

Spring 2020

## **Whiteness: An Ideology of Violence and Power as Represented in Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition*, Schuyler's *Black No More* and Larsen's *Passing***

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WHITENESS: AN IDEOLOGY OF VIOLENCE AND POWER  
AS REPRESENTED IN CHESNUTT'S *THE MARROW OF TRADITION*,  
SCHUYLER'S *BLACK NO MORE* AND LARSEN'S *PASSING*

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Keith Giles

May 2020

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The Designated Thesis Committee Approves the Thesis Titled

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## ABSTRACT

WHITENESS: AN IDEOLOGY OF VIOLENCE AND POWER AS REPRESENTED  
IN CHESNUTT'S *THE MARROW OF TRADITION* SCHUYLER'S *BLACK NO MORE*,  
AND LARSEN'S *PASSING*

by Keith Giles

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate the representations of whiteness found in three pieces of literature. The thesis not only teases out the nuances of whiteness, but specifically analyzes the violence that whiteness inflicts upon the black body. To begin, I define what whiteness and whiteness ideology is in relation to race. After introducing the idea and functions of whiteness, I dive into the investigation by analyzing three major novels written by African American authors during the early twentieth century. While analyzing the instances of white violence in one of the three novels, the other two novels will offer insights that build upon, expand, and offer a holistic representation of white ideology and its violence. These novels make it clear that whiteness is inherently violent and that it uses that violence to maintain power.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This SJSU Master's Thesis is the result of the effort of many individuals. First, thanks are due to Dr. Keenan Norris, who has spent countless hours challenging and bettering my work. Secondly, much appreciation is due to Dr. Allison Johnson and Dr. Noelle-Brada Williams, who took extensive time to review this thesis. Much appreciation is due to the faculty of the English Department of San Jose State University, who have helped encourage me through this rigorous program. And finally, I would like to thank my wife and best friend Hannah Giles, whose love and support made this project possible.

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## Introduction

Race, as Nell Irvin Painter says in *The History of White People*, “is an idea, not a fact, and its questions demand answers from the conceptual rather than the factual realm” (ix). She makes it clear that despite the nature of race being a concept, there are real, physical, and powerful implications of race (xii). By extension, whiteness is an ideology that is privileged in racial discourse. It is important that I define what whiteness is, and what I mean when I say, ‘whiteness ideology.’

Paula S. Rothenberg summarizes most recent race theorists by saying “whiteness is itself a social construct” (3). It is not a mere social convention, but “an elaborately constructed mosaic of social and cultural meaning.” This is important because within the context of language, narrative, and cultural production, whiteness has been unnamed. It is invisible and is “viewed as the normative state of existence” (Dyer, 11). It is critical that whiteness, and whiteness ideology, be confronted and addressed in race discourse in order to see both sides of racism (Rothenberg, 2002).

Whiteness *ideology* is a term that I prefer to use in order to illustrate the concept of whiteness. Specifically, it is how whiteness ideology engages in the discourse of race and seeks to privilege itself over other races. Whiteness ideology is one that seeks dominance and is akin to white supremacy. The main distinction between whiteness ideology and white supremacy is history and culture. When one thinks of white supremacists, one may think of specific people, groups, and organizations that seek to legislate, enforce, and advocate for white power over other peoples, especially black people.



Whiteness ideology, although closely connected to white supremacy, encapsulates the subconscious predisposition in society to elevate white people while simultaneously oppressing black people. This is done through microaggressions, stereotypes, complacency of racism, etc. Very often this ideology becomes hostile and is racist by nature. Whiteness ideology, and by extension white supremacy, has been the reason for black suffering. The three novels I discuss deal very closely with white supremacy, so whenever I use the term *ideology*, I am including the larger historical and cultural scope, including the history of white supremacy.

Isabel Wilkerson, a scholar who wrote *The Warmth of Other Suns*, argues that the Great Migration of black people from the southern states into the north was primarily caused by racial terrorism. Lynching and burnings were rampant across the South.

Wilkerson writes:

Across the South, someone was hanged or burned alive every four days from 1889 to 1929, according to the 1933 book *The Tragedy of Lynching*, for such alleged crimes as ‘stealing hogs, horse-stealing, poisoning mules, jumping labor contract, suspected of killing cattle, boastful remarks,’ or ‘trying to act like a white person.’ Sixty-six were killed after being accused of ‘insult to a white person.’ One was killed for stealing seventy-five cents. (50)

Needless to say, these verdicts are extreme, racist, and an excuse to murder and terrorize black southerners. Along with black people facing this physical and visceral threat, black southerners did not find economic prosperity by being freed from slavery. Sharecropping became the new form of slavery that kept black people in debt and subservient to their previous plantation owners (48). With the racial violence, and the lack of economic progress, black southerners quietly moved out of the southern states and into the north.

Mehrsa Baradaran, a lawyer who wrote the book *The Color of Money: Black Banks and the Racial Wealth Gap*, articulates in her introduction that underneath racial violence, white supremacy and crime, there is a “deep and growing financial fault line between black and white” (1). She claims that this financial gap is *the* “defining feature of America’s racial divide” due to its interconnectivity to other issues. She spends the entirety of the book analyzing political and economic legislation since slavery because, “The wealth gap is where historic injustice breeds present suffering” (1). Baradaran recognizes that the racial wealth gap did not occur because African Americans could not save, invest, or manage their money. Rather, when she looks at the slew of economic and political decisions, she sees white people doing everything in their ability to maintain money, status, and power over blacks. While Baradaran’s work does not speak directly to white racial violence, it does articulate the interconnectivity between violence, wealth, power.

Ta-Nehisi Coates, author of *Between the World and Me*, reminds his readers that racism, white supremacy, and the idea of whiteness are physically violent to black people. He writes, “But all our phrasing--race relations, racial chasm, racial justice, racial profiling, white privilege, even white supremacy--serves to obscure that racism is a visceral experience, that it dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscle, extracts organs, cracks bones, breaks teeth” (10). This is a critical distinction. While discussing the nuances of whiteness and white supremacy, it is crucial that racism generated by whiteness has a profound physical element that perpetuates historical and present trauma.

Whiteness has been unnamed and is therefore invisible (Dyer, 11). Because of this invisibility and namelessness, whiteness has become the standard, or an indication of normalcy. Race critics have made efforts to identify whiteness and representations of whiteness. By doing this, one can be more aware of the functions of whiteness, and how one perpetuates racism, discrimination, and violence. While my thesis will highlight the intersection of these features, it will focus on the violence that whiteness ideology exercises upon the black body throughout three novels.

*Passing* by Nella Larsen, *Black No More* by George Schuyler, and *The Marrow of Tradition* by Charles W. Chesnutt encounter whiteness ideology and its physical ramifications. These three novels engage with a variety of discourses. This thesis will show how these three novels give depictions of whiteness through its characters, and how these representations exercise violence upon the black body. These representations specifically involve white supremacy, and each novel shows in its own way how violence is implemented, including the coping mechanism used when faced with such violence.

While whiteness is an ideology and not fact, these novels show that this ideology is a “visceral experience.” These physical ramifications induce fear that is very real. Whiteness in *The Marrow of Tradition* takes lives in the Wilmington riot. Whiteness in *Passing* induces fear of the risk involved in passing as white. Whiteness in *Black No More* creates self-hatred of the black body, to the point where black individuals are willing to bleach themselves white.

These three novels are not simply an illustration of race theory. They are filled with complex characters who are besieged by institutional and personal troubles as they

seek the best way to live within their realities. Whiteness, for these three novels, is a transparent force that pushes its characters to resistance, assimilation, passing, or submission. These novels show that despite whiteness being an ideology, it manifests physically by murdering, destroying, and plundering.

### **White Supremacy and Loss in *The Marrow of Tradition***

*The Marrow of Tradition* depicts possibly one of the most recognizable, institutionalized forms of whiteness. In the Norton introduction, Werner Sollors articulates, “what prompted [Chesnutt] to write *The Marrow of Tradition* were urban riots, the increased prevalence of lynching, and other violent southern mob actions against black residents” (xv). The *Race Riot Draft Report Offers Revelations* was a report on the Wilmington riot published by The North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources. It described the riot as: “[A] mob of up to 2,000 whites roam[ing] the streets” who were armed with weapons. This mob was infuriated in the wake of propaganda and “rhetoric-filled meetings” (272). The mob fired upon black Americans, killing about 100 black men. Due to incomplete records, the fatality number could have been higher. But one thing was for certain: “There were no white fatalities” (272).

This riot was orchestrated by white Democrats to maintain political control. The Fusion Ticket was comprised of a set of Republican legislators up for election, including black politicians, resulting in extreme resistance and hostility from white supremacists in North Carolina. The mob not only killed at least a hundred black Americans, but they drove black entrepreneurs and businessmen out of the town.

The Wilmington riot did not occur within a vacuum. Chesnutt depicts the conditions in which this hatred and racism were nurtured and cultivated: in the fertile soil of white supremacy. Chesnutt shows that this act was not catalyzed simply by white supremacists who plotted the riot, but the entire posture of American society.

To begin, we must understand white ideology and by extension, white supremacy. Whiteness ideology propagated racial theory and “science” that gave white supremacy the ability to justify discrimination and violence against other races. One of many examples is in Thomas Jefferson’s *Notes on the State of Virginia*, where he argues that black individuals have inferior intelligence and imagination to whites. He writes:

Comparing them by their faculties of memory, reason, and imagination, it appears to me that in memory they are equal to the whites; in reason much inferior, as I think one could scarcely be found capable of tracing and comprehending the investigations of Euclid; and that in imagination they are dull, tasteless, and anomalous. (137)

Jefferson makes the argument specifically that black individuals not only lack the intelligence to think rationally, but they are unable to reflect on sensations and be able to translate those sensations into Poetry, which was a highly valued Romantic skill. He goes as far as to insult Phillis Wheatley’s work to say that it is “below the dignity of criticism” (138). He articulates the all too common stereotype that black people are only capable of only *feeling* sensations, rather than being able to rationally reflect and articulate those sensations. Jefferson attempts to pass his “observations” as scientific.

Going back to *The Marrow of Tradition*, Major Carteret, one of the key White Supremacists who incited the riot in the novel articulates to Mr. Delamere what caste he believed black people to be: “You are mistaken, sir, in imagining me hostile to the negro . . . On the contrary, I am friendly to his best interests. I give him employment; I pay taxes for schools to educate him, and for court-houses and jails to keep him in order. I merely object to being governed by an inferior and servile race” (19). It is important to note that

Major Carteret's prejudice is not informed by any actual biological fact, but rather by the stereotypes that he himself perpetuates, along with the rest of white American society.

The narrator later shows Major Carteret expressing in his editorial that a black man would be unfit for government leadership "due to his limited education, his lack of experience, his criminal tendencies, and more especially to his hopeless mental and physical inferiority to the white race" (22). The ideas that Carteret represent common among whites at that time. The privilege of the white race, and the argument that Anglo-Saxon intellect is superior to those who are black is a myth that has existed for hundreds of years. Du Bois argues in "The Conservation of Races" that black Americans have always faced the lurking "assumptions as to [their] natural abilities," including intellect, political abilities, and morality (815).

Painter, in discussing how the definition of whiteness expanded to include other European immigrants, addresses the underlying assumptions about individuals of African descent: "Any nation founded by slaveholders finds justifications for its class system, and American slavery made the inherent inferiority of black people a foundational belief, which nineteenth-century Americans rarely disputed. Very few believed that people of African descent belonged within the figure of *the American*" (201). White Americans were attempting to find the science behind the beauty and intelligence of white people. Simultaneously, they excluded black people from notions of beauty and intelligence by characterizing them as subhuman, savage, animalistic, and incomparable to white intellect, beauty, and morals.

This dangerous ideology goes beyond conceptual grounds and has physical ramifications for black people. The black citizens in Wellington faced a physical threat because whiteness is rooted in this ideology. Because many white people believed these stereotypes, they justified the exploitation of the black body through slavery and other forms of violence after emancipation.

This is why Major Carteret objected to Mr. Delamere when he said that Sandy, his black servant, was as honest as any other man in Wellington:

“You mean, sir,” replied Carteret, with a smile, “as honest as any *negro* in Wellington.”

“I make no exceptions, major,” returned the old gentleman, with emphasis. “I would trust Sandy with my life, --he saved it once at the risk of his own.”

“No doubt,” mused the major, “the negro is capable of a certain doglike fidelity...I should imagine, however, that one could more safely trust his life with a negro than his portable property. (19)

Carteret’s objection comes in two parts: He will not hear of a black man possessing the same political power, agency, virtue, and intelligence of “any men,” meaning white men. He justifies this by insinuating that Sandy is doglike. He claims that Sandy’s virtue does not stem from altruism, but his doglike fidelity because Mr. Delamere takes care of his daily basic needs.

This reasoning was (and is) used to disallow black people the identity of *the* American, including the inherent status, money, and political power of that identity. This white supremacy becomes fertile soil for the violence that will happen later in the novel. The violence is justified on the grounds of maintaining class order. *The Marrow of Tradition* shows that even the most horrific acts can be justified through the degradation of another. This is the foundation of white supremacy and racism.



In the novel, racial tensions begin to boil in Wellington; a black journalist published a controversial article that offended many white people, including the three white supremacist leaders: Major Carteret, General Belmont, and Captain McBane. The article “violates an unwritten law of the south” (55) in which McBane readily offers lynching as a demonstration of disapproval. This article, in conjunction with the Fusion Ticket, spurred the supremacists on to staging a riot. During one of their meetings Belmont readily advocates for violence. Belmont recognizes that he, along with the rest of the white supremacists, have firearms. Having this weaponry would make black citizens easy to suppress.

Carteret tries to resist the idea of becoming hostile by saying that he will not “advocate murder”; he then argues that white supremacy is founded on “high and holy principles.” However, if it appears that the black citizens are resisting their wishes to suppress the black vote and rig the election, he would not “object to frightening the negroes, but I am opposed to *unnecessary* bloodshed” (150, my emphasis). McBane disagrees with Carteret by claiming that the black citizens need to be “taught a lesson,” and that if one black citizen were killed, they “more or less wouldn’t be missed” (150).

McBane, while having a more vicious disposition than the other supremacists, addresses one fear that all three hold. Black Americans were beginning to gain wealth, status, and power through their own efforts. As Carteret stated to Mr. Delamere, he and many other whites refuse to be governed by someone they believe to be subhuman. After McBane’s rhetoric, Carteret yields by saying that should the black citizens “resist, a different reasoning might apply” (150).

A common trope in *The Marrow of Tradition* is that black resistance serves as a justification for white violence. Unlike McBane, Carteret claims to have the moral high ground in not premeditating murder. However, he has no issue becoming aggressive to the black civilians if they do not submit to voter suppression. It is also important to note that Carteret does not object to McBane's interjection of the disposal of black bodies. He may not relish it like McBane, but he will exercise it nonetheless to maintain his racial superiority.

The juxtaposition between Captain McBane and Major Carteret must be addressed. While both are white, they embody slightly different dispositions and reside in different classes. Major Carteret was wealthy prior to the civil war and took a financial loss. McBane, however, "had sprung from the poor-white class, to which, even more than to the slaves, the abolition of slavery had opened the door of opportunity. No longer overshadowed by a slave-holding caste, some of this class had rapidly pushed themselves forward" (24). Major Carteret suffered financially because he lost the slaves that he owned during emancipation. McBane, who was too poor to own slaves, gained title, power, and some wealth through the war.

The narrator makes Carteret's distaste for McBane clear. McBane is described as an "illiterate and vulgar white man of no ancestry" (56). However, because of his whiteness, wealth, and power, Carteret is willing to go against his classist tendencies and "rub elbows" and "make use of him" (56). Poor whites like McBane were not the only ones that benefited from the war. Black Americans were allowed (within the legislative restrictions of the time), to gain more economic and political status. Those who were able

to leave the plantation during Reconstruction, attained licenses and degrees and became doctors, lawyers, journalists, etc. However, blacks were still limited in their economic progress due to segregation and Jim Crow. Black individuals began to run for office, which incited white supremacists and plantation owners to fear that black Americans would gain equal status and power. In hopes of preserving white dominance and power, the definition of whiteness and its privileges expanded into the lower class. By having this expansion, white supremacy was able to exclude black folk from the status of “The American” and was able to find other means to exploit their bodies. By extension, if black Americans resisted the will of the white supremacists, then they would be met with violence.

In her book *Charles W. Chesnutt and the Progressive Movement*, Ernestine Williams Pickens argues, “The struggling white characters can be placed into two groups: those attempting to regain and secure their economic status held before the Civil War and those who have risen to a position of prominence as a result of the war” (53). She then illustrates that the black characters in the novel similarly either accept their impoverished situation, or they seek to gain financial stability and prominence.

While Major Carteret may not like McBane personally, they can agree on one thing: that black people are not meant to have the same status, wealth, and power as white people (26). Both are willing to force black people into submission if they do not comply with their desires.

Black residents were aware of the physical threat that came with being black. Later in the novel, advertisements went up offering a solution to this threat: bleaching black skin

white. By becoming white, the solution seeks to avoid systemic and institutional racism, including white violence. The same kind of solution is offered in Schuyler's *Black No More*, which takes a satirical and hyperbolic illustration of bleaching in order to pass under white supremacy's radar. Jerry, one of Major Carteret's servants, saw the advertisement and began self-treatment. While serving the three supremacists in their usual meetings, they noticed that his face had yellow and brown patches. They jeered at him, saying that it was "rank poison" (146). Naturally, there is a reason why Jerry decided to harm himself in this way. The narrator continues,

[The advertisements] were proof that the negroes had read the handwriting on the wall. These pitiful attempts to change their physical characteristics were an acknowledgment, on their own part, that the negro was doomed, and that the white man was to inherit the earth and hold all other races under his heel. (146-147)

The motif of black people bleaching their skin and attempting to pass as white is no foreign concept in American literature. It is also worth noting the biblical significance of this passage. There are two key biblical allusions here. The first being that the "white man was to inherit the earth." This is a spin of the verse Matthew 5:5, which reads: "Blessed are the meek, / For they will inherit the earth." To be meek is to be quiet, gentle, and even docile or submissive. The irony is that the white man will not inherit the earth through gentility and grace, but through force.

Secondly, "hold all other races under his heel" refers to Genesis 3:15, a prophecy that the Son of Man will crush the serpent: "And I will put enmity / between you [the serpent] and the woman [Eve], / and between your offspring and hers; / he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel." This verse is traditionally interpreted to be the

first prophecy of the Christ to remedy the fall of mankind. The original passage in *Marrow of Tradition* is a bold allegory: likening the white man to be at the place and status of Christ, while also likening “all other races” to be a serpent that will be crushed under his heel. This is an image that is controversial to the life that Christ himself depicts. Chesnutt ask his readers in this allegory to see both the violence of white supremacy, and how it is deified.

The argument of black inferiority to the white man is as old as transatlantic slavery itself. However, as Painter points out, thinkers like Emerson disown slavery while simultaneously perpetuating the rhetoric and ideology of black inferiority. Painter writes: “Emerson’s disapproval of slavery in no way reflected racial egalitarianism. Rather, it connected to his sense of civilization: he considered slavery a relic of barbarism that was bad for civilization, that is, bad for his kind of white people” (186). Emerson believed that the extinction of black and Indian people would be a benefit to white society. Because he believes black people to be “created on a lower plane than the white, and eats men and kidnaps and tortures, if he can” (186). This was a common and pervasive belief for the characters and society depicted in *The Marrow of Tradition*. The advertisements were the recognition that whiteness ideology maintained dominance in the racial caste system.

The advertisements for skin bleach show in two-fold that black people see how disposable their bodies are, as McBane indicates (150), and also that white people are at the place of power and can take, use, and exploit black bodies. After all, as Coates indicates, “[the enslaved] were people turned to fuel for the American machine.

Enslavement was not destined to end” (70). This is America’s history, and specifically the history of American whiteness, that has turned black bodies into fuel, labor, and energy under its heel.

Jerry recognized that being white meant that he would have a chance at inheriting the earth: “[Jerry] had realized that it was a distinct advantage to be white,--an advantage which white people had utilized to secure all the best things in the world; and he had entertained the vague hope that by changing his complexion he might share this prerogative” (147). While white privilege certainly is a factor, this is a form of both physical and psychological violence wrapped in one, with whiteness as the perpetrator. Starting with the psychological, the threat of physical harm frightens the black residents of Wellington to the point of hatred of their blackness. They felt that their blackness would be the reason why they would lose their lives. In hopes of avoiding such a fatalistic outcome, they undergo self-damaging procedures in hopes of maintaining their life, while gaining access to the privileges whiteness offers.

As Ronald E. Hall points out in “Self-Hate as Life Threat Pathology Among Black Americans: Black Pride Antidote Vis-à-Vis Leukocyte Telomere Length” that: “The psychological problems blacks face border on what some have described as perceptual genocide” (399). This genocide is a key focus in George Schuyler’s *Black No More* and also Nella Larsen’s *Passing*. This self hatred and physical danger of being black pushes black characters in *Marrow of Tradition* to physically change their appearance in an attempt to pass into the white community. Characters in *Black No More* and *Passing* attempt to pass for similar reasons.

This self hatred is not simply introduced due to one instance of racism, but a long history of generational systemic racism, hate, and stereotypes. Jack White talks about the psychological issues that come with being black in his *Time* article “The Pain of Being Black.” He writes:

But for blacks the problem is compounded because they belong to what Steele calls ‘the most despised race in the human community of races.’ Bombarded from infancy with signals of their inferiority from both whites and blacks, black children all too often incorporate negative racial stereotypes into their own self-images. The result can be crippling self hatred. (1991)

These images and stereotypes are all that we have discussed already: black people being equated to animals, deemed subhuman, and assessed to possess inferior intellect. These false stereotypes are driving forces to self hatred. Jack White refers to Shelby Steele’s *The Content of Our Character*, a collection of essays that analyzes American race theory in recent events in racial history. Jack White uses this quote to highlight the generational lifetimes of being belittled and marginalized, which results in victimization and self hatred.

Other than bleaching skin, black residents in *The Marrow of Tradition* respond in different ways. The two key characters that react to whiteness and the looming dangers of the riot are Dr. Miller and Josh Green. In Joyce Pettis’ article, “The Literary Imagination and the Historic Event: Chesnut’s Use of History in *The Marrow of Tradition*,” she writes: “Critics have viewed Dr. Miller and Josh Green as foils to each other, the former as the pragmatist, representing black middle-class gentility; the latter as a militant” (42). Josh Green is a key figure of resistance throughout the novel, and he refuses to accept the

demands of the white supremacists quietly, whereas Dr. Miller seeks a more pragmatic way of successfully navigating late nineteenth century America.

Dr. Miller is more pragmatic and prone to comply with the demands of whiteness. From the beginning of the novel he establishes himself as someone who will attempt to gain economic prominence through his own hard work instead of raging against the system. When being forced to move from a white car only to the segregated section while traveling with a colleague, he tells his outraged friend: “It is the law, and we are powerless to resist it” (37). Early in the novel Dr. Miller feels completely unable to resist racism and discrimination.

One of the discriminations that Dr. Miller faces is when his work is limited or dismissed because of the color of his skin. As Jack White articulated in an interview, “Even the most self-confident blacks cannot escape the fear that their work is being evaluated by a different yardstick than the one used to measure work done by whites” (Time 1991). Despite the fact that Dr. Miller has the same credentials and is viewed equally in both intellect and ability by his peers, his performance is still measured in a different way. If an African-American comes up short, the response would be “well, what did you expect” (White 1991). These stereotypes of black intellect and ability are pervasive throughout all Western societies. No matter how up to par Dr. Miller is, whiteness ideology and discrimination will be working against him the whole way.

One instance of this occurs when Major Carteret refuses his service in saving his own son when there is availability of a white doctor. He would have allowed Dr. Miller to stay and assist if he claimed to be a servant, but due to his severe racism and belief that



blacks should not be held at the same level as whites, he refused to let him into his home. His racism is highlighted when he must turn to Dr. Miller to help his son at the end of the novel, only because there were no other white doctors in town.

Dr. Miller warns Josh Green after learning that he broke his arm during a fight: “These are bad times for bad negroes. You’ll get into a quarrel with a white man, and at the end of it there’ll be a lynching, or a funeral. You’d better be peaceable and endure a little injustice, rather than run the risk of a sudden and violent death” (69). He is fully aware of the power that white supremacy has in this country, and out of concern for preserving his own life and ambitions, he believes in non-confrontational ways to live in this world.

Josh has a very different philosophy when it comes to engaging whiteness. Josh experiences and sees the visceral reality of whiteness and refuses to suffer the “little injustices” that Dr. Miller encourages. He sees the disproportionate injustice and prejudice and seeks to eradicate it with any means necessary. In retort to Dr. Miller’s plea to forgive his enemies and bless those who curse (Matthew 5:44) he says: “But it ‘pears ter me dat dis fergitfulniss an’ fergivniss is mighty one-sided. De w’ite folks don’ fergive nothin’ de niggers does” (71). Josh recognizes that Dr. Miller isn’t asking him to suffer little injustices, but to be submissive to the white system and to overcome transgression through Christ-like endurance and perseverance.

Josh’s words become fully realized when the riot breaks out. The riot broke out, and the white citizens launched their attack upon the black citizens. Despite Carteret’s “honorable” intentions of keeping his hands clean during the riot, whiteness ideology and

supremacy at its root has a history and a fundamental characteristic of violence that is geared towards the maiming and killing of black folk. When the riot breaks out, pistols are firing, and black bodies lie dead in the streets. Major Carteret cries out:

“this is murder, it is madness; it is a disgrace to our city, to our state, to our civilization!”

“That’s right!” replied several voices. The mob had recognized the speaker. “It is a disgrace, and we’ll not put up with it a moment longer. Burn ‘em out! Hurrah for Major Carteret, the champion of ‘white supremacy’! Three cheers for the *Morning Chronicle* and ‘no nigger domination’!” (182)

This is one of the clearest points in the novel where it shows the malice of white supremacy. Despite how “honorable” one’s intentions may be, a race cannot be privileged without exercising violence, murder, and genocide upon others.

The common result of whiteness, for these black characters, is to suffer. Jerry mutilates himself in an attempt to pass as white, driven by his hatred of his own blackness. Josh meets his own death by combat during the riot. And finally, despite the fact that Dr. Miller did his best to abide by the white caste system, and even gained the favor of many of the white residents, his son’s life is prematurely taken by a stray bullet. Despite his son having been murdered by white supremacists, he is expected to abandon the corpse of his son to save the son of Major Carteret, the very man that is responsible for the loss of his own son.

When Major Carteret is on Dr. Miller’s doorstep, asking for his assistance, Dr. Miller points out his hypocrisy by showing his dead son, saying: “There lies a specimen of your handiwork! There lies *my* only child, laid low by a stray bullet in this riot which you and your paper have fomented” (190). He refuses to aid Major Carteret, for how can he be expected to aid the murderer of his son? Major Carteret accepted Dr. Miller’s

decision as pure “elemental justice” (190). Olivia, however, does not accept the verdict and returns with her own set of persuasions.

Olivia Carteret and Major Carteret did not come to Dr. Miller and Janet Miller because they came to a profound resolve of racial equality and moral superiority (Pettis 45). Olivia rationalized her way of keeping Janet out of her rightful inheritance and only considered begging her to allow Dr. Miller to save her son because there were no other doctors around. She also made every attempt at emotional power play to get what she wanted. She calls Dr. Miller a “murderer” for refusing to help her son and says, “his blood be on your head, and a mother’s curse beside!” (193). Let us not forget that Olivia’s husband was responsible for the death of Janet’s own son. The irony of a murderer begging for aid in the same room in which their victim laid is palpable. Olivia is cursing Dr. Miller for desiring to grieve over his son, because it will come at the expense of her son’s life. Dr. Miller forfeits his right to grieve and allows Olivia to query Janet.

Olivia does not cease to manipulate. She tells Janet that because she is young, she can have more children to replace her dead son (194). She also claims that if she has a human heart, she will allow Dr. Miller to save her son. Which implies that if she refuses, she is subhuman, an animal, and maybe even a monster. Once she realizes that her pleading is not yielding any fruit, Olivia throws herself down to Janet. Submitting in posture, she recognizes that Janet is her sister and that her child is “near kin” (194).

This is manipulative by every means. For the entirety of her life, Olivia refuses to recognize her kinship with her sister, and maintains her status and power over her. And

yet, when she has taken everything away from Janet, she expects Janet to abandon her child's corpse. To get what she wants, she uses Janet's kinship to pose the proposition: if Janet does not save her son, she is killing her own nephew. This is not done out of racial reconciliation, but in an attempt to get what Olivia desires.

The novel was not constructed "as an academic exercise but to illustrate the pain, loss, and grief that profound racial discord occasions" (Pettis 44). This novel is not merely a means to create historical fiction; instead Chesnut employs heightened emotions and rich characters that experience profound loss. This loss challenges Chesnut's predominantly white audience. Through his use of pathos in the concluding scene, he reveals to his audience the kind of destruction that white supremacy delivers.

After suffering the threats and manipulations, she gives in but resists in the only way that she can: "I throw you back your father's name, your father's wealth, your sisterly recognition. I want none of them,--they are bought too dear! Ah, God, they are bought too dear! But that you may know that a woman may be foully wronged, and yet may have a heart to feel, even for the one who has injured her, you may have your child's life, if my husband can save it!" (195). This is the best response Janet could have given. She could not have refused to help Olivia's son. She would be equated to an animal, cursed, and possibly would await vengeance later. Conversely, she could not completely submit to Carteret's wishes. This would be disingenuous to Janet's character and grief as a mother.

Janet met Olivia's demands with a different kind of resistance. She rejected the family name, wealth, and status. A reader might think that this is a moral and "higher

road” choice. In another sense, however, in order to resist Olivia’s manipulation, she is rejecting her entitled wealth, status, and power. It is unjust no matter which way the situation plays out. If she refuses to aid Olivia, she would be branded as a traitor to family, and simultaneously lumped into more racial stereotypes. Retributive justice would be fully realized, but she still would suffer severely for it. If she simply submits and gives in to their desires, she betrays herself and her right to grieve as a mother. The third option is to reject Olivia’s manipulations and maintain moral high ground, but in doing so she revokes her right to status, money, and power. Her position is inherently compromised due to the racial caste system. No matter what she does, she loses.

Many factors weigh into her choice to save Olivia’s son. One of the root causes to her dilemma is the violence spurred on by whiteness. She is well aware that white supremacy killed her son, even if it was unintentional. Whiteness also exercises its psychological violence and power when Olivia manipulates Dr. Miller and Janet into helping her. While this may not be explicit in the text, there is also a fear and threat of physical violence to Dr. Miller and Janet personally. If word got around that the Major’s son died because they refused to help them, what would the other white supremacists think and do? In the midst of their grieving and the pressure given from the Carterets, it is likely this question crossed their minds.

Despite these various approaches to whiteness: bleaching skin to become white, complete resistance, or attempting to suffer the “little injustices” and gain prominence through hard work, whiteness will seek to execute violence upon the black body. This is because American whiteness perpetuates a racial caste system in which black people are

forced to remain at the bottom. This is not an effect of mere prejudice but is systemic or institutional racism that seeks to maintain white power through legislation and violence.

### ***Black No More: The Pursuit of Capital and Evasion of Violence***

When critics read George Schuyler's *Black No More*, they tend to focus on the racial financial capital aspect of whiteness. Sonnet H. Retman, for instance, in her excellent article "*Black No More: George Schuyler and Racial Capitalism*," articulates that "*Black No More* is a narrative of passing, part of a genre that subverts basic epistemological assumptions about race and identity . . . it reveals the function of whiteness as a kind of property" (1452). She articulates that this novel is an experiment of "if whiteness could be mechanized, packaged and sold by black men" (1453). With whiteness becoming a monetary unit, it has the ability to change class structures, as well as race structures.

In "'The Open Sesame of a Pork-Colored Skin': Whiteness and Privilege in *Black No More*," Jason Haslam discusses how whiteness occupies a unique place in *Black No More*, simply because this social construct has been mechanized and sold. He writes, "The history of the concept of whiteness is anything but untroubled; it has, at several points in its history, included and excluded various groups of people in order to defend the existing power structure" (17). The idea of whiteness has a long and violent history, and this idea is used to exclude groups of people (especially black folks) from power. For instance, in *The Marrow of Tradition*, white supremacists without difficulty were able to start a riot to exclude blacks from political power.

Haslam also discusses the economic value of whiteness. He writes: "through a satirical representation of 1930s America, [it] highlights both whiteness' performative reliance on the existence of blackness, and the non-essential nature of the connection

between economic privileges and whiteness” (19). He asserts that racial and economic systems are intertwined. Once Max Disher transfers over into whiteness, he is first given physical security from discrimination and violence. He is allowed into the definition of “the American,” and feels uninhibited by racism. The same relationship exists between race and economic status in *The Marrow of Tradition* and *Passing*. In *The Marrow of Tradition*, white characters such as Major Carteret thrived economically on the exploitation of black labor. During Reconstruction, they used their capital gained from institutionalized oppression to maintain power, status, and wealth. Later when discussing *Passing*, we will see how Clare Kendrey “passes” as white and attains financial security by marrying a white supremacist.

It should be noted that when Max Disher capitalizes on his newly found whiteness, he is not a social or racial activist in any way. He uses it to propel himself forward economically. He infiltrates The Knights of Nordica, a fictitious reiteration of the Klu Klux Klan. He uses his whiteness not just to pass as a white supremacist, but as an anthropologist and quickly becomes a leading member in the group.

Whiteness alone, however, did not bring him the status, power, and money that he finds himself enjoying. While posing as an anthropologist, he spouts off racist and white supremacist ideologies and stereotypes about black people. Under the pseudonym of Matthew Fisher, he tells Givens, the Imperial Grand Wizard, that he is fixed on “preserving the integrity of the white race.” Also, he identifies the “fate” of other nations for allowing “their blood to be polluted with that of inferior breeds” (38). Here he is



perpetuating black stereotypes which reinforce racist ideology that makes black people not only “inferior” but a “breed,” akin to an animal.

The irony in this, of course, is that he is disseminating this ideology while he himself is black. He admits that this information was pulled from a paper, and that was the “extent of his knowledge of anthropology” (38). In combination with his whiteness and the rhetoric that gained the sympathies of white supremacists, he is able to access the money and power that the Knights of Nordica hold.

At this point in the novel, one may ask if Max Disher believes that he is truly white. Or does he believe that he is still a black man who now has the ability to pass as white? He confesses near the end of the novel that he has never forgotten who he was. He always remembered that he was black and is “always on alert” (89). Even with the guise and look of whiteness, there is always the fear of future harm upon discovery.

Not only did Max Disher need blackness to highlight his whiteness and give him economic gain, but he encouraged rhetoric and ideology that is inherently violent to black bodies. Just like Major Carteret, the next step after equating black Americans to animals or a subhuman species is exploitation of both black labor and bodies. This ideology is what justified a laundry list of racist legislation, including Jim Crow. Critics rightfully recognize that this form of passing requires self harm and results in “the coercive genocide of blackness throughout the nation” (Retman 1453). Other critics also discuss the qualities of Max Disher and his ambitions to become white, along with his own desire for wealth, status, and power—not social justice.

To illustrate this point further, Matthew Fisher (Max Disher's alias) will stop at nothing to conserve his political power and wealth. With Democrats facing destruction when the Republican vote was climbing, Givens charged Matt to find a way to sway voters to keep Democrats in power. Bunny asks Matt what he thinks he may do. Without hesitation Matthew replied: "We'll try the old sure fire Negro problem stuff" (89). Bunny criticized this method, claiming that the problem no longer exists because everyone was now white. Bunny believes that at this point America has become a colorblind society, unable to see and discriminate against race.

Matthew knew that racism ran deeper than what Bunny suggested. Based on his experience, white citizens were raised and "trained" to "react" to the "Negro problem" (89). He knew that if he used black people as a scapegoat for their problems, he would be able to ignite a movement. Through his own experience with the white supremacist group, as well as his experience as a black man prior, he has seen the age-old rhetorical tactics of stereotyping, scapegoating, and othering of black people. To ensure his own safety and wealth, he is willing to maintain these conventions of white supremacy.

In *Black No More*, there is a similar reinforcement of whiteness in *The Marrow of Tradition* with Major Carteret and Captain McBane. Matthew realizes that with many black folks passing as white, they are gaining the political power of the vote because they are able to bypass voter suppression laws. He explains to Bunny that he is trying to bring both the Knights of Nordica and The Anglo-Saxon Association of America together. He explains that The Anglo-Saxon Association is made up of "rich highbrows that can trace their ancestry back almost two hundred years" (100). Although they are white

supremacists like the Knights of Nordica, they believe that they are superior because of their lineage and believe that folks in Knights of Nordica are lesser.

This type of class and social distinction exists between Major Carteret and Captain McBane. Major Carteret was a rich white plantation owner who could trace back both his ancestry and wealth for many years, whereas McBane was a poor white who was gaining new social status from the civil war. Like the two white supremacists, Matthew is trying to join the two white supremacy groups together to maintain white power in elections. This maintenance of white supremacy is done through the scapegoating of African Americans, which results in subjecting black people to hatred, prejudice, and violence.

Once again, there is something more basic and fundamental in Max Disher's actions. Absolutely, he becomes white in order to gain wealth, status, and power. This, however, is only secondary to his desire to preserve his physical body. After becoming white, Max Disher planned to "mingle with white people in places where as a youth he had never *dared* to enter. At last he felt like *an American citizen...feeling at peace* with the world" (23, emphasis mine). These are the first feelings Max Disher experiences after becoming white: excitement at the prospect of equal treatment, and peace. The most basic need of security and safety is secured with his procedure of becoming white.

This is ironic, because the process of becoming white in *Black No More* is akin to death and being born again. Max likens the Black No More machine to an electric chair. By undergoing the "scientific" process of becoming white, he is killing his old black self and emerging as a new white man. But this final act of self-harm freed him from the

“tyranny and torture of the comb. There would be no more expenditures for skin whiteners; no more discrimination; no more obstacles in his path. He was free” (14). This excitement for enhanced economic and social status is certainly the main motivating factor for his passing, but deeper down, at the very beginning, it was the desire of freedom from violent white oppression. With one final act of violence unto himself, entering that machine that was alike to an electric chair, he was able to get rid of any physical signs of blackness once and for all and to pass as white.

This is another instance of a black man loathing himself for being black, and his willingness to harm himself in order to change. We saw the servant Jerry do this for similar reasons in *The Marrow of Tradition*. After a lifetime of discrimination, hatred, and physical violence, whiteness exasperates historical and generational trauma, causing many black folks to hate themselves to the point that they were willing to deny their blackness and become white by any means necessary.

This excitement over Black No More technology caused a rupture within the black community. Not only were the individuals willing to harm themselves in order to gain whiteness, but they were willing to forget “all loyalties, affiliations and responsibilities” (51). The community stopped donating to the Anti-Lynching campaign and black businesses began to plummet. Black No More allowed black Americans to financially contribute to white establishments simply because appearing white was now an accessible option. Despite the fact that Black No More treatment was harmful to the self and the black community, many black Americans were willing to apply it as long as they could reap the benefits of being white. Especially if such benefits permitted them

into the identity of *the* American: a citizen with rights, security, money, power, and access.

Emerson, as Painter points out, was foundational to laying down the theoretical groundwork to the white racial theory of his time, including the identity of “the American.” Painter writes:

It is important to notice that when Emerson said ‘American,’ he meant male white people of a certain socioeconomic standing—his. Without his saying so directly, his definition of American excluded non-Christians and virtually all poor whites. Native American Indians and African Americans did not count. In *English Traits*, when he tallies up the American population, Emerson explicitly excludes the enslaved and skips over native peoples entirely. (185)

Painter and Schuyler both point out that this definition of *the* American changes and morphs over time. But the underlying structural products remained. By Schuyler’s time, blacks were still excluded from any substantial wealth and power. Black people were still bound by segregation, racism, and prejudice. After Max Disher emerges from the “electric chair” that turned him white, he rejoices: “The world was his oyster and he had the open sesame of a pork-colored skin!” (14) Once Max Disher became white, he realized that he was brought into the fold of *the* American identity. He saw that there were less restraints from attaining wealth, status, and power. He did not waste the opportunity to use his new-found whiteness to do so.

Langston Hughes, one of Schuyler’s contemporaries, writes about the difficulties that whiteness presents to the black artists in his essay *The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain*. In which he writes: “the word white comes to be unconsciously a symbol of all virtues. It holds for the children beauty, morality, and money. The whisper of ‘I want to be white’ runs silently through their minds.” He laments these aspirations of middle-class

black families and young black artists to emulate whiteness. He builds a case in his essay that one should embrace their blackness. Instead of desiring to be white, he argues that young black artists should say, ““Why should I want to be white? I am a Negro—and beautiful?”” (Poetry Foundation)

It is important to understand this anti-black ideology is a product of its time. The novel was published in 1931, which predates the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. Malcom X, among others, created a shift in black ideology by making blackness into a powerful and positive identity. We saw this already happening with Langston Hughes in his essay that was published in 1926. In describing the Nation of Islam, Painter in *History of White People* describes their philosophy that “black people should separate from whites, and certainly not seek integration into American society. Because blacks were the targets of racist violence, they should organize into militia for self-defense” (375). *Black No More* was written before Black Power was a national movement, which made blackness “a positive sign and [the] white race the mark of guilty malfeasance” (Painter, 378). Prior to this, there was still moments of resistance to white power and violence, as in *The Marrow of Tradition* with Josh Green’s resistance. However, with the Black Power movement was a movement characterized by the positive reframing of being black.

Schuyler asks the question, “If everyone was white, what would happen then? Would violence and prejudice still exist? Would a mono-racial culture be a color-blind culture?” Sterling Lecater Bland Jr. confronts race erasure and “color blindness” by saying, “In reality, the nation has never been neutral, post-racial, or color-blind,

particularly as those terms relate to post-prejudice or post-bias . . . the reality is that color-blindness, however it is deployed, only changes the nature of racialized bias by privileging the whiteness and depriving the Blackness it claims not to recognize” (64). Bland is specifically addressing the “Color-blind” culture and argument. Some individuals and institutions claim to not see race and their decisions are not informed by the complexion of one’s skin.

The problem, as Bland points out, is that neutrality has never been an American policy. Race has always been a factor. Whiteness has institutionalized racism that has affected economics, well-being, and social caste of other races. American systems have been built on race theory that has always put the black race at the bottom. With whiteness being made into the status quo, “color-blindness” negates blackness, and privileges whiteness as default. Whiteness is still allowed to influence policy, admission rates, and bank loans. Institutions now have language to use to argue that they are not discriminating.

With whiteness still being an influencer, the problem of violence is left. The reality is that the erasure of blackness does not eradicate prejudice or cease the aggressive nature of whiteness. As Bell Hooks indicates in *Black Looks*, the nature of whiteness is to induce terror and the possibility of future terror (176). This disproportionate incarceration of black folks and death of black people at the hands of police officers still exists today.

Schuyler does claim to eliminate race throughout the pages of *Black No More*. However, as Dana Carluccio points out in “The Evolutionary Invention of Race: W.E.B. Du Bois's ‘Conservation’ of Race and George Schuyler's *Black No More*” that the erasure

of race was not done by Black-No-More technology, which made all black individuals white. Rather, it was done through Arthur Snobbcraft's genealogy research (525).

Snobbcraft recoils in horror at the revelation that he and many other white supremacist leaders have black ancestors at some point in their lineage. In other words, everyone's lineage is tied to Africa.

The erasure that takes place here is not of an actual "physical" race, but the *idea* of white racial purity. Whiteness, once again, is not a biological fact, but an idea and representation that has been constructed to privilege a certain group of people over others. The ironic horror that Snobbcraft experiences, along with other white supremacists who received the news, is that they now are facing the same horror and terror that black people do. Because they have been labeled as "not white" they now face the violence they once promoted. Immediately Snobbcraft and Frazier fly away before the mob has a chance to murder them.

This is why at the end of the novel, when Snobbcraft and Frazier land in Mississippi, they fear that they will be lynched if the local residents discover who they are. They paint their faces black, fully believing that locals would show more mercy to a black man as opposed to if they knew their actual identities. As one may have guessed, residents rejoice at the opportunity of lynching people they believe to be black. In a final attempt to save their lives, they reveal that they were wearing blackface and were actually white people.

While the residents were disappointed, they realized not much later the identities of the two frauds, and rejoiced that the lynching was not truly cancelled. This is another



instance of irony and satire in this story. This moment highlights the needs of a white supremacist society to enact racial violence. It desires it to the point to where it goes to any lengths to make justification for such violence. For whiteness ideology, if one drop of African ancestry is found, that individual is deemed black. With this novel, Schuyler is offering a different definition of race than W.E.B. DuBois offers in his essay "The Conservation of Races" where he defines race as: "A vast family of human beings, generally of common blood and language, always of common history, traditions and impulses, who are both voluntarily and involuntarily striving together for the accomplishment of certain more or less vividly conceived ideals of life" (817). Du Bois's definition of race appears to be more socially constructed. Du Bois more frequently uses history, traditions, impulses, proximity, and societal goals to be major contributors to the definition of race. The idea of "common blood and language" can make the definition a little murkier. A small community can still share multiple languages. Blood, as Schuyler shows with Snobbcraft's genealogy, is more intermixed than white supremacists might admit.

With Snobbcraft's genealogical discovery, Schuyler shows that race is constructed. Once Snobbcraft discovered that he, among other white supremacists, had distant black ancestry, their identity was immediately recognized as black by both themselves and the public. This shift shows that race is not a real, fixed, objective biological fact but rather, an ideological construct that seeks to privilege certain people over others. And for white supremacy, having a single drop of African blood made the individual black.

If the discrimination of race was more connected with history and tradition, then Snobbcraft and Fraizier would not have to face the same sort of fear of lynching that many of the users of the Black No More did. Not only did Snobbcraft and Fraizier discover that they face the same physical dangers of blackness, but that the category and analysis of race was a foolish construct to begin with (Carluccio 527). Once again, this idea has a real physical impact. Immediately Snobbcraft was less concerned about the election, the power, and the money. They found their bodies were at risk, and they had to flee for their lives purely because they no longer were in the category of whiteness.

The novel does not stop with the violence upon Snobbcraft and Fraizier. Schuyler informs the reader that prejudice, discrimination, and violence will emerge yet again. This time, however, with the majority of black folk undergoing the whitening treatment, it takes place in a new form:

[Dr. Crookman] declared, to the consternation of many Americans, that in practically every instance the new Caucasians were from two to three shades lighter than the old Caucasians, and that approximately one-sixth of the population were from the first group. The old Caucasians had never been really white but rather were a pale pink shading down to a sand color and red.

Once the majority of black Americans used the Black No More treatment, they became whiter than Caucasian Americans. This gave original Caucasians the ability to otherize a new group of people. It didn't take long before users of Black No More became subject to discrimination, microaggressions, and insults. This shows that the definition of whiteness has always been mutable. Because whiteness was originally a tool for the dominant class to maintain power, they found a way to change the concept of whiteness to fit their needs. Even in Schuyler's world, where blackness is supposedly eradicated,

the original Caucasians found a new target in order to maintain their original power status.

There is an irony in the resurgence in studying the color of one's skin. It quickly becomes a fashion trend and a status symbol to darken one's skin. This ironic reversal exposes whiteness for what it truly is: an idea. By exposing whiteness as an idea, the reader realizes what such a concept does. *Black No More* reveals not only the racial economic concepts in whiteness, but its ability to morph and change to meet the desires of the dominate.

Whiteness ideology has been a malleable term over the centuries. Painter illustrates that whiteness was used to exclude the Irish, Italians, and Jews from power. In discussing Ralph Waldo Emerson's *English Traits*, she writes:

Emerson qualifies as a full contributor to white race theory . . . *English Traits* expressed the views of the most prestigious intellectual in the United States, elevating its formulation into American ideology. The American was the same as the Englishman, who was the same as the Saxon and the Norseman. Thus 'Saxon' supplied the key word exiling the Celtic Irish—white though they may be—from American identity. . . Emerson created a white racial ideal that was both virile and handsome. Towering over his age, he spoke for an increasingly rich and powerful American ruling class (183).

It was not until much later that the Irish, Jewish, and other non-English whites were brought into the fold of whiteness. Painter also addresses that class was linked to this definition for a long time. She notes that Emerson only included rich Christian English whites into the definition of *the American*: an individual with status and power. The idea of *the American* changed in the late 1930's and into the early 1940's.

Painter performs an in-depth analysis of media broadcasting and race identity. With the upcoming war with Nazi Germany, the identity of the "American" began to

open up to “non-whites” which included non-British European immigrants, and most distinctly black people. Painter points out that the second world war caused a collision between these “two racial systems--one for the races of Europe and the ‘alien’ races, one for the black/white dichotomy” (358) that struggled over a national American identity. This is not the only instance in which whiteness ideology expands, includes, and excludes. Painter spends the entirety of *The History of White People* discussing the historical instances in which whiteness expands to encompass new groups. The two common threads to all of these expansions is that to be white is to be identified as an American. The second is that in all instances in which whiteness ideology changes to suit the needs of those in power, “being a real American often meant joining anti-black racism and seeing oneself as white against the blacks” (363).

At the end of *Black No More*, there is a world in which the visual elements of blackness no longer exist. To illustrate the point that whiteness ideology is a weapon to maintain power, when there are no more black bodies to exploit, whiteness redefines itself and seeks new bodies to harm, mangle, and suppress.

In his essay “The Caucasian Problem” George Schuyler articulates that “The term Negro itself is as fictitious as the theory of white racial superiority” (39), but at the same time he recognizes that this fictitious narrative of racial categorization and stereotypes has been the most effective linguistic technology since the Crusades. The idea (motivated by creation and maintenance of a racial caste) of blackness, race, and whiteness is an ideological system created to subordinate the black individual and to provide a legal rationale for that subordination.

Once blackness is erased in *Black No More*, the definition of whiteness changes and seeks new ways to privilege certain groups over others. In response to Dr. Crookman's identification of folks that use the Black No More technology, the original Caucasians begin attempting to discriminate on the idea of blackness. Once blackness became just an idea and physically scarce, Americans turned to not only studying differences in skin and physical features once again in order to other, but staining skin to become brown was now indicative of status and power.

With eradication of physical blackness, race theory breaks down deeper than appearances of skin. The ability to afford skin staining became a physical way to indicate class. At this point of the novel, whiteness changes to reflect its capitalist root, character, and basis: "The new Caucasians. . . protested vehemently against the effort on the part of employers to pay them less and on the part of management of public institutions to segregate them" (149). Once the original Caucasians were able to find a way to identify those who were originally black, they immediately sought to discriminate the new Caucasians and profit on their labor. Whiteness finds new ways and new types of people to discriminate; revealing that whiteness and the driving forces behind it are not rooted in the appearance of one's skin, but rather constitute an ideological mechanism that maintains power.

### ***Passing: Risk, Safety, and Danger***

*Passing* is particularly unique when it comes to white violence upon the black body. The violence found in the novella is heavily psychological and is akin to the fear that is found in *Black No More* and *The Marrow of Tradition*. For *Passing*, the psychological fear concerns the danger of exposure while passing as white. The only manifestation of physical violence is when Irene Redfield may (or may not) have pushed Clare Kendry out of a seventeenth story window. The threats that Clare and Irene face are informed by their gender. They may not be facing violent retribution, or wrongful imprisonment like some of the men of color face in *Black No More* and *The Marrow of Tradition*. However, Irene and Clare face the looming threat of other forms of violence such as rape, domestic abuse, and domestic slavery.

It is important to understand the history of Clare Kendry and her relationship with Irene in order to understand what may have led her to such a tragic outcome. Clare decides that, in order to gain access to wealth and status, she needed to “pass” as white and marry an aristocratic white supremacist. While Irene also passed on occasion for “the sake of convenience, restaurants, theatre tickets, and things like that” (70), Clare makes, in Irene’s opinion, the dangerous move to fully pass into white society.

Clare spent many years in white society, and eventually began to miss her times with black friends, including Irene. Despite Irene’s multiple protests to reintroduce Clare to black society, Clare nevertheless makes her way back into socializing with her old friends. There are a few reasons why Irene avoids Clare at the start of the novella, but the first major concern is safety and security.

On the Dayton rooftop, a segregated restaurant, she felt a white woman staring at her. She felt “anger, scorn and fear slide over her” (11), believing that she may have been caught passing for white. She feared that she would face discrimination by being approached and kicked out. Not only did she fear ejection from the establishment, but the humiliation of being called out, which would have made a scene. However, after the woman sat down and talked with her, she realized that it was her old friend, Clare Kendry. In the excitement of catching up with an old friend she invited Clare to Idlewild, a black summer resort.

However, once she made the invitation, “she regretted it. What a foolish, what an idiotic impulse to have given way to! She groaned inwardly as she thought of the endless explanations in which it would involve her, of the curiosity, and the talk, and the lifted eyebrows” (17). She assured herself that she felt this way not because she was a classist or a “snob,” but rather bringing someone like Clare to a resort like this would be a scandal.

Michael A. Istvan Jr. notes in his article “The Manner of Blackness in Nella Larsen’s *Passing*” that: “[Irene realizes] that the other black vacationers would find it scandalous for a black family to have a white guest with them, Irene wants to take back the offer as soon as she makes it” (117). Irene immediately regrets the invitation because she feels that Clare’s presence would result in gossip that would involve her. Clare was already the talk of some gossip circles when she passed on into white society, so Irene was sure that this would start the talk again.

She is so concerned about gossip amongst peers because her primary interest is social stability. Throughout this novella, Irene's desired security is threatened and challenged constantly by Clare's interference. After her first meeting quickly devolved into "irritation" (22), she vowed to keep Clare out of her life. But with Clare being an extremely persistent character, she convinces Irene to meet her once again, where Irene meets Bellew, Clare's husband.

During the bloodcurdling scene when Irene realizes that John "Jack" Bellew does not know that she and Clare had African-American blood, "A faint sense of danger brushed her, like the breath of a cold fog" (29). In this scene, the novella takes an ominous turn. Irene learns of Bellew's strong prejudice when he reveals his disposition to black people: "I don't dislike them, I hate them. Also, so does Nig, for all she's trying to turn into one. She wouldn't have a nigger maid around her for love nor money. They give me the creeps. The black scrimy devils" (29). The tension in the room is built upon Jack's raw form of racism and prejudice, but also the irony that he is the only one in the room that clearly does not know his wife's bi-raciality: including the two women in the room (Chin 97).

This pure racism infuriated Irene, and she wished to reveal that he was the only white person in the room. But she was stopped "by her consciousness of the danger in which such rashness would involve Clare" (30). What stops Irene is the threat to Clare's social status as a "white" wealthy American lady, but also the physical danger in which she would be involved given Jack's obvious hostility.



*Passing* highlights one of the characteristic blindness of whiteness: those who are white cannot seem to tell who is white and who is not. Istvan highlights this in his article: “Whites ‘don’t’ know, according to Irene, because they only attempt physiognomic discernment of race. Blacks, on the other hand, are sensitive to *manner*, which Irene construes as different from ‘appearance’ (14) and “words” (35) and in line with ‘fact.’” (116). When white people practiced race theory, they were mainly concerned with the physical differences between themselves and other races. Based on these physical differences, many race theorists would make value judgments on how/why certain people would act a certain way, thus perpetuating stereotypes.

“Sensitive to manner” is an important phrase to discuss. This *manner* may refer to socio-economic experience that black people have with white people. Black people have often been forced to deal with the qualities of whiteness, especially if one is trying to economically advance in a white-dominated society. Conversely, white people typically do not need to understand blackness for their own socio-economic advancement. Due to not understanding black qualities, white people are ignorant and blind to those who pass as white.

It is because of this type of physiognomic judgment, Istvan argues, that Irene believes white people have a more difficult time discerning race from linguistic, cultural, and behavior differences. A similar idea is found in *Black No More* when Dr. Crookman argues that there is no such thing as “Negro Dialect” (11). Rather, dialects are derivative of location. Therefore, once a black person entered a Black No More machine, a white individual would not be able to sense that he was black simply from how he spoke. Irene

argues similarly in saying that because the emphasis of race theory is on the black body, if the black body does not actually meet the categories of “blackness,” then a white individual would not be able to recognize “blackness.”

In *Black No More*, the original Caucasians are unable to decipher who were the individuals that used the Black No More machine. It is not until Dr. Crookman reveals the physical differences of folks that underwent the Black No More operations that the original Caucasians realized that they looked any different. This idea could be an explanation as to why ‘passing’ has been so successful. The reason for this ignorance is because whiteness, again, is an idea. Even though whiteness is a concept that has no impact on genes, intelligence, or biology, black people are confronted in real physical and economic ways by this idea. Because of the real impact of whiteness, black people spend a lot of time thinking about whiteness and what is required to advance in American society. White people do not need to think about their own whiteness in order to advance in their society because the system has been built for them to succeed.

It is this theme of “danger” and threat of safety that permeates the whole novella. Deborah E. McDowell in “Black Female Sexuality in *Passing*” argues that these archetypal theses are used to cover an even more scandalous plot: “Larsen’s envelops the subplot of Irene’s developing if unnamed and unacknowledged desire for Clare in the safe and familiar plot of racial passing” (377). McDowell gives an interesting reason why Irene allows Clare to infiltrate her life, as well as how she may have been motivated to push Clare out of the window.

This assessment of themes is quite bold, and yet makes sense. It seems contradictory to say that the narrative of “passing” is considered safe or conservative. However, if it is disagreeable and dangerous to be black in white society, then it is damnable to be a gay black in white straight society. If what McDowell says is true about Irene; then not only does she face difficulties, discrimination, and oppression as a black woman, but also as a black lesbian.

McDowell makes a convincing argument for Irene’s affinity for Clare through the use of sexual conventions and descriptors in response to Clare’s letters and conversations. She writes: “From the very beginning of their reencounter, Irene is drawn to Clare like a moth to a flame” (375). Clare is often in red clothing, a sexual and erotic color. McDowell frequently quotes the text, noting that Irene notices Clare’s “tempting mouth” and “arresting eyes” and a smile that “petted and caressed Irene” (375). Clare gives Irene a sense of thrill and excitement that is sexual in nature, this attraction could be a reason why Irene finds so much difficulty avoiding her.

However, in spite of these feelings towards Clare, her desire for social status and security is her first priority. Mary Mabel Youman may be disagreeing with McDowell when she writes: “Though [Irene] disowns the fascination, there is also a sub-conscious recognition that Clare has a humane quality that Irene is lacking” (238). She articulates that her repressed sexuality has to do with her middle-class status. Irene bears both “distaste and avid curiosity” (238) for sex.

While this may be an easier reading to accept, given that was the middle-class disposition towards sex, McDowell’s reading of Irene and Clare’s relationship is not only

possible but probable. Youman gives ample textual evidence that shows Irene's repressed sexual attraction to Clare. This also changes the sense of danger. The fear of danger is compounded both by race and orientation.

Despite Irene's many attempts to push Clare away, Clare has confronted her about her avoidance. To which Irene replied: "I can't help thinking that you ought not to come up here, ought not to run the risk of knowing Negroes . . . it's dangerous and that you ought not to run such silly risks. . . It's not safe. Not safe at all" (47). The narrator does not hide the fact that Irene is mostly concerned about Irene's own safety, and the danger she feels when in Clare's proximity. Clare, being characterized many times by Irene as someone who is not concerned with danger cries out: "Safe! Damn being safe!" (47)

This is a critical moment in the novella in which Irene has clearly advised against affiliating with the black community, given the serious physical risks involved. Irene was fully aware at this point about Bellew's combative prejudice and on one hand cares about Clare enough to try to keep her out of harm's way, but also wishes to keep her security and status intact. When she rejects being safe for herself, she is also jeopardizing the safety of Irene (Puskar 93). After Clare's damning of safety, Irene realizes that more than her security and middle-class status was at risk, but also her physical and financial safety.

Jason Puskar illustrates the contrast between Clare and Irene well when he writes: "Clare refuses to manage risks prudently, and often actively courts danger instead. She becomes something like the allegorical embodiment of hazard itself" (95). Not only is Clare engaging in risky behavior, but actively committing an "ethic of recklessness" that juxtaposes and subverts Irene's desire for middle class "future-oriented bourgeois

prudence and rationality” (95). Puskar likens Clare’s need to make racial risks similar to gambling. Contemporaries viewed gambling as a barbaric and savage subsidiary trait (98).

This reading into Clare’s motives for passing would make sense if economic gain was the only factor involved in passing as white. Monetary gain is possibly one of the most obvious reasons to pass into whiteness. Clare certainly gained much wealth when she married a wealthy white supremacist. However, wealth generation and subsidy are not the only (or main) reasons for passing as white. We have seen in *Black No More* and *The Marrow of Tradition* that although many “passed” to gain wealth, simultaneously those who passed as white were relieved of the institutional racist systems that hindered them from economic advancement, but also racial violence. By extension, they desired to be brought into the identification of *the American*: to have rights, opportunity, and access.

In criticism of these three novels, scholars tend to focus on the economic benefits of whiteness. The capitalization of whiteness is certainly a major factor. It compounds, creates generational wealth, and also reinforces the generational, racial wealth gap. However, when one looks at whiteness, one must see *how* whiteness generates capital. How does whiteness maintain property, resources, and wealth? It is through the visceral exploitation of the black body. That is the foundation of this country, and this violence did not end with slavery, but continued through legislation such as sharecropping and Jim Crow laws. Coates does not let his son forget the visceral experience of being black and being confronted with whiteness. He writes, “Destruction is merely the superlative form

of a dominion whose prerogatives include friskings, detainings, beatings, and humiliations. All of this is common to black people. And all of this is old for black people. No one is held responsible” (9). Passing is a risk, a risk that yields economic returns and dividends, but also threatens harm to the body.

To view passing, and Clare’s passing specifically, as akin to gambling is short-sighted. Clare did make a big risk to pass as white to the point of denying her blackness. However, if she was exclusively gambling with her race for only economic gain, then she had already won the jackpot. She passed over into wealthy white society and did not need to return to the black community that she once knew. She had nothing financial to gain by attempting to integrate back into the black community. She was risking her physical and financial safety by affiliating with Irene and her peers. So then, why does she do all of this? What did she seek to gain?

Clare is attempting to attain something that money cannot buy: a full version of herself. She has experienced trauma and fear of violence at home. She spent nine months pregnant absolutely terrified that the baby would be born black. Jack clearly is not a mild-tempered man, and it would not be unreasonable to think that there would be physical abuse within the home for passing as white and bearing a dark-skinned child. Clare realizes that her financial gain is not worth it if she has to endure the trauma of denying a major part of herself: her previous culture, her friends, etc. She hopes that through Irene she will not only be able to resurrect the black self that she killed, but that she would be able to put her two identities together, creating a fuller, truer self.

*Passing* places both Clare and Irene as foils to one another, but as the novella progresses, the two become more synthesized. Clare brings out many of the thoughts, ideas, and desires that Irene suppresses to ensure her own bourgeois security. By the end of the novella, it becomes clear that they seek safety by the same means, but Clare has made herself a threat to Irene's familial security, along with social status.

The narrator, however, makes it very clear that Irene is more concerned with her own self-interest and security. McDowell also is not deceived by Irene's professed intentions. She writes "Irene, with a cold, hard, exploitative, and manipulative determination, tries to protect her most cherished attainment: security, which she equates with marriage to a man in a prestigious profession, the accouterments of middle-class existence--children, material comfort, and social respectability" (373). She persuades her husband to enter a profession that he never wanted to enter. She stifles and suppresses the important conversations about race and sex with her son. She does everything possible to maintain distance from Clare, the main disturber to her life.

But Clare, with her determination to reaffiliate with black society, has threatened Irene's ideals of middle-class life, including her marriage. She quickly and readily believes that Clare is infiltrating her marriage to be with her husband. Istvan says rightly that: "Irene is guilty of the same faults that she finds in Clare, particularly of selfishness" (113). Although she refuses to admit it herself, it is out of her own self-interest that she keeps her family away from Brazil, which could be a point of resentment for Brian.

The differences between Irene and Clare are limitless, but as Istvan points out, Clare has many qualities which Irene lacks, including her ability to remember

conversations, people and events, being a supreme reader of people, and empathy (127). These are the characteristics that Irene seems to suppress within herself in order to keep herself secure and safe, it is also these very qualities of Clare that threaten Irene's marriage and incite Irene's hostility towards her in the end.

What does this have to do with whiteness and the violence it executes upon the black body? The violence in this novel begins with psychological violence, posing a looming threat of physical, "danger" and "fear" about what would happen to Clare if her identity were discovered. The trauma of this looming threat leads to physical manifestations. Including "nearly dying of terror" when she was pregnant. As Youman points out, Bellew is "violently prejudiced and will certainly divorce her" (340). She then articulates that this fear leads Irene to murder Clare. Once Clare is free of white society, she would be free to assimilate back into black society and, to Irene's fear, have an affair with her husband Brian. This would absolutely destroy her sense of security.

This reading, while it may have some truth in it, comes up short. These may be Irene's motives, perspectives, and concerns, but there is more at stake for Clare and her exposure. Racial tensions were still high, and the public would not react kindly to discovering that a black woman was passing as white to gain status and money in a prominent white family. Just like The Rhinelander Case of 1924, there would be lawsuits, racist articles printed in newspapers, verbal abuse, and the looming threat of physical abuse if she did not keep out of the public eye (Madigan 1990). The Rhinelander Case was a famous annulment lawsuit filed by Leonard "Kip" Rhinelander against Alice Jones "on the grounds that she had deceived him into believing she was white" (Kaplan xvii).



Alice Jones faced harassment, not only verbal in nature, rather she was even forced to remove her clothes publicly so the jury could decide on her race.

Clare would face the similar threat of sexual violence, domestic abuse, and harassment from the public. She is risking this exposure by attempting to reintegrate back into middle-class black society. Why would she take this sort of risk? Irene would argue that it was her impulsiveness and selfishness to have what she does not. However, it goes much deeper than this.

Du Bois offers a possible explanation when he discusses the “double consciousness” of the African-American. In “Of Our Spiritual Strivings” he writes: “the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelations of the other world” (364). This idea of “double-consciousness” is fundamental to African American race consciousness. DuBois highlights that the identity of a black person is dual in nature; not only do they have their own culture and identity that they see through their own communities, but they are also seeing themselves “through the eyes of others.”

This sight that double-consciousness provides is critical to being able to pass. Because black people have this sight and “sensitivity to matter,” they must be conscious of whiteness, how it affects them, and how they can progress through their own lives while having whiteness be a standard to achieve in order to attain other “virtues,” wealth, and status. Conversely, white people have the privilege of being blind to their own whiteness and the blackness of African Americans. White people have this blindness

because they do not need to understand blackness to propel themselves forward in American society. American society is already hard wired to allow white people to succeed.

This double-consciousness can leave a fragmented and fraught self. Du Bois mentions that these two identities are “unreconciled strivings” and if not for the resilience of the black body, it would be “torn asunder” (365). Is it possible, then, for this conflict to be resolved? Clare attempted to resolve this conflict by passing. It is reasonable to believe that she did this to gain status, wealth, and security, but it also could be to resolve these warring identities. Instead of being torn between these two identities, she chose one that appeared to benefit her the most.

This did not resolve this issue of “double consciousness,” because she found herself missing the culture that black communities offered. Du Bois writes that “The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,--this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self” (365). I believe this is the crux of Clare’s actions. Instead of choosing and isolating one part of herself, she is trying to mend her fragmented self to live a more fulfilled life.

Evidence of this can be found after Clare declares her apathy for being “safe” to Irene. She told Irene that it was Jack’s racism “that has made me want to see other people. It just swooped down and changed everything. If it hadn’t been for that, I’d have gone on to the end, never seeing any of you. But that did something to me, and I’ve been so lonely since!” (47). Bellew berated Clare, to the point that she wanted to get far away from him. Day in and day out, hearing the worst possible things about her identity and

culture, and what he wanted to do to black people, pushed her away and possibly even to regret fully passing in the first place.

Her coming back, and her attempt to affiliate again with black culture could be motivated by a few reasons: Firstly, after constantly being berated with racist insults (Being called “Nig,” etc.) and violent remarks by a white supremacist, she began to fear for her own life. She after all, “nearly died of terror the whole nine months before Margery was born for fear that she might be dark” (26). She lived her whole life not only in fear of exposure, but in fear of having her whole life uprooted, as well as what Jack might do to her body (and her daughter) if he discovered her race. Secondly, while undergoing this psychologically abusive living situation for years, she greatly desired not only to see other people, but people that accepted her for who she was without judgement. She wanted a space in which she could feel that she could live her true self as a biracial person.

Finally, if she was able to integrate into the black community, she would be able to easily find refuge if her identity was revealed to her husband. This not only secures her physical safety (from Jack as well as from the white public), but she also would be able to leave and have a community to support her. Her life would be undone, but she would have security that would potentially preserve her body from violence and loss of status. These three factors play into her desire to risk this “hazardous business of passing” (Larsen 17).

Youman makes an excellent and ironic point that “Clare’s return is mostly to the middle-class Black world that envelopes Irene, not to the people who have preserved

their spiritual heritage” (341). While it may be true that she wishes to return to her heritage and have a spiritual connection to her racial roots as a black American, she is only doing so in the social settings that are still capitalist middle class.

While the irony may still be here, Clare is not only trying to fulfill a spiritual desire to come to terms with her blackness, but also to be able to establish connections and security in a different non-hostile community that will understand her. It is plausible to conclude that once Jack started nicknaming his wife a slur because she started to look blacker with each passing day, she felt her time was running short. Any other individual who is as passionate, empathetic, and intelligent with people as Clare would immediately seek other communities in order to secure physical and financial safety on their own terms.

To pass is to make the attempt to be brought into the identity of *the* American: a citizen with full rights, status, and power. Because black Americans have been required to understand whiteness in order to advance through American society, they have the sight and “sensitivity” to blackness and whiteness that white people do not. Clare passed in order to access wealth, status, and identity as well as physical safety and security. What inspired her to come back to the life that she once knew, and jeopardize her cover, is she realized that there was no other way to reconcile her fragmented spirit but to embrace her blackness and say, “I am black, and I am beautiful.”

## Conclusion

Whiteness is a specter. It is an ideology that lies hidden within the background and pulls the strings behind the curtain. Violence bears many forms that are subtler than others. *The Marrow of Tradition* demonstrates the physical, real, and exploitative losses the black community experienced at the hands of white supremacy. This violence is not only manifested in the physical, but also the psychological and emotional. In order to preserve the body, in all three novels the characters chose to harm themselves or put themselves in harm's way by passing as white.

Specifically, with Jerry in *The Marrow of Tradition* and Max Disher in *Black No More*, the biggest motivator is the attainment of the wealth, status, and power that white people have. But said and unsaid, beneath the surface, there is a black self hatred that encourages people to attempt to pass as white. This self hatred is induced by whiteness, the power-wielding tool that maintains dominance of a particular people. By extension of that power, whiteness exercises threats and maintains institutions in order to follow through on those threats. Whiteness threatens, breaks bones, pulls air from lungs, and physically destroys the black body. This physical and psychological abuse leads characters from all three novels to attempt to escape into whiteness.

Passing is done out of the need to survive while also capitalizing on whiteness. *Passing* reveals the reverse end of the narrative. Clare was able to pass, avoid discrimination, and gain capital. However, as time went on, whiteness still psychologically warred on her. She lived in fear for nine months, wondering if her baby would be black. Her fear grew, and her sense of safety dwindled as her husband began to

call her racial slurs as a nickname. While he may not be fully conscious of her race at the time, she felt fear growing, and her means of survival dwindling.

She attempts to seek solace and regain her blackness through Irene's social circles. Danger still followed her closely and involved Irene despite her attempts to avoid Clare. Clare was living with the consequences of fully passing into a white supremacist society. This is what whiteness does; it is a transparent, unseen idea that causes real harm, abuse, and violence. These three novels have shown a wide range of the functions of whiteness: wealth, status, power, and other manifestations. These qualities are incentives for passing and maintaining whiteness, but these things exist through the exploitation of black bodies. While the characters that pass into whiteness seek to attain these things, they are first fleeing the looming threat of white physical violence.

Through bleaching, whitening machines, and passing, characters in all three of these novels believe that the way to attain the American identity is to become white. Dr. Miller, Jerry, Clare, Irene, and Max Disher were able to see some if not complete economic or social success in passing as white or emulating whiteness. They were able to do so because they had a "second sight" in which they were required to understand whiteness and how it foundationally built American society. With the white characters in these novels being blind and not "sensitive to manner," the black characters in these novels were able to pass and were included in the identity of *the American*.

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