

THE “TRAGIC MULATTO” IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY AFRICAN LITERATURE

MIXED BODIES, SEPARATE RACES:
THE TROPE OF THE “(TRAGIC) MULATTO” IN
TWENTIETH-CENTURY AFRICAN LITERATURE

By

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation proposes that the American literary trope of the “tragic mulatto” has both roots and resonances in sub-Saharan Africa. The concept of the mulatto, a person of mixed black and white heritage, as a tragic, ambiguous Other evolved primarily from nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century American fiction. I argue, however, that the mulatto occupies a similarly vexed discursive space in the historiography of sub-Saharan Africa *and* contemporary African literature. After contextualizing the American trope through such postbellum novels as James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912) and Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand* (1928), I track the emergence of specific racially mixed populations in sub-Saharan Africa as a result of trade, migration, and colonialism. My historical survey of such mixed race communities as the Afro-Portuguese *lançados* of Senegambia and the Coloured people of South Africa brings to light the remarkable currency of (tragic) mulatto stereotypes across time and space. Having established the circulation of mulatto stereotypes in (pre-)colonial sub-Saharan Africa, I consider how two contemporary mixed race South African writers engage with such stereotypes in their work. This study argues that twentieth-century Coloured writers Bessie Head and Arthur Nortje realize the trope of tragic mixedness in their respective lives and writing. Head and Nortje reflect the rigid apartheid ideology of their native South Africa and assign universality to the “plight” of being mixed race in a segregationist society. But both writers also use their (gendered) identities as “tragically mixed” to challenge the policed racial categories of apartheid, subverting fixity through paradoxical performances of Self. I conclude my study in the post-civil rights and post-

apartheid arena of the twenty-first century, using my own experiences as an African “mulatta” and the current field of mixed race studies to illustrate how paradox itself is indispensable to progressive readings and imaginings of mixed race identity.

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Chapter One

The Evolution of the “Tragic Mulatto” Trope in American Literature: An Introduction

It has been said that the study of race, like the theory of numbers, is something which drives men mad. But the study of race will derange only those who accept as an initial assumption that everybody belongs to some race, so that a complete and meaningful classification is theoretically possible.

—Banton and Harwood, *The Race Concept*

In his introduction to the anthology “*Race, Writing, and Difference*,” Henry Louis Gates, Jr. makes a crucial observation about the exigent concept known as “race”: “Race, as a meaningful criterion within the biological sciences, has long been recognized to be a fiction” (4). Since this study deals extensively with the signification of race, particularly representations of mixed race, it is necessary to reiterate that *fictive* quality of “race.” Despite a persistent universal code of racial identification premised on skin colour, hair texture, facial features, and “blood,” there is no conclusive evidence to suggest that biological race exists. Yet notions about race and its meaning continue to influence human interaction on a grand scale—sparking solidarity and dissonance, giving rise to myths both advantageous and destructive, and inciting unspeakable atrocities and remarkable acts of altruism. It is in *this* capacity, as notion, idea, and social construct that race has made its impact. As Toni Morrison points out in her text *Playing in the Dark*, “Race has become metaphorical—a way of referring to and disguising forces, events, classes, and expressions of social decay and economic division far more threatening to the body politic than biological ‘race’ ever was” (63). In short, race is not only metaphorical, but precariously so—race, in the words of Gates, is “a dangerous trope” (5).¹

Although the mixed race subject seemingly subverts or “gives the lie” to the very premise of race, that subject is, tellingly, also fixed and classified according to notions of both biological and metaphorical race. The “mulatto,” a figure between the monolithic racial constructs of “black” and “white,” is a significant (though by no means exclusive) example of the fixed mixed race subject. Indeed, as this chapter will explore, the very term “mulatto” signals rigid racial hierarchies and dangerous tropes. And my own employment of this term, or even the more politically-correct “mixed race,” is also suspect.² To clarify my use of racial labels, I borrow the words of multiracial scholar Naomi Zack, who effectively explains the academic currency of such otherwise problematic terms:

My intention here is to use the words “race,” “mixed race,” “black,” “white,” “mulatto,” “quadroon,” and so on as an anthropologist might use the words “untouchable,” “berdash,” “totem,” “shamin”—the words are used to describe what is going on in a culture, in order to understand that culture. But, unlike an anthropologist, a philosopher goes beyond understanding into analysis. The analysis translates the understanding of how racial words are used into a theory or worldview, which is then criticized. (*Race* 71)

Like Zack, I use these racial signifiers in the manner of cultural artefacts, which are helpful for investigating, analyzing, and ultimately criticizing the broader cultural milieus in which they operate. Thus, I consciously use such words as “black,” “white,” and “mixed race” in order to problematize “race” as a global ideology.

In the same vein of strategic essentialism, I evoke such a fraught term as “mulatto” knowing that it is fraught and with the intention of interrogating the system(s) that cultivated the term and its associations. Despite an ostensibly clear etymology and precise definition, the word “mulatto” is neither exact in its origin nor consistent in its

application. As with all racial labels, this term is fluid and has taken on a diverse history of meaning that shifts with time and place. My own interest in the term begins, for the purpose of this project, with its usage on the plantations of the Americas and in turn-of-the-century American literature. Although the primary objective of this study is to move *beyond* the American focus and place the sign of (tragic) mixedness in an African context, the American mulatto figure remains a crucial foil for my reading of the mixed race African. The early-twentieth-century mulatto fiction of the United States will ultimately serve as a comparative model for my reading of Coloured South African literature. Particularly since the South African writers I examine ostensibly affirm the American stereotype of the tragic mulatto, an exploration of the American context becomes necessary. Before reaching back across centuries and continents, however, I will first touch on a relatively recent anecdote that effectively frames the ongoing impact of seemingly obsolete racial jargon.

*You Say MooLatte, We Say Mulatto—Let's Call the Whole Thing Off*³

In the summer of 2004, the American fast-food franchise Dairy Queen launched an ice coffee drink called the MooLatte, which immediately sparked a small controversy. A number of online magazines posted articles questioning the similarities between “MooLatte” and “mulatto” and berating the DQ Corporation for naming the light brown frozen drink in such poor taste. The most referenced censure, written by Timothy Noah for the aptly-named *Slate* magazine, poses a series of sardonic questions: “Doesn’t Dairy Queen have any black employees? Or at least somebody who’s seen *Show Boat*?” A

similar diatribe in *The Houston Press* contains an extraordinary interview orchestrated by writers Richard Connelly and Craig Malisow with unsuspecting DQ spokesperson Chad Durasa. The Swiftian conversation includes the following exchange:

Q. This drink, it's not the "Mulatto"?
A. No. No. No. "Moo," meaning cow, and then "latte," meaning—
Q. OK. We were thinking of some other possible items, and I just wanted to run them by you. How about the High Yellow Butterscotch Sundae?
A. I'm not sure if I understand what that is.
Q. Just like a sundae with butterscotch topping, but this would be High Yellow butterscotch.
A. You mean like a higher quality?
Q. Yeah. That's just something to consider. We were also thinking—the MooLatte has three separate flavours, but if you took *eight* flavours and combined them, you could call it the Octoroonie.
A. Octoroonie?
Q. Yeah.
A. Actually—wow, that's actually a pretty good idea.
Q. And then one more here . . . Sambo's Extra Dark Triple Chocolate Shake. How's that grab you?

Connelly concludes the article in the same caustic, albeit droll, manner: "We can't wait for DQ to introduce these. And hey—*everyone* who drives up in blackface gets one free!!"

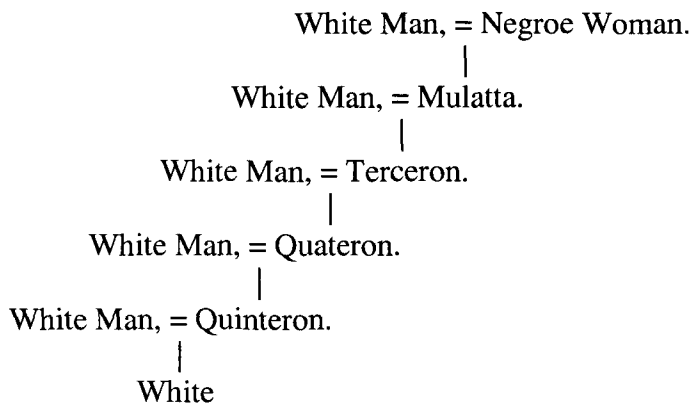
This interview and the seemingly banal "slushy" drink that incited such controversy bring to light some of the central issues I will cover in this chapter. Couched between the layers of irony are inferences of widespread ignorance about a painful national history and allusions to the complex hierarchies of race and colour that continue to be central to the institution of racism. Admittedly, the *Houston Press* writers make their point at the expense of a company official who really does seem to be "in the dark," but that factor is itself compelling. Determining whether the DQ marketing team is guilty of racism or just plain obliviousness—often one and the same thing—is not my purpose

here. Rather, I use this contemporary example as segue into the origin of such words as “mulatto” and the tradition of “colourism” that gave these words their currency, particularly in the United States.

In mock anticipation of future DQ products, Connelly and Malisow suggest the High Yellow Butterscotch Sundae, the Octoroonie, and Sambo’s Extra Dark Triple Chocolate Shake. Their deliberate parody of these racial terms as ice cream treats is not only intended to be satirical but obvious.⁴ While their efforts are lost on Chad Durasa, the demonstration remains useful for conveying the bizarre but historical practice of what simply amounts to “colour coding.” For the racist systems by which people of colour were once classified in the Americas is not so far removed from the ways in which we now distinguish between a black coffee, a mochaccino, and a steamed milk or, to be more precise, a Chocolate Xtreme Blizzard®, Mocha Chip Blizzard®, and a Queen’s Choice Vanilla Big Scoop®. Before evolutionary theory and imperialism in Victorian England and the Emancipation Proclamation in post-Civil War America triggered a frenzy of pseudoscientific racism, the pedantic taxonomy of so-called “pure” and “mixed” races was already common in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century West Indian colonies.

Matthew Lewis, an English writer and slave-holder, notes the various racial categories on his Jamaican plantation in his 1816 journal: “The offspring of a white man and black woman is a *mulatto*; the mulatto and black produce a *sambo*; from the mulatto and white comes the *quadroon*; from the quadroon and white the *mustee*; the child of a mustee by a white man is called a *musteefino*” (68). Written only two weeks after the author’s arrival in Jamaica, this methodical entry reflects the complex racial nomenclature

already in place as well as the significance of such taxonomy to Lewis, who records the labels with the same precision he uses to describe flora and fauna. Four decades before Lewis jotted down his classification, Edward Long included a similar racial chart, “Direct Lineal Ascent from the Negroe Venter,” in his infamous *The History of Jamaica* (260), first published in 1774:



Although there are notable discrepancies between the accounts of these two plantation owners—Long uses the feminized form “mulatta,” applies different Spanish terminology, and indicates a return to whiteness by the fifth generation—the underlying premise is the same.⁵ Both men refer to the parallel, if not always uniform, systems by which individuals between black and white were meticulously coded, often in an attempt to standardize and control the “aberration” of interracial relations.

I will not attempt to address all the numerous schemas, methods, and terms applied to mixed races since the advent of the transatlantic slave trade. As Lewis and Long illustrate, for all that cataloguing races was a common practice, the actual labels varied significantly, even within the same colonies. In his chapter “The Calculus of Color” from *Neither Black nor White yet Both*, Werner Sollors provides a thorough

history of colour coding and examines such convoluted proposals as John Stedman's 1796 "Gradation of Shades between Europe and Africa," Moreau de Saint Méry's algebraic *Description de l'Isle Saint-Domingue* from 1797, and Julien-Joseph Virey's 1801 *Histoire Naturelle du Genre Humain*. For my discussion, the most important point to note here is that there is always an identifiable source for these systems, despite linguistic or geographical variances. If we rewind or backtrack to what Sollors calls "a founding, interracial moment that is taken as the point of origin" (*Neither* 124), we usually find the same figure—a seemingly constant marker—the mulatto.

The etymology of the word "mulatto" continues to be debated, although most scholars trace its origin to the Spanish word *mulato*, meaning "young mule." The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the term as "a person having one white and one black parent," fixes its earliest usage at 1591, and politely reminds readers that the word is "now chiefly considered *offensive*." The other proffered, and perhaps preferable, etymological source for "mulatto" is the Arabic word *muwallad*, which "has the special meaning of being born among Arabs and covers all persons (mixed-bloods included) who are not perceived as being originally of 'old' Arab ancestry" (Forbes 145). While this latter possibility implies an innocuous, even noble, origin for "mulatto," it is the correlation with "mule" that has endured.⁶

The traits of the cross-bred mule were often conflated with so-called mulatto characteristics and helped to propagate such stereotypes as genetic inferiority and infertility. As Long observes when expounding on the widespread conviction that mulattos were sterile, "Some few of them have intermarried here with those of their own

complexion; but such matches have generally been defective and barren. *They seem in this respect to be actually of the mule-kind*, and not so capable of producing from one another as from a commerce with a distinct White or Black” (my emphasis, 335). Long includes a substantial section on mulattos in his *History*, and provides an anthropological description of the “species,” replete with images of attractive but insatiable “yellow *quashebas*” who, succubus-like, prey on weak European men. Although convinced of the mulatta’s “lasciviousness,” Long is equally certain of the mixed woman’s barrenness and the inherent weakness of any potential progeny unless she unites with an individual of “pure” race. As we will see, these early fictions about the mulatto germinated and circulated over time, eventually manifesting in the literary fictions of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century American writers.

Long’s general portrayal of mulattos as attractive but feeble creatures resurfaces in the journal of his countryman Matthew Lewis, who was familiar with Long’s work. Lewis betrays an ongoing fascination with “brown girls” throughout his own West Indian account and both affirms and discounts some of Long’s notions:

I think it is Long who asserts, that two mulattoes will never have children; but, as far as the most positive assurances can go, since my arrival in Jamaica, I have reason to believe the contrary, and that mulattoes breed together just as well as blacks and whites; but they are almost universally weak and effeminate persons, and thus their children are very difficult to rear. (68)

Lewis, in a moment seemingly unclouded by hearsay, admits that the myth of the sterile mulatto is precisely that—a myth. He immediately negates this early promise of intuition, however, by confirming the alleged frailty of the mixed race, pointing out that “on a sugar estate one black is considered more than equal to two mulattoes” (68-69). Such a

mercantile “fact” may well have been true but simply reflects the plantation owners’s collective investment in prevalent stereotypes. Indeed, for plantation owners across the Americas, investing in stereotypes (among other things) was the order of the day.

The slaveholders of the United States were no exception. Less than a century after such West Indian proprietors as Long and Lewis carefully catalogued, embellished, and ultimately tried to organize the mixed races in their notes and diaries, men in the United States were writing treatises, making speeches, and drawing up plans for the same reason. By the mid-1800s, miscegenation in the United States was a “tradition” roughly two hundred years old. As Philip Morgan points out in his article on interracial sex in the early modern period, “A certain measure of easy-going, promiscuous behaviour on the part of white men was taken for granted. . . . Young white men were expected to sow their oats in the slave quarters” (63). Although most of the states, beginning with Virginia, implemented laws ensuring that slavery was hereditary and passed on from (black) mother to (mixed) child, the inevitable blurring of the colour line made it difficult to “accurately” determine race and thus status.

In the nineteenth century, the “race problem” reached a stage of national crisis. Lawrence Tenzer remarks that, “As subsequent generations of mulattoes were born of white men and dark, lighter, and light slave mothers, the progeny lost Negroid characteristics and lightened to the point where in all actuality they were white, and questions arose as to their legal status” (12). In order to fix the legal status of mixed race persons, the different states began adopting very different definitions of “mulatto” according to parentage, generation, colour, features, and sometimes, on the part of the

definers, arbitrary inclination.⁷ Further complicating perceptions of mixedness was the prevalent belief in hypodescent or what is still commonly referred to as the one-drop rule—“the social mechanism that works to place the offspring of two different racial groups into the lower-status category” (Spencer, “Assessing” 361). This conviction, which continues to impact mixed race persons in the United States, pronounced one drop of black blood sufficient to “[make] a Negro” (Dixon 242).

Underlying the growing obsession with categorizing race was the fear that the black blood would not tell, a fear that William D. Kelley effectively voices in a public address to Philadelphians in 1856: “[After the mulatto,] the second cross is a quadroon. Trace it in geometrical progression. In the next there is but one-eighth of negro blood, in the next (only the fourth cross), there is but one-sixteenth of negro blood; and where the taint is so slight as that, who shall trace it? Who shall discover it?” The hint of desperation in Kelley’s questions reflects a greater national anxiety—an anxiety demonstrated by the scrambling of the various states to interpellate the mulatto legally and deal with the consequent court cases contesting that interpellation.⁸ While the conclusion of the Civil War in 1865 signalled an “official” end to slavery, it did very little to resolve the dilemma of mixed races in America. Indeed, Edward Reuter would still write over fifty years later that, “Broadly speaking . . . the ‘race problem’ is the problem of the mulatto” (87-88). Eager to expound on that problem, numerous nineteenth- and early twentieth-century writers turned to prose and poetry, incorporating romanticized images of the mulatto into their work.

Blood, Beauty, and Bastardy: The Birth of a National Stereotype

Such texts as Lydia Maria Child's "The Quadroons" (1842) and William Wells Brown's *Clotel; or, The President's Daughter* (1853), published before the Civil War, manifest elements of what would later be referred to as the "tragic mulatto" stereotype. These works focus on mixed race female characters that are the products of illegitimate unions and predestined by their indeterminate racial status for unhappy lives and sad deaths. Admittedly, such adjectives as "illegitimate," "indeterminate," and "unhappy" seem to qualify both these texts as part of the tragic mulatto genre. However, Child's short story and Brown's novel remain products of their time and centralize such features as the relationship between the mulatto's "full race" parents and the inevitable impact of hereditary slavery on the title characters.

As Sollors points out, "The shifts in focus from interracial (or mixed-status) founding couples to biracial descendants, from parents to their children, and from slavery to race, were central to the rise of the figures that have become known collectively as the 'Tragic Mulatto'" (*Neither* 222-23). Thus, the literary stereotype crystallized in much later texts like Frances Harper's *Iola Leroy* (1892), Pauline Hopkins's *Contending Forces* (1899), Charles W. Chesnutt's *The House behind Cedars* (1900), James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928), and Jessie Fauset's *The Chinaberry Tree* (1931). In these postbellum novels, especially those written in the twentieth century, the subjectivities of the tragic mulatto's

parents are secondary and the trauma of slavery is superseded by the torment of interraciality.

As indicated earlier, by the time such writers as Child and Brown began to shape the tragic mulatto complex in the mid-nineteenth century, slaveholders like Long and Lewis had already laid the blueprints for the stereotype through their published descriptions of ostensible mulatto traits. Postcolonial scholars emphasize the significance of the stereotype as a strategy of colonial discourse, which allows the colonizer to intimately know the Other from a paradoxically safe distance. Homi Bhabha, who describes the stereotype as both phobia and fetish, argues that, “The stereotype [. . .] is a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always ‘in place’, already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated . . . as if the essential duplicity of the Asiatic or the bestial sexual license of the African that needs no proof, can never really, in discourse, be proved” (66). Like these racial stereotypes, the beauty, desirability, and pathos of the mulatto were supposedly firm characteristics, yet they still needed constant reiteration. Edward Long’s claim that “the Mulattos are, in general, well-shaped, and the women well-featured” (335) or Matthew Lewis’s firm statement that “[mulattos] are almost universally weak and effeminate persons” (68) are precisely the kinds of essential but anxiously repeated “truths” that contributed to the tragic mulatto complex.

Attractive, intelligent, refined, and tortured by the conflicting blood of two races, the tragic mulatto appealed to the sympathies of white readers, who appreciated the enlightenment of a white heritage even as they pitied the hindrance of a black one.

Sterling A. Brown, the first scholar to identify and thoroughly criticize the stereotype, points out in his 1933 article that, “The mulatto is victim of a divided inheritance and therefore miserable; he is a ‘man without a race’ worshipping the whites and despised by them, despising and despised by Negroes, perplexed by his struggle to unite a white intellect with black sensuousness” (196). Thus, illegitimacy, ambiguity, and tainted blood aside, the true tragedy of the mulatto character lies in internal frustration and psychological turmoil.

In order to unpack this trope further, I will discuss two of the previously mentioned texts, Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* and Larsen’s *Quicksand*, at greater length. Although the tragic mulatto stereotype was employed by white and black authors of both sexes, my own interest lies in representations of mixedness by mixed race persons—a dynamic that I will ultimately ground in the work of twentieth-century Coloured South African writers Bessie Head and Arthur Nortje. The American literary context, however, sets an interesting precedent for these mixed race African writers. Indeed, such twentieth-century American authors as Johnson and Larsen proffer troubling portraits of the mulatto figure—portraits that Head and Nortje, writers from a later generation and a different continent, reflect with surprising consistency in their texts.

Admittedly, both Head and Nortje were well-read intellectuals, yet their exposure to the Harlem Renaissance and such specific tragic mulatto texts as *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* and *Quicksand* remains debateable.⁹ Thus, the resonances between the mixed race characters of Head’s and Nortje’s writings and the mixed race protagonists of earlier American

novelists excites some curiosity. Did the Jim Crowism of the United States and the institution of apartheid in South Africa produce a common literary figure in the tragic mulatto, a figure that consequently appears in both Harlem Renaissance and late-twentieth-century Coloured literature? While the texts of Johnson and Larsen may not have had a *direct* influence on these South African writers, the American novels nonetheless typify fraught portrayals of the mixed race figure and seemingly anticipate the later African texts. Notably, despite Johnson's self-identification as black, his novel remains significant because of its gendered perspective and its first-person representation of the tragic mulatto figure. Johnson's narrator, "a fearless, educated mulatto, indistinguishable from whites" (Sterling A. Brown 194), personifies the masculine counterpart to the more common female protagonist, the beautiful tragic mulatta. Where the latter is concerned, Larsen's heroine Helga Crane epitomizes the trope, while also implicating the author herself. Indeed, Larsen's public self-identification as a mixed race woman renders her autobiographical text *Quicksand* all the more compelling.

Published anonymously as the bona fide autobiography of a mulatto man passing as white, Johnson's *The Autobiography* did not receive critical acclaim until its republication in 1927. Since then, the text has been lauded by generations of critics as groundbreaking work in African American literature. M. Giulia Fabi argues that, "Johnson's pioneer fictional play with both the autobiographical mode and an unreliable first-person narrator is indicative of a new interest in portraying how reality is filtered, recreated, and mystified by individual consciousness" (90). Given the literary tradition of seeing the exoticized mulatto through a patronizing white gaze, Johnson's centralization

of the mixed race protagonist as narrator is an important deviation from the standard trope. But the ironic tenor of the novel notwithstanding, Johnson's nameless narrator still endorses recognizable stereotypes about mixed race characters. In keeping with the convention that "the Tragic Mulatto . . . is typically raised as white and only later discovers the trace of blackness" (Peel 230), the narrator only traumatically learns of his black blood when he is restrained from standing with the white scholars at his integrated public school. Devastated, he runs home after class and fearfully studies his reflection in the mirror, a Lacanian scene in which he perceives his non-white Self for the first time:

I was accustomed to hear remarks about my beauty; but, now, for the first time, I became conscious of it, and recognized it. I noticed the ivory whiteness of my skin, the beauty of my mouth, the size and liquid darkness of my eyes, and how the long black lashes that fringed and shaded them produced an effect that was strangely fascinating even to me. I noticed the softness and glossiness of my dark hair that fell in waves over my temples, making my forehead appear whiter than it really was. How long I stood there gazing at my image I do not know. (8)

This self-exoticization on the part of the narrator is curious but also in keeping with the clichéd image of the mulatto. The description immediately brings to mind the flowery sketches of such writers as Lydia Maria Child, who uses similar language to depict Xarifa, the heroine of her 1842 short story "The Quadroons": "Her complexion, of a still lighter brown . . . was rich and glowing as an autumnal leaf. The iris of her large, dark eye had the melting, mezzotinto outline, which remains the last vestige of African ancestry, and gives that plaintive expression, so often observed, and so appropriate to that docile and injured race" (233). What differentiates the equally florid portrait of Johnson's mixed race protagonist is the first-person voice and, as Sollors points out, the "narcissistic and somewhat androgynous *self*-description" (*Neither* 267).

The narrator, bewitched by his own appearance, sounds more like a white male lover observing the beauty of the tragic mulatta than a child looking in a mirror. But although Johnson's ironic exploration of what constitutes the Self and the Other borders on subversive, the tragic mulatto stereotype remains intact. After feminizing and objectifying himself, actions that foreshadow his later relationship with a white male character (and which can be traced back to Matthew Lewis's description of the mulatto as weak and effeminate), the narrator runs to his mother for confirmation of his racial identity. She vehemently denies his blackness but cannot affirm his whiteness, which inevitably leads to the full disclosure of his parentage: "She spoke to me quite frankly about herself, my father and myself; she, the sewing girl of my father's mother; he, an impetuous young man home from college; I, the child of this unsanctioned love" (19).

At this early point in the narrative, Johnson's narrator is almost interchangeable with Child's heroine Xarifa, whose white father and quadroon mother also have "a marriage sanctioned by Heaven, though unrecognized on earth" (233). Xarifa's father, like the narrator's, marries a white woman and leaves his illegitimate family, but continues to provide financially for his mixed race child. Here, however, the similarities end and we observe the significance of the gender division in the tragic mulatto/a trope and the shift from emphasis on slavery (in Child's pre-Civil War text) to race (in Johnson's post-Civil War text). After the death of her parents, Child's protagonist is sold to a wealthy master, which prompts her white lover to plan her liberation. But in keeping with the tragic theme, the lover is shot and the heroine, reduced to "a raving maniac" (239), takes her own life and is consequently cursed, buried, and forgotten. For the young,

beautiful, and almost-white mulatta in a racist and sexist society, this literally tragic end is seemingly unavoidable. As Johnson's protagonist illustrates, however, the mixed race man often has more mobility, agency, and choice than his female counterpart, despite his ongoing struggles as a tragic mulatto.

Following his graduation from grammar school and the death of his mother, the Ex-Colored Man makes his Dickensian way in the world. Armed with education, sophistication, and a talent for the piano, he mingles easily with people of different classes and races. In this respect, Johnson puts a different spin on the typical experiences of the mulatto figure. Unlike the mixed race characters of nineteenth-century texts that must usually make a drastic and enforced transition from privilege to slavery, Johnson's narrator is comfortable in multiple settings and "passes" in both lower- and upper-class, educated and uneducated, and black and white circles. His judgmental commentary on race and class notwithstanding, the narrator's loyalties ultimately lie with the black race, despite an often supercilious tone and an exoticizing gaze on par with that of any white plantation owner: "I could not help but notice that many of the girls, particularly those of the delicate brown shades, with black eyes and wavy dark hair, were decidedly pretty. Among the boys, many of the blackest were fine specimens of young manhood, tall, straight, and muscular, with magnificent heads" (28).

Although he maintains his superiority complex, the narrator renounces the extravagant lifestyle provided for him by an enigmatic white millionaire in order to follow his nostalgic dream of putting black themes to classical music. His constant psychological struggle with the "race problem" reaches a climax, however, when he

witnesses a horrific lynching. Appalled and ashamed by the dehumanized fate of the black victim, the narrator immediately and unequivocally decides to forsake the black race and pass as white:

I finally made up my mind that I would neither disclaim the black race nor claim the white race; but that I would change my name, raise a mustache, and let the world take me for what it would; that it was not necessary for me to go about with a label of inferiority pasted across my forehead. All the while, I understood that it was not discouragement, or fear, or search for a larger field of action and opportunity, that was driving me out of the Negro race. I knew that it was shame, unbearable shame. (90)

The narrator clearly tries to justify his actions, but his culpability is transparent, not only to himself but to his readers (many of whom believed the story's authenticity at the time of its first publication). His proposal to "let the world take [him] for what it would" is unconvincing in light of his considerable efforts to alter his identity and Johnson's conclusive portrait of his mixed race protagonist is condemnatory.

After his fundamental decision to "pass," the narrator moves quickly ahead in life to become a successful businessman. His marriage to a white woman, ironically described as "the most dazzlingly white thing [he] had ever seen" (93), is followed by the birth of their two children and the premature death of his wife. The tragedy for the Ex-Colored Man ultimately lies in his passing and the bitter realization that he has "sold [his] birthright for a mess of pottage" (100). Although he is not doomed to an unpleasant death or, as we will see with Larsen's tragic mulatta, the Sisyphean cycle of "preparing for or recovering from childbirth" (Larsen 124), he is sentenced to lifelong guilt. But despite Johnson's evocation of the romanticized mulatto trope and his definitive criticism of passing, *The Autobiography* effectively underscores the very real and decidedly troubled

position of mixed race persons in early-twentieth-century America. By emphasizing the “damned if you do, damned if you don’t” element of racial passing, Johnson transcends the more one-dimensional tragic mulatto texts of his nineteenth-century predecessors. While we cannot ignore his didacticism, Johnson’s bildungsroman remains a useful comparative reference for the work of Head and Nortje—writers who, like the Ex-Colored Man, were caught in the uncomfortable interstice between races in a rigidly segregated society.

One year after the reissue of Johnson’s *The Autobiography*, Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand* appeared in print and enjoyed immediate critical success. More patently autobiographical than Johnson’s novel, *Quicksand* focuses on a mixed race woman searching for her place in the Manichean world of black and white, a description that immediately resonates with the life and writings of Bessie Head. Unlike Johnson’s novel, which involves a black writer assuming the identity of a mixed race man who is pretending to be white, Larsen’s text has fewer degrees of separation between author and text. Indeed, Larsen’s proclaimed Danish and West Indian heritage and her eventual isolation from both black and white contemporaries are inextricable from the narrative of her protagonist, Helga Crane. In her introduction to Larsen’s novels, Deborah McDowell identifies “contradictory impulses” in *Quicksand*, which she attributes to the evident trope of the tragic mulatto: “Most critics locate the origins of that dualism in Helga’s mixed racial heritage. The classic ‘tragic mulatto,’ alienated from both races, she is defeated by her struggle to reconcile the psychic confusion that this mixed heritage creates” (xvii).

Certainly, one cannot read the prophetically-titled *Quicksand* without situating it as a tragic mulatto site.

McDowell goes on to claim, however, that the mulatto trope is secondary to the more pressing significance of female sexuality in Larsen's novel: "Helga is divided psychically between a desire for sexual fulfillment and a longing for social respectability" (xvii). My own engagement with *Quicksand* stems precisely from this assumed separation between the trope of the tragic mulatto and female sexuality. Admittedly, McDowell is one of many critics to foreground sexuality, particularly black female sexuality, as central to Larsen's text. Kimberly Monda, for example, argues that, "Nella Larsen's portrait of Helga Crane . . . criticizes the ways in which white racist constructions of black women's allegedly inherent lasciviousness have cut black women off from experiencing their legitimate sexual desires" (23). Here we witness Monda's problematic conflation of mixedness and blackness in her discussion of Helga's sexuality.

If mixedness is so central to the racial struggles of Larsen's protagonist, why does that mixedness suddenly fail to obtain in discussions about her sexuality? If anything, these two signifiers of the mulatta heroine—mixedness and sexuality—are conterminous and should be read as such, especially in a critical text like *Quicksand*, which interrogates these tropes even as it employs them. Indeed, McDowell's observation that Helga is torn between "a desire for [black] sexual fulfillment and a longing for [white] social respectability" is directly related to her role as mulatta. As Teresa Zackodnik points out in her text *The Mulatta and the Politics of Race*, "Since the mulatta ostensibly defined both the propriety of white womanhood and the extreme of illicit black female sexuality . . .

we see the mulatta . . . taking on double border duty, defining the poles of womanhood as well as ‘race’” (135).

Like Johnson’s *The Autobiography*, *Quicksand* offers a detailed psychological representation of the mixed race subject—one that goes beyond the superficial characterizations of the mulatta in Child’s “The Quadroons” or William Wells Brown’s *Clotel*. As with Johnson’s text, however, the emphasis on the protagonist’s inner turmoil consequently affirms the basic stereotype of the tragic mulatto’s tortured psyche. Predictably beautiful, intelligent, and sophisticated, Helga Crane manifests the same wit and cynicism as the Ex-Colored Man and the same cosmopolitan lifestyle. She continues to battle, however, with alienation and an increasing sense of disgust and self-loathing where blackness is concerned—a disgust complicated by her own reticent desire for a black man, the distinguished Dr. Anderson. Her analogous racial and sexual confusion reaches a symbolic climax in a Harlem nightclub:

They danced, ambling lazily to a crooning melody, or violently twisting their bodies, like whirling leaves, to a sudden streaming rhythm, or shaking themselves ecstatically to a thumping of unseen tomtoms. For a while, Helga was oblivious of the reek of flesh, smoke, and alcohol, oblivious of the oblivion of other gyrating pairs, oblivious of the color, the noise, and the grand distorted childishness of it all. She was drugged, lifted, sustained, by the extraordinary music, blown out, ripped out, beaten out, by the joyous, wild, murky orchestra. The essence of life seemed bodily motion. And when suddenly the music 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 hardened her determination to get away. She wasn’t, she told herself, a jungle creature. (59)

Helga’s perception of blackness is ironically rooted in the same racist colonial tradition that produced the tragic mulatto stereotype—the crowd becomes animalistic, the

music is reduced to pagan drumming, and the club is transformed into a veritable “heart of darkness.” But despite revelling in the moment, Helga refuses to acknowledge her own association with “the jungle.” Where the Ex-Colored Man is sickened by “the transformation of [white] human beings into savage beasts” (88) during the lynching, Helga is repulsed by the imagined savagery of blackness. The experience is enough to make her temporarily quit the race, not by passing but by boarding an ocean liner bound for Denmark.

Notably, Helga’s two-year tenure in Europe teaches her about “the irresistible ties of race” (92) and serves as an effective commentary on the exoticization of the mulatta figure. Although warmly welcomed by her maternal aunt, Helga quickly becomes the resident Other of Copenhagen. On her first afternoon in Denmark, her aunt remarks, ““You must have bright things to set off the color of your lovely brown skin. Striking things, exotic things. You must make an impression”” (68). This statement is echoed by her aunt’s husband, who adds, ““She ought to have ear-rings, long ones. Is it too late for Garborg’s?”” (69). Immediately, Helga becomes the Oriental woman that Edward Said references in his influential postcolonial text *Orientalism*, the Egyptian courtesan who is spoken for and represented by Flaubert: “*He* spoke for and represented her. He was foreign, comparatively wealthy, male, and these were historical facts of domination that allowed him not only to possess Kuchuk Hanem physically but to speak for her and tell his readers in what way she was ‘typically Oriental’” (6). Helga’s relatives present her in a similar manner, not as she is but as they think she should (stereo)typically be—a striking and exotic thing for which they literally speak: “Herr and Fru Dahl did the

talking, answered the questions” (70). As a result, Helga’s Otherness draws constant attention (the antithesis to passing) and she soon becomes known in Copenhagen as “*Den Sorte*”—“The Black.”

Through Helga’s experiences in Denmark, Larsen also critiques “the modern stereotype that the greatest yearning of the girl of mixed life is for a white lover” (Sterling A. Brown 194).¹⁰ After receiving a proposal of marriage from a celebrated painter, Helga impulsively rebuffs her white suitor, declaring that she is not, as he insinuates, for sale. Another turning point in the narrative, Helga’s rejection of a European husband leads to nostalgia for the black culture she originally detested—a nostalgia akin to the Ex-Colored Man’s “strange longing for [his] mother’s people” (99). Helga returns to America, where she renews her acquaintance with her now-married love interest, Dr. Anderson. Mature, attractive, and educated, Dr. Anderson represents the only possible redemption for Larsen’s heroine because he alone can reconcile her to her repressed sexuality and the black race. Although an adulterous kiss results in fleeting but genuine happiness for Helga, Anderson eventually dismisses their embrace as a trite, drunken act, triggering the heroine’s final self-destructive descent.

Until this late moment in the narrative, Larsen’s tragic mulatta seems not only saveable but, more significantly, able to save herself. The sexism of the stereotype (and the era) notwithstanding, Helga evinces considerable agency and ability, yet the final romantic loss of Anderson results in the earnest resumption of the tragic mulatto trope. Despondent, Helga wanders into a black church, where she becomes transfixed by the zealous preacher and the fanatical service. The scene parallels Helga’s earlier experience

in the Harlem nightclub and once again she is horrified by the “heart of darkness”: “The faces of the men and women took on the aspect of a dim vision. ‘This,’ she whispered to herself, ‘is terrible. I must get out of here.’ But the horror held her” (113). Finally, like Conrad’s Mr. Kurtz, Helga ostensibly “goes native,” casting off the shackles of white propriety and submitting to the orgiastic crowd. Following this strange religious encounter, Helga promptly dispenses with any remaining sexual inhibitions, seduces a “fattish yellow man” (115) from the church, marries him, and resigns herself to “a ‘quagmire’ of endless, life-threatening pregnancies and childbirths” (Monda 23)—a fate that cements her feminine role as a tragic *mulatta*.

Like Johnson’s *The Autobiography*, *Quicksand* leaves its readers with a mixed message. Helga’s constant unrest throughout the novel and her ultimate demise once again implicates the alienation of the mixed race figure. Larsen’s choice of a female protagonist further centralizes what Zackodnik terms the “double border duty” of the mulatta, the onus to be both white and black, both proper lady and “‘pore los’ Jezebel” (112). Particularly in light of the literary evolution of mulattas, from Long’s “yellow *quashebas*” to Child’s hapless “quadroons,” Larsen’s involved characterization of Helga Crane and the author’s own role as mulatta situate *Quicksand* as a pioneering text where interracial literature is concerned. Yet, despite her critique of the “race problem” and her criticism of racial and gender stereotypes, Larsen’s adaptation of the tragic mulatto trope remains questionable, especially because Helga’s tragic end is self-imposed and completely unnecessary: “She had ruined her life. Made it impossible ever again to do the things that she wanted, have the things that she loved, mingle with the people she liked.

She had, to put it as brutally as anyone could, been a fool” (133). Although Child’s *Xarifa* is sold into slavery and Johnson’s *Ex-Colored Man* is shamed and frightened into passing, Helga has no exterior force to account for her tragedy. She rashly takes on an earthly Hell in exchange for an anticipated Heaven—a reckless decision that she regrets right up to the end of the narrative. And Larsen offers very little in the way of explanation for her protagonist’s actions, except Helga’s tortured psyche, which is forever and problematically linked to her role as mulatta.

Ironically, it is precisely these kinds of complexities and contradictions that distinguish such novels as *The Autobiography* and *Quicksand* from their more simplistic antecedents, positioning them as useful points of reference for the African texts I will discuss in subsequent chapters. At the very least, these particular novels convey the worthwhile message that there cannot be a simple or a utopian resolution for the mulatto figure in segregated society. Almost a century after Johnson and Larsen probed the depths of the mixed consciousness and questioned essentialist notions of race in their texts, mixed race persons continue to grapple with the dualism of black and white in the new millennium. As Rainier Spencer remarks,

Mixed-race identity has, of course, been an issue in British North America and later in the United States for hundreds of years as mulattoes, octoroons, and quadroons have long been fixtures on the American scene. Recent times, however, have seen the mixed-race idea and the question of a US federal multiracial category occasionally occupy the forefront of national debate in ways it never had previously. (“Assessing” 358)

Miscegenation remains ever crucial to the question of an American cultural identity; although, as I explore in the next chapter, the issue of mixed race identity is clearly not restricted to the Americas. Indeed, those Dairy Queen employees who are still unaware of

their national history and the legacy of dated stereotypes and current debates will be surprised to learn that “mulattoes, octoroons, and quadroons have [also] long been fixtures” in sub-Saharan Africa.

NOTES

¹ Despite the ostensibly firm debunking of race as a biological reality, recent genome research has revived interest in the scientific element of race. Conditions and treatments based on race remain integral, albeit, debated aspects of medical and genetic science. For a more detailed discussion of the resurgence in race-based research see Wade, Leroi, and the Social Science Research Council forum, “Is Race ‘Real’?”

² Discussions about any so-called “race,” whether mixed or otherwise, will necessitate disclaimers, simply because such discussions might otherwise translate to an endorsement of racialized thought.

³ Timothy Noah, writer for online magazine *Slate*, makes this parody of Ira Gershwin’s “Let’s Call the Whole Thing Off” song lyrics in his article on the MooLatte—Dairy Queen’s controversial frozen drink.

⁴ “High yellow,” a term for very light-skinned African Americans, was widely used at the turn of the century and implicated both colour and social status. Such labels as “octoroon” (meaning one-eighth black and seven-eighths white) and “sambo” (meaning one-quarter white and three-quarters black) date back to the practice of scientifically cataloguing mixed races in the colonies of the New World.

⁵ White women, still a rarity on West Indian plantations, did not contribute to miscegenation in a significant way—hence their omission from these charts. But the presence or absence of white women ultimately made little difference to the gendered brutality of race mixing in which “white men extended their dominion over black women . . . to demonstrate their mastery” (Morgan 70). As the next chapter illustrates, the pattern of white men “mixing” with black women also predominates in (pre-)colonial sub-Saharan Africa.

⁶ For a detailed linguistic and historical study of the term “mulatto” see Forbes’s “The *Mulato* Concept: Origin and Initial Use” from *Black Africans and Native Americans*.

⁷ For a historical overview of state definitions of the “mulatto” see Tenzer’s ““What Constitutes a Mulatto?”” from *The Forgotten Cause of the Civil War*.

⁸ One of the more recognized court cases involved a woman named Abby Guy who sued for her own freedom and that of her four children in Arkansas in 1857. Guy was considered less than one quarter black but conflicting definitions of “mulatto” necessitated three trials before she and her children were emancipated. For a thorough

discussion of Guy's case, see Zackodnik's *The Mulatta and the Politics of Race* or Tenzer's *The Forgotten Cause of the Civil War*.

⁹ Larsen, in particular, was not rediscovered until the mid-1970s, by which time Nortje was already dead and Head had already produced the majority of her written work, including the text that I consider a tragic mulatto site, *A Question of Power* (1974).

¹⁰ Although Sterling A. Brown describes this stereotype as “modern,” we can once again trace its origins to such slaveholders as Long and Lewis.

Chapter Two

The White Man's "Other" Burden: (Pre-)Colonial Race Mixing in the "Dark Continent"

Miscegenation due to the transatlantic slave trade is not only well-documented in the Americas but in the African continent as well. Indeed, mixed race Africans have been an identifiable and important presence in sub-Saharan Africa at least since the inception of the slave trade. Historian Alida Metcalf notes, for example, that, "In the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century African trade, European and mixed-race men known as *lançados* and *tangomaos* became important negotiators" (58). Similarly, Joseph Miller describes "Luso-Africans descended from old families of joint African and European parentage that had formed in and around Luanda [in Angola] during the seventeenth century" (247). The long existence of mixed race communities in sub-Saharan regions, which range from the Cape Verde islands to the Western Cape of South Africa, has been firmly established. But were mixed race Africans subject to the same negative tropes that characterized mixed race figures in the Caribbean and the United States? Did such writers as Bessie Head and Arthur Nortje also draw on common African perceptions of the mulatto when they wrote their autobiographical texts? In an effort to answer these kinds of questions, this chapter examines certain mixed race groups in sub-Saharan Africa, thus laying a historical foundation for subsequent discussions of mixed race African writers.

Given my focus on the mulatto, I will not attempt a comprehensive study of intermarriage between indigenous African peoples and peoples of all other races but, instead, examine those sites where Europeans have mixed with indigenous populations to

produce an identifiable mixed race presence. North Africa remains a highly expansive site of miscegenation, but this chapter concentrates on more specific locales in sub-Saharan Africa. My strategic exclusion of North Africa is precisely because of its long history of miscegenation. The large Maghreb or “Moor” population of mixed Arab, European, and black ancestry has occupied most of Saharan Africa since Ancient times. Notably, I cannot cover all the sites of miscegenation in sub-Saharan Africa either and have limited my discussion to a few examples, beginning with the earliest identifiable mixed race population, the *lançados* or *tango-mãos* of the region known as Senegambia.

The children of Portuguese men and African women, the *lançados* were a wealthy class of traders by the sixteenth century. When the French supplanted the Portuguese in Senegambia, they maintained the increasingly popular practice of what they termed *métissage*, resulting in the rise of a new mixed race group called the *métis*. The *métis* became an elite but controversial social body in the nineteenth century, experiencing many of the same privileges and prejudices that mulattos were subject to in the United States. I also discuss the founding of a small mixed race community in eighteenth-century Sierra Leone and the development of a Euro-African population on the Gold Coast (modern-day Ghana) during the sixteenth century. Finally, and most pertinent to this project, I examine the Coloured population of South Africa. Following the Dutch settlement of the Cape in the seventeenth century, miscegenation in South Africa became a common practice yet again, resulting in what is currently the largest mixed race community in sub-Saharan Africa. Since Head and Nortje are both Coloured writers, my

discussion of South Africa's Coloured history provides some background for my reading of their texts in the next chapters.

Overall, this section entails historical analysis of European exploration, trade, settlement, and colonization in the continent and draws on both pre-colonial records and recent scholarship about the racially mixed populations mentioned above. There is a wealth of historiography on the subject of mixed race Africans—scholarship written not only in English but in Portuguese, French, and Dutch. Furthermore, this historiography covers different peoples, regions, and time periods from different national perspectives. As a postcolonialist and a literary scholar rather than a historian or an anthropologist, I must be clear about my constraints and parameters in this chapter. My interest lies in the currency of mulatto stereotypes across borders and temporalities and the representation of *fraught* mulatto subjects in sub-Saharan Africa.

Since I cannot address all the extant historiography on mixed race Africans originating in multiple disciplines and languages, I have limited myself primarily to English-language scholarship and translations. I also exercise latitude in shuttling between peoples, places, and centuries. The mulatto communities I discuss emerge in various regions at various times as a result of different European nations mixing with different indigenous populations. A linear narrative thus proves difficult, especially for a survey reading of these groups in a single chapter. In order to provide a clear sense of progression, however, I have arranged my discussion geographically, beginning in the Senegambia region and travelling east along the West African coast to Sierra Leone and the Gold Coast before concluding in South Africa.

This chapter, indeed this entire project, is about seeking out and studying *common* denominators across time and space and forging new linkages as a result. The nuances of racial mixedness, whether in the Americas or the African continent, are infinite and I do not pretend a comprehensive analysis. Historical attitudes towards and representations of mixed race African people were variable, but I will focus on *recurring* portrayals of mixed race African subjects as polemical figures, portrayals that predate the American trope of the tragic mulatto. Centuries before plantation owners drew racist conclusions about the mulatto and American writers fixed those conclusions as a literary trope, mulatto stereotypes were already being cultivated on the coast of western Africa. Indeed, I would suggest that such slaveholders as Edward Long and Matthew Louis, men who seemingly laid the blueprints for the tragic mulatto trope, were themselves influenced by much earlier racist descriptions of *African* mulattos.

The Ones Who Threw Themselves Ashore

In the first chapter of *Imperial Leather*, Ann McClintock presents the slightly comical image of Christopher Columbus “blundering about the Caribbean in search of India” (21). McClintock suggests that Columbus was yet another male traveller obsessed with penetrating the unknown in the erotic tradition of European exploration. She goes on to describe the destinations of such travellers as “porno-tropics for the European imagination—a fantastic magic lantern of the mind onto which Europe projected its forbidden sexual desires and fears” (22). And, McClintock continues, the continent with

the most notorious reputation for excess, “the quintessential zone of sexual aberration and anomaly” (22), was Africa.

In light of this porno-tropic tradition, the following scenario takes on added significance. Around 1445, half a century before Columbus’s blundering, an old sea captain named Dinis Dias, allegedly “‘unwilling to let himself grow soft in the well-being of repose’” (Castlereagh 378), impulsively set sail from Portugal. Intent on going where no European had gone before, Dias sailed south down the mysterious coast of West Africa and finally stumbled upon the mouth of the Senegal River, where he and his crew observed the mythical Africans south of the Sahara desert for the first time: “The Portuguese thereafter saw the Sénégal [River] . . . as the dividing line in West Africa, separating the Moors from the ‘fertile land of the blacks’ in Ca’da Mosto’s words. ‘It appears to me,’ that Venetian went on, ‘a very marvelous thing that, beyond the river, all men are very black, tall and big, their bodies well formed’” (Thomas 57).¹

Following his “discovery” of a big African river and, by extension, big African men (both remarkable phenomena with the enviable means to penetrate the interior), Dias continued his journey along the coast. Further south he made two more significant discoveries: the westernmost part of the continent, a lush peninsula that he named Cabo Verde (Cap-Vert), and a small island that he named Ilha da Palma (now known as Gorée Island). Although Dias did not, like Columbus, compare the earth to a woman’s breast, his purposeful expedition evokes McClintock’s trope of “male travel as an erotics of ravishment” (22) and marks the first European intrusion into the porno-tropical locale of sub-Saharan Africa. Indeed, Dias’s pioneering foray paved the way for the realization of

those forbidden sexual desires that had previously existed only in the European imagination.

Building on the success of such explorers as Dias, the Portuguese quickly established trade with the indigenous peoples of Senegambia, bartering such European goods as horses and spirits for tropical cargo like gold, pepper, ivory, and, the first inkling of the Atlantic slave trade, human beings.² The subsequent founding of a permanent trade centre on the island of São Tiago (Santiago) in the Cape Verde archipelago (opposite the Senegambian coast) soon afforded Portuguese men a rare opportunity to see “the quintessential zone of sexual aberration and anomaly” firsthand. As James Duffy notes, “To encourage the settlement of Santiago the crown granted its inhabitants extraordinary concessions in the 1460’s to trade the coast. As in the Congo, the Europeans, in the absence of any consistent royal authority and intercourse with home country, made up an undisciplined community of adventurers and fugitives” (134-35). The chance to trade freely with the Africans, evade the law, *and* get a closer look at the fabled black women who were “always on heat and eager” (Barbot 87) was sufficient impetus for many young sailors.³

By the sixteenth century a significant number of these Portuguese emigrants had taken African wives and immersed themselves completely in African societies:

Many Capverdians crossed to Guinea in order to promote the exchange of goods between the islanders and the negroes. They went to live with their families in native villages, and in this way small white and mulatto communities were founded on the mainland. . . . The number and size of the mainland settlements was augmented by a not very choice collection of unprincipled adventurers, slave-dealers, political exiles and fugitives from justice, who went from Portugal, Spain and the African islands to live

outside the law among the blacks of Guinea, intermarrying with them and trafficking in forbidden commodities. (Blake 28)⁴

John Blake's allusion to "forbidden commodities" might easily be read as a double entendre, especially in light of McClintock's reference to the "forbidden sexual desires" (22) that the porno-tropics represented. These "unprincipled adventurers" were "trafficking in forbidden commodities" not only in terms of smuggling but also in their relationships with African women.⁵ George Brooks describes the marriages between Portuguese men and indigenous women precisely as another form of trade: "Termed *lançados* because they 'threw themselves' among Africans, these men established relationships with the most influential women who would accept them in order to obtain commercial privileges" ("*Signares*" 19).⁶ Their derogatory nickname ("the ones who threw themselves ashore") and collective reputation as ne'er-do-wells notwithstanding, these European traders, who offered patronage to African women in exchange for sexual and familial relationships, parented the first generation of mulattos in sub-Saharan Africa.

Predictably, their mixed race progeny, formally referred to as Luso-Africans ("lusos" from *lusitano*, meaning "Portuguese"), became a unique social group that was both honoured and resented. Although raised by African mothers and subject to African law and custom, these mixed race children formed a crucial link to European culture and commerce. In his exhaustive study of the Atlantic slave trade, Hugh Thomas indicates that they attained considerable status: "Despite the regulations against them, the half-Portuguese, half-African *lançados*, who remained on the upper Guinea and Senegambian coasts, increased in wealth and numbers and, in the end, received a grudging if informal acceptance from the Crown" (115). Although the Luso-Africans retained the same

unfavourable reputations (*lançados* or *tango-mãos*) as their European fathers, they were able to prosper as a trading society, primarily because of their role as cultural intermediaries.

Walter Rodney writes that, “Numerically, mulattoes came to outstrip their white fathers not only by natural increase, but because the flow of metropolitan Portuguese to the mainland was not heavy during the seventeenth century” (202). But these mulattos, like their white fathers before them, also procreated with African women. Their identities as “mulattos” thus shifted over the generations and their claim to Portuguese ancestry manifested less in skin colour or appearance and more in culture, language, and religion. As Rodney explains, “Even if there was a high degree of in-breeding among the mulatto population, they would eventually have been swallowed up by the preponderance of Africans. This explains why most of the mulattoes were very dark and sometimes indistinguishable from Africans” (202). By maintaining their *cultural* role as intermediaries, however, the *lançados* also maintained their trading power and exclusive hybrid identity. Metcalf notes that, “Over time, descendants of the *lançados* continued in their roles as middlemen on the Guinea coast, even after the Portuguese had long since been replaced by other European traders. Mulatto go-betweens continued to trade on a large scale, in slaves for Europeans and in goods destined for Africans” (58).

But along with trading success, the *lançados* continued to experience discrimination, both from the “real” Portuguese, who regarded them as pariahs, and from those stratified African communities that did not want to grant leadership or power to those of European descent: “Luso-Africans were not allocated land to cultivate. . . . Of

surpassing importance, Luso-African children were denied admission to the ‘bush schools’ controlled by the power associations that educated youths. . . . Consequently, Luso-Africans were excluded from membership in age grades, and they were disdained as marriage partners by elites” (Brooks, *Eurafricans* 51-52). While African prejudice against mixed race *lançados* depended on whether the African community was acephalous or not, such scholars as Brooks indicate that the more powerful societies, including the Mandinka, Wolof, and Serer states, ostracized them. What becomes increasingly clear here is the unique position of the mixed race *lançado*, not only as a “new” and empowered entity on the Senegambian coast but also as an unfortunate figure and a social outcast.

The arrival of the English, Dutch, and French in Senegambia further complicated the meaning of Luso-African identity. Along with many of the Portuguese themselves, these Europeans considered the *lançados* to be “fake” Portuguese. As I have already noted, by the seventeenth century the *lançados* were not necessarily a visibly mixed race group, but they continued to lay claim to Portuguese roots and culture. For European observers, the idea that the primarily dark-skinned *lançados* were also European was ludicrous. Peter Mark provides an excellent discussion of the changing attitudes towards Luso-African identity, attitudes that reflected a new and pervasive European racism, which was thriving with the slave trade. Indeed, Mark quotes a range of European travellers to Upper Guinea—Richard Jobson (1620), de la Courbe (1685), Le Maire (1695), Francis Moore (1732), Thomas Astley (1745), and John Matthews (1788)—all of whom assess the *lançados* in increasingly disparaging terms.

Jobson, an Englishman who travelled up the River Gambia in 1620 and encountered the *lançados*, provides what may very well be the earliest psychological description of the mulatto as a fraught cultural identity. In his account of the region's inhabitants, Jobson observes "another sort of people . . . dwelling, or rather lurking, amongst these *Mandingos*. . . . And these are, as they call themselves, *Portingales*, and . . . *Molatoes*" (97). Jobson's sinister sketch of the *lançados*, "lurking" in the shadows along the River Gambia, is obviously disapproving.⁷ But Jobson goes on to paint a more sympathetic picture of the *lançados* when commenting on the seizure of a Portuguese trader's assets (by the local African ruler) upon his death and the consequent plight of his mixed race children:

We finde in some those few places we trade them, poore distressed children left, who as it were exposed to the charitie of the country, become in a manner naturalized, and as they grow up, apply themselves to buy and sell one thing for another as the whole country doth, still reserving carefully, the use of the *Portingall* tongue, and with a kind of an affectionate zeale, the name of Christians, taking it in a great disdaine, be they never so blacke, to be called a *Negro*: and these, for the most part, are the *Portingalls*, which live within this River. (98)

He ultimately presents the "poore distressed children" left behind by Portuguese men as an unfortunate yet industrious group. Although they do not inherit the possessions of their merchant fathers, the *lançados* nonetheless learn the art of commerce and claim their paternal language and religion.

Particularly interesting is Jobson's suggestion of a racial superiority complex on the part of the Luso-Africans, who "[take] it in great disdaine . . . to be called a *Negro*" and reserve "an affectionate zeale" for their white heritage. Here we have an early modern description of the mulatto, which is almost interchangeable with the twentieth-

century representation of the tragic mulatto. Recall, for example, Sterling A. Brown's 1933 sketch of the stereotypical mulatto figure: "The mulatto is victim of a divided inheritance and therefore miserable; he is a 'man without a race' worshipping the whites and despised by them, despising and despised by Negroes" (196). I do not propose a direct link between Jobson's account and the development of the tragic mulatto trope, but the Englishman's seventeenth-century narrative remains a telling precursor to American representations of the culturally-troubled mulatto. Certainly, Jobson and other travel writers (the Frenchman de la Courbe or fellow Englishman Francis Moore) indicate that the stereotyping of the mulatto did not begin in the Americas but rather in Africa.⁸

*Les Signares aux Yeux Surréels comme un Clair de Lune sur la Grève*⁹

By the late 1700s mixed race persons had been a recognized presence in Senegambia for three centuries.¹⁰ In that time, the slave trade became a flourishing European enterprise and the initial Portuguese monopoly in that region was eventually threatened and undermined by other European powers, primarily the English and the French. Under the latter, a highly-romanticized female group known as *signares* rose to prominence—part of an elite Franco-African community called the *métis*.¹¹ The two major commercial hubs of Senegal, the island of Gorée (first "discovered" by Dinis Dias) and the coastal city of Saint Louis, became exclusive domains for this eighteenth- and nineteenth-century mixed race social body. The dual role of *signares* in Senegalese history as the empowered foremothers of *métis* society and desirable mixed race women

is worth emphasizing here, especially because we can once again identify an African precedent for an American trope, in this case the trope of the exoticized mulatta.

In her discussion of the *métis*, Hilary Jones emphasizes the romantic portrayal of *signares* in Saint Louis culture:

The image of the *signare*, a title given to the *métis* and black African women in the pre-colonial era who engaged in temporary unions with European men called *mariage à la mode du pays*, dominates popular depictions of the history of Saint Louis and its inhabitants. As a symbol of beauty, opulence and *métissage* the image of the *signare* has become the object of consumption for western strangers and local inhabitants alike. She appears in advertisements for local products and as the subject of films depicting the nostalgia of inter-racial romance and the age of Europe's 'discovery' of Africa. (23)

A derivative of the Portuguese *senhora*, the term *signare* originally pertained to an African woman of wealth and status.¹² As this passage indicates, however, the term soon took on a myriad of racial and cultural connotations, evoking images of an enigmatic (often mixed race) woman who was part entrepreneur and part siren. Brooks, for example, points out the *signare*'s reputation as a dangerous temptress in his description: "Renowned for their beauty and feminine artifices . . . signares were reputed to have been irresistible to European men and ruined many careers" (*Eurafricans* 206). Notably, the *signare* parallels such figures as Edward Long's eighteenth-century "*quasheba*" and the mulatta of twentieth-century American fiction. Indeed, Long's 1774 censure of concubinage in Jamaica, which includes a portrait of the quintessential black/mulatto mistress as a "leech" who bleeds her white lover, is preceded by Frenchman Michel Adanson's caustic 1763 denunciation of *mariage à la mode du pays* in Senegal and a description of the *signares* as "bloodsuckers."¹³

In the nineteenth century, the mixed race progeny of these “country style” marriages (*à la mode du pays*)—the *métis*—became a crucial link between France and Senegal. Although the *métis* made up only a small percentage of the Senegalese population, they nonetheless exerted considerable influence in terms of governance and policy. Already coded as upper middle-class citizens, *métis* families relied on lineage to establish reputation and social mobility in the colonial hierarchy. As Jones notes, “The further one could trace their descent in time to an eighteenth century *signare* and a Frenchman conferred respectability and acceptance within the upper echelons of the group” (19-20). Because they maintained ties to wealthy African families and European forefathers, the *métis* were able to invest in their own commercial interests and those of colonial rule. An increasingly Gallicized body, they gradually made the transition from slave- and property-owning traders to an educated Christian bourgeoisie with French citizenship and representation in French government. In this respect the *métis* were unique, both as an insular mixed race community and a privileged society with considerable political clout. While instances of successful mixed race individuals are not uncommon in historical accounts of the Americas, there are few examples of a self-identified mixed race community wielding such influence.¹⁴

But, as Owen White explores in his seminal text on the *métis*, the role of this mixed race group was also predictably fraught. The French considered the *métis* population “a potentially valuable resource” (White 76) and implemented various plans for the management of that resource. Orphanages, schools, and government projects began to appear at the turn of the century, specifically for the advancement of *métis*

children in Senegal. White stresses, however, that these institutions were often mismanaged and only served to further isolate an already cloistered population. Colonial officials also disagreed about how best to deal with “the *métis* problem.” While some factions of the French government championed favouritism for the *métis* in French West Africa, others promoted egalitarianism and the need to treat black and mixed race Africans equally. Ultimately, the French response to *métis* society was ambivalent, although the practice of favouritism did contribute to the formation of a distinct *métis* identity.

Admittedly, records of how African communities perceived the *métis* remain scarce prior to the twentieth century, but White suggests that such communities also treated the mixed race group as a separate body. Certainly, by the 1930s, when the zenith of *métis* influence had passed, nostalgic representations of that mixed race body quickly became an integral part of Senegalese culture. Indeed, around the same time that such American writers as James Weldon Johnson and Nella Larsen were employing the tragic mulatto stereotype in their texts, at least one West African writer was using the same trope in his writing. Abdoulaye Sadjì, born in Rufisque, a city on the Senegalese peninsula of Cap-Vert, wrote the poem “Mulâtresses” in 1928, the same year that Larsen’s *Quicksand* appeared in print.¹⁵ After moving to Saint Louis as a teacher, Sadjì wrote an entire novel dealing with mixed race women, *Nini, Mulâtresse du Sénégal*. Although some critics suggest that Sadjì completed the book as early as 1935, *Nini* was not published until 1947, after which it became a singular example of an early-twentieth-century African text with a tragic mulatta protagonist.

Beyond its relevance to my project in its capacity as an *African* mulatta text, Sadji's novel also serves as a remarkable illustration of how stereotypes travel across temporalities and geographical spaces, eventually re-manifesting in what may well be their ostensible points of origin. To clarify this logic, I return fleetingly to the image of Dinis Dias naming and thus claiming Cap-Vert (Sadji's birthplace) and Gorée Island in the fifteenth century. Dias was the first of many Europeans to explore and eventually settle the Senegambian coast, resulting in what was, by the sixteenth century, a sizeable mixed race population. That same mixed race population was a subject of interest to such seventeenth-century travellers as Richard Jobson, who included his observations on West African mulattos in his account.

Such accounts were then published and circulated widely in Europe, arguably influencing later generations and such travellers as the eighteenth-century plantation-owner Edward Long. Merchants like Long augmented extant stereotypes about the mulatto and, in the same spirit as the travellers that came before them, published their narratives. As noted in my previous chapter, these narratives then served as the groundwork for nineteenth-century perceptions of the mixed race figure in the United States and the literary stereotype of the tragic mulatto. Here we see the *cyclical* nature of these intertextual moments culminate in such a novel as Sadji's *Nini*. For here is a Senegalese text that has been informed by both American and Caribbean representations of the tragic mulatto—representations that were themselves possibly influenced by stereotypes cultivated in the Senegambia region centuries ago.

Indeed, Sadjı presents the tragic mixed race figure, specifically the mixed race *woman*, as a recognizable and perpetual sign in that cultural space which Paul Gilroy famously termed the Black Atlantic:

Nini is the eternal moral portrait of the *mulâtresse*, be she from Senegal, the Caribbean, or the two Americas. It is the portrait of the physical and moral hybrid who, in the thoughtless spontaneity of her reactions, seek[s] always to raise herself above her given condition in life, that is to say above a humanity which she consider[s] to be inferior but to which an inescapable destiny links her. (7-8)¹⁶

A contemporary of Leopold Sedar Senghor and Aime Cesaire, Sadjı published his novel at the height of the *négritude* movement, which was directly influenced by the Harlem Renaissance. So Sadjı's reference to an "eternal moral portrait of the *mulâtresse*" is also arguably an allusion to such earlier mulatta texts as Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* or Jessie Fauset's *The Chinaberry Tree*. Obvious, if not intentional, parallels can be drawn between, for example, Larsen's twenty-three-year-old protagonist Helga Crane and Sadjı's twenty-two-year-old anti-heroine Virginie Maerle (Nini). Both are young and beautiful mixed race women who disdain but ultimately become "trapped" by their blackness, resulting in rejection and "an inescapable destiny" of isolation.

Remarkably, however, Nini constitutes a far less sympathetic character than her American mulatta counterparts and Helga Crane in particular. Born into the declining Saint Louis *métis* community under colonial rule, Nini attempts to assimilate into white society through her secretarial job with the French administration and a string of white lovers. Unlike the sexually-inhibited Helga, Nini has been promiscuous since adolescence, collecting (white) lovers like stamps, and even posing for erotic photographs. Where Helga eventually and symbolically desires a black husband after she

has rejected a white suitor, Nini, in an inversion of these events, snubs a proposal from an educated black man only to be spurned herself by the white lover she aspires to marry. In the end, the reader is left with a sense of the title character's erratic nature, sexual depravity, and self-destructiveness, traits that the author links directly to her mulattanness. Contrary to such scholars as Karen Wallace, who hails *Nini* as "a tableau of the inner psychological world of this paradoxical character, engaged upon a search for self" (96), I would suggest that the novel effectively confirms but does not critique the stereotyping of mixed race women in an African context.¹⁷

What needs to be underscored here is the extraordinary cultural currency and credence found in such so-called *types* as the tragic mulatto or the "eternal *mulâtresse*," despite the fact that such types are, in Sterling A. Brown's words, "generalizing of the wildest sort" (195). Note that two years before Sadjí conceptualized his overtly stereotypical protagonist, intending, in his own words, "to offer [mixed race women], as in a mirror, the reality of what they are" (8), Brown had already published the scathing opinion that any text employing the mulatto stereotype "should be discredited by its patent absurdity" (195). So there is some irony in the fact that precisely when an American scholar was beginning to disparage the trope in his criticism, an African writer, himself influenced by American literature, was touting that same trope as an "authentic" portrait of the mixed race figure.¹⁸

*Lusty Moors and Cunning Whores*¹⁹

As I established at the beginning of this chapter, mixed race peoples emerged in different parts of sub-Saharan Africa at different times as a result of different cultural moments. In maintaining a geographical rather than chronological progression, I now leave the region of Senegambia behind and shift to another West African site where mixed race subjects were an identifiable presence. Notably, miscegenation in sub-Saharan Africa and the American colonies consisted primarily of relationships between white men and black women. White women did not arrive in significant numbers in sub-Saharan Africa until the twentieth century. Those who did arrive earlier, primarily in South Africa, did not factor into race mixing in any substantial way. Fernando Henriques's tongue-in-cheek assessment of miscegenation in Central Africa is easily applicable to the entire continent: "It can be assumed that the English woman did not make her contribution to the process of miscegenation in Central Africa. It was left to the British male to shoulder this responsibility. He did this with aplomb, and no doubt enjoyment" (120). Certainly, the white woman did not contribute to miscegenation in *most* of Africa, leaving it to the white male to bear that burden. But since I will eventually address white female involvement in miscegenation through Head's *A Question of Power* and my own experience as the mixed race child of a European woman and an African man, it would be valuable to examine a historical moment where the white female/black male model is evident.

Granville Town, the first "free" settlement in Sierra Leone, serves as a singular model of an African community founded at least partially on white female/black male

relationships. Incidentally, the Portuguese had been trading in Sierra Leone since the mid-fifteenth century and historians note that *lançados* made regular visits to that region in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. José da Silva Horta, for example, describes Luso-African traders André Alvares de Almada and André Donelha as mulattos who travelled regularly to Sierra Leone in the late sixteenth century. The Portuguese, however, did not establish permanent posts there. Similarly, both the English and the French frequented the coast and eventually built factories but did not constitute a significant body in that area. By the eighteenth century, Sierra Leone was still a relatively unexplored and indigenously autonomous region with little European authority despite the ongoing slave trade. When the Committee for the Relief of the Black Poor in England began seeking an African refuge for the nation's poverty-stricken black population in 1786, Sierra Leone was considered a viable option.

The means by which roughly 400 people eventually immigrated to Sierra Leone remains a story of intrigue and controversy. Granville Sharp, the religious visionary and abolitionist behind the Committee, was later criticized for the inhumane conditions under which the colony materialized. The famous eighteenth-century African writer and former slave Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, also became involved in the project of resettlement but later criticized the Committee, resulting in his dismissal. The role of the initial settlers themselves as either informed participants or naïve victims remains a contested issue amongst scholars. Nonetheless, a fleet carrying a decidedly motley crew prepared to sail for the West African coast in February 1787. Equiano compiled a muster roll for the three transport ships, the details of which are housed in the UK Public Record

Office and reprinted in a footnote to his *Interesting Narrative*: “The settlers were not exclusively Black and included mixed-race couples. His lists total 459 people: 344 Blacks (290 men, 43 women, 11 children) and 115 Whites (31 men, 75 women, 9 children)” (298). Ship repairs delayed the journey and by the time the fleet actually left Plymouth, the number of passengers had dropped to 411 through death and desertion. Despite these inauspicious circumstances, however, at least sixty of the final settlers were white women.

The backgrounds of these English women present another source of debate for historians. James Walker describes them as “some 60 white women of ill-repute who, they later testified, were made drunk, carried aboard the transport ships and, while still in a drunken state, married to single black men” (98). Similarly, in his detailed history of Sierra Leone, Christopher Fyfe writes that, “While the transports waited in the Thames, about seventy London prostitutes, outcasts too, but not for their colour, embarked” (17). Fyfe discounts the claim that the women were intoxicated and forced into marriages with the black men, instead arguing, perhaps unconvincingly, that “they must have agreed to stay, lured by visions of a rosy future with their new partners in the Province of Freedom” (17). Notably, Mary Clifford paints a less sordid picture of the women, identifying them simply as “mostly wives of blacks or white artisans” (74) and pointing out that “white wives of two of the black colonists were sent . . . to be trained as midwives” (71). But the predominant assumption that most of the women were prostitutes and social outcasts can be traced back to an eye-witness account written *by* an English woman between 1791 and 1793. Anna Maria Falconbridge, the young wife of an agent working for the newly-

founded Sierra Leone Company, accompanied her husband to the colony and kept a journal and letters that were published in 1794 as a *Narrative of Two Voyages*.

By the time the Falconbridges arrived in Sierra Leone, Granville Town had been razed to the ground in a retaliatory act by an indigenous ruler and most of the original settlers had succumbed to disease or abandoned the area. If, indeed, the English women had been “lured by visions of a rosy future,” they were sorely disappointed: “About fifty men and women gathered under Falconbridge’s care. They include seven of the prostitute wives, so black with dirt, so covered with ulcers, Mrs Falconbridge, seeing them almost naked and quite unashamed, was amazed to discover they were Europeans” (Fyfe 29-30). After meeting these tellingly “black” white women, Anna Falconbridge wrote down their collective story as it was allegedly narrated to her by one of the settlers: “She said, the women were mostly of that description of persons who walk the streets of London, and support themselves by the earnings of prostitution; that men were employed to collect and conduct them to Wapping, where they were intoxicated with liquor, then inveigled on board of ship and married to *Black men*, whom they had never seen before” (65). Falconbridge speaks exclusively through the voice of the “other” woman in this passage, even quoting the professed prostitute directly at one point: “‘Thus,’ in her own words, ‘to the disgrace of my mother country, upwards of one hundred unfortunate women, were seduced from England to practice their iniquities more brutishly in this horrid country’” (65-66).

While Falconbridge’s text serves as an important historical document, her portrait of the white female settlers, like much ethnographic literature, is questionable—not least

because her preface confirms that she wrote the text with a public readership in mind.²⁰ Henriques identifies Falconbridge as “a somewhat colourful author” and points out that her reading of the women as prostitutes conflicts with the staunch religious standards of the settlement organizer Granville Sharp (117). Like Fyfe, however, Henriques allows for the possibility that Sharp was unaware of such details as the moral fibre of the settlers. Indeed, both Fyfe and Henriques seem to endorse Falconbridge’s claim that the women were probably prostitutes, although they quickly disregard the suggestion that the women were coerced. So between Falconbridge and her more contemporary critics, we are left with an indelible image of unwilling/willing prostitutes as the white wives of the black male settlers.

By presenting these women as *self*-declared prostitutes, Falconbridge provides a convenient explanation for why they are partnered with black men in the first place. Whether coerced or complicit, the women advantageously confirm extant stereotypes. If they were literally dragged aboard, the women immediately substantiate the sexual violence of the black male. If, however, they volunteered to join the expedition, the women prove the degeneracy of the lower class or sexually deviant white female. McClintock’s discussion of nineteenth-century scientific racism, still pending in Falconbridge’s day, is relevant here: “Prostitutes visibly transgressed the middle-class boundary between private and public, paid work and unpaid work, and in consequence were figured as ‘white Negroes’ inhabiting anachronistic space” (56). Evolutionary theory later forged a scientific alliance between the white prostitute and the black man,

grouping them together as similar “types” that shared “many atavistic features” (McClintock 56).

This inference that a relationship between a white woman and a black man is perverse—only explicable through the degenerate natures of both parties—also dominates the early racist ideologies of both the United States and South Africa. Whereas white men made little apology for their involvement in miscegenation over the centuries, the participation of the white woman cast a whole new light on the practice. Loath to consider the relationship consensual or motivated by mutual affection, white discourses frequently portrayed the black man as seducer/kidnapper/rapist and the white woman as victim/reprobate—all stereotypes that we can identify in Falconbridge’s narrative. Ultimately, we can substantiate very little about that first group of European women, but they do serve as an unusual example of white female involvement in miscegenation. Especially since the subsequent sections on the Gold Coast and South Africa reiterate the stereotyping of black or mulatta women, particularly in terms of their relationships with white men, we have here an interesting reversal in which white women are similarly stereotyped precisely because of their association with black men.

A Bastard Brood and a Parcel of Profligate Villains

Just as they were the first Europeans to explore Senegambia and Sierra Leone, the Portuguese were the first Europeans to drop anchor off the Gold Coast. Indeed, after their initial arrival on the shores of Senegambia, the Portuguese wasted little time in exploring the rest of Africa’s uncharted coastline. By the 1460s they had rounded the western hump

of the continent, conferring such toponyms as Serra Lyoa (Lion Mountains) and Costa da Malageuta (Pepper or Grain Coast) along the way. Eugenia Herbert notes in her discussion of Portugal's efforts, however, that, "The discovery of the Gold Coast in 1471 overshadowed all that had gone before" (416). Despite their role as European pioneers and the founding of small entrepôts and settlements in Upper Guinea, the Portuguese had yet to establish any kind of stronghold on the African coast. The natural harbours and lucrative prospects of the Gold Coast (referred to as Costa da Mina or Mine Coast) thus presented a singular opportunity to build a European fort and safeguard a monopoly on trade in that area. In the tradition of male imperial exploration, which was predicated on naming and marking territory, the raising of a fort was no small gesture. So in 1482, a decade after their first appearance on the Gold Coast, the Portuguese began construction on São Jorge da Mina, a castle that remains the oldest European building in sub-Saharan Africa.²¹ Named for the patron saint of Portugal and the nearby gold mines, "Saint George of the Mine" (eventually St. George d'Elmina and then Elmina) served as a literal bastion for European interests during the Atlantic slave trade and a major site for intercultural relations.²²

By the time Dutch traders began encroaching on Portuguese interests in the late sixteenth century, Elmina had a surrounding township, sister forts along the coast, and a noticeable mixed race community. Pieter de Marees, a Dutchman who visited West Africa in the late 1500s, published his *Beschryvinge ende Historische Verhael, vant Gout Koninckrijck van Gunea* in 1602.²³ The first European description of the Gold Coast, de Marees's account references the mixed race presence at Elmina more than once and

includes a detailed engraving of a mulatta with the following caption: “Portuguese woman living in the Castle d’Mina, half black, half white and yellowish: such women are called *Melato* and most [Portuguese men] keep them as wives, because white women do not thrive much here. They dress very nicely and hang many Paternoster and other Beads on their bodies” (36). Here the writer makes one of the earliest documented allusions to the practice of miscegenation and the white male exoticization of the mixed race woman in sub-Saharan Africa. Later in his account, he returns to his portrait (literal engraving) of the mulatta: “Because [the Portuguese] are not allowed to marry them properly, they buy these Women, but they consider them to be as much as their own Wives; yet they may separate from them as they please and in turn buy other women. . . . They maintain these Wives in grand style and keep them in splendid clothes, and they always dress more ostentatiously and stand out more than any other Indigenous women” (217).

While establishing the allure of the mixed race woman, who is desirable because of her near-whiteness (“white women do not thrive much here”), de Marees also highlights her position as illicit sexual object—she can never be a “proper” wife precisely because she is not white. These early modern constructions of the *African* mulatta, constructions that were published and circulated widely in Europe, set the tone for future and highly similar interpretations of that figure in the Black Atlantic. Notably, de Marees only briefly mentions mixed race men in his account, describing “six or seven hundred black or Mulatto Slaves. . . . more villainous and malicious by nature than the Portuguese. . . . they are as tough and steadfast as Trees and know quite well how to handle weapons” (220).²⁴ But since “mulatto” was still a relatively new signifier in 1602 (coined in de

Marees's lifetime), the Dutchman's usage of the term and any anthropological descriptions immediately become important models for later travel narratives. Bearing in mind that "de Marees's book formed the starting-point for much of the literature on the Gold Coast and Benin published in the following 150 years" (van Dantzig and Jones xvii), we can trace a very precise trajectory from his sketches of the African mulatto/a figure to Long's West Indian portrayal of that figure almost two hundred years later.

Admittedly, plagiarism was a widespread practice among early modern ethnographers, who would consult and copy the work of predecessors and contemporaries. Such authoritative texts as Olfert Dapper's *Naukeurige Beschrijvinge der Afrikaensche gewesten* (1668) and Nicolas Villault's *Relation des Costes d'Afrique Appellées Guinée* (1669) borrow extensively from de Marees. By the publication of Willem Bosman's *Nauwkeurige Beschryving van de Guinese Goud-, Tand- en Slave-Kust* (1704), however, a definitive pattern begins to take shape, specifically where representations of mixed race Africans are concerned.²⁵ In keeping with de Marees's original depiction of the mulatta as an improper wife or glorified prostitute and the mulatto as martial villain, Bosman makes similar, albeit more damning, observations based on his fourteen-year tenure on the Gold Coast—observations that are worth quoting at length:

I cannot help giving you an account of a wonderful and extraordinary sort of People, I mean the *Tapoeyers* or *Mulattoes*; a Race begotten by *Europeans* upon the *Negroes* or *Mulatto-Women*. This Bastard Strain is made up of a parcel of profligate Villains . . . Most of the Women are publick Whores to the *Europeans*, and private ones to the *Negroes*; so that I can hardly give them a Character so bad as they deserve. I can only tell you whatever is in its own Nature worst in the *Europeans* and *Negroes* is united in them; so that they are the sink of both. The Men, most of which

are Soldiers in our Service, are cloathed as we are; but the Women prink up themselves in a particular manner. (141-42)

Bosman concludes his misogynistic sketch with the assertion that “when old, [mulatto women] are only fit to fright Children to their Beds” (142).

The strains of de Marees’s observations remain tangible in Bosman’s account—the mulatta’s sexual affiliation with European men, her style of clothing as distinguishable from that of other women, and a fleeting reference to her male mixed race counterpart as a military figure on the coast. But Bosman’s “*tapoeyers*” are also a century removed from the mulatto community that his countryman de Marees observed. In much the same way that they were supplanted in the Senegambia region, the Portuguese were eventually ousted from Elmina by a Dutch fleet in 1637, a strategic victory that guaranteed Dutch supremacy on the Gold Coast for most of the seventeenth century. As a resident official at Elmina, Bosman was well aware that the mulatto presence was now primarily a result of Dutch and not Portuguese relations with African women.

But where de Marees made some concessions for miscegenation, attributing the practice to the scarcity of white women, Bosman is derogatory. Far from portraying the mulatta as desirable, he emphasizes her hideousness, which is a marked deviation from his predecessor. Although Bosman stresses the mulatta’s unique or ostentatious clothing, his tone is noticeably different from that of de Marees, who betrays an obvious admiration for mulatta women because they “dress very nicely” in “splendid clothes” and “stand out.” Bosman, on the other hand, signifies his disapproval, perhaps of their overreaching status, by observing disdainfully that they “prink up themselves.” Once again these early stereotypes, embellished and regurgitated, fed directly into perceptions

of the mixed race figure in Europe and later the Americas. As van Dantzig and Jones note, Bosman's text in particular was highly accessible to European readers: "De Marees has been neglected by many twentieth-century historians of pre-colonial West Africa. The main reason . . . has been the availability of another source—Bosman—not only in Dutch . . . but also in almost complete English, French, German and Italian translations (faulty though these are)" (xvii). Based on the wide distribution of travel accounts, albeit with revisions and translations, the plagiarism of Bosman's mulatta passage verbatim in Englishman William Smith's 1744 travelogue is unsurprising.

H. M. Feinberg points out in his critique of Smith's *A New Voyage to Guinea* that the Englishman spent all of two months on the Gold Coast and relied heavily on Bosman when he finally wrote an account of his voyage seventeen years later (46). His description of mulattos on the coast is thus lifted directly from Bosman's text, published forty years earlier:

Upon this Coast are a Sort of People call'd Mullatoes, a Race begotten by the *Europeans* upon *Negroe* Women. This Bastard Brood is a Parcel of the most profligate Villains . . . Most of the Women are publick Whores to the *Europeans*, and private ones to the *Negroes*. In short, whatever is bad among the *Europeans*, or the *Negroes*, is united in them; so that they are the Sink of both. They are frightfully ugly, when they grow in Years, especially the Women. (213)

This (re)introduction of mulatto stereotypes as *current* despite their cultivation decades prior is precisely the kind of cultural discourse that resulted in such tropes as the tragic mulatto or the eternal *mulâtresse*. As Homi Bhabha reminds us, the stereotype is always ambivalent (a "truth" that can never be discursively proved) and thus always applicable:

“It is the force of ambivalence that gives the colonial stereotype its currency: *ensures its repeatability in changing historical and discursive conjectures*” (my emphasis, 66).

For Smith, who ostensibly had very little contact with the mixed race community of the Gold Coast, the literal cutting and pasting of preceding stereotypes about that community was a predictable option because stereotypes are always “in *excess* of what can be empirically proved or logically construed” (Bhabha 66). Indeed, Smith’s account is particularly ironic because his plagiarized description of mulattas as “public whores” conflicts with his later and more sympathetic sketches of indigenous concubines. Towards the end of his narrative Smith spends roughly twelve pages extolling the virtues of his own “Black Lady” and celebrating their explicitly sexual relationship.

Thirty years after Smith’s account appeared in print, his fellow Englishman Edward Long published *The History of Jamaica*. Like his antecedents, Long includes a lengthy commentary on the resident mixed race population, a commentary rife with stereotypes that clearly originated in West Africa. In the same spirit as such writers as de Marees, Bosman, and Smith, Long glosses over the role of mixed race men, acknowledging that they are “well-shaped” (335) and aligning them with other male slaves in his passing reference to “Black and Mulatto companies of militia” (321).²⁶ He reserves a biting tone for the mulatta, however, and expounds upon the same negative traits referenced in Bosman and reprinted in Smith: “The girls arrive very early at the age of puberty; and, from the time of their being about twenty-five, they decline very fast, till at length they grow horribly ugly. They are lascivious” (335). When juxtaposed with Smith’s declaration that, “They are frightfully ugly, when they grow in Years, especially

the Women,” Long’s sketch of the mulatta becomes yet another iteration in the patently recursive process of stereotyping.²⁷

Remarkably, these offensive or, at the very least, suspect historical portrayals of the mulatto—only ever *seen* and *recorded* by the white male gaze—also provide an underlying portrait of the mixed race figure as inexplicably prized and indulged. I am not referring to the social value of mixed race individuals as cultural intermediaries or the exotic/erotic value bestowed upon mixed race women. Rather, I mean those grudging allusions to the mixed race child as desirable heir and functional family member. Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century records of the West African coast and West Indies suggest that European men sometimes invested time and effort in the raising of their mixed race children—a trend that carries through to such nineteenth-century texts as Child’s “The Quadroons.” While some evidence of paternal involvement filters through accounts of the *lançados* and later the *métis*, both of whom claimed the names, languages, and religions of their European fathers, the general upbringing of these respective mixed race bodies was largely and consistently tied to African mothers and extended family. But in such cases as the Dutch-controlled Gold Coast, we can identify a far more personal involvement by European fathers. In her discussion of Elmina’s eighteenth-century Euro-African community, Natalie Everts argues that most Dutch merchants tried to provide for their mixed race progeny: “For many of the men in Company service, their African family meant the only chance they had to experience family happiness. Sending a child to school in Europe was the ideal” (102).

To illustrate this point, Everts cites the example of Martijn van der Burgh, a Dutch merchant at Elmina who returned to the Netherlands with three of his five mixed race children. Although van der Burgh was murdered by pirates during the voyage home in 1684, his young children went on to have a Dutch upbringing and education. Van der Burgh's entire estate was willed to his five children upon his death and his only daughter, Helena, later appears in Dutch records as the wife of a young goldsmith and a member of the Dutch Reformed Church. Everts also identifies another Dutch merchant, Carel van Naarssen, who, upon completing his tenure on the Gold Coast, returned to Amsterdam in 1723 with his five-year-old mixed race daughter Wilhelmina: "Taking Wilhelmina to Holland would have served a double purpose: to provide her with a Christian education, and to keep her out of slavery" (105). Since van Naarssen's "wife" was classified as a slave (unlike van der Burgh's wife—a free African woman), his daughter also remained under that status while living in Elmina. In attempting to ensure the security of their Euro-African children, these Dutch merchants illustrate a marked sense of paternal duty and affection while simultaneously validating their children's claim to a European identity.

Stories of paternal investment in mixed race children appear with some frequency in Elmina's history and are paralleled by accounts originating in the West Indies. Indeed, Long describes a similar state of affairs in Jamaica, where European men "usher into the world a tarnished train of beings, among whom, at their decease, they generally divide their substance" (328). Long goes on to mock the seemingly common practice of sending young mixed race sons and daughters to England for education, arguing that the efforts of

“the indulgent father, big with expectation of the future *éclat* of his hopeful progeny” (329) are wasted. After stressing the time and money spent by such fathers on educating their children abroad, Long notes that the “yellow brood” will still have to return to Jamaica and the promise of a miserable existence. But through Long’s contempt, we nonetheless gain some understanding of how European men chose to involve themselves in the rearing and, admittedly, Europeanization of their mixed race children.

Colour in(g) the Cape

South Africa, the last site of miscegenation that I discuss in this chapter, entails a voyage southward and another brief foray into the fifteenth century. Remarkably, we meet another Portuguese explorer named Dias. In 1487, Bartolomeu Dias set sail from Lisbon in search of two legends—a king named Prester John and a passage to India. He travelled southeast along the African coast, dropping anchor at different bays but moving steadily, albeit unknowingly, towards the tip of the continent. In a surprise squall lasting almost two weeks, Dias lost sight of the coastline and, in an ironic moment of anticlimax, circumnavigated the continent without realizing it. Later he touched land and grasped that he had completed one of his objectives. Unable to press on to Asia or trace the mythical Christian king, Dias turned around. But he made one more significant discovery before sailing back to Portugal, a promontory that he named Cabo das Tormentas or Cape of Storms. This rocky peninsula where two oceans *almost* meet eventually became known as the Cape of Good Hope, part of the larger Cape forming Africa’s southwest extremity.

Somewhat surprisingly, Bartolomeu Dias's pioneering voyage excited little interest or action in Europe for the better part of a decade. As Christopher Bell sympathetically points out, "Dias received no public honour nor tribute to his success. Before Vasco da Gama set out to bring his efforts to a triumphant conclusion, nine years had passed" (153). Following Da Gama's successful journey to India in 1497, the Cape quickly became a routine stop for traders but never a permanent base. John Hunt notes in his study of the Cape's early settlers that, "The territory remained empty of Europeans for another century and a half" (3). These circumstances changed drastically in 1652 with the arrival of the *Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie*, more commonly known as the Dutch East India Company, and their agent, a man called Jan van Riebeeck. Immortalized in the history books of apartheid South Africa as the father of the nation, van Riebeeck established the first European settlement in the Cape and signalled the beginnings of race mixing in the subcontinent.

In his seminal text on South Africa's Coloured community, Mohamed Adhikari emphasizes the association between the seventeenth-century arrival of van Riebeeck and the "birth" of South Africa's Coloured community. Adhikari analyzes a common South African joke, which traces the Coloured people quite literally to the nation's "founding father":

From the very start of Dutch colonization, sexual relations between European male settlers, on the one hand, and Khoi and slave women, on the other, were thought to have given birth to a distinct racial entity, the Coloured people. This much is apparent from the way the joke employs Jan van Riebeeck as the symbolic father of the Coloured people and the alternative version of the joke dates the origin of the Coloured people at nine months after the landing of van Riebeeck. (25)

Much like European encounters elsewhere on the continent, the Dutch arrived with a tiny contingent but quickly staked a permanent claim and expanded their interests. Their interaction with indigenous peoples, in this case the Khoisan population, soon became a blend of trade, infringement, and sexual transgression. Indeed, van Riebeeck's official company journal, which covers his ten-year command of the Cape Colony, suggests that the twentieth-century joke might well be taken literally. One of the central individuals in his journal—a figure read by most scholars as his protégé and by some as his lover—is an indigenous woman. Originally named Krotoa, she was rechristened by the Dutch as Eva, an appropriate signifier for the ostensible first mother of South Africa's mixed race population.

An exoticized figure who has fascinated scholars for centuries, Eva was taken in by van Riebeeck and his family while still an adolescent. In a brief summation of Eva's life, Julia Wells writes that she “later became a key interpreter for the Dutch, was baptised, married Danish surgeon, Pieter van Meerhoff, but then died as a drunken prostitute after his death” (417). While Wells suggests that Eva may have been intimate with van Riebeeck, hence the rather literal possibility that he “sired” the Coloured people, it was her nine-year relationship with van Meerhoff that produced the Cape's first documented mixed race progeny.²⁸ Both her unprecedented marriage to a European in a Christian ceremony, the births and baptisms of her mixed race children, and her alleged descent into alcoholism and an early grave at thirty-two, make Eva a distinct, albeit tragic, figure in the saga of early miscegenation in South Africa. But despite her primacy in van Riebeeck's journal and her consequent role as “the most written about African

woman in South African historiography” (Wells 417), Eva was not necessarily the first indigenous woman in the Cape to have sexual relations with a European.

Indeed, another factor to consider in the history of miscegenation in South Africa is the mass importation of slaves beginning in 1658. Officially prohibited by the Company from attempting to enslave the Khoisan, the Dutch turned their attentions elsewhere, focusing on East and West Africa and later the East Indies. As with the institution of slavery in the Americas, female slaves were immediately and quite literally *used* as sexual objects and breeders by European men. So, for example, in 1660—around the time that Eva the Khoi woman had her first child—van Riebeeck also documents interracial relationships between Dutch men and slave women: “Van Riebeeck records . . . that on a visit to the quarters of constable Willem, he found, ‘the self-same constable there lying in his bunk . . . and next to him in the very same bunk, a slave named Maria, belonging to the Commander’” (February 12). Ironically, the two individuals caught *in flagrante* are the Company lawman and van Riebeeck’s own slave. Later in the year, van Riebeeck writes another account in which “‘freeburgher Elbertsz was caught in the act with his slave Adouke, who lived in his house and it came to light that he had often chased her husband from his [connubial] bed in order to have sexual relations with her’” (qtd. in February 13).

Already a vastly heterogeneous group originating from places as diverse as Indonesia, Ceylon, and Madagascar, these slave women were forced to play a principal role in the race mixing of the Cape. In his exploration of Coloured history, V. A. February reminds us of that age-old excuse for miscegenation during European

exploration and colonization: “A European woman at the Cape was a *rara avis* in the true sense of the word. In 1663 there were . . . only seventeen white females. Prostitution flourished in this harbour port of Cape Town. Passing sailors and garrison soldiers of the Dutch East Indies Company sought sexual release with Khoi and slave women, and the results were not insignificant” (12). Indeed, February provides a telling statistic, which confirms that much like the mulattos of the United States, the early mixed race population of South Africa was the direct result of rape and coercion by European men: “It was estimated that during the first twenty years of its [slavery’s] existence [1658-1678], no less than 75 percent of the children born at the Cape of slave mothers were half-breeds” (13). Ultimately but not uniquely, miscegenation in South Africa was a sordid or, to adopt Zoë Wicomb’s interpretation, a *shameful* business.

Wicomb, a contemporary Coloured writer, reads postmodern Coloured identity precisely in the context of shame and a troubling history. When discussing the famous case of Saartje Baartman, the controversial “Hottentot Venus,” and the demanded return of her remains by the post-apartheid South African government, Wicomb considers the implications of finally affording Baartman a decent burial.²⁹ Wicomb poses the rhetorical question of whether Baartman’s burial will also lay to rest the tradition of objectifying, sexualizing, and shaming the black/coloured female body. For the same indignity “invested in those (females) who have mated with the colonizer” (91-92) carries through to their mixed race progeny. Thus, Wicomb necessarily reads South Africa’s *present* Coloured body in light of that *past* shame and the rape of such women as Maria and Adouke by white colonizers:

Miscegenation, the origins of which lie within a discourse of ‘race’, concupiscence, and degeneracy, continues to be bound up with shame, a pervasive shame exploited in apartheid’s strategy of the naming of a Coloured race, and recurring in the current attempts by coloureds to establish brownness as a pure category, which is to say a denial of shame. We do not speak about miscegenation; it is after all the very nature of shame to stifle its own discourse. (92)

Significantly, the pervasiveness *and* denial of shame is a central theme for the two South African writers I discuss in the next chapters. Both Head and Nortje grapple with a personal and collective sense of illegitimacy as Coloured writers, simultaneously acknowledging and yet stifling the nature of their origins.

Much like the *métis* of Senegal, the Coloured population did not become a cohesive social body until the nineteenth century. As Adhikari points out in his historical reading of the Coloured community, their eventual formation of a group identity was unavoidably influenced by the increasingly racist laws of South Africa, the advent of apartheid, and the marginalization of mixed race people as an embarrassing side effect of colonialism. Similar to the other mixed bodies I have explored in this chapter, the Coloured population invariably became an ambiguous intermediary class “between the dominant white minority and the large African majority” (Adhikari 10). The history of their politics, often fluctuating between assimilationism and separatism, reflects a search for belonging in a still largely segregated society—a search that both Head and Nortje found disheartening and, in their own cases, ultimately futile. Having marked the mobility and evolution of mulatto stereotypes in sub-Saharan Africa (and the relation of those stereotypes to the Americas) through this historical survey, I will now focus specifically on these two South African writers. The subsequent sections explore how Bessie Head

and Arthur Nortje responded to and employed such stereotypes in their respective lives and writing, thus affording a detailed example of how the African mulatto/a figure functions in the twentieth century.

NOTES

¹ Alvise Cadamosto did not sail with Dias, but his impressions, recorded roughly a decade later (1455), are among the earliest written accounts of the peoples south of the Senegal River. Since we do not have Dias's own impressions, these later accounts give some indication of what Dias and other earlier explorers witnessed.

² Notably, Portuguese captains under the command of Henry the Navigator had made a regular habit of kidnapping or buying Africans during their forays along the continent's mysterious coastline since 1441. Thomas writes, however, that, "By 1448 about a thousand slaves had been carried back by sea to Portugal or to the Portuguese islands" (59). Incidentally, these African slaves would contribute to race mixing in Portugal, although the country was reputed for miscegenation long before black slaves were brought to its shores. Following its conquest by a Berber general named Tarik ibn Ziyad in 711 A. D., Portugal came under Moorish rule. As Edward Scobie notes, "From [711] onwards, racial mixing in Portugal, as in Spain, and elsewhere in Europe which came under the influence of the Moors, took place on a large scale" (337). The mid-fifteenth-century influx of Africans to the Iberian Peninsula via the slave trade thus perpetuated a practice of miscegenation dating back roughly seven centuries.

³ The Cape Verde islands also became a refuge for Jews escaping religious persecution.

⁴ These "white and mulatto communities" would have been located in the modern African nations of Senegal and Gambia. During the sixteenth century, however, the entire coast of West Africa was generally referred to as Guinea or, more specifically, Upper and Lower Guinea, while the north western Sahara was termed Nigritia.

⁵ Since the Portuguese Crown had a monopoly on trade in the Senegambia region, any "trafficking" outside royal jurisdiction or without royal consent was considered illegal and therefore "forbidden."

⁶ *Lançados*, a derivative of the Portuguese verb *lançar* ("to throw"), resonates with the English expression, "going native." The label *tango-mãos* was also applied to some settlers although the literal translation remains inconsistent among scholars. While Brooks defines *tango-mãos* as "renegades" ("*Signares*" 19), Thomas suggests that these were men who had tattooed their bodies as part of local custom (63). Both definitions indicate that *tango-mãos* referred to those Europeans who had completely forsaken Portuguese culture.

⁷ Notably, at the beginning of his narrative, an indignant Jobson relates the (second-hand) tale of the murder of an English crew the year before his arrival on the coast "by a few poore dejected *Portingals* and *Molatos*" (79-80).

⁸ I will illustrate a much more tangible progression from seventeenth-century stereotypes of the African mulatto to the American literary trope in my discussion of the Euro-African population of the Gold Coast.

⁹ “Signares with eyes surreal as moonlight on the beach”: a line from Leopold Sedar Senghor’s poem “Joal,” published in *Chants d’Ombre* (1945).

¹⁰ For a detailed discussion of how mixed race communities evolved in Senegambia over the centuries and accounts of specific interracial families, see Brooks’s “The Evolution of ‘Nharaship’ in Senegambia” from *Eurafricans in Western Africa*.

¹¹ *Métis* is simply the French term for mixed race, hence its application to mixed people of French-Canadian and Aboriginal ancestry as well. As Hilary Jones explains in her study of the Senegalese *métis*, other designations were also used by this group: “In Sénégal, the *métis* population referred to themselves as *mulâtre*. In the politically charged atmosphere of the late nineteenth century, however, *métis* leaders commonly identified themselves as *enfants du pays* or ‘children of the soil’ to indicate their heritage as native Sénégalaise” (6-7).

¹² Much like *lançado*, *signare* was not coined as a racial designation but served to describe a particular class of traders; the labels were eventually applied to the mixed race children of those traders as well.

¹³ A renowned naturalist, Adanson spent four years (1749-1753) in Senegal and submitted a report to the French government upon his return. His unpublished memoir is described at length in Brooks’s “The *Signares* of Saint-Louis and Gorée.”

¹⁴ Race relations obviously evolved differently in the Americas, resulting in markedly different conceptions of mixed race identity and different means for social mobility and expression. The mixed race populations of the French Caribbean are the nearest equivalent to the *métis* in terms of privilege, political rights, and opportunities for citizenship. The *gens de couleur* of Saint-Domingue (Haiti), for example, became an elite social body, although they wielded less influence over the colonial government than the Senegalese *métis*. The singularity of the *métis* and, indeed, the *lançados* before them, is thus worth noting here.

¹⁵ Although unpublished, this poem is referenced in Amadou Booker Washington Sadji’s text, *Abdoulaye Sadji: Biographie, 1910-1961*.

¹⁶ As White points out, “the novel is avowedly concerned with mixed-race women, rather than men” (158), a factor often linked to Sadji’s own romantic rejection by a *mulâtresse* and his later multiple marriages to *métis* women.

¹⁷ Sadji’s “eternal moral portrait of the *mulâtresse*” is problematic at best, presenting the mixed race woman as fundamentally flawed by virtue of both race and gender. Significantly, Frantz Fanon relies heavily on Sadji’s “documentation” of the mulatta psyche and quotes extensively from *Nini* in his own problematic chapter, “The Woman of Colour and the White Man,” from *Black Skin, White Masks*.

¹⁸ Certainly, there is *blatant* irony in the fact that, far from being “discredited by its patent absurdity,” *Nini* became an authoritative text for a theorist as seminal as Fanon.

¹⁹ Shakespeare’s *Othello* (1604) famously explores the relationship between a black man and a white woman. The play does, however, play off common stereotypical notions of that union—namely the hypersexual black male (Othello as “lusty moor”) and the wanton white female (Desdemona as “cunning whore”).

²⁰ Cheryl Hendricks makes the necessary point that, “Travelogues are not innocuous documents containing the written accounts of the meanderings of impartial observers. They were written by ‘explorers’, often with official status, with the intent of depicting the land and bodyscapes of the territories they encountered, and these travelogues were the source of knowledge through which an imaginary of, for example, Africa, could be produced” (32-33).

²¹ Not yet “blundering about the Caribbean” (McClintock 21), Columbus sailed to Guinea around the same time that São Jorge was built (approximately a decade before his famous transatlantic crossing) and allegedly visited the castle.

²² For a detailed discussion of “Mina” as a European appellation in West Africa and the implications of “Costa da Mina,” “Elmina,” and “Gold Coast” as geographical sites, see Robin Law’s “Ethnicities of Enslaved Africans in the Diaspora: On the Meanings of ‘Mina’ (Again).” Also refer to P. E. H. Hair’s meticulous text, *The Founding of the Castelo De Sao Jorge Da Mina: An Analysis of the Sources*.

²³ The English translation of de Marees’s text is *Description and Historical Account of the Gold Kingdom of Guinea*.

²⁴ Editors van Dantzig and Jones state in a footnote to the text that the “black or Mulatto slaves” may refer to an Asafo company at Elmina. *Asafo* were indigenous military fraternities that evolved during the initial period of European contact. Historians Datta and Porter further note that an exclusively mulatto *asafo* was later formed at Elmina in

the eighteenth century: “Akrampa [Volunteers] was the company of mulattos, not only in the Cape Coast, but wherever it appeared. Mulattos had long been in evidence on the coast and had sometimes risen to prominence” (286).

²⁵ The English translation of Bosman’s text is *A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea: Divided into the Gold, the Slave, and the Ivory Coasts*.

²⁶ These early references to mixed race men as weapon-bearers, soldiers, and militia conflict with later portrayals of them as weak and effeminate. But as I emphasize throughout this chapter, stereotypes are never static, but constantly being reinvented across space and time.

²⁷ I have already explored how such eighteenth-century writers as Long went on to impact future representations of mixed races in the Americas, thus perpetuating the sequence.

²⁸ Wells cites “an unconfirmed report” (420) indicating that Eva had a child by a Frenchman before she met van Meerhoff. After her husband’s violent murder in 1666, she allegedly had two more children by other European men.

²⁹ Baartman’s remains were returned to South Africa in 2002. For a discussion of Baartman and her treatment by the colonizers, see Sander Gilman’s “Black Bodies, White Bodies.”

Chapter Three

A Mulatta in Motabeng: Bessie Head's *A Question of Power* as African Tragic Mulatta Fiction

I have looked back on my life here with extreme agony. . . . My novels and I never came in from the cold.

—Bessie Head, “Bessie Head: Two Letters”

Tragedy is a great loss foretold but not avoided. Bessie heard the foretelling and probably felt it physically. “It will kill me,” she used to say. What was “it”? What was going to kill her? And why did she knowingly leave it unclear?

—Tom Holzinger, “Conversations and Consternations with B Head”

In a conspicuous sense, South African novelist Bessie Head could be the poster child for troubled mixed race African writers who seemingly realize the tragic mulatto stereotype in both life and literature. Certainly, in terms of a persistent inability to belong, whether racially or otherwise, Head remains a quintessential example. Or, as Lloyd Brown observes, “The complete statelessness, or uprootedness, has tended to make Head the supreme alienated individual” (60). The illegitimate child of a middle-aged, divorced, and unstable white mother and an unknown black father, Head was raised in foster care and spent the majority of her adult life as a refugee, battling with both mental illness and alcoholism until her death at forty-eight. The themes of tragedy and isolation are thus central to Head scholarship, as such melancholy titles as Cecil Abrahams's *The Tragic Life* (1990) or Head's posthumously published collection of autobiographical writings *A Woman Alone* (1990) attest.

Because the stereotype of the tragic mulatto/a hinges on the concept of kismet—the mulatto/a is *destined* for tragedy because of his/her mixedness—Head's story seems

all the more appropriate. A firm believer in the occult, Head often referenced the personal demons warring within her and linked these demons to a metaphysical world and an inescapable sense of doom. She related her “fate” as a stateless woman living in extreme isolation directly to her Coloured identity. When describing her nervous breakdown and the diatribes of her internal voices, Head explained in an interview that, “It was my appearance: there was something about a Coloured that was horrifying. So there would be repetitious things like, ‘You’re a dog. Filth. You’re a Coloured dog’. . . . It aroused such a horror in me—these things kept on beating at me” (“Bessie Head: Interviewed” 25). The “horror” tormented Head until her death, ostensibly affirming the tortured psyche, self-loathing, and fatality of the mulatto/a.¹

But Head’s so-called “tragic life” is inextricable from the rigid apartheid ideology of her native South Africa and her permanent exile to Botswana—factors that had a profound effect on Head and her largely autobiographical works. Like Nella Larsen, who used her experiences as a mixed race woman living with the Jim Crowism of the United States to inform her tragic mulatto fiction, Head drew on her identity as a Coloured woman in segregated South African society and her later status as an alien in Botswana to produce texts that centralize the tragic mixed race subject and the ostracized Other. Indeed, Head assigns universality to the “plight” of being mixed race in a segregationist society and, like the American Larsen, articulates the mixed race identity as an exclusive identity that results in isolation. My purpose in this chapter is to employ Head’s notorious personal history and her overtly autobiographical text *A Question of Power* (1973) as a case study of the mixed race African (woman) writer (self-)representing mixedness

through the predictable yet justifiable, lens of tragedy. Head's novel, born of her own experiences rather than external sources, illustrates how such a seemingly localized American trope as the tragic mulatto was also independently shaped in an African literary context as a result of a similar racist infrastructure.²

Admittedly, several scholars have made the valid point that reading Head and her writing primarily in a tragic light is itself a stereotypical approach. Percy Mosieleng points out “the prevailing view in institutionalized criticism that has succeeded in producing and packaging Bessie Head as a victim of exile and alienation in Botswana” (52). Similarly, Susan Atkinson criticizes Head researchers for applying a dualistic methodology: “Bessie Head's openness undoubtedly left her vulnerable to the fixed interpretations of certain critics who chose to impose their own ‘truth’ upon her life and work. Such ‘truth’ is frequently polarized into extremes of unrelenting misery or of optimism” (9). One of the most vocal (and perhaps most entitled) challenges to the tragic theme comes from Head's long-time friend and confidante Tom Holzinger, who writes that,

The strophe for certain B Head literary criticism is “a tragic life”, a victim of unending adversity and unhappiness from the moment of her anonymous conception to her premature death. I am delighted to proclaim the opposite. It was an exuberant life, and now an exuberant afterlife. She was indeed a victim as a child, a half-caste, an orphan, culturally and intellectually impoverished. But she found her bootstraps at an early age, and she scarcely looked back thereafter. (6)³

My intention in this chapter is neither to victimize Head nor to “impose [my] own [one-dimensional] ‘truth’” upon a considerably enigmatic writer and her equally complex body of work. And I am inclined to agree that the very word “tragic” can smack of

condescension and melodrama when applied too quickly to a literary character or a novelist.⁴

But far from being an imposed theme, tragedy was Bessie Head's *chosen* leitmotif—one she cultivated and accentuated in her books, her prolific correspondence, and her life story. Head's "exuberant life" notwithstanding, she was usually the first person to call attention to the "tragic" in her life—a point worth remembering when reading her life and writing through that lens. Notably, however, Head deftly resists an essentialist approach to her personal suffering. A self-declared victim who paradoxically defied victimization, she harnessed private tragedy for what she often intimated to be a greater public good. And, ever "the shaping, selective *novelist*" (Gagiano 47), Head perpetually relived, reinvented, and reiterated the tragic details of her life in her interviews, biographical sketches, letters, and books. By (re)scripting her illegal conception, illegitimate birth, and Coloured identity, she managed to both claim and convert a shameful past; simultaneously, she disrupted and yet vehemently declared what was for her the inevitable tragedy of being mixed race.⁵

Ultimately, Head's self-designated role/theme of tragic mixed race subject—completely and remarkably uninformed by the American stereotype—was a logical but also a subversive choice. I maintain that Head's writing was uninformed by the tragic mulatto fiction of the United States because there is simply no evidence to suggest that she was ever influenced by such texts. Head was well-read and her literary pursuits ranged from modernist prose to Hindu mysticism. But her exposure to or interest in American literature was arguably less than her familiarity with European and African

literatures. She loosely followed American politics and had a myriad of American correspondents, but there is no indication that she read the writers of the Harlem Renaissance or works dealing with the tragic mulatto. Her fleeting references to racial politics in the United States present those struggles in the Manichean terms of “black” and “white.” Given the conversational pattern of Head’s letters and interviews, one can speculate that her discovery of a literary stereotype as germane as the tragic mulatto would have occasioned, at the very least, some commentary. But if Head came across the trope, there is no clear record of it.⁶

Yet Head’s centralization of the tragic mixed race subject plainly resonates with the works of such American writers as Pauline Hopkins, James Weldon Johnson, Nella Larsen, or Jessie Fauset.⁷ In her study of the tragic mulatta in nineteenth-century American fiction, Eve Allegra Raimon writes that, “A liminal figure like the mulatta . . . is well situated to reveal writers’—and therefore the culture’s—conflicted visions of national and racial exclusion and belonging” (12). Raimon positions the mulatta as a complex rather than one-dimensional subject that does not necessarily represent a “univocal stance of resistance to hegemonic ideologies” (25). The conflictedness, indeed the confusion, of Head’s vision, played out through tragic mixedness in *A Question of Power*, definitively brings to light the inherent conflictedness of national, racial, and cultural identities. The mulatta protagonist of Head’s novel, much like the mulatta heroines of American literature, recreates, indeed “encompasses . . . such ideological complexities” (Raimon 25). Furthermore, Teresa Zackodnik argues that the tragic mulatta of American fiction, initially a problematic white creation, became a useful vehicle for

“African American women [writers] to rhetorically transgress and contest a color line that attempted to police and secure racial identities as they were interimplicated with class, gender, and sexuality” (xi). In a tellingly similar manner, Head challenged the literally policed racial categories of apartheid South Africa and incumbent questions of “class, gender, and sexuality” through her own subjectivity as tragic mulatta.

Aside from her more patent significance to this project as an African writer who forcefully invokes and complicates the device of tragic mixedness, Head also constitutes a highly compelling figure for another reason. A woman who often referenced her own masculinity and publicly expressed sexual anxiety, Head and her fictional double Elizabeth effectively destabilize the predominantly exotic/erotic role of the mulatta—a consistent stereotype that we can trace right from the Euro-African women of sixteenth-century Elmina to such sensual twentieth-century heroines as Larsen’s Helga Crane or Fauset’s Laurentine Strange. Head, who self-effacingly described herself as “a hell of an ugly woman” (Vigne 15), confronts the myth of the beautiful, sexualized mulatta and demonstrates an uncanny ability to avoid predictability in her own life and that of her mulatta protagonist *despite* the adoption of such stereotypical themes as tragedy and isolation.⁸ Indeed, I would suggest that Head’s intensely personal psychological exposé of the mixed race woman in *A Question of Power* was (and perhaps remains) unprecedented in both African and American literature—a startling conceptualization of the mulatta subject that parallels but also challenges the more conventional efforts of earlier American writers.

In Search of Bessie Head

Because Head's engagement with mulatto stereotypes hinges on her life story and her identity as Coloured, my reading necessarily begins with her personal history. Notably, that history, so seminal to her novels and the scholarship about her, has taken on something of a clichéd quality as generations of critics, following Head's lead, recall "'an ideal biographical legend'" (Gardner, "'Production'" 44). Now, twenty years after her death, such contemporary scholars as Mosieleng hint at the tedium of repeating her biography in the new millennium: "[I]t can be safely assumed that the life history of Miss Head has reached legendary status, and to rehearse it here will not advance the argument" (54).⁹ Nonetheless, Head's "legend" and its amendments remain central to my discussion of her identity as a tragic mixed race subject. In an attempt to introduce the legend with insight but without repetitiveness, I borrow a useful anecdote by Alice Walker, which effectively frames my literal search for Bessie Head—one mixed race African woman retracing the steps of another.

Walker, who, incidentally, exchanged intimate letters with Head as both an admirer and a friend, published a piece called "In Search of Zora Neale Hurston" (1975) in *Ms. Magazine*.¹⁰ This article, later reprinted in Walker's collection of "womanist prose," *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, recreates her 1973 journey to Eatonville, Florida to find the unmarked grave of the Harlem Renaissance writer, folklore collector, and anthropologist, Zora Neale Hurston. Braving waist-high weeds, anthills, and snakes, Walker tramped through the deserted cemetery calling out "Zora" until she stumbled fortuitously upon the writer's alleged final resting place. Walker's quest, which resulted

in a headstone for the grave and a reawakening for Hurston's work, positions my own modest excursion in a tradition of reclamation—the search for another literary foremother and large-spirited woman of colour who, like Hurston, loved storytelling and gardening, lived alone, and died in poverty.¹¹

Granted, my journey to Serowe, Botswana, and Head's cement-covered grave was far less dramatic than Walker's expedition. A popular pilgrimage site for researchers, Head's burial place had long been marked by a reddish tombstone proclaiming that "Courage, Selflessness and Love conquers all" and the rampant weeds of her crowded cemetery were only ankle-height. My visits to her grave, to the Khama III Memorial Museum that houses thousands of her letters and documents, and to the small bungalow dubbed "Rain Clouds" where she lived, were all customary and the generous museum curator guided me to these sites with the same patience and politeness with which he had guided countless researchers before me. I, unlike Walker, was not en route to the Pulitzer Prize and Head, unlike Hurston, was not in need of posthumous rescuing from obscurity. Yet my arrival in Serowe, Head's "village of the rain wind" and the setting for *A Question of Power*, constituted a personal discovery of sorts—the finding of, in Alice Walker's words, a "'crazy,' 'Sainted' grandmother" and the opportunity to stand, quite literally, in her garden. Precisely because of my own identity as a mixed race woman born of a white European mother and a black African father and the inclusion of my experiences as mulatta in the final chapter of this project, my reading of Head's past is openly subjective. And if, as Susan Gardner suggests, Head's tragedy was linked to being

“raised [like myself] as a Westerner in Africa” (“‘Don’t Ask’” 118), then my inquiry into Head’s extraordinary history is also an inquiry into my own alternate reality.

Tracing the Tragic

The details of Head’s “deeply inauspicious and secretive beginnings” (Mackenzie 122) read remarkably like the tragic mulatto fiction of the United States and the romantic imaginings of a novelist. But Head’s beginnings were arguably “inauspicious” because of the racist South African state, which rendered her birth and parentage unlawful. While she certainly counted her birthplace in a mental institution and her mother’s insanity as part of her tragedy, these factors alone did not make her origins inherently tragic.

Although the bare bones are factual, Head, “the shaping, selective novelist” (Gagliano 47), did have a hand in tailoring her autobiographical material and choosing what parts of her painful history to represent. The circumstances of Head’s birth and parentage were initially a mystery even to her and only revealed after her transfer as an adolescent from the care of a Coloured foster mother to a missionary school for Coloured girls. As Head writes in the now well-known autobiographical sketch prefacing her 1975 story

“Witchcraft”,

I was born on the sixth of July, 1937, in the Pietermaritzburg Mental Hospital, in South Africa. The reason for my peculiar birthplace was that my mother was white, and she had acquired me from a black man. She was judged insane, and committed to the mental hospital while pregnant. Her name was Bessie Emery and I consider it the only honour South African officials ever did me—naming me after this unknown, lovely, and unpredictable woman. (72-73)

Following this published disclosure of her illegal conception and scandalous birth, Head returned often to the story of her beginnings, sometimes repeating the above passage verbatim and at other times expanding on the information.¹²

Head, whose second-hand knowledge of her history came exclusively from the principal at her missionary school, understood her mother to be from a wealthy Scottish family that owned race horses and her father to be a groom in the stables. And Head's representation of her parents, neither of whom she ever met, was highly sentimental. In a letter to a publishing agent, Head writes of her mother that, "She sought some warmth and love from a black man who tended the family race horses; and so she acquired me. In white South Africa terms the ultimate horror had been committed, that a white woman had had sex with a black man. . . . They tell me no details were available about my father. I fear they killed him instantly" ("Letter" 208).¹³ Heightening the tragic romance even further, Head often pointed out that her mother was declared mad because of her spontaneous love affair with a black man. And, in an almost Shakespearean twist, Head believed that her mother had committed suicide in the mental institution when Head was six years old.

The unfortunate child of a damned union, literally born in bedlam, Head's infancy is no less compelling in its pathos. Head's mother, in a defiant act of love, bequeathed her full name and a stipend to her illegitimate daughter before the child was taken away from her forever. Biographer Gillian Eilersen remarks that Head was first listed as "white" on her birth certificate and placed in the care of an adoptive white family. But Head's blood allegedly began to tell for she was promptly returned to the adoption agency, which then

assigned her to a Coloured family, where she remained until her enrolment in the missionary school as a teenager. The shocking discovery of these details at the age of thirteen would later become integral to Head's oeuvre and feature prominently in *A Question of Power*. But as Gardner, one of the first scholars to attempt corroborating Head's story, writes in her own admittedly guarded article, "'Don't Ask for the True Story': A Memoir of Bessie Head", "[I]t seemed almost too 'good', in its horrible way, to be true. For what Head certainly possessed was the 'ideal biographical legend'" (115).¹⁴

Since Head's death in 1986, more precise details about her family history have come to light. Eilersen's meticulous biography *Bessie Head: Thunder behind Her Ears* and an article by Head's maternal uncle Kenneth Stanley Birch, both published in 1995, were instrumental in differentiating fact from fiction. Birch explains in his monograph that, "Due to misinterpretation of Bessie's statements, her own lack of definitive knowledge, and too shallow and inconclusive research more fuel is still being added to the legends" (1). While not diminishing what Head habitually and resolutely referred to as the "tragedy attached to [her] birth" (Head, "Bessie" 49) or the "tragic circumstances surrounding [her] birth" (Marquard 49), the aforementioned sources deromanticize the legend that Head circulated and firmly believed.

Head's mother, Bessie Amelia "Toby" Emery, seemingly a love-struck young Desdemona in Head's imagination, materializes as a psychologically damaged divorcee whose mental instability dated back to the traumatic death of her young son in a hit-and-run accident and the subsequent collapse of her marriage. Birch quotes a family letter written shortly after Toby's death, which reads, "'It (Toby's life) certainly was a tragedy

from the beginning” (8), an indication that the tragic was already a part of Head’s family history long before her own “inauspicious” birth. The deterioration of Toby’s mental state resulted in her being institutionalized in 1933, four years before Head’s birth, thus contradicting Head’s belief that her mother was “classified insane” because of her affair with and pregnancy by a black man. When Toby left the mental hospital on probation roughly a year later, she was, in her brother’s words, “a seemingly quiet, docile middle-aged woman able to cope with a certain amount of freedom while living with her mother” (Birch 10).

Toby’s probation was revoked upon the discovery of her pregnancy in 1937 and, already forty-three years old, she gave birth, as Head recounts, at the Fort Napier Mental Hospital in Pietermaritzburg. The identity of Head’s father remains a complete mystery, although research has long dispelled the Harlequin Romance plotline of the wealthy white heiress rendezvousing with the black stable boy. As Birch drolly confirms, “This particular family in South Africa . . . was never idle rich, never owned race horses, never used stable hands, nor were they ostentatious or pushy” (12). Finally, Toby’s death at the mental institution, while decidedly poignant, was not suicide but rather the result of a lung infection complicated by schizophrenia—a detail that Birch contrasts with Head’s imagined version: “As time went by, in her anguish over her mother goddess, how Bessie dramatised this scene!” (11).

Indeed, Head’s dramatization of her parents and the circumstances of her birth are crucial when reading her role as tragic mulatta. Admittedly, Head’s belated knowledge of her past was not only limited but also revealed to her in a painful manner by an

insensitive teacher, as she explains in “Notes from a Quiet Backwater” and later recreates in *A Question of Power*:

On arriving back at the mission, the missionary opened a large file and looked at me with a wild horror and said: “Your mother was insane. If you’re not careful you’ll get insane just like your mother. Your mother was a white woman. They had to lock her up as she was having a child by the stable boy who was a native.” (*A Woman Alone* 4)

Yet there remains an underlying sense of Head’s imagination as a writer in her retelling of the “facts” in her possession. If we recall Zoë Wicomb’s reading of miscegenation as historically shameful and linked to “a discourse of ‘race’, concupiscence, and degeneracy” (92), then Head’s strategy for disclosing but also deflecting the shame of her origins lies precisely in the dramatization, even the romanticization, of shame. Especially since Head’s mother was the white parent and her father the black parent—a reversal of the “standard” model and, as she rightly notes, “the ultimate horror” (Head, “Letter” 208) in white South African discourses—the shame lies not in the rape of the black female body but presumably in the innate degeneracy, madness, and/or rape of the white female body. In light of Head’s unknown father, however, shame is *also* linked to the hypersexual violence of the anonymous black male. Head’s parentage is thus doubly shameful, since “[her parents’] intercourse is no longer a purposefully transgressive act, but either the aberrant behaviour of a stray madwoman or rape” (Kapstein 79).

But Head, whether intentionally or naively, recasts the story of her parents in a quixotic light—reading her mother as an “unpredictable” woman who “sought some warmth and love from a black man” (“Letter” 208). By embellishing the ambiguous details of their sexual encounter, Head draws on the same romantic conventions used by

such American writers as Larsen, Fauset, and Johnson. Larsen's Helga Crane recalls her white mother with comparable reverence and idealism: "Her thoughts lingered with her mother, long dead. A fair Scandinavian girl in love with life, with love, with passion, dreaming, and risking all in one blind surrender" (23). In *The Chinaberry Tree*, Fauset also presents the interracial affair between Colonel Halloway and Sal Strange, the parents of her mulatta protagonist Laurentine, as a case of impulsive, albeit forbidden, desire: "Halloway a lad of serious bent but of tearing tyrannical passion loved her . . . he could not marry her" (2). And Johnson's *Ex-Colored Man* employs similarly sentimental language to describe the relationship between his mixed race mother and his white father: "[S]he, the sewing girl of my father's mother; he, an impetuous young man home from college; I, the child of this unsanctioned love" (19). Like these writers, who read the participants of interracial sex (notably, the white participants) as subject to "blind surrender," "tyrannical passion," and "impetuous[ness]," Head reads her mother as "unpredictable." If, as Wicomb writes, "shame is connected to concupiscence" (92), then Head *rewrites* concupiscence precisely as "unsanctioned love."

Further reminiscent of the American stereotype, Head traces the establishment of her identity as tragic mulatta back to the traumatic childhood discovery of her real parents and her "tainted" blood. Fauset's Laurentine, for example, remains unaware of the scandal surrounding her parents' "unusual union" (7) until her classmates begin to ostracize her and a friend explains to her that, "[Y]ou got bad blood in your veins" (8). In a comparable childhood incident, the *Ex-Colored Man* learns of his blackness through the callous words of a school teacher and writes that, "Perhaps it had to be done, but I

have never forgiven the woman who did it so cruelly” (8). He further highlights “that fateful day in school” (9) as the original tragic moment of his newfound mixed race consciousness.

Head describes the revelation of her illicit origins by her school principal with remarkable similarity: “The lady seemed completely unaware of the appalling cruelty of her words. But for years and years after that I harboured a terrible and blind hatred for missionaries” (*A Woman Alone* 4). Like Johnson’s fictional narrator, Head uses autobiographical writing as the primary medium for exploring, critiquing, and justifying her role as tragic mixed race subject. Indeed, I would suggest that Head ultimately constructed a public identity as tragic mulatta in order to engage with the “pervasive shame” of miscegenation and Colouredness that Wicomb underscores in her article. Particularly through *A Question of Power*, Head was literally able to rewrite shame and interrogate questions of “‘race’, concupiscence, and degeneracy” (Wicomb 92) through her polemical role as tragic mulatta.

Madness and Mixedness

Although, for the purpose of my argument, I position *A Question of Power* as a radical form of autobiographical tragic mulatto/a fiction, which resonates with such American novels as Hopkins’s *Contending Forces*, Johnson’s *The Autobiography*, Larsen’s *Quicksand*, and Fauset’s *The Chinaberry Tree*, my reading of Head’s unconventional novel is not fixed. Like its author, *A Question of Power* defies categorization and, as Eilersen points out, has been both dismissed as “a ‘heightened

form’ of prose poetry bordering ‘on the meaningless’” (151) and hailed as “a prolonged spiritual crisis seen from the inside and powerfully described” (152). Head herself defined the novel as “a kind of verbatim reportage” (“Bessie Head: Interviewed” 24) and “a complete kind of inward turning to my own life” (“Bessie” 54). She stressed the autobiographical content, famously claiming that “Elizabeth and I are one” (“Bessie Head: Interviewed” 25), and presented the book as a cathartic exorcism of her personal demons. Because of her strange actions during her breakdown, which included physically and verbally abusing an elderly lady and putting up a large notice at the Serowe post office accusing the President of conspiracy and incest, Head also posited *A Question of Power* as a full and painful confession and an apology. As Randolph Vigne writes in an addendum to her published letters, “[S]he wrote that she had used *A Question of Power* ‘to pull that paper down. I am extremely sorry for it and had no intention of dying with such a crime against my name’” (192).

The novel thus functions along multiple and decidedly fluid lines, operating interchangeably as testimony and memoir, fact and fiction, personal narrative and national allegory. In its conflation of the real and surreal, the rational and irrational, and the natural and supernatural, *A Question of Power* also constitutes a form of magical realism. Although, as John Erickson states, “[t]he term magical realism must be defined with care, for critics have used it indiscriminately” (428), the term is apposite for *A Question of Power*, which bears out Erickson’s own definition: “In narratives marked by magical realism . . . two diametrically opposed ontologies coexist on equal terms: the empirical world of reason and logic and the supernatural world of unreason” (428). Head

refers precisely to this coexistence of opposed ontologies early on in the novel: “It was in Botswana where, mentally, the normal and the abnormal blended completely in Elizabeth’s mind” (15). When describing her writing process for the novel, Head further outlines the two disparate worlds that *A Question of Power* documents:

The book’s in two parts. There’s the everyday world which is this project garden . . . the *real* world that Elizabeth was working in. . . . There was no record made of the nightmare side. But what was so peculiar about it was the force and the repetition of horrible things. I then decided . . . I’ll write the book and I’ll throw [the demons] over my shoulder and I’ll get through with them. (“Bessie Head: Interviewed” 25-26)

Living between the “everyday world” and the “nightmare side,” as well as such polarities as black and white, African and non-African, and so on, Elizabeth is forced to explore the ambiguity of hybridity and question the respective worlds that she inhabits. As Stephen Slemon rightly notes in his discussion of magical realism as postcolonial discourse, “Since the ground rules of these two worlds are incompatible, neither one can fully come into being . . . a situation which creates disjunction within each of the separate discursive systems, rending them with gaps, absences, and silences” (409). This description of magical realism captures the mutually exclusive worlds of reality and phantasmagoria in *A Question of Power*. Simultaneously manifest in Elizabeth’s consciousness, these two worlds clash and overlap but never find complete realization. Pertinently, Slemon’s synopsis of magical realism also evokes the hybrid space that Elizabeth occupies as mulatta and the subversive role that she plays in exposing the “gaps, absences, and silences,” indeed the psychic and even pathological rifts, that are born of separateness or “apartheid.”

By opening her text with Elizabeth's nightmarish existence and psychosis, Head also centralizes madness, specifically *madwomen*, as a primary theme, situating her novel as a successor of sorts to Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966).¹⁵ Particularly because Rhys's protagonist Antoinette is, like Elizabeth, culturally ambiguous, racially suspect, and tainted by hereditary madness, Head's *A Question of Power* serves as the next instalment in a progression of novels exploring "madwomen Others," which dates back to Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847). Significantly, however, the madness of these women cannot be extricated from their Otherness—as Rhys implies in her novel, Otherness predetermines madness.

Accordingly, madness in Head's text is yet another tragic and unavoidable symptom of mixedness—the mixed race consciousness cannot mentally sustain itself. In situating *A Question of Power* as a tragic mulatto/a text, I read the central tropes of madness and mixedness as interconnected, rather than mutually exclusive. By using such familiar tropes as the fragile psyche and alienation of the mixed race subject, Head evokes the literary character and conventions of the tragic mulatta in an African context. But her novel is also a revolutionary departure from those conventions and a singular case of a mixed race African woman "writing back" precisely through the unexpected medium, indeed the fantastic expressionism, of her own tortured consciousness.

First impersonally described as "a woman in the village" (11), Head's protagonist Elizabeth is the child of a white mother and an unknown black father. Born in a South African mental hospital, she only learns of her illicit birth when she leaves her Coloured foster mother for a mission school. Like these familiar details, the rest of Elizabeth's

background is taken directly from Head's life, including her failed marriage, her only son, and her exile to a sprawling Botswanan village called Motabeng where she works on agricultural projects with international volunteers and local farmers. These factual elements serve as the realistic backdrop for Elizabeth's frequent hallucinations, during which she converses with Sello and Dan, two village men who represent good and evil incarnate, and experiences the rigours of a nervous breakdown.

Notably, the clash between "two separate narrative modes" (Slemon 410), the real and the hallucinatory, proves a fitting setting for Head's mulatta protagonist. Elizabeth's actions, like the structure of the novel, are marked by oscillation, conflict, and contradiction. As with the novelist herself, Elizabeth performs her hybridity through moments of shocking prejudice and compelling subversion, moments of mental confusion and keen awareness, and moments of irrevocable loss and incredible triumph. Indeed, hybridity, "a fashionable keyword in post-structuralist academic discourse" (Grunebaum and Robins 168) is not a purely radical "third space" of infinite potential in *A Question of Power*. Rather, Head's novel indicates that hybridity is an indefinite and unstable space, which can never be entirely triumphant, entirely transgressive, or entirely radical. Contrary to R. Radhakrishnan's optimistic quip that "hybridity is about making meaning without the repression of a pre-existing normativity or teleology," Head demonstrates that hybridity is more about making meaning *despite* the repression of *multiple* pre-existing normativities and teleologies.

Head's early and ongoing emphasis on Elizabeth's isolation immediately resonates with the tragic mulatto fiction of the United States. Like Laurentine Strange,

who “was always proud but . . . also lonely” (Fauset 7) or Helga Crane, who first appears “alone in her room” (Larsen 1), Elizabeth’s existence is marked by solitude. But if Larsen, for example, gradually leads up to Helga’s utter debasement in *Quicksand* and has the heroine pondering “[h]ow . . . to escape from the oppression, the degradation, that her life had become” (135) on the final page, then Head begins with Elizabeth’s state of abjection: “How had she fallen so low? It was a state below animal, below living and so dark and forlorn no loneliness and misery could be its equivalent” (14). Despite friendships with those involved in the agricultural projects and the constant presence of her young son, Elizabeth battles her delirium alone in her small hut. Her inadequacy during these battles, particularly her mental and sexual inadequacy, is clearly blamed on her mixedness.

When Sello, one of Elizabeth’s primary phantasms, introduces his consort, the Medusa, she is a potent black alternative to Elizabeth’s enervated, indeed *diluted*, femininity: “Out of the fainting-away woman stepped a powerfully built woman. . . . She was flat-chested, narrow-waisted with broad hips. She was pitch-black in colour and her long black hair flowed loosely about her. Her black eyes were large, full, powerful. She walked towards Elizabeth. She had an exciting way of walking” (37). Medusa operates as a hyperbole of black female power and sexuality and a reminder of Elizabeth’s deficiency as a mixed race woman. Like the repressed Helga, who is alarmed by “the grotesque ebony figure” in the orgiastic church service who “threw off her hat, leaped to her feet, waved her long arms, and shouted shrilly: ‘Glory! Hallelujah!’ and then, in wild, ecstatic

fury jumped up and down” (112), Elizabeth is similarly disconcerted by “the wild-eyed Medusa” (38) and similarly lacking by comparison with a “real” black woman.

As a clear foil for Elizabeth’s *lacking* sexuality, however, Medusa is also a clear stereotype. For where Elizabeth’s mixed race femininity is not enough, Medusa’s black femininity is too much. Her appearance immediately calls to mind the “wild and gorgeous apparition of a woman” (60) pacing the banks of the river in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. Head, whose familiarity with Conrad’s novella is well-documented, was arguably influenced by his stereotypical portrait of a “real” African woman: “She was savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent; there was something ominous and stately in her deliberate progress” (60). If anything, Medusa is the sexualized African woman of the racist white imagination who, as Sander Gilman points out, “was widely perceived as possessing not only a ‘primitive’ sexual appetite but also the external signs of this temperament—primitive genitalia” (213).¹⁶

When taunting Elizabeth, Medusa shouts, ““We don’t want you here. This is my land. These are my people’” (38). Later, as Huma Ibrahim observes in her study of the Medusa character, “Medusa’s attacks on Elizabeth become more sexual and more personally corrosive” (129). Medusa proudly exposes her genitalia to Elizabeth, sneering, ““You haven’t got anything *near* that, have you?’” (44), an act that confirms the myth of the black woman’s “primitive” appetite and overdeveloped sexuality.¹⁷ She follows up this exhibitionism with a comment on Elizabeth’s foreignness: ““Africa is troubled waters, you know. I’m a powerful swimmer in troubled waters. You’ll only drown here. You’re not linked up to the people. You don’t know any African languages’” (44). At this

point in the narrative, Elizabeth's sexual inhibitions, lack of a "people," and inability to speak an indigenous language substantiate her role as tragic mulatta.

Although Elizabeth responds to Medusa's criticism by citing the South African Coloured community as the group to which she was "rigidly classified" (44), that community is itself tainted and perverted in her memory:

She had lived for a time in a part of South Africa where nearly all the Coloured men were homosexuals and openly paraded down the street dressed in women's clothes. . . . It was so widespread, so common to so many men in this town that they felt no shame at all. They and people in general accepted it as a disease one had to live with. . . . Suddenly the nights became torture. As she closed her eyes all these Coloured men lay down on their backs, their penes in the air, and began to die slowly . . . Medusa's mocking smile towering over them all. "You see, that's what you are like," she said. "That's your people, not African people. You're too funny for words. You have to die like them." (45)

Tellingly, Elizabeth reads the Coloured community, specifically the male Coloured community, as sexually diseased. The products of a shameful sexual history, these men are now beyond shame and redemption. By reminding Elizabeth that the Coloured people, "not African people," are her community, Medusa consigns Elizabeth to the same fate of depravity and death.

Her blatant homophobia notwithstanding, Elizabeth diffidently concurs with Medusa's pejorative assessment of Colouredness and her own affiliation with that group: "She could not help but identify with the weak, homosexual Coloured men who were dying before her eyes" (47). Elizabeth's self-loathing, evident in her equation of Colouredness with pathos and degeneracy, is amplified by a record playing incessant self-denigrating mantras in her head: "'You are inferior. You are filth'" (47). Here Elizabeth confirms Mohamed Adhikari's claim that, "Colouredness was not enthusiastically

embraced as an affirmation of self. . . . Coloured identity instead tended to be accepted with resignation and often with a sense of shame by its bearers, as a bad draw in the lottery of life” (14). Notably, this negative and still relatively recent (self-)view of Colouredness diverges from representations of mixedness in an American context and runs counter to the celebratory approach to hybridity in much postcolonial theory.

Although shame and illegitimacy were undeniable legacies of miscegenation in the United States, as the stereotyping of the mulatto/a figure illustrates, the “one drop rule” precluded the formation of a collective mixed race identity and a collective “sense of shame by its bearers.” On an individual basis, mixedness in the United States was often equated with preferential treatment, social mobility, and aesthetic beauty—not necessarily “a bad draw” in a race- and complexion-conscious lottery. As Cheryl Hendricks stresses, however, “in South Africa, coloureds were officially treated as a separate category” (42), a fact that resulted in a more concrete association between a shameful past and the highly visible and carefully differentiated result of that past, the Coloured people. Hendricks further states that, “The acculturation of coloureds along with their racialized difference was used by the state to distance them from Africans rather than to posit similarity with whites” (42). So, far from subsuming mixedness under blackness, as was the case in the United States, the South African state set the mixed race body apart from both white and black, plainly linking that marked body to the uncomfortable and infamous history of interracial sex.

The seemingly indelible shame of Colouredness and the perception that “[p]eople of ‘mixed’ descent are deemed almost pathological and can never transcend their flaw”

(Hendricks 42) immediately complicates the postcolonial acclamation of hybridity as a positive discursive space. Heid Grunebaum and Steven Robins underscore this tension between fragmented Coloured identities and the sanguine model of hybridity circulating among academic discourses. Indeed, they warn against romanticizing inbetweenness and voice their concern over “uncritical celebrations of hybridity as a radical and empowering cultural politics of location” (169). In reading Colouredness as a vexed and volatile category of identity, they concentrate on the testimony of a Coloured female activist, Zahrah Narkadien, who gave an account of her imprisonment and torture before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). Narkadien’s horrific experiences under apartheid, which I will not attempt to abridge here, were partially but irrefutably linked to her Colouredness. And through Narkadien’s story, Grunebaum and Robins situate Coloured identity as a difficult space that necessarily reconfigures optimistic anti-essentialist discourses.

Also citing the narratives of Coloured post-apartheid theorist Zimitri Erasmus, Grunebaum and Robins write that Colouredness “is not a romanticized, radical and celebratory space of in-betweenness, but is instead a way of living without certainty that can evoke pain, nostalgia and a sense of loss of ‘pure’ origins and coherent memory” (70). This pragmatic approach to Colouredness is useful in reading Elizabeth’s self-awareness and self-loathing as a hybrid figure and a mulatta. For Elizabeth is incapable of celebrating her own Coloured identity and her “way of living” is definitively marked by pain, nostalgia about her biological parents’ “beautiful story” (17), and a sense of loss regarding “real” Africanness and “pure” origins. Substantiating the innate ambiguity of

the tragic mulatta, however, Elizabeth's negative perception of Colouredness does not automatically mean a positive conceptualization of "real" Africanness or a sense that blackness is a better draw. Her self-loathing is compounded by both an aversion to and desire for blackness, which manifests in racist commentary and violent fits of fear and disgust.

When attempting to justify her sordid hallucinations, Elizabeth says to herself, "“Yes, you think like that because you hate Africans. You don't like the African hair. You don't like the African nose . . .”" (48). This internal dialogue, a recognizable regurgitation of white South African racism, vilifies so-called black African features while simultaneously distancing Elizabeth from such features and reaffirming her (partial) whiteness. When she enters a store during the day to buy a radio from an attendant, the voice in her head continues to torment her: "“You don't really like Africans. You see his face? It's vacant and stupid. He's slow-moving. It takes him ages to figure out the brand name of the radio. You never really liked Africans”" (51). Eventually, Elizabeth's "white" racism culminates in a verbal attack on the store clerk: "“Oh, you bloody bastard Batswana!! Oh, you bloody bastard Batswana!!” Then she simply opened her mouth in one long, high piercing scream" (51).

In a familiar moment, reminiscent of Helga's "desire to scream . . . 'Fools, fools! Stupid fools!'" at the surrounding "tan and brown faces" (Larsen 53), Elizabeth is physically seized by an overpowering hatred for blackness. Yet, in keeping with the tragic mulatta theme, her keen sense of superiority is constantly destabilized by an opposing sense of personal inadequacy ("you are inferior") and the contradictory awareness that as

a Coloured woman she can never fully claim either whiteness or blackness. Colouredness, captured by the image of “grinning homosexuals in drag” (Kanneh 163), ultimately remains weak, abnormal, and condemned in Elizabeth’s imagination.¹⁸ Conversely, blackness, despite her ridicule and hatred, is personified by such empowered apparitions as Sello, Dan, and Medusa, who are hypersexual but also, therefore, repulsive and corrupt. If Medusa represents the excess of black female sexuality, then Dan, “the epitome of the African male” (137), is a caricature of black male sexuality. A Priapus-like figure, Dan introduces Elizabeth to the seventy-one “nice-time girls,” who collectively feed his unnatural sexual appetite: “[H]e thrust black hands in front of her, black legs and a huge, towering black penis. The penis was always erected. From that night he kept his pants down; after all, the women of his harem totalled seventy-one” (128).

These respective characters and the procession of “nice-time girls” constitute a recognizable spectacle of blackness—another familiar construct of a racist white imagination. By reducing both blackness and Colouredness to exaggerated stereotypes, Head implicates the process by which an institution such as apartheid attempted to rigidly determine and categorize race. But Head/Elizabeth’s association of blackness with a phallus or Colouredness with transvestism is not satirical or the lampooning of racial categories. The complexity of Elizabeth’s hallucinations and the pervasiveness of her psychosis make her visions an amplified response to the already psychologically-damaging system of apartheid. Kadiatu Kanneh aptly describes Elizabeth’s “pathological” racial portraits as “a panicked internalisation of the social parameters of race and gender” (163). Despite romanticizing her origins as “such a beautiful story” (17), Elizabeth cannot

“escape the ‘perversion’ of her own biology” (Kanneh 164) or the racist paranoia that she has adopted from South Africa. Precisely because of her psychosis, however, Elizabeth also undermines the racist stereotypes that she seems to propagate—her stereotyping is openly hallucinatory, the product of a diseased consciousness (like apartheid itself), and visibly larger than life.

Thus, in Elizabeth’s pathological mind, to be “a tribal African” (145) or “genuinely African” (159) is to be sexually excessive, while to be a “mixed breed” (147) is to be deficient. Significantly and seemingly problematically, Head detaches her white characters from the interconnected realms of Africanness and sexuality all together. Tom, the energetic American volunteer, or Birgette, the attractive young teacher from Denmark, remain idealized figures who are removed from the baseness of Elizabeth’s sexual visions and her struggle to belong. As Mosieleng observes, “It is not surprising that Head did not experience evil among whites because ‘white liberals’ she met were part of ‘polite society’ where hisses and obscenities would be totally out of place” (67). Interestingly, Head’s “liberal” white characters, including the “racialist” Camilla and the “old, pious church woman” Mrs. Jones, often prove to be the moral antidote to Elizabeth’s supernatural, implicitly witchcraft-induced, and decidedly African nightmares.

The irony, however, lies in the fact that her nightmares are *not* rooted in the occult practices of black Africa but the racism of white South Africa. Head subtly, albeit firmly, draws attention to this important fact towards the end of the novel, clearly implicating South Africa’s apartheid ideology as the underlying source of Elizabeth’s torment. When

Dan, “the epitome of the African male” (137) and the equivalent of Satan, is finally confronted by the ambiguous but God-like Sello, he suddenly loses his focus. Interrupted in the middle of copulating with one of the “nice-time girls,” appropriately named “The Womb,” Dan’s power wavers. And Head’s description of him in that moment of hesitancy and defeat is critical: “For a split second he forgot he was God. He scrambled to his feet. He looked like one of those Afrikaner Boers in South Africa who had been caught contravening the Immorality Act with a black woman” (198).

Dan sheds his blackness in his last moments, showing his underlying and, I suggest, highly symbolic form as a white South African man caught in the act with a black woman. Head presents the familiar but no less critical image of the Afrikaner transgressing his own laws by practicing the interracial sex that he officially deems “immoral.” By alluding to the concupiscence that eventually produced a Coloured population and the Immorality Act that her own parents contravened, Head provides a lucid moment in her complicated novel where she addresses the national shame of apartheid and the history of rape that gave rise to a mixed race body. At this point, the seventy-one “nice-time girls” take on added significance—a reminder of what Wicomb refers to as “the shame invested in those (females) who have mated with the colonizer” (92). But the fleeting image of Dan as an Afrikaner Boer, like the image of Dan as a hypersexual black man, remains suspect. Dan continues to play a stereotype—this time a clichéd version of white South African masculinity.¹⁹ Head thus addresses stereotypical notions of race *across* the colour line, although she also critiques the histories behind the stereotypes, including the documented abuse of black women by white men.

Despite fluctuating between an allegiance to whiteness and an allegiance to blackness, Head cleverly evades any final sense of alignment—notably, the individuals closest to Elizabeth in the novel are Tom, a white man, and Kenosi, a black woman. In this respect, Elizabeth fulfills the mulatta's oscillating and often paradoxical role between such binaries as white and black, civility and savagery, decorum and lasciviousness, and, significantly, victimizer and victim. For over the course of the novel, Elizabeth, like other mulatto/a characters, practices the very racism that she proscribes. But Elizabeth's subversive potential lies precisely in such ambiguity and her ability as an illegitimate, indeed a *confusing*, figure to effectively and necessarily throw the neat racial order into a category crisis. In his article on hybridity, Radhakrishnan asks the following question: "[S]hould hybridity function as that 'dangerous supplement,' that moment of radical indeterminacy that haunts and destabilizes the discourse of dominant identitarian regimes?" Head's interpretation of hybridity in *A Question of Power* answers the question in the affirmative, for her protagonist conveys a decidedly oxymoronic "radical indeterminacy," which does not *always* challenge or transgress but which certainly "haunts and destabilizes."

Respectability or Shame

As with the mulatta heroines of American literature, Elizabeth's struggle to reconcile conflicting racial impulses ultimately involves a stereotypical contest between (white) primness and (black) curiosity. As Erasmus recalls of her own identity as a young Coloured woman, "These were the possibilities in my young life: respectability or shame"

(“Re-Imagining” 13). Elizabeth remains caught between these two familiar “poles of womanhood” and constantly battles sexual shame both in public and in private.

Admittedly, Elizabeth foregoes respectability early on in the novel because of her outbursts and perplexing behaviour, but her impropriety is never sexual in nature. Indeed, her activities outside her home, especially her involvement in gardening and agricultural projects, are strictly mundane and often dignified. Even her notorious slander of a well-known individual at the post office is a self-righteous attack on someone else’s sexual perversions, rather than her own. And she expresses both apathy and distaste for sex, which “had never counted in the strenuous turmoil of destiny behind [her]” (63). Yet Elizabeth’s inner world, “a black, roaring sea of obscenity” (87) peopled by demons, is exclusively and remarkably sexual.

Although she does not take part directly in the frenzied, vulgar actions of Dan, Medusa, or the “nice-time girls,” Elizabeth indicates a dormant desire to succumb to an innate concupiscence. When Dan first appears in her home under the misleading guise of a hero and “grasp[s] her firmly around the waist” (105) she covers her mouth so he cannot kiss her, reminding him sternly that they are still strangers. Undeterred, Dan kisses her hand instead and Elizabeth experiences an immediate orgasmic reaction: “The most exquisite sensation passed from him to her . . . it was almost indescribable; it was warm, it vibrated, it was a heightened ecstasy” (106). Startled, Elizabeth decides ““to find out more about this”” (106) and allows Dan to kiss her properly. Again, Elizabeth reproduces the actions of Larsen’s protagonist, Helga, whose desire is also awakened by the kiss of an attractive black man: “She fought against him with all her might. Then, strangely, all

power seemed to ebb away, and a long-hidden, half-understood desire welled up in her with the suddenness of a dream” (104). Like Helga, Elizabeth betrays a repressed sexual appetite, which is literally aroused by black masculinity.

But where Helga and other predictable tragic mulattas of American fiction remain seductive and erotic, easily able to fall back on a seemingly innate ability to entice, Elizabeth does not fit this mould. Nor does Head indulge readers with a lengthy sensual portrait of her protagonist. Here Head diverges sharply from and thus effectively contests the conventions of American writers who centralize the mulatta subject. When compared to such characters as Helga Crane, Laurentine Strange, or the beautiful mulatta heroine of Pauline Hopkins’s *Contending Forces*, Sappho Clark, Elizabeth represents an abstract, even un-aesthetic, alternative to the clichéd mulatta beauty.²⁰ Head tellingly provides physical descriptions of all her central characters except Elizabeth, whose appearance she leaves to the reader’s imagination.

Aside from the curt interjections of other characters like Medusa, who says to Elizabeth, ““Don’t eat too much. You’re too fat”” (61), or some prior knowledge of Head’s own appearance, the reader has little to draw on in formulating a visual image of the protagonist—a stark contrast to the stereotypically erotic iconography of the mulatta figure. Larsen, for example, spends a solid paragraph on the appearance of Helga, who has “narrow, sloping shoulders and delicate, but well-turned, arms and legs. . . . soft, yet penetrating, dark eyes, and a pretty mouth, whose sensitive and sensuous lips had a slight questioning petulance” (2). Likewise, Fauset carefully describes Laurentine’s “slender, well-moulded figure. . . . her slender proud neck and her small, perfect head” (35).

Sappho, whose beauty is emphasized throughout Hopkins's novel, is "[t]all and fair, with hair of a golden cast, aquiline nose, rosebud mouth, soft brown eyes veiled by long, dark lashes which swept her cheek" (107). Even such male characters as Johnson's Ex-Colored Man or Charles W. Chesnutt's mulatto protagonist John Warwick in *The House behind the Cedars*, who "was tall, dark, with straight, black, lustrous hair, and very clean-cut, high-bred features" (269), suggest an inherent attractiveness to being mixed race.²¹

Elizabeth's erratic ramblings and soliloquies, however, give a strong sense of how she perceives herself to be decidedly unattractive. At one point, Elizabeth mutters unpretentiously, "I shouldn't mind if anyone told me I'm ugly because I know it's true" (48). Unlike Laurentine, Sappho, and the Ex-Colored Man, who are all bewitched by the loveliness of their reflections, Elizabeth is repulsed when confronted by her own appearance. Laurentine "glance[s] at herself in the mirror smiling with an unwonted coquetry" (34) and Sappho wonders as she passes a mirror, "What would the world say if it could see that brilliant, vivid, flashing beauty that the mirror gave back to her astonished gaze?" (315). The Ex-Colored Man, as I discussed in my first chapter, becomes aware of his beauty for the first time when looking in a mirror. But far from seeing beauty in her reflection, Elizabeth is literally horrified: "She washed and dressed, then had to comb her hair in the mirror. She flinched and looked away. There was an unnameable horror there. She could not endure to look at it" (46). Notably, the "horror" is *not* blackness but its mutation, mixedness. While American authors proffer aesthetic beauty as the usual counterbalance for that "horror," Head presents mixedness in its most raw and repellent form—a perversion born of apartheid ideology.

Although she romanticizes her parents' interracial sex act, recasting that dubious liaison as a love affair, Head does not attempt to sugar-coat her own personal shame as the child of that union or her shameful actions while living as a mixed race woman in a primarily black population. There is nothing romantic or sentimental about Head's exorcism of demons, enacted through a full written account of her mental torture and a detailed description of her possession by evil: "It was like taking a walk on slime; slithering, skidding and cringing with a deep shame" (138). To observe that *A Question of Power* airs Head's dirty laundry would be an understatement. For despite her protagonist's inability to face a mirror, Head provides an intimate and unflattering reflection of herself through the novel as a whole, disclosing everything from her medication and alcohol abuse to her depression, racism, suicidal tendencies, difficulties as a single mother, and visits to "the loony bin."²² Wicomb writes that "it is . . . the very nature of shame to stifle its own discourse" (92), but far from stifling shame in her novel, Head broadcasts it.

Certainly, the pornographic nature of Elizabeth's visions, heightened by her own sexual confusion, racial stigmatization, and mania, reflects back on Head's persona and presents her, at the very least, as a medium and originator, if not a voyeur and participant, in shame. As Gagliano rightly points out, "Head's insistence on uncomfortable realities, it needs to be recognized, grew out of agonising, shameful memories—and to overcome that agony and its awful, attendant shame required great effort and daring" (53). Despite subtly deflecting the shameful nature of her conception through the brief but idealistic portrait of her parents, Head ultimately magnifies her own harrowing descent into

madness and disgrace, using her individual identity as a tortured, tainted, and tragic mixed race woman to incriminate a shameful national history. In exorcising her private demons, the novelist also enacts the symbolic exorcism of an institution such as apartheid and the adherent shame of Colouredness.

Transcending the Tragic

But if Head questions absolute categories of identity through the mulatta's complex liminality and explores the evils of racism through her protagonist's brittle psyche, then what kind of alternatives does *A Question of Power* offer? Such texts as Larsen's *Quicksand* and Johnson's *The Autobiography* remind readers that there is no ideal solution for the mixed race individual. Usually faced with impossible choices and the inevitable betrayal of one or both races, the mulatto/a cannot find either peace or happiness. And Head, as we have seen, was a firm believer in the inescapable tragedy of mixedness. When trying to describe her "strange journey into hell and darkness" (190), Elizabeth explains patiently to Tom that, "Someone weighed up [her] soul and set the seal of doom on it" (192). Nonetheless, Head unexpectedly proffers as utopian an ending as can be expected in a tragic mulatto/a text.

In her summation of the novel, Linda Susan Beard writes that, "Elizabeth must journey through disintegration and madness in order to integrate the warring parts of self and flee the tyranny of absolutes" (44). The suggestion here is that Elizabeth not only makes the traumatic journey but comes through with her sanity and selfhood intact. Remarkably, Head's protagonist does exactly that, symbolically referencing "David's

song” (Psalm 23) and D. H. Lawrence’s “Song of a Man Who Has Come Through” to describe her triumph. Finally free from delirium, Elizabeth awakens to “a still, lofty serenity of soul nothing could shake” (202) and underscores the genuineness of her sanity by disposing of her medication. She then, somewhat surprisingly for a mulatta figure, exuberantly and quite simply embraces life unencumbered by the usual weight of tragedy. Head’s minimalist prose brilliantly captures this turn of events and Elizabeth’s emancipation from the dual forces of madness and mixedness: “She had reeled towards death. She turned and reeled towards life” (203). The well-known conclusion to the novel has since been adopted as the title for a posthumously-published collection of Head’s letters: “As she fell asleep, she placed one soft hand over her land. It was a gesture of belonging” (206).

By concluding Elizabeth’s ordeal in such an idealistic manner, Head seemingly dares to go where previous writers did not or perhaps could not go. Head inverts the usual pattern of the tragic mulatta’s life, choosing to begin with that brand of utter abjection that Larsen saves until the end of her novel and permitting her heroine the final redemption that eludes such a character as Helga Crane. But the survival of the mulatta is not unique to Head’s text. Indeed, by the end of Hopkins’s *Contending Forces*, “Sappho was happy in contemplating the life of promise which was before her” (401) and Fauset’s Laurentine eventually finds “solid ground beneath [her] feet” (341). Like Elizabeth, these mulatta characters also “come through” their trials with selfhood intact.

Tellingly, however, their redemption, especially their social redemption, is implicitly tied to their domesticity and the sanctioning institution of marriage. In an

inversion of Helga's situation, where her marriage to a black, working-class preacher is her undoing, Sappho and Laurentine find deliverance from their tarnished pasts in their respective marriages to handsome and educated mulatto men who, like themselves, are almost white and decidedly middle-class. Head's protagonist, however, finds a redemption that is remarkably independent of domestic ties or social legitimacy. Unlike Sappho and Laurentine, Elizabeth's renewal is not linked to the validation of marriage and motherhood but rather to her land. Despite her fervent belief in fate, Head defies "the seal of doom" by permitting her mulatta protagonist a full rebirth and a newfound identity that is primarily self-initiated. In her reincarnation, Elizabeth no longer seeks membership in national, racial, and cultural groups but instead references humankind and a global community: "There was no direct push against those rigid, false social systems of class and caste. She had fallen from the very beginning into the warm embrace of the brotherhood of man" (206).

Significantly, Head did not find the peace that she afforded her literary double and her redemption of the tragic mulatta does not extend beyond the pages of her text. The "horror" did not subside for Head and her bouts of mania, depression, and alcoholism resulted in her early and unsurprisingly tragic death, like her mother's, at the age of forty-eight. She did not live to see the fall of apartheid or the rise of the New South Africa, founded on the same utopian principles with which she concluded her book. Appropriately, however, Head's seemingly unrealistic ending proved to be a portent of things to come—fact rather than a-historical fantasy. After reading a simple yet acute poem by her son, Head's protagonist applies a similarly child-like viewpoint to her

anticipated future: “That’s what she felt about people’s souls and their powers; that they were like sky birds, aeroplanes, jets, boeings, fairies and butterflies; that there’d be a kind of liberation of these powers, and a new dawn and a new world” (205). These words are a fitting prediction of the renaissance envisioned and partially realized for South Africa roughly twenty years after the novel’s publication—not only through the “liberation” of such figures as Nelson Mandela but through the end of apartheid and the arrival of a long-awaited dawn for the “new” nation.

Head ultimately and quite literally embodied tragic mixedness, physically internalizing but also exhibiting that role in her writing. Her recognition and manipulation of tragedy as a means of expressing her mixed race identity in a black and white world was an explicable, even warranted, methodology, as an earlier mixed race author like Larsen confirms. In playing/writing the part of tragic mulatta, however, Head redefined some of the basic stereotypes about mixed race femininity, particularly the exotic/erotic codes of mulattanness that are identifiable in both African and American literary contexts. Head presented the tragic mulatta in an extraordinary and certainly unprecedented light—not *just* “a woman alone” but a daunting, complex, and completely unpredictable woman alone who broke the tragic mould (at least in the novel) by deliberately and *autonomously* “reel[ing] towards life.”

NOTES

¹ Atkinson points out Head's appropriation of Conrad's famous lines: "Writing on the horizon of 'living life' and 'living death' she could acknowledge fully what she called 'The Horror, the Horror' (she went on to say 'this latter favourite I picked up from Conrad!')" (9).

² Whereas Abdoulaye Sadji draws on representations of the mulatta in the Americas to conceptualize the "eternal *mulâtresse*" in his novel *Nini*, Head imagines her mixed race protagonist through her own lived experience as a Coloured woman in South Africa and Botswana.

³ Holzinger himself leans towards an extreme optimism here, his reference to "bootstraps" indicating his desire to position Head within a conservative ideology of self-sufficiency and "triumph" over circumstances.

⁴ When operating outside the classical tradition of tragedy, one should consider the connotations of over-simplistically pegging a writer like Head as "tragic."

⁵ The following conversation, recalled by Tom Holzinger, illustrates how Head firmly believed Colouredness to be tragic in the most ominous sense of the word: "'Oh Tom. [. . .] You're a white man from America. People have to respect you. You always respect yourself. But I'm this *coloured* person from South Africa. Do you know what that means, Tom? Do you know?' 'Bessie, I can't see how that's different from being any other kind of person. I mean, how . . . ' 'Tom! You listen here. I'm from *South Africa*. I'm *coloured*. I have *no parents*. How does that feel? You, Tom, you will always belong *somewhere*. I will always belong *nowhere*. One day, one day . . . this will kill me.'

 She leans back, eyes closed, her face a mask" (8).

⁶ Despite her membership in a vibrant literary community via her correspondence, Head did not have access to a library in Serowe and relied largely on the generosity of her overseas friends for textual material. More obscure books outside the realm of the "classic" would have been difficult to find.

⁷ Johnson's *The Autobiography* figures in both my reading of Head and my reading of Nortje in the next chapter. Because Johnson focuses on the mixed race man, however, his novel will be far more central to my discussion of Nortje.

⁸ Head's marked refusal to be read as sexual or even attractive is an interesting variation of Bosman's eighteenth-century claim that mulattas are "only fit to fright Children to their Beds" (142). Also relevant here is Adhikari's mention of the *goffel* stereotype: "*Goffel* is a highly pejorative term that generally refers to working-class Coloured women

and characterizes them as socially inferior, usually physically unattractive, but sexually available” (23). These negative physical portraits of the mulatta in an African context are notably distinct from the American representation of the mixed race woman as beautiful. But Head’s resistance to exoticization arguably remains a subversive act—a rejection of those traditions that always see the mixed race female body as a sexual body.

⁹ Tedium aside, Mosieleng describes his article as a “biographical study” and openly admits the bearing that Head’s life story has on his reading of her novels despite her “legendary status” and the widespread familiarity of her biography.

¹⁰ Walker, an editor with *Ms.*, was instrumental in getting one of Head’s pieces published in the magazine that same year. Head’s story “Witchcraft,” later to be quoted incessantly by critics (myself included), was the first of her writings to disclose specific details about her birth to a wide readership.

¹¹ Hurston and Head shared a number of similarities beyond their writing talent—fascination with local histories and folklore, love of food and drink, infectious humour, estranged families, outspokenness, loneliness, and impeccable diction. But Hurston, unlike Head, did not claim tragedy as her racial legacy. On the contrary, Hurston proclaimed an exhilarating optimism that rebuts the very notion of tragic mixedness: “I am not tragically colored. There is no great sorrow damned up in my soul, nor lurking behind my eyes. I do not mind at all. I do not belong to the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a lowdown dirty deal and whose feelings are all hurt about it. . . . No, I do not weep at the world—I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife” (“How It Feels” 216).

¹² In her own defence, Head observed the public’s need for biographical repetition where the life of an acclaimed novelist is concerned: “I am always forced to give biographical information so everything begins rather pathetically: Bessie Head was born the 6 July, 1937, in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa. . . . One had to begin *somewhere*” (Atkinson 2).

¹³ Under South Africa’s 1927 Immorality Act, which prohibited sexual relations between whites and blacks (later reinforced by the National Party in 1950 to ban any kind of interracial sex), Head’s very conception was a crime.

¹⁴ Gardner, initially Head’s friend, later fell out of favour with the writer. She published her memoir of Head roughly seven months after Head’s death, hinting darkly at but never properly substantiating the “almost intolerable burden” (113) of knowledge she had supposedly gained about Head’s “true” history.

¹⁵ Head corresponded with a number of groundbreaking female writers, including Michelle Cliff, Nikki Giovanni, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker. If she did not read Rhys's pioneering text, then she had arguably heard of it.

¹⁶ Maria Olaussen provides an excellent Freudian reading of Head's Medusa, incorporating Hélène Cixous's seminal essay "The Laugh of the Medusa."

¹⁷ Medusa's self-exposure is a disturbing re-enactment of Saartje Baartman's allegedly (but improbably) voluntary exhibitions. Baartman, also reduced to a caricature of black female sexuality, was marvelled at for her "unique" genitalia, which were preserved and displayed in Paris for more than a century and a half after her death.

¹⁸ Given Elizabeth's emphasis on the depravity of Coloured men, one might also read Colouredness here as a failed or degenerate form of black masculinity—a point that I will return to in my discussion of Arthur Nortje.

¹⁹ Head proffers an opposing and highly positive model of white South African masculinity through the character Eugene, the Afrikaner principal of the local secondary school.

²⁰ Although Head's portrayal of Elizabeth reiterates the protagonist's *lack* as a Coloured woman, that portrayal is, I suggest, subversive because it flies in the face of the centuries-old tradition of exoticizing the mulatta.

²¹ Johnson, however, describes the beauty of the Ex-Colored Man in decidedly feminine terms, reaffirming that the attractiveness of the mixed race character is gendered. Furthermore, as Donald Goellnicht notes in his reading of Johnson's text, "the [Ex-Colored Man] may be as uncertain of his sexual orientation as he is about his racial identity" (31), a possibility that intersects with both Head's portrayal of Coloured men as "natural" homosexuals and earlier stereotypes of mulatto men as effeminate.

²² Sadji's rather presumptuous desire "to offer [mixed race women], as in a mirror, the reality of what they are" (8) arguably falls short, but Head's reflection of her own reality succeeds precisely because of its excruciating candour.

Chapter Four

A Portrait of the (Tortured) Artist as a Young (Coloured) Man: Reading Arthur Nortje

And I hybrid, after Mendel, / growing between the wire and the wall, / being
dogsboddy, being me, buffer you still.

—Arthur Nortje, “Dogsbody Half-Breed”

No presentation of Arthur Nortje could separate the poet from the man of colour.

—Jacques Alvarez-Pereyre, *The Poetry of Commitment in South Africa*

A biographical sketch of Arthur Kenneth Nortje reads more like the profile of a rebellious rock musician than the story of a mild-mannered South African poet.¹ Born of mixed race ancestry in late 1942, he showed early artistic promise although his opportunities were limited by racism and segregation laws, prompting him to leave his home country for England in the mid-sixties. He smoked and drank heavily during his brief career and had a penchant for LSD, producing some of his work while under its influence. His body was discovered in an English flat on a Friday morning in late 1970 just before he turned twenty-eight. A post-mortem examination confirmed that he had consumed a large quantity of alcohol and sleeping pills shortly before his death. The coroner's inquest recorded an open verdict, attributing his death to barbiturate poisoning and the inhalation of vomit. Whether he took his own life or lost it accidentally remains a mystery.² A prolific and versatile artist, he left behind an abundance of material, most of which has been edited (sometimes problematically) and published posthumously.

At a cursory glance, Nortje's life and death bear an uncanny resemblance to those of legendary American guitarist Jimi Hendrix. The latter, a rock star of black and

Cherokee descent, was born three weeks before Nortje and lived a similarly “fast” life, dying three months before Nortje in the same country, at the same age, under identical circumstances. Considered one of the greatest guitarists of all time, Hendrix headlined the famous Woodstock Festival in 1969 and became a household name in Europe and North America. But where Hendrix gained international stardom and lasting fame despite the brevity of his life and career, Nortje remains an obscure South African writer—a “shadow-figure” (McLuckie and Tyner, “‘The Raw’” 1), “peripheral character” (Volk 56), and “neglected poet” (Pordzik 35).³ Nortje published only a fraction of his poems while he was alive but wrote hundreds in his seminal Oxford journal, diary-like notebooks, correspondence, and personal documents. These poems have been studied and published sporadically since his strange and untimely death, recently culminating in the two most comprehensive Nortje resources—the first major anthology of his poetry, *Anatomy of Dark (AD)*, published in 2000, and an anthology of critical essays, *Arthur Nortje: Poet and South African*, published in 2004.

Although, as Dirk Klopper notes in the preface to the former text, “Nortje’s poetry has not been widely circulated” (xxiv-xxv), Nortje has been a cynosure for a small body of critics and a subject of debate because he himself did not see the majority of his compelling work through to publication. Most of his poems were discovered in draft form and editors have taken serious, albeit inevitable, liberties in attempting to arrange, chronologize, and present the poetry without undermining the integrity of the work or the intentions of the poet. Such liberties include the reconstruction of rough drafts, selection from multiple versions of the same poem, and decisions on dates, titles, punctuation, and

structure. Nortje is thus, to borrow Richard Volk's analogy, something of a palimpsest—his original meanings are often lost yet (re)scripted and his body of work remains a site of ongoing (re)construction.

But Nortje, in a prophetic, permissive, even baleful, moment, wrote that, “You will find my journal, you may work / the memoirs over. The scope / you give the story is how it must ever travel” (*AD* 228). While Nortje arguably had a more specific addressee in mind for this poem, scholars have nonetheless become the collective “you” who found and examined the journal, memoirs, and other documents, published the poetry, and gradually disseminated Nortje's oeuvre. In this chapter, I also “work over” or (re)inscribe the poet's biographical material and writings. “The scope [I] give the story,” however, is not one of breadth but rather a literal “scope” or magnifying lens. I read Nortje's “story” *through* the “scope” of the tragic mulatto and again explore the powerful realization of that trope by a mixed race African writer in a segregated world where “the gold boss . . . whips / the black bull in full view / of the sun” (*AD* 303).

That Nortje was a troubled, even tortured, writer, like his fellow South African and exile Bessie Head, is common knowledge. Once more there is a conspicuousness about the “tragedy” of this Coloured writer, who wore his anguish on his proverbial shirt sleeve and ostensibly realized the most drastic conclusion of the mulatto stereotype—suicide.⁴ Despite various interpretations of Nortje and his poetry, scholars generally agree that his highly autobiographical verse centralizes a lifelong sense of isolation and a ceaseless search for belonging as an illegitimate Coloured man and a South African émigré. But where my examination of Head hinged on her gendered role as mulatta, my

reading of Nortje necessarily shifts away from that paradigm to the (self-)representation of mixed race masculinity. As ethnographic portrayals of the mixed race figure in tropical Africa and the Americas and the later tradition of tragic mulatto fiction in the United States indicate, mulatto/a tropes deal primarily with the mixed race woman. Particularly in the American literary context, the tragic mulatto/a is a construct largely *by* and *about* women. The mixed race man, alternately an aggressive, tormented figure and/or a feminized, homoerotic character, remains less prevalent in literary traditions. Nortje and the self-representations we find in his poetry thus provide an interesting foil, not only for Head (as a female South African counterpart) but for the mulatta (as a recognized symbol for tragic mixedness).

At face value, Nortje's male "performance" of tragic mixedness underscores such familiar markers as self-loathing, psychological turmoil, and an inability to belong. His poetry is riddled with the confusion of apartheid, the shame of Colouredness, and the loneliness of exile. Certainly, like Head, and many fictional mulatta figures, Nortje was plagued by his illegitimacy and, as I explore in detail, his "bastard" status. Even with numerous friends, undeniable talent, and lucrative opportunities that were not available to many of his contemporaries, Nortje, like Head, pursued an incongruous path of self-sabotage and ultimately self-destruction. As an educated and sophisticated young Coloured *man*, however, Nortje arguably had a mobility and agency that Head, "a woman alone," did not. Although the male mulatto body is also a sexualized body, Nortje was not a sexual target in the same way that a solitary woman like Head or the mulatta in general constituted a target for men. Neither was he burdened by parental responsibility. Nortje

thus moved with surprising physical (if not psychological) ease in the world. He carried a legitimate passport, which was a rare commodity for non-white South Africans, and his exile, while clearly justifiable, was self-imposed.

Much like Johnson's *Ex-Colored Man*, Nortje transitioned fluidly between classes, races, and languages.⁵ His abilities were nurtured and encouraged by various mentors and benefactors. He lived, worked, and travelled in three continents with legal and financial freedom and he could have become a citizen of either the United Kingdom or Canada had he chosen to do so. Barring his death, once again self-imposed (even if accidental), Nortje's life story now begins to sound like the not-so-tragic mulatto. Yet a close reading of his personal history and poetry suggests that despite any flexibility tied to his gender, Nortje was unable to repair the fractured sense of self he inherited at his illegitimate birth or reconcile the knowledge of his interracial background. As I demonstrate in this chapter, mixed race masculinity, like mixed race femininity, inevitably posed its own set of gendered strictures and stereotypes.

To begin with, I discuss Nortje's powerful and symbolic ambivalence for his white father—a pattern that is repeatedly found in representations of the tragic mulatto as opposed to the tragic mulatta.⁶ For the mulatta character in American fiction, the white father is traditionally a sympathetic and loving figure who privately, if not publicly, acknowledges her but does not live long enough to save her from a tragic fate.⁷ The stereotypical relationship between white father and mixed race son, however, is markedly different. The mulatto embodies "bastardy," already a gendered concept, in a way that the mulatta never does, largely because he is never claimed by his white father. Despite tell-

tale markers of his paternity, the mulatto is refused recognition by the “real” father; although, as I explore, the mulatto still experiences the full weight of the symbolic father through such white patriarchal laws as apartheid and Jim Crow. In his poetry, Nortje reflects the psychic schism that results from the ironic absence and silence of his biological white father in a world where white men, as symbolic fathers, infantilize and police his actions under their racist Law. When read in the context of segregation, the mixed race son of the white father presents a distinctive character—one who ultimately exhibits unrequited love and violent hatred for the father he cannot “own,” reflect, become, or conquer. In Nortje’s case, we also see a paradoxical compassion and contempt for the mother figure, precisely because she is another of “those (females) who have mated with the colonizer” (Wicomb 92).

Furthermore, like the mulatta “taking on double border duty [and] defining the poles of womanhood as well as ‘race’” (Zackodnik 135), Nortje indicates a similar onus on the mixed race man to represent or demarcate opposing constructions of masculinity as a result of his opposing “races.” If the mulatta oscillates between “a desire for [black] sexual fulfillment and a longing for [white] social respectability” (McDowell xvii), then Nortje tellingly recasts that dilemma in masculine terms, situating the mixed race man as similarly torn between “white” propriety and “black” passion. Significantly, Nortje’s split or dual self manifested in an urbane British gentlemanliness (a stereotypical version of “white” masculinity), offset by drunken revelry and debauchery (a stereotypical version of “black” masculinity).

Indeed, when Zimitri Erasmus recalls the possibilities for young Coloured women as either respectability or shame, she goes on to apply that dichotomy to the Coloured experience in general: “I can see how these possibilities were shaped by the lived realities not only of gender and class but also of ‘race’. I can see how respectability and shame are key defining terms of middle class coloured experience” (“Re-Imagining” 13). Nortje’s life and writings affirm Erasmus’s suggestion that respectability and shame are not only touchstones for Coloured women but the ostensible options for Coloured people *en masse*. In Nortje, who maintained an irreproachable record as a scholar *and* a “shameful” lifestyle involving alcohol and drugs, we see not only the pressure to distinguish between those opposing (racialized) options but the poet’s “solution” to the either/or dichotomy—the simultaneous realization of *both* possibilities. Nortje confirms the “double border duty” of the mixed race subject and proves that the weight of “white” respectability and “black” shame is not the mulatta’s weight alone.

Lastly, I consider Nortje’s sexuality, which is sometimes playfully unclear, “[a] dadazen of the deep with his dildo / hanging half-priapically loose” (AD 393), and at other times openly suggestive: “Apollo’s man-breasts smooth and gold-blond / hold between in the fine-boned cleft / the kernel of radiant light. Like wind / youth’s madness streams through the orifices” (AD 125). I argue that Nortje presents a discernible “queerness” in his poetry, which recalls and certainly complicates the historical trend in both the Americas and South Africa of reading mixed race masculinity through sexual and gender ambiguity. Through the lens of queer theory, I position Nortje as a sexually ambiguous Coloured male writer—emblematic of the feminization of the tragic mulatto

in American literature and the more explicit linking of Coloured masculinity with homosexuality in twentieth-century South African discourses.

If Nortje's prospects as a poet, scholar, and emigrant were more favourable because of his gender, especially in the patriarchal worlds of university education and publishing, then his advantages as a man were not sufficient to counterbalance or displace the identity crisis he experienced as a *Coloured* man. His poetry, a blend of Romantic melancholia, bravado, and despair, signifies a subversive attempt to reconstruct a cohesive sense of self, but his failure to "triumph" or even survive reiterates the fatal consequences of apartheid and the bearing of "tragic" mixedness. Like Head, Nortje inevitably conveys a poignant solitude, dark foreboding, and psychological chaos in his work that resonates with the American trope precisely because he was illegitimate and mixed race in a segregated society. That Nortje, a man of seemingly infinite potential, "a brilliant all-round student and excellent sportsman" (Brutus 26), "an excellent teacher" (McLuckie and Tyner, "Arthur Nortje" 109), and "the best South African poet of our time" (Brutus 27), could not cheat what he himself called "the stamp / of birth" (AD 372) reiterates the fateful implications of Colouredness and the exigencies of Coloured masculinity.

The Coloured Man and the Ex-Colored Man: Nortje and the American Trope

In my examination of Nortje's "tragic" mixed race masculinity, I read his life story and poetry alongside a significant American text dealing with the mulatto subject—James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912). While

Johnson's novel is not the only example from the American genre that explores the consciousness of the mixed race man, it is a primary example. As indicated in my earlier analysis of the novel, *The Autobiography* was considered a pioneering text, both for its unprecedented mulatto narrator and its complex exposé of the narrator's identity.

Johnson's book is a logical comparative text and one that informs my discussion of Nortje as a male African writer who realizes the tragic mulatto trope in his personal life and his autobiographical verse.

As well, I include the work of Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, and Jean Toomer, important figures of the Harlem Renaissance who explore the mulatto psyche in their writings. Although Hughes and McKay, like Johnson, identified as black under the one-drop rule and the Renaissance's celebratory reclamation of blackness, they wrote poems respectively titled "Mulatto" (1927) and "The Mulatto" (1925), which resonate strongly with Nortje's self-representation as the "bastard" son of a white father and a "black" mother. Hughes also wrote a two-act play called *Mulatto: A Tragedy of the Deep South*, which debuted on Broadway in 1935. Fittingly for a discussion of Nortje, the tragedy centres on a young mulatto who is driven to suicide by "the circumstances of his birth."

Toomer, a mixed race writer known for his controversial "vacillation between black and white" (Pfeiffer 82), is often paralleled with Johnson's *Ex-Colored Man* and remembered for his resistance to racial categorization and the one-drop rule. I reference Toomer in my conclusion as an American poet who stood apart from his contemporaries because of his desire to see human beings rather than races—a desire that Nortje strongly

echoes in his verse. In identifying the parallels between these early twentieth-century American writings and the themes in Nortje's poetry, I posit an intercultural iconography of the mulatto (as opposed to the mulatta) and re-emphasize that tragic mixedness in South African literature was the result of a segregation system akin to that in Jim Crow America.

Hate for the Father

Parentage, birth, and childhood are crucial to the trope of tragic mixedness and Nortje's case is no exception. He was born to an unmarried Coloured mother, Cecilia Nortje, on December 16, 1942 in the Western Cape town of Oudtshoorn. Like Head, who was also raised by a Coloured woman, Nortje "always assumed that both parents were coloured" (Klopper, "Arthur Nortje" 2). Only in late adolescence did he learn the truth about his heritage, namely that his father was Jewish and thus white under the South African racial classification system. Notably, Nortje and Head would still have been considered mixed race and Coloured if they had been born to two Coloured parents rather than one white and one Coloured/black parent. As Cheryl Hendricks points out, "In the twentieth century, 'in-breeding', rather than 'inter-racial' sex became the dominant form through which the group reproduced itself" (43). Nonetheless, a white parent added another layer of stigmatization precisely because interracial sex was a criminal offence. As the first-generation progeny of illegal, extramarital, interracial sex, such individuals as Nortje and Head were ostensibly more illegitimate than other Coloured people.

A significant part of the mulatto/a tragedy is the life-altering, pre-adult discovery that he or she is not what they *appear* to be. Interestingly, if we read Nortje's biographical details against those of Johnson's fictional Ex-Colored Man, we see a curious inversion of similar circumstances. Both men are raised by unmarried mixed race mothers—young domestic servants who became pregnant by white men living at their places of work. Klopper writes of Nortje's parentage that, "Cecilia, a Coloured domestic worker from Oudtshoorn, fell pregnant with Nortje by a young Jewish man called Arthur Kaplan, most likely the son of her employer" ("In Pursuit" 875). Likewise, the Ex-Colored Man describes his mother as "the sewing girl of [his] father's mother" (19) and his father as "an impetuous young man home from college" (19). Incidentally, Robert Young reminds us in *Colonial Desire* that nineteenth-century ethnologists such as Louis Agassiz put the blame for these sexual unions squarely on the woman of colour: "The men are, Agassiz claims, attracted by the white part of the 'colored' mixed-race housemaids, while the black part loosens the inhibitions of both maid and master" (140).

Hedy Davis, the pioneering scholar who single-handedly uncovered and collated the extant biographical material on Nortje, points out that Cecilia had already been pregnant once before—a fact that Agassiz would undoubtedly have considered proof of the mulatta housemaid's "loosened inhibitions." Clearly, such theorists as Agassiz did not consider rape and coercion a possibility for the mulatta housemaid in white service. Davis indicates that Cecilia's first child was adopted by her brother, but following the birth of Nortje, her second illegitimate son, "Cecilia and the two-month old baby were sent away in disgrace" (1). Cecilia Nortje's family, who were staunch Calvinists and well-respected

in the community, immediately brings to mind Erasmus's description of her own family and the pressure on young Coloured women to adhere to respectability: "With our roots in the rural outback, the family's journey to the city, combined with a Protestant work ethic, has made it now middle class and 'respectable'. . . . the message of my family was that girls who 'came home with babies' were 'not respectable'" ("Re-Imagining" 13). The punishment for such girls as Cecilia who had "chosen" shame instead of respectability was usually ostracization. Thus, Kloppe writes that, "[u]nder pressure, in particular, from her older brother Andrew, she was persuaded to leave her hometown and take up residence . . . in Port Elizabeth" ("Arthur Nortje" 3), where Nortje spent his boyhood.

Like Cecilia Nortje, the mother of the Ex-Colored Man relocates, in this case from her birthplace in Georgia to a town in Connecticut, while her son is still a young child. Although she is initially well maintained by her white lover, she has nonetheless moved from the Deep South to the North and no less than seven states away for his convenience: "She told me even the principal reason for our coming North. My father was about to be married to a young lady of another great Southern family" (19). The white father remains a peripheral character who is financially, rather than emotionally, invested in his "mulatto" family. Eventually, even his monetary contributions taper off until he is completely absent from the scene. The mother of the Ex-Colored Man, like Cecilia Nortje, must then navigate her son's initiation into race consciousness and the principles of segregation—an initiation complicated by her own blackness and the absent father's whiteness.

While the Ex-Colored Man's distress erupts around maternal blackness, however, Nortje's angst lies in paternal whiteness—as he indicates in the aptly-titled poem, “For Sylvia Plath”: “Hate for the father. / A pool of malice in my blood / dribbles like yellowing water down the cliff-face of ferns. / His blood confuses mine” (*AD* 182). In invoking Plath, who herself famously wrote, “Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I’m through” (50), Nortje points to his ongoing struggle with “the father.” Tainted blood is a common signifier for mixedness, but the taint usually lies in the so-called “black” blood. Nortje, on the other hand, identifies malice and confusion in his “white” blood and ties those negative feelings to the knowledge of his paternity. He goes so far as to describe his father's genes as “white trash / coursing through my blood” (*AD* 376), thus reducing his whiteness to contaminating waste.⁸ We know from Davis, who interviewed Cecilia on more than one occasion, that Nortje discovered his father's racial background when he was eighteen years-old and we can ascertain from the poetry that the discovery made a poignant impression.

For both Nortje and the Ex-Colored Man, the absence of the white father magnifies the uncertainty of their already ambiguous identities and affirms their social and cultural distinction as “bastards.”⁹ Nortje was presumably called “Arthur” after his father and thus shared a concrete identity—his given name—with that absent figure.¹⁰ Significantly, Cecilia Nortje did not disclose this fact to her son and Nortje never learned any details of his paternity beyond race. Inevitably, Nortje betrays that curiosity and confusion about his father in his poetry, writing, for example, that, “I shall be true eternally towards / my father Jew, who forked the war-time virgins: / I shall die at war

with women” (AD 169). Despite an almost anti-Semitic “[h]ate for the father,” Nortje maintains a paradoxical loyalty to the man who used his mother and aligns himself with his father against women. Here Nortje reveals his own ability to speak with a “forked tongue,” betraying the split in his approach to his imagined father by expressing his “eternal trueness” to the hated “father Jew.”

Tellingly, Grant Farred reads Nortje’s affiliation with his father in the context of a shared violence and misogyny: “The Jewish father becomes, in the poem’s most striking double entendre, a man who ‘forked’ coloured women (so palpable is the violence of this line that clearly the poet intends us to hear the echoes of the harsher expletive, ‘fucked,’ as we read it)” (68). Certainly, Nortje’s callous description of his white father “forking/fucking” the “war-time virgins” evokes both the abuse of women during WWII and the long colonial history of rape with its pervasive discourse of shame.¹¹ Whether accusingly or admiringly, Nortje casts his father as (ab)user and his mother, paradoxically, as complicit victim, writing of her body, “your delicate nooks and moments noble-gentle / bud-open both to blond and black” (AD 345).

In his early poetry, Nortje paints his own sexual exploits in a similar language of male conquest: “She urges, whimpering, venom from my body: / I thud forked thighs with thunder” (AD 95). Over time, however, his descriptions become far more passive; for example, he writes in the poem “Natural Sinner” that, “[I] have lain with Soho prostitutes” (AD 372). Next to his father’s active “forking” of virgins, Nortje’s “laying” with prostitutes suggests a reversed, almost indolent, sexuality, which belies his alleged “war with women.” Nonetheless, he remained emotionally estranged from the opposite

sex, asserting that, “I think of you, the woman, with shrill fury” (*AD* 103), a life-long hostility that reflects back on the actions of his anonymous father—the “original” woman user.¹²

As David Bunn observes, the Oxford journal also “abounds with references to Dedalus, the ‘old Artificer,’ and to a narrative in which the father Joyce (or sometimes the Jew Leopold Bloom) invests his bleak exile with avant-garde meaning. But this remains a paradigm for *fathers*; it is a phallocracy” (38). Prompted by the impenetrable mystery surrounding his biological father and his own decidedly conflicted masculinity, Nortje explicably searched for surrogate fathers in both fictional and material worlds. The Ex-Colored Man indicates a similar confusion around the father he meets twice but never truly knows: “‘Father, Father,’ that was the word which had been to me a source of doubt and perplexity ever since the interview with my mother on the subject” (15). In a pattern analogous to that of Nortje, the Ex-Colored Man seeks answers to his “doubt and perplexity” in male authority figures, particularly his white millionaire patron.

A Freudian analysis of Nortje’s relationship with his white father, or the Ex-Colored Man’s filial ties for that matter, would probably smack of the Oedipal.¹³ Because of his father’s absolute identity as white male or “baas,” an identity he cannot inherit or even mirror, Nortje expresses a desire to reconfigure that oppressive identity: “Flesh tears from flesh because it must / be acquired in a new amazing dominion, / assimilating the tyrant that bred it, to nurture / the conquering lord, who is handsome and stealthy, a boss cat!” (*AD* 183). While the tearing of flesh implies a painful separation, assimilation implies absorption or mixture—so the “tyrant,” the white male (father) figure, is

assimilated or absorbed by his own torn flesh (in this case his progeny), originally bred to nurture him. Presumably, the son becomes the “conquering lord” and “boss cat,” adopting but also reinventing token images of colonial white masculinity by assimilating the father.¹⁴

According to Lacan, “the father” is an amalgamation of the real, the symbolic, and the imaginary. He represents a biological function and the social system of the Law.¹⁵ A Lacanian reading is particularly compelling for Nortje, whose father was simultaneously “white trash” *and* the definitive legal and symbolic authority of apartheid South Africa—the archetype father or imago—the white male “baas.” Significantly, Nortje’s biological father was fundamentally absent from the family triangle—he was literally nameless, forever unattainable, and permanently unknown. The Law, on the other hand, was omnipresent and the Name-of-the-Father was repeatedly invoked through apartheid. Nortje was put in his place by this symbolic father, this “gold boss” in a “blond-bossed kingdom” who called him “boy,” told him what he could and could not do as a *Kleurling* or Coloured, and warned him against transgressing the Law.

In the poem “Exit Visa,” Nortje describes this white male authority figure who polices his actions under apartheid:

Nor was his genius equal to
though he was blond and I black
removal of the sun from me cement-celled.
I had seen and spoken to the light
though at any time he could call the darkness back.

Evils accumulate.
Perils that patiently lie in ambush
at every crossing would snare my progress
had He and his Praetorian henchmen

had their way.
After marching orders
They laughed about my wintering in cold climes
Beyond those golden borders. (*AD* 395)

The blond “He” of this poem, earlier referred to as the “Strongman,” becomes interchangeable with the Name-of-the-Father. “He” is the Law within the “golden borders” of South Africa and attempts to impede the “genius” and the “progress” of the “black” speaker by holding him back in “cement-celled” darkness.¹⁶ In a much more concrete incarnation as symbolic father, “He” appears in the poem “Autopsy” as “the blond / colossus [that] vomits its indigestible / black stepchildren like autotoxins” (*AD* 194).¹⁷ Nortje’s self-representation as “black” in “Exit Visa” suggests that the “black stepchildren” include Coloureds like himself.¹⁸ As a result of Sarah Gertrude Millin’s 1924 South African novel of the same name, “God’s stepchildren” also became a specific epithet for Coloured people—an epithet of which Nortje was likely aware.

While Nortje’s biological white father remained officially unrecognized by his mother, the apartheid Law, a symbolic white father, was inevitably recognized, not only by his mother but by the state in general. Far from resolving any identity crises, however, the Law exacerbated the process of signification and the formation of identity. Although Nortje expresses “the anatomy of fear” (*AD* 87) for the Law, he also disparages the symbolic “blond colossus,” who cannot digest him even though, in a deft role reversal, he describes himself “assimilating the tyrant.” Neither is the symbolic father’s “genius” equal to his own, “though he was blond and I black.” As a mixed race subject, Nortje was precluded by race from ever claiming or becoming the white father, but he also refused to defer to the father’s apartheid Law, choosing exile “[b]eyond those golden borders.” If, as

Lacan writes, “The true function of the Father . . . is fundamentally to unite (and not to set in opposition) a desire and the Law” (321), then the Father’s function, for Nortje, resulted in predictable and categorical failure.

Fittingly, Nortje’s response to his biological white father and, by extension, the white Law of apartheid, was a deep-seated ambivalence.¹⁹ When Nortje writes, “my schizoface scarred like a contender’s / yet champions / the soulfully misted mirror” (*AD* 303), he evinces his aggressive and ongoing attempts to decode a racial identity hopelessly scrambled by apartheid and defrost the “misted mirror” of Self. Appropriately for a Lacanian reading, encounters with mirrors are a consistent paradigm in Nortje’s poetry. Like the Ex-Colored Man, whose moment of racial recognition/denial occurs in front of a mirror, Nortje recalls Lacan’s Mirror Stage and that initial point of self-identification where the child (mis)recognizes him/herself as a separate and self-contained being. But also like the Ex-Colored Man, Nortje is troubled by his racially-conflicted reflection, noting that “[i]nfinities of images clash in my mirrors” (*AD* 235) and describing “a parody of self in shattered mirrors” (*AD* 246). The vivid portrait of his reflection(s) as multiple clashing selves and a parody in broken mirrors reiterates Nortje’s inability to discern or literally re-cognize the Self.

A Little Yellow Bastard Boy

The theme of ambivalence to the white father—a filial investment offset by passionate hatred—has long been recognizable in American texts dealing with the male mixed race subject. The tragic mulatto usually names whiteness as visible common

ground with the father, attempting to bridge the racial gap. In the face of the father's silence and/or rejection, however, whiteness becomes a means of retaliation that is often futile. The Ex-Colored Man takes little pleasure in his ability to pass as white, which he labels his "practical joke on society" (1), but his passing is ultimately a joke on white people—his father's people. In the Hughes poem "Mulatto," a chilling conversation between the mulatto speaker and his white father reflects the mulatto's urgent demand for recognition by the father because of their biological connection and shared whiteness. The mulatto exclaims, "*I am your son, white man!*" (533), relying on filial ties to trump racial difference. "*Like hell!*" responds the father, immediately severing all genetic ties by reducing the mulatto and his black mother to subhuman recreational objects: "What's a body but a toy? / Juicy bodies / Of nigger wenches / Blue black / Against black fences. / O, you little bastard boy, / What's a body but a toy?" (533). The white father conflates his rape of the mulatto's mother with the mulatto's birth in a taunting, sing-song rhyme that acknowledges paternity only to deny it through repetitive, capitalized use of the word "bastard": "A nigger night, / A nigger joy, / A little yellow / Bastard boy" (533).

In his drama *Mulatto*, Hughes again centralizes the love-hate relationship between a mulatto protagonist, Robert Lewis, and his white father, Colonel Norwood. The play leads up to a tense confrontation between the two men, during which the question of paternity and, by extension, racial categories, are put to the test:

Robert: Oh! But I'm not a nigger, Colonel Tom. I'm your son.
 Norwood (*Testily*): You're Cora's boy.
 Robert: Women don't have children by themselves.
 Norwood: Nigger women don't know the fathers. You're a bastard. (549)

The argument gradually builds, resulting in an inversion of the “if you can’t beat ’em, join ’em” mentality to an “if you can’t join ’em, beat ’em” approach, as Robert declares, “I’d like to kill all the white men in the world” (550). His angst culminates in patricide and then suicide. Tellingly, the final scene of the play depicts Robert’s mother, “a brown woman in her forties,” confronting a lynch mob, which expresses collective disappointment to learn that the “yellow bastard” is already dead.

The murder of the white father also constitutes the central theme of McKay’s violent poem “The Mulatto.” McKay’s mulatto speaker goes beyond reasoning with the white father straight to plans for retribution and assassination. Here the voice of the white father is completely silent as the mulatto plots his revenge: “Because I am the white man’s son—his own, / Bearing his bastard birth-mark on my face, / I will dispute his title to his throne, / Forever fight him for my rightful place” (559). The speaker once again identifies his father through their shared whiteness but further uses that whiteness, “his bastard birth-mark,” as a pretext for his own claim to the “throne.” He experiences “[a] hate that only kin can feel for kin” and remains “unreconciled” until he has slain his father: “When falls the hour I shall not hesitate, / Into my father’s heart to plunge the knife / To gain the utmost freedom that is life” (559). McKay’s mulatto speaker, like Hughes’s protagonist Robert Lewis, invokes a common existential paradox, namely the ability to obtain freedom and life through the murder of another.²⁰ In keeping with this gendered theme of violence, the desire to kill the (white) father as an act of self-liberation is completely absent from fiction on the mulatta.

Significantly, Nortje's cynical self-representation as a Coloured "bastard," a term that peppers his poetry and his diaries, strongly echoes these American texts dealing with the mixed race man. Despite his ambivalence, Nortje, like Johnson, Hughes, and McKay, incriminates the white father who is "divided from yourself / by golden fortune, natural largesse, / forgetting . . . your bastardies, abortions, sins of silence" (AD 345). The father litters "bastardies" and "abortions" behind him, rarely looking back to the mixed race children in his wake. Unable to gain legitimacy through his father, Nortje seeks consolation in the knowledge that "[w]hose past is black or white no glance can tell" (AD 135) but also admits that "wrong pigment has no scope" (AD 171).

Inevitably, these fraught portrayals of the mulatto's white father provide a fragmentary snapshot of the mulatto's "black" mother. Hughes's haunting portrayal of the mulatto's mother through the goading voice of the father ("*What's the body of your mother?*") in the "Mulatto" poem, resonates with Nortje's own troubled and troubling portrait of his mother, Cecilia. While he is decidedly ambivalent (literally of two minds) about his father, Nortje is allegedly "at war with women" and thus, presumably, with his mother. Farred takes up Nortje's gauntlet against the opposite sex, situating Nortje as a "revisionist patriarchal historian" who "transforms white male aggression into black and coloured sexual lasciviousness" (63). In other words, the Coloured mother is held accountable for the sins of the white father. According to Farred, Nortje's mother is "a pathetic figure, a terrible failure as a parent" (66) in her son's poetry. Bunn, however, reads Nortje's approach to women as more obscure than outright misogyny, identifying a

“deep ambiguity about women and . . . deep ambiguity about the womb that expelled him as a racially indexed body into apartheid South Africa” (40).

Without absolving Nortje’s identifiable hostility to women, I would suggest that his representation of his mother, in keeping with Bunn’s argument, is marked by pathos and a sense of shared suffering. Although there remains an underlying implication that his was a “tragic” beginning, “[b]eing born (in jungle time) to the drums of sorrow” (*AD* 162), his poetry acknowledges that the tragedy was not entirely his own. If anything, Nortje’s repeated emphasis on his mother’s womb and his own birth brings us back to Lacan and the imaginary dyadic state of being with the mother before the intrusion of the father.²¹ Nortje writes in the poem “Affinity (for Maggie)” that, “my blood mother mourned / the damp and gloomy evenings of our country / whose womb hurt with deadweight” (*AD* 180). The womb, which simultaneously belongs to his mother and to South Africa, contains “deadweight,” painful and unwanted.²² Though he clearly situates himself as a subject of pity, alienated even in utero, the misfortune of the poem also lies with his mother, who mourns and suffers the “hurt” of her pregnancy. The “hurt” here is shared by both Nortje and the mother figure. Similarly, in “Dogsbody Half-Breed,” written eight months before his death, Nortje rhymes, “Maternal muscle of my mixed-blood life / with child were you heavy, with discontent rife” (*AD* 344). Again, the “discontent” applies to the child but extends to the mother (or vice versa).

In the poem “My Mother was a Woman,” Nortje reviews his actual delivery through “the microscope of [his] bewildered eye,” observing that, “[t]he growth shaped, muscle-spilt, is going to / its foster home: your young cave, void, relaxes” (*AD* 229).

There is some ambiguity here, both in light of his mother's earlier illegitimate pregnancy and the later birth of his half-sister, but Nortje's portrayal of (t)his birth is imbued with an almost objective compassion for the "young cave" now "void" of its "deadweight." In "Casualty," the same poem in which he declares war on women, Nortje imagines how "the rats peeped from hiding when / the scissored bag had spilled me like a wombscrape" (*AD* 168). The acutely painful image of birth reemphasizes connectivity between the mother who is "scissored" and the son who, like the tissue from a D&C abortion, is "scraped."

The maternal "black" body, like the paternal white body, undeniably constitutes another site of confusion for the mulatto subject, who hates his father for the abuse and abandonment of his mother, yet realizes his father's abuse is both a model of (white) male power and the reason for his own existence. The result in Nortje's case appears to be a lasting ambivalence to both parents. As Klopper writes of Nortje's adult relationship with his mother, "There is no evidence that Cecilia neglected Nortje. . . . Nevertheless, it is true that Nortje later claimed to have long been estranged from his family" ("Arthur Nortje" 5). Nortje's rupture with his absent father and present mother again signifies his literal embodiment of "irreconcilable differences." Indeed, instead of the cathartic patricide that McKay's mulatto protagonist envisions ("Into my father's heart to plunge the knife"), the stabbed heart for Nortje figuratively became his own: "the wood of the heart splits, showing splinters / brilliantly" (*AD* 184). As I explore in the next section, this splintered sense of self tellingly manifested in a double life of restrained "normalcy" and uncontrolled debauchery, the latter of which would eventually be his undoing.

Kleurling

Despite his mother's eventual marriage to a spendthrift Coloured man and constant movement "from one impoverished dwelling to another" (Klopper, "Arthur Nortje" 4), Nortje found stability in school, the Anglican Church, and the homes of family friends. He spoke English and an Afrikaans dialect at home but also, like many young Coloured people, mastered both languages through his education. He studied hard, read voraciously, and made a positive impression on his teachers. Klopper identifies a primary school teacher who "would remain a mentor for many years to come, and would help fund Nortje's subsequent studies" ("Arthur Nortje" 4). Furthermore, a high school teacher, Dennis Brutus, the celebrated poet and activist, would forge a special bond with the young Nortje: "Describing their relationship, Brutus says that they 'were more than teacher and pupil', they were 'friends, and in many ways almost colleagues', as they 'did things together'" ("Arthur Nortje" 6). These teachers were two of the many paternal figures that Nortje leaned on for guidance as well as emotional and financial support over the years.

Just as Nortje's boyhood centred largely on education and the church, Johnson's Ex-Colored Man identifies a similar scholastic and religious foundation in his childhood. He excels at school despite the traumatic discovery of his blackness, studies the piano, and cultivates a habit of reading. His love of books begins with the Bible and he finds his first mentor in the church organist. Following his completion of high school, his mother's death, and his inability to fund a university education, his music teacher, in the role of surrogate father, organizes a benefit concert to assist him financially. The Ex-Colored

Man then deliberates between an Ivy League (white) education at Harvard and a reputable (black) education at Atlanta University. He opts for the latter because of cheaper expenses and a “peculiar fascination which the South held over [his] imagination” (23), but the decision is also a symbolic moment in which racial loyalty is determined.

For Nortje, university was no less a crucial turning point involving racialized institutions. Klopper suggests that Nortje, backed by numerous bursaries and intellectual promise, had his sights on the prestigious University of Cape Town and the University of Fort Hare, the latter being the alma mater of African National Congress (ANC) freedom fighters Nelson Mandela, Govan Mbeki, and Robert Sobukwe. Due to the 1959 Extension of University Education Act, however, Nortje had little say in the choice of his university. The Act resulted in the racial segregation of universities and the reservation of white institutions for white students. The University of Cape Town was closed to non-white students and the University of Fort Hare was demoted, along with other academic institutions, to an “ethnic” college with lower standards. Klopper writes that, “Nortje was forced to enrol at the newly invested University College of the Western Cape” (“Arthur Nortje” 8), which was designated as a Coloured university.²³

Nortje arguably began to grapple with his identity as a Coloured individual and shape a double persona during his university years. Klopper describes a young man who was both popular and lonely, both political and passive, both industrious and profligate. Certainly, Nortje’s university years coincided with some of the most notorious moments in apartheid history and he entered adulthood during a turbulent political period—his personal struggle for selfhood can hardly be disassociated from the collective “black”

struggle for selfhood that was sweeping the nation. The Sharpeville Massacre of March 1960, resulting in the deaths of sixty-nine black protesters at the hands of white police officers, was still a recent tragedy when Nortje matriculated in December 1960. By the time Nortje graduated in 1963, the ANC and all other African political organizations had been banned and Mandela had been arrested. In 1964, when Nortje earned a supplementary University Education Diploma, Mandela was sentenced to life in prison on Robben Island.

Klopper writes that, “By 1965, two hundred political trials had led to the incarceration of 1300 individuals for an average of seven years each. With the leadership of the black resistance movements in confinement, and its infrastructure smashed, the struggle would be conducted for several decades from outside South Africa’s borders” (“Arthur Nortje” 7). Although Nortje did not consider himself an activist, he also became part of that “struggle from outside,” leaving South Africa in 1965 to “[winter] in cold climes / Beyond those golden borders” (AD 395). But Nortje accentuates his isolation, that pervasive condition of tragic mixedness, long before his exile. He describes the “long stretches of loneliness” (AD 35) and writes plaintively that, “I’m lonely . . . I am alone here now, here living / with shoals of fragments” (AD 75). The self-portrait he provides in the poem “Hangover” is a bitter reference to the identity card he was required to carry under South Africa’s Pass Laws Act (1952) and a strange premonition of his solitary death: “In case of foul play, imprisonment, death / by drinking (identity is / 268430: KLEURLING, / Pretoria register, male 1960) / inform Mrs Halford, Kromboom Road, Crawford, / house without garden. No reward” (AD 77).

Perhaps in response to his growing sense of isolation, Nortje sustained an exhausting and contradictory living schedule to fill the “long stretches of loneliness.” Klopper writes that, “Nortje developed a pattern of intensive study during the week and unbridled socialising over weekends, a pattern he was to follow throughout the remainder of his life. In giving expression to these divergent desires, he was in fact leading two lives, the life of the sober-minded and conscientious academic and the life of the dissipated libertine” (“Arthur Nortje” 9). Despite his exile to England and his teaching stint in Canada, Nortje was surprisingly consistent in “acting out” these two roles. A colleague in British Colombia recalls in an interview with Craig McLuckie and Ross Tyner that “*he was a . . . I refer to it as a weekend binger. Yeh know, he wouldn’t touch anything . . . all week. On Friday night, it was his night to howl so to speak and he would drink quite a bit*” (“Arthur Nortje” 112).

There is something transformational about these descriptions of Nortje, a latent Jekyll and Hyde motif in the representation of a studious academic who is regularly displaced by a “dissipated libertine” who figuratively “howls” come Friday night. When read in the context of the tragic mulatto trope, Nortje’s two lives suggest the “typical” mulatto struggle between a white appreciation for propriety and an innate and degenerate black excess. In a more constructive light, Nortje’s paradoxical behaviour recalls the collective emphasis on respectability and shame that Erasmus identifies in the Coloured community. Nortje seemingly paraded those two exclusive models of identity for the Coloured individual—the reputable, middle-class individual and the rude “native.” In a sense, Nortje defied the ultimatum that Erasmus describes where opposing identities are

concerned: “When one lives aspects of both these cultural identities having to choose one means the denial of some part of oneself. This is not easy especially when one’s actions are judged in these stark racial terms” (“Re-Imagining” 14). Instead of choosing one identity and thus denying the other, Nortje seemingly lived both identities to the fullest.²⁴

My own argument here is that Nortje’s double life simultaneously reflects a familiar, even expected, identity crisis as a Coloured individual *and* a subversive ability, as a result of that crisis, to present multiple selves. I suggest that Nortje consciously *performed* his dual personas, conceivably knowing that they were easily read along stereotypical racial lines. Nortje’s binge drinking in particular appears to confirm the “shameful” possibilities for Colouredness in an all too obvious way. Erasmus observes that “[b]eing coloured is about living an identity that is . . . associated with drunkenness and jollity” (“Re-Imagining” 14) and Mohamed Adhikari lists “drug and alcohol abuse, and vulgar behaviour” (14) under a list of negative characteristics attached to Coloured identity. Remarkably, Nortje blatantly substantiated these particular stereotypes only to disprove them through his equally public alter ego as sober academic.

Nortje’s contradictory behaviour is *almost* farcical—a rebellious mockery of the racialized character types endorsed by apartheid. He becomes the “primitive” drunken Coloured man on the weekend—playing the role that exists in the white imagination—then reappears on Monday morning as the grave and “civilized” scholar. But there is also an acute desperation to Nortje’s self-destructive excess, which betrays his overpowering loneliness and his desire to belong. Klopper cites a friend’s recollection of the drunken Nortje: “[He] wanted to be cool, wanted to be a chum, one of the boys . . . he could not

quite pull it off. He was too separate, too detached . . . somehow alone even in the midst of the drinking and partying” (“Arthur Nortje” 11). In this respect, Nortje’s “role playing” resonates with American representations of the tragic mulatto, who can never *quite* give in to the “heart of darkness.”

Nortje certainly recalls Helga Crane’s experience at the subterranean Harlem nightclub in *Quicksand*: “It was gay, grotesque, and a little weird. [She] felt singularly apart from it all” (58). Like Larsen’s heroine, Nortje visited “the jungle,” but his acquaintances suggest that he was not, to borrow Helga’s words, “a jungle creature.” More pertinently, in light of my gendered discussion, Nortje’s detachment “in the midst of the drinking” evokes the Ex-Colored Man’s social behaviour. Cheated out of his money and thus his university education, the Ex-Colored Man soon excels in a cigar factory, where he becomes immersed in a decadent life. But he too evinces an aloofness that is implicitly tied to his mulattohood: “Several of the men at the factory were my intimate friends, and I frequently joined them in their pleasures. . . . There was a dancing pavilion, a great deal of drinking and generally a fight or two. . . . I drank [liquor] only when the company I was in required it, and suffered for it afterwards” (39). The Ex-Colored Man, in a marked example of the shame/respectability paradigm, admits that, “I was a bit wild” but immediately counters this assertion with the claim that, “I can’t remember that I ever did anything disgraceful . . . anything to forfeit my claim to respectability” (39).

In his presentation of tragic mixedness, Nortje constantly tested this line between “a bit wild” and “respectability.” Although his reserve, even during revelry, was

noticeable to his peers, he threw himself with an ironic enthusiasm into his adopted role as debauchee. Klopper quotes a letter written by Nortje in 1964, which reads, “I am spending my weekends more dangerously than ever, roistering and sowing chaos. Much disgust and/or embarrassment of friends and relatives” (“Arthur Nortje” 11). If anything, Nortje’s lasting routine of alternating abstinence and indulgence made him all the more difficult to *know* or understand. Like Head’s character Elizabeth, whose subversive potential resides in her confusing nature, her ability to throw the tidy racial order into a category crisis, Nortje also *confused* those around him, literally “sowing chaos.” His opposing identities as erudite scholar and wayward bacchant, existentialist poet and jazz enthusiast, stoic tutor and carefree *kleurling*, were a means of defying categorization, even though such performances also magnified his inner turmoil.

In spite of sowing chaos and wild oats, however, Nortje also applied his versatility, “[his] talent / for capitalising on ambiguities” (AD 157), towards advancing himself and staying “respectable” during the week. Klopper notes that, “Nortje had discovered jazz music and sex, had smoked and drunk” (“Arthur Nortje” 12), but the young poet also “immersed himself in English literary culture” (12). While playing the drunken “chum,” Nortje completed his first degree and an auxiliary diploma with honours and won a scholarship for postgraduate study at Oxford University. In England, he maintained a similar balance between profligacy and progress. He played varsity cricket, joined the Union, published his poetry in academic journals, and successfully completed a second BA in two years. He also continued to binge drink and experimented regularly

with narcotics, including hashish, LSD, and “a euphoric drug taken intravenously” (Klopper, “Arthur Nortje” 16).²⁵

The Ex-Colored Man displays a comparable ability, one that is linked to his chameleon-like identity, to mix with a tougher crowd and still prove an innate sophistication. He admits to his reader that he learned “to smoke, to swear, and to speak Spanish” (33) at his factory job. Where the first two traits authenticate his performance as “hail fellow well met,” the last, a result of industry and aptitude, results in his promotion and immediately sets him literally and figuratively above his workmates. When he becomes a compulsive gambler, he sensibly begins to earn a separate income through his piano-playing, thus escaping the fate of other “bright, intelligent young fellows who . . . had fallen under the spell of this under life” (53).

Both men effectively apply their mixedness to their chosen art forms, manipulating different modes of cultural expression and drawing on divergent racial histories to give their creations weight and inspiration. As a writer, Nortje invoked a decidedly white English tradition. He tested such Western forms as the sonnet and referenced English poets in his verse: “I stir my sad little self from thoughts / of Keats under autumn” (*AD* 80). But he also drew heavily on his Cape upbringing and black South African history to “colour” his poetry: “Where are the mineworkers, the compound Africans, / your Zulu ancestors, where are / the root-eating, bead-charmed Bushmen, the Hottentot sufferers? / Where are the governors and sailors of the / Dutch East India Company, where are / Eva and the women who laboured in the castle?” (*AD* 249). In his diaries, he switched between the “King’s English,” the Coloured patois of Cape Town,

and an idiomatic tongue of his own making. This literary facility is symbolic of Nortje's competence, both in formal scholarly circles and local pub scenes, and his comfort with "academic speak" and the vernacular *kombuis* or "kitchen" Afrikaans.

The Ex-Colored Man, a classical pianist, is also formally trained in a white tradition. But similar to Nortje, his "real" talent lies in his ability to imbue classical scores with the black flavour of ragtime. He boasts that, "I developed into a remarkable player of ragtime. . . . I brought all my knowledge of classic music to bear and, in so doing, achieved some novelties which pleased and even astonished my listeners. It was I who first made ragtime transcriptions of familiar classic selections" (53). This hybrid form of music, a novelty like himself, earns the Ex-Colored Man the title of "professor" and tellingly advances his career in a more direct way than his "playing of Beethoven and Chopin could ever have done" (54). Because of his talent for "shaking things up" in his musical performances, the Ex-Colored Man impresses black and white audiences. And just as Nortje's versatility made him "passable" in the English homes of white professors and the black slums of Cape Town, the Ex-Colored Man rubs shoulders with the poverty-stricken and the affluent of both races.

These examples provide a sense of agency amidst the "tragedy" for such mixed race figures as Nortje or Johnson's Ex-Colored Man. Although confusing, Nortje's contradictory behaviour was a means of taking control under a system that afforded very little control to its "secondary" citizens. Indeed, there is a reckless determination to Nortje's duality, which is reflected in his poetry. Alongside "September tennis" (AD 190), "Oxford poetry in the satchel" (AD 249), scotch eggs, and marmalade, Nortje positions

“love and liquor” (AD 76), “wild, heart-breaking orgy” (AD 104), “sins / of carnality” (AD 369), and “life of the libertine” (AD 369). His was arguably a lucid decision to manipulate identities and present “a strange visage / that troubled the best zookeepers of my mind” (AD 390). Tellingly, ambiguity was Nortje’s *modus operandi* as a mixed race figure—he was not propelled by violence like McKay’s mulatto speaker or subterfuge like Johnson’s Ex-Colored Man. Nortje’s more aggressive poems rarely link the aggression to his mixedness but rather to his blackness or his masculinity. The poem “Questions and Answers,” for example, includes a fantasy of raping the white daughters of the “boss” as an act of vengeance, but the scene functions in the larger context of the black apartheid struggle: “I will fall out of the sky as the Ministers gape from their front porches / and in broad daylight perpetrate atrocities / on the daughters of the boss: / ravish like Attila / and so acquire more scars myself” (AD 374).²⁶

The moments where Nortje expresses rage or empowerment are always tied to his role as poet rather than his role as mulatto. He writes confidently of his craft, “Sensitive as a moon instrument. My / pen bites like a bullet. White and cringing / the paper bleeds black tears . . . My hands are magnets / attractive in silence: / it is my mind that strikes and makes them assassins!” (AD 184). Where Nortje is primarily “tragic,” even self-pitying, in his references to mixedness, he is almost arrogant about his skills as a writer and his ability to make the symbolically white paper cringe and bleed. He thus demonstrates a concrete agency beyond his ambiguous performances of respectability and shame as a Coloured man. In a remarkable way, the Ex-Colored Man’s introduction to his “autobiography” is a fitting monologue for Nortje: “I know that I am playing with fire,

and I feel the thrill which accompanies that most fascinating pastime” (1). In his performances, including brash political poet, careless libertine, and suicidal artist, Nortje also knew and was perhaps even thrilled by the knowledge that he was playing with fire and that his “playing” might one day prove fatal.

Queer Eye for the Mixed Guy

Nortje, Johnson, Hughes, McKay, and Toomer, collectively signal an aspect of mixed race studies and scholarship on the mulatto that I have not yet discussed in this project—queerness.²⁷ And I use the term “queer” in the same context that Siobhan Somerville employs queerness in her excellent text *Queering the Color Line*: “[Q]ueer theory has tended not toward locating stable ‘queer’ subjects but rather toward understanding the very process of deviant subject formation that results from a refusal or ‘failure’ to adhere to the proscriptions of compulsory heterosexuality” (136). Let me first state, however, that Nortje never “officially” came out as either gay or bisexual, although his poetry, diaries, and decidedly ambiguous relationships with both men and women make him, in his role as palimpsest, a compelling figure for reading queerness.

Davis suggests that Nortje’s near breakdown at the end of 1966 was precipitated by the strain of a homosexual relationship that had developed in England. Based on his erotic 1967 poem “Joy Cry” and the observation by Raymond Leitch, one of the central male figures in Nortje’s life, that the poem “is not necessarily about heterosexual love,” Davis makes the following statement: “It appears that it was [1966] that Nortje first committed himself to a homosexual relationship. Much of his subsequent suffering and

self-loathing was caused by his revulsion at having allowed himself to become thus involved” (22). Bunn, however, writes in a sceptical footnote that, “Leitch alludes to Nortje’s supposed homosexuality” (43), suggesting that the reading of homosexual desire in Nortje’s work is pure speculation. Significantly and perhaps prudently, Klopper, one of Nortje’s primary biographers, is silent on the subject of Nortje’s alleged bi- or homosexuality, simply ceding that, “he seems never to have developed a longstanding intimate relationship with any one person. Certainly, this is true of his relationships with women. Even his relationships with men, however, tended to end, or were suspended, in acrimonious quarrel” (“Arthur Nortje” 5).

Although we have little in the way of concreteness here, concreteness—itself a form of fixity that runs counter to the fluidity of queerness—is not necessarily the point. The absence of “concrete” homosexuality in Nortje’s life and writings does not mean the absence of queerness. When writing on Matthew Lewis, the same plantation owner who categorized race in Jamaica, Max Fincher provides another definition of “queer” that proves apt for Nortje: “[D]esires and practices are arguably ‘queer’ because they remain undefinable, ambiguous, and irreducible to a notion of sexuality as an identity defined solely through sexual bodily practices.” Queer theory thus becomes a viable reading strategy for analyzing Nortje, who wrote of himself, “Supremely individual, flamboyant, proud, / insane and thirsty for a stable life, / attacked by love’s dementia, and predicaments loud” (AD 369).

Aside from “Joy Cry,” a poem that *appears* to describe his reaching orgasm with a white male lover,²⁸ Nortje hints at his ambiguous “desires and practices” in the poem

“Identity,” which circles around the question of gay desire: “Miscellaneous notions violate me. / Familiar gesture in the gents / at Paddington Station: the wristy aesthete / in pinstripe trousers, pale lizard, beckoned: / porcelain tiles reflected me vaguely declining” (AD 235). Despite “vaguely declining” (surely a double entendre) the “familiar” proposition by the sexually evocative “pale lizard” in the men’s room, Nortje also references a man “[b]rushing promiscuously past” and a later proposal in a shop queue: “a revealing smile was prelude to a / supple suggestion, i e room to shave.” He then addresses the reader, both commandingly and pleadingly: “Do not interpret this only, the odd / encounters, the sought liaisons” (AD 235). If nothing else, Nortje’s sexuality was ambiguous—another part of his identity and self-expression that was obscure and contradictory. Cryptically, he admits that the “crowds that disgust me are also those I adore” (AD 369).

I do not intend to undertake a broad reading of queerness in Nortje’s autobiographical work or, for that matter, to explore the palpable and potentially analogous homoeroticism in Johnson’s *The Autobiography*. I do, however, want to situate androgyny, effeminacy, and sexual ambiguity as recognizable historical stereotypes of mixed race masculinity in both the United States and South Africa—stereotypes that have since been redefined from a queer perspective. Nortje and Head, in particular, demonstrate how illegitimacy and exile can translate into extreme isolation and the absence of lasting personal relationships with either sex—a pattern that qualifies as “a refusal or ‘failure’ to adhere to the proscriptions of compulsory heterosexuality” (Somerville 136).²⁹ Already a liminal figure that is forever *between* things, the mixed race

subject is easily grafted into that interstice between genders and sexualities. But even though contemporary queer approaches can constitute a positive reclamation and reveal another stratum where the mulatto/a disrupts hegemonic binaries, the *historical* reading of the mixed race body, specifically the male mixed race body, as a sexually ambiguous site was hardly a positive process.

From the “default” gaze of the white male slave owner and later the white male theorist, the mulatta was a purely heterosexual object (“purely” in this case is ironic) and the mulatto was not heterosexual enough—both stereotypical attitudes that reinforced essentialist categories of identity and asserted the superiority of the white male. The mulatto has long been “queer” in the original sense of the word, literally strange, exotic, and unnatural. For those scientific discourses attempting to label and thus control racial difference *and* sexual difference, the road from “queer” to “queer” for the mixed race subject was a short one. Certainly, as Somerville writes of nineteenth-century America, “[I]t was not merely a historical coincidence that the classification of bodies as either ‘homosexual’ or ‘heterosexual’ emerged at the same time that the United States was aggressively constructing and policing the boundary between ‘black’ and ‘white’ bodies” (3). Racial hybridity became, at the very least, a question mark for sexual hybridity.

The possibilities for constructive queer readings of the mulatta are largely, if problematically, obscured by her symbolic weight as a participant in or victim of heterosexual sex. In her earliest portraits, the mulatta is inevitably seen through the heterosexual (white) male gaze as object of desire. In more contemporary representations, her raced body continues to hold the promise of deviant heterosexual sex—a promise

reflected by Helga Crane's internal battle against the encroaching "jungle fever" or the "obligatory" idioms circulating in South African Coloured communities for the benefit of young Coloured women: "*Hou jou linne binne* (Keep your linen hidden). *Hou jou koek in jou broek* (Keep your fanny in your panties)" (Erasmus, "Re-Imagining" 13). Sexuality is thus racialized—the historical tension lies in whether the mulatta will give in to "black" sexual impulses rather than "lesbian" sexual impulses. Significantly, those two categories are kept separate—ostensibly, "black" sexuality, despite its implicit deviance, is always heterosexuality, at least for the mulatta subject.

Her traditional choices are thus between "proper" (marital) relations with a black man and "improper" (extramarital) relations with a white man—she measures, indeed symbolically straddles and complicates, the spectrum of heterosexual sex from white restraint to black concupiscence. The reproving words of Nanny to her mixed race granddaughter Janie Crawford in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* neatly sum up those two recognizable poles: "'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?'" (Hurston, *Their Eyes* 13). The largely unmitigated heteronormativity of the mulatta trope posits queerness as a fresh lens through which to read that character and complicate her sexuality.³⁰ As Somerville, who has initiated some of that innovative work, cautiously writes in her introduction, "My readings . . . listen for 'the inexplicable presence of the thing not named' and are attuned to the queer and racial presences and implications in texts that do not otherwise name them" (6). Her study includes the tragic mulatta and situates lesbian desire as another locus of ambiguity, inversion, and subversion.

Tellingly, however, “the thing not named” is far more discernible in texts dealing with the mulatto and the stereotypical reading of the male mixed race body as sexually ambiguous reaches back at least to the representations of the mulatto figure on the plantations of the Americas. As I note earlier, lengthy ethnographic sketches of the mulatto are few and far between, presumably because white slave owners saved their energies, literary and otherwise, for the mixed race woman. And like representations of the mulatta, who is “horribly ugly” to Edward Long in mid-eighteenth-century Jamaica but “the most picturesque object” to Matthew Lewis in early-nineteenth-century Jamaica, portrayals of the mulatto are not always consistent. Nonetheless, the mixed race man materializes as an attractive but “universally weak and effeminate” (Lewis 68) figure in the discourses of white proprietors.

Lewis, for example, uses the same admiring gaze for both mixed race men and women in his journal, indicating that their aesthetic appeal originates in the refined, “gentle” quality of their race.³¹ Young, who discusses the white scientific practice of feminizing “other” races, makes a useful observation here:

[T]he gendering of racial difference means that the sex of the races to whom the Westerner is attracted becomes indifferent, . . . if all blacks and yellows are ‘female or feminized’, then the white male becomes instinctively attracted to both sexes; it is just that one kind of sexual engagement happens to produce mixed offspring. As so often in the colonial era, civilization thus begins to merge with an inter-racial homo-eroticism. (102)

If the “mulatto” race is a “female” race by virtue of its inferiority, then the gender distinctions within that race begin to blur. In his attraction to the “mulatto” race, Lewis was presumably attracted to both sexes. He describes “a young mulatto carpenter, called

Nicholas, whom I had noticed in the crowd, on my first arrival, for his clean appearance and intelligent countenance” (50). Later he reiterates the “good looks and gentle manners” (51) of the young carpenter and expresses a desire “to set him at liberty at once” (51). Because “mulatto” as a racial category implied deficiency, delicacy, and infertility—traits traditionally associated with women—the mulatto became feminized because of his race. His role in heterosexual practices was further eroded by the belief that he could not reproduce.

Whereas the mixed race woman functioned as a (hetero)sexual signifier despite her alleged barrenness, which was itself linked to sex with other mulattos, the mixed race man was considered a futile (hetero)sexual partner who could hardly contribute to “breeding” on a plantation. Recall, for example, Lewis’s observation that, “On a sugar estate one black is considered as more than equal to two mulattoes” (68-69). Interestingly, blackness remains implicitly fecund and heterosexual here—one black slave can perform the labour (presumably also the sexual labour) of two mulattos because the mulatto’s “diluted” blood makes him (or her) less likely to keep up. Unsurprisingly, however, white slave owners did not consider the mulatto’s weakness (as a result of his white blood) a negative reflection on their own “undiluted” and *also* implicitly heterosexual whiteness.

By the time the mulatto appeared in American fiction as a character, his feminization and, in a full realization of the double entendre, his “queerness,” was tacit, if not explicit. Again, I must emphasize that representations of the mixed race man were not necessarily homogenous, although the feminization of mixed race masculinity is certainly an identifiable paradigm. As Philip Brian Harper states, “the tragic mulatto has been

conceived as a specifically feminine character” (103). Johnson’s Ex-Colored Man is usually cited as the primary example of the androgynous, sexually ambiguous mulatto, but other characters are readily identifiable. For example, Hughes describes the character William Lewis in his play *Mulatto* as “a fat, easy-going, soft-looking mulatto of twenty-eight” (534).³²

Notably, the sexual ambiguity of the American mulatto, represented primarily through his feminization (a couched transvestism), parallels the more overt conflation of Coloured masculinity in South Africa with homosexuality. One obvious example is Elizabeth’s vivid and seemingly exclusive memory of Coloured men in Head’s *A Question of Power*: “She had lived for a time in a part of South Africa where nearly all the Coloured men were homosexuals and openly paraded down the street dressed in women’s clothes” (45). Head refers here to Cape Town and, more specifically, the famous District Six, where she lived and which Nortje frequented, at roughly the same time, from the late fifties to the early sixties.³³

Assuredly, Cape Town had a very active gay culture, one that was primarily visible through Coloured men. As a result, Coloured masculinity became a contradictory platform for the celebration *and* the stereotyping of both Colouredness and homosexuality. In his description of Cape “moffie” life in the mid-twentieth century, Dhianaraj Chetty notes that

within Cape coloured communities there has *always* been a highly visible and socially developed moffie subculture. Gays and lesbians gathered at shebeens and clubs all over the city—like Aunty Josephine’s, a well known venue in District Six—and the centre of their world seemed to be Hanover Street in District Six, where many gay men had lodgings. Of this

community, the majority was coloured, and *there appear to have been few, if any, African moffies*. (my emphasis, 117)

The link between “moffie” culture and the Coloured community is significant, precisely because it once again posits a direct association between mixed race masculinity and sexual ambiguity. The South African term “moffie” itself speaks interchangeably to maleness, Colouredness, and homosexuality. Chetty explains that, “‘Moffie’, coined in the coloured communities of the Western Cape, has become the South African equivalent of ‘queer’, ‘faggot’ or ‘flikker’, with extremely derisive connotations. Nevertheless, particularly among coloured gay men themselves, it has been reappropriated, with some pride, as a term of self-identity” (127).

Although gay men were ostensibly a minority in Coloured communities, they were a very visible minority, as the passage in *A Question of Power* illustrates. Indeed, Jack Lewis and Francois Loots point out a general conviction in South Africa that homosexuality is somehow more of a “Coloured thing”: “There is a belief, not without foundation, that a gay sub-culture is more visible and tolerated within the coloured communities of Cape Town than elsewhere in South Africa” (142). Certainly, Chetty’s article indicates that Head’s description of lurid transvestism in Cape Town is not entirely homophobic exaggeration but actually rooted in the historical reality of the moffie scene. Particularly because their drag performances were documented, albeit in a sensationalist manner, by the two leading black South African publications of the fifties and sixties, *Drum* and the *Golden City Post*, moffies had a measure of the country’s spotlight.

Head, who worked briefly for the latter newspaper, would have been aware of the melodramatic photographs of “moffie culture,” the existence of regular drag parties, and

the *Post*-sponsored annual Moffie Queen competition.³⁴ Chetty emphasizes, however, that the public attention on Coloured men performing homosexuality was itself a form of stereotyping: “The moffies were inevitably in drag; they were effete, theatrical, tragic or comic. Alternatively, they were cast as social pariahs, wallowing in self-pity and praying for sex changes. The pictures of a typical ‘moffie drag’ provide a sense of lives lived between these two powerful stereotypes” (120).

Remarkably, this stereotyping of the moffie strongly evokes the traditional stereotyping of the tragic mulatto. Homosexuality and Colouredness are conflated in this passage, which highlights sexual ambiguity as a subtext of racial ambiguity. In their respective works, Erasmus and Adhikari unpack the stereotypes of Coloured people in general. Aside from a susceptibility to alcohol, drugs, and vulgarity, Erasmus mentions “immorality, sexual promiscuity, illegitimacy, impurity and untrustworthiness” (“Re-Imagining” 17). Adhikari adds such “masculine” traits as criminality and gangsterism. Justifiably, neither of these theorists includes homosexuality or queerness under the “negative associations attached to Coloured identity” (Adhikari 14). Nonetheless, such markers as gender and sexual ambiguity functioned as stereotypical signifiers of Colouredness, specifically Coloured masculinity, precisely because—in the tradition of the stereotype—such markers were seen, constructed, and/or (mis)represented through a heteronormative gaze.

As a young Coloured man living in Cape Town, Nortje was likely aware of the moffie scene, even if that awareness is not reflected in his work. Klopper points out that, “[Nortje] acquired intimate knowledge of the city, from Elsies River to Crawford, from

Athlone to District Six” (“Arthur Nortje” 12), and Brutus recalls that, “He knew the hardships and squalor of ghetto existence on the fringes of society” (26). Although he did not openly identify with the gay subculture of the Coloured community, Nortje certainly hinted at a personal understanding of that subculture in his poetry. The covert “Poem in the Bathroom,” describes “hands [that] caress unknown the eyes they seal” and “[e]lectric current flows from distant eel” (AD 21). Nortje’s veiled verse anticipates his later sexual encounter in the “gents” at Paddington Station. The openly suggestive poem “Apple-Eating” reconfigures the symbolic apple as a sign of male, rather than female, seduction: “In oral recesses / result is pleasant / as teeth sink deep into / dome of firm fruit. / O fruit of Adam” (AD 116).

In his most explicit moment, Nortje confesses that, “I have tasted potables, edibles, all that flesh / can offer: lain in luxury with rich women, / and homosexuals” (AD 370), and then dares the reader to judge him: “Unpalatable beast, or you who think / I revel in disgust, yourself are cloyed” (AD 370). Here Nortje seems finally to confirm his homosexuality, although the poetry may be as much fantasy as fact. The possibility of fantasy, however, is hardly counter to queer theory. As Judith Butler reminds us in *Undoing Gender*, “The critical promise of fantasy, when and where it exists, is to challenge the contingent limits of what will and will not be called reality. Fantasy is what allows us to imagine ourselves and others otherwise; it establishes the possible in excess of the real” (29). In other words, even if Nortje’s homosexuality *only* exists in the imagination of his poetry, his very imagination speaks to sexual queerness and reminds us of the “different” ways in which mixedness disturbs neat categories of identity.

Pertinently, the post-apartheid reinvention of South Africa as the “Rainbow Nation” was remarkably in synch with the development of queer theory—an auspicious sign for the historical reclamation and renarration of queer Colouredness. Ironically or perhaps appropriately for the mixed race man, queer desire and performance is both subversive possibility and stereotypical realization. Such paradoxes and contradictions, however, were the status quo for Nortje, who spent most of his short life disturbing neat categories of identity.

Cracking the Spectrums

Davis cautions against overemphasizing Arthur Nortje’s Colouredness as “an explanation for his instability” (59). She rightly points out Nortje’s kinship with such figures as Sylvia Plath, Ingrid Jonker, and Amedeo Modigliani, tortured artists who were not mixed race but who also experienced an alienation from the body politic that culminated in a tragic death. Similarly, Jacques Alvarez-Pereyre argues that “it would be mistaken to see in [Nortje] only the Coloured victim of a society determined to deprive him of his humanity: his anguish as a human being is that of many people in our twentieth century” (166). In this chapter, I have focused the lens on Nortje’s racial mixedness, but his anguish did not always have a complexion. There is, as these critics suggest, something of the *human* condition about Nortje’s angst, as well as other markers that I have stressed, like illegitimacy and exile. Whether Nortje’s interwoven talent and turmoil was because of or in spite of the circumstances under which he was born, we shall never know. But based on his personal documents and his poetry, we can confirm that

Colouredness was a *central* part of Nortje's identity crisis. To discount the psychological effects of apartheid is itself an injustice; at the very least, his position as Coloured under apartheid influenced and/or aggravated the fracturing of his selfhood.

Richard Rive, Nortje's acquaintance and fellow Capetonian writer, observes that "so completely had [Nortje] identified with his work that he was his poetry" (qtd. in Davis 18).³⁵ When read in the spirit of that observation, Nortje's poetry becomes a mirror of the psyche—an ostensible opportunity to *see* the "real" Nortje. But unsurprisingly, the reflection remains unclear, the image of a man who does not want to face the glass. Nortje describes "[e]yes that move but slowly in the mirror" (*AD* 104), "the scalpel glints of mirrors" (*AD* 183), and admits that, "afraid of reflections I creep past the mirror" (*AD* 258). In "Mirror Prison of the Self" he writes, almost frantically, that, "Everywhere I looked was me / reflected reflection in all . . . (which could I choose in turning where / I was I, to / infinity / with blistered and unmoulded skin?)" (*AD* 389). This composite portrait affirms Nortje's "anguish as a human being" *and* his private anguish, applicable only to himself—he sees his reflection in everyone, but everyone is him.

In terms of race, he describes himself interchangeably as *kleurling*, Coloured, brown man, black stepchild, Afro-Saxon, mixed-blood life, half-breed, hybrid, bastard, and, in his most quoted self-description, "dispersed hotnot, disparaged jew" (*AD* 391). A slang term for Cape Coloured, "hotnot" is an obvious mutation of the derogatory epithet, "Hottentot," which the Dutch coined for the indigenous Khoisan peoples in the seventeenth-century Cape. The juxtaposition of "dispersed hotnot" and "disparaged jew" draws attention to two different histories of racial persecution and reiterates the poet's

identity as a wanderer lacking a homeland. Consistently, Nortje defies categorization, moving fluidly between identities, never standing still long enough to catch or reveal a conclusive reflection. Perhaps, like Head's Elizabeth, Nortje was horrified by what he saw in the mirror and thus "flinched and looked away" (Head 46), averting his gaze from the "blistered and unmoulded skin." Certainly, Nortje's representation of the Self as a "mirror prison" reminds us that just as we can only see mediated reflections of Nortje in the poetry (the "real" Nortje and his psyche remain inaccessible), he also saw mediated versions of himself—hated and problematic stereotypes rather than any so-called "realities" of Self.

Notably, in his perpetual movement between different, often conflicting identities, Nortje becomes a microcosm for the continental African identity that postcolonial scholar Achille Mbembe describes in his article "African Modes of Self-Writing":

[T]here is no African identity that could be designated by a single term or that could be named by a single word or subsumed under a single category. African identity does not exist as a substance. It is constituted, in varying forms, through a series of practices, notably *practices of the self*. Neither the forms of this identity nor its idioms are always self-identical. Rather, these forms and idioms are mobile, reversible, and unstable. (272)

Nortje, well aware of his own contradictions and pluralities, relied on his practices, "practices of the self," to track his identities. He captured the different forms and idioms of his reflections on paper, conveying their mutability. Indeed, he embodied the mutability of an "African identity" long before such mutability, in Mbembe's view, became "the all-too-familiar and clichéd rhetoric of nonsubstantiality, instability, and indetermination" (272)—a means of imagining Africanness in the postcolonial and post-apartheid arena of the new millennium.

Beyond his emphasis on difference, however, Nortje also pointed to a non-racialized sameness. Like Head's Elizabeth, who believes in "the warm embrace of the brotherhood of man" (206), Nortje clings to the "human" bond, revealing that identity as the one dependable sense of self: "My kind (and I mean homo sapiens) / weave in and out of unknowing subways" (AD 80). By claiming "homo sapiens" as his kind, Nortje, like others before him, points to the collective signifier that transcends race and gender. Shortly before his death, Nortje noticeably distanced himself from the political struggle of apartheid and began to identify less with the ideals of his fellow South African exiles. In this respect, he was also edging away from race-oriented causes. Apologetically, he acknowledges that he is "no longer the watchman finding / nutriment in the glow of an African fire / but merely a mouthpiece / dried of wonderful ghostly tales" (AD 392).

Nortje echoes the stance of an earlier mixed race poet who believed in people rather than races and who controversially detached himself from the cause of his "fellow blacks." Jean Toomer, who published his modernist collection of prose and poetry, *Cane* (1923), at the age of twenty-nine, was critically acclaimed as a fresh young "Negro" voice. What complicated matters was Toomer's straightforward observation that he was *not* a Negro. Toomer literally and figuratively "never heard the end of it" once his views on racial categorization became clear. In a terse letter to James Weldon Johnson, Toomer writes that, "My poems are not Negro poems, nor are they Anglo-Saxon or white or English poems. My prose likewise. They are, first, mine. And, second, in so far as general race or stock is concerned, they spring from the result of racial blending here in America" (106). Also a man who abandoned the "African fire," "a mouthpiece dried of . . . tales,"

Toomer's racial individualism resonates with Nortje's increasing reluctance to use his poetry as a vehicle for the black South African struggle.

In his poem "Men," Toomer describes the human condition from a perspective that anticipates Nortje's views: "Separate in bodies / Many in desires / One in ultimate reality / Strangers on the earth / Prisoners in this world / Natives of deity." His more frustrated poem "People" questions the ironic blindness of those who see colour: "In the many colored world, / Or in the mind. / The strange thing is that / These people never see themselves / Or you, or me. . . . O people, if you but used / Your other eyes / You would see beings." In the same spirit of frustration, Nortje would ask roughly thirty years later, "Where have the men gone / who fought colour / theories, cracked spectrums – / back to the prisms?" (*AD* 81). Aptly, Nortje's poem "Chelsea Visit" provides a wonderfully succinct presentiment of the dilemmas now facing the Rainbow Nation: "The arching rainbow arcs a problem spectrum. / I seek no answers, cradling your muddied face, / so far together have we come from home" (*AD* 153).

The New South Africa has indeed come "so far together" since Nortje's death, but colour theories remain an entrenched reality in the post-apartheid era. Contemporary South African critical race theorists continue to fight "old" colour theories with "new" theoretical models. Sarah Nuttall, for example, posits creolization as a hypothetical and largely unexplored means of reading the "muddied face" of South Africa:

It seems to me that a 'créolité hypothesis' can be applied to aspects of the South African cultural archive, proposed as one set of questions amongst others in relation to the shaping of racial and cultural identity in South Africa, and offers a programme of possibility in relation to neglected questions and a point of interrogation directed towards a richly complex and extremely conflictual history in a future-oriented way. (733)

Nuttall carefully describes *créolité* as “a programme of possibility” and “a point of interrogation” for South Africa’s colour theories. Despite acknowledging resistance to creolization amongst postcolonial and post-apartheid scholars and a general preference for such theories as hybridity and syncretism, Nuttall calls for a shift in such “new” approaches. She argues that *créolité*, itself premised on violent mixing, may well be the model of choice for cracking apartheid spectrums.

In a more generalized and controversial argument, which undoubtedly resonates with the visions espoused by Nortje, Toomer, or Head, Paul Gilroy asserts that, “However reluctant we may feel to take the step of renouncing ‘race’ as part of an attempt to bring political culture back to life, this course must be considered because it seems to represent the only *ethical* response to the conspicuous wrongs that raciologies continue to solicit and sanction” (41). Gilroy premises his argument on what he terms the crisis of race and raciology, namely our inability as human beings to reconfigure “race” as it currently exists in our world and our history. As a result of that stasis, raciology, in a repetitive cycle, continues to foster more harm than good. In search of an ethical response to the past, present, and future atrocities incited by race, Gilroy proposes what he admits to be an idealistic, even ironic, suggestion—the complete expunction of race and raciologies from the (future) human experience. The next chapter will situate mixedness in the twenty-first century, cleverly dubbed the “mulatto millennium” by Danzy Senna, and consider the implications of race and raciologies, which have yet to be renounced, for the next generation of “mulattos.” Had Nortje lived to see the Cape Town, London, and

Toronto of today, he would have found a few things fundamentally different but many things, remarkably, unchanged.

NOTES

¹ McLuckie and Tyner reprint a letter by one of Nortje's Canadian students, which helpfully confirms the proper pronunciation of the poet's last name: "*Nortje was particular about his name being pronounced correctly. We all started calling him NORT-GEE, and he would patiently correct us, NOR-KEE*" ("Arthur Nortje" 121).

² The following excerpt from one of Nortje's notebooks, formally termed "Notebook A" and housed along with his other documents at the University of South Africa (Unisa), provides haunting confirmation that he had long contemplated suicide by overdosing. The entry was written in 1962, eight years before his death: "Often I do like tonight I kept thinking - what would it be like to take an overdose of sleeping tablets (barbiturates or soporifics) & end it? Why suicide? Psychologically bec. you have nothing to look forward to - nothing to achieve in life as such. So why not attempt a premature entry into next world? It won't be illegal, since as a bastard I AM here on short shift, as it were. A bit of luck, a chance encounter in popular magazine jargon. And yet suicides are regarded (paradoxically?) as OPTIMISTS. Hope to find something better elsewhere. Or take yourself out of the vicious circle, isn't that an end in itself? But fight, fight, fight. Time & strength are dimensions of here and now. So try, try, try" (37).

³ The comparison between Nortje and Hendrix highlights the limits of segregation in South Africa and the United States—both men left for England largely because they found a measure of freedom lacking in their home countries. Arguably, however, Jim Crow was already in its death throes in the sixties while apartheid was at its height.

⁴ I must acknowledge here that Hedy Davis, the "first" Nortje scholar and the woman who tracked down his acquaintances, friends, and family, collected his papers, and made his work accessible through Unisa, is openly contemptuous of the belief that Nortje committed suicide. She remains critical of those scholars who tout suicide as the perfect ending for a tragic poet, maintaining that Nortje's circumstances before his death were propitious and his death was an accident.

⁵ Nortje was light-skinned, but not light enough to pass as white: "Not that I spit of deceptive lustre / (I take it in my leather complexion)" (AD 137). He nonetheless mingled easily with people of different "races" and, in the words of his close friend Raymond Leitch, "presented different faces to different people, quite deliberately" (McLuckie and Tyner, "Arthur Nortje" 119).

⁶ I once again centralize the white male/"black" female parent dynamic simply because that was the historical paradigm and the model of Nortje's parentage in particular.

⁷ In reality, the role of the mixed race daughter incited its own crisis around her desirability and vulnerability to other white men, her father's identity as protector/predator of "black" women, and her mother's chaotic function as sexual victim/concubine/slave/female role model.

⁸ As a Coloured woman, Nortje's mother was also mixed race and a contributor to her son's "white" blood. Under the strict laws of apartheid, however, "white" for Nortje hardly reflected his mother's history or social circumstances. In an American context, "white trash" is also a class reference, but the connection between whiteness and a lower social status did not obtain in apartheid South Africa where white people were automatically upper class. If Nortje is indeed making a class reference, then he is being ironic.

⁹ Clearly, absent fathers are more common than not in this study simply because miscegenation in pre-colonial and colonial Africa and the Americas was rarely about romantic commitment or the joint raising of a child. I say "rarely" because there are, as I illustrate in my second chapter, those cases where white fathers had a seemingly genuine investment in their "black" families. During the practice of slavery in the Cape and the United States, however, the *primary* relationship between the parents of mixed race children was that of (white male) owner and (non-white female) property. Paternal responsibility and involvement also depended on social mores, but the historical position of white men as the proprietors, oppressors, and biological fathers of mixed race children resulted in a strange family dynamic to say the least.

¹⁰ Head was similarly named after her mother, a fact of which she was immensely proud. Unlike Nortje, however, she was able to claim that shared identity as an inheritance and a link to an otherwise unknown parent.

¹¹ Nortje's representation of his parents' union through the language of concupiscence is a marked contrast to Head's idealistic construction of her parents' interracial sexual encounter.

¹² Scholars often attribute Nortje's "war with women" to a failed love affair with a Coloured woman named Joan Cornelius.

¹³ The pitfalls of universalizing Freudian concepts like the Oedipus complex have been well marked by such theorists as Deleuze, Guattari, Foucault, Jameson, and, the most famous postcolonial critic of Western psychoanalysis, Fanon. Ania Loomba rightly points out, however, that, "Fanon does not entirely break away from the Oedipal framework, but rewrites it in racial terms" (124). But even Fanon's revolutionary "ethnopsychiatry" leaves little room for the mixed race subject whose authority figure is not only a symbolic white father, but also a biological white father. See Bertoldi's "Oedipus in (South)

Africa?” for an excellent discussion of how/if Oedipus fits into pre- and post-apartheid South Africa.

¹⁴ The reference to tearing flesh also brings to mind Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* (1596) in which the Jewish merchant Shylock famously demands a pound of flesh as collateral.

¹⁵ Lacan’s argument that the Name-of-the-Father is *the* fundamental signifier and the absence of the father is a trigger for psychosis is undeniably controversial, especially from a feminist perspective. Strategic use of his theories, however, makes for an interesting reading of Nortje as the child of an absent white father and a single Coloured mother under a patriarchal system like apartheid—a system that was itself pathological.

¹⁶ The reference to “Praetorian henchman” evokes the special guard employed by emperors in Ancient Rome and the infamous maximum-security prison at Pretoria. Pretoria was known as the unofficial apartheid capital of South Africa.

¹⁷ The image of a colossus vomiting his offspring has echoes of Greek mythology. The supreme Titan Cronus swallows his children at birth to prevent them from overthrowing him. His youngest son Zeus escapes this fate and eventually forces Cronus to regurgitate the devoured offspring like “indigestible autotoxins.”

¹⁸ Nortje, like Head, was not always consistent in claiming “blackness.” He sometimes identified with the black struggle against apartheid and, at other times, held himself apart because of his Colouredness. Kwadwo Osei-Nyame argues, however, that, “Although coloured and therefore inhabiting a specific locale within the South African racial imagery, [Nortje] is speaking for the oppressed majority as a whole” (65).

¹⁹ Notably, ambivalence is a trademark of the tragic mulatto trope, although Freudian theorists trace ambivalence to the father back to the Oedipus complex.

²⁰ South African novelist Achmat Dangor proves in his novel *Bitter Fruit* (2001) that the theme of a mulatto son murdering a white father is not restricted to tragic mulatto or apartheid fiction. The mixed race protagonist of the novel, figuratively read as “bitter fruit,” learns of his Coloured mother’s rape by a white policeman during apartheid and the consequent truth of his paternity. Devastated, the young man eventually tracks down his biological white father and shoots him in broad daylight before disappearing, implicitly to be reborn with a new identity as a Muslim scholar.

²¹ Interestingly, however, one of Nortje’s earliest poems, “Mother Republic,” conflates the brutal image of the symbolic apartheid father with the nation as a “mother republic.” But even as a nation, the mother is an ambiguous site of suffering and the relationship

between “mother” and child is symbiotic: “Me, slash with whip, till pain can merge / With dungeon black, I am your property: / Mother, my muscles feel nothing, but temptation / To succumb” (AD 3).

²² Again, we can identify undertones of Greek myth in Nortje’s poetry. Gaia (Earth) was forced by her husband Uranus (Heaven) to keep her children inside herself. This “deadweight” became so painful that she plotted with her youngest son Cronus, inciting him to castrate Uranus.

²³ Other universities were categorized as “black” or “Asian.”

²⁴ Undoubtedly, the pattern of functional sobriety followed by evening or weekend binge drinking pertains to a “student life” in general and is hardly restrictive to any one social group, especially if pubs and drinking are considered part of a national “culture.” Nonetheless, Nortje’s double life does evoke those two so-called options for Coloured individuals—shame and respectability—in an exaggerated way.

²⁵ Scholars generally present Nortje’s time in England and Canada as academically stimulating but only vaguely political. McLuckie and Tyner, the two main researchers on Nortje’s Canadian experience, suggest that he rarely mentioned apartheid or South Africa while teaching in Hope, British Columbia and Toronto, Ontario and he shared very little of his personal life or background. Neither did Nortje find much of a South African community in Canada. In England he felt more at home, despite claiming that, “wherever I am going to settle . . . it will be under the blood-curse of the moon” (AD 230). London harboured a significant number of South African exiles, including Nortje’s mentor Dennis Brutus. But despite giving poetry readings and maintaining ties with other exiles, Nortje was resistant to being appropriated as a “voice” for the struggle.

²⁶ Nortje’s fantasy echoes Eldridge Cleaver’s call to rape white women as revenge in *Soul on Ice*, published in 1968—only two years before Nortje wrote this poem. By declaring war on white women specifically, Nortje seems to align himself with radical Black masculinity.

²⁷ Johnson’s Ex-Colored Man has repeatedly been read or considered as a subject of homoerotic desire. Similarly, Hughes, McKay, and Toomer have all been (re)claimed as “queer” writers of the Harlem Renaissance. See Schwarz’s *Gay Voices of the Harlem Renaissance* (2003) and Somerville’s *Queering the Color Line* (2000).

²⁸ Nortje writes, “Apollo’s man-breasts smooth and gold-blond / hold between in the fine-boned cleft / the kernel of radiant light. Like wind / youth’s madness streams through the orifices. The swift / vivacious morning shoots along the ripples: / in my loins the swelling

pearl moves. / This growing jewel wants to burst. . . . The joy cry of virility stirs quivers: / from your naval I bite the ivory flower” (AD 125).

²⁹ Incidentally, Head, who spent the rest of her adult life single following the early breakdown of her marriage, inspired rumours of lesbianism. Her self-proclaimed masculinity only seemed to confirm the possibility. But Tom Holzinger ultimately discounts this interpretation of Head’s sexuality in his memoir: “At one point after reading *QPower*, I thought Bessie might be a lesbian, deep down in her repressed catholic heart. But since that time I have read more and thought more, and now I think that view was wrong. The person referenced in every romantic dream, every fantasy, every hypothetical situation, is always male. Her occasional use of ‘girlfriend’, as often when used by a woman, meant ‘woman friend’ without romantic overtones. So, much as I personally might wish to count Bessie among the liberated sisterhood, she wasn’t” (13).

³⁰ Ellen Craft, the famous light-skinned mulatta who escaped from slavery by passing as a white man, would be one example of the mixed race woman performing a non-heteronormative role.

³¹ Lewis, most famous for his Gothic novel *The Monk* (1796), is considered a “queer” writer.

³² Hughes counterbalances this effeminate character with the different, but also stereotypical protagonist, Robert Lewis, who is “strong and well built; a light mulatto with ivory-yellow skin and proud thin features . . . of a fiery, impetuous temper—immature and wilful” (534).

³³ A sprawling, poverty-stricken Coloured township in Cape Town, District Six was known for its vibrant street culture, but later became famous as a site of apartheid injustice. In 1966 the suburb was designated whites-only under the Group Areas Act, leading to the eviction of 60,000 residents and the bulldozing of the entire area. Head and Nortje both depict the pre-1966 “slum world” of District Six in their writing.

³⁴ Chetty’s study of 1950s and 1960s Cape moffie life indicates a strong dialogue with American culture. He writes that, “Gay men became ‘Capuccine’, ‘Doris Day’, ‘Eartha Kitt’, and ‘Lena Horne’” (121). Aside from Capuccine (a name that certainly carries colour connotations) and Day, the other adopted signifiers reflect a telling kinship with actresses who were visibly, if not “officially,” mixed race. The portrait of a thriving homosexual subculture laced with gang violence and alcoholism also resonates with images of gay and lesbian Harlem in the 1920s and 1930s. The South African “shebeen” corresponded to the American “speakeasy,” where patrons gathered for a night of “anything goes.” For an excellent discussion of Harlem’s homosexual subculture, see Garber’s “A Spectacle in Color: The Lesbian and Gay Subculture of Jazz Age Harlem.”

³⁵ Rive, an acclaimed Coloured writer in his own right, was known for his reclamation of “blackness,” his appreciation for Langston Hughes, and his portrayals of District Six. He met his own tragic death in 1989: “Richard Moore Rive stands as and for a specific kind of coloured intellectual. Born in Cape Town’s District Six in 1930 and the victim of a gruesome murder (in his own home) in 1989, Rive is one of the pre-eminent figures in South African letters. A gay man whose work is remarkably silent about his sexual orientation, Rive was killed in his suburban home by two young men after he had gone ‘cruising’ and picked them up late one evening” (Farred 27).

Chapter Five

The Premise/Promise of Paradox: Concluding Theories and Reflections from a New Millennium “Mulatta”

In his article “Adjudicating Hybridity, Co-ordinating Betweenness,” R. Radhakrishnan commences with the following statement: “Allow me please to begin these speculations anecdotally, and I promise, after adequate elaboration, to gloss and nudge my anecdote in the desired thematic direction.” My final chapter, a crucial and perhaps ambitious one, also begins anecdotally. And I do promise to fit this beginning, a personal story, into the requisite thematic and theoretical frameworks. I originally wrote this short autobiographical essay, “Knowing Your Place,” in response to a call for papers on African women writing resistance.¹ But the core of this piece, which I now position as a prologue and a personal introduction to this final chapter, is undoubtedly mixedness.

Knowing Your Place

In the spring of 1980, a few months before my birth, Gloria Anzaldúa wrote a letter addressed to “third world women writers.” This letter, published as “Speaking in Tongues,” has only just reached me. Perhaps I was not ready for it until now. Gloria writes, “Throw away abstraction and the academic learning, the rules, the map and compass. Feel your way without blinders. To touch more people, the personal realities and the social must be evoked—not through rhetoric but through blood and pus and sweat” (173). More to the point, she writes, “*Put your shit on the paper.*” This is a hard

lesson learned. I have not yet thrown away the map and compass. But I have tucked them away, out of sight. And I will try *not* to reach for them until this piece is done.

The man's features have since become fuzzy in my memory. But I recall thinking that he looked sinister, despite the bright sunshine and the warm brick thoroughfare. We had already sized each other up by the time we brushed shoulders, walking in opposite directions along a university walkway in southern Ontario. A number of stereotypes had crossed my mind—words like “hick” and “redneck.” I too was guilty of prejudice that day. I had taken in his overalls and his swagger, met his white gaze, and immediately become guarded. My expression blank, my heartbeat inexplicably fast and my gaze unwavering, I remember marching on. As we approached each other, he slowly removed the lollipop he was sucking, revealing a tongue stained bright red. Then, so softly that I almost did not catch it, he whispered a solitary word in passing: “Nigger.”

To this day, I am hesitant to admit what was murmured to me as I strolled across a pleasant campus on a late summer afternoon. He spoke so quietly, almost gently, that I thought, indeed hoped, that I was mistaken. I replayed the moment in my mind and tried desperately to convince myself that I was hearing things. The wrong things. After all, people misconstrue meaning all the time. But *that* word is decidedly hard to *mis*-construe. I was sufficiently rattled. My identity, my right to belong, had once again been called into question. Ironically, or perhaps appropriately, I was in the midst of preparing for my doctoral comprehensive exams when this incident happened. The postcolonial literature I was doggedly wading through came surprisingly alive after that day.

Academic objectivity melted. Terms like “subaltern” and “other” jumped off the page. In true epiphany fashion, I *became* the subaltern and the other. On a more mundane level, I became pissed off. A complete stranger had seen me, labelled me, and dismissed me in one fell swoop. I felt as though I had been stamped on the forehead (Nigger) and mailed off somewhere (Return to Sender). Although cultivated on the plantations of the southern United States, the notorious “N-word” is clearly international in its currency.² And this particular individual was not averse to adopting the word when “necessity” dictated. My intrinsic reaction, naïve as it may sound, was utter bewilderment. Because only one thing mattered to that man on the walkway—he was white and I was not. That simple equation, responsible for innumerable tragedies in human history, had triggered this unpleasant experience. That stranger clearly believed that I was out of place. I needed to go somewhere that would suit him and (he probably thought) suit me much better. *Back to Africa?* Yet there was a real possibility that I did not belong there either.

After all, a few years ago I was affronted on another walkway, an *African* walkway—and not by a white man but by a black woman. The occasion was my cousin’s wedding in Nigeria, the woman was my aunt, and the walkway was smack down the middle of a massive Anglican church. In standard Yoruba style, the wedding was ostentatious. My entire family was dressed in traditional clothing. Since I had reached that “end of adolescence” stage where rediscovering my cultural roots was “cool,” I donned a bright yellow *buba* and *iro*, draped the stiff aso-oke *iborun* over my shoulder and allowed a relative to tie the matching *gele* on my head, all with little complaint. The

church was full of people milling around and searching for seats, including the aforementioned aunt, whom I had not seen since I was a child.

She sailed towards me, her elaborate starched head-tie not unlike the prow of a ship, and waited for recognition. I smiled politely, which produced a stark crease in her brow.

“Do you know who I am?” she demanded in very precise English.

“Um . . .” I faltered.

Scornful of my ignorance, she proceeded to outline my genealogy and her own formidable place in it. Visibly pleased with herself, she then instructed me to kneel down and show the proper respect. My response, in hindsight, was probably not the wisest course of action. Much like the biblical Sarah in the face of the Almighty, I laughed, unconvinced that my aunt was being serious. Serious she was. Incensed by my chuckle, she placed surprisingly firm hands on my shoulders. “Come on! Don’t you know your place!?! Just who do you think you are? You better kneel down in a hurry!” In full view of everybody who had packed the cathedral that day, she forced me into a kneeling position, gloated for a brief moment, and then sailed off, leaving me like flotsam in her wake.

Like the incident with the man on campus, this episode with my aunt evoked confusion, humiliation, and anger. I am willing to admit, however, that on this occasion the fault was partially mine. Since I had dressed the part, it was inevitable that I would have to *play* the part. Did I think I would shake her hand? Or kiss her on both cheeks, in the tradition of my European mother? It was a Yoruba wedding and kneeling is what

Yoruba girls do when they see their Yoruba aunts come bustling towards them. But, my inner voice protests, I am only part Yoruba! I don't even speak the language! These are not really my traditions! The upshot on this occasion, indeed many occasions, was that I had been reduced to something one-dimensional and inadequate. Like the man on the university walkway, my aunt had completely ignored all of the cultural experiences that shaped my awareness. So while my respective anecdotes are not immediately analogous, they do share a common resonance. A white man called me "nigger;" a black woman made me kneel. But both read me according to their own rigid ideas about race, gender, and culture before quickly trying to put me in my "appropriate" place.

As a mixed race woman, knowing my place, appropriate or not, has always been a difficult thing. I was born to a Dutch mother and a Nigerian father—the only brown infant in the Dutch maternity ward. My cosmopolitan parents brought me "home" to Nigeria when I was two weeks old. I grew up knowing a smattering of Yoruba, rudimentary Dutch, and fluent English. Along with my two siblings, I attended first British, then American schools in Nigeria, where the student populations were always a diverse mix of nationalities and cultures. Summer vacations in Europe and North America expanded what I thought were already pretty broad horizons. By the time I arrived in Ontario, a curious, cagey, and slightly arrogant seventeen-year-old, ready to pursue an undergraduate degree in Fine Art and English, my sense of identity, cultural or otherwise, was decidedly fraught.

Now, almost a decade later, I am a permanent resident of Canada. I still have both a European and an African passport. I speak Canadian-accented English, a language that

neither of my parents own as their first. My field is postcolonial literature. And my place remains unfixed, my sense of belonging inevitably poked and prodded by those who allege a stronger claim. People from both sides of the Atlantic nervously eye the stakes that I have driven into their soil. Sometimes I am the one who denies the right to belong, pulling up the stakes with both hands, unwilling to accommodate the traditions that literally come with the territory.

Should I have reacted differently on those two occasions? Some people certainly think so, advocating that I should have “given the white guy the finger” and “told my aunt to shove it.” While these responses may have felt good, they would hardly have been productive. Perhaps I should have delivered an impassioned speech, resisting my oppression with the power of my voice. Or would that have reduced me to yet another stereotype, pegged before I opened my mouth, always already spoken for—the angry black bitch with the “bring it on” attitude? Or perhaps the insolent girl who shamefully ignores ancient traditions and talks back to her elders?

My place, regardless of citizenships, languages, or accents, may forever be in flux. That is not necessarily a bad thing. “Home” has always been a relative term. So who do I write as today? What passport will it be? Do I write as a young African woman questioning the “old ways”? Or am I the African woman facing the challenges of emigration to a predominantly white society? And what about the world of truly “ivory” towers that I have chosen to enter, where any “ebony” at all becomes representative? Such questions could be posed *ad infinitum* so I will settle on three things that I know to be firm amidst the flux and which represent my own personal resistance, whether to a

white man or a black woman, for oppression crosses all boundaries. I write *as a woman*; I write *as a woman of colour*; and, simply, *I write*.

A Fine Balance

In what is perhaps an ironic moment given the mixed race subject's stereotypical reputation for contradiction, I must concede that my objectives in this final chapter are openly contradictory. On the one hand, this conclusion is very much about shelving abstraction, theory, and rhetoric. Anzaldúa, herself a celebrated contributor to mixed race studies with her pioneering work on the *mestiza*, writes of harnessing “personal realities.” Undoubtedly, my realities as a mixed race woman have fuelled my interest in the tragic mulatto/a character and my sustained gaze on such mixed race writers as Nella Larsen, Bessie Head, or Arthur Nortje is also a gaze fascinated by alternative Selves. More than just case studies, these “tragic” writers are predecessors, reminding me of how things *might* have been by evoking *their* personal realities. The self-representation of mixedness has been vital to this project, especially since, as British sociologist Jill Olumide points out, “there are so few studies which employ the perceptions of those considered to be mixed or mixing race *in their own terms*” (8). My own perceptions, experiences, and realities are a means of maintaining that priority—the *self*-representation of mixedness—while guiding this study firmly and necessarily into the new millennium.

On the other hand, precisely because I conclude my project in the postcolonial, post-civil rights, and post-apartheid arena of the twenty-first century, contemporary theory is a critical tool—a means of considering the place of tragic mixedness in a “new”

world of rainbows, mosaics, melting pots, and smorgasbords. If nothing else, tragic mixedness has proven to be a lasting trope—one that I have tracked from the shores of sixteenth-century West Africa to the plantations of the Americas and back across the Atlantic to twentieth-century South Africa. As the recurring product of similar conditions in dissimilar times and places, can the tragic mulatto trope ever be rendered dated or obsolete? The current field of mixed race studies grapples with such questions and this chapter is an opportunity to weigh in on those debates.

Tellingly, “mixed race studies” remains a predominantly American field, both in terms of theorists and geographical specificity. This project began as a response to that monopoly—a desire to move beyond the United States and forge new transatlantic links between the American trope of the tragic mulatto and the mixed race African identity. By positioning recent American scholarship alongside contemporary South African theory, I bring my historical study full circle and maintain that emphasis on transatlantic parallels. In reading mixed race studies as a thriving multidisciplinary field in present-day academia, I also address the significant theoretical contributions from other sectors, for example Britain, which has seen a recent surge in studies of mixedness.

What I am proposing here is a two-part chapter. The first part is the placement of my own individual story in the broader narrative of this project—a literary trajectory of mixed race Africans reaching back across generations. In writing down my experiences, I join a cohort of mixed race women who have shared their personal realities in their academic work. Indeed, over the last twenty years, an exciting range of scholarship by and about mixed race women has appeared in print. I have already cited contemporary

South African writers Zimitri Erasmus and Zoë Wicomb as Coloured women who incorporate their personal histories into their theory. A text published much closer to my current geographical “home,” the Canadian anthology *Miscegenation Blues: Voices of Mixed Race Women* (1999) compiles an assortment of writings and artistic works by women who identify as mixed race. An earlier, ground-breaking anthology *Showing Our Colors: Afro-German Women Speak Out*, originally published in German in 1986, brings together the narratives of fourteen Afro-German women. In her theoretical text *Scattered Belongings* (1999), Nigerian British anthropologist Jayne Ifekwunigwe situates herself as an auto-ethnographer and recreates her family history through “a kaleidoscopic series of narratives” (29). As well as the testimonies of six mixed race women of African, Caribbean, and European parentage, she includes her own “frozen snapshots” to “capture [her] particular complex evolving everyday lived realities as a *métisse* woman” (29).

Similarly, American writer Danzy Senna playfully mocks the recent and superficial “hip-ness” of being mixed race in her 1998 essay “The Mulatto Millennium.” And, such well-established American scholars as Naomi Zack and Maria P. P. Root have often referenced their own mixedness in their writings. As the latter admits in her 1992 essay “Within, Between, and Beyond Race,”

Initially, I thought my interest in exploring this topic was too personal. However, after a decade of contemplation, reading, writing, doing therapy, teaching, and finally a year of living in Honolulu, Hawaii, I think there is much to say. The topic of racially mixed persons provides us with a vehicle for examining ideologies surrounding race, race relations, and the role of the social sciences in the deconstruction of race. (147)

As with Root and the rest of these women writers, my interest in the topic of mixed race begins with the personal, because there *is* much to say, both on a personal and a broader ideological level.

Accordingly, the second part of this chapter makes that vital transition from the personal back to the ideological, repositioning my personal realities amidst contemporary and decidedly heterogeneous theories of mixedness. Such words as “hybridity,” “creolization,” and “multiculturalism” are signposts of possibility for multiracial states in the twenty-first century. Beneath the layers of satire, Senna’s quip that, “2000 is the official Year of the Mulatto. Pure breeds (at least black ones) are out and hybridity is in” (12), reflects something of the current global climate for mixed race individuals. As Kimberly McClain DaCosta points out, “Multiraciality itself is becoming a branding tool. Unlike target marketing, in which a message or product is created to appeal to a particular demographic, this kind of marketing uses multiracialism to appeal to a mass audience” (163). Tellingly, racial mixedness has become “cool” in both advertising and the media as a “gimmick” for reaching audiences *across* boundaries.

In a marked paradigm shift, mixedness has even become popular among white South Africans, as Helene Strauss points out: “White appeals to so-called mixed descent and inbetweenness are fashionable in post-apartheid South Africa where claims to racial purity have come to be associated with apartheid social engineering” (27). In an ostensible reversal of the tragic model, the mulatto is now *à la mode*—Benetton incarnate—an avatar of positive change for such nations as South Africa and the United States. Technically, I should be able to pack my things and go home. Problem solved.

Tragic mixedness has become *passé*. After all, a mulatto is currently vying for the presidency of the United States, the world's alleged superpower. The son of a white American mother and a black Kenyan father, the young and charismatic senator appears on the July 2007 cover of *Newsweek* alongside the heading, "Black & White: How Barack Obama is shaking up old assumptions." Surely that is already more than enough progress for one very young century?

Obviously, things are not *quite* that simple. Even if well-intentioned, the recent appropriation of mixedness by various parties for various causes remains controversial, not least because it re-enacts a history of exoticization and fantasy where the mulatto subject is concerned. Any appeal to mixed race people as symbols of hope—here to "shake up old assumptions" and deliver humanity from racial thinking—immediately and paradoxically reinvests race categories and hierarchies with meaning. Inevitably, tragedy and triumph are two sides of the same coin for the mixed race subject who, whether trapped or transcendent, remains tied to race. Long ago, the mulatto was identified as a remarkable racial embodiment of a very basic philosophical premise—that of opposites. Unsurprisingly then, theorists have yet to tire of this figure, a walking *taijitu*, a dialectical enigma. As I will show, present-day scholars not only perpetuate a centuries-old debate regarding the "place" of the mulatto/a on racial, cultural, national, and international levels, but they also regularly fall back on biological precedents and conflicting stances.

Far from trying to produce any universal solutions, I intend to tease out a few of the recent approaches to mixedness, such as the clamouring for an "official" mixed race category in the United States or a post-apartheid theory of creolization in South Africa

(ironically, the clamouring for labels in the US occurs right when South Africa is attempting to do away with its race categories). More precisely, I illustrate that recent academic debates about the mixed race subject have more in common with eighteenth- and nineteenth-century “scientific” discourses on the mulatto than we might like to think. Our politically-correct jargon notwithstanding, we are, much like our academic predecessors, trying to name and perhaps tame a proverbial “different beast.” And, much as I would like to declare that the dismantling of such state practices as apartheid and Jim Crow has rendered the trope of tragic mixedness obsolete, I examine why such a declaration would be simplistic and premature.

The official end of racist state practices is not, as my introductory sketch proves, the end of racism. The residues of anti-miscegenation policies continue to impact mixed race individuals and echoes of the tragic mulatto persist in contemporary American and South African literatures. Senna’s novel *Caucasia* (1998) or Achmat Dangor’s post-apartheid text *Bitter Fruit* (2001) are only two examples of recent fiction dealing with the trials of mixedness in the present-day United States and South Africa respectively. The fashionableness of hybridity in the New South Africa notwithstanding, such post-apartheid theorists as Heid Grunebaum and Steven Robins warn against the hasty reconfiguration of mixedness, specifically Colouredness, as “a romanticized, radical and celebratory space of in-betweenness” (70). So, even though we should be laying such an archaic stereotype as the tragic mulatto to its final rest, we cannot discount the enduring resonances of that stereotype in current fiction or the very real and specific challenges that continue to result from being mixed race.

Presumably, the mulatto/a is easily read as a deconstructive sign, if only because “mulatto/a” deconstructs the binary opposition of “black” and “white.” From an even broader deconstructive stance then, the very project of looking at racial mixedness and its pervasive stereotypes must ultimately self-destruct because, as a figure such as Nortje illustrates, there is no singular “reality” after all the historical myths and stereotypes have been duly stripped away. Or, to borrow the words of Stuart Hall, there is no “collective or true self hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed ‘selves’ which a people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common” (4). Instead of moving towards a final “truth” to counter all the stereotypical models of the mulatto, I have thus tried to chart the shifting pluralities of the mixed race subject, even when that subject is seemingly tragic, disempowered, and exoticized.

Hall brilliantly argues that “identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not ‘who we are’ or ‘where we came from’, so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves” (4). This concluding chapter necessarily maintains that emphasis on shared histories, relative differences, and compound possibilities where mixed race identity is concerned. The “process of becoming” is arguably at its most crucial phase in this final section. In my subjective capacity as a mixed race subject of black and white parentage, I have curiously looked at “how we have been represented” in order to consider “how that bears on how we might represent ourselves.” Rather than proffer a myopically “positive” finale, a much-needed, feel-good balance for all the ostensible “negatives,” I will consider the

lasting complexities of mixed race identity and the bearing of those complexities on self-representation. Finally, I will return to that enduring sense of contradiction where racial mixedness is concerned and situate “paradox” itself as a valuable deconstructive approach when *openly* acknowledged and framed by multiracial discourses.

Brown Girl in the Ring

I am not the first writer to appropriate the words from the Caribbean children’s game called “Brown Girl in the Ring.”³ The game, which involves a “brown girl” in a literal ring of children, is a hard metaphor to resist, especially for a woman of colour. Granted, I am not Caribbean and I never actually played the musical game as a child. Instead, I grew up hearing the popular Boney M version of the song and always felt a definite sense of affinity with that mysterious “brown girl” because “brown” in my family had always meant “mixed race.” Indeed, as a university sophomore, I got into a serious argument with a Canadian housemate over the exact racial implications of the term “brown.” My housemate, born to East Indian parents, argued vehemently that “brown” was an exclusive signifier for South Asians. Still relatively new to Canada, I responded that I had never heard of that connection—where *I* came from, “brown” obviously and quite logically meant part-black and part-white. In retrospect, I know that we both had a valid claim. Feeling neither “black” nor “white” we were each fighting for “brown” as a more accurate reflection of our respective identities. Surprisingly, given my mixed race heritage, “race” was *not* something I was used to arguing about. Although my immigration to Canada launched a phase of teenage angst and defensiveness, primarily

because I felt my “mixedness” constantly being negated in favour of an all-consuming “blackness,” race was not a memorable feature of my childhood in Nigeria. Culture, yes. Class, yes. Nationality, yes. But race? I do not recall any family discussions that centred heavily on blackness, whiteness, or brownness.

I realized, of course, that my dark-skinned, curly-haired Yoruba father was “black,” much like the rest of the people in Nigeria, and that my light-skinned, straight-haired Dutch mother was “white.” I was also aware that as a result of my parents’ “different-coloured” genes, my older brother, younger sister, and I all arrived in roughly the same shade of “brown.” When specializing in oil painting for the Fine Art portion of my double major in Fine Art and English, I narrowed my complexion down to a blend of Winsor & Newton’s “brown ochre” and “cadmium orange.” As a child I simply opted for the orange crayon as the closest approximation. But beyond those kinds of choices—what crayons to use in family portraits—I did not dwell on the question of race. From my insider perspective, our multi-racial-national-cultural-lingual family was normal and I was content. To be honest, even more than contentment, I remember feeling an unmistakable smugness, a firm conviction that my background was *extra*-ordinary. Incredible as it sounds, especially in light of the tragic mulatto trope, I even felt a touch of pity for all those people born into “boring” monoracial families, which were not half as interesting as mine.

Unlike the United States or South Africa, the region now known as the Federal Republic of Nigeria does not have a lengthy history of black-white contact, segregation, or miscegenation. White people shrewdly opted *not* to settle that part of the equatorial

“white man’s grave” in any significant numbers, relying instead on small contingents of missionaries, traders, explorers, officials, and regiments to make their presence felt. Consequently, British colonialism, while detrimental in a myriad of ways, did not leave either a sizeable white or a sizeable brown population as one of its legacies. The most populous nation in Africa is thus a black nation, inhabited by roughly 140 million black people. And, much as sexism would presumably be a non-issue in an all-female environment, racism is a non-issue in an all-black environment.

Do not misunderstand me—I am certainly not claiming a lack of prejudice in a country well-known for its ethnic conflict. Nigeria, the borders of which were established in a European drawing room, encompasses roughly 250 distinct ethnic groups with distinct languages, practices, and religions. So instead of racial prejudice, meaning the kind exemplified by Jim Crow and apartheid, *intra*-racial prejudice is what thrives as the primary form of discrimination. Jokes, stereotypes, animosity, and violence remain recognizable and no less dangerous symptoms of bigotry in Nigeria, but the bigotry targets “other” ethnocultural groups, such as the Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, and so on. A glaring but hardly exclusive example of intraracism is the Nigerian Civil War, more commonly known as the Biafran War, which erupted in 1967 largely as a result of interethnic rivalry.

But even tribalism is less palpable in the dense cosmopolitan metropolis of Lagos where I grew up. Ultimately, perhaps amazingly for a person of colour, racism and ethnic prejudice were things I simply did not experience. Nobody ever picked on me for the colour of my skin, claimed superiority because of their straighter hair and lighter

pigmentation, or called me “Nigger,” which I knew early on to be a *very* bad word because my father had neatly crossed it out of his Oxford English Dictionary. If anything, my childhood in Nigeria was a sheltered and privileged one, in just about every way imaginable. Much like that dictionary purged of its offensiveness, my world was free of racial slurs—the worst thing I remember being called in elementary school was “spoiled.”

My Yoruba father, a practicing medical doctor who earned his degree at the prestigious Leiden University in the Netherlands, comes from a well-respected family with strong blood-ties to the *awujale* or traditional monarch of his hometown Ijebu-Ode. Born under British colonial rule, my father received his primary and secondary education in Nigeria before moving to Europe. Part of the Achebe and Soyinka generation, he spent most of his young adulthood in the West. My Dutch mother was born into a large working-class family soon after the Second World War. Since the Netherlands was encouraging, even financing, emigration to other countries in an attempt to rebuild its economy and manage its population, her family, like thousands of others, boarded an ocean liner bound for Canada. She left her small hometown Moordrecht with her parents and six of her eight siblings when she was seven years-old and grew up in Brampton, Ontario. Also a person with a fraught sense of “home,” she returned to the Netherlands by herself at the age of twenty-one, settled back into the land of her birth, and gave up her permanent resident status in Canada. My parents met at a Black Power meeting in Leiden in 1968—they have been together ever since. An accountant by vocation, my mother eventually took on the job of business manager at the elite American school in Lagos, thus expanding the expatriate world to which we, as children, were already accustomed.

We lived in “Anthony Village,” a sprawling suburb allegedly named for a nineteenth-century European farmer who briefly owned that land. Our house, where my parents still live, is on a quiet back street and stands opposite a butcher shop, a fruit and vegetable stall, a panel beater (mechanic), and a flame tree, in that order. My parents shipped all of their European belongings in a massive container when they moved permanently to Nigeria in 1979. So we grew up with heavy oak furniture, an antique upright piano, thick carpets on the terrazzo floor, classic European cars in the driveway, and the very un-Nigerian scent of fresh coffee from a Philips coffeemaker if the electricity was on. Like most middle-class families in Nigeria, we had house help and, because of my father’s private practice on the first floor, a regular flow of patients, visitors, and employees.

Through our mother’s enterprise, we discovered Dutch community celebrations, the annual “American Women’s Bazaar,” “Nigerwife” gatherings specifically for foreign women married to Nigerian men, a multicultural, interdenominational church fellowship, and the beach. Because of our father’s dual status as the eldest son in his family and a medical doctor, we were also aware of a large, complicated, and mysterious network of Nigerian relatives, acquaintances, and supplicants. Occasionally, we piled into one of the European cars, which my father personally maintained, and made the bumpy, pot-holed, two-hour drive from Lagos to his birthplace, Ijebu-Ode. I remember sitting alongside my siblings in the backseat and waiting restlessly for a first glimpse of the colonial-style house where my father grew up. Once we arrived, I was indulged and oblivious to the indulgence. I fussed about Coke that was too warm and goat meat that was unappetizing

to my palate. Although our mother kept an innovative and multicultural menu in our home, cooking everything from Dutch *hutspot*, to Indonesian *nasi goreng*, to Yoruba *egusi*, to pancakes, I remained finicky about Nigerian food. After seeing our neighbours slaughter a live goat in their back yard, I permanently lost an already reluctant appetite for goat meat. To my Nigerian relatives, however, I must have seemed coddled, even snobbish.

Our parents enrolled the three of us in the nearby British private school where we memorized the Lord's Prayer for daily assembly and Enid Blyton became a favourite author. We were then transferred to the even more exclusive American school where my British spelling and block letter handwriting had to be un-learned and I picked up my American-ish accent—later to become a source of confusion for Canadians, who still think I sound nothing like a Nigerian ought to sound. We had swimming lessons at the local country club, piano lessons at home, and tennis lessons at school. By Western standards, our family was probably upper middle class. Also by Western standards, specifically American standards, my privileged childhood was not inherently linked to racial identity but rather to our white-collar, dual-income household. Especially at my multicultural American school in the upscale district known as Victoria Island, playground politics proved that “coolness” or simply being accepted had very little to do with skin colour and very much to do with other identity markers such as class, culture, and consumerism.

For example, white American *and* African American students flaunted their nationality, their Guest Quarters, their barracks-like embassy, and their mysterious

commissary, a magical source of Kool-aid, macaroni and cheese, and Oreo cookies. Their hierarchy was based largely on American-ness—they bragged about “back home,” wore the latest trends, and made fun of you if your parents did not watch CNN. Ironically, wealthy Nigerian children, who were dropped off by their drivers in brand new Mercedes-Benzes, were no less vocal in advocating Western products and no less adept at playing the capitalist game. These Nigerian students, part of the nation’s small but affluent upper crust, had the latest Nike sneakers before the American kids had a chance to ask for them over Christmas—they lived in marble-floored mansions with cast iron gates and satellite dishes. Although our family was comfortable by both Nigerian and Western standards, we were far from the top of a social food chain where oil-rich dynasties and foreign investors managed vast amounts of money. We had older cars, we lived an hour away from school in a “regular” part of town, and I have a distinct memory of being self-conscious about our cosy but modest home after seeing the sprawling houses of other kids via birthday parties, sleepovers, and group projects.

Far more than a race-based environment, ours was a class-based environment. And while my lack of exposure to racism was a good thing, I felt the alternative modes of inclusion and exclusion, which predictably circulated around consumer culture, to be problematic in their own way. Fortuitously, at least to my mind, that school only went up to grade nine, necessitating a switch to another American institution in order to complete the rest of high school. A stark contrast to my Lagos experience, this new American school, which ranged from kindergarten to grade twelve, was founded and run by missionaries in the small northern Nigerian city of Jos. Thus, my brother, then I, and

finally my sister, moved north. Eventually, the three of us made a far bigger move to a different kind of “North,” namely Canada, after graduating from high school.

At fourteen, I found the first north, much as I would later find the second, exciting and nerve-racking. We lived in the Christian Reformed Church hostel, a student boarding home run by a Calvinist denomination with Dutch roots, and I discovered a new variant of multiculturalism. Here the white students, most of them missionary kids (or MKs), had been born and raised in Nigeria—they spoke fluent Hausa, which was far more than I could do, and they embraced a hybrid African identity. The rest of the student body, who were Nigerian, Middle Eastern, Asian, or children of mixed race and nationality, all projected a similar “Africanness” that was nonexistent at my previous school. My classmates spoke in Pidgin English and did the kinds of things I could not and would not do in a chaotic city like Lagos.

They walked around town or sometimes took local transport, braving a ride on the back of an *okada* motorcycle or a lift in an ancient-looking taxi. They bought lunch from the “kosai lady,” who squatted by a charcoal fire in a smoke-filled hut near the basketball courts, deep-frying *kosai* (bean fritters), plantain, potatoes, and *puff-puff* (doughnut balls). They even occasionally wore traditional clothing to school, casually and without the awkwardness that I always felt when doing so. As far as I could tell, they did not care about satellite dishes. Gone was my juvenile investment in the power of “cool” consumption—those packaged pretzels that came with their own dipping sauce or clothing with visible logos. These students did not necessarily have wealthy or westernized families; status symbols and brands were no longer the name of the game.

Because most of us lived at one of the various mission-run hostels, we generally had similar lifestyles. We arrived at school in hostel buses, took part in the same activities, and were subject to the same rules, regardless of race, culture, or nationality. I began speaking in the local student vernacular, wore a *buba* and *iro* without embarrassment, and took more of an interest in my “ethnicity.”

My high school years in Jos, much like my entire childhood in Nigeria, were not particularly race-conscious. Again, I remember being consistently culture-conscious, class-conscious, nationality-conscious, and language-conscious. But my mixed *race* status was never really an issue and nobody (including myself) was overly perturbed by my genetic make-up. Yes, I had moments, such as the run-in with my aunt, where my “thwarting” of tradition caused a bit of a ruckus. I recall various Nigerian adults, including my father, deploring my rudeness as a child, my tendency to talk back. And my physical difference was periodically pointed out to me, usually by complete strangers. Cries of “oyibo,” meaning “white,” and “half-caste,” which is self-explanatory, sometimes greeted my appearance outside the multicultural worlds of home and school. Apart from the sporadic poking and prodding, however, my mixedness in Nigeria was not an anomaly, especially in cosmopolitan cities with their fair share of foreigners. People tended to visually recognize light-skinned mixed race children, acknowledge that such children were tied to the country through a Nigerian parent, and leave things at that.

I never felt obligated to choose a “side” and I was not, to my knowledge or memory, tortured by the two races figuratively warring in my veins. Although I was sheltered from the everyday realities that most Nigerians experienced, I also felt as

though I had seen more of the world than most Nigerians or, for that matter, most Dutch people. When I graduated from high school in the summer of 1998, I had already visited much of West Africa, the bulk of central Europe, and parts of North America. I had bicycled in Denmark, enjoyed cottages in the Netherlands, gone sightseeing in France, strolled in Germany, done a road trip in the United States, lounged on Canadian patios, tanned on Ghanaian beaches, and been suitably impressed by restaurants in Benin. So in that respect, I felt decidedly exposed. My prologue emphasizes the fluidity of such concepts as “place,” “belonging,” and “home.” Even though I could never pass as a “real” Nigerian or a “real” Dutch person in terms of appearance, language, or culture, I was never handicapped by these ostensible lacks, which had always been compensated for in multiple other ways.

Nosce Te Ipsum

My brother, sister, and I are the first generation of mixed race children, specifically of black and white descent, in both of our parents’ respective families. Personally and rather egocentrically, I think that makes for a compelling history. When I compare the names, dates, and timelines of my respective genealogies, I am not only fascinated by the disparities but by the parities. My Yoruba grandparents, Jeremiah Adeyemi Mafe (1900-1958) and Abigail Adesola Otubusin (1905-1992), were married in the local Anglican Church of a colonial Nigerian city called Ijebu-Ode in 1927. They stand formally beside each other in their wedding photograph, a young and fashionable couple wearing unexpectedly trendy Western clothing. My grandmother is wearing a

white flapper dress, white stockings, and a string of beads in her straightened hair—she looks just about ready to do the Charleston. My dark-suited grandfather, probably at the photographer's behest, is holding his new wife's purse. That same year, my Dutch grandparents, Marius van Halem (1902-1975) and Gerritje Roodzant (1907-1993), were married in the local Reformed Church of a small town called Moordrecht in South Holland. Although less chic than their future African in-laws, they are positioned just as formally in their engagement photograph. My rotund dark-haired grandmother sits facing the camera in a modest brown dress while her fiancé, probably at the photographer's behest, balances precariously on the arm of her chair. My grandfather, the fiancé, wears a three-piece suit and has a closed smile that contrasts with my grandmother's serious gaze.

These two sets of grandparents lived in different continents, spoke different languages, and never met. Had their paths crossed in some inexplicable chance encounter, especially as young couples, I imagine they would have seen very little common ground and found it hard to believe that they would one day biologically share a set of grandchildren. Nonetheless, there were enough similarities between them that if they *had* spoken the same language, they would have had something to talk about. All born at the turn of the century, they entered adolescence during the First World War, were married shortly before the Stock Market Crash of 1929, and shepherded their growing families through the global Depression and the Second World War. As practicing Christians, they also conducted those families to church every Sunday, baptized each of their children, and read the Bible at home. Perhaps if they had known these details about each other, they would have shared an appreciative moment over the neat coincidences. Were my

Yoruba grandparents, my *baba agba* and *mama agba*, hosting this hypothetical meeting, they would have offered their guests cold drinks and a warm meal and then settled them in the formal parlour. If my Dutch grandparents, my *opa* and *oma*, were the hosts, I think they would have done exactly the same thing. Perhaps a stiff drink would be tactfully suggested since neither the Anglicans nor the Reformed practice teetotalism. As “age-mates” their parting would have been casual, a hand-shake between men and a clasping of hands or a kiss on the cheek between women.

This imaginary tableau of my black paternal forebears and my white maternal forebears breaking bread together captures something of the differences *and* the similarities of my respective “races” and cultures. Mixed race scholar Anthony Appiah writes of his own childhood in Ghana that, “If my sisters and I were ‘children of two worlds,’ no one bothered to tell us this; we lived in one world, in two ‘extended’ families divided by several thousand miles and an allegedly insuperable cultural distance that never, so far as I can recall, puzzled or perplexed us much” (viii). Quite right, I think, as I reflect on not only my world but the world of my parents and their parents before them. Remarkably, “insuperable” does not come to mind. While the meeting of my grandparents remains fictional, I can thankfully rely on other historical moments as evidence that the cultural distance is surmountable. I know that my Dutch grandparents not only met my Yoruba father but liked him and that when my Yoruba grandmother finally met my Dutch mother she gave a full and sincere Yoruba blessing.

For my siblings and I, mixed race individuals who entered adulthood at the turn of the new millennium, there remains the ever engaging “task” of *being* mixed race, having

two extended families thousands of miles apart, and quite literally bridging the gaps. So far, my mixedness has resulted in priceless conversations, inevitable moments of discomfiture, and a cache of anecdotes. Tellingly, the majority of these anecdotes reflect back on my time in Canada, where I am more conscious of my “race” simply because everyone else seems to be more conscious of—or at least more opinionated about—my race. Here I have had first-hand exposure to such North American phenomena as the one-drop rule and countless heated debates over my racial and cultural identity, debates similar to the one with my South Asian-Canadian housemate over “brown” identity.

In my freshman year at university, two self-identified “black” girls of Caribbean heritage wasted little time in attempting to adopt me. They expressed collective horror over my ignorance of so-called black classics—such American films as *Menace II Society* and *Boyz N the Hood*—but gave up trying to “educate” me when I did not respond to their efforts. Since that memorable year, my first in university and in Canada, I have been consistently identified *with* or simply identified as “black” and uniformly hailed by surprisingly different discourses. A black woman and fellow graduate student once leaned over to me and whispered conspiratorially, “White people are *so* difficult sometimes.” Taken aback, I responded that my mother was white and we got along quite well.⁴ A white man once openly challenged me in a restaurant when he overheard me call my mother “Mom.” “She’s not your mother,” he said, the slight guffaw in his voice conveying just how absurd he thought I was being. When we jointly confirmed that we were indeed biological mother and daughter, he sheepishly apologized and left.

In a more explicit commentary on race, the Pakistani-born manager at my gym confirmed his belief in the genetic “fact” of my “blackness.” After I flippantly attributed my consistent body weight to luck, he immediately and quite seriously countered, “Well that’s not luck. That’s race. It’s because you’re black—black people are physically and athletically superior. That’s why there are so many of you in the NBA.” Agitated, I responded that if he wanted to credit my metabolism to black genes, then only fifty percent of my genes were black, making me less prone to the “perks” of blackness. Visibly stumped by this unexpected twist, he replied that he only knew about empirical studies on black people, not *half* black people.

There is an obvious pattern here, namely the pervasive inability to visually or culturally recognize my white heritage. To my amazement, this monochromatism even extends to people who should, in my opinion, know better. A freckled, strawberry blonde woman at a Tim Hortons once asked me about where to get “black” hair braided, confiding to me that her husband was black, her daughter was mixed race, and she had no idea what to do with her daughter’s hair. Her plight struck a chord as I thought back to my own mother, herself blessed with sleek waist-length dark hair, wrestling my puffy tangles into some semblance of order. Enthusiastically, I opened up to the woman, explaining how my white mother had similar concerns when I was a child. Willing to play “native informant” for once, especially since I *did* know where to get “black” hair braided, I started to offer the name and number of the Congolese woman who braided my hair. But the woman was now eyeing me with visible consternation. “Your mother is white?” she echoed my earlier words dubiously. “Wow. You totally can’t tell.” My

feelings of camaraderie evaporated. Deflated, I took my sandwich and departed, suddenly irritated by this perceived ally who had bluntly informed me that, as mixed race people went, I did not measure up.

Even extended family members surprise me from time to time. While sipping punch at a (white) family gathering, I overheard a very young, blonde-haired, blue-eyed child ask quite innocently what my siblings and I were doing there. Recently, I was at another (white) family get-together with my mother and recall the two of us sharing a glance when the topic of affirmative action was raised. “White men,” pontificated my middle-aged, well-employed, white, male, Canadian cousin, “cannot get jobs in this country anymore.” I sat with my coffee cup suspended halfway to my mouth, unsure of whether I was being invited to commiserate or being held personally responsible. My mother, for her part, took up the debate, arguing eloquently that white men were hardly disadvantaged and that affirmative action had its place in the world.

When I applied for permanent resident status in Canada, the same status that my mother gave up so many years ago, I referenced one of my (white) aunts in my application because I could get more points if I had a Canadian relative. This particular aunt, one of my mother’s six older sisters, was happy to help. She immediately provided me with copies of her passport, so that I could prove she was Canadian, and copies of her birth certificate, so that I could prove she was my mother’s sister, born with the same maiden name to the same parents, and thus my biological aunt. When her son, another of my numerous white male cousins, overheard us discussing these details, he immediately said to me, “Well, they’re never going to believe she’s your aunt. She’s white and you’re

black.” My aunt, in my defence, pointed out that since I had a white mother, perhaps it was not *such* a stretch that I had a white aunt.

These moments are inevitable and while I cannot celebrate them, I can certainly harness them and, particularly in my role as a critical race scholar, try to learn from them. Notably, confusion about my racial identity has always been external confusion as *other* people try to “place” me. In North America, I am inexorably “black.” In Nigeria and other parts of Africa, I am quickly spotted as an “oyibo,” my lighter complexion, hair texture, and features read as a sign of white ancestry. During my visit to the Western Cape province of South Africa, people assumed that I was Coloured. For the first time in my life I was not a visible minority and the sensation was startling. I spent my entire first day in the Cape gawking and smirking interchangeably, for I simply could *not* get over all the “brown” people doing grocery shopping, sitting in cafes, and walking down the street. Everyone greeted me in Afrikaans, a language derived from sixteenth-century Dutch, and expressed surprise when I answered in American-sounding English. In Botswana, a young dark-skinned Tswana woman, her face heavily powdered, asked me point-blank if I was part-white. When I said “yes” she crowed triumphantly. “Aha! I knew it! I could tell by your features.” In response to my polite smile she looped an arm through mine and whispered, “You are so lucky, you know.”

Generally, the views of others have had little bearing on my self-perception. I feel “mixed” and that is that. Neither a renunciation of my blackness nor an aspiration to greater whiteness, this statement is simply a reflection of how I *see* myself. But my unshakable conviction in my “black” father, my “white” mother, and my own irrefutable

“mixedness” is open to criticism, as I explore in the subsequent sections. I too am doing the genetic math, clamouring for recognition, and implicitly reinforcing biological race. Yet again that snag of mixed race identity, caught between the Scylla of racial absolutism and the Charybdis of racial taxonomy, becomes apparent. Whether celebrated or stigmatized, mixedness inevitably begs the delicate question that Paul Gilroy poses in *Against Race*—should we just do away with “race” all together? Instead of “Brown Girl in the Ring” should we be moving towards “Girl in the Ring”? Or, if we are going to be truly politically correct, “Person in the Ring.” The challenge of ethically negotiating the social realities of race lies at the heart of mixed race studies. I intend to address some of the responses to that challenge and consider if, at the very least, we can claim more progressive strategies for reading mixed race identity in an ostensibly progressive new millennium.

Admittedly, the ensuing representation of contemporary mixed race scholarship originating in the United States, Britain, and South Africa suggests a thriving but *paradoxical* academic field, which often reinforces problematic boundaries and binaries. Nonetheless, a paradox in and of itself is not a negative phenomenon. This project has regularly highlighted the paradoxical as both compelling and subversive. The seventeenth-century *lançados* of Senegambia paradoxically asserted their claim to “whiteness” long after that whiteness had ceased to be visible. Bessie Head captured decidedly paradoxical visions of Self in *A Question of Power*, writing through sanity and madness, daydreams and nightmares, tragedy and triumph. Arthur Nortje regularly played paradoxical roles as scholar, drunkard, introverted poet, and extroverted socialite. In

underscoring some of the extant paradoxes in mixed race studies, I hope to expose not only the shortcomings but the potential of a burgeoning and volatile field. Indeed, I theorize how we might apply the paradoxical towards the progressive. In doing so, I return to Hall's useful point that there is no "true self" with which to orient ourselves when studying identity. Furthermore, I revisit some autobiographical moments in situating paradox as an acceptable, even necessary, tool with which to consider racial mixedness.

Instead of resisting or attempting to surmount the inconsistencies of mixed race studies, we need to regularly voice those inconsistencies, ironies, and impossibilities as the very premise of the field. In the words of Judith Butler, "Identifications are never fully and finally made; they are incessantly reconstituted, and, as such, are subject to the volatile logic of iterability. They are that which is constantly marshalled, consolidated, retrenched, contested and, on occasion, compelled to give way" (*Bodies* 105). Undoubtedly, mixed race studies is in its own "process of becoming" where "identifications are never fully and finally made." Scholars of racial mixedness need to constantly articulate their awareness that mixed race studies *is* a process, which presupposes paradox, volatility, and change.

The American Hegemony

I began this study with a historical overview of the American mulatto figure because that figure is the comparative model for my readings of mixed race African subjects. But far from simply transplanting an American trope to sub-Saharan Africa, I

have tried to prove that the trope was never exclusively American to begin with and that tragic mixedness *always* had manifestations in an African context. I will use a similar strategy in my examination of mixed race studies as a thriving area of critical race scholarship. Having fast-forwarded to the late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first century, I now position American scholarship on mixed race identity as the comparative model for my discussion of multiracial ideology in South Africa. Again, the objective here is to forge new transatlantic links and ultimately decentre a Western paradigm. Inevitably, however, I (re)encounter that common postcolonial dilemma—in order to decentre the Western model, I must first contextualize (and thus effectively centre) that model.

Plainly stated then, the interdisciplinary field of “mixed race studies” is predominantly an American field. In other words, the majority of contemporary theoretical work devoted to the study of mixed race has been written by American scholars and consequently deals almost exclusively with racial mixedness in the United States. As British-born Ifekwunigwe writes in her edited collection *‘Mixed Race’ Studies: A Reader*, “the 1990s witnessed a publishing explosion in the form of pioneering compilations on ‘mixed race’ populations in the USA” (8). This “explosion” was largely precipitated by self-identified mixed race populations seeking new and ostensibly “better” representation on a national scale. While South Africa was marking a historic shift in race relations in the nineties, the United States was going through a transformation of its own. Suddenly, the one-drop rule was just not good enough anymore. But instead of individual protests reminiscent of Jean Toomer’s solitary battle against racial absolutism, mixed race people across the country were forming coalitions and (pro)claiming their ethnic

diversity. By the year 2000, Americans could choose “one or more” races on the census, Tiger Woods had booked a place in history as both the best golfer of all time *and* a “cablinasian,” and mixed race studies was in full swing.⁵

No other multiracial nation state has been quite so prolific in the study of either its own mixedness or racial mixedness in general. Although such nations as Canada, England, South Africa, and Brazil have all produced interdisciplinary scholarship on mixed race populations, the United States has been the most public and arguably the most consistent contributor to mixed race studies. Ifekwunigwe addresses this imbalance in scholarship from a British perspective in *Scattered Belongings*, noting that “in England, during that same period [of the nineties], there have been relatively few books written by ‘mixed race’ authors about ‘mixed race’ identity politics” (xii). Also writing in a British context, Olumide observes that, “Current explorations of biracial or multiracial positioning in the United States, such as those explored in Zack, Spickard and Root suggest that the North American mixed race condition is moving towards group awareness and redefinition” (6). And, providing an insider’s perspective, Senna quips that, “America loves us in all our half-caste glory” (“Mulatto” 12). I will return to Ifekwunigwe and Olumide as representative of a British “movement” in mixed race studies, but I would first like to explore some of the primary questions and debates in American(ized) multiracial ideology.

Mixed Race Studies: Fielding Questions/Questioning a Field

A central concern of multiracial scholarship today is the age-old question of categorization. Should we have a one-size-fits-all “multiracial” category or, following the example of Tiger Woods, attempt to reflect the nuances of individual racial mixture? Much like “black” and “white,” such blanket terms as “mixed race,” “multiracial,” or the truly vague “ethnically ambiguous” unify groups at the expense of heterogeneity. But such overly specific labels as “cablinasian” recall eighteenth- and nineteenth-century nomenclatures where the gradations and generations of racial mixture were measured and named *ad ridiculum*. Prior to the momentous Census 2000, American critics debated this classificatory dilemma for mixed race subjects. Now, in the aftermath of the census, they deliberate the implications of having “one or more” choices for racial identity in the United States.⁶ Underlying current discussions about multiracial identity is a national memory of both paranoid taxonomy and hypodescent.

Although the comparison may be an unwelcome one, scholars of racial mixedness are effectively covering much of the same ground that self-professed race scholars covered centuries ago. Obviously, there are fundamental differences. As David Parker and Miri Song point out, race critics have moved “from pathologisation to celebration” in their studies of mixedness: “[H]ybridity, mongrelisation and syncretism are no longer pathologies, but celebrated as exemplars of contemporary cultural creativity” (“Introduction” 4). But we bear an uncanny resemblance to our academic antecedents in the sense that we remain transfixed by so-called *racial* mixedness despite the fact that biological “race” is now considered a well-exposed fiction. In the introduction to her

Reader, Ifekwunigwe observes that, “Not since the nineteenth-century Victorian era, when pseudoscientific treatises on the presumed social pathology of the ‘racial’ hybrid abounded, has there been such an academic interest in ‘mixed race’ studies” (4). Our motives may be “purer” or at least more politically correct than those of our Victorian predecessors, but we are also employing inadequate labels, taxonomy, hypodescent, and biological race in our efforts to come to terms with and come up with terms for multiracial identity in the new millennium.

Regarding the question of labels, Mark Christian, one of the few scholars to approach multiracial identity from an international perspective, writes that, “It seems that academics are forever searching for nomenclature that is ‘new’ in order to provide something original in the research output. But often the result is to merely bring forth another syncretic, and obscure, term for describing multiracial persons” (306). Woods’s quirky coinage is probably the most famous example of a “syncretic and obscure” multiracial label, but Christian rightly targets academics as equally complicit in what can simply be called “the name game.” To illustrate his point, Christian references Ifekwunigwe, who applies the term “métis(se)” to mixed race persons of African, Caribbean, and European heritage living in the UK. Given the French-African specificity of the term (both Christian and Ifekwunigwe neglect the Canadian significance) Christian questions her appropriation of “métis(se)” for mixed race British people.⁷ Such pitfalls are rampant in a field where the ostensible building blocks for terminology and naming are rooted in impossibly diverse racial, national, and cultural histories, themselves often premised on white supremacy.

Another prominent voice in mixed race studies, Rainier Spencer criticizes multiracial ideology, specifically *American* multiracial ideology, as inconsistent, largely because scholars often rely on the very concepts of hypodescent and biological race that they claim to undermine. Spencer rigorously and convincingly argues against statistical data and population figures that allegedly chart such things as increases in interracial marriages or “biracial baby booms.” Inevitably, those demographics, which count black-white marriages or black-white babies for example, are presuming monoracial blackness and monoracial whiteness as their points of departure. But since, as Spencer reminds us, *most* African Americans are mixed race, how do we define monoracial blackness in America? As a useful example, Spencer provides the following scenario:

What does it mean, what sense does it make, when a person who possesses both European and African ancestries is categorized as black, as if the European component did not exist? What does it mean when such a person is said—because she procreated with a white partner—to have given birth to a multiracial child, when that child is no more the product of genetic mixture than she herself is? This kind of interpretation only means that a selective hypodescent has been deployed in the case of the parent, but not in the case of the child. (“Thinking” 222)

Multiracial ideology remains ambiguous regardless of context, but that ideology becomes even more convoluted in a nation that has a long history of miscegenation, such as the United States. Indeed, we would be hard pressed to discern what Werner Sollors calls “a founding, interracial moment that is taken as the point of origin” (*Neither* 124). In the absence of such a moment, contemporary scholars rely on hypodescent to account for the “black” parents of “multiracial” children. Posing an argument similar to that of Gilroy, Spencer ultimately calls for the transcendence of race-based categorization: “Multiracial ideology, like the monoracial ideology it depends on, is a false

consciousness. The frustration its adherents feel would be better directed at criticizing the American racial paradigm itself rather than at attempting to modify the paradigm's configuration" ("Thinking" 223).

What becomes increasingly clear is the *instability* of mixed race studies, which remains inextricable from broader and no less volatile critical race theories. Spencer's reference to frustration among multiracial theorists is undoubtedly correct, for much as we may wish to transcend race or simply racism, we remain grounded in a field that is founded exclusively on race.⁸ Lewis R. Gordon identifies "the suicidal irony of a *critical* mixed-race theory," which becomes apparent in light of what he calls the two dominant principles of racism: "(1) be white, but above all, (2) don't be black" (161). Gordon examines how arguments in favour of mixed race ideology, such as "accurate" racial identification, recognition of ancestry, and antiracist potential, are often subtly or even overtly governed by the latter principle, if not the former. Especially for mixed race persons with one black parent, individuals who "are pretty much excluded from most racial categories except for black" (158), Gordon suggests that a mixed race position is one way of saying to a racist world, "I'm not black." He further maintains that multiracial scholars may repeatedly reject the first racist principle ("be white"), but they regularly endorse the second racist principle ("don't be black"), hence revealing the "suicidal irony" in their stance.

As a mixed race person with one black parent, I should probably be mildly perturbed by Gordon's argument, not least because he contends that the only way to really prove that there is nothing wrong with being black is to choose blackness.

Remarkably, however, I am inclined to agree, at least on an ideological level. Gordon is not targeting mixed race individuals *per se* or contesting their right to identify with all their ostensible races. Rather, he brings to light how an *official* mixed race category and an allegedly *critical* mixed race ideology can never fully reject racism precisely because such a category and such an ideology will always promote an identity that is explicitly *not* black. Let me use myself as an illustration. I often emphasize my white side because that “side,” which represents half my history, is consistently ignored in North America. Nonetheless, my repetitive, if incited disclaimer, “I’m not black—I’m mixed,” does *appear* to corroborate that second racist principle, “Don’t be black.” Certainly, I would immediately and vehemently argue that I am not racist and that my resistance to being identified as black is a resistance to hypodescent. But such an argument, heartfelt though it may be, does not change the fact that I am emphasizing my *non*-blackness. If we now take my personal resistance as representative of mixed race ideology, we clearly have an ideology that promotes *not* being black. Understandably then, Gordon questions whether critical mixed race theory can ever truly be an impartial platform for antiracism.

Lisa Tessman poses a similar inquiry in her meticulous article and approaches the issue of mixed race solidarity with blackness from multiple angles. On the one hand, she asks, “Why does it seem like a betrayal when a person opts for a closer-to-white identity or when a racialized group of people becomes white or whiter through the changing landscape of racial politics?” (283). On the other hand, she acknowledges that “there is a moral or political injunction for mixed black and white race people to, if not identify as black, then to express either solidarity with or loyalty to black struggles or more broadly

the struggles of people of color” (284). Tessman further addresses the realities of racism among mixed race individuals and the alternative implications of mixed race as “an emergent collective (rather than individual) identity with connotations of shared struggle as a group of people of color” (285).

There remain numerous other debates and paradoxes within the field of mixed race studies, which reveal the inherent instability of a mixed race ideology. Minelle Mahtani and April Moreno, for example, argue that mixed race studies consistently prioritizes the black/white binary specifically and non-white/white binary generally. The common denominator in these racial mixtures is whiteness. For Mahtani, a “Canadian woman of South Asian and Iranian descent” (65), and Moreno, “a woman of Chinese and Mexican-American ancestry” (65), the privileging of whiteness in mixed race studies is an obvious but rarely addressed problem. These writers examine the marginalization of non-white mixed race voices within mixed race discourses and call for reform where definitions of mixedness are concerned.

Notably, their views have *also* been challenged, as they acknowledge in their article. Mahtani writes that, “I have been told coolly at conferences that I should not be allowed to identify as ‘mixed race’ because I am not ‘multiracial’ at all; rather, ‘multiethnic’” (69). This distinction between “multiracial” and “multiethnic” remains a point of contention among scholars. Openly countering Mahtani and Moreno, Katya Gibel Azoulay argues that,

Efforts to expand the discourse of “mixed race” to include any combination that abridges diverse ethnic/national origin—e.g., Chinese-Chicano, Southeast Indian and Iranian—seem rather disingenuous given the mating history of humankind. Scholarship on the impact of

contemporary demographic changes and their impact on mixed identities per se must not confuse the historical particularity of *mixed race*. Again—more, not less, clarity and precision is needed and the appealing notion of *third-ness*, a separate space defined for mixedness, still confuses the challenges of racial ambiguity with panethnic mixing between minority communities. (234)

Azoulay calls for a more scrupulous approach to mixedness and a greater investment in “purposely employing continental and national terms in analyses of individuals whose parental ancestry joins people of different national origins” (234).

Here the muddiness of mixedness becomes highly apparent. How does “panethnic mixing” or “international mixing” fit into mixed *race* studies? The possibilities or, to borrow Azoulay’s words, the “combinations” are endless. An individual with a Yoruba parent and an Igbo parent is ethnically mixed but not racially mixed. Similarly, a person with a white British parent and a white American parent is culturally and nationally mixed but again not racially mixed. Presumably, these people would not be included in a multiracial category. But what about Chinese-Chicano or Southeast Indian and Iranian? Can we exclude Mahtani or Moreno so easily from racial mixedness? Is their claim any more or less valid than that of a “multiracial” American with a white parent and an almost-white “black” parent? While “mixed race” does have what Azoulay describes as a “historical particularity,” multiracial scholars must be wary of an ironic tendency to police mixed race identities in the same manner as historical racist discourses.

At this point, we might also ask how the American-dominated representation of mixed race studies impacts non-American multiracial identities. Since, as Azoulay rightly notes, we should be more sensitive to “continental and national terms,” let us consider how continental and national identities are shaping the discourse of mixed race. Racial

mixedness aside, national and regional affiliations have undoubtedly been important sites of group formation. Just as American critics have focused largely on such American issues as the one-drop rule and the census, British scholars have launched a school of mixed race studies that examines mixedness in a British context. As I mentioned earlier, Ifekwunigwe and Olumide situate their respective texts as compensatory for the shortage of British works on mixed race subjects. British sociologists Parker and Song express a similar desire to create a British-conscious if not British-centred study of multiracial identity in their anthology *Rethinking 'Mixed Race'* (2001). Furthermore, such scholars as Barbara Tizard and Ann Phoenix, authors of *Black, White, Or Mixed Race?* (1995), and Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, author of *Mixed Feelings* (2001), have worked hard to put British studies of mixedness on the map.

Incidentally, Ifekwunigwe draws attention to one important aspect of the field that is *not* heavily Americanized—women-centred and/or feminist readings of mixed race identity. Whereas numerous American scholars of racial mixedness are women, they do not necessarily stress gender in their analyses. Ongoing American interest in the tragic mulatta character notwithstanding, many seminal contemporary studies that prioritize mixed race women have originated outside the United States. I have already named such texts as *Showing Our Colors*, *Miscegenation Blues*, and *Scattered Belongings* as women-authored or women-edited texts that focus exclusively on mixed race women. Scholarship on the Latin American *mulata* is also worth noting here, although much of that work—Angela Gilliam and Onik'a Gilliam's "Odyssey: Negotiating the Subjectivity of *Mulata*

Identity in Brazil” (1999) or Kia Caldwell’s very recent *Negras in Brazil* (2007)—has been produced at American universities.

Certainly, gendered approaches to mixed race studies reveal fresh nuances and, unsurprisingly, fresh paradoxes. For example, in her discussion of “White mothering, Black daughters,” Ifekwunigwe identifies “paradoxes of identity and affiliation for *métisse* women, whose White British or White European mothers . . . have been central socializing influences” (*Scattered* 171). Such mixed race women “first witness the complex world of womanhood through everyday interactions with White female caretakers” (171). Their inheritance of or initiation into a white femininity, however, is negated by social discourses that read them exclusively as black. Indeed, they are ultimately expected to perform a black femininity for which they have never had a parental model. Complicating matters further is the implication that “White mothers do not completely understand the extent to which their own White privilege separates them from the ‘everyday racism’ . . . which their Black daughters face” (172).

Again, such theoretical observations become quite personal. Immediately, I am transported back to the man in the restaurant who so confidently challenged my right to biologically belong to a white mother. He merely voiced what others have probably thought: “She’s not your mother.” The white mother/mixed race child is already an uncomfortable picture for various parties. Carol Camper, editor of *Miscegenation Blues*, expresses open hostility towards “white, middle-class, liberal” mothers of “black” children and suggests that these mothers have stolen their children from a larger “black” collective: “So many of these children see much more of their white mothers’ families

than those of their Black fathers. They are separated, stolen from us. This is genetic appropriation; theft on a grand scale” (168). Camper, herself a mixed race woman of black and white heritage, embraces a black identity and seemingly speaks for a black collective when she targets white mothers as suspect(s). Similarly, as the man in the restaurant confirmed, a white woman birthing and rearing “black” children is literally frowned upon by many white people.

Clearly, being the white mother of a non-white child *or* the non-white child of a white mother comes with its own set of challenges. Writing from the “child” perspective, I am well aware that my raced and gendered body cannot mirror those of my parents and that my white mother will often be read at a remove from myself. The world has imposed a permanent forward slash between us: “White mother/Black daughter.” (*Surely* this binary is ironic?) Painfully and with maddening consistency, her (white) mothering is negated and rendered invisible. How can I not be rankled by Camper’s sweeping dismissal of middle-class white mothers as dubious parents who are guilty of “genetic appropriation”? If anything, white mothers of mixed race daughters need to be firmly and necessarily included in new feminist strategies, not only because they can provide a “different” perspective but because their contribution (even to their own children) is regularly discounted. As Ifekwunigwe points out, there is potential in this particular mother/daughter relationship precisely because it complicates raced feminist models. But whereas Ifekwunigwe only highlights mixed race daughters as well-suited to bridge “the Black/White feminist divide” (173), I would include white mothers as well.

Returning then to the broader British context of mixed race studies, which such critics as Ifekwunigwe represent, let me point out that Britain, like the United States, implemented a new format for the first census of the new millennium. But instead of a “one or more” option for racial identification, Britain introduced a “mixed” category for its 2001 census. While the adjustment to the British census did not spark the same furor as America’s Census 2000, British scholars of racial mixedness nonetheless took notice of the symbolic change in national policy, marking the parallels with their American counterparts. In his discussion of early-twentieth century studies of race mixing, Frank Furedi describes an “Anglo-American cross-fertilisation of ideas” (30). Such a description arguably applies to mixed race studies today, where British critics build on (North) American scholarship but also, in turn, influence that scholarship. But this transatlantic “cross-fertilisation of ideas” noticeably excludes Africa, the Caribbean, and South America as major sites of study. While multiracial scholars writing in the United States, Britain, and to a lesser extent, Canada, may have ancestral ties to those “other” sites, their geographical parameters remain decidedly Anglo-American. Again, the ostensible shortcomings of mixed race studies become apparent—despite simulating an inclusive third space, the field maintains a problematic West/Rest binary.

That binary, however, is impetus for my discussion of South African multiracial ideology. While post-apartheid work on Coloured identities is undoubtedly part of “mixed race studies,” that work is generally glossed over in Anglo-American scholarship. Ifekwunigwe’s *Reader* is a primary example. Although she introduces mixed race

scholarship as a global project, she decides *not* to reflect that global perspective in the anthology:

In the interest of coherence and word length, I have restricted my selection of extracts for this Reader to the geographical regions of North America and the United Kingdom. . . . I wish to inform students that scholarship on ‘mixed race’ is global, and both includes and transcends conventional ‘black’/‘white’ and British/North American boundaries, i.e. Australia, South Africa, India, Southeast Asia, the Caribbean, Latin America including Mexico and Brazil. (20)

Precisely because hers is a pedagogical Reader, I am surprised that Ifekwunigwe did not choose a broader geographical selection of texts representing the “other” sites she has listed. Her proviso notwithstanding, she ultimately reinforces the heavy Anglo-American slant on mixed race studies and presents a selection that is far from representative of a “global” field. As she herself proves in her excellent bibliography and her comprehensive “suggestions for further reading,” there is no lack of material originating in the “Rest” of the West/Rest divide. The exclusion of that material on the basis of “coherence and word length” comes across as dubious and hierarchical.

This final section will examine contemporary readings of mixed race identity in South Africa and consider whether, as seems to be the case with multiracial scholarship in the “West,” the paradoxes outweigh the progressiveness. Such Coloured theorists as Zimitri Erasmus, Mohamed Adhikari, and Zoë Wicomb stress the painful history of Colouredness in South Africa, effectively countering both celebratory claims to mixedness among white South Africans and the epidemic “mulatto fever” (Senna, “Mulatto” 12) in Anglo-American scholarship. Furthermore, Erasmus, as part of a new movement in South African theory, adopts the term “creolization” (from Martiniquean

theorist Édouard Glissant) as reflective of the traumatic process by which the multiracial nation state of South Africa and the Coloured population in particular were conceived.

These discourses inform the global project of mixed race studies and, more specifically, the question of tragic mixedness in the twenty-first century. Underlying South African multiracial ideology, however, are familiar and ostensibly universal concerns about race and its transcendence. Bessie Head and Arthur Nortje imagined a South Africa where their Colouredness would not result in stigmatization and where “race” in general would not matter anymore. The dismantling of apartheid in 1994 allowed South African theorists to consider these possibilities as never before and, in keeping with global trends, re-evaluate racial mixedness at the turn of a new millennium.

Colouredness and Creolization in the New South Africa

Studies on Coloured identity in post-apartheid South Africa share basic priorities with mixed race scholarship originating in the “West.” These priorities can be summed up as follows:

1. “Mixed race” peoples have historically been grouped by racist systems, often on the basis of their being neither one so-called race (for example “black”) nor the other (for example “white”).
2. In the recent absence of such official or legally-sanctioned racist systems, mixed race peoples now have an opportunity to (re)convene and (re)signify, placing less emphasis on biological race and more emphasis on cultural hybridity and shared histories of social marginalization.
3. Scholars necessarily recognize mixed race identities as historically racialized group identities, but examine if/how such group identities should/can continue *without* also sustaining race or racist discourses.

As I have already noted, the challenge of maintaining, let alone celebrating, a group identity originally premised on biological “race mixture” without reifying biological race is formidable to say the least. Much like their counterparts in the “West,” South African theorists approach mixedness from multiple and sometimes conflicting stances, which reveal the inevitable ironies and paradoxes of any “mixed race” scholarship.

Interestingly, just as critical work on Coloured identity is hardly more than a footnote in American or British multiracial studies, post-apartheid Coloured theorists rarely draw on Western multiracial scholarship in their publications. Especially given the well-marked parallels between Jim Crow America and apartheid South Africa as well as the respective revivals for “mixed race” identity and “Coloured” identity in the mid-nineties, I find this mutual exclusiveness surprising. Although cultural specificity is probably a good thing in such an ambiguous field as mixed race studies, there is ample room for productive exchange between Coloured identity studies and mixed race discourses elsewhere. At the very least, such a comparative approach allows for exposure to new models and directions that might not be considered in a single-location study. Just as “creolization” has been adopted in South Africa from a Caribbean context, other theoretical models originating elsewhere may prove to be useful imports for the multiracial nation state.

Notably, “Coloured” in the New South Africa is a more cohesive identity with a more linear social evolution than the recent amorphous category of “mixed race” in the United States or Britain. Inevitably shaped by the segregationist ideologies and vocabularies of pre-apartheid and apartheid South Africa, Colouredness remains a liminal

identity in post-apartheid South Africa. As my discussions of Head and Nortje illustrate, there is a pervasive understanding that Colouredness equates racial mixedness. Indeed, Adhikari stresses this correlation between “Coloured” and “mixed race” in his recent study *Not White Enough, Not Black Enough* (2005): “The attribute of racial hybridity is virtually inherent to the concept of Colouredness in the popular mind and is the most prominent of the array of negative qualities associated with it. Coloured people are generally considered to be of ‘mixed race’ or, less flatteringly, to be a ‘half-caste’ or even a ‘bastard’ people, with racial mixture viewed as their defining characteristic” (21). Theoretically speaking then, Coloured identity scholarship is “mixed race” scholarship. Unsurprisingly, however, the distancing of Coloured identity from race and racist discourses is high on the agenda of many South African theorists writing in the *very* recent absence of apartheid. Instead of focusing on racial mixture, a number of scholars focus on *cultural* mixture and employ mixedness, hybridity, and creolization as cultural terms.

Creolization in particular has been adopted and adapted in post-apartheid South Africa (from Caribbean discourses) as a means of working through burdened racial and cultural histories. Building on Glissant’s definition of creolization as an “unceasing process of transformation” (142) resulting from multiple, often painful, cultural encounters, South African theorists have applied this model towards constructively addressing the violent legacies of slavery and apartheid as well as future and perhaps redeeming prospects for the nation state. More specifically, creolization has been claimed as a useful theoretical tool for Coloured identity scholars—a possible means of

acknowledging fraught mixedness without perpetuating the apartheid definition of “mixed race.”

In the introduction to her seminal collection *Coloured by History, Shaped By Place* (2001), Erasmus repeatedly stresses the importance of distancing Colouredness from any biological notions of “mixed race.” She first points out that “coloured identities are not based on ‘race mixture’ but on cultural creativity, creolized formations shaped by South Africa’s history of colonialism, slavery, segregation and apartheid” (“Re-Imagining” 14). She then identifies this distinction as the first pillar of her argument: “First, coloured identities are not about ‘race mixture’. Attempts to define these identities in terms of mixture buy into notions of ‘race purity’ that can be traced to nineteenth century European eugenicists” (“Re-Imagining” 16). Finally, in case there remains any lingering doubt on this point, she writes that, “In re-imagining coloured identities we need to move beyond the notion that coloured identities are ‘mixed race’ identities. Rather, we need to see them as cultural identities comprising detailed bodies of knowledge, specific cultural practices, memories, rituals and modes of being” (“Re-Imagining” 21).

In explicitly calling for the reinvention of Colouredness in non-racial terms Erasmus diverges somewhat from prevailing multiracial theories in the United States and Britain. Much as Anglo-American scholarship produces such investigative titles as *Race and Mixed Race*, *American Mixed Race*, *The Multiracial Experience*, *Rethinking ‘Mixed Race’*, *Making Multiracials* and so on, the very vocabulary of racial engineering remains central to the Western discipline. Such loaded terms as “mixed race” and “multiracial” are integral to “mixed race studies” and few scholars suggest doing away with the terms

altogether or viewing mixed subjects through a strictly cultural lens.⁹ Significantly, as I have already pointed out, most of the discrepancies in the field boil down to its foundation on race and the tricky question of how to define mixed race if not through biological race.

In the first chapter of this project, I quote Naomi Zack in my own attempts to qualify the use of problematic labels: “My intention here is to use the words ‘race,’ ‘mixed race,’ ‘black,’ ‘white,’ ‘mulatto,’ ‘quadroon,’ and so on as an anthropologist might use the words ‘untouchable,’ ‘berdash,’ ‘totem,’ ‘shamin’—the words are used to describe what is going on in a culture. But, unlike an anthropologist, a philosopher goes beyond understanding into analysis” (*Race* 71). Zack reminds us that we must be sensitive to the ironies of “mixed race studies” and constantly, if repetitively, position “mixed race” as a fraught signifier analogous to a cultural artefact. Erasmus extends Zack’s argument by addressing the urgent academic imperative to “move beyond the notion that [mixed race] identities are ‘mixed race’ identities” *within* our analysis. In other words, racist national histories and imposed racial identities aside, contemporary studies of contemporary “mixed race” subjects should not represent those subjects as *racially* mixed—to do so is to perpetuate discourses originally founded on racism.

So why do we continue to employ “black,” “white,” and “mixed race,” not only as cultural signs for academic study but as meaningful contemporary signifiers connoting genes and their ostensible blending? Common responses to this question include the social realities of race and the pervasiveness of racialized identities. Even if we represent ourselves along non-racial lines we are inevitably represented by others along racial lines,

as my own anecdotes have demonstrated. Consequently, theorists tend to go along with race as a necessary evil: “[M]any mixed-race theorists or activists mention that they only accept [a mixed race category] because the end of the racial state itself is not yet in sight” (Tessman 279). Or, as Spencer irritably remarks, scholars of racial mixedness regularly focus on remodelling racial paradigms rather than dismantling them.

But Erasmus is not naïve about the daunting task of re-envisioning racialized identities as non-racialized identities in a decidedly racialized nation state. Her very definition of Colouredness as “a creolized identity” indicates her sensitivity to the racial and cultural pressure cooker in which Colouredness was, is, and continues to be figuratively conceived. However, she calls for a shift in how we as critics are *thinking* about mixedness and maintains that a “mixed race” definition of Colouredness is unproductive—an argument which, along with Spencer’s similar criticism of multiracial ideology in the United States as “a false consciousness,” I find compelling. After all, how can “the end of the racial state” *ever* be in sight if we continue to operate through racial discourses? Furthermore, how can mixed race scholarship and advocacy sustain integrity if it remains complicit in erroneous systems of racial classification?

David Theo Goldberg, one of the few theorists to comment specifically on the parallels between Colouredness and a “new” American multiracial identity, notes the fallibility of *both* categories so long as they rely on race: “[T]he undertaking to undo the insidious implications of the racial project via mixed-race hybridity impales itself on its racializing assumptions” (247). Similarly, Coloured writer Thiven Reddy calls for a collective theoretical confrontation of all race-based categorization. Even though

Ifekwunigwe, for example, revives “mixed race” as a useful signifier in her Reader because “[u]nlike *métis(se)*, ‘mixed race’ is a term that is part and parcel of the English vernacular” (xxi), Reddy questions that standardization or normalcy of racial terms: “Unless *all* these stable, racialised categories are problematised, located in discourses, and made the focus of countless attacks and contests, the dominant discourse of racial classification and its material expressions in everyday social relations, will remain in the formidable position it sadly won for itself in South Africa” (78). And, in the same vein as Erasmus, Grant Farred presents his discussion of Coloured identity in *Midfielder’s Moment* (2000) as a form of *cultural* rather than “race” studies.

Let me stress here that such post-apartheid scholars as Erasmus, Goldberg, Reddy, or Farred are not discounting the historical racialization of Coloured identity, the formation of that identity through fraught processes largely grounded in racism, or the potential of that identity *as* a culturally “mixed” identity. Rather, they urge us to carefully work with and through such “mixed” identities 1) knowing that we risk reifying and ratifying race and 2) taking measures to minimize or at least complicate that risk. Let me also point out that just as some multiracial theorists in the “West” have chosen to accommodate rather than counter existing racial paradigms, certain Coloured identity scholars propose a similar approach in the New South Africa.

Specifically, Adhikari writes that, “Since the reality of Coloured identity cannot be wished away or ignored in the political arena or other areas of public life, a more practical alternative to the strictly non-racial position has become necessary for those hoping to steer expressions of Coloured identity in a more progressive direction” (184).

But despite his dismissal of a non-racial position as impractical, Adhikari admits that more feasible solutions are in short supply. He does outline one “practical alternative” as “a rainbowist position that accepts the reality of racial and ethnic distinctions . . . but embraces the multiculturalist precepts that all communities be accorded respect and receive equal treatment” (184). Ironically, however, he then critiques rainbowism as a less than viable strategy: “[T]he marginalization of Coloured people in the new South Africa is already a reality. Rainbow nationalism has proven to be an arid ideology that is long on rhetoric but short on practical solutions to racially defined problems of South African political life” (185). Indeed, the problem with such “rainbowist” or “multicultural” approaches is the assumption that the racist slates of history can be wiped clean and that national life can begin anew with equality and celebratory diversity. Such ideologies, evinced by government policies that are “long on rhetoric,” discount the psychic trauma of racism that carries on for generations and the enduring economic, social, and political effects of past injustices.¹⁰

Again, the flux of mixedness and mixed race scholarship comes across in the work of Coloured identity theorists. As with their counterparts in the United States and Britain, South African “multiracial” scholars grapple with entrenched “racially defined problems” and the need for progressive solutions. A familiar “search for a dignifying, self-defined and appropriate vocabulary of identity” (Grunebaum and Robins 170) is underway and scholars continue to debate both the racialization of mixedness and what Wicomb describes as “the retreat into culturalism with a rallying mumble of diversity” (106). But whether espousing a “strictly non-racial position” or “a rainbowist position,” these post-

apartheid theorists seemingly agree on one point—the *ongoing* marginalization and confusion in and about Coloured identity.

Here we can mark an important distinction between the more celebratory multiracial ideologies in the “West” and contemporary studies of South African Colouredness. In writing about the optimistic prospects for multiracial Americans in the new millennium, G. Reginald Daniel asserts that, “As multiracial-identified individuals climb over the walls, cross the borders, erase and redraw the boundaries that separate them, everyone will be reminded that they actually live most of their lives in the liminal gray space between the extremes of black and white, whether or not they are conscious of that fact” (291). Daniel’s invigorating vision, ostensibly penned under the influence of a still progressing American “mulatto fever,” clashes with post-apartheid perspectives on Colouredness. Despite earnestly seeking radical new directions for Coloured identity, the majority of critics acknowledge the *painful* reality of contemporary Colouredness, a reality that strongly evokes the experiences of Head and Nortje in apartheid South Africa.

Now we necessarily return to the question of tragic mixedness in the twenty-first century. In summing up the writings in her compilation on Colouredness, Erasmus states that, “The essays in this collection point to various ways in which coloured identities are encounters with difficulty” (“Re-Imagining” 24). All the essays bear out Erasmus’s description by dealing in one way or another with the struggle of being Coloured. Most poignant is Grunebaum and Robins’s account of the Coloured activist Zahrah Narkadien, her testimony before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and their portrayal of a “grey space,” which is decidedly less positive than the one described by Daniel:

“[Narkadien’s] story testifies to the fact that living in the grey zones between the essentialized and racialized blocs of whiteness, colouredness and blackness is not necessarily an easy space to occupy. Her story draws attention to some of the cracks, fissures, ambiguities and continuing difficulties in negotiating this politics of location, identity and history in contemporary South Africa” (171).¹¹ Even Adhikari, who claims a more empowering, albeit historical, analysis of Coloured identity, concludes with a rather bleak contemporary portrait: “The overall sense one has regarding Coloured identity in the new South Africa is one of fragmentation, uncertainty, and confusion” (186).

What should we make of this *current* emphasis on conflicted Coloured identities and the broader theoretical inconsistencies in mixed race studies? What can we learn from the mixed race African bodies reaching back across time and space—the mulattos allegedly “lurking” along the River Gambia in the seventeenth-century, the *métis* of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Saint Louis, or such twentieth-century Coloured writers as Head and Nortje? For as Hall reminds us, the representation of those bodies “bears on how we might represent ourselves” (4). If tragic mixedness is about the uncomfortable, even hazardous, occupation of the grey zones between racialized identities, then that mixedness clearly has resonances today. But such discomfort is an incentive for intercultural dialogue and a means of sharing and shaping more progressive realities. I would suggest that the uncomfortable, the unstable, and the inconsistent can be harnessed for collective identity formation. The inevitable paradoxes of “mixed race identity” and “critical mixed race studies” are a (the?) constant and common denominator. Such paradoxes *should* be the starting point for discussions of racial

mixedness as both an individual identity and a collective identity that spans time and space.

Whether championing an official “multiracial” category in the United States or advocating a more cultural definition of “Colouredness” in South Africa, scholars need to regularly address what Hall terms “the necessity and the ‘impossibility’ of identities” (16). A “mixed race” identity is only useful insofar as it meets a real need (whether personal or political) through an imagined constituency. Unless theorists, activists, and self-identified mixed race peoples acknowledge and reiterate the *imagined* parameters of mixedness, the paradoxes remain setbacks instead of logical contingencies. I have employed such labels as “brown,” “mixed,” and “mixed race” all my life. These terms are a means of articulating a “truth” about my identity and my histories. I have always carefully scanned forms for the racial categories that most closely reflect my sense of Self. “Black” *and* “White.” “African” *and* “European.” “Other.” I generally feel a sense of kinship with individuals who I perceive to be of black and white parentage. My siblings and I triumphantly yell (or whisper) “Mixed kid!” when we see a mixed race child. These are moments of recognition and celebration. Unexpectedly, we have found the familiar.

Secretly, I pride myself on my insider’s knowledge of mixedness. I correct people who cannot tell the “difference.” I was strangely troubled by the film *Secrets and Lies* (1996), which featured Marianne Jean-Baptiste as the mixed race daughter of a white woman. To my critical gaze, Jean-Baptiste did not look mixed enough to play the part. But that is where the imaginary element of mixedness comes in. After all, my white

mother notwithstanding, I did not look mixed enough either to the woman at Tim Hortons. Centuries ago, the Portuguese *lançados* already argued that there is more to mixedness than its visibility. So as an identity, whether biological, cultural, or social, mixedness is neither reliable nor consistent. My own experiences as “white” in some parts of the world and “black” in others merely confirm that identifications “are incessantly reconstituted” (Butler, *Bodies* 105). The imperative thus lies in sketching out the imaginary landscape of a mixed identity—a landscape that is fluid and impermanent but which can be a site for mutual priorities and subjectivities.

Despite the futility of conjecture, I cannot help wondering how Bessie Head and Arthur Nortje would have felt about the recent trendiness of mixedness, not only among white South Africans but in Western popular cultures. For those two writers, Colouredness was a curse with which they struggled daily. But although Colouredness continues to connote “fragmentation, uncertainty, and confusion” (Adhikari 186) in the New South Africa, racial mixedness is not the taboo it was under apartheid. From a new millennium perspective, a sense of community and support is only a mouse-click away. International web sites, chat sites, message boards, blogs, and so on dedicated exclusively to the topic of mixed race continue to flourish on the internet. Such sites are not necessarily sophisticated, but they instantly attest to a global mixed race presence that is interested in dialogue and debate.

Would Bessie Head have found a stronger support group today than she found in the Coloured community and the friends of her lifetime? Would her demons have been less fearsome when shared with other mixed race women—the daughters of black fathers

and white mothers? If Arthur Nortje had a laptop and made contact with other sons of Jewish fathers and mixed race mothers, would he have been less willing to take his own life? Would Nortje have been surprised to learn that contemporary American rock star Lenny Kravitz, also born to a Jewish father and a “coloured” mother, now epitomizes “cool”? Hall reminds us that it is the necessity as much as the impossibility of identities that makes them viable. The very idea of a mixed race may be paradoxical, but that idea is an indispensable identity for countless people, including myself. Having the option to relate to and identify with others on that basis is imperative. In the cases of Head and Nortje, that option was undoubtedly tainted by apartheid. Yet those writers struggled within their respective lives and works to resist the taint and make Colouredness their own. Head and Nortje affirm the transatlantic currency of the tragic mulatto and the manifestation of that trope in twentieth-century South African literature. But they also affirm the fluidity of the mulatto/a subject and the impossibility of locating a “stable core of the self, unfolding from beginning to end through all the vicissitudes of history without change” (Hall 3).

I have pointed to both historical and current transatlantic parallels between subjects (self-)defined as mixed race. These parallels signal important personal and ideological connections that can and should be explored, not just in the Black Atlantic but in a comprehensive global arena. We need to expand the “third space” of mixed race/cultural studies, forge crucial links within and between discourses, and recognize the shifting pluralities of mixedness in our individual and collective “processes of becoming.” If the discomfort of mixedness is not limited by time or place, neither is the possibility. In

openly acknowledging the paradoxes of multiracial discourses and voicing our awareness that identifications are “lodged in contingency” (Hall 3), we open things up, so to speak, for imagining mixedness(es).

In *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987), Anzaldúa writes of both a painful *and* empowering consciousness as a mixed subject: “In attempting to work out a synthesis, the self has added a third element which is greater than the sum of its severed parts. That third element is a new consciousness—a *mestiza* consciousness—and though it is a source of intense pain, its energy comes from continual creative motion that keeps breaking down the unitary aspect of each new paradigm” (79-80). Anzaldúa’s description of a *mestiza* consciousness suggests multiple weighted histories and the strength and creativity that results from bearing that weight. Her *mestiza* is a force with which to be reckoned—a teller of stories and creator of myths. In reading about this mixed consciousness, this subject that “sustain[s] contradictions [and] turns the ambivalence into something else” (79), I am reminded of Head and Nortje, who also channelled intense pain into creativity. Indeed, I am reminded of my own desire to transcend Manichean duality, embrace multiple histories, and creatively harness both the painful moments and the empowering moments in my own “process of becoming.” Just as mixed race subjects are ultimately global subjects, mixed race studies is and has always been a global project—the key is to *collectively* sustain that “continual creative motion,” which stretches borders, stimulates new modes of thought, and resists fixity.

NOTES

¹ “Knowing Your Place” is slated to be published in the forthcoming anthology, *Women Writing Resistance in Africa and the African Diaspora*.

² See Randall Kennedy’s *Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word* for a detailed discussion of the “N-word” and its evolution.

³ Caribbean Canadian writer Nalo Hopkinson published her first novel, *Brown Girl in the Ring*, in 1998.

⁴ In her discussion of mixed race women with white mothers, Ifekwunigwe writes that, “One could argue that from the cradle, *métisse* women who have been mothered by White women are potentially equipped with the social tools for understanding White feminists and building coalitions across the Black/White feminist divide. Yet, amid all the feminist academic attention paid to mothering and mother/daughter relationships, very little if any textual space attends to this strategic political possibility” (*Scattered* 173). I would agree that the white mother/non-white daughter relationship makes for a compelling bridge between racialized feminist discourses.

⁵ Notably, Woods, much like Toomer, was first branded as a traitor to the black race. His declaration of racial mixedness, however, was eventually embraced as a positive model for multiracial Americans. Woods invented the syncretic term “cablinasian” to reflect his “Caucasian,” “Black,” “Indian” (or Native American), and “Asian” heritages.

⁶ After Census 2000, the US Census Bureau began a series of special reports, one of which is entitled, “We the People of More Than One Race in the United States” (April 2005). This particular report “provides a portrait of the Two or More Races population in the United States and discusses the twelve largest race combinations within this population at the national level” (United States 1).

⁷ Ifekwunigwe acknowledges the inadequacy or inappropriateness of “*métis(se)*” in the preface to her Reader but also rightly points out the inherent difficulties of naming in mixed race discourses: “By redeploying this term in English milieux, my intention was to decentre ‘race’ as a primary identity marker and to clear space for the *interplay* of other hierarchically positioned signifiers such as ethnicity, religion, sexuality, locality, generation, gender and social class. Although the deprivileging of ‘race’ remains both an important critical theoretical and research objective, I now believe that the term *métis(se)* does not sufficiently do this important job. My research has taught me that parents, carers, practitioners, educators, policy makers, academics and ‘mixed race’ individuals themselves are all hungry for a uniform but not essentialist term which carves out a space for the naming of their specific experiences without necessarily reinscribing and reifying ‘race’” (xx).

⁸ My use of the adjective “multiracial” for theorists, scholars, critics, and so on refers to those persons who study mixed race or multiracial issues. These persons may also *be* mixed race, but my emphasis in this particular context is on their scholarship.

⁹ Certainly, the different approaches to racial mixedness in Britain and North America, on the one hand, and South Africa on the other hand, are tied to different histories and political climates. “Race” in the former continues to be a viable category in official discourses and popular cultures. While “race” is no less pervasive in South Africa, one could argue that since 1994 there has been a national effort to devalue the official currency of race.

¹⁰ Canada is one example of a nation that has adopted official state multiculturalism, thus falling into the trap of such presentist thinking. For critiques of official multiculturalism see Eva Mackey’s *The House of Difference*, Himani Bannerji’s *The Dark Side of the Nation*, and Marlene NourbeSe Philip’s *Frontiers*.

¹¹ Narkadien, a Coloured female activist who I also reference in my chapter on Head, was imprisoned and tortured during apartheid. As already noted in that chapter, I am wary of abridging Narkadien’s story or providing a “tidy” summary. To give some sense of her story in her own words, however, I include the final transcript of her testimony before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission: “So I {suffered} just for being a coloured person. It was the first time I had to face up to the fact that I was part of a minority. I mean I thought I was just an African woman. So even my comrades used the fact that I was not really in their eyes an African. It was painful for them to also deny me that right to be an African woman. Because my parents have always taught me that my ancestors were African {breaks down crying}. So it hurt to be tortured by your own comrades. Okay I understand that they had been in prison longer than me, and that they were more disturbed than what I was. But I suffered unnecessarily because of this coloured issue. Okay, I think I should end on this isolation bit {. . .}” (Grunebaum and Robins 167).

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