and exclusion reveal the contradictoriness of American racial politics. Within and without America, the yearning of black Americans for Americanness is intertwined with the search for equality in a country where the actualization of the democratic ideals that are at the grassroots of its Constitution is deferred. Ralph Ellison’s appellation of America as “a nation of ethical schizophrenics” in *Shadow and Act* (1964) divulges the dichotomous nature of American ethics: the belief in democracy and the violation of its sacrosanct principles.

A substantial body of literature documents the double-voiced discourse of African-American writers, which mirrors the phenomenon of double consciousness. Jean Toomer’s *Cane* (1923) exemplifies the *métissage* emblematic of America. The power of his book lies in its structural mixture—poetry, prose vignettes, and short stories are connected by a web of thematic echoes—and in its charting of the multifarious discrepancies in America between North and South, the city and the country, men and women, and body and soul. Toomer metaphorizes the idea of black fragmentation in his book. His main purpose is to probe the meaning of his Americanness in an era when rural folk culture is threatened by modernism. What is most interesting is Toomer’s transcendence of the split inherent in double consciousness. While he rejects the label Negro writer upon the completion of *Cane*, in interpreting his gesture one should emphasize less his rejection of blackness and focus instead on his avoidance of being trapped by the tenuousness of the racial dilemma. Toomer conceives of black/white

relations as symmetric, and conceives of his art as grounded in the American world of racial reciprocity.

The inception of the New Negro movement between World War I and the Great Depression sparks a rethinking of the issue of blackness. The socio-economic sphere of blacks in the U.S. begins to change due to their heightened awareness and determination to improve their living conditions. They migrate from the agrarian South to the industrial North in search of better opportunities and socio-economic freedom. In Nathan Irvin Huggins's *Voices from the Harlem Renaissance* (1976), the aims of the New Negro are structured around demands for political and social equality, and better working conditions (23-25). Black radicals such as Marcus Garvey and DuBois promote Pan Africanism and champion ideas about racial equality. The Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s, characterized by an outburst of black artistic achievement, brings the New Negro's claims to the forefront. Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, and James Weldon Johnson, among others, attempt to re-construct Negro American identity, and Harlem becomes the showcase for urbanity and sophistication for blacks. Huggins writes: "New York [...] was America's cultural capital, open to cross-currents from around the world. Blacks were coming to the city not only from the South but also from the French and British West Indies and Africa" (1995, 6).

Black consciousness in Harlem is echoed in subsequent years in black communities in Paris, the Caribbean, and Africa, as black intellectuals such as Aimé Césaire and Léopold Sédar Senghor were influenced by the militant literature of the Harlem Renaissance writers. In the 1930s, they promoted the beauty and the positivity of blackness through a movement called *Négritude*, in which the rejection of the artistic

qualities of natives on the part of most Europeans was superseded by the enhancement and rehabilitation of black cultural values. However, *Négritude* grappled with an aporetic situation, because of its reproduction of the racist stereotypes it sought to contest, which triggered off fiery criticisms from African and Caribbean critics. Stanislas Spero K. Adotevi's *Négritude et négrologues* (1972), Marcien Towa's *Léopold Sédar Senghor: Négritude ou servitude* (1971), and Frantz Fanon's *Les damnés de la terre* (1961) are examples of works that respectively find fault with the racial essentialism of *Négritude*, its reinforcement of Eurocentric prejudices against Africans, and its folkloric aspect. The replacement of the popular term Negro by the term black in the United States in the late 1960s, at the peak of the black power movement, appears as a step toward erasing the nightmarish and frustrating recollections of the painful legacy of slavery.

In contrast to the United States, where race is steeped in biological essentialisms and binarisms, in the Caribbean race is a sociological construction. Frantz Fanon's statement in *Les damnés de la terre* that "on est blanc parce que riche" (9) ["you are white because you are rich" (40)], spells out the interrelatedness of race and class. Martinican-born Mayotte Capécia echoes this Fanonian idea in her autobiographical novel, *Je suis martiniquaise*, where the upper-class and light-skinned colored in the Caribbean are considered white: "[w]e also called 'white' some of those who were mixed blood and who had money, providing their complexion was light enough" (41). Conversely, as illustrated in Capécia's second novel, *La négresse blanche*, the low-class white is assimilated to a black: "Pascal faisait partie d'une de ces familles de blancs pauvres qui étaient ravalés au rang des noirs" (87) ["Pascal belonged to one of those poor white families set on the level with blacks" (207)]; Pascal is the boyfriend of the mulatta

Isaure]. This shows that blackness and whiteness are not always biologically oriented. In *Le discours antillais*, Glissant lays bare the psychological effects of the French colonial policies of assimilation on Martinicans. He argues that the latter acquire white cultural values at the expense of their indigenous native culture and that their acculturation prevents any process of enculturation.

The existence of “mimic people” in the colonies who are brainwashed by Western culture gives weight to the conquering ideology of imperialism. Postcolonial theorists such as Fanon and Bhabha identify mimicry as the self-alienating process that marks the relationships between Europeans and non-Europeans. Fanon conceives of the black man’s imitative propensity as a manifestation of a pathological self-alienation. In *Peau noire, masques blancs*, he avers that the black man “sera d’autant plus blanc qu’il aura rejeté sa noirceur, sa brousse” (34) [“becomes whiter as he renounces his blackness, his jungle” (18)]. The word “jungle” might underscore the degree to which blackness is repulsive for the “black-white” man whose alienation accentuates negative black stereotyping. In “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse” (1984), Bhabha focuses less on the effects of mimicry than on the double-voiced discourse of colonial authority in its construction of colonial subjects’ identities. Mimicry becomes a resemblance and a menace (132).

In French West Africa, particularly Senegal, the *évolués* or *assimilés* coming from the Senegalese *élite* since the nineteenth century are simultaneously called *mauvais nègres* and anti-French. The separation of the alienated Senegalese from their cultural heritage, coupled with their “threatening” assimilation, the product of an education which presupposes ambition and aspiration to social mobility, threatens white supremacy and

leads to their liminal positioning. Rita Cruise O'Brien's *White Society in Black Africa: The French of Senegal* (1972), shows how black/white relationships in Senegal shift from interaction to separation. In fact, the change is due to rivalries between low class Europeans in the colony, referred to as *petits blancs*, and Western-educated Africans: "the growing European minority included a significant sub-group of people of low-class and status at a time when the number of educated or skilled Africans was increasing" (95). This situation threatens to reverse the master/slave relationship; the white ruler is afraid because his power is at stake.

Prior to the reconfiguration of the relationships between the colonizer and the colonized in Senegal from 1945 to 1960, blackness was the precondition for exploitation. Commercialized relationships superseded racial relationships. Colonialists masked their imperialist drives under the guise of the fallacious motives of religion and civilization, claiming that natives had to be psychologically "reshaped" for their own interest. In the second half of the eighteenth century, the commodification of Senegalese living in Saint-Louis and Gorée is noteworthy. They are used as mere means to the colonizer's end, as O'Brien explains:

The success of company investment became dependent upon them. A certain interdependence between European and African in these small settlements was essential [...] It was difficult for white attitudes to be drawn on strictly racial lines, because, for the Europeans, the Africans did not constitute an undifferentiated racial group. They included slaves, villagers supplying the fort, soldiers, servants, wives, confidants, employees, and trade associates. (32)

Blacks are undoubtedly the foundation upon which rests the enrichment of Europeans. Maria Mies's book *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale* (1986) offers a useful theorization of the insidious workings of economic exploitation. The colonized blacks commonly share what Mies terms "housewifization" by virtue of their atomization and subjugation in their relentless and helpless service to white men. Although this term may sound far-fetched, it somehow underscores the domination/subjugation relationships between capitalists and laborers. Housewifization is a product of capitalism which is essentially grounded in the exploitation of female labor. In South Africa, economic exploitation has also been the invisible layer for the visible racial discrimination. Capitalism is most often the root of racism in the modern era.

Apartheid was a policy of segregation and separateness that was invented in 1948. The word apartheid, meaning "aparthood" or segregation, comes from Afrikaans, the language primarily of the white people of Dutch ancestry in South Africa. In theory, apartheid engendered the partitioning of the country into white areas and black areas; the cities and most of the rich farm lands belonged to Europeans whereas Africans would only be accepted there as servants or migrant laborers. In praxis, apartheid was a Manichean system which thoroughly enforced white supremacy and the segregation of Africans. Under apartheid the progress and fulfillment of Africans was thwarted by restrictive laws. Pass laws required Africans to receive permission in order to travel, find a job, or live in a particular locality; the Native Laws Amendment Act prevented Africans from attending churches and institutions located in European areas; the Bantu Education Act provided an educational system for African children which would prepare them only for unskilled labor in the white man's society. The separate development benefited whites

in terms of economic opportunities, social privileges, and political rights. The causes of the clashes between whites and the indigenous people of South Africa were essentially economic, for the whites, seeking raw materials, labor, and markets to sell their products, stripped blacks of their resources, land, selfhood, and dignity. The race element was only incidental. The color of the skin was a camouflage under which whites hid so as to exploit blacks.

The black/white opposition triggered killings, mass murders, and the Sharpeville and Soweto massacres. hooks's association of whiteness with terror finds more significance here. The unavoidable and undesirable consequence of the implementation of violence in South Africa was its internalization by blacks. As the saying goes, violence breeds violence. Literature in South Africa is redolent with themes of racial injustice and violence. Alex La Guma's works, for example, reflect the evils of the South African regime. His novel *A Walk in the Night* (1962) is the story of Michael Adonis, who has been alienated by the degrading and dehumanizing practices that prevail around him. After being unfairly fired from his job for only going to the toilet to empty his bladder, he unleashes his anger by murdering an innocent white man named Doughty. His irrational act is the uncontrollable manifestation of repressed feelings of frustration and anger nurtured by being black in a community where despair, misery, and poverty reign.

Although the era of colonialism and slavery is gone, bell hooks remarks that "the habits of being cultivated to uphold and maintain institutionalized white supremacy linger" (*Black Looks* 168). The counterhegemonic underpinning of postcolonial studies shifts debates on race to cultural studies and to discourses of alterity and subalterneity. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in *The Postcolonial-Critic: Interviews, Strategies,*

Dialogues (1990), points out the urgency for the reversal in power dynamics: “what we are asking for is that hegemonic discourses, the holders of hegemonic discourse should de-hegemonize their position and themselves learn how to occupy the subject position of the other” (121). Whether or not “holders of hegemonic discourse” are able to try on the shoes of the disadvantaged and dominated, the truth of the matter is that they cannot stymie the emergence of minority discourses. In their endeavor to problematize and even dispel the monolithic and stereotypical representations of the Other in Western discourses, Third World scholars embrace issues of alterity, otherness, and subalterneity, with de-constructive insights. Even more so, they resolve to disinter the “invisible” and “hidden” subjectivity of marginalized people at a time when it has become fashionable to be preoccupied with difference and marginality in the academy today. In this study, marginality is associated with race and difference. The diametrically opposed concepts of blackness and whiteness are defined through the prism of an all-encompassing philosophical dualism of “right” and “wrong.” The ascription of racial categories to difference reflects the hegemonic nature of nomenclature, in which whiteness and blackness are commensurate with power and non-power and Western discursive power has produced a pseudo-scientific racial taxonomy. The stigma of inferiority attached to blackness explains the dynamic process of the discourse on blackness. The goal of the struggle against racist monolithic stereotypes in discourse is to restore humanity and dignity to blacks, but the limitations of racial binarism are immensely complicated by the concept of racial hybridity, a topic that is the focus of the next section of this chapter.

Racial Hybridity

First broached in the eighteenth century, the issue of hybridity was initially indistinguishable from that of infertility. The obsession of the West with ideals of universality and sameness accounted for the stereotypical construction of the hybrid as infertile. The Edinburgh racial theorist Robert Knox explains: “Naturalists have generally admitted that animals of the same species are fertile, reproducing their kind for ever; whilst on the contrary, if an animal be the product of two distinct species, the hybrid, more or less, was sure to perish or to become extinct [...] the products of such a mixture are not fertile” (487). The association of hybridity with infertility is rooted in the belief in polygenism which went against the Darwinian theory that “there is no essential distinction between species and varieties” (288).

Since the Enlightenment, racial mixture has been likened to anomaly, as noted above, as in Gobineau’s *Essai sur l’inégalité des races humaines* (1855), a study which is renowned for its racist-oriented philosophy. Ernest Sellière’s 1903 book, *Le Comte de Gobineau et l’aryanisme historique*, sheds light on the root of Gobineau’s hatred of racial mixing by establishing a correspondence between Gobineau’s racial discourse and his family background: his mother, was a Creole from Martinique, who was allegedly said to be the illegitimate grand-daughter of Louis XV.

The major concern of Enlightenment European anthropologists was the unity of the human species. Some thinkers accepted this principle, while others denied it. Voltaire’s contempt for racial hybridity is overt in his *Essai sur les mœurs et l’esprit des nations* (1756) where he avers that: “[I]es mulâtres ne sont qu’une race bâtarde d’un Noir

et d'une Blanche, ou d'un Blanc et d'une Noire" (6) [mulattos are nothing but a bastard race from a black man and a white woman, or a white man and a black woman].

The perception of the hybrid as a “cross between two species, such as the mule and the hinny, which are female-male and male-female crosses between horse and ass” (Young 8) unerringly reveals Western feelings of repulsion toward racial hybridity which, in Julia Kristeva’s terms, they reject as the abject. In *Pouvoirs de l'horreur: essai sur l'abjection* (1980), Kristeva conceives of the abject as “ce qui perturbe une identité, un système, un ordre. Ce qui ne respecte pas les limites, les places, les règles. L'entre-deux, l'ambigu, le mixte” (12). [what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite] (4). The idea of limit is very important because hybridity becomes in Western rhetoric a transgression of boundaries or limits separating blacks from whites. The abhorrence of racial mixture stems from its subversion of racial classification and its location outside the totalitarian logos. The blending of different species is viewed as an assault on racial “purity.” The definition and origin of racial hybridity, the status of racial hybrids, and their negotiations of their identity split are fraught with complexities. However, the conceptualization of hybridity becomes more dynamic with the concept of *mestizaje* which suggests an incorporation of differences. The *métis* is generally defined as a product of a white man and an Indian woman, whereas the mulatto refers to the union between a black and a white. The Grand Dictionnaire Richelet in 1759 insists mostly on color in accordance with the degree of *métissage*:

MULATRE, s.m. C'est ainsi qu'on nomme les enfants qui naissent du commerce des blancs avec les Nègresses. Mais ceux qui naissent des blancs et des

Mulâtresses ou Mules, car c'est ainsi qu'on les nomme dans nos colonies, s'appellent *Terçerones*. Ils approchent plus que les Mulâtres de la couleur des blancs. Les *Quarterones* qui suivent, en approchant encore plus: l'enfant né d'un blanc et d'une *Quarterone*, ne diffère pas sensiblement de la couleur du père, et quelquefois il est plus blanc: ce sont les *Quinterones*. Enfin les enfants des blancs et des mères *Quinterones* sont censés Espagnols. Ce sont comme les dégradations de couleurs dans la peinture.

[Mulatto: it is thus that one calls the children born from the contacts of white men with Negro women. But those who are born from white men and mulatto women or mules, for this is how they are called in our colonies, are called *Terçerones*. The latter are closer to whites than mulattos in terms of their color. Quadroons that follow are closer yet. *Quinterones* are children born from white men and Quadroon women who are almost the same color as their fathers, and are oftentimes whiter. Lastly, children born from white men and *Quinterone* mothers are Spanish. It is like color degradation in painting.]

The derogatory connotation of the word mulatto, which etymologically has an animal overtone—it was derived from the Latin *mulus* meaning mule and adopted in English from about the year 1600—reflects the rhetoric of exclusion defining differentiated people. By the same token, the verb *nomme*, which means “to name,” conjures up the specifically peculiar nomenclature proper to racial hybridity. The analogy with painting dis-places the complexity of the mulatto phenomenon from unrepresentability to representability, as the degradation of colors in painting corresponds to the “whitening” of mulattos, with respect to their proximity toward whiteness. The paradox is grounded in

the association of mulattos with blackness, for the unreadability of near-white mulattos undermines the validity of racial theories. Is it really fair and objective to call somebody black who is as white as the white?

The terms quadroon and the other variants show that a single drop of black blood suffices to categorize somebody as black, irrespective of his/her color. In *Patterns of Race in the Americas* (1964), Melvin Harris lays bare the biased nature of the “one-drop rule.” He explains the prevalence of the “hypo-descent rule” in racially mixed persons, on account of their inescapable and unavoidable subordinate stance (56). James Davis’s *Who is Black* points out American monovision regarding the determination of blackness: “[i]n the United States of America, the terms mulatto, colored, Negro, black, and African-American all came to mean people with any known black African ancestry” (6). It appears that phenotypical, cultural, behavioral, and geographical aspects are less important in the consideration of blackness. The lumping together of people more divided by discrepancies than they are knit by commonalities under the mantle of racial unity is very problematic. All things considered, mulattos and almost-white members of this category consider themselves white. In literature across the Diaspora, the rift between the willful whiteness and undesired blackness of mixed-blood people, coupled with their inner unresolved clashes, are sources of heightened tension in their lives. Doubly marginalized by both blacks and whites, they desperately identify with whiteness because of the socio-economic privileges associated with the Caucasian race. The rejection of blackness is linked to the history of humiliation and degradation. The emergence of racial hybrids is intertwined with pain and shame. By-products of colonialism, slavery, and military conquest, they embody a double transgression via the blurring of the lines of

racial boundaries and oftentimes illegitimate birth. The generalized processes of objectification of black or slave women by Western forces of domination engender coercive and undesired pregnancies. The offspring of these women carry within their bosom the anger and frustration of their lawless and degrading conception.

Rita Cruise O'Brien's *White Society in Black Africa* (1972) explains the status given to mulatto children in Senegal in the colonial period, insisting on the shift in the treatment accorded to them. From the nineteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth century, the care of mulatto children falls on white fathers because of the primacy of the "colonial ethos." After the Second World War, "[l]iaisons with African mistresses were no longer regarded as socially acceptable by local Europeans, and the accidental offspring of such liaisons were kept in well-guarded secrecy" (93). Indeed, the anxiety of "bastard" children is exacerbated by the fact that they helplessly bear the mark of illegitimacy.

The prevalence of monoracialism over biracialism reveals the Western monotheistic obsession with the familiar and the same. I propose that racial difference is ontologically nonthreatening but is politically frightening. Mixed identity destabilizes essence, deconstructs universals, and decenters monocultural authority. The subversion of rigidly established racial categories is viewed as a threat to racial normative discourse. Despite their bipolar construction, blacks and whites are acceptable because they are well-defined racial categories, but mulattos/mulattas are beyond the system of nomenclature. European attitudes toward such racial hybridity contrast with those of Americans, for miscegenation in America is synonymous with taboo in the eighteenth century insofar as it undermines the binary logic that stands at the roots of slavery.

The construction of the mulatto figure captured the imagination of nineteenth-century American writers. It was deployed in the novels of propaganda by abolitionist writers like Harriet Beecher Stowe and Richard Hildreth, as well as in those by Negrophobes like Thomas Dixon. For instance, reflecting on the situation of mulattos, the African American abolitionist William Wells Brown thought that it is “evidence of the degraded and immoral condition” (55). In *The Mulatta and the Politics of Race* (2004), Teresa C. Zackodnik explains that the tragic mulatta is the “[c]reation of white female abolitionists [which] functioned in post-war American fiction as a sensationalized figure of ruined womanhood” (xi) and is the most frequently encountered stereotype in mulatto fiction. This figure is a figment of the imagination of white authors and a psychological manifestation of their fear of and unease with racial hybridity. The black critic Sterling Allen Brown analyzes the stereotypical representation of the racial hybrid by white authors:

Mathematically they [white novelists] work it out that his intellectual strivings and self-control come from his white blood, and his emotional urgings, indolence and potential savagery come from his Negro blood. Their favorite character, the octoroon, wretched because of the “single drop of midnight in her veins,” desires a white lover above all else, and must therefore go down to a tragic end. (1937, 144)

The magnification of the white part in the mulatto at the expense of the black part constitutes an icon of racist ideology which reinforces derogatory stereotypes ascribed to blacks. Thus these white novelists opposed white to black, rationality to irrationality, reason to instinct, and reason to primitive savagery, and following this biased binary

logic, they modeled mulatto characters according to their own desiderata. They failed to consider the fact that the hybrid is the product of miscegenation. In other words, white supremacist authors saw racial hybridity only through the lens of white rhetoric.

In contrast with white writers who described mulattos, black authors mainly portrayed the irresolvable tensions of mulattos, especially those who are torn between their inevitable fate and their unsatisfied yearnings, and who desperately seek to transcend the American white caste system. James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* (1912), Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929), Walter White's *Flight* (1926), and Claude McKay's "Near-White" (1932) portray mulattos and mulattas who seek to bury their frustrations in the delusion of passing, for as mixed people their condition is more difficult than that of the full-blooded blacks. This accounts for the ascription of degeneration to mulattos mainly in fiction. McKay's story "Near-White" dramatizes this through a mother-daughter conversation. The mother explains:

You know what they say about us light-colored, what they write about us. That we're degenerate, that we're criminal—and their biggest bare-faced lie, that we can't propagate our own stock. They hate us even more than they do the blacks.

For they're never sure about us, they can't place us. (96)

The concept of degeneration persists in Europe as well by virtue of the continuum in the dominant praxis of racial ethos in the twentieth century. In Germany, *Mein Kampf* (1922) reveals Hitler's ethnocentric and racist fanaticism. As an unrepentant apologist for racial purity, he upholds the superiority of the white race, particularly the Aryan race, and he condemns racial intermixture. His philosophy of racial hybridity or *Rassenmischung* is

indistinguishable from *Rassenschande* or disgrace. The implementation of Hitler's policies in 1933 led to the forced sterilization of all the racial hybrids born in Germany after the First World War who were products of black/white miscegenation.

As time elapses, racial dynamics began to change. The nineteenth-century ideology of racial purity in America fades in the face of novel perceptions of racial hybridity. The 1960s "biracial baby boom" counters and ruptures antimiscegenation pathological behavior. Joel Williamson's *New People: Miscegenation and Mulattoes in the United States* (1980) and Maria P. P. Root's *The Multiracial Experience: Racial Borders as the New Frontier* (1996) in the subsequent decade focus on the fluidity of racial definition. The figure of the tragic mulatto becomes an anachronism replaced by contemporary postmodern reconfigurations of hybridity. A racial aesthetics valuing difference heralds a new era for mixed-race Americans salvaged from the biased and unfair laws of racism.

The new concept of identities in America converges with Caribbean racial dynamics. Racial hybridity in the Caribbean transcends American black/white polarization as the history of the Caribbean is inseparable from the phenomenon of miscegenation. The challenge to universal essence antedates postcolonialism. Islands are reputed to be sites for racial mixing. In *Islands and Exiles: The Creole Identities of Post Colonial Literature* (1998), Chris Bongie explains his theory of duality characterizing Creoles as embodiments of islands because their lives are structured around fragmentation and an insatiable desire for wholeness. He points out the doubleness of Creole identity:

On the one hand, as the absolutely particular, a space complete unto itself and thus an ideal metaphor for the traditionally conceived, unified and unitary identity; on the other, as a fragment, a part of some greater whole from which it is in exile and to which it must be related—in an act of (never completed) completion that is always also, as it were, an ex-isle, a loss of the particular. The island is thus the site of a double identity—closed and open—and this doubleness perfectly conveys the ambivalence of creole identity. (18)

In Bongie's conceptualization of the doubly-natured islands as fragments, islands presuppose a separation from a whole, implying an idea of both self-sufficiency and incompleteness. The openness of islands—they are places of attraction, beauty, and exoticism—is countered by their insularity. Islands are analogous to children severed from their mother and whose desire to retrieve the ideal unity is impaired by the alienating effects of separation. Completion is never brought to fruition because of the provisionality or illusoriness of unity or wholeness which disallows de-fragmentation. This accounts for the exilic condition of Creoles that is fueled by the puzzle of irreconcilable differences.

The openness of islands is favorable to miscegenation. To be a Creole is to be born on the island. The intersection of race, class, and color renders the definition of Creole identity complex. The Caribbean society of Martinique is stratified according to two main groups: the white masters, called the *békés*, an abbreviation of *blancs creoles*, who control lands and factories, and mulattos, who are divided into two groups, bourgeois mulattos and working-class mulattos. Light-skinned and wealthy mulattos are identified with whites.

In contrast with the United States, the Caribbean is a space of fluidity. Racial intermixture is produced by both mulattos and *mestizos*. Racial dynamics in the Caribbean islands redefine and decenter the configuration of racial purity found in the United States. Miscegenation is not only the product of blacks and whites, but mixtures are also occasioned by people of African, British, French, Dutch, Spanish, East Indian, and indigenous stock. Moreover, unlike mulattos in America, those in the Caribbean are not a threat to whites. Eugene Genovese's *Roll, Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (1974) clearly explains the strength of mixed-race Caribbean people with respect to their majority: "[i]n the Caribbean whites constituted a small minority of the population and had to build up an intermediary colored class of managers, tradesmen, and small proprietors. In the South, whites constituted the majority and had no such problem" (431). The acceptance of racial hybrids is set in contrast to their denial in the American South. However, the acceptance of coloreds in the Caribbean is not untouched by marginalization. White masters needed black laborers and consumers for the success of their economic enterprise.

Creolization defines Caribbean identity, which is the product of the acculturation and interculturalization that occurred among the European, African, Asian, and Amerindian populations. The Martinican theorist Glissant connects creolization to the boundless movement of relationality. In his challenge to Western colonial systems that categorize identities, he upholds the poetics of *métissage* because it is relational, grounded in change and mutability rather than fixity and essentiality. In *Poétique de la relation* (1990), he rejects black and white racial paradigms in favor of the rich and diverse meeting and synthesis between races, emphasizing the boundlessness of *métissage* (46). Consequently,

he favors the term and concept *créolisation* over *créolité*, propounded by Bernabé, Chamoiseau, and Confiant in *Eloge de la Créolité* (1989). Glissant moves away from the trodden path of his Francophone predecessors who promoted ideas such as *Négritude* and *Francité*. His philosophy of being and becoming is marked by diversity as well as endless movement, and excludes essentialism and stasis.

By contrast, the institutionalization of difference through apartheid in South Africa bespeaks white racial essentialism. Racism is an absolutization of difference and a legitimation of a dominant position. The legal system of institutionalized apartheid or racial separation in South Africa meant limited economic, political, and social opportunities for black minorities. Africans, coloreds, and Indians were collectively racialized as blacks. In *Twentieth-Century South Africa* (1994), the historian William Beinart focuses on the hard living conditions of black minorities, whose marginalization compelled them to live in “overcrowded conditions, overcrowded houses, overcrowded pavements, overcrowded streets, overcrowded station platforms, overcrowded trains, unending bus queues, overcrowded buses” (147). As opposed to the United States and the Caribbean, mixed people are called Colored. This underscores their separateness, and thus exclusion from dominant racial categories. In the book edited by Noel P. Gist and Anthony Gary Dworkin, “[b]eing a Colored means, above all, being discriminated against by exclusion from the advantages of the whites” (36).

In nineteenth-century South Africa, Coloreds held the status of second-class citizens and grappled with racial injustice. Segregated public schools limited the educational opportunities for Colored children. It was not until the 1960s that Coloreds managed to transcend the political barriers set by apartheid. The ambivalence of the

colored appears in their cultural “whiteness” and social exclusion. They succeeded neither in integrating white societies, nor in fusing with Africans and Indians, for they felt threatened by these subordinated groups. They viewed themselves as superior to other African and Indian populations in South Africa because of their higher economic position. However, their cultural parity with whites hindered the improvement of their standard of living. Africans and Indians managed to create political organizations such as the African National Congress in 1912. Nelson Mandela, the future leader of this movement, championed ideas of equality and democratization for South African society. Even though he was imprisoned for twenty-seven years for his role in the struggle to liberate blacks from the shackles of racial segregation, he reaped the fruits of his tenacity when he became president of South Africa. Mandela’s famous speech, *We have waited too long for our freedom: Nelson Mandela’s Speech on his Release, Cape Town, 11th February, 1990*, provided enough information regarding his steady and ongoing objective to dismantle apartheid. He called on the international community to exert pressure against the South African government for the eradication of racial segregation. Though Mandela was elected the first president of a post-apartheid regime with an ANC majority government, he was not, however, able to effect radical structural changes for justice and equality for racial majorities. Power is still in the hands of white minorities who control the economy, monopolize ownership of land, and live in different areas from blacks, who remain mired in ghettoization. To understand the diverse solutions to the difficult and complex conditions governing the lives of mixed-blood people, as portrayed in the novels examined in this project, it is useful to view their situation through the lens of liminality.

Betwixt and Between: The Ambiguity of Liminality

Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial.

(Turner, *The Ritual Process* 95)

Turner's definition in *The Ritual Process* bears witness to the problematic classification and interstructural positions of transitional beings, in particular, initiands, by virtue of their withdrawal from normative societal structures and their immersion in the antistructural or unconventional recesses of ritualized processes. This impossibility to classify, in the context of the rite of initiation, excludes initiands from the realm of the visible. Liminality subverts structural conditions and specifically revolves around the unstructured. Thus Turner employs metaphors of dissolution, gestation, and parturition to underscore the structural invisibility of ritual passers, who are excluded from the culturally defined statuses. In *Principles of Psychology* (1918), W. James equates initiation with death, which is the symbolic condition of the structural non-being of initiands, and the unconditional prerequisite for the renewal of their beings, after their acquisition of gnosis and maturation. Both Turner and Gennep articulate the positive outcome of liminal subjects with respect to their re-connection with structural and social bonds.

Liminality is not exclusive to the rites of passage of initiation. Human life is made up of liminal stages that mark transitions from one state of being to another. For example, liminality is a useful concept in religion. In both the Moslem and Christian religions, the liminal position is ensured by the prophetic mediation between the profane world and the sacred world, body and soul, the visible and the invisible, God and human

beings. Specifically, prophets are regarded as God's messengers who preach and sensitize mortals to the urgency of their compliance with the Almighty's recommendations. Their earthly mission is fraught with obstacles that are tied to humanity's sinful deeds and wickedness. In *The Wreath of Wild Olive: Play, Liminality, and the Study of Literature*, Spariosu argues that liminality is "a universal anthropological element" and gives the example of the *bardo* and *limbo* as paradigmatic of liminality in Buddhism and Christianity (37). The *bardo* in Buddhism is "the period between sanity and insanity, or the period between [...] death and birth" and *limbo* in Christianity is "a place between heaven and hell, where certain souls are in an intermediate or transitional state" (37). In my study, mixed blood women experience this *bardo* or *limbo* via their liminal experiences of autobiographical writing, sexuality, madness, racial passing, and expatriation.

Genep sees liminality as describing three phases: "the rites of separation from a previous world, *preliminal rites*, those executed during the transitional stage, *liminal* (or *threshold*) *rites*, and the ceremonies of incorporation into the new world post-liminal rites" (21). This approach is useful for the exploration of the identities of mulattas. However, the ways in which mulattas negotiate their identities through the experiences cited earlier contrast with Genep's traditional conceptualization of liminality, which concerns the whole community and implies "a homogeneity of values and behavior, strong social constraint, and loyalty to tradition and kinship" (Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre* 42). In the works studied, mulattas are often expatriated from their communities by virtue of gender and racial oppression, and individually seek ways out of their agonistic experiences. Beyond the situation of the mulattas in my study, liminality is an

effective paradigm that can provide women in patriarchal and sexist societies with possibilities to survive. Ramatoulaye, the protagonist of Mariama Bâ in *Une si longue lettre* (1979), gets over her situation as an abandoned and a betrayed woman by writing a letter to her best friend Aissatou, which serves as a liminal instrument for her regeneration. Silence is the liminal strategy used by the protagonist of the third-generation migritude writer Fatou Diome for her economic survival in a racist society. Employed as a nanny by the French couple Dupire in *La Préférence nationale et autres nouvelles*, she accepts their whims for pragmatic purposes because: “[r]éagir signifierait perdre le privilege de nettoyer le carré des murs des Dupire. Une heure de ménage en moins ce serait un steak, un savon, un pain ou un livre en moins” (102) [“to react would result in the loss of the privilege of cleaning up the house of the Dupire. An hour less of cleaning would be one less steak, soap, bread, or book”]. Liminality is not confined to women’s struggles for better social conditions.

Displacements or changes of place, whether forced or voluntary, engender liminal stages: the pre-liminal stage of separation from the homeland, the liminal stage of relocation abroad, and the potential post-liminal stage of ceaseless re-departures. Genep’s concept of incorporation, or Turner’s concept of reaggregation or reincorporation in *The Ritual Process*, in which the “passage is consummated and the ritual subject is in a relatively stable state,” (95) is not applicable for the exile. Homecoming is impossible for most exiles, and so is stability, as shown in the literature by many Maghrebian women writers like Malika Mokeddem. In *Des rêves et des assassins* (1995) the liminal exile of her protagonist Kenza is laden with complications and uncertainties. France, like Algeria, denies her a nurturing shelter. Kenza suffers from her triple burden as a Beur, a woman,

and an intellectual. Her unbelonging to either Algeria or France is a fertile soil for anxiety, ambiguity, and loss. France is only a temporary place of re-location which opens up a new departure. The exile unavoidably oscillates between the “here” and “there.” The frustration and disillusionment of the “here” coupled with the expectations and uncertainties of the “there” vitiate the flimsy and bubble-like adumbrations of anchorage.

Exile and liminality are almost interchangeable phenomena. The liminality in exile and the exile in liminality are inscribed in an ideology of spatial quest. The absence of definite anchorage is common to both exiles and racial hybrids. The post-exilic and post-liminal journeys are unfinished and marked by complexities. Similarly, the linkage to a point of departure drastically fades away. However, the escape from liminality can be different for mulattos. Unlike exiles whose rites of passage involve change of places, the rites of passage for racially-mixed subjects involve change of identities. They cross the color line as a means to shift from invisibility to visibility, and from death to birth. In her essay in *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* (1991), Patricia Williams points out the white erasure of the subjectivity of the marginalized black. The logic of visibility defines the Western view of identity formation. Difference is associated with invisibility. Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952) illustrates the social invisibility of a visibly black man, chronicling the life of an unnamed first-person narrator from his youth in the segregated American South of the 1920s to a temporary “hibernation” twenty years later in a “border area” of Harlem. The narrator explains his invisibility as derivative of antiblack racism and the failure of the white ruling class to acknowledge the human presence of non-whites. In this respect, passing can be a means to chase away the specter of invisibility.

Passing can sometimes be viewed as an antidote to “social death” and physical death, as in the case of Clare Kendry in Larsen’s novel *Passing*. Passing figures inhabit a site of their own making. They stand as indomitable refutations of the unbridgeable boundary between blacks and whites, and topple the rigidly set rhetoric of racial categories which lock them in a slot. Like transgendered people who reject and subvert gender normativity, and American Jews who cross the borders of cultural, national, and racial identity to fight ostracization by white Americans, passing mulattos and mulattas struggle against their exclusion by wearing the mask of whiteness. The book edited by Maria Carla Sánchez and Linda Schlossberg, *Passing: Identity and Interpretation in Sexuality, Race, and Religion* (2001), contains essays in which the authors establish a link between passing and the performativity of identity. Racial and gender passing are transitional stages presupposing the embodiment of behavioral patterns or features that converge with the sought-after identities. Color privilege, the prerequisite for the passing of mulattos and mulattas, translates into a synecdochical presentation of a white appearance as white. The interplay between passing as visibility and concealment as misrecognition poses a problem of authenticity. Passing is a recurrent theme during the Harlem Renaissance, which generated a plethora of fictional narratives. Walter White’s *Flight* (1926), Jessie Fauset’s *Plum Bun* (1928), and Nella Larsen’s *Passing* (1929) problematize arbitrary patterns of racial classificatory systems. Conventionally, in passing-for-white stories, passers are viewed as traitors who are ultimately punished through their surrender to their “authentic” past or through death.

Passing sets forth the dialectic of enclosure and disclosure. The almost-white black passers often present a problem of reading for whites who mistake them for whites.

Nella Larsen's *Passing* offers an example of the unreadability of her protagonists Clare and Irene, which problematizes the epistemological guarantee of the visible, and the orthodoxy and inconsistency of the one-drop rule. Racially mixed people occupy a position analogous to that of Esu-Elegbara, the Yoruba trickster figure that Henry Louis Gates finds in black mythology in Africa, America, and the Caribbean: Esu is said to limp as he walks precisely because of his mediating function, for his legs are of different lengths because he keeps one anchored in the realm of the gods while the other rests in this, our human world (*The Signifying Monkey* 6). The uneven lengths of Esu's legs bespeak the barriers separating the divine world from the profane. In the case of mixed-race people in the books examined in this study, their location on the margin of two cultures which never completely interpenetrate substantiates their instability. Esu's limping corresponds to the instability of mulattos, which is produced by their irreconcilable strivings. Their attempts to solve their dilemma through passing are understandable, but passing can be risky and anxiety-producing, for passers are neither glorified nor relieved by their practice of impersonation and masquerade. That is why passing narratives are not characterized by comfort and ease. The discomfort is rooted in the ambiguous escape from the constricting minority position—it can either be fettered or unfettered—which increases the tensions associated with liminality.

Passing for white is not necessarily tied up with the act of fleeing one's racial heritage. The black American writer Walter White passes in order to travel to the South to carry out investigations regarding lynching and other atrocities meted out to blacks. His autobiographical self-portrait articulates passing as subversion of racial classification. White points out the paradox of race and physical features: "I am a Negro. My skin is

white, my eyes are blue, my hair is blonde. The traits of my race are nowhere visible upon me” (*A Man Called White* 3). White’s self-description challenges the prevalent racial taxonomy.

Identity for passers represents an elusive wish because the passage between minority and mainstream states is never consummated. Nowadays, racial passing is *passé*, but other forms of passing, mainly gender passing, prevail. Racial and gender passing involve physical and psychic transformations. Sometimes, passing involves self-whitening and depersonalization. Skin-bleaching is primarily a sign of an inferiority complex and a manifestation of a desire for self-whitening; black men and especially black women resort to this practice as a result of their pathological rejection of their darker skin (the most striking example in the United States today is Michael Jackson). The maintenance of the liminal state of “whitening” produces many problems, including the risk of developing cancer from the repetitive practice of skin-bleaching. Generally, women and men who bleach their skin are afraid to stop the treatment lest they become darker. They struggle to maintain an even skin tone, but the irregular patchwork on their faces and necks and the strong smell of their products is a powerful disincentive against this self-denying practice. But some women succumb to the irresistible virus of self-whitening, and are under the delusion that it enhances their beauty. This behavior is antagonistic to the foundational premise of *négritude*, which revalues the beauty of blackness. In all cases, whether from genetics or from skin-bleaching, passing is marked by ambiguity. It involves agency through the actualization of desire prompted by feelings of inauthenticity. Passing triggers alienation from the self. The passing subject will never retrieve his/her former self, which accounts for the contingency and provisionality of

identities shaped and reshaped by desirable or unexpected transformational narratives. In recent years, the issue of passing has generated debates within newly-emergent disciplines such as literary theory, philosophy, cultural studies, and gender studies. In this context, the marginal site of passing remains intact and marks the interspaces between old and new, major and minor disciplines and subjects.

From the evidence presented in this chapter, it appears that marginal identities produced by the mixed-race experience are based on power dynamics. The binaristic logic of racial discursive epistemology, grounded in a process of inclusion and exclusion, appears to be the result of Western imperialist ideology. In *Mille Plateaux: Capitalisme et Schizophrénie*, Deleuze and Guattari's assumption that "il n'ya pas de race dominante" (470) ["there is no dominant race" (379)] dismantles hooks's identification of whiteness with domination and her description of the self-reflexive nature of its discourse (*Black Looks* 21).

The delineation of black and white racial categories in terms of Manichean aesthetic and ethical representations results from the contacts whites had with non-whites through exploration and colonization, when the myth of inferiority of blacks was constructed by whites as a ploy for exploitation. This ambivalent Western system of domination is evidenced in Diop's *Nations nègres et culture* where the focus is on *nécessité économique* (53) [economic necessity], and in Albert Memmi's *Portrait du colonisé, précédé du portrait du colonisateur*, where Memmi argues that "[à] la base de toute la construction, enfin, on trouve une dynamique unique: celle des exigences économiques et affectives du colonisateur, qui lui tient lieu de logique, commande et explique chacun des traits qu'il prête au colonisé" (104-105) "[a]t the basis of the entire

construction, one finally finds a common motive; the colonizer's economic and basic needs, which he substitutes for logic, and which shape and explain each of the traits he assigns to the colonized" (83)]. The Western logic of domination is perpetuated by the stigmatization of racial hybridity as degeneration by nineteenth-century racial thinkers like Gobineau and his ilk. The vilification of the *other* stems from the fear of and discomfort with alterity. That is what accounts for the etymological underpinning of the word "mulatto," which, as pointed out above, is likened to the mule (Lionnet 10). As illustrated in Larsen's *Passing* and White's *Flight*, as pointed out above, the inconsistency and limitations of Western racial theories become more pronounced with the problematic classification of racial hybrids, due to the lack of correspondence between the color of the skin and racial classification. Moreover, as seen in the books that will be examined in this dissertation, the intersection of race with class, especially in the Caribbean, shows the fluidity of the concept of race. The wealthy light-skinned mulatto is considered white, whereas the low-class white man is likened to a black man. Thus, blackness and whiteness prove to be less biological than sociological constructions. The blurring of the two races with racial hybridity engenders phenomena such as in-betweenness which resist racial essentialism. The agonistic situation where hybrid entities dwell, due to their blending of and separateness from racial categories, appears to be soothed with liminality when it provides them with free and fluid alternative worlds. The analysis of autobiographical writings in the next chapter will illustrate how writing is the liminal experience between discontinuity and change, insanity and sanity, and nationalism and exile.

Chapter Two

Liminal Psychoautobiographies: Rites and Routes

I am not arguing that there are no African women's autobiographies, or denying that they may share western and African influences; I am saying something as simple as insisting that not every writing that uses extended elements from the author's life should be labeled autobiography. In this era of difficult, sometimes obfuscating, theoretical jargon and fascinating but confusing concepts of genre hybridity, I wish to argue for our insistence on clarity of terminology. (Elder 15)

Arlene Elder's plea for a more careful and sustained theoretical re-examination of the autobiographical genre reflects her discomfort with the term autobiography, which has given rise to a plethora of controversies since the classical age. The general criticism leveled against autobiography, from Pascal through Sartre and Deleuze to Elder and Kusunose, revolves around egomania, insincerity, and indeterminacy. The masculine tradition of autobiography starting with *The Confessions of Saint Augustine* (1907) is the perfect embodiment of egomania, narcissism, and subjectivism. It stands to reason that the canonization of the transcendent masculine norm of autobiographical writing leads to the invisibility of female autobiographers. In Europe and Africa, women's lack of a written tradition and their marginality in male-centered societies triggers their oppositional writing. The autobiographical works of Gertrude Stein, Nawal El Saadawi, Nafissatou Diallo, and Mariama Bâ speak volumes of the discursive strategies adopted by women to challenge and complicate the traditional, conventional, and monadic paradigms of men's self-writings. The purpose of this chapter is to expose the intricate, divergent,

ambivalent, and subversive articulations of women's experiences in Mayotte Capécia's *Je suis martiniquaise* and Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*. The fictionalized narratives of Capécia and Head respectively span colonial and post-colonial eras. Although they write from their expatriate lands, their stories are different in form, function, and narrative posture. Beyond these differences, their shared experiences of marginalization by race, gender, and class prompt them to harness their creative potential as a tool of the reconstruction of their identities. Capécia and Head's autobiographical novels offer an understanding of the constitutive relationship of autobiography to the historical and socio-cultural realities of Second World War Martinique and apartheid-ruled South Africa. In each, issues of self-representation overlap with issues of gendered, racial, and national identities. These texts prompt two fundamental questions: How do Capécia and Head articulate their marginal experiences and rearticulate their unstable and fragmented identities through the liminal experience of autobiographical writing? How does their writing mediate the space between their race and their gender?

Autobiography as Autobiographie: Je-Jeu in Mayotte Capécia's *Je suis martiniquaise*

Capécia's autobiographical novel is set during the Second World War, when Admiral Robert, High Commissioner of the Vichy government, and his small fleet of French warships took control of Martinique and Guadeloupe from 1940 until his surrender in the face of an allied blockade and local anti-Vichy riots in 1943. Referred to in Creole as *Tan Robé*, this unsettled historical period was essentially characterized by an ideological shift from *blanchitude* to *Négritude*. Black Martinicans made a transition

from their pre-war assimilation and self-definition as French to the acceptance of *Négritude* values and self-identification as blacks. *Je suis martiniquaise* describes the racial tensions between blacks and whites, and blacks and colored, sparked by the war, and the quandary of the colored protagonist, who refuses to accept any connection with her African heritage. Patrick Taylor specifies in *The Narrative of Liberation: Perspectives on Afro-Caribbean Literature, Popular Culture, and Politics* (1989) that “it [was] normal for a black Antillean to be antiblack. He or she has internalized the archetypes belonging to the European” (42). Fanon also explained the belief in difference between Africans and Caribbeans in the first chapter of *Peau noire, masques blancs*, describing Africans’ attempt to pass as Caribbeans by learning Creole and the feelings of hurt displayed by Caribbeans whenever they are mistaken for Africans (25-26; 38).

The shift in consciousness for black Martinicans does not concern Capécia’s heroine, whose desire for whiteness remains unperturbed despite the racial clashes in the island. Autobiography for her becomes the liminal experience between history and race, as the fate of Mayotte is spun into the historical and racial tapestry. Describing herself as a *métisse*, and yearning to marry a white man, she grapples with maladjustment in her community, which rejects her for bearing the son of a white French Pétainist soldier. She ends up leaving Martinique for Paris. Her separation from Martinique is paradigmatic of her solitude and loss of communal bearings: “Je dis pour toujours adieu à cette île où je ne laissais que des morts” (202) [“I said goodbye forever to that island where I left only the dead” (153)]. The decision to turn her back on her native land “forever” is prompted by her desire to open new avenues for herself.

Mayotte epitomizes the prototype of the French Caribbean who is a colored yet yearns for whiteness. Her departure for France reasserts the dynamic of the colonial “family romance,” which is the fictive bond between colonized French subjects and the valorized metropolitan Mère-Patrie. Freud’s idea of the family romance implies the normal pre-oedipal attachment of the child to its parents. He pathologizes it when the adult keeps clinging to his parental support (238). Mayotte’s desire to fuse with the French other testifies to her psychological dependence on the white man. Fanon’s *Peau noire, masques blancs* illustrates the theme of acculturation and its attendant effects on the psychology of the Caribbeans. In the section of the book dealing with “The Negro and Psychopathology,” Fanon writes that “[u]n enfant noir normal, ayant grandi au sein d’une famille normale, s’anormalisera au moindre contact avec le monde blanc” (137) “[a] normal black child, having grown up within a normal family, will become abnormal on the slightest contact with the white world” (143).] This abnormalcy is materialized in the Caribbean woman’s rejection of her black self as a result of her identification with the white other.

Je suis martiniquaise is the autobiographical novel of an assimilated and colonized young colored woman. Autobiography is the activity that Jacques Lecarme and Éliane Lecarme-Tabone break down into three components: “Il s’agit d’écrire (graphie) sa vie (bios) soi-même (auto)” (7) [“It is about writing (graphy) one’s life (bio) by oneself (auto)”]. Seen through a Eurocentric perspective, this definition fits well with the framework of Western societies where individual experiences are separate from collective experiences. Hence I agree with Susan Anderson’s argument that the “impulse

to examine the history of the self, to turn systematic retrospection into art is a European one” (398).

Autobiographies are always stories of individuals but in African contexts, the lives of individuals are knit into family and communal experiences. Adetayo Alabi’s theorization of the characteristics of the black autobiographical genre reinforces the interweaving of the individual and the collective (5). However, the business of writing one’s life is itself problematic because autobiography is not and cannot be the mirror through which life is perceived.

The temporal and spatial dimension of autobiographical writing cannot capture the heterotopic and heteronomous character of real life. How is it possible for writers to relate the multiple roles they enact in their society, their various experiences, and their unconscious urges as well? It stands to reason that autobiographical narrative can only retrieve fragmented parts of human experience. Writing the self encompasses three different processes, referred to by Marie-Françoise Chanfrault-Duchet as “narrativisation” “fictionalisation” and “textualisation.” She explains:

The double process of narrativisation and fictionalisation which takes charge of the organization and interpretation of biographical data is specified and complexified by a process of textualisation, which aims to express the singular identity through a close meaning system. (69)

The autobiographical self thus develops narrative identity, fictional identity, and textual identity. I will not focus on textual identity, that is, the autobiographical novel as text, but on narrativization and fictionalization. In *Je suis martiniquaise*, the real person of the author is easily distinguishable from the fictional character, whose life is circumscribed

within the length of the hundred and twenty-five page narrative. Mayotte is both the fictional protagonist around whom all the actions revolve and the narrator who recounts her life experience in a form of a *bildungsroman*. Gérard Genette argues that the narrator and the protagonist do not share the same identity in first-person narratives; he calls this occurrence a *homodiegetique* narration (286).

Beyond the narrator-protagonist complementarity, it is important to place Capécia's work within the general literary trends of the period. The publication of *Je suis martiniquaise* in 1948 marked the beginning of unprecedented breakthroughs in Caribbean literature. Capécia, Édouard Glissant, Joseph Zobel, Alejo Carpentier, Una Marson, Louise Bennett, Samuel Selvon, V. S. Naipaul, George Lamming, Wilson Harris, and Derek Walcott all belong to the generation of Caribbean writers whose voices resonate in such metropolitan centers as London and Paris. In Capécia's autobiographical novel, which poses the dialectics of nationalism and exile, the narrator Mayotte claims her national identity as a Martinican woman in France the way Laye casts a backward glance at his native Guinea in *L'Enfant noir*. Like Laye, Mayotte writes to overcome her loneliness and curb the monotony of the winter in her Parisian exile. Her childhood memories serve as an antidote to her nostalgia:

Pourquoi me suis-je mise à écrire? Je venais d'arriver à Paris. J'y étais venue pour me marier, mais cela, c'est une histoire dont je ne veux pas parler... Il faisait froid, il neigeait et cette blancheur douce qui tombait lentement du ciel et que je voyais pour la première fois m'enchantait, tout en me donnant de la nostalgie. C'est alors que j'ai noté quelques souvenirs de mon pays, de mon enfance. (21)

[Why did I decide to write? I had just arrived in Paris. I had come to get married, but that is another story I don't want to talk about. It was cold and snowing and the gentle whiteness falling from the sky that I was seeing for the first time both fascinated and caused me pangs of homesickness. That is when I wrote down some of the childhood memories about my country. (39)]

Although Mayotte resolves never to return to Martinique, her backward glance recaptures and recreates her bond with her home and community through the liminal process of writing. The discomfort caused by the weather in France and her attempts to adjust to life in Paris point to her deterritorialized subjectivity. Writing in this context becomes an imaginary reterritorialization, that is, a reconstruction of one's homeland in fiction. This reterritorialization consists in rewriting home by virtue of the desire for home (Davies, 113).

Mayotte's severance from her native land Martinique and imaginary return through recollections marks her doubling—she is at two places at once—and contradictory psychological state. Her wish to start afresh in Paris is undermined by the surge of nostalgic glances which fosters her sense of in-betweenness. Rooted in her exclusion from post-World War II Martinique, where the values of *Négritude* substitute for the ethos of whiteness, Mayotte's relocation to France is motivated by her quest for legitimacy that she hopes to achieve through marriage. Her yearning to step out of her spinsterhood with marriage in Paris makes of the host society a space of promise and expectation, as opposed to her native land Martinique. In *The Rites of Passage*, Genep conceives of betrothal as liminal and the married life that follows as postliminal (11). Autobiographical writing helps the reader to understand the constraints of gender and

race, and provides an alternative space where the narrator can counteract the exclusivist rhetoric of nationalism.

Life-writing by authors who have emigrated offers an interesting vantage point from which to view the relationship between autobiography and what could be called *autrebiographie*. Traditionally, autobiography has been thought of as the story of an author telling his or her life, usually from childhood to adulthood, but Capécia's autobiography has been viewed as inauthentic by critics such as Christiane Makward, Gwen Bergner, Beatrice Stith Clark, and Ilona Johnson. The inauthenticity of Capécia's autobiography has to do with the myriad of mysteries surrounding her life. Her disconnection from her homeland Martinique, her reconnection with her adopted land France, and her liminal strategy of re-creation of herself through writing, make of her autobiography what I would term an *autrebiographie* or "otherbiography." This term constitutes a reanalysis of the activity of self-representation, which turns out to be marred by the intrusion of fiction, the incoherence of the autobiographical self, and the conscious *je-jeu* (I-game) of the narrator who omnisciently weaves the body of her narrative.

Reminiscences are preconditions for the writing of the self, but are simultaneously barriers for the restitution of the true self which is mired in illusion. As anamnestic stories, fictional autobiographies are vitiated by forgetfulness in remembrance and the fallibility of memory. The almost impossible writing of a unified and nonfragmented self, coupled with the gaps between the imagined narrating "I" and the real narrated "I," illustrates the intentional fallacy of autobiographical writing. Capécia's fictionalized autobiography is really a "recitation of a recitation" rather than a "recitation of the self" (Smith, "Performativity" 111). Despite the self-referential quality of her narrative, the recitation

of her self falls prey to the constructed recitation of the self. In fact, Capécia's artificial authority is prompted primarily by her nominal disguise: Mayotte Capécia is a penname. The writing of the self thus becomes steeped in the ambivalent grammar of closure and disclosure and geared toward a conscious effect of transformation. In her article "Autography/Transformation/Asymmetry" (1998), Jeanne Perreault emphasizes the transformative dynamic embedded in the activity of writing the self: "[t]ransformation enters the discussion of writing the self in that it is the site of the mutable self engaging with language" (194). The narrative is the site of re-construction or re-articulation of the self and transformation of the writing subject into an effect of language. This transformation, as suggested by bell hooks in the following lines, purges the self from its old negative or unwilled reality and reshapes it, hence the destructive and regenerative rhetoric of autobiography. I believe that one writes to become other than what one is, which makes of the enterprise of autobiography an *autrebiographie*. This idea is corroborated by hooks in her article "Writing Autobiography":

To me, telling the story of my growing up years was intimately connected with the longing to kill the self I was without having to die. I wanted to kill that self in writing. Once that self was gone—out of my life forever—I could more easily become the me of me. (429)

hooks's conceptualization of autobiographical writing establishes a link between the recapitulation of the past through writing and the yearning for self-regeneration. Writing, in this respect, is the liminal experience of dissolution that preconditions rebirth. Joseph G. Kronick actualizes or fulfills hooks's necrophilic self-writing by defining autobiographical writing as an *autobiothanatography* because of the correlation between

writing and death (1014). However, can one kill one's pre-narrated self through writing? I do not de-link telling and recreating in autobiography, but I problematize the killing of the self. The killing of the self, I believe, is a presumption of amnesia. Multi-faceted, multi-dimensional, and the site of desired and undesired things, the self cannot be contained in writing. Therefore, "killing the self" is a partial elimination. In *Je suis martiniquaise*, the "killing of the self" is stymied by the narrator's willed retention of information about her life. Thus, autobiography becomes what I also call *partiobiographie* or partial autobiography. This is evidenced in the following sentence: "I had come to get married but that is another story I don't want to talk about." The *je* [I] is transformed into a *jeu* [game] whereby the narrator simultaneously includes and excludes, reveals and hides things to narrate, which conjures up the incompleteness of the narration and the ludic nature of autobiography.

The ludic is an important aspect of liminality. Spariosu writes: "[b]ecause of their fluidity, flexibility, and freedom from rigid ontological commitments, liminal worlds are ludic worlds *par excellence*" (68). The reader of *Je suis martiniquaise* embarks on a ludic journey of truth/fiction, representation and misrepresentation because of the mask Capécia wears. I argue that the "desire to create a being like oneself" (3), as Barbara Johnson specifies in her article "Autobiography as Monstrosity," is shattered by the distance between the author's life and her created autobiography. Wayne Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961) focuses on the artificial presence of the author: "artifice is unmistakably present whenever the author tells us what no one in so-called real life could possibly know" (3).

In *Je suis martiniquaise*, Capécia's artificial authorship, mostly visible in the disguise of her name, bears witness to the ways in which she negotiates with social constructions of femininity. As one of the earliest women writers in the Francophone Caribbean, her disguise efficaciously reveals what Sandra Gilbert refers to as the "anxiety of authorship" that women writers have to deal with, due to the unflattering remarks their male predecessors make about their artistic abilities (*The Madwoman in the Attic* 49). As Leah D. Hewitt notes, the autobiographical genre has been made inaccessible for women, because autobiography has been regarded both as a generically marginal, self-indulgent examination of the author's personality and as a canonical, often spiritual narrative of an exemplary life (2). Thus the employment of a disguise is a necessary ploy that enables Capécia to fight her marginalization and acquire a voice and a hearing.

Makward, who uncovered significant data about Capécia's life in her informative book *Mayotte Capécia ou l'aliénation selon Fanon*, points out the near impossibility of representing Capécia's life: "conter la véritable histoire de Capécia, ce sera donc expliquer en situation les choix et problèmes d'une femme qui fit scandale en tant qu'icône et non point en tant que personne, car la personne est restée inconnue" (43) ["narrating the real life of Capécia will then consist in explaining the choices and difficulties of a woman who created a scandal as an icon and not as a person. In fact, the person has remained unknown"]. Makward's statement conjures up the dialectics of Capécia's autobiography and what I believe to be her *vie-mystère*. The three words *conter*, *choix*, and *icône* ("narrate" "choice" and "icon") suggest the inauthentic nature of Capécia's autobiography. Through its imaginary rhetoric, the verb *conter* in French vitiates truthful life rendition. The construction of the narrative "I" by a mysterious

author blurs the boundaries of autobiography and fiction. Moreover, the juxtaposition of *conter* with *véritable* in Makward's statement ironically represents a falsification of reality, whereby access to truth is impaired by the unreliable narrative I which becomes an *autre/other*. Indeed, Capécia the author has puzzled critics. Her real name and important details of her life would remain unfathomed if Beatrice Stith Clark, the translator of her two novelettes *Je suis martiniquaise* and *La négresse blanche*, and Makward had not taken pains to unravel some of her mysteries. Capécia's choice to shroud the details of her own life is self-empowering. Even though critics misperceive her identity, Capécia's self-identity becomes her view of herself and derives from the gendered and racial marginalization that influenced her becoming and her reaction toward others.

According to Makward's research,² Mayotte Capécia is the pseudonym for Lucette Combette, born in Carbet, a small town in Martinique. In the story, Combette adopts the pseudonym Mayotte, changes her twin sister's name from Reine to Francette, and omits important details of her sexual life. The impact of authorial authority on textual representation appears in the ways in which Capécia the narrator consciously selects materials to incorporate in her text and shelters herself from utter self-exposure.

Capécia excludes upsetting episodes of her life, such as her illegitimacy—she and her twin sister were born out of wedlock—and her reproduction of illegitimacy when she conceives three children as an unwed mother. Even though in the text there is only mention of the child Mayotte has with the French officer André during the Second World War, Makward gives accurate information that gainsays this textual claim in the article

² I am indebted to Makward for her elaborate and detailed assessment of the degree of truthfulness of Capécia's autobiography, and her insistence on its collective character.

she co-edited with Ilona Johnson, entitled “La longue marche des franco-antillaises: Fictions autobiographiques de Mayotte Capécia et Françoise Ega” [The long walk of French-Caribbean Women: Autobiographical Fictions of Mayotte Capécia and Françoise Ega]. She argues that Capécia was the “mère célibataire d’un troisième enfant dès Février 1943” (312) [unwed mother of a third child by February 1943]. In fact, Capécia does not hide the birth of her illegitimate child but twists the facts by obliterating the existence of the two others, as shown in the above-cited article and confirmed by Beatrice Stith in her article “Who Was Mayotte Capécia? An Update.” She writes that “Le père de Capécia, Eugène Combette, a reconnu Lucette et sa soeur jumelle Reine, peu avant sa mort en 1946. Les trois enfants de Lucette Ceranus Combette, Claude, Georges, et Annie, vivent à Paris” (456) [“Capécia’s father, Eugène Combette, acknowledged Lucette and her twin sister, Reine, shortly before his death in 1946. Lucette Ceranus Combette’s three children—Claude, Georges, and Annie—live in Paris”]. Capécia’s exclusion of such details of her life from the novel bespeaks the *jeu* of the autobiographical *je* and her craving for self-protection. Despite the fact that she employs sexual and nominal masks, she recounts important events of her life, including her childhood in Carbet, her mother’s death, her father’s avarice and propensity for chasing young girls, and her financial independence.

The first page of *Je suis martiniquaise* plunges the reader into the heart of Mayotte’s family environment with the presence of all the members of her family including her sister, mother, and father. However, critics like Stith, as shown earlier, refute Mayotte’s pretense of having a united family. In this respect, the narrative picture of her parents as living under the same roof proves to be imagined:

Lorsque nous étions petites [...] Ma mère suspendait devant ma bouche un régime de bananes [...] Mon père avait clos le jardin où il cultivait des manguiers, d'une simple palissade en fils de fer barbelés mais il avait quand même construit un portail très décoratif et même monumental dont nous étions fiers (8)

[When we were little [...] My mother would hold a bunch of bananas in front of my mouth [...] My father had enclosed a garden with a barbed wire fence where he grew mango trees, but even so, he had built a very decorative gateway which made us very proud (29)].

Capécia's transformation of her father's absence into presence might respond to her need to bridge a psychological impairment. In Freudian terms, the correction of this lack corresponds to the return of the repressed. At the moment of writing her autobiography, Capécia divests the sour recollection of her birth as an illegitimate child of the narrative and constructs her literary legitimacy. She dispels the image of fragility and vulnerability of Martinican women. The *autrebiographie* of her autobiography is manifest through her self-invention and her reinterpretation of the topoi of traditional autobiography, as illustrated by the celebratory vein of "Rousseauian" autobiography in the eighteenth century where the autobiographical "I" is sovereign: "In the master narratives of modernity, the autobiographical "I" has functioned as a culturally forceful enunciatory site of the autonomous, free, rational, unified individual or self" (Smith, "Memory" 38). Ostensibly, the individualistic masculinized self differs from the gendered female self that is fraught with contradictions and tensions. In the case of Capécia, whose self is split, owing to her hybridized and diasporic identity as black, white, and African/Caribbean, the I is the site of acute clashes and ambiguities, of truth and "lie."

The presence of fictitious elements is not peculiar to Capécia's narrative. Though fundamentally based upon factual information, autobiography seems not to be incompatible with fiction, because of the presence of the dramatized narrator and the author's masterful arrangement of his/her text. Gunnthórunn Gudmundsdóttir's book *Borderlines: Autobiography and Fiction in Postmodern Life Writing* (2003) focuses on the similarity between the two: "[l]ife-writing can be said always to contain both autobiographical and fictional aspects" (5). It is for this reason that I find fault with the traditional notion of autobiography because of the narrative pretense to retrieve and relate events pertaining to the past, as if the past were an intact and immutable entity. The author who writes about himself/herself does it via a process of selection, elimination, and transformation of the materials of the past. Such activity strips the text of completeness and reliability. The writing of Capécia gives enough evidence for this, as well as the fictional thrust many African and Caribbean women writers impart to their self-writing. Mariama Bâ's *Une si longue lettre*, Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*, and Nawal El Saadawi's *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor* offer excellent examples of this phenomenon. In the preface to her autobiographical novel, El Saadawi notes:

I still consider *Memoirs*, incomplete as it is in the present edition, as a fair description of the moral and social position of women [...] Some people believe that *Memoirs* is autobiographical, but although many of the heroine's characteristics fit those of an Egyptian woman such as myself, active in the medical field [...] the work is still fiction. (8)

The problem of autobiographical fiction is where to draw the line between fact and fiction. Knowing about the author's life would help make the distinction. But how far can one know about the author's life as is the case with Capécia?

In the French West Indies, Capécia has an existential double named Marie-Magdeleine Carbet. Born in Martinique in 1902, Carbet wrote and published consistently in the 1930s in a variety of genres such as the novel, short story, children's story, essay, song, and poetry. She was a strong activist against racism and anti-semitism. Her thematic concerns revive echoes of some nineteenth-century issues of Romanticism, in particular the representation of nature, love, and longing for a halcyon and blissful life. Predecessor of Capécia, this woman was reputed for her inscrutable nature. E. Anthony Hurley starts out his article "D'un masque à l'autre: Marie-Magdeleine Carbet" with what I call a textual gap which is reflective of the shroud of mystery surrounding the woman-author: "Marie-Magdeleine Carbet occupe une place unique dans l'histoire littéraire des Antilles du vingtième siècle. Mais qui est cette femme? Son identité tant personnelle que littéraire touche à l'énigme" (281) ["Marie-Magdeleine Carbet holds a unique position in the literary history of the twentieth-century Caribbean. But who is this woman? Both her personal and literary identity remain unknown"]. Hurley also points out Carbet's treble disguise through her racial mask, her sexual mask, and her nominal mask (281). In fact, Carbet's real name is Anna Marie-Magdeleine. Her adoption of the pseudonym "Carbet," name of a town in the North of Martinique, where Capécia was born, conveys her unabashed identification with her Martinican identity.

The use of the mask by Carbet and Capécia is emblematic of the marginality experienced by Caribbean women and prompted by their need to access the public realm

of literary visibility. Marie Cristina Rodriguez's "Women Writers of the Spanish Speaking Caribbean" highlights how Spanish Caribbean women's low consideration by men up to the 1990s is projected onto their writings:

Women are seen for the most part as harmless, emotional, almost hysterical if pushed too far, unable to make a reasonable argument, and playing at being independent just to come home running to a man who will offer security in exchange for submission. So when women write, they are not taken seriously [...] They can be tolerated if they are relatively good and make us laugh. When they get too serious [...] they become dangerous and must be closely watched. There is more tolerance of women poets because they tend to deal with intimacies—their own, not men's. (345)

It seems that under the constrictions of the male gaze, women writers evolve in a tight literary space and are unlikely to develop high literary sensibilities. Beyond the psychological pressures Spanish Caribbean men exert upon women in order to maintain a position of supremacy in the literary arena, Caribbean women writers also grapple with the precariousness of their situation by virtue of the "aberrations of literary production" (Shelton 347). Therefore, women writers in the Caribbean are worth their *pesant d'or* or "weight of gold," like the Maghrebian and Francophone African women writers whose *prise de parole* in the 1970s unshackled them from an existence in the shadows.

The symbolism of the mask is liminally significant for the transition of women from the private to the public realm, and from voicelessness to voice-throwing. Hurley substantiates the rationale behind Marie-Magdeleine's writing:

Toute l'écriture pour Carbet est, comme son nom, une sorte de masque [...] C'est à cause du masque qu'elle peut dépasser les rôles assignés traditionnellement à la femme, qu'elle soit noire, martiniquaise, voire française, en participant d'une disponibilité et d'une indépendance totales qui la laissent libre d'exprimer sa propre voix littéraire et de devenir ce qu'elle voulait avant tout être: elle-même. (291)

[All writing for Carbet, like her name, is a kind of mask [...] Because of the mask, she is able to go beyond the roles traditionally assigned to women, be they black, Martinican, and even white. Her availability and total independence give her the freedom to express her own literary voice and to become what she fundamentally wished to be: herself.]

Writing is instrumental in the de-marginalization and de-naturalization of Marie-Magdeleine. The mask serves as a strategic ploy with which she transcends the barriers of literary restrictions erected by men; it lays the groundwork for subversion, contestation, and resistance to male dominance. The instance of pre-liminal separation from others that autobiographical writing necessitates is compensated by the liminal space of the mask, which makes the personal shareable. The enactment of female subjectivity via the prism of the mask has a liberatory power. The mask has the same liminal potential of protective anonymity and dissemblance as the veil in the writing of the Algerian feminist writer Assia Djebar. In "Écrire comme un voile," Laurence Hughe explains that "Djebar has chosen to veil herself in order to venture into the public space of writing" (867).

Marie-Magdeleine also cherishes freedom and independence, like Capécia's heroine Mayotte, but while Marie-Magdeleine's search for independence responds to

individual fulfillment, Mayotte's is rooted in the necessity for historical repair. Through her unabashed craving for the liberating force of independence, Mayotte seeks to redress the grievances and avenge the memory of her slave ancestors: "Moi, dont les ancêtres avaient été des esclaves, j'avais décidé d'être indépendante; et, aujourd'hui encore, bien que je n'aie pas toujours pu en jouir comme j'aurais voulu, je pense qu'il n'y a rien de mieux au monde que l'indépendance" (9) ["I, whose ancestors had been slaves, had decided to be independent, and even today, although I have not always been able to enjoy it as I would have liked, I believe that there is nothing better in all the world than independence" (30)]. Mayotte's awareness of her heritage of slavery heightens her aspiration for independence. The syntactic structure of the sentence, whereby the narrating "I" is isolated from its ancestors, marks a rupture between past and present, a transition from slavery to freedom. Capécia's autobiographical novel thus becomes a liminal counter-discourse to the dominant discourse of slavery. Later in the novel, Mayotte's yearning for independence and financial autonomy is reasserted when she leaves Carbet for the capital of Martinique, Fort-de-France:

Je ne gagnais que juste de quoi me nourrir. Or, j'aurais voulu avoir un commerce à moi, être tout à fait indépendante, avec la perspective de gagner davantage. J'étais, je suis toujours ambitieuse. Peut-être est-ce un défaut, mais si je ne pouvais pas changer la couleur de ma peau, j'avais la volonté d'améliorer ma condition. (121)

[I earned only enough to feed myself. Now, I would have liked a business of my own, to be altogether independent with the prospect of earning more and more. I was, and still am, ambitious. Maybe that's a weakness, but if I couldn't

change the color of my skin, I had the determination to better my condition. (99)] Mayotte's belief in hard work spurs her efforts for economic survival in the urban setting. Her awareness of the difficult condition of being a colored and a woman in Martinique, coupled with her belonging to a low social class, strengthens her determination to improve her social standing. She becomes an inspiring and self-regenerating model for colored women by her psychological strength and resolve to rise above the constraints of her race. Spariosu's idea that "a limen cannot be marginal" (38) is reflected in Mayotte's striving to forge a new identity for herself as an independent woman. She starts in a sewing workroom and ends up opening a laundry service (108).

In Capécia's second novelette, *La négresse blanche*, this yearning for autonomy is reiterated in the narrator Isaure, Mayotte's literary double, who is a bar owner. Isaure fiercely puts work at the forefront of her principles. When her brother Gustave borrows a substantial sum of money from her, under the delusion that her white lover Daniel lavishes money on her, she specifies with insistence that: "[i]l ne m'en donne pas. Je ne lui en demande pas. Je gagne ma vie toute seule en travaillant (49) "[h]e doesn't give me any and I don't ask for any. I earn my living myself by working" (184)]. Isaure's striving for independence revalorizes the image of the Martinican woman. The critic Gwen Bergner makes a linkage between Capécia's autobiography and the expression of her independence:

L'autobiographie de Capécia est vraiment une représentation rare, sans vergogne et tonique, des efforts d'une femme noire pour se tailler sa propre autonomie économique et sexuelle, au sein d'une société qui limitait très étroitement l'auto-détermination féminine" (87)

[The autobiography of Capécia is really a rare, shameless, and tonic representation of a black woman's efforts to carve her own economic and sexual autonomy out of a society which limited feminine self-determination very tightly.]

Bergner acknowledges and applauds the striving of Capécia's heroine for social advancement in a patriarchal society. Thus *Je suis martiniquaise* is a song of pride for the self-asserted colored Martinican woman. It is an autobiographical novel that reshapes and redefines the image of the Martinican woman whose aspiration for social change is untrammelled by the restrictions of patriarchy.

Mayotte's longing for financial autonomy transcends the limitations and constraints of her occupation as a laundress. Upon "psychoanalyzing" Mayotte's choice to become a laundress, the Martinican critic Fanon fails to acknowledge the economic empowerment behind the job. He considers this occupation as an attempt to bleach the world (*Peau noire* 45). Indeed, Fanon's psychoanalytical interpretation is marked by sexism. He does not get the message launched by the narrator: she cannot unshackle herself from the fetters of gender and race, but she is ready to alter her social status. All in all, Fanon does not deem it necessary to appraise fully and fairly Capécia's work. Consequently, the double stance of Capécia as a reader and an author escapes his analysis.

Capécia dismantles the image of the Martinican woman devoid of respect and worth in Western travelogues. In *Je suis martiniquaise*, this occupation has nothing degrading for the narrator: "Je faisais payer plus cher qu'ailleurs, mais je travaillais mieux et, comme les gens de Fort-de-France aiment le linge propre, ils venaient chez

moi. Finalement, ils étaient fiers de se faire blanchir chez Mayotte” (131). [“I charged more than others but I did better work and, since Fort-de-France liked clean linen, they patronized me. In the end, they were proud to have their linen become whiter at Mayotte’s” (108)]. Ostensibly, Mayotte shows the extent to which hard and well-done work pays off and enhances her dignity. Simultaneously, her ability to ensure the cleanness of the clothes of potentially wealthy creoles (whether black or white) can be construed as a challenge to the white association of whiteness with standards of beauty and cleanliness. This profession symbolically makes the mulatta Mayotte visible and respectable. Such visibility is, for instance, denied to the heroine of Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Pecola Breedlove, who is younger and more vulnerable. In her community, blackness equates with ugliness. Morrison focuses on Pecola’s disarming and helpless demeanor vis-à-vis the stigma associated with the color of her skin: “Long hours she sat looking in the mirror, trying to discover the secret of the ugliness, the ugliness that made her ignored or despised at school, by teachers and classmates alike” (45). The tragedy of Pecola lies in the unattainability of her unappeasable quest for blue eyes. The hostile family and societal environments contribute to her madness.

Mayotte escapes madness because of her moral strength and unflinching resolution to fight against gender and racial oppression. However, Capécia emphasizes the difficulties experienced by her protagonist because of what her community perceives as racial transgression. The birth of her son François, the half-white mulatto, during the height of the emancipatory struggles of blacks in Martinique in 1943, contributes to Mayotte’s anxiety. She has to grapple with blacks’ hostility and backbiting, but also with the discomfort and dismay of her father, who takes issue with his grandson’s white father,

and her sister Francette, who resents appearing in public with her light-skinned nephew (190-1). The autobiographical novel implicitly urges the reader to sympathize with Mayotte's plight. She has no control over the changes that sweep across wartime Martinique, where racially hybrid people become a sort of malediction. Attributing Mayotte's maladjustment to mere alienation, without reevaluating the project of *Négritude*, would seem reductive and simplistic. Through its contestation of white racist ideology, *Négritude* often appears to replicate the racism it seeks to contest. Black Martinicans tended to exclude racial hybridity from their scale of values, making the Mayottes outcasts in their own country. *Je suis martiniquaise* becomes a liminal revisitation of the historical metanarrative of *Négritude*.

In her article "Women Writers of the French-Speaking Caribbean," Marie-Denise Shelton rightly argues that "Capécia furnishes one of the first testimonies of the Caribbean *mal féminine*" (349). In the works of Capécia's successors, this *mal féminin* is generated by the exclusion of mixed-blood women from their socio-cultural environments and the subsequent projection of this exclusion onto their bodies, from which they become ultimately alienated. Michèle Lacrosil's novels *Sapotille et le serin d'argile* (1960), *Cajou* (1961), and *Demain Jab-Herma* (1967), Marie Chauvet's *Fille D'Haiti* (1954) and *Amour* (1960), Maryse Condé's *Heremakhonon* (1976), *Une saison à Rihata* (1981), and *Juletane* (1982) vividly express this feminine malaise.

The theme of malaise abounds in Caribbean women writers' works from the 1930s to the 1980s, which portray the image of *femmes échouées* [wrecked women], who can soothe their anguish only in madness or suicide. Virgile Valcin, one of the predecessors of Capécia, delves into this issue in her two novels *Cruelle Destinée* (1929)

and *La négresse blanche* (1934). The thematic peculiarities of Caribbean women writers are likely to find root in the abyss of cultural, racial, and linguistic fragmentations that underlie Caribbean identity. Elizabeth Wilson's article "Le voyage et l'espace clos: Island and Journey as Metaphor: Aspects of Women's Experience in the Works of Francophone Caribbean Novelists" furnishes a relevant description of the cleavages in the island: "the suffocating island with its prejudices of race and color and false alienating values" (47).

In *Je suis martiniquaise*, the *mal féminin* appears in the noxious impact of race and gender on women's sexuality. The life of Mayotte's white grandmother has been curtailed because of her unsanctioned liaison with a colored man. The narrator recalls her mother's story of her grandmother's past: "Ta g'and'mè' était d'une grande famille française du Canada [...] Elle fut élevée en pension chez les religieuses comme tous les enfants blancs fortunés. Malheureusement pour elle, elle fit la connaissance d'un jeune homme de couleur et elle l'aima. (57) ["Your grandmother came from an old French Canadian family [...] She was brought up in a convent like all wealthy white children. Unfortunately for her, she met and fell in love with a young colored man" (61)]. Whether Mayotte has internalized the tragedy resulting from interracial unions through the example of her grandmother or not, she expresses her feeling of indignation vis-à-vis her white grandmother: "Comment une Canadienne pouvait-elle aimer un Martiniquais? Je décidai que je ne pourrais aimer qu'un blanc, un blond avec des yeux bleus, un Français" (59) ["How could a Canadian woman have loved a Martinican? I decided that I could love only a white man, a blond with blue eyes, a Frenchman" (63)]. This autobiographical novel is a liminal site where Mayotte renegotiates her fluctuating identity in the web of

the competing and contradictory discourses of her self-definition as a colored, her claim as a Martinican woman, her rejection of Martinican men, and her desire for a white man.

Such complexity is undervalued by Fanon who simply ascribes Mayotte's decision to marry a white man to lactification in *Peau noire, masques blancs* (47). It is difficult not to accept the character of Mayotte as an embodiment of the dislocated and depersonalized colonial subject because her relationship to her history and culture has been distorted by colonial discourse. The colonialist destroys the effectiveness of native socio-political and moral systems and imposes its own agenda on the Other. Colonialism manufactured a creature of lack and desire who "perpetually yearns for Europeanness" (Olaniyan 273). In "Remembering Fanon: Self, Psyche and the Colonial Condition," Homi Bhabha locates colonial subjectivity in the fragmented and indeterminate space between the Self and the Other: "It is not the Colonialist Self or the Colonized Other, but the disturbing distance between that constitutes the figure of colonial otherness—the White man's artifice inscribed on the Black man's body. It is in relation to this impossible object that emerges the liminal problem of colonial identity and its vicissitudes" (117).

But Fanon fails to reflect on the root of Mayotte's alienation. I would argue that Mayotte's alienation could be rooted either in the internalized grudge she bears against the colored man who causes her grandmother's tragedy, or in her negative perception of the Martinican man, based on her view of her father's misconduct and irresponsibility (79-108). What needs to be said is that Fanon cannot escape the label of a sexist critic, because while he considers the search for whiteness by women of color as devoid of morality and self-respect and adamantly dismisses Capécia's *Je suis martiniquaise* as a

“cut-rate merchandise” (42), in *Peau noire, masques blancs* he considers men of color’s pursuit of white women as a search for civilization and dignity. Fanon underscores this with the following statement: “J’épouse la culture blanche, la beauté blanche, la blancheur blanche. Dans ces seins blancs que mes mains ubiquitaires caressent, c’est la civilisation et la dignité blanches que je fais miennes” (71) [“I marry white culture, white beauty, white whiteness. When my restless hands caress those white breasts, they grasp white civilization and dignity and make them mine”]. (63).

Fanon’s generally negative perception of Capécia has unleashed a storm of controversies among female critics. For instance, Makward reproaches Fanon for his sexist-oriented interpretation of Capécia’s oeuvre: “[n]otre perspective en cette fin de siècle est que l’attaque de Fanon était fondamentalement pré-analytique et déterminée par le sexe des auteurs” (17) “[o]ur perspective at the end of the century is that Fanon’s critique was fundamentally pre-analytical and determined by the sex of the authors”]. Makward’s opinion makes sense because of Fanon’s misunderstanding and misjudgment of Capécia’s purpose of unveiling the myriad of contradictions with which Martinican women grapple in their identitary quest and attempts at self-knowledge.

The church is instrumental in the alienation of Caribbean people, as illustrated by Beatrice Stith Clark in her introduction to Capécia’s translated novelettes *I am a Martinican Woman* and *The White Negress*:

Families like the Capécias, typically, held the parish priest in high esteem; he was their intimate counselor, his word was the fount of morality. Mayotte’s first communion, overseen by the mother, involved all members of her extended

family. But it was the priest who guided the young girl and her comrades through the “rite of passage,” to responsible adolescence. (17)

As a result of a childhood of alienation, Mayotte persists in her clinging to white values until her severance from her island Martinique. Despite the changes in the racial politics of post-war Martinique, she fiercely holds onto her racial beliefs, a colored woman desiring a white man, which can be conceived of as a contradiction or strength depending on the perspective of the critic. I would argue that Mayotte’s inability or choice to adapt to the transformations of a changing world places her in a liminal situation where the values and standpoints of her community become antivalues and vice versa. This liminal attitude is described by Turner as anti-structure in *The Ritual Process* as it challenges “jural-political-economic structures usually institutionalized, which have as important features, hierarchy, official classification, differentiation, stasis” (14). Thus anti-structure is the individual’s dissolution of the normative structural order prevailing in the rest of the community. Mayotte’s liminality becomes anomic, hence her exile to Paris. Her nationalist claim, via the three problematic words of the autobiographical novel, *Je suis martiniquaise*, in her land of exile, pushes further her liminality into another realm. She negotiates her identity in the liminal site between her re-connection to her lost native land and her relocation to Paris.

In the light of my analysis, *Je suis martiniquaise* appears to be a complex autobiographical novel where the experiences of the colored Martinican woman are wrought in the nexus of gender, class, race, history, and sexuality. Her uncontested yearning for financial independence is mixed with ambivalent negotiations of her identity through the contradictions surrounding her quest for both national and racial identity. The

autobiographical writing is liminally reconstructive and regenerating for the narrator, who seeks to re-member the fragments of her past and to claim an identity she was taught to despise and which was wrenched away from her. The autobiographical narrative fosters a process of self-knowledge, maturation, and epistemological growth.

The redeeming power of autobiography is also found in Bessie Head's *A Question of Power* but is inscribed within the framework of madness. The second part of the chapter reveals the complex ways in which Head's autobiographical novel charts the map of recreation of her character's identity.

Internal Drama: Spectralized Presences in Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*

A Question of Power defies the paradigmatic praxis of autobiographical writing because of the complexity and peculiarity of its structure. Set in Motabeng, a village in Botswana, the novel centers on the harrowing inner distress of the protagonist, Elizabeth, whose psychological disturbances result from her gendered and racial oppression. These problems appear in a series of dream visions, which mirror her excruciating and relentless search for an identity within the suffocating exilic landscape of her adoptive land, Botswana. The acute and torturous mental disintegration of Elizabeth is a site where she probes into the dark recesses of the human soul to come to terms with her past and understand the mechanisms of power.

The idiosyncrasy of Head's autobiographical novel lies in the enunciation of the narrative plot in the mind of Elizabeth, a smaller and interstitial space located between the private and the public, and not often critically recognized as political. This unusual narrative context raises two questions. How does the narrator's internal dialogism with

the forces of power unfold? How is the narrator's route to recovery punctuated by the rhetoric of self-oppression?

Elizabeth's internal drama is a liminal space between psychopathology and healing. Through her madness, she purges her mind of the wanton racism and sexism she experienced in her life. Her liminal catharsis responds to her need to remember the atrocities of her past life in order to re-member the dis-membered parts of her identity. The act of remembering is the liminal cognitive exercise following the pre-liminal dis-membering and leading to the post-liminal re-membering. To understand these different states, it is useful again to draw on the theory of Genep. He distinguishes the "rites of separation from a previous world, preliminal rites, those executed during the transitional stage liminal (or threshold) rites, and the ceremonies of incorporation into the new world postliminal rites" (21). In his view, the ritual passer or initiand is pre-liminally separated from his community to enter the liminal space of acquisition of gnosis and maturity before his post-liminal reconnection with the members of his community. All the three stages of liminality apply to Head's writing.

I would argue that Genep's pre-liminal phase of necessary separation between the individual and his community corresponds to Head's imposed blending with and separation from both black and white categories. The liminal stage is Head's narrativization of the plight of her racial exclusion. Her post-liminal phase, contrary to Genep's incorporation, which celebrates the significant return of the physically strengthened and spiritually regenerated individual to his community, charts her individually-oriented incorporation-recovery. *A Question of Power* is a testimonial herstory that she sets out to tell for her personal rehabilitation.

Head asserts that *A Question of Power* “was a completely autobiographical novel taking a slice of [her] life [and] experience and transcribing it verbatim into novel form” (qtd in Coundouriotis 28). The novel form enables her to trace the teleology of a fragment of her life through the creation of a protagonist. Her declaration that the novel is a transcription of a part of her life prompts one to wonder whether the task of autobiography as a retrospective story of a writer’s life is ever fulfilled. Elizabeth W. Bruss argues that “[t]he ‘story’ the autobiography tells is never seamless, and often it is not a story at all but a string of meditations and vignettes” (164). The lack of seamlessness in Head’s autobiographical novel appears in the alinear structure and in the array of issues covered, including sexuality, exile, power, and racism.

Head’s novelization of a slice of her life follows the autobiographical norm, because the voice of the adult Elizabeth dominates the narrative in accordance with the rules of classical autobiographical narrative (Lejeune 53). Her mixture of the novel with autobiography impugns the validity of intrinsically autobiographical forms or even self-sufficient genres. Head’s decision to relate the story of her life in a novel form is rooted in her artistic sensitivity. In *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Booth states that “a novel should be made dramatic” (24). Head’s creation of the ghostly world of Dan and Sello in *A Question of Power* responds to this dramatic effect. Thus the novel is a suitable device that frees autobiography from monotony. Indeed, the form is not divorced from the matter or content.

Head’s struggle for self-definition accounts for her necessity to explore such deep philosophical issues as the source of evil and the nature of power. These questions are examined from within the solitary mental drama of the heroine, Elizabeth, whose

nightmares are the orchestrations of two men, Dan and Sello, epitomes of competing forces of good and evil. Farmer and cattle breeder, Sello, the religious man of God, symbolizes love and compassion, and enacts the role of a god. For three or four years, as specified in the early pages of the novel, Sello has been “a ghostly, persistent commentator on all her thoughts, perceptions and experiences [...] First, he had introduced his own soul, so softly like a heaven of completeness and perfection” (14). Nightly companion of Elizabeth—he is a man-like apparition or hallucination—Sello constantly reveals spiritual truths to her. Dan, on the other hand, epitomizes male egotism. He threatens Elizabeth’s mental health and violates her mind with debasing and obscene scenes of unbridled eroticism and sexuality. Dan displays to Elizabeth what Arthur Ravenscroft calls “his gargantuan sexual exploits with an incredible succession of sexually insatiable females” (184). Among his seventy-one women, there are Miss Glamour, Miss Beauty Queen, Miss Legs, and Miss Buttocks. Elizabeth’s internal territory is thus readily colonized by Dan’s “sexual exploits” because of her insecurities as a husbandless colored woman and her desire to satiate her unconscious sexual urges.

Embodiments of power, Dan and Sello accompany Elizabeth to hell, not as icons of her alleviation from the pangs of hell, but as creatures manipulating her as a puppet on a string, and precipitating her descent into madness by virtue of their incessant fragmentation into dissimilar apparitions. The alter ego of the god-like Sello is the vile Medusa of Greek mythology, and Dan is an extension of the same Medusa. These apparitions are both metaphorical actualizations of evil or filth that crowd in on Elizabeth’s splintered mind and also signposts of her racial and sexual oppression. The nightmarish visions churning around in her head, nonetheless, help her to explore the

warring of good and evil in herself and to understand the workings of evil in South Africa in order to “transform it from deadness into a living hope” (Abrahams, 1990: 9). The novel ends on the promising note of Elizabeth’s peaceful resolution of her inner conflicts in Botswana: “As she fell asleep, she placed one soft hand over her land. It was a gesture of belonging” (*A Question of Power* 206). Elizabeth’s “gesture of belonging” blots out her post-traumatic experience initiated by South African racism and sexism, and expresses her yearning to find home in her “other” land, Botswana.

A Question of Power grows out of the grim and brutal South African experience. Like the Martinican writer Capécia, Head’s writing is informed by the historical and socio-political situation of her native country, and by her oppressive gendered and racial condition. Both artists share a common experience of expatriation, marginalization, vulnerability, and unrequited longing to heal their psychological wounds through the soothing balm of writing. Writing away from home about home offers evidence of undying memories that linger behind in a hidden part of a human being’s mind and readily resurface with the prickling sensations of hostility and insecurity.

The instrumentality of remembrances in the re-creation of the selves features in black male-authored and female-authored works. In Africa and the Caribbean, Césaire’s *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal* (1956), Laye’s *L’Enfant noir* (1953), and Senghor’s poetry compilation *Chants d’ombres* (1945) are all creative props the writers construct so as to overcome their loneliness and homesickness while living in France. Senghor reminisces about the idyllic setting of his *royaume d’enfance* [childhood kingdom] to transcend the callous vicissitudes of his exilic condition. Head’s backward glance is soured by the recollections of her expulsion from her native South Africa due to a

“peripheral political involvement.” She insists on the suddenness and swiftness of the termination of her South African citizenship:

In March 1964, barely a day’s journey separated me from one way of life and another. Until that day in March I had been a South African citizen. A very peripheral involvement in politics resulted in a refusal of a passport and I left South Africa on an exit permit. (*A Woman Alone* 85)

The biased and double-edged reality of citizenship in South Africa interferes with the rights of colored people, who cringe under the yoke of socio-political inequities. The institutionalization of white racial superiority sets in motion the implementation of laws detrimental to the well-being of the colored. The relegation of Head to the status of a sub-citizen reveals the processes of inclusion and exclusion inherent in South African citizenship at the time. Her own exile is experienced by Elizabeth, who unsuccessfully mediates the transition between her previous “citizenship” and her current exile. Scripted out of her native land and a misfit in her new alien environment, Elizabeth suffers from a mental breakdown. In fact, her dementia sprouts from her acute sense of difference, her non-African background, and her lack of knowledge of the language spoken by Botswanans. Elizabeth establishes the correlation between madness and no-place or exile: “It was in Botswana where mentally, the normal and the abnormal blended completely in Elizabeth’s mind” (*A Question of Power* 15). Elizabeth’s madness is reflective of the backbreaking and uncertain refugee life Head led in Botswana:

Officially she was designated a stateless person: she had to report to the police station every Monday morning, a practice she was to keep up for thirteen years. No refugee could be given employment through official channels. This meant that

she had to find some form of self-employment. A writing career would be the perfect answer to this. (Eilersen 91)

Significantly enough, Head's disadvantaged and underprivileged situation in Botswana spurred her writing activity, which enabled her to dramatize the quandary of colored women through Elizabeth. Mayotte's awareness of the plight of a woman's life in *Je suis martiniquaise* is echoed in *A Question of Power* due to Elizabeth's statelessness and exile. Her "nervous condition" results from her expulsion from South Africa and from the trials and tribulations of her exilic situation.

Head's autobiographical novel is a liminal space between an experience of racial oppression and a search for survival. Her works unwaveringly project the predicament of the marginalized. The novels of her triptych, *Maru* (1971), *A Question of Power* (1973), and *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1977), focus on the subordination of racial minorities within hegemonic contexts. The protagonists, Makhaya, Maru, and Elizabeth, are fictional representations of Head's experiences. All of them are refugees and exiles assailed by problems in their expatriate land, Botswana, and struggling to attain spiritual regeneration in defiance of the rigors of tribalism, political and racial exclusion.

About her work, *Maru*, which is a parable on the evils of racial prejudice, Head writes, "[w]ith all my South African experience I longed to write an enduring novel on the hideousness of racial prejudice. But I also wanted the book to be so beautiful and so magical that I, as the writer, would long to read and re-read it" (*A Woman Alone* 68). Head addresses the difficulty of writing about debilitating experiences and circumvents the trauma of her lived experience with the magic of her fictional creation. This is how she manages to create a masterpiece, *A Question of Power*, a fascinating autobiographical

novel that captures the reader's attention. Ironically, Head may take pleasure reading and re-reading, but her reader must make sustained efforts to grasp the narrative subtleties of the book. Head's insertion of the magical in her novel, however, through the intrusion of the ghostly figures of Dan and Sello, lessens the autobiographical import. In fact, her three novels are fragments of her life experiences. Even more so, they do not and cannot exhaust the problems that beset Head on her terrestrial itinerary. Each of them is a partiobiography of Head dwelling on different stages and events of her life. This reasserts the extent to which autobiography is tinged with incompleteness. The expression of one's life in a work of art proves to be a deferred wish. Keiko Kusunose conveys this idea: "[b]efore her death, Head had launched into writing her autobiography" (29). The autobiography in question was to be entitled *Living on an Horizon*, but was unfinished. The unfinished character of what was supposed to be her real autobiography, after her previous alleged autobiographies, parallels the incompleteness of autobiographical writing. Derridean post-structuralist deconstruction of signification, through the philosophy of *différance*, whereby meaning is never completely achieved because of the endless network of signifieds, can be a suitable designation for this feature of autobiography. *A Question of Power*, like many autobiographical novels, is incomplete because of the partial retrieval of the author's life in a work of art. However, this incompleteness does not strip Head's work of its aesthetic value. The unordinary narrative structure greatly astounds the reader.

The disjunctive story of Head's life challenges the recognized pattern of autobiographical novel writing. Her blending of autobiography with peculiar novelistic elements makes her opus follow its own rules, distinct from those of standard

autobiography, experiences, and motivations. The recounting of experiences is an expected feature in female autobiographical novels, yet differences arise in the depiction of experiences which are inextricably linked to the socio-political and historical realities. *A Question of Power* differs from many women's autobiographical novels because of the unusual unfolding of what Cherry Wilhelm calls "the arena of psychic struggle" (3), which I construe as an inner liminal resistance against oppression and a precondition for post-liminal recovery. In *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (1944), Johan Huizinga defines play as "a free activity standing outside 'ordinary' life as being 'not serious'" (13). I argue that both play and liminality share the paradigms of freedom, fluidity, extraordinariness, and flexibility. So "the arena of psychic struggle" in *A Question of Power* that "stand[s] outside 'ordinary'" autobiographical writing is a liminal creativity transcending the monotony of monadic autobiographical writing and opening up new writing paradigms.

Head's non-traditional narrative thread is prompted by her exclusion from all of South African society's power structures. The literary representation of her mother's tragic death in a mental asylum, her undesired birth in this stigmatized place, her unchildlike childhood, her subsequent flight into exile in Botswana, and her heart-rending predicament there are almost impossible to imagine. The elegiac expression of her marginal condition substantiates the functionality of her work. In her interview with Lee Nichols, Head defines her creative paradigm in these terms:

I would never fall in the category of a writer who produces light entertainment
 [...] My whole force and direction come from having something to say. What we
 are mainly very bothered about has been the dehumanizing of black people. And

if we can resolve our difficulties it is because we want a future which is defined for our children. So then we can't sort of say that you have ended any specified thing or that you have changed the world. You have merely offered your view of a grander world, of a world that's much grander than the one we've had already. (55-56).

Head's dismissal of literature that is "light entertainment" unmistakably reflects her ethics of functionality. Her "view of a grander world" shows the link between autobiography, oppression, and the articulation of hope for a better world. *A Question of Power* goes beyond the exploration of the innermost recesses of evil to sow the seeds of love and hope for mankind. Head turns the moral wasteland of her expatriate land into "a grander world" where the imps of brutal and ruthless power are extinguished by the fire of prophetic creativity for the efficacious achievement of a humane society. Her heroine Elizabeth has been spiritually enriched by her purgatorial meditation: "[a]nd from the degradation and destruction of her life had arisen a still, lofty serenity of soul nothing could shake" (202). For her, the question of good and evil started in her native foreign land, South Africa, where the only reality lies in "a vehement vicious struggle between two sets of people with different looks; and like Dan's brand of torture, it was something that could go on and on and on" (19). Elizabeth's soul journey parallels the "vicious struggle" opposing powerful and powerless people. Her understanding of the mechanisms of socio-political evils prompts her to sketch connections between the insanity of her violated mind and the insanities of deranged societies. Her mind is the site where the atrocities perpetrated by the ruthless regime of apartheid are staged. The battle she is

fighting to be freed of the forces of evil through her “creative propelling force” of writing is liminally significant.

The liminal import of Elizabeth’s odyssey is tied to its transformational dynamic. Turner refers to the metaphors of gestation and dissolution usually characterizing the liminal state: “liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness” (*The Ritual Process* 95). This gloomy perception of liminality matches the condition of Elizabeth, cast off on the fringes of her host society, and literally wiped off the map of socially visible people. But her state of dissolution lays the groundwork for her rebirth. The release of the whirlpool of horrors from her mind is an effective exegetical grid for understanding the disintegrative and doleful search for knowledge. Elizabeth’s recovery depends on the spiritual understanding gained from the knowledge of the abyss of darkness that *A Question of Power* fosters. To the ethical orientation of Head’s autobiographical novel must be added her wondrous creative achievement. Head’s location of the action of *A Question of Power* inside the mind of Elizabeth relocates the latter’s subjectivity within the internal protective realm of the psyche uncontaminated by the chaos and cruelty of the outer world. Elizabeth’s true inner self is restored within this invisible and psychologically constituted space which is out of the control and gaze of those in dominant positions.

Craig Mackenzie convincingly underscores the “narratological authority” of Elizabeth’s dream visions (58), but does not focus on the ways in which such visions disrupt the narrative unity. Ubiquitous and omnipresent in Elizabeth’s mind, they relegate her to a mere shadow. The subliminal stance of the narrator is informed by her self-oppression, which results from her internalization of the oppressive ideologies of racism.

Hence, the “narratological authority” of the ghostly presences transgresses the borderline separating the narrator’s sphere from the characters’ world. The actualization and visibility of the characters of Elizabeth’s internal drama in the narrative dismantle the hierarchy between outside and inside, reality and fantasy, narrating subject and narrated object. Genette refers to this kind of narratological leap as metalepsis (238-43). The presence of metalepsis in *A Question of Power* complicates the pattern of autobiographical writing while at the same time it increases the dramatic intensity of the novel form.

Hershini Bhana’s “Reading Ghostly Desire: Writing the Edges of Bessie Head’s *A Question of Power*” identifies the ghosts as instruments of resistance for women exposed to patriarchal authority, gendered and racial violence: “The ghosts in *A Question of Power* are crucial in order to recognize those voices erased and silenced within the African diaspora, those resistant presences rendered unheard and unintelligible by the monologism and deafness of power” (42). The ghosts are effectively actualizations of the return of the repressed. Jacques Lacan states that the repressed always reappears (*Écrits* 297). Returning in a disguised form, the repressed avoids conscious censorship, and surfaces in dreams, slips of the tongue, and in art. The eruption of ghastly specters of apartheid, sexualized violence, and patriarchal authority in Elizabeth’s mind reveals the release of her pent-up frustrations. Thomas Wägenbaur makes a consistent argument on the cause/effect relationship between colonial dismembering and postcolonial remembering when he states that “postcolonial remembering is the painful unmaking of previous dismemberings” (119). It follows that remembering is the strained and nerve-racking excavation of the ghostly past for the recovery from traumatic experiences. The

sentient narrator Elizabeth is subjected to a “hellish” rite of passage: her body is the site of remembering of her “previous dismemberings.” She is possessed by threatening and evil demons that suck her soul like vultures. The location of her re-memory in the site-body is illustrative of the overarching scope of the psychological domination exerted by callous and power-thirsty colonizers on the colonized.

Head’s *A Question of Power* interrogates the inhuman logic of power and unmakes its practices by likening it to rape. The forceful entry of Dan and Sello into Elizabeth’s inner territory is a metaphorical rape that literarily replicates Head’s own rape. Eilersen’s *Thunder Behind Her Ears* (1995) reveals the sexual assault against Head in District Six in Cape Town, when “a violent and unwelcome one [was] forced upon her” (49). For Head then, writing is the creative dismantlement of man’s phallic domination. It enables Head to gain agency from her creative instrumentalization of male figures, as is apparent when she writes: “[Dan] flay[s] his powerful penis in the air” (13). Head transmogrifies the power of the penis into a weakened and preposterous entity. Simultaneously, she reverses the inferiority and superiority sexist binarism that privileges men over women. She uses men as literary expedients to accommodate her creative goal. As the beginning of the novel indicates, Elizabeth teams up with Dan and Sello to grasp the alienating effects of power: “The three of them had shared the strange journey into hell and kept close emotional tabs on each other. There seemed to be a mutual agreement in the beginning that an examination of inner hells was meant to end all hells forever” (12). The soul journey into the sources of evil is the artistic or creative representation of the traumas Elizabeth goes through as a child and adolescent in South Africa and a woman in Botswana. The “examination of inner hells” metaphorizes the meaning of the

life of a marginalized woman from the vantage point of a colored, an exile, and an outcast.

Head's mental disintegration is occasioned by the takeover of her body and mind by powerful forces. The different stages of her life in South Africa and Botswana are an imbroglio of unsuccessful and undesired becomings. Her internalization of her existential ordeals produces her liminal "nervous condition" and accounts for her earnest desire to be freed of these onerous memories. Eilersen's biography underscores the ubiquitous resonance of "thunder behind [Head's] ears." The ear represents the channel through which the stories of the past are filtered. But the sound of these narratives confusingly, threateningly, and violently vibrates in Head's fragmented mind. As shown in the uncomfortable mental restlessness of her character Elizabeth, the receding of recollections is harnessed to the staging of the events of the past.

Elizabeth's liminal struggle against the forces of evil arouses her heightened sense of awareness. She realizes "how easy it was for people with soft shuffling, loosely-knit personalities to be preyed upon by dominant, powerful positions" (12). Power feeds and thrives on the subordination of the marginalized. The whole novel vividly relates Elizabeth's "examination of hell" and her unavoidable collapse to "a state below animal, below living and so dark and forlorn no loneliness and misery could be its equivalent" (14). Sello, one of the soul journeyers and pursuer after the things of the soul, witnesses the intensity of Elizabeth's mental torture: "I've never seen such savage cruelty" (14). Coming from one of Elizabeth's torturers, this observation illustrates the self-diagnosis of powerful forces. Sello's consciousness and recognition of the ugly face of power marks his transition from inhumanity to humanity. The "savage cruelty" Elizabeth displays in

her “arena of psychological struggle” takes on a universal dimension. She is an exemplar for the vulnerability of women at grips with oppressive socio-political machinations and sexualized violence (180, 198).

Elizabeth’s condition is shaped by Head’s direct experience with unrivaled oppression and indirect experience from her encounter with a German witness of the horrors of the Holocaust. Because of this, Head sketches an analogy between the horrible stories of the Nazi persecution of the Jews and South African racism. Both dehumanizing practices share the “same elements of irrational and unprovoked attacks by the ruling class” (Eilersen 51). The intransigent ruler in *A Question of Power*, Dan, wields his power on the unfortunate Elizabeth. He violates his prey’s body, opens her skull and talks into it (193). His action constitutes an allegorization of colonization by the communication of the persecutor. Elizabeth contends that: “Dan was not over. He had not yet told the whole of mankind about his ambitions, like Hitler and Napoleon, to rule the world. He had told half the story to Elizabeth” (*A Question of Power* 14). The correlation between Dan’s domineering positioning and the creative act of telling a story reveals the functional use of writing. Elizabeth’s metadiscursive analysis of power is mediated by Dan’s figure. Dan’s appropriation of Elizabeth’s mental space and manipulation of her consciousness precondition her psychic balance. Her voicing of her marginalization in male-dominated racist South African society is a catalyst for her liberation from the tangle of burdensome memories.

The liminal experience of writing, albeit poised between autobiographical facts and fictional elements, is spiritually redeeming for the author. The renarrativization of the past, via the third-person narrative, allows Head to reinvent herself. She gains a hard-won

and self-proclaimed victory thanks to her doleful activity of writing. But this renarrativization is not devoid of fictionalization. Head's collection of materials from her childhood undermines the reliability of her autobiographical facts. In her article, Kusunose argues that Head

began to collect the materials from her childhood and her life in South Africa which had remained a mystery to her. Although her life had been fairly evenly divided between South Africa and Botswana, she didn't think she could write much about her childhood. She was unable to go beyond the facts or stories about her real mother that she heard from her foster mother. These facts had been fictionalized in her writings. (30)

The "fictionalized" facts of Head's childhood diminish the autobiographical aspect of her novel. Head suggests reservations about autobiography as the appropriate vehicle for reassembling the collected information about her childhood. As opposed to autobiography, the autobiographical novel signals a conflicting relationship between the author as subject and as creator of the narrative. The author cannot change his/her life but can manipulate the narrative according to his/her needs. Consequently, Head has the power to reconstitute the story of her life to reach the effects she seeks. The foster mother's story demonstrates the dramatic vividness of the novel:

First they received you from the mental hospital and sent you to a nursing home. A day later you were returned because you did not look white. They sent you to a Boer family. A week later you were returned [...] What can we do with this child? Its mother is white [...] When you were six years old we heard that your mother had suddenly killed herself in the mental home. (17)

The depersonalization of autobiography appears in the ways in which the narrator Elizabeth substitutes her voice for that of the foster mother who momentarily controls the narrative. The combination of the foster mother's story and other people's stories about Elizabeth's childhood reveal the heterogeneous and incoherent recitation of the latter's identity by different voices from different locations. The author's self is simultaneously recounted by the primary narrator as an omniscient voice and by secondary narrators as narrative supplements. The temporary disappearance of the narrating voice into the tangle of unreliable voices reveals the alteration of autobiographical narrative by the novel. The intrusion and affirmation of voices other than the narrator's voice dismantle the authority of the omniscient narrator. Head's autobiographical novel draws heavily on events of her own life which undergo certain transformations under the prism of the rhetoric of the novel. In so doing, the novel turns autobiography into *autrebiographie* or "otherbiography." I have already used this term in the first part of the chapter to highlight the inauthenticity and the *je-jeu* of Mayotte Capécia's autobiography, *Je suis martiniquaise*, engendered by her disguised self. In an entirely different manner, Head's third-person narrative bears no disguise. The *autrebiographie* of *A Question of Power* appears in the multiplicity of depersonalized narrators.

Prior to her foster mother's story, Elizabeth's identity is divulged by her cruel school principal, who stresses her illegitimate birth as well as her mother's insanity and sequestration in an asylum. Elizabeth's unfamiliarity with her own mother accounts for her misrecognition of her story because "she really belonged emotionally to her foster-mother, and the story was an imposition on her life" (16). The mediation of Elizabeth's knowledge about her childhood and her mother's past by channels extraneous to herself

stresses the illusoriness of self-representativeness. Elizabeth's avowed intention to recapture her self is hampered by her inability to attain self-knowledge. To what extent can she say that she knows herself? Her self-knowledge is denied to her by her illegitimate birth, her early separation from her mother, and her alienation from herself by the hostile forces of racism and sexism in her life. The lack of self-knowledge vitiates the autobiographical import. The incoherence of the pre-narrated self precludes a unified and coherently structured autobiographical self. The gaps in the author's life cannot be filled by self-writing. The "auto" in autobiography is a narrow and reductive representation of the author's multi-dimensional self. The limits of the autobiographical genre can be extended to its cohabitation with other literary forms.

A striking exemplar is Bâ's epistolary novel *Une si longue lettre*, which obfuscates the classificatory pattern of autobiography. Structurally and stylistically, the book establishes itself as an epistolary novel. The protagonist Ramatoulaye confides in her friend Aïssatou, through a letter, to allay the pain she internalized in her marital life. Yet, by sentence two, she explains: "[e]n guise de réponse, j'ouvre ce cahier, point d'appui dans mon désarroi" (11) "[b]y way of reply, I am beginning this diary, my prop in my distress" (1)]. *Une si longue lettre* is a diary, an epistolary novel, an autobiography, and a memoir as well. The difficulty in categorizing Bâ's work according to Eurocentric standards is indicative of the complexity of postcolonial writing, and mainly of the limits of autobiographical writing in terms of genre classification. The acknowledgment of the limits provided by the distance between the author's life and the narrative voice reinforces the fictionalization of autobiography. In women's narratives, the issue is less

the foray of fiction into autobiography than the “manner and matter” of autobiography, that is, respectively, their stylistic features and thematic concerns.

The attempts at self-authentication by women in their autobiographies are impaired by the patterns of spatial and temporal discontinuity that mark their lives. These discontinuous paradigms, resulting from gender oppression and sociopsychological pressures, affect their writing. That is why Head’s life experiences are inseparable from her autobiographical praxis. This view is supported by black and white female researchers. The anthology of essays entitled *The Tradition of Women’s Autobiography: Essays in Criticism* (1980) edited by Estelle C. Jelinek, illustrates the experiential underpinning of twentieth-century white autobiographers. The same idea is projected by black female autobiographers. Nellie Y. McKay’s “The Narrative Self: Race, Politics, and Culture in Black American Women’s Autobiography” underscores the political significance and overtly rebellious narratives of black women writers who seek self-empowerment and agency beyond the confines erected by patriarchal and racialist discourses. African women writers are also looking for self-actualization in writing. However, the different kinds of experiences in their lives call for a specific “manner and matter” in their writing. The politics of location of writing also impacts the substance or ingredients and the style of writing as well.

Relocation has been instrumental in Head’s writing, which is the liminal experience between her endurance of her exilic condition in Botswana and her endeavor to restore her identity. Although financial needs were the primary motivations to her writing, her ostracization, her struggle for integration into that society, and mostly her stark loneliness are what spur and hone her artistic skills. Likewise, Head’s protagonist

Elizabeth grapples with so much solitude and isolation amidst the hostility and wilderness of Motabeng that she starts “seeing” things. She bitterly observes her exclusion from her host society:

Definitely, as far as Botswana society was concerned, she was an out-and-out outsider and would never be in on their things [...] [S]he remembered a day when the whole population of Motabeng turned around and looked at her, quietly, with vague curiosity, almost disinterestedly. (26)

Elizabeth’s triple burden as a Colored, an exile and a refugee in her adoptive land engenders her absence from the inimical outside world and her presence and immersion in the nurturing inner world. The coming to life of the phantom world through Dan and Sello testifies to the magic achievement of Head’s artistic creativity and her earnest longing to make up for her loneliness. Elizabeth’s long conversations with Sello, “the white-robed monk who sat on the chair beside her bed” (23), serve as anti-destructive strategies. Elizabeth’s ghostly conversations parallel Head’s writing.

In *A Gesture of Belonging*, Head points out the interrelatedness between loneliness and writing: “The place is desolate, lonely and I need hours of ruthless solitude to get written the kind of book I want to write [...] so that I can take off as me in it [...] I desperately want to take off on one long goddam vivid flight from physical reality” (24). Head’s evasion from what she sees as the meaningless and alien Botswanan environment nourishes the flames of her imaginative creativity. Her need for “hours of ruthless solitude” to write reflects her chosen and self-imposed torturous state of liminality as a step toward the attainment of post-liminal reincorporation and healing. Head’s obsessive effort to achieve mental stability is expressed in the following lines:

My plan is this. I shall just have to get SOMETHING written. While I am here. And I am prepared to strain every nerve, day and night to write the best I've ever written. There is no alternative. After that I might be in a position to by-pass ANY circumstance; any revolution in Africa where the individual is an expendable commodity. (*A Gesture of Belonging* 44)

The liminal writing phase becomes the instance of purification of Head's mind from the stifling aggregation of psychological wounds accumulated over the years. Her obstinate desire to kill the phantom of the past through writing takes on a survivalist dimension. Writing is akin to a drug that combats the drabness and meaninglessness of her life. In the same way, Elizabeth's transition from necrophilia to biophilia is mediated by a liminal meditation that one might describe as scriptophilia: "She had reeled towards death. She turned and reeled towards life. She reeled, blissfully happy, up the dusty brown road, down the pathway into the valley area of the local-industries project" (203). Elizabeth's "reeling" is the result of her liminal exhausting and tormenting journey which has sucked her stamina. To her great advantage, her feebleness and despondency deriving from her mental and physical wreckage by the forces of evil have been overcome by her strategic and survivalist "plan." Her "turn towards life" stops the progress of evil and ushers in her new state of mind and radical change of life direction. Elizabeth's involvement in the "local-industries project" in Botswana, more precisely in Serowe, activates her mental peace. By becoming the instructor of the gardening group, she mingles with other women such as Birgette and Kenosi. The regenerating capacity of Elizabeth's contact with the earth and the termination of her solitude thanks to the consolation of healthy companionships bring peace to her restless mind.

This comparative analysis of *Je suis martiniquaise* and *A Question of Power* shows how the liminal experiences of autobiographical writing are therapeutic and redeeming for the women writers. The comparison of these narratives allows a broader perspective on the relationship between autobiography, the impact of historical forces on the lives of women protagonists, and their survivalist strategies. The particularity of Capécia's and Head's writing lies in their artistic transcendence of their marginalization, their revisitation of history for their self-knowledge and epistemological growth, and their modification of the narrow defining features of autobiography. The inauthenticity of Capécia's autobiography and the peculiarity of Head's autobiographical novel bear less significance than the interstitial spaces from which their texts emerge. The first writer uses narrative masks and the second creates her narrative from the spaces of her ordinary self in order to disrupt the racial and sexual discursive definitions of their identities. Their autobiographies, albeit rife with destabilizations and discontinuities like their own lives, are undoubtedly powerful instruments for their self-recreation. Ultimately, the finality of female autobiographical writing overpowers and supersedes the manner of its writing. Autobiography is not autobiography but autoreconstruction. In this sense, one can conclude that mixed-blood women writers affirm the importance of the relationship between language/writing, power, and identity.

Chapter Three

The Liminal Experience of Sexuality and The Problematic of Respectability

Black women's sexuality is often described in metaphors of speechlessness, space, or vision; as a 'void' or empty space that is simultaneously ever-visible (exposed) and invisible, where black women's bodies are already colonized. (Hammonds 171)

The definition of black women's sexuality in terms of "speechlessness" is rooted in a generalized ideology of domination that black scholars and postcolonial theorists, such as Marianna Torgovnick, Rey Chow, Edward Said, and Himani Bannerji, ascribe to the political and hegemonic rhetoric of slavery, colonialism, and neocolonialism. The ambivalent conceptualization of black women's sexuality as visible and invisible in Hammonds' statement reveals the Western construction of their hypersexualization and their racial invisibility as well. Eurocentric ideologies, as shown in Frantz Fanon's *Peau noire, masques blancs* (1952), Robert Young's *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (1995), and Patricia Hill Collins's *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (1991) construct black women's sexuality as abnormal, deviant, and pathologized, in contrast to white women's normal sexuality.

In this chapter I analyze sexuality as a liminal experience within the overlapping margins of race and gender. The liminal experience of sexuality in Larsen's *Quicksand*, Capécia's *La négresse blanche*, and Sadjji's *Nini, mulâtresse du Sénégal* is determined by the cultural definitions, prescriptions, or proscriptions of the sexuality of mixed-blood women. The "void" or silence about sexuality is enacted by African American women

writers who try to resist the degrading stereotypes of black female sexuality. Through the repression of the sexuality of her heroine, Larsen deconstructs the myths of black women's hypersexuality that have been constructed since the era of slavery and crystallized in the consciousness of whites. By contrast, Capécia and Sadjji frame the active sexuality of their protagonists within the devastating and depersonalizing assimilationist projects of French colonization. Despite their specific historical settings, all three novels show the extent to which the sexual meanings assigned to racially hybrid women's bodies are determined by the sexual ideologies conveyed by the alienating and oppressive systems of slavery and colonialism. The purpose of this chapter is to examine how these systems of oppression produce intra-psychic anxieties in the mulattas and shape their sexuality. The portrayals of sexuality raise a series of questions. Are the sexual responses of mulattas compatible with the ethos of social respectability? How do mulattas negotiate the liminal space between their sexual desire and societal prescriptions or proscriptions? Does the preoccupation with social respectability favor or hamper their sexual assertion?

Sexuality at Point Zero in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* and Mayotte Capécia's *La négresse blanche*

Daughter of a Danish woman and a colored gambler, Helga Crane, the refined heroine of *Quicksand*, grapples in a psychic battle between her desire for sexual fulfillment and her yearning for social respectability. By the end of the novel, Helga marries a rural black Southern preacher, turns her back on her aspiration for middle-class upward mobility, and sinks into a state of hopeless motherhood. The following lines

indicate her extreme weakness, caused by repetitive pregnancies : “AND HARDLY had she left her bed and become able to walk again without pain, hardly had the children returned from the neighbors, when she began to have her fifth child” (*Quicksand* 135).

Larsen’s yearning to promote the ethos of respectability rooted in the Victorian cult of true womanhood is caused by the anxiety over the derogatory construction of black womanhood in the nineteenth century. As explained by Sander Gilman in *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness* (1985), “[t]he Hottentot Venus’ [...] served as the emblem of black sexuality during the entire nineteenth century, a sexuality inherently different from that of the European. An attempt to establish that the races were inherently different rested... on the sexual difference of the black” (112). The Hottentot Venus was the Southern African black woman Sarah Bartmann, who was exhibited and objectified in Europe because of what were considered her anomalous genitalia and buttocks. Hammonds points out that by the end of the nineteenth century, Victorian sexual ideology perpetuated the differentiation of black and white female sexuality in terms of purity and pathology (173).

From the nineteenth to the early twentieth century, black women in America danced to the tune of white ideology, the patriarchal yoke, and conflicting sexual desires. The nineteenth-century Protestant Victorian ethos championed an ideology of true womanhood which rested, according to Barbara Welter, on four core characteristics: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. These values were deemed by whites to be lacking in black women, who were perceived as deviant and libidinous. The concept of true white womanhood could be significant only when measured against the abjection of black womanhood. In the nineteenth century, black women writers challenged this

stereotype of lasciviousness by revising the ideology of domesticity through the creation of what they called a “noble womanhood.” In works like Frances Harper’s *Iola Leroy* (1892) and Pauline Hopkins’s *Contending Forces* (1899), black heroines struggled to preserve their virginity. Hence Deborah McDowell’s assertion, “[a] pattern of reticence about black female sexuality tended to dominate novels by black women, particularly in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[...] black women responded to the myth of the black woman’s sexual licentiousness by insisting fiercely on her chastity” (1988: 141-42).

In *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Black Female Novelist* (1987), Hazel Carby documented black women’s anxiety about dealing with the theme of sexuality and also focused on the displacement of sexuality in their works: “[r]acist sexual ideologies proclaimed black women to be rampant sexual beings, and in response black women writers either focused on defending their morality or displaced sexuality onto another terrain” (174). Black feminist literary and cultural critics, such as Anne Duce, consider the other terrain on which black women’s sexuality was displaced to be music, notably the blues. Duce notes that the blues singers who were not middle-class were referred to as “pioneers who claimed their sexual subjectivity through their songs and produced a Black women’s discourse on Black sexuality” (419). We clearly see the difference between black women writers’ reluctance to engage in issues of sexuality and the boldness of blues women.

In *Quicksand*, Larsen treats sexuality with reticence in order to defy the degrading stereotypes of female sexuality constructed since the era of slavery. At first, she emphasizes socioeconomic status and middle-class respectability by endowing her

protagonist with a strong subjectivity that is misaligned with predetermined categories of race. Significantly, Helga is a teacher at Naxos, a black school in the South. Her material achievement combines self-protection, moral behavior, and social respectability. As Barbara Omolade notes, African Americans “encouraged their daughters to become teachers to escape the abominations of the white man [...] Teaching required of black women an even more rigorous adherence to a sex code enjoining chastity and model womanhood than that guiding other black women” (361). The scarcity of schoolteachers among black women in the early decades of the twentieth century in America reinforces Helga’s economic and morally gratifying position.

Helga suffers from the conservatism prevailing at Naxos, a southern school for the upward mobility of Negroes which fosters conformity vis-à-vis prescribed behavioral norms. Modeled on Larsen’s experiences at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama and Fisk University in Tennessee, Naxos is an anagram for “Saxon” and functions as a disciplinary institution, fostering the adoption of white values and reducing black people to dull conformity to an Anglo-Saxon norm. Helga is frustrated by the rigidity of behavior and dress codes. The colors and textures she wraps her body with defy the restricted policy of the school: “[b]lack colors are vulgar [...] Black, gray, brown, and navy blue are the most becoming colors for colored people [...] Dark complected people shouldn’t wear yellow, or green or red” (*Quicksand* 17-18). Larsen critiques the “whitening” policies of this black college, which seeks to reinforce the supremacy of the dominant white culture. The imposition of ladylike and bourgeois decorum marks the policing of black women’s sexuality. Helga regretfully comments that “[t]his great community [...] was no longer a school. It had grown into a machine [...] ruthlessly cutting all to a pattern, the white

man's pattern. Teachers as well as students were subjected to the paring process" (*Quicksand* 4). The prevalence of conformity in Naxos suppresses Helga's individuality. Nevertheless, Ann Ducille notes that "her [Helga's] taste in colorful clothes links her to that other life whose bodacious blues rhythms will not be entirely repressed, no matter how bourgeois her surroundings" (430). Helga's resolution to quit Naxos stems from her objection to conformity and imitation of white middle-class values and also from the nameless and incomprehensible force lodged within her:

It wasn't [...] the school [...] and its decorous people that oppressed her. There was something else, some other more ruthless force, a quality within herself, which was frustrating her, had always frustrated, kept her from getting the things she had wanted. Still wanted. (*Quicksand* 11)

The disturbing, overwhelming, and unfamiliar force that eludes and slips Helga's understanding thwarts her volition. Such an impeding force sabotages her striving for happiness and hampers her quest for materialism. Helga is a sophisticated woman strongly attached to beauty and luxury and desiring material security: "All her life Helga Crane had loved and longed for *things*" (6). Beyond its materialistic underpinning, the word "things" subsumes her desire for stability. Helga unwaveringly yearns for a proper family and an acceptable outlet for her sexuality. Unfortunately, her desires are occluded by the internal and restrictive limits she begrudgingly sets for herself in order to follow the respectable social norms to the point that her desire always transmutes into a fantasy, if not a self-prohibition.

Helga's internalization of codes imposed by white norms curbs her sense of self. Hiroko Sato argues that "[t]he title, *Quicksand*, signifies the heroine Helga Crane's

sexual desire, which was hidden beneath her beautiful and intelligent surface and came up at an unexpected moment and trapped her” (84). Sato emphasizes the inconvenience of the return of Helga’s repressed sexuality. Yet, contrary to Sato, I would argue that Helga is less trapped by the enactment of her sexuality than by her repeated attempts to disavow it. The dialectic of Helga’s sexual desire and her sexual repression permeates the fictionalized narrative.

Helga’s inhibition of her sexual desire responds to her longing for respectability in compliance with the cult of respectability promoted by the black bourgeoisie. On one hand, the absence of sexuality is outwardly ennobling because it is a sign of decorous and ladylike demeanor. On the other hand, the expression of sexuality allegedly makes a black woman a jungle creature stripped of any sense of self-respect. This accounts for Helga’s rejection of the men she loves. It needs to be said that her parentlessness triggers her sense of self-effacement, which, in turn, conditions her sexual life. The desertion by Helga’s father of her white mother and the latter’s remarriage to a white man who treated Helga with malicious hatred provoke her narcissistic deficit: “[s]he saw herself as an obscene sore in all their lives, at all costs to be hidden” (*Quicksand* 29). Helga’s quandary brings to mind Hammonds’s idea of the visibility and invisibility of the black woman (171). Her sexual visibility as a black woman and her racial invisibility place her in an uncomfortable liminal situation.

Helga’s self-effacement impacts the choices she makes. In almost every event of her life, she seems foreordained to choose the wrong course of action. This leads Barbara Johnson to ask the following question: “[h]ow [can] one account for the self-defeating or self-exhausting nature of Helga Crane’s choices?” (255). I would say that Helga’s “self-

defeating choices” as well as the repression of her desire are the workings of the “ruthless force” within her, which can be identified as the alien.

The alien is the result of the abnormal psychology of a middle-class, educated colored woman unable to find a niche in the world. It also represents the site where her repressed wishes, her fears of her blackness, her psychological turmoil, and her sentiments of self-negation reside. The pervasiveness of this inimical force in all the events of her life increases her vulnerability and instability. The alien feeds on the “lack” in her and thwarts all her schemes. Helga herself is unable to understand it. Many a time, this incomprehension is verbalized in a somewhat querulous tone:

But just what did she want? Barring a desire for material security, gracious ways of living, a profusion of lovely clothes, and a goodly share of envious admiration, Helga Crane didn't know, couldn't tell. But there was, she knew, something else. Happiness, she supposed. Whatever that might be. What, exactly, she wondered, was happiness. Very positively, she wanted it. (*Quicksand* 11)

Throughout the novel, Helga's recurring questions emphasize her frustration and her lack of self-knowledge. The unanswered questions underscore the elusiveness of her longing, which in turn motivates her compulsive drive for gratification. These also reveal the insatiability of her desire, a feature that corresponds to the Lacanian observation that “desire is in principle insatiable” (Grosz 67). Although deeply marked by anxiety, her sexuality intersects with her desire for family and proper social connections. Helga searches for legitimacy through her relationship with her snobbish first black fiancé from Naxos, James Vayle. Her absence of family is a lack she is hell-bent to bridge. She makes a link between family and social belonging:

No family. That was the crux of the whole matter. For Helga, it accounted for everything, her failure here in Naxos, her former loneliness in Nashville. It even accounted for her *engagement* to James. [...] To relinquish James Vayle would most certainly be social suicide, for she had wanted social background.

(*Quicksand* 34-35)

Helga's engagement to Gayle is liminally significant because of her longing for a transition from social exclusion to inclusion, solitude to companionship, and thus escape from what Spariosu terms the "agonistic" nature of marginality in order to access a new social situation. The question of desire in *Quicksand* seems to be linked to "phantasy" because

[it] appears in the rift that separates need and demand; it cannot be reduced to need since, by definition, it is not a relation to a real object independent of the subject but a relation to phantasy; nor can it be reduced to demand, in that it seeks to impose itself without taking the language or the unconscious of the other into account. (Laplanche and Pontalis 483)

Viewed through the lens of Laplanche's and Pontalis's paradigm of desire, Helga's engagement to Vayle is steeped in the conflicting relationships between her "need" and the "demand" of her society. In fact, she is much more motivated by the need to correct her deficient background and thus eventually conform to propriety and decorum than she is concerned about the satisfaction of her heartfelt desire. Given the imprisonment of Helga's subjectivity in the repressive social script of the Harlem Renaissance, her sexual desire is impeded by social obligations. What matters for her is to be sheltered from the punitive measure she will mete out to herself by seeking to capture the "prohibited

object,” that is, the fulfillment of desire in its purest form. Consequently, Helga’s yearning for social respectability overrides her sexuality and causes her to dismiss Vayle’s attraction to her as nameless and shameful:

The idea that she was in but one nameless way necessary to him filled her with a sensation amounting almost to shame. And yet his mute helplessness against that ancient appeal by which she held him pleased her and fed her vanity—gave her a feeling of power. At the same time she shrank away from it, subtly aware of possibilities she herself couldn’t predict. (*Quicksand* 8)

Helga’s internalization of the stereotypes attached to black female sexuality produces ambivalence and anxiety, hence her refusal to name and much less explore her desire. Such reticence to acknowledge one’s sexuality is identified by Carby as a signal of a secure bourgeois class position in novels of the Harlem Renaissance (“Policing the Black Woman’s Body” 738-755). Helga struggles to avoid the replication of “that ancient appeal,” which for her (if not the reader) refers to the image of the sexually degenerate black female. Her fear and unease to express her sexuality dissolve her sensation of power, contrary to what she assumes. The ladylike behavior Helga is striving to adopt betrays the swirling undercurrents of sexual desire that vibrate in her being. The conversation she has with the principal of the school, Anderson, before her departure from Naxos shows the ways in which she resists being labeled a lady:

What we need is more people like you, people with a sense of values, and proportion, an appreciation of the rarer things of life. You’re a *lady*. You have dignity and *breeding*. At these words turmoil rose again in Helga Crane [...] If you’re speaking of family, Dr. Anderson, why, I haven’t any. I was born in a

Chicago slum [...] My father was a gambler who deserted my mother, a white immigrant. It is even uncertain that they were married. As I said at first, I don't belong here. (*Quicksand* 21)

Both the terms “lady” and “breeding” connote social respectability and decorum. Historians of the antebellum South, such as Francis P. Gaines, Rollin G. Osterweis, and Anne F. Scott have depicted the Southern woman in terms of the lady. The cult of the lady emerged in the decade of the 1830s and implies good manners, demureness, kindness, and gentleness. Consequently, Anderson's compliment to Helga that she is a “lady” becomes unintentionally offensive. Helga does not and cannot have the values Anderson thinks that she possesses. Her decision to quit Naxos is fueled by her feeling of unbelonging to the Naxos community. Larsen attributes Helga's malaise to the fact that she “could neither conform, nor be happy in her unconformity” (*Quicksand* 7). Helga's frustrations over her absence of family background and the emotional instability created by her repressed sexuality make of her liminality a site of tensions and yearnings for change.

The dichotomy between social respectability and sexual desire so salient in Larsen's novel is reproduced in Zola Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). Hurston uses Tea Cake as the embodiment of unregulated working-class desire and Nanny as the representative of the middle-class ethos of respectability. Nanny's belonging to the working-class and her experience of rape during slavery make her embrace the cult of respectability. When her granddaughter Janie rejects the idea of a respectable middle-class marriage to Logan Killicks, Nanny describes her as lascivious and as a victim of her own desire, like her mother Leafy:

So you don't want to marry off decent like, do yuh? You just wants to hug and kiss and feel around with first one man and then another, huh? You want to make me suck de same sorrow yo' mama did, eh? Mah ole head ain't gray enough. Mah back ain't bowed enough to suit yuh! (28)

Nanny's position as a slave, her rape, and that of her daughter Leafy, account for her advocacy of middle-class marriage and respectability as protection from sexual abuse. In *Quicksand*, the desire for respectability acts as Helga's compensatory means for her absent family background and as a conduit for her psychological balance. Her unwilling separation from her family uncannily impacts her sexuality. Freud defines the uncanny as "that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well-known and had long been familiar" (*The Uncanny* 124), adding that "something should be frightening precisely because it is unknown and unfamiliar" (124-5). First and foremost, the uncanny presupposes a past dissatisfaction or anxiety regarding known and familiar experiences. In Helga's case, the uncanny relates to her absence of family, which engenders an inner sense of dissatisfaction that thwarts all her attempts to be happy and balanced: "it was of herself that she was afraid" (*Quicksand* 47). If Helga is afraid of herself, this implies that her self is neither protective nor secure but a potential site of danger. To Fanon's conceptualization of the Negro as "un objet phobogène" [a phobogenic object] in *Peau noire, masques blancs*, by virtue of the white girl's confidence that "coucher avec un nègre représente pour elle quelque chose de terrifiant" (143) ["to go to bed with a Negro would be terrifying to her" (151)], it could be added that the Negro is a phobogenic subject. Helga does not cause fright to anybody else than herself. I argue that her discomfort results from her lack of self-knowledge because of the inner forces that escape

her control and hamper her stability. One of the things that will escape her control is the manifestation of her repressed sexuality that I will focus on later on in this chapter. The discomfort with herself substantiates the versatility of her personality and determines the ambiguous nature of her sexuality.

Helga's rupture with her former boyfriend Vayle precipitates her departure from Naxos. The intersection of place and sexuality accounts for Helga's need for displacement after the failure of her sexual expression. After Naxos, she heads for Harlem, where she wears a *décolleté* dress at a dinner party, the cut and the color of which suggest passion and warmth. Helga's impulses of attraction and repulsion, and pleasure and danger reach their paroxysm in the Harlem cabaret, when she finds the music simultaneously enjoyable and arresting:

When suddenly [it] died, she dragged herself back to the present with a conscious effort; and a shameful certainty that not only had she been in the jungle but that she had enjoyed it, began to taunt her [...] She wasn't, she told herself, a jungle creature. (59-60)

Throughout the novel, Helga suppresses the call of her sexual feelings. It is in her attempts to avoid them that she leaves Harlem, mythically known to many white cultural outsiders as the mecca of the primitive as well as the site of sexual freedom and abandon. She sails to Europe to visit her white mother's relatives, the Dahls.

In white discourses, the migration of black women from the South to Northern urban areas gives leeway to their sexual deviancy. In "Policing the Black Woman's Body in an Urban Context," Hazel Carby underscores how black women's migration threatens white Americans' feelings of security:

The movement of black women between rural and urban areas and between southern and northern cities generated a series of moral panics. One serious consequence was that the behavior of black female migrants was characterized as sexually degenerate and, therefore, socially dangerous. (739)

Helga's migration to Copenhagen does not resolve her dilemma, because the Danes reduce her to a "queer dark creature" (69) and an exotic treasure. Despite Aunt Katrina's subtle plots to marry her to the famous artist Axel Olsen, Helga's fear of childbearing undermines her aunt's wish. The experience she has been through in her life prompts her dismissal of interracial marriages as a disadvantage for children. In Larsen's other novel, *Passing*, such a dread is also marked by the fear of bearing children who might be dark. One of the passers, Clare Kendry, reveals the risks associated with childbearing: "[n]o, I have no boys and I don't think I'll ever have any. I am afraid. I nearly died of terror the whole nine months before Margery was born for fear that she might be dark. Thank goodness, she turned out all right. But I'll never risk it again" (168).

Helga's desire to protect herself from the hazards of interracial union with Olsen is mixed with her desire to harm herself, given the repression of her sexuality. Despite the initially self-affirming quality of her relationship with Olsen, her fear of rejection is reinforced by her feelings of sexual aversion for him. She senses "a curious feeling of repugnance" associated with the sexualized Olsen (85), the same sensation she had for Vayle. After her aunt notifies her of the artist's attraction to her, a "feeling of nakedness" (79) overwhelms her. She dismisses Olsen's marriage proposal as an indecent proposition: "[b]ut you see, Herr Olsen, I'm not for sale. Not to you. Not to any white man [...] What I'm trying to say is this, I don't want you. I wouldn't under any

circumstances marry you” (87). Helga’s newfound sense of belonging to a community of race and appreciation of racial solidarity nudge her in the direction of self-esteem and conceal her ambivalent sexuality. Race, rather than sex, becomes the justification of her response: “You see, I couldn’t marry a white man. I simply couldn’t. It isn’t just you, not just personal, you understand. It’s deeper, broader than that. It’s racial” (88). Helga uses Olsen as a scapegoat for all the white people who have rejected her.

Helga’s rejection of Olsen’s proposal testifies to Copenhagen’s failure to fulfill her desire. As a result, she seeks a newly-idealized object through her sudden outpouring of sympathy for her father:

For the first time Helga Crane felt sympathy rather than contempt and hatred for that father, who so often and so angrily she had blamed for his desertion of her mother. She understood, now, his rejection, his repudiation, of the formal calm her mother had represented [...] She understood and could sympathize with his facile surrender to the irresistible ties of race, now that they dragged at her own heart. And as she attended parties, the theater, the opera, and mingled with people on the streets, meeting only pale serious faces when she longed for brown laughing ones, she was able to forgive him. Also, it was as if in this understanding and forgiving she had come upon knowledge of almost sacred importance. (92-93)

Helga’s recognition of her heretofore repressed feelings for her father is “knowledge of almost sacred importance.” She embraces the core of her identity and bolsters her self-esteem by sympathizing with her father. Her return to New York is punctuated by her unexpected encounter at a party of her former black school principal,

Anderson. But she refuses to acknowledge her sexuality by not responding favorably to his overtures. Paradoxically and belatedly, she offers herself to him only after he marries her best friend Anne. Unfortunately, her attempt to give herself is countered by Anderson's distance. Humiliated by his rejection, she reacts by "savagely slap[ping] Robert Anderson with all her might, in the face" (108). After this episode, Helga can no longer contain the desire lying dormant in her: "[f]or days, for weeks, voluptuous visions had haunted her. Desire had burned in her flesh with uncontrollable violence. The wish to give herself had been so intense that Dr. Anderson's surprising, trivial apology loomed as a direct refusal of the offering" (182). Helga has unavoidably reached a point of no return. The paradox of her previous rejection of and current attraction to Anderson reveals the return of the repressed.

Freudian and Lacanian theorization of the repressed includes this type of return. Helga's uncontrollable and burning desire to "give herself" to Anderson is symptomatic of the release of her pent-up emotions. Her inability to soothe this sexual desire results in her harrowing frustration. It is in a state of confusion, vulnerability, and necrophilia that Helga participates in a religious orgy in a church where she pathetically pours her mental torment into the bosom of religious conversion. When she begins to "yell like one insane" for God's mercy, she unburdens herself of the agony inherent to desire (113). At the moment of her surrender, the narrator reports, Helga "was lost—or saved" (189). These contradictory trajectories are met in her ambivalent personality.

Helga's resort to religion is somewhat surprising because she had never been religious. She attempts to drown the searing pain of self-defeat by succumbing to the monochromatic religious paradigm that whites construct for blacks and that serves as an

instrument for subjecting independent women like Helga into a submissive role. Her yearning to transcend the agony of her life through religious conversion leads to her marriage to Reverend Pleasant Green and to the fulfillment of her sexual desire. She follows this “rattish yellow man,” an embodiment of the Law of the Father, to his parish in a small Alabama town. Born out of wedlock, Helga considers her union with this “man of God” as the opportunity to attain her much-awaited stability: “It was a chance at stability, at permanent happiness, that she meant to take” (117). Stability, of course, has always been Helga’s object of desire. She becomes very relieved at the idea that she finds an acceptable outlet for her sexuality: “the intangible thing for which, indefinitely, always she had craved [...] had received embodiment” (200). The retrieval of the “intangible thing,” the previously nameless sexual desire, through respectable matrimony, provides a great deal of satisfaction to Helga. Cherishing her new role as the mistress of a house, attending to domestic chores, a garden, chickens, and a pig, she epitomizes the perfect wife, a devoted mother and an impeccable homemaker.

Helga’s attainment of respectability becomes problematic, however, because it is circumscribed within the anchors of the biological imperatives of childbearing and physical suffering. She becomes encumbered by a bevy of children and exposed to physical enfeeblement and moral despondency as her repeated pregnancies weaken her and jeopardize her health. Like many novels written during the Harlem Renaissance, such as Ellen Glasgow’s *Barren Ground* (1925) and Emma Summer Kelley’s *Weeds* (1972), *Quicksand* likens marriage to death or the annihilation of the self. By the end of the novel, Larsen’s heroine realizes that she could not “even blame God [...] now that she knew that He didn’t exist [...] The white man’s God” (130). Helga ultimately indicts

Western culture through her heresy. The existential impasse in which Larsen imprisons Helga is meant to debunk middle-class respectability.

Helga's disappointing marriage experience reveals the pitfalls of respectable sexuality. The institution of marriage should be problematized, owing to its privileging of the demands of social expectations over individual fulfillment. I suggest that Larsen uses the figure of the mulatta in *Quicksand* to parody and critique the idealized vision of true womanhood according to white standards, for Helga embodies this ideal at the expense of her self-fulfillment and well-being. The socially-instituted prohibitions meant to direct female sexuality simultaneously kill it. Butler explains that "prohibitions [...] produce deflections of sexual desire" (*Bodies that Matter* 99). In the course of the novel, the deflection of Helga's sexuality appears in the normative repression of her sexual desire and the punitive expression of her sexuality. I conceive of the expression of Helga's sexuality as the ambivalent and anxious manifestation of her trapped desire as a mulatta. Her desire stands between prohibitive and punitive codes, hence its liminal indeterminacy.

While Larsen questions the middle-class notions of respectability which stifle Helga's agency and sexual subjectivity, in the following section the focus will be on how colonialism impacts the mulatta's vision of respectability, as evidenced in the second novel by Capécia.

Sexuality and Normative Illegitimacy in Mayotte Capécia's *La négresse blanche*

Set during the socially, economically, and politically unsettled period of the Vichy régime of 1941-43 in Martinique, *La négresse blanche* recounts the story of Isaure,

a proud young mulatta who struggles to attain financial autonomy. Perched somewhere between the upper class world of the rich *békés*, or *blancs créoles*, and the hand-to-mouth peasants, Isaure aspires to gain middle-class security and respectability. But the unresolved tensions between her admiration for whites and her hatred of blacks put her on tenterhooks. Her loathing of blacks is the reflection of her internalized feelings of racial inadequacy that are characteristic of colonial societies and her own self-contempt. This pathological narcissistic lack has been doubly detrimental to her. By the end of the novel, she loses her personal solace and her social stability, for not only has she been attacked by a black man, but also her white husband Pascal has been killed by furious black workers. Neither black nor white, adrift between the hatred of blacks and the contempt of whites, the “white Negress” is compelled to leave the island: the paradoxical title of the book charts her racial as well as the sexual ambivalence. Her situation prompts two questions. What are the features of Isaure’s sexuality? How does she negotiate the rift between her sexuality and social respectability?

In *La négresse blanche*, the protagonist Isaure is a young mixed-blood woman who is described as light-skinned, with “sleek” hair and face that “had the look of a white person” (160). Like Mayotte in *Je suis martiniquaise*, she prefers to have white men as lovers. But she stands in contrast with Helga, who fears interracial relationships because of her unwillingness to bear a half-breed child. Isaure admits to the white officers in her bar that she has never slept with a black man because they “disgust” her and she is “afraid” of them (162). In his section entitled “The Woman of Color and the White Man” in *Peau noire, masques blancs*, Fanon ascribes the Martinican woman’s desire for the white man to “lactification” (47), but Fanon’s attitude seems sexist, because in his

chapter “The Man of Color and the White Man” he describes men of color who pursue white women only for the purpose of seeking civilization and dignity (63). Fanon fails to take into consideration the impact of education on the formation of the personality of the Martinican woman and her sexuality.

Isaure has internalized her mother’s teaching, which has been instrumental in the unfolding of her first relation with the white man Emmanuel, who conquered her easily: “[e]lle ne pouvait se débarrasser de ce respect des blancs que sa mère, abandonnée pourtant par le marin qu’elle avait aimé, lui avait inculqué” (13) [“[s]he was unable to rid herself of the respect for whites that her mother, abandoned by the sailor she had loved, nonetheless had instilled in her” (162)]. Unlike Helga, who becomes a mother within the sanctioned boundaries of marriage, Isaure conceives her son François out of wedlock at seventeen. In *La négresse blanche*, the depersonalizing effect of French colonial assimilation is responsible for the alienation of the colored Martinican woman. Such alienation causes her liminal instability between her yearning for whiteness and her awareness of the Fanonian idea that “les Blancs n’épousent pas une femme noire” (59) [“white men do not marry black women” (*Black Skin, White Masks* 49)]. Capécia’s narrator expresses her anxiety in the following terms: “[l]e mariage avec un noir, cela ne vaudrait-il pas mieux que le concubinage avec un blanc? Les enfants, du moins, n’auraient pas été des bâtards” (12) [“[w]ouldn’t marriage with a black man be better than living with a white man? At least the children wouldn’t be bastards” (162)]. Isaure’s straddling of two oppositional states of mind underscores her liminal state.

In *Les Antilles décolonisées* (1969), Daniel Guérin conflates the sexuality of the Caribbean woman with illegitimacy: “[l]e rêve de bien des mères antillaises est d’avoir

un enfant illégitime d'un blanc, même si ensuite le père se refuse à donner son nom au rejeton. L'enfant métissé ainsi mis au monde aura bénéficié [...] d'une 'promotion'" (85) ["[t]he dream of many Caribbean women is to have an illegitimate child from a white man, even if thereafter the father refuses to accord paternity to the child. The half-breed child will thus benefit from social promotion"]. The wish for illegitimacy in Guérin's statement contrasts with social respectability *stricto sensu*. Capécia does not exhibit her character's willed illegitimacy, but reveals her unrestrained sexuality. Contrary to Helga Crane, who represses her sexuality to conform to social norms, Isaure's sexuality knows no restriction. But she has sexual autonomy. In *Peau noire, masques blancs*, the Antillean woman is the sexual object seeking "la blancheur à tout prix" (59) [whiteness at any price] (49) at the expense of respectability which seems not to be the issue. The mulatta's love and happiness are ancillary to her strong longing for union with the revered and valorized white man.

Capécia's purpose in *La négresse blanche* appears less to commodify her character Isaure than to show the impact of her alienation on her sexuality. Isaure's double illegitimacy, through her birth and the birth of her child, François, as well as her internalization of her inferiority, impede her efforts to arrive at self-definition and self-worth. Her blind respect for the white man causes the self-effacement of the mulatta who values only the desire of the sublimated French other. The similarity in the fate of Isaure and her mother underlies the Senegalese Wolof saying, *doomja ndeyja*, "like daughter, like mother." In other words, the daughter reaps what her mother sowed, and, thus, follows in her footsteps: "[l]e premier, qui l'avait prise à dix-sept ans et qui lui avait fait ce fils à la peau si claire, était un blanc" (12) "[t]he first one who had taken her at

seventeen and who had given her that son with such a light complexion, was white” (162)]. According to Jacques André, the maternal continuum, the reproduction of illegitimate birth from mother to daughter, is vital for the maintenance of matrifocal law. In fact, the regime of matrifocality permeates Caribbean families and societies. It rests on the libidinal attachment of mulattas to white men and the absence of legitimate biological fathers. André specifies that “[b]ecause familial logic and the social code do not so much recognize two different types of sexuality—male and female—as they oppose the masculine, the sexual, to the feminine, the nonsexual, the junction of the feminine and the sexual can only happen under the auspices of ‘undoing’” (83). The phenomenon of “undoing” can be considered as Turner’s liminal notion of anti-structure in *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, which Spariosu thinks “inverts or dissolves the normal (and normative) structural order prevalent in the rest of the community” (33). In André’s statement, the Caribbean woman affirms her sexuality by breaking up the binary sexual/nonsexual, visible/non visible.

Isaure’s expression of her sexuality corresponds to the repression of Helga’s sexuality. For both, sexual desire is a lack they are not entitled to bridge because of their racial difference. Helga’s restraint from sex as well as Isaure’s freedom both navigate in the same waters of prohibitive codes and hamper the realization of their selves. In the historical contexts of *Quicksand* and *La négresse blanche*, social expectations override female freedom and choices. Isaure’s overt sexuality negates social respectability. Her relationship with her first white lover, Emmanuel, expresses her disempowerment and enslavement: “[I]’avait-elle aimé celui-là? Elle l’avait rencontré à son premier bal, il l’avait prise jeune fille, il l’avait quittée mère” (91) [“[h]ad she loved him? She had met

him at her first dance; he had won her as a young girl and had abandoned her as a mother” (208)]. In this statement, the feeling of love is vitiated and stymied by the ruthless white phallic power. Love is antithetical to the act of “winning” and “abandoning.” The thin line between girlhood and motherhood spells out the vulnerability of the mulatta’s sexuality. Likewise, the curt passage from the verb of meeting to that of abandoning occludes the presence of Isaure’s sexual desire and gratification.

Isaure’s distress is occasioned by her liminal positioning between prohibitive legitimacy and normative illegitimacy. In her society, albeit unethical and self-degrading, “living with a white man” is the norm. The mulatta’s marriage with a black man, even though more easily attainable, is avoided, as if it were self-defeating and self-crippling. The countering of Isaure’s personal recognition of the truth by social misrecognition arouses her nervousness and exacerbates her victimization. She strengthens the myth of the superiority of the white man who colonizes and possesses the colonized other. The mulatta’s obsequiousness to her white lover’s desires upholds his self-importance. Even so, the latter’s overweening pride and self-centeredness makes him think of the mulatta as the rightful perpetuator of white supremacy. Capécia’s first novelette, *Je suis martiniquaise*, also illustrates André’s imperialist posture to his lover. Speaking of François, the son he has with Mayotte outside the boundaries of marriage, he boldly notes: “[t]u l’ élèveras. Tu lui parleras de moi. Tu lui diras: c’était un homme supérieur. Il faut que tu travailles, pour être digne de lui [...] Tu deviendras comme lui et, plus tard, tu rendras, à ton tour, une femme heureuse!” (185) “[y]ou will raise him; you will tell him about me. You will say to him: he was a superior man; you must strive to be worthy of

him [...] You will become like him and later you will, in your turn, make a woman happy” (143)]. André’s warped conception of the mulatta’s happiness is the product of his self-centered gaze and wish. Mayotte’s happiness, in his perception, is linked to his phallic satisfaction and to her sexual commodification. Mayotte’s racial and sexual transgression and her potential perpetuation of the white man’s ideology triply disempower her. Furthermore, the feeling of pride and satisfaction she develops about her son François, along with Isaure, emphasizes her illusory happiness

In *La négresse blanche*, the interweaving of politics and sexuality stymies Isaure’s happiness. Apart from the deleterious effects of the economic slump on Martinicans’ lives during the Vichy régime, the island reeks of social and interracial tension. The antagonism opposing whites and blacks is exacerbated by the morally loose *doudous* who reject their black lovers and husbands to be with the white sailors for materialist purposes. Isaure is taken aback by the chaotic situation on the island:

Elle déplorait ces querelles, elle aurait voulu que les gens de différentes opinions et de différentes couleurs s’entendent une fois pour toutes. Ne pouvait-on pas vivre heureux sur une île aussi belle que la Martinique? Fallait-il toujours se disputer, malgré le soleil, malgré la mer, malgré l’amour? (63)

[She deplored these quarrels; she would have liked for people of different colors to get along once and for all. Couldn’t happiness be found on an island as beautiful as Martinique? Did they need to quarrel with one another, despite the sun, despite the sea, despite love? (192-93)]

Ironically, happiness and beauty are contradictory terms. The enchanting landscape of Martinique where entertainment and rapture are legion, stirs obnoxious, lewd, and

obscene attitudes. Besides, the profusion of sun, sea, and love symbolically represents the eroticization of an island pervaded by sexual depravation.

Isaure disparages the “perpetual carnival” (202) in the island marked by the arrival in Fort-de-France of the *Emile*, the French cruiser carrying gold from France to Martinique, and the subsequent immoral fiesta of the *doudous* running after material things

Quant à celles qui avaient des liaisons, les marins qui étaient devenus leurs amants [...] les meublaient magnifiquement [...] Les plus sérieuses avaient rompu avec leurs maris ou leurs amants noirs et hommes privés de femmes, furieux d’en être frustrés, allaient rejoindre la racaille qui rôdait autour des cafés. (79-80)

[There were those having affairs with sailors who [...] provided for them magnificently [...] The more involved women had broken off with their black husbands or lovers, and these men without women, furious at being deprived, went and joined the rabble that hung out by the cafes. (202)]

The illicit and unsanctioned love-making of the *doudous* accentuates the interracial and intraracial conflicts. Isaure, herself, is disgusted at their moral impropriety. She is ashamed to be the same color as these sexually available women (196). Contrary to the dialectic of sexual expression and repression in *Quicksand*, which punishes Helga’s sexuality, pleasure and danger are co-terminous in *La négresse blanche*, where the unrestrained and misguided sexual expression of the *doudous* produces insecurity and danger for blacks and whites as the frustrated and humiliated black husbands and lovers wreak their vengeance on white trouble-makers. This results in bloody encounters and in

the destruction of a peaceful environment. Still, even though Isaure's sexuality is experientially unrelated to that of the *doudous*, it is nonetheless affected by it. Her relentless desire for financial independence enables her to rise above the image of the sexually and economically dependent *doudou*. Her relationships with white officers serve solely as an economic expedient:

Elle était mécontente, angoissée. Aux officiers qui étaient ses clients et qu'elle devait continuer à servir, car elle tenait plus que jamais à être indépendante, elle ne souriait plus. Sa seule consolation était son fils François. (68)

[She was unhappy, in anguish. No longer did she smile at her clients, the officers, whom she had to continue serving because, more than ever, she clung to her independence. Her lone consolation was her son François. (195)]

Isaure's disconsolate state is rooted in her psychic ambivalence as well as in her unease with the socio-political upheaval. Her previous admiration for whites begins to wane because she holds them responsible for the maelstrom in the island. It dawns on her that, as a woman having some black blood, her empathy with whites is incongruous and antagonistic to blacks' struggles for liberation from the yoke of Europeans. The war has a transformative effect on Isaure's psyche as she moves from naiveté to awareness, from the fierce denial of her black heritage to its acceptance. The shift in her psychological stance favorably leads to her self-reconciliation. Indeed, the consciousness and acceptance of what one really is decrease internal confusion:

Elle se transformait elle aussi; elle sentait que bientôt la vie qu'elle avait menée jusqu'ici ne lui suffirait plus. Certains mots comme révolution, libération, qui la laissaient autrefois indifférente, quand elle les entendait prononcer par les noirs,

éveillaient chez elle des échos et la troublaient. Elle avait aussi du sang noir. Et quand on a du sang noir on est une noire. Elle ne pouvait plus se borner à servir les békés. (68)

[She, herself, was being transformed. She felt that soon the life she had led up to then would no longer satisfy her. Words such as revolution and liberation, that formerly had left her indifferent when she heard them voiced by blacks, stirred up in her echoes of the past and disturbed her. She, too, had some black blood and when one has black blood, one is black. She could no longer limit herself to serve only whites. (196)]

Isaure's political awareness, spurred by the war, contributes to the liminal re-articulation of her identity as her preoccupation with change in the status of blacks reveals her adherence to the subversion of the power imbalance. She frets over the social regression produced by ideological stasis and her negative racial views change considerably. As the blockade by the Allies against the Vichy-controlled island continues, Isaure begins to develop an acceptance of her black identity.

Isaure's rethinking of her identity impacts her sexuality as her new-gained political awareness overrides her sexual life. Daniel's apolitical concerns and interest in business markedly contrast with Isaure's ethical political sensitivity. She turns Daniel away because of what she considers as his flaws and improprieties: "Daniel ne s'occupait que de ses affaires, sans prêter aucune attention à la politique [...] Isaure commençait à le trouver vulgaire, égoïste, elle découvrait chez lui quantité de défauts et une bonne dose de bassesse (67) ["Daniel was only interested in his business, and paid no attention to politics [...] Isaure was beginning to find him vulgar, selfish and discovering in him a

number of weaknesses and a large dose of dishonor” (195)]. As a white man, Daniel’s disinterest in politics is consistent with his spirit of conservatism, which goes against any change in the status quo in Martinique.

Whereas Isaure gains agency by virtue of her emerging political consciousness, Daniel retreats into a static posture. Her anger with him first derives from his responsibility for the failure of her *quimbois*, the occult practice she performed to charm him. Unfortunately, her cautious and painstaking preparation of all the things she bought (sheep and parchment-paper) to make her *quimbois* successful has been to no avail, for Daniel accidentally breaks the *canari* [a clay pot] containing Isaure’s mixture: “[i]l s’était approché de la petite table. D’un coup inattendu, il tira la nappe. Le canari tomba bruyamment et laissa échapper son contenu” (28) [“[h]e had gone over to the little table. With an unexpected movement, he removed the cloth. The *canari* fell noisily, spilling its contents” (171)].

Why would Isaure cast a spell on Daniel? Her apparent strength hides an inward weakness, and the man’s company enables her to satisfy a physiological need. She explains:

Ah! Si elle avait pu se passer des hommes! Elle aurait dû, depuis longtemps rompre avec Daniel. L’aimait-elle? L’avait-elle aimé? Elle ne savait même plus. Tout ce qu’elle savait, c’était que son corps voulait être dominé. Peut-être que cela provenait de ses ancêtres esclaves choisis en Afrique et importés à la Martinique comme des étalons. (71)

[Oh, if she had been able to do without men, a long time ago, she would have broken with Daniel! Did she love him? Had she loved him? She no longer knew.

All that she knew was that her body wanted to be dominated. Perhaps this had its origin in her ancestors, slaves chosen in Africa and imported to Martinique like stud-horses. (197)]

The social strength of Isaure, as a proud mulatta providing for herself, as well as her hypersensuality explains the ambivalent nature of her personality. But this hypersensuality is what Isaure attributes to her black blood, which arouses her sexual urges and her desire for the domination of her body. In her perception, blackness is associated with sex and slavery. This statement reveals the Manichean construction of race in colonial society, which impacts the quest for identity of the colonized, notably the mixed-blood, whose bothness to and otherness from black and white racial categories complicates their identitary search.

Isaure's sexual prescription is antithetical to the sexual proscription of Maméga, the main character of Françoise Ega's *Lettres à une Noire* (1978), the epistolary narration of a poor Martinican mother and wife who records her life as a domestic in France. Ega focuses on Maméga's absence of discourse on sex. Like the Virgin Mother with whom she identifies, she scrupulously represses her sexuality, dismisses her employers' sexuality as criminal and immoral, and regards the man who has made sexual advances to her friend Renélise as a "vieux cochon" [old pig]. Isaure's free enunciation of her sexual desire—she needs her body to be dominated—has affinities with Veronica's actions in Maryse Condé's *Hérémakhonon* (1976), a novel that valorizes sexuality and the sexual act. Literally oversexualized, Veronica considers her body as a locus of pleasure: "[q]uand on a mangé à sa faim depuis l'enfance, on a le temps de songer à l'amour et de ne songer qu'à cela" (24) ["[w]hen one has eaten one's full since childhood, one has the

time to think about love and nothing but love”]. Condé’s and Ega’s novels represent what seem to be the two extreme ideologies of the sexuality of the Caribbean woman.

Although closer to *Hérémakhonon*, *La négresse blanche* speaks in less crude sexual language.

Isaure’s sexuality, however, does not turn her into a docile woman, though she wants to inscribe her pleasure within a respectable outlet. After discovering Daniel’s infidelity, Isaure slaps him and ends their relationship (200-201). She shows that Caliban’s daughter is not Prospero’s sexual underdog. She celebrates her break-up by destroying the material symbol of their union: “[p]our bien marquer la rupture, elle avait brûlé la photo de Daniel et l’avait remplacée, dans sa chambre à coucher, par celle d’Emmanuel, le père de François” (86) “[t]o commemorate the break-up, she had burned Daniel’s photograph and had replaced it in her bedroom with one of Emmanuel, François’s father” (206)].

Isaure’s replacement of Daniel’s photograph with that of her ex-lover Emmanuel, the man who impregnated and abandoned her, is paradoxical. She seems to be caught in a maelstrom of conflicting sexual emotions that raise questions. Why didn’t she burn Emmanuel’s photo after the latter’s betrayal? Is it because he is the father of her only child? I believe that Emmanuel’s photo is the emotional prop she holds onto in order to cope with her separation from both partners. But Isaure does not have to put up with her loneliness very long, because of her unexpected encounter with Pascal. She is gleeful about her contact with her former schoolmate, regardless of his modest social class and unattractiveness:

Pascal faisait partie d’une de ces familles de blancs pauvres qui étaient ravalés au

rang des noirs. Son frère était devenu pêcheur, comme son père, mais lui avait pu, à force de travail et d'intelligence, faire de bonnes études. Il avait enfin été nommé gèreur dans une plantation de cannes à Basse-Pointe. (87)

[Pascal belonged to one of those poor white families set on the same level with blacks. His brother had become a fisherman like the father, but he, by dint of hard work and intelligence, had succeeded in becoming educated. He ended up by being named overseer on a sugar cane plantation in Basse-Pointe. (207)]

Unlike the U.S., where biological essentialism prevails, race in the Caribbean is a sociological construction. In *Les damnés de la terre* (1961) Fanon points out the interchangeability between race and class (9). Although he is the manager of a sugar cane plantation in Basse-Pointe, Césaire's home town on the Northeastern coast of Martinique, Pascal cannot be on the same level as the rich white plantation owner, the *béké*. Despite his kindness and empathy with blacks—he is the “white Negro” sincerely trying to win the trust and love of his black compatriots—Pascal is chastised for his naivety. Eventually, he is ruthlessly slaughtered by the furious black plantation workers.

Before his death, Pascal flouts his family's wishes and social demands by marrying Isaure. The mulatta's plea to dissuade him from marrying her functions like an unconscious warning and a prefiguration of her ill-fated marriage with him: “Je vivrai avec toi, si tu veux, disait-elle, je ferai ce que tu voudras. Je t'obéirai comme une chienne. Tu n'as pas besoin de m'épouser” (132) [“I'll live with you, if you want, she said. I'll do what you want. I'll obey you like a dog. You don't need to marry me” (231)]. Isaure's attitude of depersonalization vis-à-vis the valorized white other is attributive, according to Fanon, to the modus operandi of colonialism which “distord, défigure, [et]

anéantit [le passé du colonisé]” (*Les damnés de la terre* 144) [“distorts, disfigures, and destroys [the past of the colonized]” (210)]. Her desire for whiteness is devoid of any sense of self-worth and social respectability. However, Isaure’s marriage with Pascal secures her stability:

Elle se sentait une autre femme depuis qu’elle était mariée. Elle avait enfin la permission d’aimer un homme, de sortir avec lui, de l’embrasser publiquement [...] Même si Pascal ne lui avait pas été aussi cher [...] elle l’aurait aimé sans doute du seul fait qu’il fût devenu son mari. Elle avait toujours aspiré à la légitimité et au définitif, elle qui avait été une fille illégitime puis une fille mère, elle qui n’était ni blanche ni noire. (140)

[She felt like another woman since being married. At last, she had the right to love a man, to go out with him, to kiss him in public [...] Even if she had not cherished Pascal as much [...] she would have loved him for the simple fact that he had become her husband. She had always aspired for legitimacy and permanency, she who had been illegitimate, then an unwed mother, she who was neither white nor black. (235)]

Fanon’s oft-quoted idea that white men do not marry black women in *Black Skin, White Masks* (49) finds its source in whites’ aspiration to preserve racial endogamy. In West Indian societies, David Lowenthal notes:

Of all instrumentalities that separate classes, the most deliberate and durable is endogamy. Nowhere in the Caribbean is miscegenation legally banned or publicly censured. None the less white Creole [i.e., native] intermarriage remains

customary if not mandatory; whites who marry nonwhite West Indians are, in the main, expatriates unconstrained by Creole family ties. (133)

That is why the transience of the marriage of Isaure and Pascal can be partly explained by their violation of the ethos of racial endogamy. The transgression of the endogamous norm, however, is empowering for Isaure, who manages to achieve marriage during the socially and politically unstable situation of the Second World War that was marked by the tensions between whites and blacks in Martinique. Her violation of the norm prohibiting the marriage between a white man and a black woman gives her a space to realize her sexuality, which is the liminal experience between her desire and societal constraints. Isaure and Helga both achieve some degree of stability via marriage, yet grapple with difficulties. Helga's marriage "uses her up" because of her entrapment in childbearing. At the end of the novel, Larsen expresses the suffocation of Helga, who wants to "get herself out of this bog into which she had strayed" (134) but realizes that she cannot desert her children (135). As for Isaure, the burdensome responsibilities of motherhood are not the issue but rather the consequences of her marriage with Pascal.

After the death of her husband, Isaure grapples with the pressures of her white mother-in-law, who lays claim to what belonged to her son and to the hatred of the black Martinicans who bear a grudge against her for marrying a white man (255). After the war, the development of a reverse racism makes the *métis* like Isaure outcasts in their community. Isaure wonders: "trouverait-elle un pays où échapper enfin à la malediction de n'être ni noire ni blanche?" ["would she find a country where she could finally escape the curse of being neither black nor white?" (255)]. Ultimately, Helga and Isaure are better off unmarried. Helga is punished for her conformity to the ethos of social

respectability, and Isaure is punished for her unconformity to the ethos of racial endogamy. In both cases, social expectations curb feminine sexual happiness.

Michel Pécheux's theory of identification reveals the entrapment of social subjects within the dictates of discursive formations: "Individuals are 'interpellated' as speaking subjects by the discursive formations that correspond to them and [...] the interpellation of the individual as subject of his discourse is achieved by the identification with discursive formations that dominate him" (*Language, Semantics, and Ideology* 156). The interpellation of subjects calls for their conformity to social scripts and regulatory norms, but interpellation is a process of regimentation that makes individuals automatons rather than subjects. *Quicksand* and *La négresse blanche* offer different perceptions of female sexuality inspired by socio-cultural determinisms. The situations of mulattas in these novels, however, are dissimilar in many ways from that of Nini, the Senegalese protagonist of the third text to be analyzed in this chapter.

Nini, mulâtresse du Sénégal: Between Sexual Empowerment and Disempowerment

The interwar period of the French colonization of West Africa provides the historical context for Sadjji's *Nini, mulâtresse du Sénégal*, which is set in Saint-Louis, an old colonial city in Northern Senegal that was once the capital of the colony. The novel documents the story of Virginie Maerle, commonly known as Nini. Near-white and upper-class mulatta, Nini's espousal of the French lifestyle and value system makes her, in my view, whiter than the whites. Her unwavering denial of her black heritage causes her to reject the marriage proposal of a black Senegalese civil servant, the only man who ever asked for her hand. The high hopes she had of marrying a white man vanish into thin

air, leaving in their wake bitterness and distress. Betrayed, disappointed, humiliated, and bereft of hope, Nini finally leaves Saint-Louis for Paris.

Unlike Helga and Isaure, Nini's yearning for marriage is not intertwined with the anxious quest for legitimacy. Despite the fact that Nini's parents are not mentioned in the text, her Aunt Hortense alerts the reader to her niece's respectable family background, which markedly contrasts with that of Madou Meckey, Nini's almost-black friend:

“[a]llez, on sait dans quelles familles les enfants naissent sans père [...] Tel n'est point notre cas, nous autres les Maerle. Nous pouvons marcher dans Saint-Louis la tête bien haute” (236) [“[c]ome on, we know about families where children are born without fathers [...] That is not our case, we, the Maerle. We can walk in Saint-Louis with our heads held high”]. As *signaras*, Aunt Hortense and Grandmother Hélène, the only living symbols of the Maerle, jealously preserve the glorious gemstone of their genealogy.

Senegalese *signaras*, it must be noted, are the equivalent of the Martinican *doudous*. Both are beautiful and seductive women who were attractive to white settlers. In *Children of the French Empire: Miscegenation and Colonial Society in French West Africa 1895-1960* (1999), Owen White links the origin of the term *signaras* to the Portuguese presence in French West Africa:

European men sought out West African women as companions from the earliest days of their presence there. Portuguese settlers in coastal areas of Senegambia and Upper Guinea lived with African women from as early as the fifteenth century. The women who engaged in such relationships, it has been argued, tended to be well placed in local society, and used their links with the Portuguese traders to secure commercial privileges. The Portuguese influence in the region is

testified by the term the French later applied to such women—*signares*, from the Portuguese word *senhoras*. (7)

I have quoted this statement at some length to show how colonialism in French West Africa fostered miscegenation: as White goes on to explain, miscegenation served the interests of both whites and *signares*. *Signares* gained considerable economic advantages and preserved the business interests of whites (8). There were usually *mariages à la mode du pays* which “last[ed] for the duration of the European’s stay in Africa” (9). Moreover, children resulting from the unions between *signares* and whites were often recognized by their legitimate fathers (9). This historical background explains the preference of the *signaras* Aunt Hortense and Grandmother Héléne for white lovers. The Senegalese *homme de lettres* Madior Diouf rightly points out, in his critical book on Sadji’s novel, the *signaras*’ deep attachment to family glory and social respectability (24). The pride of bearing an illustrious family name and of having prestigious ancestors reinforces Nini’s conviction of being a French girl from France and leads to her longing to marry a white man. Colonialism is responsible for this alienation of mixed-blood people from African society.

Nini is a blond and blue-eyed mulatta brainwashed into believing in her superiority to blacks. Contrary to the normative prohibition enforced in *La négresse blanche*, where a white man does not marry a black woman for fear that he undermines the ethos of racial endogamy, *Nini, mulâtresse du Sénégal* conventionalizes the mulatta’s marriage with a white man. However, such a marriage often begins in the realm of the imaginary. The first pages of the novel describe the unsuccessful relationships of Nini’s aunt and grandmother:

Grand-mère Hélène et tante Hortense [...] avaient été jeunes filles comme Nini, sveltes, gracieuses, nerveuses et remuantes. Elles avaient eu comme tout le monde leur rêve de jeunesse: ce rêve s'était élargi démesurément, emportant tout leur être dans un immense besoin d'aimer et d'être aimées [...] Toute leur jeunesse n'a été qu'une suite de déceptions. Elles l'ont passé en plusieurs films avec des amoureux d'occasions, tous Blancs d'Europe qui, après les avoir adorées, étaient parties sans retour. (11)

[Like Nini, Grandmother Hélène and aunt Hortense [...] had been slender, charming, nervous, and fidgety young girls. Like everybody, they had had their childhood dreams. But these dreams had widened excessively, and taken away their whole being in a tremendous need to love and to be loved [...] Their entire childhood was nothing but a series of disappointments. They spent it in several films with chance white lovers, all from Europe, who, after adoring them, left them without returning.]

The sexual experiences of Grandmother Hélène and aunt Hortense reveal the cultural and psychological impact of French colonization on non-white gender identities. The African Americentric critic and cultural worker Bernard Bell explains:

[O]ur identities are both a product of and a process in a specific time and place of a core of ethnic beliefs and values derived from the complex, dynamic relationship of our chromosomes, color, ethnicity, class, gender, geography, age, culture, sexuality, consciousness, commitment, conscience, and choice. (xxvii)

Bell enumerates thirteen components that come into play in the ways in which African Americans negotiate their identities, revealing the complexity of identity formations that

are not always a smooth process. Even though Grandmother H  l  ne and Aunt Hortense did not achieve their goals of marrying white men, they are responsible for the choices they made. These choices can be perceived as empowering and disempowering. The sexual choices of the mulatta Nini are reflective of and consolidated by her social condition as a colonized subject.

In *Discours sur le colonialisme* (1955), C  saire rightly equates colonization with *chosification* or “thing-ification.” The marginalization of the colonized accounts for their puppetry by the white master. The colonial construction of sexuality in Sadj  ’s novel moulds the identity of mulattas. One can interpret the “several films” H  l  ne and Hortense spent seeing with their “chance white lovers” as the prescriptive sexual roles they are supposed to play rather than subjects freely enacting their sexuality. Their acquiescence to and consolidation of white dominance yoke their sexual expression to normative performance. Hence, there is an inextricable link between sexuality and power. Sexuality seems to be an act of power benefiting the empowered and harming the disempowered. As Hortense Spillers points out, “[t]he discourse of sexuality seems another way, in its present practices, that the world divides decisively between the haves/have-nots, those who may speak and those who may not, those who, by choice or the accident of birth, benefit from the dominative mode, and those who do not” (79). Sexuality is thus a liminal experience between gender and power. Spillers’s binary construction reflects in general the “rule” that confirms the exception, the case of Nini who is not denied utterance because she asserts her sexuality, regardless of the consequences this might trigger.

Nini's physical, family, and social assets—she is a blond, blue-eyed stenographer who has the luxury to have a black servant at her disposal—influence tremendously her sexuality, which is simultaneously a domain of power and weakness. The lack of actualization of her womanhood through marriage and motherhood empowers her because she escapes the constraints of being a woman, but also disables her because she flouts the concept of womanhood.

Nini's challenge to the concept of respectable womanhood identifies her as what Odile Cazenave terms a *femme rebelle* or “rebel woman.” Her unfulfillment of both wifehood and motherhood roles problematizes her gendered subjectivity. In the Igbo society of Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979), she would be likened to a male, with the only difference being that her absence of motherhood is not the result of barrenness. Her lack of procreation and of realization of marriage markedly contrasts her with Isaure, Capécia's narrator in *La négresse blanche*. Nini's childlessness salvages her from the pain and shame of besmirching the honor and reputation of the Maerle with an illegitimate child. Her doubly advantageous stance as neither wife nor mother results in her sexual fulfillment outside the patriarchal circumscription of female behavior.

Although she is forsaken by her white lovers, Nini's sexuality is free from the constraints of reproduction and illegitimacy. In this respect, she has more sexual power than Isaure or Helga, for Helga is a hopeless mother whereas Isaure is an unwed mother. In addition, both carry their heritage of illegitimacy in their bosom. Free from the double handicap of racial and sexual transgression, the sexuality of Nini is unburdened by the anxious need to redress a family grievance. Nonetheless, the power Nini supposedly

gains from her unfettered sexuality is vitiated by the way she is objectified sexually by her multifarious white lovers.

Since the age of fifteen, Nini has sacrificed her body for the satisfaction of the exotic pleasure of her white lovers. The album of her adolescent years displays the naivety and moral impropriety of a young girl whose psychological wounds and grief are assuaged by her pride in her tremendous attractiveness and her ability to seduce white men. Sadji's narrator explains, "[I]eur vie n'est pas possible sans ces albums qui leur disent, contre toute logique: 'Après tout vous fûtes belle et vous eûtes de nombreux amants très comme il faut'" (93) "[t]heir life is not possible without these albums that tell them against all logic: 'After all, you have been beautiful and you have had numerous well-bred lovers'"]. Paradoxically, the white lovers Nini and her fellow women so earnestly cling to are only pleasure seekers, "vrais adorateurs d'un seul jour, d'une seule nuit. Ou tout au plus de quelques semaines d'ennui tropical" (92) ["real admirers for a single day, a single night, or at most for a few weeks of tropical boredom"]. Temporary clerks in the colony, these whites utilize the easily accessible mulattas like Nini as their pastime and as doll-women who satiate their masculine urges.

White men's sexual power over mulattas is an emanation of their social domination. They are responsible for the devalorization of the mulattas whose desire for white partners overrides and blinds their self-esteem. Sadji's narrator establishes a connection between the arrival of whites in the colony and the sexual degradation of mulattas:

Les Blancs qui arrivent à la colonie, surtout lorsqu'ils sont célibataires, sont trop esseulés pour résister à certaines tentations. On ne peut pas leur faire grief

d'oublier la mission civilisatrice de leur pays lorsqu'il se trouve constamment sur leur chemin de petites mulâtres grassouillettes et pimpantes qui ne demandent qu'à se donner à eux. (49)

[White men who arrive in the colony, especially when they are bachelors, are too lonely to resist certain temptations. It cannot be held against them that they forget about the civilizing mission of their country, when they constantly encounter little plump and well made-up mulattas only asking to offer themselves.]

Sadji's projection of the image of the mulatta-as-sex-object, the sexual temptress living off the market for moral looseness and sinfulness, is problematic because of its one-sidedness. Who is the sexual exploiter if not the white man, who uses and betrays the mulatta? If both sexual partners share a degree of responsibility for their sexual transgression, the white man, in his position as a colonizer and a potential civilizer, decivilizes and degrades himself by responding to his sexual urges, unconcerned about and unperturbed by the ethical consequence of his demeanor. The corruption of the mulatta's sexuality is caused by historical events which exacerbate the stereotype of her "cheapness" and also by the position of the author Sadji, who does not describe mulattas in a favorable light. One is tempted to ask if his negative portrait of the mulatta was not influenced by his own frustration over his rejection by a mulatta he once loved. Owen White explains that

Sadji himself had been in love with a métisse named Nini Dodds, who came from a long-established mixed-race family in Saint-Louis. Sadji's affections, however, were rejected, apparently on the basis that he was black; Dodds preferred instead the attentions of an unscrupulous white man. (157-8)

Nini's concern for social respectability is rooted in racial prejudice. Like Isaure, she is imbued with her instinct of superiority vis-à-vis blacks and considers whites as the only ones worth getting along with. Nini and Isaure equally manifest their negrophobia. Isaure is afraid of blacks, whom she considers savages (161), and Nini's fear of blacks appears in the nightmare she explains to her two white colleagues, Martineau and Perrin:

“Imaginez que je me trouvais dans une forêt noire, mais une forêt, tout ce qu'il y a de plus vierge. Alors, tout à coup, des nègres ont surgi armés de grands couteaux” (18)

[“Imagine that I was in a black forest, a virgin forest, when, all of a sudden, blacks armed with big knives appear”]. The Senegalese critic Madior Diouf shows how this kind of racial prejudice permeates interracial and intraracial relationships in Saint-Louis: “[l]e préjugé de race, l'instinct dominateur caractérisent les attitudes de la majorité des Blancs face aux Métis et aux Noirs, tout comme l'attitude des Métis face aux Noirs” (1990, 33) [“[r]acial prejudice and the instinct to dominate characterize the relationships of most whites vis-à-vis mulattoes and blacks as well as the relationships of mulattoes to blacks”].

He adds that the city of Saint-Louis is a hierarchical society consisting of three separate communities that date back to the eighteenth century. Whites have the highest social rank, mulattoes occupy an intermediary position, and blacks are at the bottom of the pyramidal structure. Ironically, mulattas are either unaware or reluctant to notice whites' sentiments of superiority toward them. They show contempt to mulatto and black men and valorize whites who devalorize them. The mulattas in the novel appear to lack maturity, dignity, and self-worth. White men, irrespective of their occupation, are their unconditional and ideal partners.

Les mulâtresses de première et de seconde classe relèguent dans le même mépris les Noirs et les Mulâtres. Parmi ces derniers se trouvent des hommes ayant une instruction et une situation qui en imposent. Mais ce n'est pas du tout cela qu'il faut à leur orgueil insensé; ce qu'il leur faut c'est un homme blanc et rien d'autre.

(43)

[First and second-class mulattas despise both blacks and mulattoes. Among the latter are educated men with respectable positions. But this does not suit their [the mulattas] senseless pride. What they need is a white man and nothing else.]

Beyond everything, mulattas' infatuation with white men accounts for their strained endeavor to be loved by them. They deploy all their attractive paraphernalia to seduce them, but this undertaking is doomed to fail because of the absence of mutual feeling. The tireless love investment of mulattas is a ludic adventure for white men.

The odyssey of Nini's relationship with her white colleague Martineau offers evidence of this phenomenon. Nini's preconceived ascription of decorum and gentility to whiteness fashions her relationship with Martineau, whom she treats respectfully and with consideration, regardless of the modest position he occupies in the River Company in Saint-Louis. Martineau's simple invitation of Nini to a tennis game paves the way for their romance, but what the white man conceives of as a trivial adventure is taken seriously by the Maerle, as both Grandmother Héléne and aunt Hortense rejoice about Martineau's visit, which brightens up their drab world:

Ce soir-là, à table, on ne parle que de la visite de Martineau. Nini semble avoir remporté une victoire. Jamais peut-être, durant leur jeunesse ardente et folle,

grand-mère Hélène et tante Hortense n'étaient arrivés à séduire un Blanc si comme il faut et si bien élevé. (29)

[That evening, at dinner, Martineau's visit was the only subject of conversation. Nini seemed to have won a victory. Never perhaps, in their passionate and wild youth, had grandmother Hélène and aunt Hortense managed to seduce such a well-bred and well-behaved white man.]

Why do the two old mulattas encourage Nini's relationship with Martineau, despite their disappointments and the humiliations their white lovers meted out to them by seducing and dropping them like useless goods? Didn't they draw a lesson from their experiences? Their unabashed empathy for white men and persistent devotion to social respectability are preposterous, but these factors play a major role in Nini's uprooting and discordant integration into her society, leading her astray in reinforcing her belief and conviction that a mulatta should only love a white man. Diouf observes that "l'auteur a un projet nettement éducatif" (10) ["the author has a distinctly educational project"], which is to show that Nini's upbringing has been fertile soil for her alienation and distancing from self-knowledge. Because of this, she pursues Martineau, a man who does not deserve her and who tramples her dignity underfoot.

Nini's embitterment by the betrayal of her ex-lovers also spurs her attachment to Martineau. The romantic walks and intimate moments they spend on the beach simultaneously fill Nini's heart with glee and anxiety, as she is increasingly consumed by a burning desire for marriage. Her distress gathers momentum with the formal marriage proposal of M. Darrivey, a white European employed in the civil service, to Dédée, a dark-skinned mulatta. The announcement of this marriage news arouses mixed feelings

among mulattas in Nini's community: it is a source of both contentment and discontent. All of them wish to be in the fortunate Dédée's shoes and are taken by envy. A white man's marriage with a mulatta is so uncommon in colonial Saint-Louis that it is like a miracle. Nini's unease and jealousy are provoked by her lack of acceptance of the fact that the younger dark-skinned girl will marry well, and her grandmother and aunt are also baffled and taken aback by Dédée's betrothal:

Mais au fond ce mariage 'anormal' l'étonne et la déçoit. Elle ne comprend pas que Dédée, qui est deux fois plus noire, puisse trouver un mari blanc à l'âge de dix-huit ans. Elle en est profondément jalouse. Et si elle pouvait invoquer tous les mauvais génies des eaux et de la jungle pour empêcher cette union, elle le ferait volontiers. Sa grand-mère et sa tante ne sont pas plus satisfaites. Elles trouvent que nulle fille, issue d'une des familles mulâtres de Saint-Louis, ne mérite davantage que leur Virginie l'honneur d'être épousée par un 'Toubabou Guètch.'

(95-96)

[But in her heart of hearts, this 'abnormal' marriage astonishes and disappoints her. She cannot understand that Dédée, who is twice as dark, should find a white husband at the age of eighteen. She is extremely jealous of it. And if she could invoke all the evil spirits of the waters and of the jungle to prevent this union, she would willingly do so. Her grandmother and aunt are not satisfied either. They think that no girl, coming from one of the mulatto families in Saint-Louis, deserves more than their Virginie the honor of being married by a white man.]

The two old mulattas' fixation on *passé* glory serves as a survivalist strategy that counters the emptiness of their lives. Sadjì deconstructs the notion that lightness of skin and ties to

a well-known and respectable family are the unconditional prerequisites for the marriage of a mulatta to a white man. Moral qualities are given more importance than physical attributes. Nini has unremittingly offered herself to white men since the age of fifteen, under the delusion that her “cheapness” to her white lovers would facilitate a potential union. At twenty-two, the psychological awakening provided by Dédée’s example prompts Nini to rethink her sexuality so that she no longer wants to be the white man’s sexual toy but his legitimate spouse, for Dédée’s marriage with M. Darrivey encourages her hopes to marry a white man and foreshadows interracial harmony and the end of racial prejudice. Sadji’s narrator observes that the union is a “[m]ariage très souhaitable du point de vue purement colonial et humain, puisqu’il semble réaliser dans une certaine mesure le rapprochement des races et qu’il constitue un cas typique d’assimilation intégrale” (111) “[f]rom a purely colonial and human point of view, [it is a] very desirable marriage. To a certain extent, it seems to contribute to racial reconciliation and constitutes a typical case of integral assimilation]. Such a marriage doubly benefits the mulatta through her victorious admittance into the white world and the reconciliation of her sexual desire with her sexual achievement. Dédée’s assimilation illustrates Genep’s post-liminal stage of reincorporation or reaggregation, where the subject recovers from his or her liminal instability.

Dédée’s psychological quiescence markedly contrasts with Nini’s heightened inner turmoil. Nini is caught in a liminal posture between her longing for marriage and her fear of being abandoned. The snail’s pace of Martineau’s much-awaited engagement with her granddaughter arouses grandmother Hélène’s anxiety:

Sa petite-fille est en amitié depuis cinq mois avec ce Monsieur Martineau qui a l'air si comme il faut. Pourquoi ce monsieur n'épouserait-il pas sa petite-fille [...]

Mais que faire? [...] Elle songe au maraboutage. (111-12)

[Her granddaughter has had a close friendship for five months with this Mr. Martineau who seems so appropriate. Why wouldn't this gentleman marry her granddaughter [...] But what to do? [...] She thinks about sorcery.]

Grandmother Héléne carries out her sorcery scheme to concretize Nini's marriage with Martineau. With the help of her relative Khady, she encounters a charm-maker who hastily dissipates her worries with his promises. Heart-wrenchingly, Nini's elaborate use of the sorcerer's magic potion and festive preparation of "un repas digne des rois" (137) [a meal worthy of kings] for the revered Martineau and his friend Perrin turns out badly and the false marriage promise (157) made by Martineau deals a serious psychological blow to her. On top of that, the closing down of the River Company where Martineau works precipitates his departure for Paris and his abandonment of the mulatto: once in France, he marries a white woman. Martineau's betrayal tears the Maerle apart. Nini is at the end of her tether: "[l]a voilà de nouveau abandonnée [...] Elle sent l'immutabilité de la vie." (179) [o]nce again she has been abandoned [...] She feels the immutability of life]. Nini's translation of her disappointments and suffering as signposts of the immutability of life is understandable but implausible. Her life is not unchanging because of the psychic and sexual *rebondissements* occasioned by her multiple white lovers.

The failure of Grandmother Héléne's efforts to achieve happiness for her granddaughter contributes to her illness and subsequent death. Through the depiction of her character, Sadji, like Larsen, disparages the primacy of social respectability in the

mulatta's life. Nini's blind and stubborn clinging to this ethos ironically contributes to her moral and social degradation until she ends up being a disgrace to herself and to her society. Paradoxically, she who views as an insult the proposal of Matar Ndiaye, the respectable black Public Works employee, becomes the embodiment of an insult. She sullies the reputation of the mulatta with her disdainful rejection of the man's epistolary declaration of love:

Je trouve que cette lettre est une insulte, un outrage fait à mon honneur de fille blanche. Ce nègre est un imbécile, un malappris qui a besoin d'une leçon. Et je la lui donnerai, cette leçon; je lui apprendrai à être plus décent et moins hardi; je lui ferai comprendre que les 'peaux blanches' ne sont pas pour les 'bougnoles.' (73)

[I find this letter insulting; it is an outrage to my honor as a white girl. This Negro is an idiot, an ill-bred person who needs a lesson. And I will teach him that lesson; I will teach him to be more decent and less daring, and will let him understand that 'white skins' are not for 'darkies.']

One would think that such insults were mouthed by a racist white person. Nini's excessive identification with a white girl borders on the theatrical. Sadji's exaggeration of the traits of her actress-like protagonist is prompted by his disgust for and scathing critique of the mulatta's hyperalienation. Nini's derogatory designation of the black man as *bougnoles* expresses her visceral hatred of blackness. Matar's proposal is deemed to be a felony which has to be redeemed through his arraignment. The mulatta community, which is generally divided by discord and jealousy, joins together to mobilize incredible solidarity for Nini: "[t]oute la mulâtraille est alertée et l'on donne à cette simple histoire de déclaration d'amour le retentissement d'un scandale public. Les vieilles 'signaras'

informées de la nouvelle parlent d'envoyer l'affaire en justice" (75) [a]ll the community of mulattas is alerted and this simple story of a declaration of love takes on the dimension of public scandal. Informed about the news, the old 'signaras' think about taking the matter to court].

From the evidence available in all three novels, it is clear that gender, race, and sexuality collude in a dense matrix of social and colonial regulation that conditions the terms of mulattas' existence. The social exigencies of the Harlem Renaissance and colonialism control, direct, and restrict the mulattas' sexuality. Two images of women emerge from the works examined. In Larsen's *Quicksand*, the Victorian ethos of white purity and prudery fashions Helga into a wife and Madonna whose sexuality locks her into the prison of hopeless maternity. Capécia's *La négresse blanche* and Sadjji's *Nini, mulâtresse du Sénégal* construct the image of the colonized mulatta-as-sex-object simultaneously liberated and enslaved by her sexuality. The wife Helga, the widow Isaure, and the spinster Nini perform their liminal sexuality in ambiguity and ambivalence.

In addition to the sexual performance of mulattas, their condition as transracial passers indicates the difficult and complex negotiation of their identity. The next chapter will show how their racial performance impacts their identity construction.

Chapter Four

Herspace: Liminal Madness and Racial Passing of the Mulatta

Madness and racial passing are issues that have long piqued the interest of scholars. The criticism on racial passing increased considerably in the 1990s among African American critics; Elaine Ginsberg, Amy Robinson, Carole-Anne Tyler, Gayle Wald, and Linda Scholssberg have addressed the complex ambivalence of passing and its subversion of the ontology of identity categories. Regarding madness, postcolonial writers such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Doris Lessing, and Tsitsi Dangarembga take up this issue and associate it mainly with the disorders created by the hegemonic forces of racism and colonialism. In the works that are the subject of this chapter, *A Question of Power* and *Passing*, the authors Bessie Head and Nella Larsen focus on what appear to be these two unrelated themes—madness and racial passing. The link between these two novels from different corners of the African diaspora may not be apparent at first, but a closer analysis reveals that each reflects a common problem rooted in the identity of the individual mulatta and her relationship to her socio-cultural environment.

The focus here will be on the double-voicedness of the madness and the racial passing performed by mixed-blood heroines. Head inscribes madness within the racist context of apartheid in South Africa and challenges traditionally accepted social classifications and narrative structures. The Harlem Renaissance is the historical backdrop of Larsen's novel which sketches out the ambivalence of racial passing that simultaneously destabilizes the essentialism of black/white identity categories and is complicitous with the American racial imaginary. Despite their thematic differences, the two works treat madness and passing as socially-induced phenomena that open up the

doorway to the reinvention of mulattas through the affirmation of their humanity and the subversion of their fixed categorization in the Western imagination as tragic mixed-breeds. The situation of these mulattas raises the following questions: how do mulattas reinvent their identities through the affirmation of alternative identities that allow them to escape the insanity of race in America and South Africa? How are the liminal experiences of madness and passing resulting from the sociopsychological effects of racial and gendered oppression appropriated by mulattas as subversive strategies to transcend the hegemonic investments in the construction of their identities?

I am Mad And I am Not Mad: Shuttling Between Seamless Identities in Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*

Originating in the Enlightenment, the psychopathologies of the other are emblematic of the projection of Western culture's anxieties. The historical linkages of blackness and madness in the 1840s in the United States, rooted in the faulty census results describing "free blacks [as having] an incidence of mental illness eleven times higher than slaves and six times higher than the white population" (Gilman 137), stem from white policies to maintain blacks in slavery. Jews were also stigmatized in the 1880s, as diseased bodies having special proclivities for neurasthenia, by French anthropologists such as Boudin and Charcot, who ascribed the mental illness of Jews to their endogamous marriages.

Madness is perceived and produced differently in each age. The transcendent and divine stance of madness in platonic theology in ancient Greece contrasts with the desacralized conceptualization of madness as unreason in the Enlightenment. Foucault's

groundbreaking *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (1965) proffers a genealogical history of madness between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. Madness, as Foucault explains, ranges from the state of celebration in the Renaissance to that of control in the Age of Reason. The creation of internment houses throughout Europe bears witness to the social exclusion and isolation of mad people. The confinement of the mad with the poor and disabled, beggars, those with venereal diseases, libertines of all kinds, and all those whose demeanor exhibits signs of derangement vis-à-vis morality, reason, and society equates madness with vice, guilt, and sexual debauchery.

The artificial racial binarism that privileges the supremacy of white over black, as Jordan Winthrop suggests in his book *White Over Black*, dictates the contours of representation of the non-Western other. The imperialist paradigms of colonialism and slavery establish the subhumanity of black subjects through the propagation of negative stereotypes. Césaire's *Discours sur le colonialisme* (1955), Fanon's *Peau noire, masques blancs* (1952) and *Les damnés de la terre* (1961), Memmi's *Portrait du colonisé, précédé du portrait du colonisateur* (1957), and Mudimbe's *The Idea of Africa* (1994) illustrate the devaluating consequences of colonialism on the personality of the colonized. Colonizers foster poor self-concepts such as passivity and pathology in the colonized. Contrary to the Western self-conscious epistemological normality—the history of Western culture conceives of madness as the opposite of reason—madness in colonial Africa is considered to be steeped in the natives' psychology.

The mad man is defined as “other” in the history of insanity in Europe because, to use Foucault's formulation, he is denied his own voice and is forced to speak through the

institutions such as the internment house that cause his madness. In colonial Africa, the “other” already existed in the form of the colonial subject, the African. Consequently, the colonial subject was potentially predisposed to madness, by virtue of his or her status as colonized. In the post-Enlightenment European mind, Africa was constructed as a repository of disease and madness. Europeans read the cultural differences between themselves and Africans as evidence of their own superior civilized nature, and further asserted their superiority through the vilification of the Africans as “others.” Françoise Verges’s “Chains of Madness, Chains of Colonialism” (1996) bears witness to the abstraction and racist-oriented trends of colonial psychiatry which considers blacks as degenerate beings prone to madness: “Colonial psychiatry was heir to both the school of degeneration, which in the West had influenced all the psychiatric discourses from the middle of the nineteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth century, and social Darwinism” (53).

At the turn of the nineteenth century in France, industrial transformation, colonial expansion, and the theories about nation and race contributed to psychological theories of social behavior. The goal of psychology was to define a relationship between race, culture, and the psyche of the colonized natives. Gustave Le Bon’s *Les lois psychologiques de l’évolution des peuples* (1894) exemplifies the extent to which colonial psychiatry predicates Negro madness on the nature of the race: “each people possesses a mental constitution which is as fixed as its anatomic characters” (13). Another example is offered by Antoine Porot, the first professor of neuro-psychiatry at the Faculté de Médecine at Algiers, who considered abnormality as inherent in the psychological makeup of the Muslim population: “[t]he native Muslim shows a

remarkable propensity for passivity; static personality [...] hinders in him the dynamic personality” (380). Fanon inveighs against these notions of “static personality” and “dynamic personality” in his articles, “Medicine and Colonialism” in *A Dying Colonialism* (1965), “The North African Syndrome” in *Toward the African Revolution* (1967) and “Colonial War and Mental Disorders” in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963). The reformist psychiatry and liberationist humanism he exuded at Blida-Joinville demonstrate his stark opposition to colonial discourse on Muslim pathology. (Blida-Joinville is the *Hôpital psychiatrique* created in 1938 by the Algerian government, where Fanon served as a psychiatrist). In “Colonial War and Mental Disorders,” Fanon convincingly argues that “mental pathology is the direct product of [colonial] oppression” (251).

African and Caribbean writers did not shy away from the treatment of madness in their novels. But for them, madness means “une revendication d’humanité [et] l’affirmation d’une volonté d’être réintégré dans la famille humaine” (Mouralis 11) [“a claim of humanity [and] an affirmation of the will to be reintegrated into the human family”]. Jacques-Stephen Alexis’s *Compère Général Soleil* (1955), Ousmane Socé’s *Karim* (1935) and *Mirages de Paris* (1937), and Cheikh Hamidou Kane’s *L’Aventure ambiguë* (1961) are examples of fictionalized narratives that portray psychic forms of culturally-oriented madness as instances of reaffirmation of the humanity of their heroes. Césaire’s *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal* (1956) dismantles colonial oppositions between reason and madness, rationality and irrationality, by proposing an alternative epistemological paradigm that extols madness: “parce que nous vous haïssons vous et votre raison, nous nous réclamons de la démence précoce de la folie flambante [...] la

folie qui se souvient/ la folie qui hurle/la folie qui voit/ la folie qui déchaîne” (76)
 [“[b]ecause we hate you/ and your reason, we claim kinship/ with dementia praecox with
 the flaming madness [...] The madness that remembers/ the madness that howls/ the
 madness that sees/ the madness that is unleashed” (49)].

In *A Question of Power*, Head’s politics of madness incorporates Socé’s affirmation of humanity, Fanonian discourse on madness, Césairian *knowing* madness, and her oppositional and epistemological madness. Head demystifies the colonial illusion of African women’s inhumanity or lack of interiority, both textually and performatively, while she shows the fallaciousness of the colonialists’ assumption that African women were incapable of madness. In *Curing Their Ills: Colonial Power and African Illness* (1991), Megan Vaughan writes that “African women were said not to have reached the level of self-awareness required to go mad” (22). In colonial medical discourse, African women were conceptualized as primitive individuals whose self-awareness was lacking because they were bound up with collective identities. The dissolution of their identities in the collective apparatus was deemed to act as a roadblock to their subjectivities and to their madness. Given the gendering of the medical discourse which operated through the articulation of notions of difference, only men who gained the rudiments of individuality from their contacts with Europeans could go mad. “It was men who,” as Vaughan specifies, “having behaved strangely or violently in an urban area or mining compound, found themselves defined as schizophrenic and confined to a lunatic asylum” (22). Male madness as a disease of industrialization appeared then as a signpost of civilization.

Head’s emphasis on the madness of her heroine Elizabeth transcends the biased, gendered, and unrealistic configurations of madness created by colonial psychiatrists. In

A Question of Power, madness stems from the racial and gendered oppression and exclusion that Elizabeth experiences. Sue Greene defines madness in Head's work, among others, as a "convenient and effective metaphor for portraying normal reaction to the colonial experience" (20).

Elizabeth cannot escape madness because she has been socially defined as madness embodied. Since her childhood, the burden of her white mother's racial and sexual transgression has haunted her. She has been plagued by her genetic predisposition to madness because of her mother's defiance of the fundamental law of the Apartheid system, the Immorality Act of 1957, by begetting "a child by the stable boy, who was a native" (16). As a result of her legal, racial, and sexual transgression, the mother was locked away in the local mental hospital in Pietermaritzburg. Stripped of her child's affection and condemned to live the life of a hermit within the walls of an asylum, Elizabeth's mother allegedly killed herself when her daughter was only six (17). The mystery surrounding her death remained unfathomed.

Subsequent to her mother's death, Elizabeth grapples with an unstable and unsettled childhood. With the exception of her white grandmother, her racial hybridity poses a real problem to her white family, whose sole relief was to cut off all kinship bonds with her. The unwanted, unfortunate, and unloved orphan's shifts from one foster family to another reveal the extent to which she constitutes an encumbrance for her racist society. Such reactions as "[w]hat can we do with this child?" (17) generated by the unsuccessful attempts at placing her in a family or a nursing home foreshadow the tribulations of Elizabeth's childhood in South Africa. Unavoidably, the peculiar circumstances of her birth contribute to her social exclusion and stigmatization.

Elizabeth's childhood in South Africa smacks of frustrations and humiliations. Born "in a country where people were not people at all" (17), she lives on the fringes of her society and is forced to "bear the stigma of insanity" (17) of her late mother. Unfairly enough, the cruel principal of her mission school warns her, "[w]e have a full docket on you. You must be careful. Your mother was insane. If you're not careful you'll get insane like your mother" (16). Elizabeth's nervous condition appears in the ways in which she leads the existence of a pariah in her community. Contrary to her principal's admonishment, her carefulness or carelessness is not the issue, given the generally held belief in the white society that she is bound to inherit her unknown mother's madness. Elizabeth becomes separated from other students physically and emotionally as her slightest misconduct elicits castigation. As Head notes, the principal "lived on the alert for Elizabeth's insanity. Once Elizabeth struck a child during a quarrel and the missionary ordered: Isolate her from the other children for a week" (16). To a lesser degree, the frequency of her "isolation periods" is analogous to her mother's confinement and is symptomatic of her inward adult life.

Elizabeth's life in South Africa, a country where racial discrimination and prejudices festered, and where black people's lives were marked by psychological deprivation and psychopathology, disables her creative vision. The narrator remarks:

In spite of her inability to like or to understand political ideologies, she had also lived the back-breaking life of all black people in South Africa. It was like living with a permanent nervous condition, because you did not know why white people there had to go out of their way to hate you or loathe you. They were just born

that way, hating people, and a black man or woman was just born to be hated.

(19)

The “permanent nervous condition” that black people in South Africa suffer as the result of apartheid reflects the distance between their desires for inclusion in their native society and their de facto exclusion from it. Elizabeth’s attempts to grasp the inhuman modus operandi of her deranged society, though unsuccessful in South Africa, will be successful in her adopted land Botswana. Her “inability [...] to understand political ideologies” will be supplanted by her ability to understand the insidious aftermath of socio-political forces on the psyche of individuals and also to diagnose the intrinsic nature of power. However, Elizabeth acquires this ability through the *passage obligé* of madness. Shortly after her move to Botswana, she experiences a traumatic nervous breakdown as a result of her isolation and alienating social circumstances.

Elizabeth’s stay in Botswana is couched in hardships. At first, she grapples with adjustment problems due to her transition from an urban center to a rural area. A secondary school teacher in Motabeng, a small village in Botswana, Elizabeth suffers from the absence of infrastructure and the backwardness of her new environment: “She found the pitch-black darkness of the Motabeng night very terrifying. She had always lived in a town with a street light shining outside the window, so the first thing she hastened to buy was a chair on which to place a candle [...] The chair, a bed and a small table were the only pieces of furniture she had in her hut” (21). Despite her material deprivations, she assumes a position of power that cannot be contested by whites.

Beyond the uncongenial environment of the arid landscape and uninviting mud huts of the village of her refuge, Elizabeth has to put up with the sense of difference and

ostracization in the hostile community. The narrator underscores her exclusion because: “[a]s far as Botswana society was concerned, she was an out-and-out outsider and would never be *in on their ways*” (26). Her outsidership stems from the language barrier between her and insiders. She manifests her great discomfort in dealing with Botswana greetings:

It seemed to Elizabeth that it took people half an hour to greet each other each day. It took so long, they said, because Motabeng was a village of relatives who married relatives, and nearly everyone had about six hundred relatives [...] People often looked at Elizabeth with a cheated air. (20)

For an African exile coming from a particular milieu, the sociocultural rituals of her new environment are puzzling. Elizabeth’s madness results from the systematic gulf separating her from this alien community: “[i]t was in Botswana where, mentally, the normal and the abnormal blended completely in Elizabeth’s mind” (15).

Head explores the question of marginality from the perspective of a stateless and exiled person. The psychic disturbance of her protagonist Elizabeth stems from her crossing over from racial exclusion in her native South Africa to another state of exclusion in her adoptive land. Her threshold condition between her lost and irretrievable native country and her new alien environment condemns her to social death and to an incredibly restless inner life. Head refers to mythology to describe Elizabeth’s descent into madness: “[she] had been the Osiris who had been shattered into a thousand fragments by the thunderbolt of the Medusa” (39). Such fragmentation echoes the fragmentation of Elizabeth’s self into the dissimilar personalities of Sello, Dan, Medusa and others. Eugene, the principal of the Motabeng Secondary School, tells Elizabeth that

breakdown is an inevitable result of exile: “[a] lot of refugees have nervous breakdowns” (52). But her breakdown is a strategic resistance marking her transition from her previous silencing as a victim of apartheid to her epistemological leap as a philosopher probing into the deep recesses of her mind to understand her victimhood. In *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (1989) Trinh Minh-ha writes:

Women must write through their bodies. Must not let themselves be driven away from their bodies. Must thoroughly rethink the body to re-appropriate femininity. Must not however exalt the body, not favor any of its parts formerly forbidden. Must perceive in its integrity. Must and must-nots, their absolution and power. When armors and defense mechanisms are removed, when new awareness of life is brought into previously deadened areas of the body, women begin to experience writing/the world differently. This is exciting and also very scary. For it takes time to be able to tolerate great aliveness. (36)

Elizabeth writes through her mother’s body so as to explore the interiority of the exilic consciousness. She is not “driven away” from her body because her inner world is threateningly peopled by the ghostly presences of Dan and Sello, two local black men from Motabeng who turn her mind into a battlefield where they compete for the possession of her personality. Yet Elizabeth and these two men share the same epistemological journey meant to examine evil: “[t]he three of them had shared the strange journey into hell [...] There seemed to be a mutual agreement in the beginning that an examination of inner hells was meant to end all hells forever” (12). Rooted in her oppressed situation in South Africa, the hells Elizabeth sets out to examine are the interrelated triad of her sexual identity, madness, and personal and political questions of

good and evil. The paradoxical and transitional philosophical examination between readable or apparent madness and sane madness situates Elizabeth in an indeterminate and indefinable condition. This confusing state reflects the mulatta's racial ambivalence and ambiguity. Neither black nor white, she can only negotiate her identity in the boundary between two oppositional states.

Elizabeth's breakdown is curiously sexual. Throughout *A Question of Power*, both Dan and Medusa, Sello's alter ego and Dan's extension, repeatedly haunt her mind by flaunting their sexual prowess and deriding her sexlessness. The narrator describes the phenomenon in the following manner:

He [Dan] had been standing in front of her, his pants down, as usual, flaying his powerful penis in the air and saying: 'Look, I'm going to show you how I sleep with B... She has a womb I can't forget. When I go with a woman I go for one hour. You can't do that. You haven't got a vagina.' (13)

Later, Medusa similarly mocks Elizabeth's sexual deficiency; her onslaughts are purely sexual:

Medusa was smiling. She had some top secret information to impart to Elizabeth. It was about her vagina. Without any bother for decencies she sprawled her long black legs in the air, and the most exquisite sensation traveled out of her toward Elizabeth. [...] Then she looked at Elizabeth and smiled, a mocking superior smile: 'You haven't got anything *near* that, have you?' (44)

The ambiguity of Elizabeth's sexual breakdown lies in her counteractive attitude against Medusa's rejection of her sexuality. She conceives of the sexual area of her identity as obnoxious and antagonistic to her spiritual interest: "[b]ut it was not maddening to her to

be told she hadn't a vagina. She might have had but it was not such a pleasant area of the body to concentrate on, possibly only now and then if necessary" (44). The simultaneous disempowerment of Elizabeth as a victim of the attacks of Dan and Medusa and empowerment as agent dismissing the things of the body for the things of the soul—which is a "pleasant area [...] to concentrate on"—reveals her liminality. Between and between, her liminal position accommodates her ability and will to transgress boundaries. It is as if she redefined her identity through transgression.

Though strange, the sexual orientation of Elizabeth's neuroses is prompted by her ontological and personal sexual legacy. Charles Larson explains that Elizabeth is neither disturbed about her "physical appearance" nor afraid about men's lack of physical attraction to her but is rather afraid of her own sexuality (164-73). Larson's argument is plausible, because Medusa represents Elizabeth's fear of her own sexuality, but he fails to focus on the origin of such discomfort. Elizabeth's trauma derives from her husband's promiscuity (18-19) and the institutionalization of her mother who violated the racial laws forbidding interracial unions. The explanation Nikolas Rose gives of the link between madness and citizenship and the legal and social motivations of confinement fits the context of South Africa: "[t]he confinement of the mad person as a citizen had to satisfy the double requirement of social protection and constitutional justification" (146). This "double requirement" is encapsulated in Foucault's characterization of the house of confinement in the classical age as "an instance of order" (40) for the madman, and can serve as a discursive template for Elizabeth's mother's confinement. Foucault's madmen are primarily male and include socially marginal and unproductive men, such as the poor, the unemployed, prisoners, loiterers, and the insane. On the contrary, Elizabeth's

mother's insanity is the stigma attached to white female transgressors in apartheid-ruled South Africa. But despite its polysemic cloak, madness in both cases is a measure of control against chaos and a deterrence against outlawed behavior. Foucault shows that the creation of the General Hospital in 1657 in France was an instance of the bourgeois oppressive order meant to control the masses through their internment. Far from being a medical institution, that hospital was "the third force of repression" which had the power to try, convict, and execute outside the decisions of the court (61). In fact, such internment was purely an invention of Classicism, which assigned to madmen the status of outcasts, once reserved only to lepers in the Middle Ages.

In *Women's Madness: Misogyny or Mental Illness* (1992), Jane Ussher articulates a brilliant gendered discourse on madness, showing how the labels of witch, madwoman, and hysteric serve to control women (39) in the same ways that the practices of confinement in Foucault's analysis serve to control unemployed people. The association of women and madness has a long history. In her study on women and madness, Phyllis Chesler finds fault with a "female psychology" that is conditioned by a patriarchal male culture. She specifies that "for a woman to be healthy she must 'adjust' to and accept the behavioural norms for her sex even though these kinds of behaviour are generally regarded as less socially desirable [...] The ethic of mental health is masculine in our culture" (68-69).

Ussher and Chesler show how madness is an effect of language rather than a physiological condition, and a measure of male control over women. Politically and ideologically interrelated, the act of labeling or naming and the structures of power contribute to the muteness and powerlessness of marginalized subjects. Elizabeth's

mother's confinement reveals her silenced subjectivity by the forces of power. Denied a voice, she is mute and socially defined. Jennifer Waelti-Walters's *Fairy Tales and the Female Imagination* (1982) casts madness within the realm of power relationships: "madness is, indeed, man's derisive name for any speech (value system) that is not of his making; within his system of logic and acceptability and therefore under his control" (89). Thus madness appears in the ways in which those in power assign labels to others in order to serve their needs and perpetuate the power structure.

The categorization and stigmatization of Elizabeth's mother emphasize the victimhood of women living in patriarchal cultures, for her madness is not self-generated, like Nyasha's self-starvation or anorexia in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988), but is entirely imposed on her by an extremely unjust society. The appropriation of the discourse of madness by the forces of power makes a linkage between language and power, clinical madness and social creation or invention. In *Madness in Literature* (1980), Lillian Feder defines madness as "a state in which unconscious processes predominate over conscious to the extent that they control them and determine perceptions of and responses to experience that, judged by prevailing standards of psychological thought and relevant emotion, are confused and inappropriate" (5). Head does not place a premium on the "unconscious processes" of either Elizabeth or her mother. The written notification that the cruel principal of the mission school gives Elizabeth functions as a disclaimer for her mother's mental illness. One finds it hard to believe that she is mentally unsound because she asks authorities to "set aside some money for [her] child's education" (16), but the expected response would be that lucidity can be a moment in a state of madness. The institutionalization of Elizabeth's mother

constitutes instead the punitive and drastic measure enforced by South African authorities during apartheid on the violators of pro-apartheid laws.

Contrary to her white mother, who has been sent into oblivion in the asylum until her death, Elizabeth escapes confinement and control. She cannot erase the history imposed on her by apartheid—that of a person genetically predisposed to madness—but she acquires the agency to rethink and reshape her identity through the liminal performance of madness. Far from being self-defeating and self-destructive, Elizabeth's madness has been a potentially epistemological experience meant to grasp fully the nature of power. She appropriates the space of madness in order to dismantle the colonial pathologization of powerless colonized subjects. Madness becomes Elizabeth's liminal strategy of resistance between her oppression and self-invention, which debunks the master's discourse.

Writing about madness by a powerless and marginal African woman not only contributes to the dismantlement of colonial medical discourse, according to which African women lack interiority, but also challenges rigidly established literary norms. Head is not one of the first women writers to dwell on the issue of madness. In the Caribbean, Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) and Merle Hodge's *Crick Crack Monkey* (1970) antedate *A Question of Power* (1974). The treatment of madness in Africa by women writers received considerable attention in the 1980s, with such novels as *Scarlet Song* (1981) by Mariama Bâ and *Juletane* (1987) by Myriam Warner-Vieyra. In one way or another, African and Caribbean female novelists employ madness as a theme to articulate the historical, sociocultural, and post-independence constrictions that have throttled women's lives in the twentieth century. Elizabeth Mudimbe-Boyi writes that

“[m]adness functions rather as a metaphor of the female social condition and alienation” (137), a perception of madness that partially encapsulates Head’s creative vision of madness, for the madness of the protagonist Elizabeth takes on the meaning of metaphor or symbol of her racial exclusion and that of an instrument for the reconfiguration of the self.

Head’s creativity lies in what Gates calls signifyin(g) because of her “repetition with a signal difference” (*The Signifying Monkey* 51), as she reuses the topic of madness with difference. Gilles Deleuze conceives of repetition as transgressive *par excellence* (*Différence et répétition* 12). Head’s transgression lies in her deployment of the master’s tool to dismantle his house. She frowns on the Western discursive conceptualization of madness, in which the designation of a person as mad establishes a measure of control over that person and reinforces the status quo. In the Western conception, madness is also a question of the logical functioning of the mind, which, as Foucault points out in *Madness and Civilization*, is the bourgeoisie’s secularized conception of the soul. By contrast, in Head’s African context madness enables the mad person to address social and cultural conflicts. Her narrator Elizabeth refers to a religious and spiritual approach to madness, which prioritizes the soul. John Mbiti writes that “[i]n African villages, disease and misfortune are religious experiences, and it requires a religious approach to deal with them” (169).

The religiosity of Head’s experience appears in the ways in which she attempts to purge her character’s mind of all the atrocities she experienced in her childhood in South Africa. Elizabeth’s journey into hell is analogous to a difficult spiritual quest, and loneliness and endurance characterize her meditative and epistemological journey. Her

internal agony is prompted by her exilic condition and is reflective of the paradigmatic polarities of good and evil. Elizabeth's parentlessness, her rejection from her native society South Africa, and her outsiderness in her adoptive Botswana undoubtedly precipitate her descent into madness, but by the same token, these states of "ontological insecurity" that disrealize "integral selfhood and personal identity" (O'Callaghan, 1992: 92) allow her to unravel the web of complexity of the victim-torturer relationship, unmask the face of evil, and cultivate an etiology of humanity.

Elizabeth's persecution by the vile Medusa of Greek mythology, who reproaches her for her un-Africanness (45), engenders her yearning for a universal personality. The maturity and spirituality she gains from her purgatorial examination of evil and her "pursuit after the things of the soul" (11-12) enable her to transcend the rigid and artificial black/white racial binarism and dispel the incidental character of her Africanness. In the opening lines of *A Question of Power*, the narrator observes:

It seemed almost incidental that he was African. So vast had his inner perceptions grown over the years that he preferred an identification with mankind to an identification with a particular environment. And yet, as an African, he seemed to have made one of the most perfect statements: 'I am just anyone.'" (11)

The African the narrator is describing here is Sello, the alter ego of her heroine Elizabeth, for in her novelized autobiography, Sello, Dan, and Medusa are facets of Elizabeth's split personality. As a Colored marked by race and gender, Elizabeth artistically reclaims through art the universality of the human. Through the prism of postcoloniality, Head appropriates the Western-like universalistic standpoint by giving it an Africanist

inflection. As an African woman writer, she conceives of the thought of oneself as ordinary as a potential mitigation of socio-political evils.

The “insane pursuit” (12) Elizabeth carries out for the dissection of power in correlation with questions of good and evil markedly contrasts with the sane and spiritual dimension of this pursuit. Tom, the American Peace Corps volunteer in Motabeng, marvels at Elizabeth’s philosophical potential: “You’re a strange woman, Elizabeth. The things *you* draw out of a man! You know, men don’t really discuss the deep metaphysical profundities with women. Oh, they talk about love and things like that” (24). The strangeness of Elizabeth has to do with the “mad state of affairs in her house” (24) because she is the only one to grapple with hallucinations. Not only does she “see” Dan and Sello, the ghostly visitants, but she also hears their voices. For instance, Tom’s remark about Elizabeth’s heightened interiority is confirmed by Sello: “[y]es, that’s right” (24). Her mediation between her disorderly behavior and her acute analytical mind reveals the complexity of her madness. Her parodic use of madness is not divorced from the double state of madness and spirituality. Though she is possessed by demonic visions, Elizabeth’s clarity of vision remains unaltered, as her madness is a liminal experience of self-flagellation and transformation wherein she claims her exilic self-assertion. Her state of being, on the boundary between insanity and sanity where her change of identity takes place, fosters her liminality.

In *The Ritual Process*, Turner makes a link between the liminal sufferings of ritual passers and post-liminal reintegration: “[t]he ordeals and humiliations, often of a grossly physiological character, to which neophytes are submitted represent partly a destruction of the previous status [...] in order to prepare them to cope with their new

responsibilities” (103). Although Elizabeth shares with Turner’s neophytes from the Ndembu society her liminal ordeals—her body and mind are besieged by powerful and inimical forces—their difficult experiences are of a different order. While male neophytes passively endure physiological ordeals from their instructors (95), Elizabeth’s inward and torturing soul journey is individually based. However, the motives of the liminal experience are partially similar in the sense that they are structured around the “destruction of the previous status.” Turner’s initiands lose their former immaturity and weakness to acquire the rudiments of manhood, while Elizabeth gains sanity through the release of long-standing internalized racial and gendered grievances. She embodies the painstaking and brave student who chooses moral endurance and is determined to acquire knowledge from her two great teachers Dan and Sello, who take possession of her mind to dramatize the conflicting relationships between good and evil. Thanks to them, she learns about the ambivalence of good and evil.

Because of her insecurities as a woman and an exile as well as her experience of racial marginalization, Elizabeth unerringly recognizes evil in all its forms. However, she finds the transformation of good into evil very disconcerting and develops a “deep, black rage” against Sello the monk when he allies himself with the vile Medusa of Greek mythology. Elizabeth’s psychological arena dramatizes the attribute of goodness via the monk figure of Sello and evil through the same Sello “clothed in a brown suit” (37). The fragmentation of Sello through dissimilar personalities illustrates her split personality. She “had grown over a period of four years to despise the man Sello [who] had freely disclosed some unpleasant and horrific details about his inner life, which dammed him as a monumental sinner in her eyes” (12). The narrator goes on to specify, “[b]ut (...) she

had turned again to Sello and held out her hands and said: ‘Thank you! Oh God, thank you for the lever out of Hell’ (12).

Head’s conceptualization of the relationship between good and evil is undoubtedly complex. Elizabeth despises Sello for revealing “unpleasant and horrific details about his inner life,” yet thanks him for sloughing hell off her life. Her feelings of hate and relief reflect her liminal mental restlessness and post-liminal recovery. She could not like Sello who, for more than four years, through a series of hellish dream visions, has submitted her to inner torture by using her mind as the stage for the horrific and traumatizing display of evil. Still, Sello’s persecution has to be seen as the *sine qua non* condition for Elizabeth’s recovery, which can be achieved only via her confrontation with her past. While contradictory, good and evil are not mutually exclusive, for Sello’s example shows that the realization of good is dependent upon the understanding of evil. Sello has been as effective a teacher as Dan.

Throughout *A Question of Power* Elizabeth is exposed to the persecutions of the devil incarnate, Dan, who “understood the mechanics of power” and reduced her to a “wilting puppet” (13). However, he becomes a force of deeper realization in her life: “[b]ut Dan had blasted her to a height far above Buddha; he had deepened and intensified all her qualities. He was one of the greatest teachers she’d work with, but he taught by default [...] he taught the extremes of love and tenderness through the extremes of hate” (202). Indeed, Dan’s “brand of torture” (19) leads Elizabeth to a state below the animal. His exclusive prophecies that she is “going to commit suicide at a quarter to one tomorrow” (13) and that he has “the power to take the life of [her] son” (14), drive Elizabeth into a breakdown. The narrator explains: “[s]he swallowed six bottles of beer

and six sleeping tablets to induce a blackout” (14). But as a creation of Elizabeth’s imagination, Dan, like Sello, despite their different strategies, helps her come to terms with her past. After learning good from the perpetrators of evil, Elizabeth manages to resolve her inner conflicts and retrieve her true self, which was imprisoned in a wellspring of atrocious realities that led to her nadir. The spiritual or religious meditation she undertakes allows her to be released from the false self, which acted according to the impositions of the forces of power and prevented her from sowing the seeds of love in her heart.

Elizabeth’s contact with the land serves as a catalyst for her mental recovery. With the help of the Botswanan woman Kenosi, the Peace Corps volunteer Tom, and the Motabeng school principal Eugene, she builds up her garden in the local-industries project, an activity which helps her make a felicitous and healthy transition from insanity to recovery: “[she] had reeled towards death. She turned and reeled towards life. She reeled, blissfully happy, up the dusty brown road, down the pathway into the valley area of the local-industries project” (203). Significantly, she rises from the dark valley of isolation and solitude to the solid rock of companionship and integration into her adopted land. Elizabeth’s “gesture of belonging” (206) in the closing line of the novel ends her state of indeterminacy between her rootlessness and yearning for rootedness.

In *Bessie Head: Subversive Identities*, Huma Ibrahim problematizes Head’s sudden resolution of her protagonist’s problem: “[t]he ‘happy’ ending, even though it does not detract from the ‘workout,’ comes somewhat abruptly” (169). However, attention should be paid less to the temporal resolution of Elizabeth’s conflict in the narrative than to her transition from insanity to sanity, and also to her use of madness as

an instrument for the diagnosis of power and as a catalyst for mental recovery. By the end of the novel, Elizabeth's new consciousness as a philosopher allows her to dismantle the God-man power that subjugates people and to adhere to Sello-the-monk's belief that "God is people. There's nothing up there. It's all down here" (109). By transforming the victims of apartheid into powerful subjects, Elizabeth assumes post-apartheid liberation and equality for blacks. In the last page of the autobiographical novel, she borrows the Moslem belief in the uniqueness of God and recognition of the prophet Mohammed in the service of her philosophy: "[t]here is only one God and his name is Man. And Elizabeth is his prophet" (206). Head's philosophy might be deemed blasphemous to Islam, but in my view, her purpose is to redress the power imbalance between the powerful white master in South Africa and powerless blacks, and then to redefine their relationships.

This examination of madness in *A Question of Power* reveals that this condition is the means of self-assertion for Elizabeth. It also offers a space of articulation for the socio-psychological problems she faces as a colored and exiled woman battling to keep her head above water. Her madness is essentially a combination of the insane socio-political realities of apartheid that she experienced in her native South Africa and her harrowing exilic condition in her adopted land Botswana. However, this madness has nothing clinical or pathological about it. Elizabeth has complete control over the space of madness which is significantly cathartic. Although her release of the feelings of hatred and her experience of oppression takes on the *form* of madness, it is nonetheless the liminal prerequisite for her recovery.

Madness is not the only ambivalent space through which mulattas negotiate their identities. In the next section of this chapter, I shall analyze racial passing in Nella

Larsen's novel as another liminal experience that complicates the identity politics of mulattas.

Telling a New Story: Racial Performance and Ambiguity in Nella Larsen's *Passing*

The discontinuous state of being of Elizabeth, whose philosophical meditation takes place in the transformative liminal space between her visible mental breakdown and her invisible sanity, is reproduced in *Passing*, but whereas the standards by which identity categories are measured and established remain immutable with madness, they become mutable with the phenomenon of passing. Contrary to the black madman or madwoman who cannot change his/her race and gender, the racial passer alters his/her racial and gendered identity.

Passing originates in the color caste system, which favors light skin over dark skin and thus in the U.S. prompts the light-skinned African American to cross over into white society. The passer's expectation is to have access to the myriad of social, cultural, and economic benefits allotted to whites. Adrian Piper's explanation of the *modus operandi* of racial taxonomy in "Passing for White, Passing for Black" (1994) reveals the economic reasons and desire for human recognition behind passing: "[r]acial classification in this country functions to restrict the distribution of goods, entitlements and status as narrowly as possible, to those whose power is already entrenched" (232). The institutionalization of asymmetrical power relationships between blacks and whites accounts for the anxieties of blacks and their subsequent survivalist strategies to move out of the quagmire of alleged racial inferiority through passing. As there are many

definitions of passing, it is necessary to describe its types and purposes before elaborating on its signifying dimension.

In *Neither Black Nor White: The Mulatto Character in American Fiction* (1978), Judith Berzon defines passing sociologically as a consequence of the mulatto's resolution of the clashes between the circumscription of his/her black identity and his/her yearning for effective integration into white society. She explains that "[t]he mixed blood [is] caught between two cultures [and] has had to exist in an indeterminate area between the boundaries of the American caste system" (3). She adds that passing for white is "[t]he most extreme form of [...] denial wherein the mulatto abandons all affiliation with the black community" (4). Though relevant, this definition is only partially true for one of the heroines of Larsen's novel, Irene, whose act of dissemblance takes place outside her black Harlem community. Unlike her childhood friend Clare, who is separated from her black community, Irene lives in Harlem with her black husband Brian and her two children Junior and Ted, but as will be shown later in this chapter, she is uncomfortably wedged between her loyalty to her race and her racial betrayal.

Almost a decade later, in 1987, Hazel Carby's *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Novelist* extends Berzon's definition by insisting on the economic component of racial passing, which Carby defines as "the conscious decision to use a white appearance to hide a black heritage for social advancement" (158). The concealment of a black identity for class mobility is mainly seen in Clare. Contrary to Irene, who belongs to the middle class, Clare belongs to a poverty-stricken family. She suffers through a childhood of material and psychological deprivation under the tutelage of a drunken and abusive father (4). After his death, Clare leads the life of a servant

among her white aunts, who echo nineteenth-century pro-slavery discourses that support the subservience of slaves and who pronounce the curse of Ham on her. By way of flashback, Clare relates to Irene the degrading treatment her white Christian spinster aunts mete out to her:

[W]hen dad came to his tipsy end, they did their duty and gave me a home of sorts. I was, it was true, expected to earn my keep, by doing all the housework and most of the washing [...] Besides, to their notion, hard labour was good for me. I had Negro blood and [...] they weren't quite sure that the good God hadn't intended the sons and daughters of Ham to sweat. (39-40)

As a result of all the humiliations that Clare suffers, passing becomes a survivalist strategy because of the precariousness and meaninglessness of her life. The reader of *Passing*, contrary to the judgment that the narrator Irene passes on her former friend—describing her “having ways”—empathizes with Clare’s passing, which salvages her from the shackles and tyranny of bondage, and enables her to avoid the consequences of what Joel Kovel calls the “Ham Myth of Expulsion”: “I was determined to get away, to be a person and not a charity or a problem, or even a daughter of the indiscreet Ham. Then, too, I wanted things. I knew I wasn't bad-looking and that I could ‘pass’” (40-41).

Beyond the quest for “social advancement,” subsequent critics have shifted their gaze to the mechanisms of passing. In 1996, Elaine Ginsberg, in her book *Passing and the Fictions of Identity*, asserts that passing is:

about identities: their creation or imposition, their adoption or rejection, their accompanying rewards or penalties. Passing is also about the boundaries established between identity categories and about the individual and cultural

anxieties induced by boundary crossing. Finally, passing is about specularity: the visible and the invisible, the seen and the unseen. (2)

Berzon's and Carby's conceptualization of passing is strengthened by Ginsberg's explication of the ambivalent narrative of passing, which simultaneously empowers and disempowers the passer. As a case in point, Larsen's heroines gain agency because of their manipulation of "race" to their advantage, but live under the perpetual fear of being unmasked. Werner Sollors' subsequent, more generous and inclusive definition of passing in *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both: Thematic Explorations of Interracial Literature* (1997) transcends the situations imputable to black/white racial binarism and defines passing as merely "the crossing of any line that divides social groups" (247). The relevancy of Sollors's definition has to do with its incorporation of all types of passing from race to the collateral categories of gender, class, and ethnicity.

In African American literature, there is an interweaving of racial and gender passing. The nineteenth-century novelists often dealt with the trope of the escaped tragic mulatto slave disguising himself/herself by cross-dressing and the light-skinned black man who, in Harlem Renaissance literature, is perceived as feminine and emotional. James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912) offers evidence for the emasculation of the male. His literary depiction of the white-skinned Negro man in his book unavoidably raises issues regarding black masculinity, for the social subjectivity of the nameless protagonist, in his process of self-discovery and after his self-discovery in his adulthood, is defined in feminine terms. When a school administrator notifies him of his black heritage, the young boy churns with anxiety and runs home after school to inquire about the truth:

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 [...] rushed to where my mother was sitting [...] I buried my head in her lap and blurted out: “Mother, mother, tell me, am I a nigger? (11-12)

The “ivory whiteness” of the protagonist’s skin suffices to indicate his racial intermixture, but his appreciation of beauty in feminine terms problematizes his embodiment of a normative black masculinity. Later on in the novel, his witnessing of the lynching of a black man by a mob of whites in the South prompts him to re-embrace his racial masquerade. Consequently, he decides to “change [his] name, raise a mustache, and let the world take [him] for what it would” (139). His determination to pass for self-protection reveals his fear and emasculation.

The feminization of male passing in Johnson’s work contrasts with the bravery associated with passing during slavery. The most famous example of passing as an escape from slavery is offered in *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom: The Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery* (1860) by the African American female abolitionist Ellen Craft and her husband William Craft, who left Georgia in 1848 for Boston. Daughter of her master, Major James Smith, Ellen was light-skinned enough to pass for

white. In her attempt to escape her degrading condition as a southern-born white woman slave, she disguised herself as a gentleman, with her husband William posing as her slave (Zackodnick: 2004, 44). The Crafts' case shows that passing is not restricted to the move from blackness to whiteness but includes the transition from property to human being.

However, passing also includes the passage from whiteness to blackness. *Memoirs of Waldo Frank* (1973) expresses Waldo Frank's anxieties over the stability of his own whiteness. While traveling to the south in 1922 with Jean Toomer, Frank anxiously reacted to his own performance of blackness: "I felt with the Negro. This empathy was startling. Lying in dark sleep I would dream I was a Negro [...], in proof I was white and myself" (105). Frank's performance of blackness contrasts with the Jewish blackface performance that Michael Rogin delves into in *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Plot* (1996), explaining how early twentieth-century Jewish movie stars used blackface to smooth their transition to whiteness. Blackface, he writes, "passed immigrants into Americans by differentiating them from the black Americans through whom they spoke" (56). This practice points out the problematic existence of Jewish people outside whiteness and blackness, yet underscores their versatility. In "Passing Like Me" (2001), Daniel Itzkovitz elaborates on the contradictory construction of Jewish identity: "Jews were both white and racially other, American and foreign, deviant and normative, vulgar and highly cultivated, and seemed to have an uncomfortably unstable relation to gendered difference" (41). The issue of Jewish "chameleonism"—Jews were commonly referred to as a "chameleonic race"—is treated in modern debates about anti-semitism, for the Jews' reputed imitative skills and incredible potential for performativity aroused anxieties among white Americans. In *The*

Passing of the Great Race (1916), Madison Grant observed: “[t]hese immigrants adopt the language of the native American; they wear his clothes; they steal his name, and they are beginning to take his women, but they seldom adopt his religion or understand his ideals” (16). The performance of the Jews is seen as disruptive of the boundaries between real whiteness and constructed whiteness, the same way mulattas in Larsen’s novel are subversive of the dividing lines of black/white racial binarism.

Passing is the story of two attractive and affluent light-skinned women, Clare Kendry and Irene Redfield, who pass for white for class mobility. The narrative is essentially seen through the perspective of Irene, simultaneously a narrator and a spectator gazing at Clare. Irene occasionally passes for white for convenience, whereas Clare is a permanent passer. Published at the peak of the Harlem Renaissance in 1929, Larsen’s *Passing* ascribes her heroines’ passing to acts of signifying that play on and contest racial essentialism. Teresa Zackodnik situates Larsen’s interrogation of the fixity of race within the dialectics of authenticity and construction that define black identity in the 1920s: “[it is both] an *essentialist* discourse of ‘authentic’ blackness believed to be embodied in ‘the folk,’ the southern, rural, poor African American; and an emerging *constructionist* discourse refuting notions of essential racial difference [...] associated with the bourgeoisie, the northern, urban, middle-class African American” (158, my emphasis).

Larsen engages with the issue of authentic blackness, casting aspersions on racial nomenclature by virtue of the lack of correlation between the definitional certainty of race and the epistemological uncertainty. Her characters pass because of their phenotypical assets: they look unconditionally white. Through their mimicry and

excessive performance, Clare and Irene blur the divides between authentic blackness and constructed whiteness. Signifying appears in the ways in which the Western logic of visibility, grounded in the inextricable link with epistemology, is disrupted by passing. Such disruption is illustrated by the unreadability or undecipherability of Irene and Clare on their random encounter in the Drayton, a tearoom in an exclusive Chicago hotel. Once childhood friends in their hometown Chicago, they have been separated for twelve years. Irene lives in Harlem with her husband and two sons, where she becomes deeply involved in the uplift of the black community. Their accidental reunion provokes a double discovery: they are both passing and entering the Drayton, a hotel reserved for whites.

When Irene first meets Clare, she is passing temporarily: her racial passing is concomitant with her enactment of white bourgeois womanhood. Overcome by heat while she is shopping in Chicago, she is mistaken for a white woman by a cab driver, who drops her at the Drayton hotel for tea. Irene's natural passing appears in the ways in which she is not even conscious of her passing. Surprisingly, during the cab ride, she simply "ma[kes] some small attempts to repair the damage that the heat and crowds had done to her appearance"(12), and blissfully enters the Drayton. Her trespassing on forbidden territory echoes Elizabeth's madness, in *A Question of Power*, which subverts the colonialist medical discourse whereby madness cannot be an African woman's disease because of her lack of interiority. Both Irene and Elizabeth accordingly and counterhegemonically re-narrate their histories from their own perspectives and with their own strategies. Elizabeth acquires voice and agency through her transition from the private to the public realm, and from invisibility to visibility. After entering a shop, in the

company of her son, Elizabeth unleashes her mental torture out in the open: “the ugliness of the inner torment was abruptly ripped open and exposed to public view” (50). The narrator adds: “[s]he sprang to her feet, slamming the chair back against the wall and shouted: ‘Oh, you bloody bastard Batswana! Oh, you bloody bastard Batswana!’” (51). After this incident, Elizabeth is declared ill and is hospitalized, but there is a rift between the public ascription of her weird attitude to madness and her individual understanding of madness. She is conscious of the destructive form of her spiritual meditation:

Journeys into the soul are not for women with children, not all that dark heaving turmoil. They are for men, and the toughest of them took off into the solitude of the forests and fought out their battles with hell in deep seclusion. No wonder they hid from view. The inner life is ugly. (50)

The enactment or unfolding of Elizabeth’s soul journey through madness charts the doubleness of her condition, the clash between exteriority and interiority, readability and unreadability. Like Larsen’s mulattas, she signifies on her madness because people in her adoptive society in Botswana cannot perceive the dimension of her liminal “battles with hell.” Elizabeth’s shuttling between two different states over which she has control projects her privileged liminality. Her performed madness opens up a space of redefinition of her identity, for she is dead to her social world but alive to her psychologically constituted asocial world. Thus, her madness is less the issue than the oppressive forces that impel it. Thereby, her madness is the expressive form or the surface appearance of the latent epistemological process of understanding evil in order to come to terms with it. Elizabeth is robed in the material cloth of madness for the sake of her meditative enterprise. Her situation is as analogous to that of Head as Clare’s and

Irene's are to Larsen. They all grapple with racial and gendered oppression and seek a modicum of recognition.

Thadious Davis shows the extent to which Larsen was profoundly scarred by the reality of racism and sought recognition and validation by establishing herself as a writer. As the daughter of a Danish immigrant woman and an African American man, she suffered exclusion from her family upon her mother's remarriage with a Danish man; her mother did not even report her existence to census takers in 1910 (Davis 27). She made her own way in the world without receiving an ounce of consideration from her family. Larsen's search for recognition becomes a viable precondition for her characters, similar to Elizabeth's liminal experiences or quests. Liminality appears in the ways in which both Elizabeth's madness and Irene's and Clare's racial passing replicate their dilemmas and conflicts and offer temporary cathartic solutions to their plight.

In this case, the adaptation of Turner's paradigm of liminality to the situation of mulattas requires certain modifications. In *The Ritual Process*, Turner emphasizes the ambiguity of the initiands in the traditional culture of the Ndembu of Zambia: "[d]uring the intervening 'liminal' period, the characteristics of the ritual subject (the 'passenger') are ambiguous; he passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state" (94). Subsequent to their pre-liminal separation from their families and larger communities, Turner's male "passengers" or ritual passers acquire the rudiments of manhood via the liminal rite of initiation. Consequently, they have "few or none of the attributes of the past" because of their transition from immaturity to maturity and wisdom. Their new state also differs from their "coming state" insofar as their post-liminal situation is characterized by their significant return to their communities, where

they are expected to actualize their ethical ritual training and enact their new responsibilities. Contrary to Turner's initiands, whose "liminality must be a tabula rasa, a blank state, on which is inscribed the knowledge and wisdom of the group" (103), the liminal experience of Larsen's mulattas in *Passing* is individually-oriented and is contrary to submission and conformity to any authority. Rather, their liminal situations are steeped in ambiguity, contestation, destabilization, and transgression. However, Turner's ritual passers as well as Larsen's racial passers undergo changes and transformations. His passer metaphorically dies because he is divested of his previous socio-cultural status, and her racial passers transform themselves into racially visible agents who yearn for access to the socio-economic privileges of white society. Liminality as transgression in *Passing* is manifest in the attitude and the body of the passers, which prove to be unreadable.

Irene's transgressive entrance into the hotel, imputable to her illegible body, is described in these terms: "[i]t was, she thought, like being wafted upward on a magic carpet to another world, pleasant, quiet, and strangely remote from the sizzling one that she had left below" (13). This statement reveals Irene's desire to distance herself from the working classes. Her class-conscious demeanor appears previously when, making her way along the Chicago streets, she "edge[s] her way out of the increasing crowd, feeling disagreeably damp and sticky and soiled from contact with so many sweating bodies" (11). It is in the "need for immediate safety" that she hails a taxi bound for the hotel.

Apart from her dichotomous description of what she perceives as the lineaments of the black world which stands "below" and the desired white world which is "upward," Irene's simile (13) manifests the inauthenticity and frailty of masked performance. Her

temporary transition from her black community to the unnatural white place locates her in a liminal situation where her identity leaves its ordinary moorings and drifts rather perilously between blackness and whiteness. Furthermore, the racial restrictions that guarantee the pleasant tranquility of the Drayton account for the discomfort and danger associated with passing. Irene's anxiety gathers momentum because of her fear of what her potential unmasking might lead to: "Irene felt, in turn, anger, scorn, and fear slide over her. It wasn't that she was ashamed of being a Negro, or even of having it declared. It was the idea of being ejected from any place, even in the polite and tactful way in which the Drayton would probably do it, that disturbed her" (19).

The hazards of the liminal terrain of passing are felt by Irene through the presence of Clare. Irene and Clare remain an enigma to each other, and their invisibility to each other suffices to reveal the limits of racial taxonomy. In his article "Passing for White, Passing for Black," Piper tells the story of Susie Guillory Philips, a woman in Louisiana in the 1980s, who discovered her black identity when she applied for a passport: "she discovered that she was identified on her birth records as black in virtue of having 1/32 African ancestry" (231). Though the woman's strong reaction against this imposition of the one-drop rule for racial identity contributed to the change of this law, her case illustrates the monadic and totalitarian scope of whites' definition of black identity. Davis's *Who is Black? One Nation's Definition* ascribes this definition to whites' desire to efface miscegenation in the South: "[b]y defining all mixed children as black and compelling them to live in the black community, the [one-drop] rule made possible the incredible myth among whites that miscegenation had not occurred, that the races had been kept pure in the South" (62). Whites' deliberate rejection of miscegenation reflects

their anxiety over unreadable passing. The lumping together of racially hybrid people in the South appears to represent an explicit anti-passing policy across the region. In fact, the mobility of white-skinned blacks is an object of perpetual fear and threat to white racial superiority. In Larsen's *Passing*, Clare's move from her black community in Harlem to Chicago accounts for her successful passing. She explains to Irene "how much easier [passing] is with white people than with us [blacks]" (37), and triumphantly states in reference to her husband that "there was no one to tell him that I was coloured [...] I stopped slipping off to the south side" (42). This shows the extent to which location can favor racial disguise. Clare outsmarts her husband and family the same way Irene outsmarts white people who are tricked into believing that she is white. She describes whites' invisible visibility because of their failure to read her:

White people were so stupid about such things for all that they usually asserted that they were able to tell; and by the most ridiculous means, finger-nails, palms of hands, shapes of ears, teeth, and other equally silly rot. They always took her for an Italian, a Spaniard, a Mexican, or a gipsy. Never, when she was alone, had they even remotely seemed to suspect that she was a Negro. (18-19)

Clare and Irene signify on their social performativity of race because of the position of mastery they assume over whites whose inability to read reduces them to powerless subjects. But contrary to the traditional and conventional conceptualization of liminal entities such as neophytes in initiation, whose "behavior is normally passive or humble [and who] must obey their instructors" (Turner, *The Ritual Process* 95), Irene and Clare have agency and authority. They reconstruct their personal narratives in a liminal and privileged site. The instructors in Turner's statement correspond to the community in

Larsen's novel, but contrary to the instructors, who exercise control over the ritual passers in their path toward manhood, Irene and Clare consciously manipulate their unconscious community in their passage to visibility. Their attitudes echo those of the trickster who is betwixt and between, a liminal position which accommodates their ability to transgress boundaries.

In *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (1966), Mary Douglas uses the ideas of pollution and taboo to characterize the trickster's transgression: "[t]he function of such anomalous, 'dirty' characters as the trickster is not simply mediation between binary oppositions, but is reflexive, provoking a recognition of the 'fictive, man-made, arbitrary' cultural categories that humans create for taboo subjects, figures, ideas, etc (200). Like the trickster, Irene and Clare mediate between authentic blackness and performed whiteness. They take on the posture of parodic subjects whose imitation is counteractive of the interpellative power of the white master. However, they cannot escape the ambiguity and ambivalence which are reflective of their signifying strategies. Their encounter in the Drayton hotel ironically and metaphorically describes them as blind, for Clare cannot read Irene, nor can the latter read her either. This episode materializes the opacity of specularization because of the conflation of the mask or simulacrum with reality. Both passers move beyond the lines of demarcation that define stable identities, which is an excessive performance. According to Bhabha, "the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference" (*The Location of Culture* 86). Bhabha's statement reveals racial instability, but whereas he focuses on the indeterminacy of mimicry, I consider it as a liminal space between reality and fantasy,

pleasure and fear, power and weakness, authenticity and inauthenticity. The passers' renunciation of their ineradicable blackness as well as their adoption of performed whiteness becomes illusory and anxiety-producing. This makes of mimicry a fragile space readily destroyed with unmasking. Therefore I find some weakness in the argument of Gayle Wald who, in *Crossing the Line: Racial Passing in Twentieth-Century U.S. Literature and Culture* (2000), observes how "racially marked subjects deploy race to their own ends and desires" (28). Of course, passing characters have the potential to subvert racial categories by temporarily proving the falsity and artificiality of racial binarism, as Elaine Ginsberg argues in *Passing and the Fictions of Identity* (16), but Wald's statement fails to take into account the ambiguity of mulattos' passing. Their deployment of race "to their own ends and desires" testifies to their victimization by race. Moreover, the desires of mulattos to cross over are rooted in the redress of their socio-economic condition.

The performance of whiteness places mulattas in *Passing* in a liminal situation between visibility and invisibility, disclosure and closure. However, this dichotomy operates on different levels for the two protagonists. While Irene is legible in her black Harlem community, Clare is illegible in her white Chicago community. Irene's failure to sever ties with her black community enables her to lead a more stable and securing life. The entire novel underscores the danger of leaving one's community by passing through the figure of Clare. She is not comfortable with the consequences of her passing nor is her friend Irene who churns with anxiety over Clare's unmasking.

The reader might ascribe their failure to recognize each other to Larsen's narrative weakness. However, the author might be using her two characters as instruments for the

dismantlement of the rigid and artificial racial classification. The encounter of the two friends has been a moment of confusion, suspicion, and fear. The two women looking at each other takes on the dynamic of what I view as looking *je (ux)*, that is to say, looking agents involved in a game of unreadability. The narrator describes it in the following terms: “[v]ery slowly she [Irene] looked around, and into the dark eyes of the woman [Clare] in the green frock at the next table” (17). The expression “dark eyes” might emphasize the opacity of Clare as a visual signifier, as opposed to the light that her name evokes. As the equivalent of the French “claire” meaning light, Clare embodies the “clair-obscur” game that remains an object of curiosity for Irene. But the strength of Irene as the spectator in the text, gazing at Clare’s every move, diminishes with the latter’s intent gaze. Clare’s stare arouses Irene’s discomfort and inner restlessness. At first, Irene thinks that something is awry in her appearance: “[h]ad she, in her haste in the taxi, put her hat on backwards? Guardedly she felt at it. No, perhaps there was a streak of powder somewhere on her face [...] Something wrong with her dress [...] What was it?” (17-18). The persistence of Clare’s look intensifies Irene’s unease and gives way to her suspicion. She becomes fearful of Clare’s discovery of her racial masquerade: “Did that woman, could that woman, somehow *know* that here before her very *eyes* on the roof of the Drayton sat a Negro?” (18, my emphasis). The italicized words spell out the lack of correlation or the gap between the cognitive exercise of knowing and the faculty of seeing with racial passing. Irene’s self-interrogation also poses the problem of racial performativity, which is mired in the double entendre of definitional certainty and epistemological uncertainty. In the act of passing, Irene “calls into question the very notion of authenticity [...] [and] threatens to call attention to the performative and

contingent nature of all seemingly ‘natural’ or ‘obvious’ identities” (Schlossberg 2). The conflict between appearance and being, the visual and the known, the visible and the invisible, undermines racial nomenclature.

As Clare and Irene attempt to catch up on their past in the Drayton Hotel, Irene tactfully avoids the issue of passing. As a temporary passer who lives in a Negro community, she silently condones Clare’s permanent passing:

There were things that she wanted to ask Clare Kendry. She wished to find out about this hazardous business of “passing,” this breaking away from all that was familiar and friendly to take one’s chances in another environment, not entirely strange, perhaps, but certainly not entirely friendly. What, for example, one did about background, how one accounted for oneself. And how one felt when one came into contact with other Negroes. But she couldn’t. She was unable to think of a single question that in its context or its phrasing was not too frankly curious, if not actually impertinent. (36-37)

The reader, I believe, must guard against believing the narrator Irene, who should not perceive Clare as an “other” whose relationship to her black heritage has been alienated by her racial passing, for Irene herself is involved in a deliberate game of disclosure of Clare’s passing and closure of her own identity for self-protection. What Irene considers as Clare’s “familiar and friendly” environment in Harlem was rather aloof and unfamiliar because of Clare’s poverty-stricken childhood. Irene’s class-conscious ethos is conspicuous: “Clare had never been exactly one of the group” (28). Throughout the novel, Irene’s dishonesty and duplicity markedly contrast with Clare’s honesty.

Clare's mobility to the upper strata of white society is mixed with her sympathy with her race, whereas Irene's proximity with her black community is mixed with her desire for whiteness. Clare's performance of whiteness is mixed with her desire to become black again. Like Elizabeth in *A Question of Power*, who lives her liminal experience of madness amidst loneliness, Clare's liminal passing is laden with stark solitude. But unlike Elizabeth who gains spiritual regeneration, Clare's pre-liminal separation from her primary community becomes a *passage manqué*. Clare's nostalgia for the "lost paradise," the warm black world she forsook for the cold world of white materialism, is conspicuous in the letter she sent to Irene:

For I am lonely, so lonely...cannot help longing to be with you again, as I have never longed for anything before; and I have wanted many things in my life
You can't know in this *pale life* of mine I am all the time seeing the *bright pictures* of that other that I once thought I was glad to be free of [...] It's like an ache, a pain that never ceases [...] (8, my emphasis)

Clare's thirst for companionship as an antidote to her solitude is expressed in her longing to be with Irene. Her *passage manqué* appears in the ways in which she misses the lively and enticing world she left and in the fragmented nature of the letter, whose gaps and unfinished sentences reveal her disintegrated subjectivity. Unlike Elizabeth's liminal experience of madness in *A Question of Power*, which enables her to re-member the fragments of her identity, Clare's passing exacerbates her confusion and instability. Her unappeasable desire to reconnect with her black community and her maintenance of the social niceties represent the dialectic between her feelings and her appearance. She needs to keep up appearances to bridge her emotional gaps.

Clare's ambivalence projects her double-consciousness, by virtue of her awareness of her racial origin and her duplicitous positionality, contrary to Irene, whose proximity to her Negro community places her in a relatively stable situation. Clare remains suspended in the middle stage of liminality because of her indeterminacy and her dangerous state of yearning. She is separated from her Negro community yet longs to reconnect with it. Such longing is viewed by the narrator Irene as risky, and she becomes greatly distressed over Clare's secret visits in New York. Many a time, Irene advises Clare not to attempt any return to the Negro community: "I can't help thinking that you ought not to come up here, ought not to run the risk of knowing Negroes" (116-117). Irene strengthens her admonition by informing Clare of the conversation she had with her husband about the danger associated with the passer's return to the community: "Brian and I talked the whole thing over carefully and decided that it isn't wise. He says it's always a dangerous business, this coming back. He's seen more than one come to grief because of it" (119).

Irene's evocation of the "dangerous business" that Clare's return might represent is in fact a form of camouflage of her great anxiety and fear. Much of the novel is devoted to Irene's reluctance to be "the link between her [Clare] and her poorer darker brethren" (97). Irene's assumption of superiority testifies to her alignment with the conservative and bourgeois ethos in American society. How can she take pride in being a member of the Negro Welfare League and thereby otherize Clare and her poor brothers? She lives within and without her black Harlem community, wearing her mask of allegiance within it and performing whiteness outside. Her whiteness within is unfolded through her enactment of bourgeois womanhood.

Irene's performance of middle-class decorum is conspicuous in her ritual of "[p]ouring tea properly and nicely" (165), as the sequence of elaborate gestures involved in the tea ritual and the search for propriety are liminally transformative for her gendered identity. Her convention-bound demeanor markedly contrasts with Clare's defiance of convention which is noticeable in her frequent and secret visits to Irene. The narrator notes:

Her [Clare's] visits were undecided and uncertain, being, as they were, dependent on the presence or absence of John Bellew in the city. But she did, one in a while, manage to steal uptown for an afternoon even when he was not away. As time went on without any apparent danger of discovery, even Irene ceased to be perturbed about the possibility of Clare's husband's tumbling on her racial identity. (147)

The invitation to Clare's tea party places the three African American disguisers, Clare, the host, and the guests Irene and Gertrude, in a confusing liminal state. Clare's husband, the racist John Bellew, discloses his hatred for "niggers" in front of the women whose performativity of whiteness done for his benefit becomes laughable. The conflict lies in the female passers' avoidance of the signifier "nigger" and in their inability to respond to a white American's stigmatization of niggers. The superficial veneer of performativity is undercut by the inescapable reality of their origin, as appears in the dichotomy between the light that Clare's name suggests and the darkness that her nickname Nig evokes.

In his article "Nella Larsen's *Passing* and the Fading Subject," Nell Sullivan refers to Jacques Lacan's concept of "aphanisis" to describe the authority or hegemony of the signifier over the subject (373). Ironically enough, the passing subject Clare cannot

hide her blackness: her husband Bellew calls her Nig. He explains to Irene and Gertrude at the tea party, “[w]hen 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” (67). Beyond Bellew’s ignorance of the ironic twist of his remark, the women are dumbfounded by his unerringly strong aversion for “niggers”: “I don’t dislike them, I hate them. And so does Nig, for all she’s trying to turn into one. She wouldn’t have a nigger maid around her for love nor money. Not that I’d want her to. They give me the creeps. The black scrimy devils” (69-70). The ladies’ fear of detection reduces them to speechlessness as their racial performativity strips them of the agency to challenge Bellew’s stereotypic beliefs. Irene becomes totally shocked at the humiliation Bellew metes out to them and her impossibility to defend her racial origin because of the “burden of race.” Such unease accounts for her abhorrence of her Negro identity:

Irene Redfield wished, for the first time in her life, that she had not been 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 [were] so cursed as Ham’s dark children. (181)

Simon During’s explication of Jean-François Lyotard’s notion of *différend* in his article “Postmodernism or Post-colonialism Today” (1993) nicely illustrates the heterotopic discourse opposing Bellew to his interlocutors. During notes: “[t]he paradigm for a *différend* is a case in which two parties in dispute cannot articulate their cause in the same

idiom” (456). The difference in idiom arises because of Bellew’s monolithic and uni-dimensional language which is reflective of the Western logic of visibility, logic that establishes a correlation between visibility and epistemology, and the double-voiced language of the women. Such double-voicedness appears in the disruption of racial categories of signification: performativity alters the physicality of the body, which encompasses a covert and overt meaning, authenticity and construction, and depth and surface reality.

The new behavioral and ideological paradigms deriving from the liminal racial performativity of mulattas in *Passing* are empowering, because they open up new spaces for “free or ‘ludic’ recombination in any and every possible pattern [...] [which] is the essence of liminality *par excellence*” (Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre*: 28). The “recombination” of Irene and Clare appears in their ambivalent posture between not only their constructed whiteness and their genuine blackness but also their embodiment of contradictory urges. Larsen displays the dialectics of security/insecurity and stasis/change through her two heroines. Irene’s yearning for security is jeopardized by Clare’s disruptive presence in her life; whereas Irene avoids Clare, her attractive alter ego, the latter keeps intruding upon her privacy. Irene holds Clare responsible for the humiliation Bellew has heaped upon her at the tea part and also refuses to mediate between her and her black community, attempting in vain to persuade Clare to stay away from the Negro community in Harlem, lest her racist husband and her daughter Margery should discover her black identity. Clare is more than ever determined to “take [her] chance on getting by” (127). Despite Irene’s reproof, she attends the Negro dance and arouses her friend’s jealousy: “Irene, with her new rose-coloured chiffon frock ending at the knees, and her

cropped curls, felt dowdy and commonplace. She regretted that she hadn't counselled Clare to wear something ordinary and inconspicuous" (135). She considers Clare "so easy on the eyes" (162) and her presence greatly annoying. Irene's anxiety gathers momentum when she views Clare as a threat to her marriage.

While Clare sees Irene as her link to blackness, Irene mediates her desire for whiteness through Clare. Such desire takes on the veneer of attraction and envy. Examples abound in the novel when Irene either compliments her friend or is struck by her beauty, her lovely clothes, and her incredible attraction (47, 48, 52, 53). When they accidentally met at the Drayton in Chicago, after their long separation, Irene becomes anxious over the possibility of never seeing Clare again: "At that moment it seemed a dreadful thing to think of never seeing Clare Kendry again. Standing there under the appeal, the caress, of her eyes, Irene had the desire, the hope, that this parting wouldn't be the last" (47).

Critics often ascribe Irene's attachment to Clare to homosexual desire. In her essay "'The Nameless ... Shameful Impulse': Sexuality in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* and *Passing*" (1988), Deborah McDowell claims that the "safe theme" of racial passing is the surface reality of the hidden and dangerous theme of homosexual desire. Passing, according to her, "is an account of Clare's racial passing and distinguishes between surface and depth [...] underneath the safety of the surface is the more dangerous story—if not named explicitly—of Irene's awakening sexual desire for Clare" (90). Such an argument appears to be a misinterpretation. Irene's interest in Clare is described in erotic terms, and we can talk about Larsen's queering of desire because the root of Irene's attraction is apparently sexual and specifically racial. As will be developed later on in this

chapter, passing is coterminous with sexuality. However, Irene's attraction to Clare is desire for something unattainable, hence the intensity of her desire. Clare is her alter ego, the woman she wishes she were but is not: her desire for Clare epitomizes her denial of her blackness and her racial betrayal. Davis's study, *Nella Larsen, Novelist of the Harlem Renaissance: A Woman's Life Unveiled* (1994), imputes Irene's attraction to Clare as an "aesthetic attraction to whiteness," a "logical extension of her black bourgeoisie life-style and ideology" (326).

Irene's visceral jealousy of Clare degenerates into her murderous action when, subsequent to Clare's unmasking by her husband at the party in New York, she kills Clare. She explains: "[s]he couldn't have Clare Kendry cast aside by Bellew. She couldn't have her free" (209). Clare's tragedy appears to be a punishment for transgressive passing. According to Judith Berzon, fiction echoes sociological studies: the passer either dies or returns to blackness. She observes that Anglo-American and African American writers have focused on the passing-as-white mulatto in their fictionalized narratives from 1900 to 1930, but with a difference:

The Negro version of the unhappy passer or the middle-class mulatto who denies his or her people is essentially a Harlem Renaissance phenomenon. In the white version, the mulatto dies; in the black version, he is summoned back to his people by the spirituals, or their full throated laughter, or their simple sweet ways.

(Neither Black Nor White 63)

Do we have to ascribe the death of Larsen's passer to the tradition conveyed by the white novels or to Larsen's adherence to racial authenticity? Contrary to Berzon, Valerie

Smith's reading of passing narratives is gendered. In "Reading the Intersection of Race and Gender in Narratives of Passing" she notes:

Passing male characters can either be re-educated and returned to the bosom of home and community to uplift the race, or they can remain in the white world and be constructed with some measure of condescension, ambivalence, or even approval. Passing women characters, on the other hand, are either re-educated and returned to the bosom of home and community, or they receive some extreme form of punishment as death or the sacrifice of a loved one. (45)

The tragedy associated with Clare's passing might be Larsen's strategy to discontinue the anomie resulting from Clare's suspension in a middle stage: she is estranged from the white society and her primary Negro community. Her death can metaphorize her rootlessness in no community, contrary to Elizabeth's rootedness in her adopted land Botswana, which is expressed in the juxtaposition of her hand and the land: "[a]s she fell asleep, she placed one soft hand over her land. It was a gesture of belonging" (*A Question of Power* 206).

As the evidence from these two works shows, madness and passing are the transient liminal experiences the mulattas go through so as to reinvent themselves. These redefinition processes are not only marked by anxiety, ambivalence, internal havoc, and risks, but are also catalysts for their social visibility and affirmations of their humanity. For these purposes, Elizabeth, Clare, and Irene create alternative existential paradigms by entering an interstitial margin or limen outside the normative structures of their societies. The anomic negotiations of their identities, however, represent viable modes of resistance against the hegemonic inscription and naturalization of their identities. Through their

performances, they disrupt the visual foundations of Western epistemology and the standardization of peripheral identities. The reconfiguration of black models of subjectivity by both Head and Larsen invalidates, however briefly, the center/periphery binarism. Nonetheless, the marginal black subjects' search for recognition and visibility, via unstable and ambivalent forms of identification, testifies to their crises of representation that are imputable to their internalization of the stigmas that the dominant structures attach to them. The indeterminacy that marks the lives of mulattas in their change of social position or status, subsequent to their liminal performances of madness and racial passing, is exacerbated by their change of place. In the next and last chapter of this study, the focus will be on the peregrinations of mulattas in the vortex of uncertain yet liberating becomings.

Chapter Five

The Limen of Journeys: Mulattas and Colonial Paris

In the last two decades, the theme of exile in literature has been of growing interest, particularly among African and Caribbean scholars. This trend reflects the socio-political instability created by the pitfalls of nationalism in Africa, the economic problems since World War II in the Caribbean, and the processes of globalization. Experiences of exile or migration, temporary or permanent, helped inspire such writers as Calixthe Beyala, Aimé Césaire, Édouard Glissant, and Fatou Diome, whose works dwell on the difficulties associated with the condition of exile, while Mayotte Capécia and Abdoulaye Sadjí deal with the theme of exile as they focus on the political economy of race, history, gender, and class. In this chapter, I will seek answers to the following questions: What are the motivations behind exile in their works? What are and what are likely to be the dynamics of becoming for the mulattas? Is there a difference between the experiences of the Caribbean and African mulattas?

Emphasis will be laid on the complex tapestry of socio-historical and socio-psychological forces into which the migratory subjectivities of the heroines are spun. Despite their cultural and geographical differences, *Nini, mulâtresse du Sénégal*, *Je suis martiniquaise*, and *La négresse blanche* are all set during the last stage of French colonization of Africa and the Caribbean. The alienating effects of French assimilationist policies on the psychology of the colonized mulattas contribute to the loss of their communal bearings, their supervalorization of the French other, and their severance from their native lands.

The French Métropole: Interior Landscapes in *Nini, mulâtresse du Sénégal*

In the introduction to *Order and Partialities: Theory, Pedagogy, and the 'Postcolonial'* (1995), Lalita Pandit and Jerry McGuire observe, “It is always worth taking note of *where* one has crossed a border into the territory of the other, and *what* one carries over and what one has left behind. It is worth paying attention to *what* one has crossed when one has crossed a border” (1, my emphasis). Pandit and McGuire frame their reflections on border crossings within cartographical, cultural, and epistemological parameters. One crosses borders from a specific location and socio-cultural status, under certain circumstances, and for certain reasons. The borders can be linguistic, social, spatial, and sexual.

Crossings are liminal par excellence. Spariosu argues that liminal worlds are ludic because of “their fluidity, flexibility, and freedom from rigid ontological commitments” (68). Although this chapter revolves around spatial crossings, it is necessary to complement the statement of Pandit and McGuire with the addition of the class and gender of the crosser, as these characteristics may help to reveal the specific motivations and implications of his/her displacements. For instance, the frequent performance tours of the famous Senegalese singer Youssou Ndour to Europe and North America differ from the relocation of the Cameroonian writer Calixthe Beyala to France. The specification of the period when border crossings are made is also crucial for the understanding of historical and political forces that shape the migrants’ identity.

In the novel by Sadj, the eponymous central protagonist, Nini, whose real name is Virginie Maerle, leaves her native island Saint-Louis, former capital of the French colony of Senegal, to go to France. The action of the novel takes place in the 1930s, when

the colonial assimilationist policies of France are at their apogee and therefore are mostly instrumental in shaping the identities of *métis* in Saint-Louis. As the capital of mulattas, as Sadji stresses in *Nini, mulâtresse du Sénégal*, Saint-Louis has been a unique economic and interracial center for colonial French West Africa. The implantation of a French trading post or *comptoir français* since 1659 on the island of *Ndar*, later renamed Saint-Louis (*Children of the French Empire* 7), led to interracial contacts between traders and West African women. These women came to be called *signares*, a term which originated in the Portuguese word *senhoras*, because of their tremendous economic power accrued from their relationships with whites. George E. Brooks's "[t]he *Signares* of Saint-Louis and Gorée: Women Entrepreneurs in Eighteenth-Century Senegal" illustrates how some of the *signares* became not only prosperous but slave-owners, and maintained their economic privileges until the mid-nineteenth century.

The economic power of the *signares* is felt in Sadji's novel through Nini's inheritance of a building from her family. The sale of this property makes her exile to France possible:

Nini se rend chez le notaire qui s'occupe des affaires de la famille Maerle. Elle demande que l'immeuble situé dans le Sud, qui lui appartient légalement, soit vendu le plus tôt possible. Le notaire ne peut arguer d'aucune clause pour refuser cette vente. Nini est majeure et légalement elle est la seule propriétaire de l'immeuble en question. (185)

[Nini visits the notary who is in charge of the affairs of the Maerle family. She requests that the building located in the South, which legally belongs to her, be sold as soon as possible. The notary cannot find any legal reason to refuse

this sale. Nini has come of age and is legally the sole owner of the building in question.]

The sale enables Nini to amass enough money to make a world tour (185). Her freedom to make choices fosters her agency and her will to self-actualization. The strength of her resolution and her unabashed determination to leave colonial Saint-Louis are not shaken even by the disapproval and insults of her aunt Hortense, who is unappreciative of her niece's sale of the inherited property without consulting her. The cultural and generational clash that opposes them is imputable to the deleterious impact of colonization on the stability of colonized societies and on the perpetuation of traditional values. Nini's alienation is not confined to her extreme absorption of white European ways but extends to her systems of thought. Her mental colonization contributes to the rupture in the hierarchical relationships that bind old people and youngsters in traditional African societies. Her conversation with her aunt illustrates the generation gap:

Tu as pu faire cela, Virginie? sanglote la pauvre femme [...] Et avec l'autorisation de qui?

Je suis assez grande, ma tante, pour me passer de toute autorisation dans ce genre d'opérations. J'étais seule héritière de l'immeuble vendu. Or, il y a belle lurette que j'ai atteint ma majorité. L'affaire ne regardait donc que moi (249)
[How could you do that, Virginie? sobs the poor woman [...]. And with whose authorization?

I am old enough, my aunt, to do without any authorization in this kind of affair. I was the sole heir of the building I sold. It has been a long time since I came of age. The matter concerned only me.]

Nini's disregard for the authority of her old aunt reflects her anti-conservatism and her yearning for self-refashioning away from the prescriptive impositions of old guard women like her aunt (44). The socio-cultural changes brought by the colonial encounter in Saint-Louis open up new avenues for young women, and the reasons for Nini's exile to France are strengthened by the steady progress of French assimilationism on interwar Saint-Louis. Her decision to quit Africa is fueled by a series of disappointments that have thwarted the fulfillment of her wishes. First, Nini has to resign from her job as a shorthand typist in the colonial administration after she discovers that she owes her position to a black man, when her friend Madou tells her that she is the subject of conversation in the town:

Eh! bien, sais-tu le bruit qui court en ville? On dit que tu dois ta situation à un Noir ou plutôt à des Noirs? [...] On ajoute donc qu'en douce tu as accepté les avances de ce Noir qui aurait réitéré sa déclaration d'amour et t'aurait promis une aide efficace pour trouver une bonne situation. (175)

[Do you know about the rumor that goes around in town? They say that you owe your post to a black man or rather to black men? [...] They add that you discreetly accepted the advances of this black man who is supposed to have reiterated his declaration of love and promised to help you find a good position.]

Nini's culturally-enforced identification with whiteness disallows any form of affiliation with the black community, whose image of negativity that she inherits from her ancestors is deeply ingrained in her unconscious. She systematically and spontaneously replicates the belief system of some of the *signares* who were slave-owners in the nineteenth century and who popularized the idea of the subhumanity of other blacks by putting them

on the same level as slaves (44). Sadji derides his heroine's preposterous yearning for whiteness because she is wearing a white mask, whereas some of her features are undeniably black: he mentions her "petit nez écrasé [et] ses lèvres fortes" (41) [little flat nose [and] big lips]. In ascribing blackness to specific phenotypical features, he sets in motion the forces of essentialism. Moreover, he seems to replicate the white discourses that exclude blacks from their aesthetic standards of beauty.

Inevitably, Nini perceives her world through white standards. By resigning, she loses her job yet safeguards her dignity within the walls of her entrenched white ethos. Her myopic and tragic attachment to whiteness places her in a fragile liminal situation where she easily succumbs to the gossip of other mulattas in her community. Their defamation of Nini is paradigmatic of the clashes opposing mulattas of different hues and classes in colonial Saint-Louis, where almost-white first-class mulattas like Nini from prestigious family backgrounds are hated by darker-skinned and lower classes of mulattas. Sadji thus underscores the antagonisms resulting from phenotypical and class differences (39). Nini's abandonment of her island, a place which festers with conflicts among mulattas and between mulattoes and blacks, holds the promise of greater stability in her life.

The other reason that prompts Nini's departure for France is the betrayal of Martineau, her white colleague, who breaches his marriage promise to her by marrying a white woman. The news of Martineau's betrayal, however, does not sink Nini into hopeless despair and futile complaints. Instead, she maintains her equanimity. She draws strength from her predicament, and buries her disappointment in the balm of her idea of relocation to the metropolis. By contrast, Nini lacks the support available to the widow

Ramatoulaye in Bâ's *Une si longue lettre* whose confidence in her friend Aissatou allows her to purge her mind of the pain her late husband Modou Fall meted out to her by marrying a girl as young as their daughter Daba. Nini copes with her distress alone. Her beloved grandmother Hélène has died, her former friend Madou has betrayed her by yielding to gossip from other mulattas, and the only aunt on whom she could have counted bears a grudge against her for jettisoning her post in the colonial administration. Nini describes her impasse in these terms:

En d'autres moments elle aurait communiqué l'annonce à sa tante et aurait cherché, blottie en pleurs dans ses bras, l'immense réconfort qu'il faut pour apaiser une douleur si profonde. Mais le visage qu'elle lui connaît maintenant la force à se taire même sur des questions de cette importance qui ont coûté des jours, des mois, et deux années de soucis à sa grand-mère Hélène et tante Hortense. (185)

[Under other circumstances, she would have revealed the announcement to her aunt, and, tearfully snuggled up in her arms, sought the great comfort needed to soothe such a deep pain. But the face her aunt shows now forces her to keep quiet even on issues of such importance that have cost days, months, and two years of worries to her grandmother Hélène et her aunt Hortense.]

The collapse of her family relationships and her friendship impels her to choose de-territorialization as a therapeutic and redemptive solution. Her grandmother Hélène and her aunt Hortense had invested themselves in her failed relationship with Martineau, but their hopes for Nini's marriage to the revered white man have been torn asunder. Her exile to France results, then, from both her heart-wrenching disappointment and the

disintegration of her family ties. Her psychological turmoil serves as a precondition to her severance with Africa, opening up both new existential paradigms and new opportunities for her personal reconstruction.

Nini's Africa is not the mythical and romanticized continent extolled by the poets of Négritude like the late Senegalese president Senghor who, in his famous poem "Femme Noire" (1964), overcomes the loneliness and winter of European exile with the sweet and invigorating memories of his idyllic *royaume d'enfance* or childhood kingdom, his source of poetic inspiration and solace. Nini's African experience equally contrasts with Guinean-born Camara Laye's timeless and sensitive account of traditional African life in his classic childhood autobiography *L'Enfant noir*. Unlike Senghor and Laye, Nini drives a thick wedge between her mythically-wrapped "white" self and what she sees as blackness marked by violence (14) and primitivity (19).

Sadji's *Nini, mulâtresse du Sénégal* shares narrative pattern of the flight-from-Africa to the ideal France with such postcolonial francophone African novelists such as the Paris-based Cameroonian writer Calixthe Beyala. However, while Nini's relocation to France is prompted by her cultural assimilation, Beyala's expatriation stems from her yearning to find freedom and a voice in the West. Her 1996 interview with Emmanuel Matateyou is very revealing:

Je ne pourrai pas vivre en Afrique [...] Je ne pourrai même pas manger, avoir la liberté totale de penser. Et si je suis limitée par ces censures hâtives ou sournoises, mais je ne vis plus [...] Si j'habitais le Cameroun, je n'aurais pas droit à la parole. L'exil me donne la liberté qui m'est refusée, l'exil me donne la parole qui m'est refusée, l'exil est ma survie. (613)

[I could not live in Africa [...] I could not even eat or have the complete freedom to think. And I cannot really live if I am still restricted by hasty or pernicious censorship [...] In Cameroon, I would not have the right to speak. Exile gives me the freedom and voice which have been denied to me. I survive thanks to exile.]

Nini projects her feelings of negativity vis-à-vis the black race onto a continent from which she resolves to break forever: “quitter ce pays où elle n’a jamais connu le bonheur; s’en aller, partir, oublier et se faire oublier” (185) [“leave this country where she never knew happiness, go away, forget, and make herself forgotten”]. In this respect, France becomes more than a physical space; it takes on a regenerating and repairing dimension, and becomes a critical aperture on a new identity formation. Nini’s change of country is a limen where her former disconsolate state of being is substituted by the complex yet creative and healing alternative models of reinvention.

Iain Chambers, in his book *Migrancy, Culture, Identity* (1994), points out the transformative dynamic of migrancy: “movement and migration—from Africa to the Americas, from rural space to urban life, from ex-colonies to metropolitan centers—involves a complex transformation” (26). Chambers’s observation offers three scenarios as emblematic of the swell of modernity. The first migration arose from underlying economic realities and refers to the forced Atlantic crossings of enslaved Africans transported to the Americas in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The second is not as dehumanizing as the phenomenon of slavery but is purely motivated by the needs for urbanization and the quest for better opportunities, offshoots of the idealism of the First World War and paradigmatic of the mythic representation of the city; a great rural-to-urban migration occurred in the early twentieth century in America, with the massive

migration of African Americans from the rural South to the industrial North for the social, cultural, economic, and political improvement of their lives. The last scenario, migration from the ex-colonies or colonies to the *métropole*, as is the case in the novel under examination, is emblematic of the role of metropolitan centers in the edification of black modernity.

Interwar Paris, an illuminating crossroads of transnational cultural and intellectual cross-fertilizations, which has aroused a vast array of critical reflections. In *Negrophilia: Avant-Garde Paris and Black Culture in the 1920s* (2000), Petrine Archer-Straw spells out the artistic interest of Paris in black alterity and the non negligible contribution of negrophilia to avant-garde modernity. “Negrophilia is about how the white avant-garde in Paris responded to black people during the 1920s, when interest in black culture became highly *fashionable* and a sign of being modern,” she notes (9, my emphasis). The assumption of Euromodernity, based on the commodification of things black through the banal search for exoticism in painting, sculpture, popular music, dance, and theatre, could be viewed as an anti-modern modernism. Whites wear the mask of modernity, via their participation in and recognition of black culture, yet move away from modernity by framing the modern within the primitive and by reviving black stereotypes. Furthermore, whites’ definition of modernism is antithetical to blacks’ perception of modernism. In the preface to his book *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (1987), Houston Baker explains: “[t]raditionally in discussions of Afro-American literature and culture, ‘modernism’ implies the work of British, Irish, and Anglo-American writers and artists of the early twentieth century” (xiii). The African Americentric critic Bernard Bell goes beyond Baker’s Eurocentric veneer and his aesthetic and literary-based conceptualization

of modernism to provide a broader perspective by placing it in the context of “traditional assumptions and conventions about history, science, culture, art, language, and literature” (*The Contemporary African American Novel* 187). The oppositional and paradoxical perceptions of modernism from blacks and white avant-gardists can be attributed to what Jean-François Lyotard refers to as the *différend*, which sets in whenever two parties do not speak the same idiom (9). Whites’ definition of modernism, in Archer-Straw’s statement, suits their political and ideological ethos, which is meant to congeal blacks in a state of primitiveness.

While the primitivist celebration of the exotic and picturesque otherness was at its height, anti-colonial protests were emerging. One cannot help noticing the clash between the European desire for maintaining cultural supremacy over the natives through the reification of cultural difference and the projects of cultural rehabilitation by the Negritude intellectuals, for the gazes of colonizers and colonized produced different epistemologies that are coterminous with their specific subject positions. It is a widely-held view that the knowledge production by the former about the latter is ineluctably tainted by solipsism. Phyllis Taoua’s *Forms of Protest: Anti-Colonialism and Avant-Gardes in Africa, the Caribbean, and France* (2002) sheds light on the pitfalls of avant-garde ideology in the interwar period: “[i]n fact, the position of unavowed privilege that avant-garde artists and intellectuals enjoyed during the interwar years created a critical blindness in their perception of all aspects of the ‘primitive’ cultures in question” (42). Thus negrophilia is a mystification and a disguised form of domination which is antagonistic to the very promotion and development of black culture. The fashionable trend of negrophilia in France in the interwar period produces a reverse effect in the

French colonies, where francophilia, direct heir of the French assimilationist project, generates maudlin dreams of metropolization among the assimilated blacks and the colored. Sadji's novel provides interesting examples by ironically underscoring the ebullient waves of the mulattas' magnetic attraction to Paris, the City of Light:

Peu d'entre elles [les mulâtresses] ont vu Paris; mais toutes vous diront la féerie des Champs-Élysées, le charme du Trocadéro, les merveilles des Tuileries. Et quand la nostalgie les grise par trop fort, elles parlent de leur prochaine rentrée en France. Surtout n'allez pas leur demander si elles parlent Wolof (la langue de leurs aïeux nègres). Elles ne comprennent que le français, et peut-être l'anglais.
(45)

[Few among them have seen Paris, but all will tell you about the magic of the Champs-Élysées, the charm of the Trocadéro, and the wonders of the Tuileries. And whenever they are carried away by nostalgia, they talk about their next return to France. Do not ask them if they speak Wolof (the language of their ancestors). They understand only French and perhaps English.]

In *Introduction à l'étude du roman négro-africain de langue française* (1980), Makouta B. Mboukou describes interwar Paris as "la mère des arts, armes et des lois" (45) [the mother of arts, weapons, and laws], because Paris is a center of erudition and an embodiment of knowledge and culture. In conformity with Bernard Dadié's project to deconstruct the myth of Paris, Tanohé, the protagonist of *Un nègre à Paris* (1959), deliberately replicates the colonial discourse of the superiority of the white race to undermine it from within: "[n]'est-il pas le cerveau du monde? [...] C'est ce qu'il faut entendre par 'Paris, ville de lumière'" (34) [isn't it the brain of the world? [...] That is

what should be understood by Paris, city of lights]. The bulk of intellectuals, who, like Prometheus, left Africa during colonization to go to the City of Light, reinforce the association of Paris with the “brain.”

The hypnotization of Sadjì’s mulattas, whose attention is riveted to the “charm” of Paris, emphasizes their francophilic feelings and unswerving identification with their *mère-patrie*. Such identification is felt through their rejection of their vernacular language for European languages, and is indicative of the crystallization of the myth of white superiority in their minds. The mastery of those supposedly civilized languages is the handiwork of colonial instruction, which is closely modeled on the French system of education. That is why the mulattas who have never set foot in Paris know about the geography of France. Their transition to Paris occurs only in the realm of their imagination.

It is necessary to extend the traditional theorization of liminality by Gennep, whose seminal book *The Rites of Passage* frames transitional rites within changes of place, age, and social position, which are dynamic processes involving physical movements, physiological and social transformations. Mulattas who fantasize about Paris in *Nini, mulâtresse du Sénégal* also enter a liminal though imaginary realm, where their wishes are virtually fulfilled. This imaginary space they construct through their conversations about the mythic Parisian landscape provides them with the virtual sense of being in Paris to a point where dream can overpower reality. Under such circumstances, liminality overcomes the agonistic situation of mulattas who are unable to go to their dreamland because of the lack of financial means and soothes their unfulfilled yearnings.

The other liminal state of the mulattas is their language assimilation, which pushes them further into the white man's path. The barrier between their treasured and borrowed foreign values and their forsaken local cultural values widens and leads to departure from the island, as Nini's case vividly exemplifies. In *Linguistique et Colonialisme* (1976), Jean Calvet attributes the refusal to speak indigenous languages to *glottophagie* which leads to the annihilation of the language of the colonized (118). Nini's abhorrence of her ethnic language, Wolof, appears when she querulously dissuades Mamadou, the orderly of the river company for which she works, from addressing her in that language: "[é]coute Mamadou, s'empote Nini, parle-moi français s'il te plait, je ne cause pas ta langue" (16) [I]isten Mamadou, rages Nini, please speak to me in French; I do not talk in your language]. A Fanonian white mask encapsulates her condescending attitudes toward blacks (19), her speech and dress code (17, 48, 53), and her "well-bred" relationships such as with her colleagues Martineau and Perrin, her favorite companions. All of these elements coalesce to reimagine the local landscape of colonial Saint-Louis. Despite Nini's physical presence in Africa, the metropolis inhabits her in behavior, imagination, and thought through a process of what could be called the interiorization of the metropolitan landscape.

This interiorization is partly prompted by the politics of receiving a colonial education, which is an important milestone in the cultural colonization of the colonized. In *Mirages de Paris*, Fara, the protagonist created by the Senegalese-born writer Ousmane Soce, illustrates the alienating mechanisms of European colonization that foster his longing to visit France: "[I]e plus cher souhait de Fara était de voir cette France dont il avait appris, avec amour, la langue, l'histoire et la géographie" (169) [t]he dearest wish

of Sara was to see the France whose language, history, and geography he had learned with enthusiasm]. Through their unconditional fealty to France and evocation of the historic and famous places of the Champs-Élysées, the Trocadéro, and the Tuileries, icons of the crowning glory and grandeur of metropolitan France, the mulattas in Sadji's novel perpetuate the myth of the City of Light, for they have learnt that the Champs-Élysées is one of the most famous thoroughfares in the world with its cinemas, cafés, and luxury shops (its full name is "Avenue des Champs-Élysées"), the Trocadéro includes the museum of ethnology where the Universal Exposition of 1878 took place, and the Tuileries is the most central park in Paris, bedecked with flowerbeds and well-trimmed green landscapes.

The perception of Paris as an Eldorado by the colonized mulattas bears witness to their deep internalization of the systems of thought of the white colonizer, who has succeeded in making a tabula rasa of their local cultural values. Such a rupture with their cultural heritage leads to their depersonalization and tragic desire for things white. Unlike the Hegelian master-slave dialectic, where a revolutionary consciousness defines the slave's relationship to the master, the colonized mulattas in French West Africa are overwhelmingly subjugated by the colonizer's lines of thought and codes of conduct. The hegemonizing colonial discourse negates and effaces the humanity of the colonized, who are left without real choice, because the colonizer forces them to choose between fidelity and progress or backwardness and rupture. Their choice of European progress and civilization is predetermined by the colonial vilification of indigenous cultures and justification of their imperial duty to civilize. The perception of value is within the control of Eurocentric rationality.

In *Nini, mulâtresse du Sénégal*, the city of Saint-Louis is described as what I call the *fille-patrie* of the metropole: “Saint-Louis est la capitale des mulâtresses, leur univers fermé d’où elles entrevoient la belle et douce France, objet de soupirs énamourés, patrie perdue” (38) [“Saint-Louis is the capital of mulattas, the closed universe where they catch glimpses of the beautiful and sweet France, object of their enamored affections, and lost homeland”]. This infatuation of the mulattas with their mother country France echoes the Fanonian idea of colonialism’s psychological domination of the natives in *Black Skin, White Masks*. Born of African and French parents, their internalization of French lifestyles and value systems, as well as their status as French citizens, account for their unswerving idealization of France. In French West Africa, people born in the “Four Communes” of Senegal (Dakar, Gorée, Rufisque, Saint-Louis) were considered French citizens.

In “The Family Romance of French Colonialism and Métissage” (1999), Françoise Vergès finds that the integrity of the colonized hinges upon their complete rupture with the metropole:

[O]nly a clear, sharp break with the metropole would guarantee the possibility of constructing a *decolonized culture* and identity that would affirm its radical difference with the legacy of colonialism and give birth to a purified identity, cleansed from the alienating, shameful elements of colonization. (1-2, my emphasis)

However, Vergès brushes aside the complexities and paradoxes of decolonization. Could there really be a break between the colonized and the metropolis? The black and Caribbean intellectuals who agitated for the emergence of the *négritude* movement

rediscovered and then enhanced their cultural heritage in the belly of the beast. Besides, writers such as the Nigerian Chinua Achebe conceive of European languages as suitable and efficacious tools for their project of cultural reconstruction. One might argue that a break with the metropolis is antithetical to cultural humanism and detrimental to the modernization of the colonized culture. Vergès's unrealistic view of the need for a total rupture between the colonized and the West might be recast in terms of a shift of the consciousness of the colonized vis-à-vis their responsibilities for the end of colonialism and their dedication to the national cause. In *Les damnés de la terre*, the Martinican Fanon inscribes decolonized culture within the context of national struggle: “[l]a culture nationale, dans les pays sous-développés doit donc se situer au centre même de la lutte de libération que mènent ces pays” (163) “[a] national culture in underdeveloped countries therefore should take its place at the very heart of the struggle for freedom which these countries are carrying out” (233)].

Nini and her contemporaries are not steeped in the behavioral traditions of the older generation, though after their betrayal by their French lovers, her aunt Hortense and her late grandmother Héléne resorted to religion as a prop for their distress. Sadjì describes their old age in terms of inertia and lethargy: “[o]n peut les voir passer comme des ombres, comme des fantômes, avec l’air de trébucher à chaque pas et de défaillir [...] cette foi en Dieu qui, seule, désormais, peut les consoler” (17) “[t]hey can be seen walking like shadows and ghosts. At every step, they give the impression of stumbling and becoming feeble [...] this faith in God which, from now on, is the only thing that can console them”]. Though freed from any patriarchal constraints and family responsibilities—they have neither husbands nor children—their attitude reflects the

tendency to be confined to the domestic sphere. On the macro-social level, their attachment to Saint-Louis renders their identities insular in more than one sense of the word.

Nini departs from the colonized margin to the imperial center, from the claustrophobic island to the center of cosmopolitanism and internationalism that Paris turns into during the interwar period by attracting black artists and intellectuals from Africa, the Americas, and the Caribbean. In 1927, the American Civil Liberties Union lawyer Roger Baldwin sketched out in the magazine *Survey* the cultural and artistic matrix of Paris: “Paris means a half-dozen things to Americans—fashion, sport, art, sidewalk café life, Montmartre music-halls, the charm of a ripe old metropolitanism” (460). He adds that France is the “only safe haven of refuge in all the world” (460) for “men without a country” who are “the groups of black, brown and yellow French colonials who agitate there for freedom of the colonies from French rule [...] In France, they may agitate freely what is illegal in the colonies themselves” (465-66).

In the 1920s, the presence in France of blacks and coloreds from the French colonies helps enhance the image of Paris as a crossroads of transnational, cultural, and intellectual exchanges. The meeting of the famous American writers Gertrude Stein and Ernest Hemingway in Paris, the plethora of black jazz musicians and performers, and the amazing popularity of the African American performer Josephine Baker make Paris a center of artistic illumination. It is a period that has been analyzed by Benetta Jules-Rosette and by Tyler Stovall, Brent Hayes Edwards, and Eileen Julien, who describe the glamour of Paris in the interwar years. The traditional narrative of the African American experience in Paris describes the move from America to France as a transition from

collective oppression to individual liberation. However, in *Nini, mulâtresse du Sénégal*, Sadjji does not follow the heroine to France, for the novel ends when Nini is about to board a plane bound for France. Her one-day stopover in Dakar nevertheless gives her a foretaste of the French metropole and liberates her from the entrapment of her native Saint-Louis:

Dès Dakar, Nini commence à se sentir dans un monde nouveau. Grands magasins illuminés, restaurants éclairés au néon, foules et grouillements de voitures, tout la change déjà de cette petite ville de Saint-Louis, si archaïque et si pleine de cancans. (187)

[Once in Dakar, Nini begins to feel as if she were in a new world. Big illuminated shops, neon lit restaurants, and streets swarming with crowds and cars, already everything brings her change, and moves her away from Saint-Louis, this little town so archaic and gossipy.]

Gateway to France by virtue of its international airport, Dakar is a mini-metropolis, with its illumination from big shops and restaurants and its cars being reflective of modernity.

In *Greater France: A History of French Overseas Expansion*, Robert Aldrich explains:

The new colonialist was the entrepreneur armed with designs for bridges and schools or figures for imports and exports. The dawn of the age of aviation illustrated the metamorphosis. Planes connected Marseilles to Algiers in 1921, Tunis in 1923 and Casablanca in 1924. By the mid-1930s there were commercial flights from France to Dakar. (115-6)

Physically and psychologically, Nini's change knows no bounds because of her escape from the petty class antagonisms, rivalries among mulattas, and racial prejudices that

undermine the stability and harmony of the island. The modernization and industrialization of the mother country France heralds promising, regenerating, and stabilizing psychological transformations for the young and educated mulatto, whose transition from her confining island to Dakar is a liberating and transformative liminal experience. Nini's liminality is epistemological.

The modernism of Dakar, offshoot of the post-First World war project of modernization initiated by colonizers in French West Africa, markedly contrasts with the pre-modern atmosphere of Nini's native Saint-Louis, which lacks public transportation, as depicted in the early pages of the novel (10), and is surrounded by old colonial habitations. Sadjji's portrayal reveals the unattractive landscape of colonial Saint-Louis:

La maison de Nini [...] fait partie d'un groupement de masures toutes vieilles, toutes lézardées, qui se tiennent, s'appuient les unes aux autres dans un suprême élan de solidarité. Rien ne l'embellit depuis cinquante ans. Elle a pris le ton gris de toutes ces maisons de Saint-Louis qui s'effritent, se désagrègent dans une hautaine vieillesse. Vue dans la nuit elle semble morte. (25)

[Nini's house [...] forms part of a group of very old and cracked tumbledown cottages, which are held together by leaning on each other in a supreme burst of solidarity. Nothing has embellished it for fifty years. It has taken on the shades of grey of those houses in Saint-Louis which crumble and disintegrate in a lofty old age. By night it looks dead.]

The unappealing and uninviting habitations in colonial Saint-Louis testify to the profit-making enterprise of white colonizers, who sink the island into underdevelopment and drain it of its vitality. The paradox of colonialism appears in the ways in which Saint-

Louis, “the centre of French activities in Africa [...], a base for purchases of slaves, Arabic gum and other products” (Aldrich 15), contributes to the wealth of white colonizers yet does not reap any evident economic fruits for the local people. Albert Memmi’s *The Colonizer and the Colonized* explains the attraction and benefits of colonialism for colonists. He states:

Il suffit d’ailleurs d’interroger l’Européen des colonies: quelles raisons l’ont poussé à s’expatrier, puis, surtout, quelles raisons l’ont fait persister dans son exil ? Il arrive qu’il parle aussi d’aventure, de pittoresque et de dépaysement [...] [une] colonie [est un endroit où on] gagne plus [et] dépense moins. On rejoint la colonie parce que les situations y sont assurées, les traitements élevés, les carrières plus rapides et les affaires plus fructueuses. (33-34)

[One need only ask a European living in the colonies what general reasons induced him to expatriate and what particular forces made him persist in his exile. He may mention adventure, the picturesque surroundings or the change of environment [...] a colony [is] a place where one earns more and spends less. You go to a colony because jobs are guaranteed, wages high, careers more rapid and business more profitable. (3-4)]

The reply of the colonial administrator Vidal to Reverend Drumont in Mongo Beti’s *Le Pauvre Christ de Bomba* unveils the economic reason behind colonialism and buttresses Memmi’s argument: “[e]t qu’est-ce que je ferais en Europe maintenant sans spécialisation? Sans compter qu’après avoir goûté à la puissance, je la trouve plutôt délicieuse” (260) “[a]nd what could I do in Europe now, with no proper training? Not counting the taste for power which I’ve acquired. And, after all, it will be a ‘good

experience’” (161). Vidal’s colonial Cameroon is a delicious tart he revels in consuming according to his taste. His desire to stay in Africa to collect its golden fleece contrasts with the situation of colonized subjects whose Africa is synonymous with subjugation, exploitation, and poverty.

Having cherished white values and immersed her whole being in the wellsprings of the Western world, and having briefly tasted the enchanting atmosphere of modernized Dakar, Nini expects that her experience in France will be extraordinary, marked by the possibility to fuse with the valorized French other and attain some sense of wholeness through the symbolic reframing of the island of Saint-Louis in the matrix of the West. In other words, she leaves a fragmented island which epitomizes a part in a whole, whereas the métropole symbolizes a whole from the cartographical and imaginary level.

Geographical variations impact the construction of gender. Nini’s pre-exile fragmented identity, conspicuous in her nickname Nini, a synthesis of the French double negation “ni-ni” or “neither-nor,” marks her exclusion from both black and white identity. Her departure from colonial Saint-Louis is a significant and symbolic leap from negation to the affirmation of her identity. Therefore, she cuts her ties with her past and creates a new *whole* identity, though it might seem fictive. In *Migrancy, Culture, Identity*, Chambers links “fictive wholeness” to therapy: “[t]his fictive whole, this ‘I’, is, as Nietzsche would have it, a life-preserving fiction, one that conserves us, and saves us from the discontinuities of the unconscious, from schizophrenia, self-destruction and the entropy of madness” (26). Nini’s “I” or “fictive whole” is the liminal alternative paradigm born of her future contact with the West and conducive to significant geographical, social, psychological, and epistemological changes.

While Sadji focuses solely on the exile of Nini to France, without elaborating on the occurrences of her exilic journey, Capécia, on the other hand, deals with the dialectics of exile and nationalism because of Mayotte's claim of her "Martinicanness" in Paris.

Migration and Trans-Caribbean Identity in *Je suis martiniquaise* and *La négresse blanche*

The events of the post-Columbian era have been determinant in the creation of a heterogeneous and pluralistic society in the Caribbean. After the extinction of the indigenous populations in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the repopulation of the Caribbean was ensured by voluntary immigration from Europe, forced immigrations via the transatlantic slave trade, and indentured labor from Africa, Asia, and India. The Caribbean, however, is not only a site of arrivals but also of departures. The centuries-long domination of the economies of the islands by plantation agriculture resulted in economic crises which fueled strong waves of migration to the United Kingdom, France, and the United States in the twentieth century. Franklin W. Knight's *Race, Ethnicity, and Class: Forging the Plural Society in Latin America and the Caribbean* (1996) documents the European establishment of plantation societies in the Caribbean for economic reasons. In the twentieth century, migration as portrayed in *Je suis martiniquaise* and *La négresse blanche* is prompted by socio-political instability in Martinique, especially during the Second World War. Like *Nini, mulâtresse du Sénégal*, Capécia's autobiographical novels similarly link the displacements of mulattas to class, gender, history, and race, though their main difference lies in the social status of the heroines as unwed mothers. This situation, however, does not prevent them from leaving Martinique.

The flight to Paris of Mayotte and Isaure, the protagonists of Capecia's two novelettes, *Je suis martiniquaise* and *La négresse blanche*, stems from the drastic social changes that swept across the island of Martinique during World War II: occupation by a Vichy régime and resistance by Martinicans. In *Vichy in the Tropics: Pétain's National Revolution in Madagascar, Guadeloupe, and Indochina, 1940-44* (2001), Eric T.

Jennings explains the changes the Second World War brought to the French colonies with the defeat of their Mother Country France by Germany. In the novel, the political instability created by the war severely affects the psychological condition and the romantic lives of Isaure and Mayotte. After her separation from her boyfriend André, the white French officer who leaves Martinique with the capitulation of Admiral Robert, the Vichy ruler of the island, the single mother Mayotte seeks refuge in her black community in Carbet, only to experience rejection. François, the *métis* son she bears, drives a wedge between her, her family, and blacks in her community. Even her twin sister Francette is uncomfortable with Mayotte's racial and sexual transgression. The narrator explains:

Francette prétendait que l'on parlait de moi à cause de cet enfant blanc, qu'elle ressentait l'affront de ces médisances et qu'elle ne pouvait tolérer plus longtemps cette existence. La guerre avait changé beaucoup de choses. La population était devenue beaucoup arrogante. Je ne crois pas que l'on m'eût accusée, quelques années plus tôt, d'avoir trahi ma race. Mais les nègres relevaient la tête [...] Ils se montraient particulièrement susceptibles. (191)

[Francette claimed that people were talking about me because of my white child

and that she felt the affront of this slander. She felt that she could not tolerate this state of affairs much longer. The war had changed many things; people had become arrogant. I don't believe that a few years earlier they would have accused me of betraying my race. But blacks were holding their heads high [...]. They had turned out to be especially touchy. (146-47)]

The events in the second half of *Je suis martiniquaise* and throughout *La négresse blanche* reflect the political influence of the Vichy ruler Admiral Robert, which led to heightened racial tensions between blacks and whites, and creoles and mulatto, as remarked by Isaure (192). Jennings, Baptiste, and Burton describe this unsettled period as *Tan Robé*, a landmark in the history of Martinique because of the ideological shift from *Blanchitude* to *Négritude*, from the idealization of white values to the acceptance of black culture. The erosion of the prewar racial hierarchy in Martinique, the emancipatory actions of Blacks and their newly acquired racial pride, and the anticolonial resistance movements and the surge of nationalism in Africa acted as the push and pull factors for liberation from the colonial yoke during World War II. In *Pour la révolution africaine: écrits politiques* (1964), Fanon notes the racial hierarchy that prevailed before the war when West Indians basking in the shadow of whiteness believed in their superiority to Africans: “[c]hez tout Antillais, avant la guerre de 1939, il n’y avait pas seulement la certitude d’une supériorité sur l’Africain, mais celle d’une différence fondamentale. L’Africain était un nègre et l’Antillais un Européen (30) “[i]n every West Indian, before the war of 1939, there was not only the certainty of superiority over the African, but the certainty of a fundamental difference. The African was a Negro and the West Indian a European” (20)].

The liberationist impulse of blacks sows seeds of rebellion in the island and creates discomfort for the narrator, who is blamed for what the community in her native village of Carbet conceives of as racial betrayal. Mayotte's exclusion from her primary community and abandonment by the white officer to whom she has so firmly clung place her in an uncomfortable liminal terrain, where her identity is caught in a double negation. Mayotte's quandary stems from her social exclusion as well as from the stark loneliness that gnaws at her. The death of her parents and her separation from her sister Francette, who chooses to become a nun, plunge her into a state of loneliness similar to that of Nini, but whereas Sadji's heroine never has the chance to visit the city except for her one-day layover at Dakar, Mayotte's departure to the metropolis is mediated by her short stay in Fort-de-France. The details of her transient return to Fort-de-France from Carbet and her subsequent decision to relocate herself to Paris deserve to be quoted:

Je vendis la maison de mon père, ce qui ne me donna pas beaucoup d'argent, car elle était hypothéquée et revins m'installer en Fort-de-France. Mais je me retrouvai sans plaisir dans cette ville où j'avais été si heureuse. Je restai insensible aux officiers qui avaient connu André et qui me faisaient la cour. (201)

[I sold father's house, which didn't bring me much money because it was mortgaged, and I returned to Fort-de-France. But this city, where I had been so happy, offered me little pleasure. I remained *indifferent* to the officers who had known Andre and who courted me. (153, my emphasis)]

One common thread that binds Sadji's novel and Capécia's novelettes is the sale of belongings or property by mulattas in preparation for their migration to France. Mayotte sells her father's property, Nini sells her own property (249), and Isaure sells the

household belongings and the furniture she shared with her late husband Pascal (251). Despite their class differences—Nini belongs to middle-class society whereas Mayotte and Isaure share their working-class status—these sales are the preconditions that lead to the liminal renewal of their identities. In the case of Mayotte, her return to Fort-de-France is understandable because this is the city where she successfully conducts her laundry business, in spite of her hard beginnings; the city has been instrumental in the forging of her personality as an independent woman. The drastic shift in the relationship between Mayotte and her former revered white officers does not stem from her divorce from white values—she still yearns to marry a white man (153)—but rather from her awareness of the risks associated with her alignment with whiteness in postwar Martinique. Apart from her maladjustment in Carbet, where she runs the gauntlet of hostility from the black community who cannot accord her a modicum of forgiveness for her racial betrayal, Mayotte suffers neither attack nor danger. Her exposure to gossip from blacks markedly contrasts with the terrifying experience of Isaure.

Capécia's judicious and self-conscious choice to title the fifteen chapters of her second novel *La négresse blanche* brings to light the racial antagonisms and the tension between Admiral Robert and the local population that culminate in Isaure's attack and the brutal murder of her white husband Pascal, overseer in the cane fields where blacks work. Like Mayotte, she prefers white men as her lovers. She admits to the white officers in her bar that she has "never slept with a black. They disgust [her] and [she is] afraid of them" (162). Contrary to Mayotte who abstains from exhibiting her hatred for blacks, Isaure calls a black man named Blanchart "sale nègre" (13) [dirty nigger] (163). Such racist language was unacceptable in Martinique where it was illegal to refer to a black as a

“nigger.” Isaure was imprisoned for six months and was subsequently attacked by an anonymous black man who wanted to teach her a lesson.

Isaure’s attack foreshadows the murder of her communist husband Pascal by rioting black plantation laborers in Macouba. They bear a grudge against Isaure’s downplaying of blacks and her marriage with a white man, whom they metonymically scapegoat for their difficult working conditions. Confronted with hatred by blacks and rejection by her racist in-laws, Isaure ends up being an outcast. The narrator explains her predicament:

Quant à Isaure, elle avait à souffrir quantité de petites vexations non seulement de sa belle famille mais des noirs eux-mêmes. Du temps de son enfance, alors que les blancs étaient tout-puissants, les sang-mêlé étaient traités par eux comme des nègres. Maintenant qu’un racisme contraire s’était développé, ils étaient aux yeux des noirs presque aussi impopulaires que les blancs. On voyait dans une même famille naître des haines terribles : un garçon d’un noir africain détestait son frère parce que celui-ci avait une peau plus claire que la sienne. Il fallait être ou blanc ou noir mais pas entre les deux comme Isaure et son fils. Elle avait enfin réussi à épouser un blanc, un béké goyave, mais elle n’était pas devenue blanche pour cela et sa belle famille le lui faisait cruellement sentir. (153-54)

[As for Isaure, she had to undergo countless harassments, not only from her in-laws but from the blacks themselves. Since her childhood days, when whites were all powerful, they treated the mixed-bloods like blacks. Now that a reverse racism had developed, in the eyes of the blacks they were almost as unpopular as whites. In the same family, there were visible signs of terrible hatreds: a black boy

detested his brother whose color was lighter than his. *It was better to be either white or black, not between the two, like Isaure and her son.* She had managed to marry a white, a béké goyave, but for all that, *she had not become white* and her in-laws made her feel this keenly. (242, my emphasis)]

I quote this passage at length so as to emphasize the underlying reasons for Isaure's migration to France. Like Sadji, Capécia does not follow her heroine's destiny to France but focuses on the socio-historical forces that foster her migration. The intolerance of blacks vis-à-vis mixed-bloods in postwar Martinique excludes the Isaures whose in-betweenness threatens the binary constructions of race which are perceived as normative. Such a construction of blackness and whiteness as two mutually exclusive forms of identity is later challenged by postcolonial theorists such as Homi Bhabha, Edouard Glissant, and Antonio Benitez-Rojo, who strip racial hybridity of negativity and strengthen it with a powerful epistemological thrust. Bhabha's theory of the in-between in *The Location of Culture*, the theory of creolization in Glissant's *Caribbean Discourse*, and Benitez-Rojo's *The Repeating Island* all value hybridity as a ceaseless process of possibilities.

Both Mayotte and Isaure do not fit into the Martinican community's new racial standards. Isaure's cry of distress in indirect discourse conveys her baffled and distraught situation: "[m]ais trouverait-elle un pays où échapper enfin à la malédiction de n'être ni noire ni blanche?" (179) "[b]ut would she find a country where she could finally escape the curse of being neither black nor white?" (255)]. Nini escapes the searing racial exclusion of Isaure and Mayotte because her pre-war colonial Saint-Louis was not infused with the racial essentialism of *Négritude* found in postwar Martinique. Isaure's

longing for a tolerant society that accepts hybridity shows that the vilification of racial mixing does not exclusively pertain to nineteenth-century scientific discourse, but finds reverberations in the twentieth century. Isaure finds a response to her query regarding the ideal country which will welcome mixed-bloods in its womb through her relocation to France: “Je m’embarquai sur un bananier à destination de la France, de Paris et je dis pour toujours adieu à cette île où je ne laissais que des morts. Il est vrai que chez nous les morts ne le sont jamais tout à fait. J’ai bien senti en écrivant ces pages qu’ils continuaient à rôder autour de moi” (202) [“I boarded a freighter bound for Paris, France. I said goodbye forever to that island where I left only the dead. It is true that, for us, the dead are never altogether dead. In *writing* these pages, I have sensed that they were still lurking about me” (153, my emphasis)].

Mayotte is not anchored *ad vitam aeternam* in the island, like Césaire’s octopus clinging to his rock or town in *Moi, laminaire*. Her decision to quit the island forever is equally antithetical to the myth of return embodied in Maryse Condé’s three novels, *Hérémakhonon* (1976), *A Season in Rihata* (1981), and *Segu* (1984), all of which deal with a search for some essentialized blackness and thus reverse the image of the claustrophobic island embraced by earlier generation of francophone Caribbean writers such as Michèle Lacrosil in her novel *Sapotille et le serin d’argile* and Mayotte Capécia.

The departure of Mayotte as well as Isaure from Martinique has to be inscribed within the new dynamics of race relationships that Fanon explains clearly in *Toward the African Revolution*. After the Second World War, “l’Antillais ...est un nègre” (34) [“the West Indian ...is a Negro”] who more than ever yearns to reconnect with blackness and African cultural heritage (24). It stands to reason that Mayotte and Isaure, who have been

immersed in prewar Western idealism, feel excluded from the new standards espoused by their West Indian community.

Edouard Glissant's repudiation of the universalism of *négritude* finds significance and validity in Capécia's novels. Mayotte and Isaure do not fit into the racial restrictions of the *négritude* project. By positioning itself as a metanarrative with claims of a universal black identity and a unique cultural heritage, *négritude* replicates the racism it seeks to contest because of its exclusion of multiracialism. Glissant separates Caribbean identity from *négritude*'s concerns with homogeneity and essence; in *Introduction à une poétique du divers* (1995), he reinforces his opposition to universalism: "il nous faut abandonner l'idée de l'universel. L'universel est un leurre, un rêve trompeur" (136) ["we should abandon the idea of the universal. The universal is an illusion, a deceptive dream"]. Glissant instead extols the creolization, heterogeneity, plurality, and provisionality of Caribbean identities, which are the product of the historical legacy of racial and cultural diversity in the Caribbean. His anti-totalitarian vision of identity seems to be embraced by Capécia, who opens up other avenues for the reassertion of non-totalizing entities through exile. Glissant's theory of creolization relates in some ways to liminality because both theories quarrel with notions of stasis and favor ideas of endless possibilities of becoming.

The liminal transition of Capécia's heroines to France promises to unshackle them from the anxieties of their marginal existence, enable them to rise above the limitations of their race and gender, and cross the pitfalls of indeterminacy that imprison them in a "neither-nor" socio-cultural situation in postwar Martinique. The transformative effects of exile are assessed only by Mayotte, whose contact with France is unfolded in *Je suis*

martiniquaise. Once in Paris, she considers her visit to the Invalides as an achievement: “lorsque j’arrivai à Paris, mon premier soin fut de me rendre aux Invalides, pour admirer le tombeau du grand mari de Joséphine, puis à la Malmaison où elle vécut. Mais je n’ai jamais retrouvé l’émotion qui me saisit devant cette statue à la fois si majestueuse et si vivante” (114) [“when I arrived in Paris, my first accomplishment was to visit the Invalides to admire the tomb of Josephine’s great husband, then to Malmaison where she lived. But I have never relived the feeling that came over me, standing before that statue, both alive and majestic” (95)].

Mayotte experiences the epistemological condition of exile through her satisfying discovery of the tomb of Empress Josephine’s husband Napoleon, which, according to the narrator, is the dream of every Martinican woman of her generation. Standing up before the statue becomes a uniquely and preciously significant moment. Before her arrival in Paris, Mayotte’s short visit to Fort-de-France provides her with the opportunity to see the statue of Empress Josephine in the Place de la Savane. This is how she recounts her experience:

Enfin, je me remis en marche, tournai à droite et me dirigeai vers une grande place, dont les allées cimentées dominaient un cercle au centre duquel se dressait, majestueuse, la statue de l’Impératrice Joséphine. Mon coeur se mit à battre. Mon père m’avait souvent parlé de la femme du grand Napoléon, elle était l’orgueil de notre île. Qu’une Martiniquaise ait pu devenir Impératrice de la France, de tout l’empire français, qu’elle ait pu devenir la femme du grand souverain du monde, nous remplissait tous de fierté. Nous la vénérions et moi, comme toutes les petites filles de chez nous, j’avais souvent rêvé à ce destin sans pareil. (113-14)

[I turned right, toward a large plaza whose paved lanes led to the middle of a circle where the statue of Empress Josephine stood majestically. My heart beat faster. Father had often spoken about the wife of the great Napoleon; she was the pride of the island. We gloried in the fact that a Martinican had succeeded in becoming Empress of all of France, of the whole French empire, that she had become the wife of the greatest sovereign in the world. We venerated her, and I, like all young girls there, had often dreamt about a *similar destiny*. (94-95, my emphasis)]

The erection of the statue of Empress Josephine in Fort-de-France testifies to the modernity of the city, which is a reflection in some ways of similar sites in the great French metropole. The change of décor from rural Carbet to urban Fort-de-France has been a liminal experience of discovery, liberation, and psychological transformation for Mayotte who becomes enthralled by the stores, carpet shops, and beauty salons. However, her unexpected encounter with her father, “who was holding a woman by the arm” (96) after leaving her and his young wife Rènèlise, angers her. Consequently, she decides to stay temporarily in Fort-de-France despite her father’s injunction that she return to Carbet straight away.

Fort-de-France marks Mayotte’s transition from the yoke of her domineering father and the back-breaking life she has been living after her mother’s death as “the mistress of the household” (72). More significantly, she moves from dependence to independence, self-reliance, and resourcefulness, as despite the hardships of city life, she forges a new identity for herself (98). The change of place has been instrumental in the liminal reconstruction of Mayotte’s identity. Her rebellion from her father’s authority, her

liminal situation as a city dweller grappling with quandaries alone, and the daily task of fending for herself markedly contrast with the notion of tribal liminality which operates on a principle of what Turner refers to as “a homogeneity of values and behavior, strong social constraint, and loyalty to tradition and kinship” (1982: 42). Mayotte further reasserts her self will and her craving for self-actualization when she forsakes her island Martinique for Paris. She moves from one state of liminality to another state of liminality which is framed in different environments but is knit around the same search for fulfillment.

Mayotte’s discovery of the statue of Empress Josephine in Fort-de-France was a partial and incomplete epistemological experience that needed to be completed and strengthened by her discovery of the tomb of Napoleon in France. The ambivalent position of Napoleon vis-à-vis the West Indies is explained by Robert Aldrich in *Greater France: A History of French Overseas Expansion* (1996): “[h]e maintained a sentimental attachment to the West Indies, partly under the influence of his first wife, Josephine de Beauharnais, who was from Martinique. Yet Napoleon’s re-establishment of slavery in the Antilles and in Guyane in 1802 and 1803 had more to do with desire to ensure the fortunes of planters and reap as much profit as possible from the West Indies than with any emotional consideration” (19). For current generations of Martinicans, the association of Josephine with the re-establishment of slavery on the island is a highly negative souvenir of the woman, contrasting sharply with the response of Capécia’s narrator to the statue. It is for this reason, no doubt, that in February 1990 vandals cut off the head of the statue on the *Place de la Savane*.

The reunion of the discoveries of the statues of Empress Josephine and Napoleon in two different places that are historically connected—Martinique is the *fille-patrie* and France the mother country—symbolizes the wholeness of Mayotte’s identity. Eventually, this wholeness resembles the idea of the “fictive whole” expressed in Chambers’ *Migrancy, Culture, Identity* as already demonstrated with Nini in the first section of this chapter. However, contrary to Nini, whose reinvention of her French West African identity excludes a nostalgic gaze—Sadji chooses not to incorporate her experience in France in the novel, Mayotte’s self-refashioning is made through her nationalist claims as a writer in France. Her longing to follow the same destiny as Empress Josephine, as expressed in the previous statement (94-95), appears in the following lines of *Je suis martiniquaise*:

Pourquoi me suis-je mise à écrire? Je venais d’arriver à Paris. J’y étais venue pour me marier, mais cela, c’est une histoire dont je ne veux pas parler. Il faisait froid, il neigeait et cette blancheur douce qui tombait lentement du ciel et que je voyais pour la première fois m’enchantait, tout en me donnant de la nostalgie. C’est alors que j’ai noté quelques souvenirs de mon pays, de mon enfance. Il s’est arrêté de neiger, les rues de Paris sont redevenues sales, mais j’avais pris du plaisir à écrire, et maintenant je continue bien que le printemps soit venu et qu’il fasse moins froid. (21)

[Why did I decide to write? I had just arrived in Paris. I had come to get married, but that is another story I don’t want to talk about. It was cold and snowing and the gentle whiteness falling from the sky that I was seeing for the first time both fascinated and caused me pangs of homesickness. That is when I wrote down

some of the childhood memories about my country. It stopped snowing and the streets of Paris were dirty again, but I had enjoyed writing, and now I continue, even though spring has come and the weather isn't as cold. (39)]

After the woes of the Second World War, the experience of exile was fashionable among African as well as West Indian writers. Caribbean literature was marked by unprecedented breakthroughs with the writings of exiled or expatriate authors such as Aimé Césaire, Mayotte Capécia, Edouard Glissant, and Joseph Zobel from Martinique, Alejo Carpentier from Cuba, Una Marson and Louise Bennett from Jamaica, and Samuel Selvon and V. S. Naipaul from Trinidad.

For the purpose of this section, the anamnestic childhood stories of the narrator-protagonist Mayotte matter less than the dialectic of exile and nationalism. As the title of Capécia's *Je suis martiniquaise* reveals, Mayotte frames her nationalist claims within an exilic situation, which raises questions. Why is she claiming her national identity? Is her national identity more important than her racial identity? Mayotte's engagement with nationalism follows the postwar aesthetic shift toward politically engaged realism. I argue that exile becomes a privileged liminal place of resistance where Mayotte reaffirms her belonging to Martinique, which she was forced to leave because her racial hybridity clashed with its new postwar values.

As a biracial woman and unwed mother, Mayotte's nationalistic claim of belonging to Martinique through writing is also a contribution to the cultural and literary development of Martinique. Furthermore, the evocation of childhood memories outside of Martinique is a determinant characteristic of trans-Caribbean identity, which Premdas explains in the following terms:

The Trans-Caribbean identity occurs outside the Caribbean in all those places where peoples of Caribbean origin reside. It is constructed from memories of assigned Caribbean values, ecology and history. People who argue for a trans-Caribbean identity often can recite a litany of historical facts on slavery, plantations, colonialism, and sugar as well as supply a catalogue of unique beliefs and customs that define and distinguish this type of identity. (33)

In other words, Caribbean identities ensure the cultural continuity and preservation of values outside the region. Even though Premdas fails to specify the frameworks within which “memories of assigned Caribbean values” can be preserved and consolidated, I assume that these are achieved through transnational immigrant networks liable to sustain their ties with their island-based culture. Trans-Caribbean identities are not solely constructed through social networks. Writing can be a viable mode of cultural preservation, as Laye’s *L’ enfant noir*, among other works, has illustrated so well.

Identity categories of race and gender have to be taken into consideration in the exploration of female trans-Caribbean identity. Mayotte’s trans-Caribbean identity appears in the ways in which she recaptures the memories of her past as an assimilated Martinican woman who relentlessly valorizes whiteness. Indeed, Mayotte’s trans-Caribbean identity is grounded in an inauthentic Caribbean identity that vitiates her claim of Martinican identity. Both Mayotte and Nini leave their native islands without carrying any cultural values over to France because of their utter absorption of and identification with white values. In his interview with Jacqueline Leiner, Césaire describes the pre-negritude cultural scenario in Martinique in terms of emptiness and passive consumption:

J'ai toujours été frappé par le fait que les Antilles souffrent d'un manque. Il y a aux Antilles un vide culturel. Non que nous nous désintéressons de la culture, mais les Antilles sont trop exclusivement une société de consommation culturelle.

(Leiner v)

[I have always been struck by the fact that the Caribbean suffered from a lack.

There is a cultural void in the Caribbean. It is not that we have no interest in culture, but the Caribbean is too exclusively a society which consumes culture.]

The persistence of Mayotte's cultural assimilation after the Second World War extends the temporal range of Césaire's remark. The complexity of defining her trans-Caribbean identity is attributable to the legacy of French colonialism which is responsible for the fragmentation of the identity of the colonized, whose black skin and white mask are at war and who cannot find balance anywhere. Mayotte's backward glance to her lost Martinique from the vantage point of her revered France bears witness to the paradoxes inherent in her exile, which is a physical separation but not necessarily a psychological rupture. While Nini physically and emotionally breaks with her native Saint-Louis, Mayotte's look back into her past divides her cognitive and emotional attachments between two places. Thus Mayotte's trans-Caribbean identity could be conceived of as noxious to her wholeness and her psychological stability.

Sadji's and Capécia's descriptions of the liminal exile of their female protagonists present similarities and discrepancies. In their works, exile results from three things: the desire for the West and whiteness, the disintegration of families, and the loss of communal bearings. All three protagonists abandon their homelands, which fail to provide them with nurturing homes. However, exile has different outcomes in the novels.

Capécia frames expatriation within a context of ambivalence, where Mayotte's re-connection is mixed with a nostalgic gaze. Mayotte's claim of Martinique as home reveals the paradoxes and contradictions of exile. Such paradoxes are absent in Sadjì's novel, which does not quench the curiosity of the reader regarding Nini's relocation to France.

Conclusion

This examination of the liminal identities of mulattas as portrayed in literatures from Africa, America, and the Caribbean has provided the opportunity for bringing together works of thematic richness, cultural heterogeneity, and historical significance.

From the evidence presented in the analyses of these texts, it is clear that liminality is a valuable tool for mapping the identities of mixed-blood women. As suggested in the Introduction, an approach based on liminality offers new ways of understanding the construction of identity for the protagonists of these works. However, the concept of liminality does not exclude ambiguity, ambivalence, and contradictions because the negotiations of mulattas are inscribed within social spaces that restrict their freedom and agency. The use of liminality in relation to gender, place, and race extends the traditional conceptualization of the concept and adds other layers of complexity.

The texts analyzed in this study expose in many ways this complexity, because of both the barriers between mulattas and their oppressive, patriarchal, and racist societies, and the transgressive methods these women devise in order to seek self-assertion. Turner rightly conceives of liminality as anti-structure, by virtue of the fact that liminal entities stand aside from political and social positions in their quest for alternative existential paradigms. However, I would suggest that Turner's notion of anti-structure be called a structure within a structure. The evidence gathered in the different chapters illustrates this, because mulattas carve out spaces for themselves within the larger social structures and thus redefine their relations with their societies through a myriad of experiences.

The evidence that emerges from the analysis of the texts *Je suis martiniquaise* and *A Question of Power* suggests that these self-writings are fraught with ambiguities and

contradictions which are reflective of the fragmentation of the lives of the female narrators, caught up in the discontinuities of their exilic condition and their need to remember their past through recollections, as racial oppression and historical determinisms impact their thematic choices and the structural thread of their narratives. The backward glance of the narrators has different political and ideological purposes. The rejection of Capécia's protagonist, Mayotte, from Martinique because of her racial hybridity and subsequent nationalist claims in France reveals the dialectics of exile and nationalism. In this context, writing becomes a liminal negotiation between unbelonging and belonging, de-territorialization and imaginary re-territorialization. In Head's novelized autobiography, writing is the liminal experience between psychopathology and healing. The narrator Elizabeth goes through the liminal process of madness as a release of her interior demons and as a way to mental recovery. These two texts show the linkages between writing, race, and gender, and illustrate the liminal dimension of autobiographical writing as a site of self-knowledge and maturation. Geographical locations, gender, race, and social status determine the subjectivities of the narrators, but race and gender take precedence over geography because the individual selves enter into conflict with the oppressive institutions of colonialism, apartheid, and patriarchy.

Whatever the framework through which one views the condition of the mulatta, there is one experience that cannot be avoided: sexuality. The treatment of sexuality in the three texts *Quicksand*, *Nini*, *mulâtresse du Sénégal*, and *La négresse blanche* reveals that sexuality is not exclusively a liminal experience between race and gender, but also a liminal negotiation between individual and society. Outside sexual ideologies can exert an overarching influence on mulattas' experiences of sexuality to the point that they

become alienated from their bodies, as is the case in *Quicksand*. In the other two texts, upbringing and the internalization of colonialist assimilationist practices condition the sexuality of mulattas who exhibit their unabashed preference for white lovers. Despite their sexual autonomy, I argue that Sadjí's and Capécia's heroines have a false sense of power which is fed by the projection of their sexual fantasy. No force dissuades them from fulfilling their sexual lives, yet their desire for white males traps them in a world of illusions where the union with a white man is constantly deferred. Both Nini and Isaure pursue their dreams of marriage with whites to France. In all three works, marriage appears as detrimental to the fulfillment of women, or absent and sought after by them. In *Quicksand*, marriage is a respectable outlet for the sexuality of the heroine, yet it is also a trap, showing how conformity to social respectability smothers female sexuality. In *Nini*, *mulâtresse du Sénégal*, and *La négresse blanche* sexuality is the liminal gap between the opposing interests of the colonized and the colonizers. Women's hopes to have genuine relationships with colonizers based on trust and love are undercut by the latter's will to take advantage of their bodies. In each case, historical, ideological, and social forces determine the sexual meanings.

The diverse forces are so powerful that it is not surprising to find the two seemingly unrelated themes of madness and racial passing impacting on mulatta protagonists in some of these works. Racial passing reflects a form of mental alienation, a type of imbalance that could be described as a milder form of madness. Two of the texts, *Passing* and *A Question of Power*, offer examples of these kinds of psychological problems. Both are framed within the larger efforts of mulattas to reconceptualize identity by transgressing the lines that contain and categorize people. In *Les damnés de la*

terre, Fanon explains, “[l]a première chose que l’indigène apprend, c’est à rester à sa place, à ne pas dépasser les limites” (18) “[t]he first thing the native learns is to stay in his place, and not to go beyond certain limits” (52)]. I argue that the master’s attempt to police the identity of the native fuels the latter’s will to transgression, which is meant to affirm his humanity. The anomic liminality of Head’s and Larsen’s mulattas lies in their transformation of forbidden spaces into habitable spaces, but for the protagonists in their works madness appears to be more creative and productive than racial passing. While racial passing in Larsen’s *Passing* forecloses stable and coherent identitary possibilities for the heroines, madness in Head’s *A Question of Power* is a liminal catalyst for the sanity of the protagonist. Racial passing becomes assimilated to what I call a form of “passing into madness” because of the murder of one of the passers, Clare, by her fellow passer Irene. I suggest that the image of the madwoman dissecting power in Head’s autobiographical novel, through her liminal internal meditation, articulates a non-Western epistemology based upon the logic of invisibility and interiority, that acts as a challenge to Western visibility-based epistemology. Head’s use of madness is a deconstructive and reconstructive conceptualization of the trope of the madwoman in colonial discourses. Her conceptualization of madness calls for a problematization of the Western construction of what is mad or not and a redefinition of virtue along the parameters of the margins.

An experience that combines with other factors and contributes quite literally to the transgressive tendencies of these women is expatriation. In those examples where the protagonist leaves her homeland, the departure appears as both a solution and as a form of transgression. In both *Nini, mulâtresse du Sénégal*, *La négresse blanche*, and *Je suis*

martinique, the protagonist decides to leave home for what is seen as a more hospitable environment in France: colonial Africa and wartime Martinique do not provide nurturing homes for the female protagonists. Race and gender are the main factors that trigger off their expatriation. The crises of self-definition resulting from the lack of harmonization of their biracial heritages cause mulatta characters in this study to feel alienated from their socio-cultural environments. The absence of anchorage in their communities and any stable families to fall back on places the mixed-blood heroines in a situation of internal expatriation and desire for home. In this context, the dis-connection with the homeland unshackles them from the pangs of indeterminacy and social instability. Expatriation opens up new renegotiations with place for mulattas who enter a limen where the past is suspended and the future becomes pregnant with possibilities for self-reconstruction.

Authors provide different approaches to expatriation. In one pattern, the omission of the outcome of the heroine's journey to France lays the groundwork for ambivalent responses; her quest is either successful or aborted, though Sadji's narrative implies that her mulatta ruptures all ties with Africa. A second pattern illustrates the paradoxes of expatriation through the backward glance of the protagonists. In this context, home is situated within the shifting terrain where the "here" convokes the "elsewhere" and far-away memories are interwoven with exilic realities. I suggest that memories of the lost home make exile more bearable. In the three texts, mulattas have no nurturing home to return to, but attempt to retrieve home through reminiscences or to obliterate the existence of home. The reconciliation and harmonization of the contradictory experiences of the lost home and the exile land are the coherent alternatives that these authors fail to

incorporate in their texts, but the open-endedness of their texts is favorable to the emergence of a wide range of interpretive possibilities.

The evidence in the different texts analyzed in this study reveals that liminality challenges monologic representations of identities through a variety of alternative cultural meanings and paradigms that counteract cultural and political pressures. It is a concept that has been applied to many fields, including anthropology, psychotherapy, religion, literature, film, and theatre. The scope of this study, limited as it is to several narratives portraying mulattas, offers a basis for future research on liminality in relation to race and gender. This may be especially true in the context of postcolonial and postmodern narratives that reconsider the margin/center binomial, for the texts in this study illustrate the redefinition of the margin by mixed-blood women. Liminality is equally an appropriate tool in a global world where heterogeneous histories and cultures of contending people are in constant flux, and where cultural and academic debates about the definition of the human subject in a posthuman world are growing.

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