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Racial Etiquette and the (White)
Plot of Passing: (Re)Inscribing "Place" in
John Stahl's *Imitation of Life*
Adrienne Johnson Gosselin

The idea of "passing for white" is a uniquely American notion. It is a social more than a biological phenomenon, the one-drop rule, artificial constructs of race and miscegenation, and America's "unique definition of what makes a person black" (Davis 1990,14).¹ The narrative of passing-for-white is embodied in the trope of the tragic mulatto, a figure characterized by betrayal and race-denial, haunted by racial impurity, and whose very body bears the stigma of relations unsanctionable in the United States. While the narrative of passing-for-white has been popular with both black and white American authors, it would be a mistake to assume their treatment to be the same. For example, in *Our Nig* ([1859] 1983), the author Harriet Wilson utilized the passing plot to frame a narrative "not about virtue in distress because of mixed blood and male oppression but about the hypocrisy of New England Christians" (Bell 1987, 50). Moreover, *Our Nig* is the first to introduce an interracial marriage into American fiction with a white wife and black husband, as well as the first to treat its mulatto protagonist "as an individual rather than a type" (Bell 1987, 50).

The theme of passing was also a frequent topic of black and white writers during the 1920s and early 1930s, a period when black life "fascinated" the American imagination.² Black modernist writers such as James Weldon Johnson (*Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, [1912] reprint 1926), Nella Larsen (*Passing*, [1929] 1969), Jesse Fauset (*Plum Bun*, [1928] 1985), and George Schuyler (*Black No More*, [1931] 1969) used the plot of passing, as did white modernist writers, such as William Faulkner (*Light in August*, 1932) and Fannie Hurst (*Imitation of Life*, 1933). In "white" narratives of passing, however, plots are "typically predetermined... presupposing] that characters who pass for white are betrayers of the black race," while depending "almost inevitably, upon the association of blackness with self-denial and suffering" (Smith 1994, 43-44). However, unlike Faulkner's haunted Joe Christmas,³ the racial origins of Johnson's anonymous protagonist are known to his wife and his material success is secured by children whose identities are "white enough to cast no doubt on his" (Mullen 1994, 79); in the same vein, Schuyler's satiric science fiction parodies the absurdity of colour prejudice by means of an electrical process for turning black people white. Like *Imitation of Life*, Larsen and Fauset deal with women and passing, but while Hurst reinforces racial and gender determinism, Larsen uses the theme to critique the black middle class; while Fauset combines the dual plots of passing and the female *bildungsroman* to critique "unequal power relations in U.S. society" (McDowell 1995, 65) and encourages her black (women) readers to "act independently from a "new understanding of the nature of power"(69).⁴

For very different reasons, the plot of passing was a narrative strategy important to both black and white writers. On the one hand, black writers were attempting to stem the tide of racial passing in order to build solidarity for the New Negro Movement, led by a second-generation black intelligentsia not easily awed by white psychology and empowered by participation of African and African-American soldiers in the First World War. On the other hand, white writers used the passing narrative to exploit the threat of "invisible blackness," the result of "centuries of miscegenation [producing] thousands of mulattoes who had simply lost visibility, so much did color and features overlap between those who were mixed and those who were purely white" (Williamson 1995, 98).⁵ Such differences in treatment become even

more significant when one considers that the practice of passing for white reached its "all-time peak" by 1925 and that by 1932, a study of 2,500 mulattos showed quadroons, octoroons, and persons with three-eighths African ancestry who could pass as white were not doing so (Davis 1990, 56).

Of relevance to my argument is the particular interest in passing, miscegenation, and the trope of the tragic mulatto to filmmakers in the late 1920s and early 1930s, who frequently utilized what Karen Orr Vered refers to as the "technology of popularity" to become sites for convergence of radicalized ideologies (1997, 53). As Orr Vered points out, the primary message of such films was the evils of miscegenation, the implications of which affected even "liberal Hollywood." As Don Bogle's (1979) groundbreaking study reveals, on-screen representations of black characters were "merely filmic representations" of antebellum stereotypes already popularized in (white) American life and art. Black men, for example, were on-screen representations of black men as rapists, demons, or "Uncle Toms," while the racialized sexuality of black women was subsumed in "Hollywood's numerous ethnographic metaphors," wherein Western prohibitions against miscegenation are disguised as tales of romance and melodrama (Hirschfield 1998, 3). What such films reflect are the policies of "racial etiquette," a system of extralegal practices (backed by extralegal terrorism) to enforce the hundreds of segregation laws known as "Jim Crow."⁶ As F. James Davis's study of miscegenation and the taxonomy of racial behaviours explicates, like master-slave etiquette, racial etiquette was a complex network of behaviours designed to control "close personal relationships" and his description bears repeating in full:

Some close daily contacts were inevitable in the play of small children, in domestic work, at other places of work, in discussing rental and work arrangements, in stores, and on the streets, but when such contacts occurred, the interaction had to follow a strict pattern of interracial etiquette. The white person had to be in charge at all times, and the black person clearly subordinate, so that each kept his or her place. It was a master-servant etiquette, in which blacks had to act out their interior social position, much the same way slaves had done. (1990, 64)

One of the best known antimiscegenation films of the period in question is John Stahl's 1934 adaptation of Fanny Hurst's novel *Imitation of Life*. And while, as Valerie Smith notes, "there may appear to be a veritable industry of *Imitation of Life* criticism, most focuses on Douglas Sirk's 1959 remake" (1994, 45). To date, only three articles focus on John Stahl's original—Smith's "Reading the Intersection of Race and Gender in Narratives of Passing" (1994), Sandy Flitterman-Lewis's "Imitation(s) of Life: The Black Woman's Double Determination as Troubling 'Other'" (1991), and Lauren Berlant's "National Brands/National Body: Imitation of Life" (1991). And while each examines aspects of radicalized gender behaviours, it is important to recognize more specifically the policies behind such behaviour. As a result, this paper focuses on Stahl's version in an attempt to examine the machinations of racial etiquette and the ways in which the film enforces the politics of passing and place.

Modernizing Master/Slave Etiquette

Imitation of Life is the story of two *mothers*, one white (Bea Pullman) and one black (Delilah Johnson), who join together to create a home and respectable upbringing for their daughters, Jesse and Peola. The passing narrative is embodied in Delilah's daughter, Peola, the mulatta who refuses to imitate her mother's accommodationism and acquiescence to "place." Stahl's adaptation was one of the few commercial successes produced by Universal Pictures in the 1930s (Cook 1990,313) and its seeming articulating conflicts of mother/daughter separation provide the trauma and tears for the "classic melodrama." Yet in his study of popular genre, John Cawelti argues that melodrama is a somewhat problematic category in that the structure appears to have no "single overriding narrative or dramatic structure" (1976, 44). What the diverse forms of melodramas do have in common, however, is a "fundamental pattern" of complex actions that reflect the tragedy and violence of the "real world," but which also seem to be "governed by some benevolent moral principle" (44—45). In that sense, Cawelti continues, melodrama involves a fantasy world and its chief characteristic is "the combination of a number of actions and settings in order to build up the sense of a whole world bearing out the audience's traditional patterns of right and wrong,

good and evil" (45). In *Imitation of Life*, the fantasy world is made possible when Bea parlays Delilah's family recipe for pancakes into a fortune as Aunt Delilah's Pancake Mix, a company whose corporate logo is a plump black woman with a wide smile and white chefs hat, holding a plate of pancakes.

The model for Aunt Delilah is unquestionably that of Aunt Jemima, an even more political choice when one considers Lauren Berlant's point that the white "fantasy condensed in the face and history," the icon of Aunt Jemima is itself modern (1991, 122). The figure was introduced at the Colombian Exposition in Chicago in 1893, which, ironically, links Aunt Jemima with "the origin of American progressive modernism, the alliance between industry and the state to produce new 'frontiers' of production and invention, and the introduction of advertising itself as an arm of American sovereignty" (Berlant 1991, 122). Certainly, the fantasy embodied in the mammy-icon of Aunt Jemima extends beyond culinary convenience. As Berlant notes, not only did the figure embody a "racial nostalgia, national memory, and progressive history" that provided a "natural" vehicle for post-Civil War consolidation, it became associated with a new line of products which in themselves were icons of modernity and included the sky scraper, the aeroplane, radium, the X-ray, the telephone, the wireless telegraph, the automobile, and the motion picture (122). Moreover, in terms of marketing strategy, Aunt Jemima represented state-of-the-art technologies in advertising, including the newly invented "half-tone" printing process that enabled a new realism in graphic representation, the beginning of the now familiar logocentric style of linking products to personalities, and the invention of "ready-mix convenience foods" designed to liberate the American housewife (122). Nevertheless, while the Aunt Jemima figure in real life—and the Aunt Delilah figure in Stahl's film—represent modernity as "emancipating" to (white) housewives, policies of racial etiquette could never allow such modernity to be read as emancipating black women from their racialized "place" in American culture.⁷

As Davis's study notes, the system of racial etiquette was both subtle and complex, requiring "courtesies" of blacks not reciprocated by whites. For example, "the black went to the white's back door and knocked; the white went to the black's front door and didn't need to knock" (Davis 1990, 64). Adult white males were to be called "Mister," while black adult males called

"Uncle" or "boy." Adult white females were addressed as "Miss," followed by their first names; black women were addressed by first name only, unless they were elderly, in which case, they were called "Aunt." Certainly Delilah enters the film circumscribed by racial etiquette, a "beaming face... against a softly lit pastoral background" (Smith 1994, 47), filtered by the back door screen. The effect, as Smith notes, is to "momentarily freeze Delilah's face in a nostalgic, photographic stillness," transforming the shot into a "mythic moment" and Delilah as "the mammy in the plantation south" (47). The stereotypical image is reinforced by the infant Jesse, whose initial reaction is to point at the dark-skinned woman and label her a "horse." While the intended response, both on and off screen, is the indulgence granted only to precocious three- or four-year-olds, the "license" Jesse takes establishes her position within the irreversible "difference" that will govern the film's intimate world. Moreover, Delilah's response—a jovial "I've been called worse"—reifies her position as the icon of the plantation mammy, further dehumanizing her character. The scene also illustrates Davis's observation regarding film and racial etiquette, which required that "even small white children, as little Shirley Temple so heroically demonstrated in her 1930s films, had to be totally in charge of black children and patronizing to black [adults]" (1990, 64).⁸

As the mulatto, however, Peola (who must wait outside while Delilah prepares breakfast for Bea and Jesse) does not enter the film with the sanction of racial etiquette: she is neither smiling nor childlike, and unlike Delilah, Peola's face must be defined. In fact, Peola is the reason Delilah is having problems finding work. While a white woman would have no problem hiring an icon such as Delilah, Peola bears the mark of sexual taboo. Delilah defines her daughter immediately, explaining to Bea that Peola's father was a light-skinned coloured man, who, we learn later, was driven to "misery" by his light complexion. It is Delilah's definition that legitimizes Peola, as well as intimates that, like Delilah, Peola knows her place. At the same time, Stahl uses the end of the scene to foreshadow Peola's predetermined alterity. The camera pans from the two mothers to the two daughters, who stand side by side in a medium shot that fills the screen. Peola, older and taller, occupies the left, Jesse, younger and smaller, occupies the right. The shot itself reflects the tenet of racial etiquette that "older white

children were forbidden to play with black children"(Davis 1990, 64), thus becoming a modern reinscription of the practice during slavery when slave children served as companions to the master's children. Peola, unsmiling, stands in a stiff and awkward posture: Jesse, on the other hand, is smiling and animated. Jesse's childlike gestures signal an acceptance that, like Delilah's definition, legitimizes Peola, in spite of Peola's brooding, if not defiant expression. In terms of racial etiquette, the scene is pertinent in that it lays the foundation for the distance between the two daughters to be maintained throughout the film. Indeed, the natural and childlike quality of Jesse's actions makes even more "natural" the message she will deliver, for (out of the mouths of children) it is Jesse who will first "define" Peola as black.

In fact, the presentation of Peola's character is marked by a sullen quality, first seen in the nonverbal contrast between the infant Jesse and the Peola of indeterminate age, demonstrates Robert Stam's observations that, "as an audiovisual medium, cinema can thus correlate word with gesture, dialogue with facial expression, verbal exchange with bodily dynamics" (1989, 60), thus rendering film itself as language. The point is further developed in the initial passage of time, in the film registered by Jesse, who is by then older than when first seen in the film: Peola, however, is played by the same actress. It is also at this time we hear both girls speak. Jesse, as a preadolescent, exhibits a "grain of voice" readily identifiable with a young girl in her middle years. Peola's tone of voice, on the other hand, deeper and marked by a timbre whose "social tone" (Stam 1989, 60) is not associated with a child. It is also at this time we see Peola smile (the first of only two times in the film), as she and Jesse leave for school, quizzing one another in preparation for their assignments. And while Smith views the scene that follows to be exemplary of Peola as the vehicle who keeps the film from drifting into improbable realms of maternal Utopia (1994, 48), I would add that the scene is also significant in that this is the period the two girls are most "equal." In terms of adolescent development, Jesse would be the individual most readily considered Peola's peer; as a result, in terms of racial etiquette, it becomes Jesse's place to assign Peola to hers.

After the daughters leave for school, Delilah and Bea—who has just paid all the bills for the restaurant—"fantasize about how they will spend their money when they become rich" (Smith 1994, 49). Their reverie is disrupted

by Peola, who reenters in a tearful rage: Jesse has called her black. While the camera, as well as criticism, focuses on Delilah's "pain at acceptance of her daughter's verbal abuse," I would suggest the subtext of the outburst reveals what Peola resists is not the naming—"I'm not black!"—but rather the behaviour—"I won't be black," which is quite another matter, particularly when one considers that the only model for "blackness" in the film is Delilah's accommodationism. In short, what Peola rejects is not race but place; not Delilah's blackness as much as the manufactured (white) definition of blackness Delilah represents. Indeed, Smith's description of Delilah-as-signifier bears repeating in full:

A domestic servant in the 1930s, she [Delilah] is the apologists' vision of the plantation mammy revisited, devoid of any desire other than to care for her white mistress, even after emancipation. As such, she offers the perfect justification for black repression. The symbolic power of this image is underscored by the ensuing shots in which we see how fully the type has captivated the [white] popular imagination. (1994, 48)

Moreover, it is place rather than race that Delilah, in her infinite patience, advises Peola accept. Indeed, despite Bea's reproaches to Jessie for calling Peola "such a thing" (black), it is Delilah who "insists that Peola learn to accept her place, saying: Tou gotta learn to take it and you might as well begin now'" (Smith 1994, 49). And while it is certainly true that Peola rejects "black," one must also consider what "black" involved in an era dictated by racial etiquette. As Lauren Berlant points out,

in every version of the text the white woman struggled to achieve economic success and national fame, while living in a quasi companionable couple with the black woman, who does the domestic labor; the black woman who is also instrumental in the white woman's mastery of commodity culture, remains a loyal domestic employee, even in the wealthy days. (1991,114-15)

While for Berlant, security comes to both women by their "mutual" exploitation of "the structures of commodity capitalism and American mass

culture" (1991, 114), I would argue that the "class and maternal difficulties" are never "shared," as Berlant believes (124). Neither is the "dignity and pleasure" (114) achieved by Bea ever granted to Delilah—nor, because of racial etiquette—could it ever be since, as Davis points out, the dictates of social segregation held consequences for whites as well as blacks. Furthermore, whites who were suspected of being overly tolerant to blacks "face[d] gossip, ridicule, or ostracism. Open offenders were called 'white niggers' or 'communists' and ran the risk of economic sanctions, threats, or violence" (Davis 1990, 65). Stahl accommodates this particular mandate through comedy, a common strategy in films of the period. For example, after the two girls leave for school, prior to Jesse's "naming," Bea comments that Peola is not only smart, but "smarter than Jesse," to which Delilah responds "Yas'm. We all starts out that way. We don't get dumb till later on." While Berlant sees "dumbness" as Delilah's "will-not-know," I would again argue that Delilah "knows" very well. Indeed, rather than Delilah's engagement in "political analysis" (Berlant 1991, 126), her statement is, in fact, required by racial etiquette. And while, in terms of the language within the film, Delilah's comment could be construed as a mother's modesty; in terms of language beyond the film, the remark illustrates exactly Davis's observation that "if any suggestion of lack of proper deference arose, the etiquette required the black to clown and act stupid" (1990, 64). What is more, Delilah's comment makes allowable Bea's observation, saving Bea from a tolerance unacceptable to racial etiquette, even though the truth of the statement is reinforced later in the film when an older Jesse refuses to take an algebra exam she blithely admits she would fail if she did.

Comedy alone is not enough, however, to temper two scenes constructed to reveal the emotional depths of the women's friendship. Both recall what Mas'ud Zavarzadeh identifies as the cultural politics of intimacy, which imply a "presence in which one person, in completeness and without 'difference,' is accessible to another" (1991, 113). For Zavarzadeh, the notion is part of the discourse of ideology, wherein "intimacy" becomes a constructed set of values, which in turn become part of a complex network of social strategies designed to represent the hegemonic notion of "real." As Zavarzadeh explains,

This ideological representation of intimacy is politically critical because if intimacy can be represented as outside the reach of history and culture then, it follows, those who are intimate with each other derive their relationship not from a given historical and social situation but by virtue of their own panhistorical individuality. (1991, 113-14)

In Stahl's version of the film, the first occasion of "intimacy" occurs in the scene immediately following Delilah's employment, when Bea, still a syrup "salesman," returns home from work, tired and too late to see Jesse (still then a baby) awake. After looking in on her sleeping daughter, Bea sinks into a chair, and, following a question about her husband, begins to tell Delilah of her somewhat lacklustre marriage. The scene demonstrates what Zavarzadeh terms a "space of emotional transcendence [wherein] the individual who is 'exhausted' in the daily competition of the marketplace is 'repaired' and restored as part of a viable labor force" (1991, 116). The moment becomes one of feminine intimacy, gleanng moments of familiarity to depict supportive relationships, wherein one individual "feels" rather than "knows" the other. According to Zavarzadeh, such a paradigm is "emotional and affirmative instead of analytical and inquiring . . . prohibit[ing] any form of critical reflexivity about the relationship and forbid[ding] any investigative attitude toward it (115). In fact, under Stahl's direction, the dialogue that ensues seems to defy racial etiquette when Delilah chides Bea for not wanting a man. Such an act transgresses the edict that "the black . . . could never bring up a delicate topic or contradict the white" (Davis 1990, 64), until one realizes the admonishments are delivered as Delilah massages Bea's feet.

The moment of intimacy is repeated in the Manhattan townhouse following the gala celebration of the company's ten-year anniversary, and Bea meets Steve Archer, the ichthyologist who will become her fiance. While Delilah does not (and could not) attend, she nevertheless dresses for the occasion and listens to the music in her apartment below. After the guests have gone, Delilah comes upstairs, where she is invited by Bea to sit and talk "like the old days." On one hand, these aren't the "old days"—Bea is a millionaire, no longer in need of restoration as part of a viable labour force, and instead of two old chairs, they sit on Bea's luxurious Art Deco sofa. On the other hand, while Delilah's obligatory large-print floral dress is clearly designed for

formal occasions, Bea readily places her feet in Delilah's lap to be massaged. This time the talk is not only of men, but also Peola's restlessness, and any reference to Peola must be circumscribed by racial etiquette. The conversation ends with Bea's suggestion to send Peola to a "colored college" in the South. The scene itself ends with a closing shot of an elaborate white staircase, the screen divided almost in half by the landing where both women stand. After each bids the other goodnight, the two women leave for their private residences and, as the shot fades, Bea ascends to her "place," Delilah descends to hers.

Passing for What?

Interestingly, as Berlant's observes, after her husband's death, Bea Pullman, becomes B. Pullman, thus assuming his name and gender and in so doing, passes for male (1991, 115). In this sense, Bea becomes the modern equivalent of the benevolent white master. While the film is "fundamentally concerned with the problematic of the white working mother and advocates the return of white women to their domestic spaces and relations" (Smith 1994, 46), Stahl's "New Deal optimism" enables him to accommodate the period's interest in the modern woman (Flitterman-Lewis 1991, 44), as well as racial etiquette, which required the white person "to be in charge at all times" (Davis 1990, 64). No where is this more evident than in their business dealings, wherein Bea grants Delilah a twenty percent share in the Aunt Delilah Corporation. The scene is staged as a ritual, personifying Davis's observation that interactions between the modern master-servant were embodied in a "ritual [that] had to be acted out carefully lest the black person be accused of 'getting' out of his or her subordinate place" (78).

Bea is seated, as is her business manager, while Delilah stands. Bea, with her usual half-teasing smile, is explaining to Delilah the way a corporation works. Delilah does not understand—nor, in keeping with racial etiquette, does she want to; neither does she want the house, car, or the presumed independence that will come with her share of the wealth. In a scene that almost parodies Charles Chesnutt's rendition of Mammy Jane, the ex-slave in *The Marrow of Tradition* ([1903] 1990), who lives (and dies) for her white mistress, Delilah literally begs to remain with "Miss Bea":

DELILAH: You gonna send me away, Miss Bea? I can't live wid ya? Oh, honey chile, please don' send me away—don' do that to me.

BEA: Don't you want your own house?

DELILAH: No'm. How'm I gonna take care of you and Miss Jesse if I ain' here? Let me an' Peola stay same's we been doin'. I's you' cook an' I want to stay you' cook.

BEA: Well, of course you can stay, Delilah. I only thought, now that the money's coming in—and, after all, Delilah, it's all from your pancake flour.

DELILAH: I gives it to you honey. I makes you a present of it. You'se welcome.

As Smith underscores, Delilah is "the apologist's vision of the plantation mammy revisited, devoid of any desire other than to care for her white mistress, even after emancipation" (1994,48). Stahl once again chooses comedy to seal the plantation fantasy, ending the scene with the manager's droll one-liner, "Once a pancake, always a pancake," and the audience is to supply the metaphor's unspoken analogy.

Peola, however, is no pancake. In fact, this type of external definition is exactly what Peola rejects—she rejects Jesse's naming, she rejects her image as "black," and she rejects association with black, which means she rejects her mother's blood, which provides the context for maternal melodrama. Such rejection, we are led to believe, is Peola's tragedy, the hubris that must lead to her downfall. Yet, as Flitterman-Lewis notes, in Stahl's version, Peola's racial hubris is secondary to the "utopian dual realm of maternal reciprocity" (1991, 44), an aspect reiterated by Smith, who further argues that the film's mother-daughter relationship is "idealized, if not comic" (1994, 46). Moreover, Smith adds,

tensions surrounding motherhood, class mobility, and abandonment are displaced onto the black plot, which performs the emotional labor in the film ____Bea, the absent, largely ephemeral white mother is reconstituted in Delilah, the hyperembodied, present black mother. (1991, 46)

I would argue, however, that rather than comic, ironic better describes the film's mother-daughter relationships, in that "Miss Bea" is the mother figure with whom Peola identifies, the mother, who, like Peola, refuses to stay in her "place." For Flitterman-Lewis, Peola's conflict is less that of the individual conflict than that of a woman at odds with her cultural definition (1991,44), since to identify with the (black) mother is to assume the position of child. Smith agrees, noting that while the film builds a "symmetrical household" of two mothers and two daughters, "the emotional logic sets up an analogy between the white mother and the black daughter" (1994, 51). Indeed, for Peola, passing for white is passing for the white mother, an assertion of "adult femaleness . . . into a world of symbolic relations and circuits of exchange" (Flitterman-Lewis 1991, 47), passing into a world denied to women in general and to black women absolutely.

In her identification with the white mother, Peola disappears from the coloured college where she has been sent, to take a job as a cashier in a white restaurant, thus, as Flitterman-Lewis observes, establishing herself "in a circuit of commerce" (1991, 51). After receiving a note from the college informing her of Peola's disappearance, Delilah, along with Bea, goes to retrieve the errant daughter. The darkened screen of the train speeding South is immediately followed by one of the brightly lit restaurant, where Peola stands behind the counter by the register, smiling for the second—and last—time in the film. A couple, completing their transaction, receive their change, and leave. The action is immediately followed by a polite exchange between Peola and the restaurant manager. The camera then moves to Delilah, who stands for an instant, unobserved, before exposing her daughter as "black" for the second time in the film. The moment repeats one from Peola's childhood, when Delilah comes unexpectedly to Peola's school: "Is Peola tryin' to pass *again*?" she asks the unsuspecting teacher (emphasis added).

While in the first instance, Peola's defence is limited to walking out of the classroom while muttering "I hate you" to her mother, the second public exposure builds in emotional impact. Delilah stands at the restaurant door until she is noticed by Peola, and in a sequence filmed in silence, mother and daughter confront each other. For Flitterman-Lewis, "the emphatic silence underscores . . . a powerful, visual exchange [wherein] Stahl affords Peola the prominence denied her by the narrative text" (1991, 52). While Louise

Beavers, as Delilah, registers the same hurt-but-benevolent confusion displayed throughout the film, Fredi Washington, as the adult Peola, registers horror more than hatred. Nor, when Peola does speak, does she succumb to Delilah's remonstrance, but rather, for the first time in the film, solicits a third party to challenge the logic of her definition by asking the restaurant manager if she looks as if Delilah could be her mother. The manager is unable to answer and his hesitation is significant—to say "yes" would imply he has knowingly hired a woman of colour; to say "no" would admit the power of invisible blackness which racial etiquette is devised to resist. In the end it is Bea, not Delilah, who solves the unspoken dilemma by using maternal guilt—"Peola, how could you treat your mother this way"—to clarify who was "white" and who was "white" with black blood.

Following their return to New York, Peola announces her intention to pass, instructing her mother not to acknowledge her should they ever meet in public. While Flitterman-Lewis sees Delilah's response as "the culmination of a series of statements in the film which associate Delilah, motherhood, and acceptance of blackness, with nature, essence, and femininity" (1991, 52), I would argue the reaction personifies both Zavarzadeh's notion of the politics of intimacy and the blindness of racial etiquette to the logic of human behaviour. In African-American culture, the trope of the mask—deliberately acting in a manner that is expected—reflects a political/cultural strategy developed to cope with racial oppression, as well as a recurring motif in African-American literature. As Davis so perceptively observes, while for blacks "the mask" was a matter of "prescribed, stereotyped role-playing"; for whites, however, such compulsory accommodation was presumed to be "real." As a result, Davis continues, while "Whites typically felt that they knew 'their blacks' well... Black people dropped the mask... when among themselves" (1990, 64-65). Although Flitterman-Lewis dubs Delilah's impassioned speech as "the most quotable moment in the film" (1991, 52), I would argue the response is most notable for its artifice and misrepresentation.⁹ "I'se your mammy," Delilah tells Peola, a term she has used repeatedly to Peola's consistent trepidation. "You can't ask your mammy to do this. I ain't no white mother. It's too much to ask. I ain't got the spiritual strength to beat it. I can't hang on no cross. You can't ask me to unborn my own child!" Spoken in privacy (Bea has not yet entered the room), the scene is

intended to provide a "site for manifesting true and authentic selfhood" (Zavarzadeh 1991, 114), an intimate and inviolate space where mother and daughter are free from cultural restraint. As Zavarzadeh explains, in the cultural politics of intimacy,

intimacy is made to appear so private in order for it to be taken as 'natural' as the personal seems to be: I am what I am (a 'natural' and transhistorical fact) and, because of what I am, I have certain types of relations and particular forms of intimacy (which are also 'natural' and transhistorical). (114)

The point here is that for racial etiquette—and for those who subscribe to its "reality"—when black people inhabit such a privatized space, there is no "mask" to drop. In this constructed intimacy, Delilah is "free" to confess what she knows in her heart of hearts—that she is a "mammy" not a "mother." Moreover, as the (white) racialized mammy, in the "safety" of such intimacy, she can admit the "biological truth," that "motherhood" requires a spiritual strength the depths of which she, as a black woman, is not capable. The insidious irony is, of course, that the institutionalized system of slavery has thrust a spiritual strength on black mothers that white mothers have never known, so much so that some black mothers have killed their own children rather than see them a life of inhuman servitude.¹⁰

Politics, Plot, and Principles of Passing

In the Aristotelian sense, "plot" is described by Austin Wright as "the fully developed subject. . . [that] displays the organizing or integrative power of the subject in all the details of the work" (1982, 98). Nor, Wright continues, is plot to be confused with "narrative," which makes plots visible by means of principles initially independent of plot. Indeed, as Wright's study of novel and formal principle so carefully demonstrates,

the fictional world provides the surroundings, the circumstances, the conditions within which the plot develops. So we say, but soon we discover, that if the novel is indeed the integrated thing we are supposing,

the fictional world will disappear and become thoroughly absorbed by the plot... as soon as we have seen how the plot is developed, we cease to find the fictional world independent. Its coherence is explained by that of the plot, its problems are those of the plot, and its population contains nothing that is not specified or required by the plot. (98)

Wright's description is applicable to Cawelti's discussion of melodrama as "the combination of a number of actions and settings in order to build up the sense of a whole world bearing out the audience's traditional patterns of right and wrong, good and evil" (1976,45). Both find resonance in the conclusion of Stahl's film. Wright's point is particularly relevant, in that following Peola's announcement, the fictional world begins to disappear; in fact, within hours of Peola's departure, Delilah is dead, a death constructed to reinforce traditional notions of the evils of miscegenation. As a result, Peola's "tragedy" becomes, not her racial denial, but the guilt she must bear for committing matricide: "I've killed my own mother!" she sobs to "Miss" Bea after throwing herself on Delilah's coffin.

But if Peola's tragedy is the result of her refusal to accept place rather than race, her tragedy stems not from denial, but violation of racial etiquette; in short, Peola is guilty of getting off her place. And while the funeral scene confronts Peola with her tragedy, the scene in which she defines herself is the actual scene of her crime. Nor is this a sentimental crime, since a violation of racial etiquette is also a violation of the law, and punishment is therefore required.

Moreover, while Delilah's stoic acceptance and Christian resignation, "enhance the sentimental appeal of her character" (Smith 1994, 49), this same sentimentality masks the legal reality of Peola's crime.¹¹ Indeed, unlike Flitterman-Lewis, who asserts that Stahl's "utopian matriarchy" excludes all questions of race from the film's resolution (1991, 52), I would argue that such is not the case. In fact, in terms of racial etiquette, to have left the racial problem unresolved would suggest that such a problem has no resolution and that whites have no control of "the blacks." To be sure, while death is an option often employed in the passing narrative (for example, Larson's *Passing* and Faulkner's *Light in August*), Stahl's optimistic vision and emphasis on Utopian matriarchy would fail to absorb the death of either daughter. Delilah,

however, is simply expendable. The point becomes clear when one recognizes that Delilah's role as "mother" is limited strictly to caretaker as embodied in the plantation mammy stereotype and, by the end of the film, "gone are the days." More to the point, by the end of the film, there is no one left to take care of—even a compliant Peola would be away at school; Jessie will finish college in Switzerland, where passing algebra is not necessary for graduation; and Bea will eventually join Steven Archer on his island paradise, where, as the good wife, she will rub his feet at the end of the day. Consequently, Delilah's death is the vehicle rather than tenor of the film's melodramatic effect.

More unthinkable than Peola's death, however, is Peola "loose" in the world, where without "Miss Bea" or her mother to monitor her behaviour, she would and could successfully pass. After all, Peola's attempts at passing have already succeeded, as demonstrated by the unsuspecting teacher and the white restaurant manager, who, assuming Peola is white, engage in the very social amenities against which racial etiquette is designed to protect. For Peola to remain unchecked implies the possibility of miscegenation and underscores the spectre of "invisible blackness," nor would it lend to connotations of her life as "tragic." A more efficacious solution is to remand a suitably repentant Peola to the care of the white mother, who returns the black daughter to school in the South.¹² The racial resolution is therefore very much present, embodied in Peola's absence at the periphery of the white world. As Smith observes, although "Peola's story is a metaphor for Bea's," in that both characters are driven by ambition and both returned to their place by the end of the film. However, Smith continues, "it's one thing for Bea to stay in her place (by the end she is a millionaire), [and] another all together for Peola to stay where she belongs as the daughter of a black domestic worker" (1994, 51).

I am struck by Smith's remarks in the conclusion of her article, which recall a student's comment of such material as "inherently retrograde." According to the student, a focus on "mixed-race characters replicates the problematic of black self-loathing that may well have contributed to the overrepresentation of such figures in black narratives" (Smith 1994, 56-57). It is a reaction I have encountered frequently in my Black Literature courses, where often any representation of mixed-race characters is considered inauthentic in terms of African-American culture. It is also a reaction I counter

by referring students to "Race, Gender, and the Politics of Readings," an article by Michael Awkward published in *Black American Literature Forum* in 1988, and one of the first to discuss a priori assumptions as they effect the reading of black texts. Like Awkward, my concern is the danger of reading black texts in terms of ideologically limited criticism, whether those limitations stem from ideologies "black" or "white." In fact, the student's comment, as well as Awkward's article, address issues I believe to be relevant at the end of the twentieth century, particularly in light of the strengthening grassroots movement propelled by mixed-race peoples who refuse to be "either/or." Rather than dismiss such narratives as "non-representational" (whether written or visual), cultural criticism may do well to interrogate the arbitrary categories such texts are meant to represent. At present, Stahl's version of *Imitation of Life* is available only in 16mm format, and, as a result, less accessible than Sirk's 1959 revision. However, an understanding of the political components of Stahl's film, particularly examined in conjunction with the passing plot as utilized by black writers of the period, affords a concrete approach to notions of "difference," which for cross-cultural dialogue is always a worthwhile start.

Endnotes

1. Davis's study also traces these definitions in other cultures.
2. Nathan Huggins (1971) notes that eight works by white writers between 1920 and 1926 focussed on black life: Eugene O'Neill, *Emperor Jones* (1920) and *All God's Chillun Got Wings* (1924); e.e. cummings, *The Enormous Room* (1922); Waldo Frank, *Holiday* (1922); Sherwood Anderson, *Dark Laughter* (1925); DuBose Heyward, *Porgy* (1925) and *Mamba's Daughters* (1926); and Carl Van Vechten, *Nigger Heaven* (1926).
3. For a discussion of invisible blackness in Faulkner's *Light in August*, see Joel Williamson (1995, 99-100).
4. As Davis's study shows, however, more men passed than women and most passing was done in order to secure better employment: some passed on the job as white, but lived in the black community; some lived in the North for part of the year passing as white, then returned to the South, living as black for die rest. According to Davis, die vast majority who could have passed permanently did not do so, citing reasons such as the pain of family separation, loss of community, and fear or whites (1990, 56).
5. Mulattos were a particular problem in terms of the colour line. As a racial category, mulattos were counted for the first time in the 1850 census, with pollsters relying on visibility to recognize a person of mixed racial ancestry. The results list 159,000 free mulattos and

247,000 slave mulattos for a total of 406,000, a figure comprising 11.2 percent of the black population and 1.8 percent of the national total (Williamson 1995,24). However, because the category is determined not only by black/white parentage, but also black/mulatto, white/mulatto, and mulatto/mulatto parentage, by the 1860 census, the number of blacks, defined as unmixed from African populations (Davis 1990,5), rose only 20 percent, while the number of mulattos in slavery rose by 67 percent (Williamson 1995,32). Moreover, two-thirds of the mulatto population resided in the upper South, where more than half were free (Davis 1990, 40). Alienated from the white community by the "one-drop" rule of race classification begun in the 1850s, mulattos increasingly allied themselves with black culture and community. As Davis notes, "this realignment started a basic shift in mulattos' sense of identity, especially lighter mulattos, who began to see themselves as Negroes rather than as a marginal group of 'almost whites'" (42). Mulatto identification with the black community became stronger than ever during the New Negro/Harlem, Renaissance of the 1920s. While passing reached its peak by 1925, numbers declined by 1932. Among factors Davis attributes to the decline are the black urban migration and the "mulatto-led Renaissance" with its emphasis on black cultural identity (60).

6. According to the taxonomy of behaviour dominating race relations in America for the first half of the twentieth century, the more intimate the contact between blacks and whites, the greater the need to maintain segregation. Sexual contact with white women was the first priority of concern and lynching was the most immediate consequence. Other terrorist methods were loss of jobs, loss of credit, destruction of property, loss of sharecropping contracts, whippings, beatings, and torture (Davis 1990, 54). The second highest priority involved control of day-to-day behaviours and required enforcement less extreme, thus the "etiquette" of racial behaviours.
7. That the Columbia Exposition itself is consistently characterized as the conclusion of one age and the beginning of another reflects its political intent to justify American imperialism. The impulse was not lost on black intellectuals, who saw the fair as a "moral regression" meant to reconcile the North and South at the expense of black Americans. Indeed, as Hazel Carby notes, "the Colombian Exposition embodied the definitive failure of the hopes of emancipation and reconstruction and inaugurated an age that was to be dominated by the 'problem of the color-line'" (1987, 5).
8. For an interesting account on the racial dynamics in films by Shirley Temple and Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, see Karen Orr Vered, "White and Black in Black and White" (1997).
9. Delilah's speech also demonstrates Robert Stam's observations of film as language. For Stam, "while contemporary theoretical work has been concerned with the analogies and disanalogies between film and 'natural language,' it has virtually ignored the role of language difference within the film" (1989, 57).
10. Margaret Garner, whose case provided the germ of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), is probably the best-known example of slave infanticide.
11. Sentimentality elides legalities in several key scenes in the film. For example, while Bea sacrifices time with Jesse to aid in finding Peola, the exterior shot of the speeding train fails to reveal policies concerning train travel in the South. Like Bea, Delilah could afford a first-class compartment, but would have to ride in the Jim Crow car of the train, usually located

behind the engineer's cab, thus exposing black passengers to soot from the engine's smoke stack. A similar elision occurs when Delilah asks Peola to go South to attend the coloured college. Peola's expression registers repugnance, presumed in relation to associating with "coloreds." Again, what is unspoken is the maxim held by southerners of "knowing how to treat the nigras" or the dangers faced by northern blacks in adjusting to southern racism.

12. The action also marks the end of Bea's passing for male, in this case, her role as the benevolent white master.

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