

Scott Simpkins

The Color of Sex

*Whiteness, Heterosexuality, and
the Fictions of White Supremacy*

Mason Stokes

ship and her intellect when I desperately needed both. Lisa Samuels has seen me through a variety of relocations and reorientations; I continue to benefit enormously from knowing her.

In ways big and small, Derek Nystrom, Tim Wager, and Rod Waterman have made both my work and my life better places.

Since 1997 I have been privileged to work with a host of truly inspiring teachers and scholars in the Skidmore English department; I thank them all for the community they have offered me. My chairs during this time, Sarah Goodwin and Susan Kress, have created a space for the kind of teaching and scholarship that I've always wanted to do. Linda Simon, conspirator from day one, is to me that rarest and most valuable of combinations: friend and mentor.

My community at Skidmore extends beyond the halls of the English department, and I thank my friends and colleagues across the college for helping me understand the real value of our collective endeavor. In particular, I thank Jennifer Delton for disagreeing with me in the most interesting, provocative, and useful ways imaginable; this work is better for it. Susan Walzer is one of the smartest and most generous people I know; being her friend is a wonderful thing.

These next are more difficult to categorize:

I thank Anne-Elizabeth Murdy, for understanding the roots of this work as only she can.

Kim Langford and Adam Daniel, for their wide-eyed faith in the importance of good times.

Mike Furlough, for almost fifteen years now.

Bill Verner, for his love and support when I needed them most.

Michael Miller, for giving me the reason to do the most difficult and important thing I've ever done, and for everything since then.

Mike Bennett and Juan Battle, not only for providing a fabulous downstate retreat but for caring enough about family to create an extended one—and for making me a part of it.

My uncle and name-giver, for his creative spirit.

Finally, my parents. In her life and in her death, my mother set an example of strength and sureness of character that I will always draw on. I also thank my father, whose willingness to embrace challenge and adventure comes as a welcome reminder of new possibilities, of new hope.

This book was written in the spirit of such hope, and I thank all of these people for the things that made it possible.

Introduction

White Fictions

Were I to state here, frankly and categorically, that the primary object of this work is to write the negro out of America, and that the secondary object is to write him, (and manifold millions of other black and bi-colored creatures, little better than himself,) out of existence, God's simple truth would be told.—Hinton Rowan Helper

Writing and racism. White supremacy and the text. What this passage from Helper's *Nojoque; A Question for a Continent* (1867) makes clear is the interdependence of the two—the construction of white supremacy as a textual practice, whereby ink on a page and the circulation of books work to fix racial identity and its supposedly attendant qualities. Once fixed in print, Helper's "negro" can be written away like so many dinosaurs, the victim of the textual weight of mid-nineteenth-century anthropology. Or of Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1784), where Jefferson infamously writes, "Never yet could I find a Black that had uttered a thought above the level of plain narration; never seen even an elementary trait of painting or sculpture. Religion indeed has produced a Phillis Whately [*sic*] but it could not produce a poet. The compositions published under her name are below the dignity of criticism" (140). In Jefferson's view, blacks are incapable of saying or thinking anything worth writing down, worth making into text.

And yet so much of African American literary history, especially in the nineteenth century, attaches a supreme importance to the power of the text as a path to freedom and its attendant grace, humanity. Think of Frederick Douglass's 1845 *Narrative*, both a textual badge of his humanity, according to the dehumanizing racial logic of the En-

for the collection of moral and physical properties. The Bible becomes a how-to manual for would-be colonizers and exterminators.⁴

And as Helper suggests elsewhere in the preface, yet another textual authority looms over the scene of his writing—namely, what would come to be called Social Darwinism, whose chief proponent was English sociologist and philosopher Herbert Spencer. Putting his faith in the “present economy of Nature” (vii), Helper weighs the following “consoling and cheerful consideration” against the plague of “coal-black and copper-colored caitiffs”: “The appointed period of their tenancy upon the earth will soon be up; and then, like the short-lived ephemera of a summer afternoon, they shall all speedily pass away, and thenceforth and forever be known only, if known at all, in fossil form!” (vii). Although Helper doesn’t directly invoke Spencer here, his presence is most surely felt. His *Principles of Biology*, published in 1864, provided a textual authority for this kind of exterminationist thinking, introducing a phrase that would (mistakenly) get associated with Darwin, “the survival of the fittest.”⁵

There is, however, an interesting irony in Helper’s version of Spencer’s “survival of the fittest,” one that returns us, once again, to the familial connection between writing and racism. According to Helper, once the Negro has gone the way of the “toxodons, the glyptodons, the mastodons, and thousands of other extinct species of animals” (vii–viii), he will only exist “in fossil form” (vii). Although I doubt that Helper was actually referring to his book as one of those forms, I want to suggest that it was—and is—a fossil-like reminder of one man’s representation of “the Negro.” Helper surely thought, optimist that he was, that his own words would outlast their subject and that in the absence of actual Negroes, those words would create the final and lasting “truth” of a race that no longer existed.

That textual representation could, in fact, manufacture “the Negro” had been proven in a long line of literary antecedents to Helper, the most famous of which was surely Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), published a scant fifteen years before *Nojoque*, and only five years before *The Impending Crisis*. Stowe’s work demonstrated the incredible power of the written word both to alter and become part of the American racial landscape. Stowe’s goal was to make her Negro America’s Negro, to make the docile and Christlike Tom the universal face of the American slave. Although Helper’s lingering presence certainly indicates at least a partial failure on her part,

the attempt had an enormous transformative power, one lasting well into the next century. The power of Stowe’s representation shaped the literary conjunction of race and writing in countless ways, from the many anti-Uncle Tom novels of the 1850s and 1860s to Thomas Dixon Jr.’s determination, on seeing a stage version of Stowe’s story in 1901, to set the record straight and tell the “true story” of the South, the Negro, and slavery (Cook 105). The result would be *The Leopard’s Spots* (1902), a novel of racial hatred that sold almost as well as Stowe’s.

And yet, while Stowe’s novel has lasted into the late twentieth century, becoming, in fact, part of “the canon,” Dixon’s and Helper’s works have virtually disappeared from our critical awareness. Although part of me sees this as a perfectly happy occurrence (“Good riddance, racist scum!”), a larger part believes that the disappearance of these white-supremacist texts from our vision of the American literary landscape renders that landscape false and incomplete, a testament to a literary history that didn’t really happen. Although scholars have cataloged the incredibly prolific and offensive output of antiblack writing between 1852 and 1915, few have read these works seriously as revealing and ambiguous textual productions. This book offers these texts—from plantation romances to theological tracts to popular film—as a shifting, complicated, yet continuous record of how white Americans lived and commodified racist ideologies in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

At the same time, I contextualize this white-supremacist writing vis-à-vis the interventionist efforts of African American writers and activists. Although my primary object here is to pressure the dissonances within white-supremacist literary representation, I have no desire to do so in a vacuum. As Ida B. Wells notes in *Crusade for Justice*, too much has been lost because “only the southern white man’s misrepresentations are in the public libraries and college textbooks of the land” (5). To focus on the discourses of white supremacy without paying attention to those black writers who wrote actively against those discourses would be to reify the structural power that white supremacy has worked to claim. It would be to allow whiteness the very tautology and exclusivity that it needs to survive.⁶ Instead, I strive throughout to keep one eye trained on the ways in which black writers and activists both responded to and shaped the debate over racial difference in this country—how writers such as Harper, Jacobs, Douglass, Du Bois, and countless others refused to grant

whiteness the intellectual space it sought and required. These black interventions ranged from the book-length (Sutton Griggs's *The Hindered Hand*, for example) to the devastatingly precise (Anna Julia Cooper's brisk dismissal of William Dean Howells's *An Imperative Duty*: "Mr. Howells does not know what he is talking about" [201]).

The most extended treatment of such intervention occurs in chapter 4, which I devote to Charles W. Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901). Chesnutt's novel strategically refigures turn-of-the-century white-supremacist narratives, turning white anxiety against itself in a brilliant recasting of dominant sexual ideologies. Chesnutt's literary intervention also reveals the difficulties of writing "against" such ideologies, exposing how the omnivorous energies of whiteness fracture any strictly binary model of racist domination, on the one hand, and antiracist resistance, on the other. To imagine that Chesnutt could write entirely outside the structures of whiteness would be to underestimate the protean potentials of white supremacy, its uncanny ability to throw its voice. Although Chesnutt's novel is clearly distinguishable from the white-supremacist fictions I treat here, it bears a relation to them that isn't purely oppositional. It belongs among these white-supremacist fictions not because it is itself white supremacist but because its encounter with white supremacy reveals the seemingly impervious nature of whiteness, its knack for making friends of enemies.

Even as I acknowledge, however, the importance of African American responses to American racism, I still want to claim whiteness and textual white supremacy as my primary foci, my main objects of inquiry. Although I recognize the dialectical give-and-take of competing "racial" voices, I have no intention of re-creating a debate here, of sketching in full the shape this conversation took during its time. I've resisted any inclinations to refute, point by point, the racist arguments put forth by the writers I examine. Although such a refutation may be worth doing, this is not the space for it. My primary goal is to chart the workings of whiteness through sustained attention to these seldom studied white-supremacist texts. Consequently, the texts themselves—with all of their hatred and venom—will demand my primary attention, as well as the majority of the following pages. Only by taking them seriously as richly ambivalent textual productions and by devoting to them the kind of attention too often reserved for "seri-

ous" works of literature will these hateful works pay off in the kinds of broadly instructive ways that I think are both possible and desirable.

Justifications

My focus throughout is on white racism as a popular discourse, one aimed at and received by a significant number of people. Charles Jacobs Peterson, for example, wrote his proslavery novel *The Cabin and Parlor* (1852) directly on the heels of Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, hoping, like so many other proslavery novelists, to cash in on the enormous popularity of Stowe's novel. These anti-Uncle Tom novels were quickly written and designed to sell by the thousands so as to influence the ongoing debate over slavery. Metta V. Victor's *Maum Guinea and Her Plantation "Children"* (1861), the dime novel I examine in chapter 2, sold well over one hundred thousand copies, enormous sales for this genre and time. Its audience, like that of the dime novel in general, consisted of a wide array of people, from shop-floor workers to merchants, from seamstresses to the president.⁷ Dixon's *The Leopard's Spots*, like several of his race novels, sold so well that it is credited with establishing Doubleday, Page and Co. as a major publishing house. It also helped make Dixon extremely wealthy and famous. Even the ethnologists and theologians whose work I examine in chapter 3 can be seen as popularizers of a more elite discourse, dedicated to making their scientific and religious racism palatable and palpable to "the masses."

The texts I've chosen, with certain exceptions, move quietly beneath our contemporary critical radar. They aren't studied, and too often aren't taken seriously. They announce themselves, from the beginning, as avowedly white supremacist in their orientation. Like Helper, they foreground the propagation of white supremacy as their primary goal and disdain what might be called the merely literary exercise of symbol and myth. As a result of their conscious identification with whiteness as a structural ideology, these works better demarcate its shape, its constitutive parts, than more canonical nineteenth-century meditations on whiteness.⁸ Though Melville's and Poe's works offer a rich field for reading race in the nineteenth century, *Maum Guinea* provides a more fertile space for this kind of analysis, precisely because Victor's status as a successful writer of dime novels

demonstrated time and time again her ability to shape narrative to the pressures of popular desire.⁹ When the desire for a large audience in midcentury America meets a “romance of slavery” told with supposedly antislavery leanings, the product is, to say the least, richly instructive and heavy with ambivalence. The writers I examine were dedicated to establishing and buttressing a specifically popular racism, one they hoped would seep into every thread of the American fabric so as to become a pervasive determinant of that fabric. I’m concerned throughout with white supremacy and whiteness as live cultural forms, lived and inhabited by the man and the woman on the street.

Of course, my attention to “the popular” as a literary category has an institutional history, one that can be traced back to various moments and to various critics (Helen Papashvily, Judith Fetterly, Nina Baym, Ann Douglas, Janice Radway, Nancy Armstrong, and Michael Denning, to name just a few). For my purposes, however, it is useful to see the most recent phase of that history as being inaugurated by the publication in 1985 of Jane Tompkins’s *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790–1860*. Tompkins’s book has had an enormous impact on literary studies in the years since its publication, and its shadow certainly hangs over my own work. It marks something of a paradigm shift in literary studies, establishing at least two tenets that we now tend to take for granted and that lie at the root of the analyses that follow. First, Tompkins argues that a text’s popularity, in and of itself, justifies our critical attention to it. As Tompkins writes about the works of Stowe, Brown, Cooper, and Warner, “the enormous popularity of these novels, which has been cause for suspicion bordering on disgust, is a reason for paying close attention to them” (124). Second, Tompkins argues that aesthetic judgment has a history, and she makes visible the modernist criteria that have shaped that history. As she writes, “In modernist thinking, literature is by definition a form of discourse that has no designs on the world. It does not attempt to change things, but merely to represent them, and it does so in a specifically literary language whose claim to value lies in its uniqueness. Consequently, works whose stated purpose is to influence the course of history, and which therefore employ a language that is not only not unique but common and accessible to everyone, do not qualify as works of art” (125). With these two claims, Tompkins helped open up a new space for literary analysis, legitimating a kind

of highbrow attention to the lowbrow, the application of New Critical skills to texts that the New Critics would most likely have found beneath their contempt.¹⁰

Although my readings here owe a particular debt to Tompkins, the differences in our approaches ultimately outweigh the similarities. An obvious difference is contextual. You can hear in Tompkins’s work an explicit defensiveness about her project, a defensiveness absolutely reasonable in 1985, but perhaps no longer necessary. The study of popular fiction has become something of an industry in the late nineties, owing in part to Tompkins, but to others as well. This isn’t to say that the prevailing modernist criteria that Tompkins was writing against no longer hold sway, but that she and others have pried open some critical space around those criteria, making room for other evaluative standards.

If it’s no longer necessary to be defensive about one’s attention to popular texts, what’s left for one to be defensive about? Well, an attention to white-supremacist popular texts, for starters. This concern marks a shift from a defensiveness about form to a defensiveness about content, and it’s worth pointing out that Tompkins tends to deemphasize the content of the popular forms she examined. As she writes, “Because I want to understand what gave these novels force for their initial readers, it seemed important to recreate, as sympathetically as possible, the context from which they sprang and the specific problems to which they were addressed. I have therefore not criticized the social and political attitudes that motivated these writers, but have tried instead to inhabit and make available to a modern audience the viewpoint from which their politics made sense” (xiii). Tompkins’s neutrality on “the social and political attitudes that motivated these writers” may have been necessary given her historical moment, but it was only possible because she did in fact assign a content to these texts, one that was always already subversive. For Tompkins, the sentimental novel is “a political enterprise, halfway between sermon and social theory, that both codifies and attempts to mold the values of its time” (126). And I would add, since Tompkins doesn’t, “for the better.” For isn’t this phrase implicit in Tompkins’s claim that “the sentimental novelists elaborated a myth that gave women the central position of power and authority in the culture” (125)? Tompkins is ultimately interested and invested in these texts to the extent that they constitute subversive interventions in a patriarchal culture. I go to

the trouble to make explicit Tompkins's claim here not because I disagree with her—the myth she elaborates is an attractive one—but to ask what happens if instead of adding “for the better” we are compelled to add “for the worse.” For this is surely the case with the white-supremacist texts I examine here, none of which can be heroically defended as a neglected but subversive intervention in normative cultural politics.

I'm following, then, Ann Cvetkovich's argument that mass cultural forms don't have to resist oppression to be worth studying and interpreting. As she writes in *Mixed Feelings*, “Critics who argue for the political and aesthetic reevaluation of mass culture or women's culture can confuse the critically interesting with the subversive, forgetting that a work does not have to be resistant to be worth interpreting, and that an intervention within the institution of literary criticism is not always a synecdoche for other forms of resistance” (38).¹¹ My attention to these enormously popular but critically neglected works constitutes, I think, just such “an intervention within the institution of literary criticism.” Whether this intervention pays what we might call oppositional dividends, it is meant to shift the way literary critics think about race and literature in the nineteenth century. It is meant, in short, to make visible a strain of American writing that critics have preferred to neglect. Although this neglect is certainly understandable, given the sometimes awkward good intentions of American literary studies, it has been neither accidental nor incidental to the shaping of what we mean when we talk about American literature.

In fact, the novels I read here occupy something of a switchpoint in the relation between institutional literary studies and popular fiction. Before critics like Tompkins began making a different argument, it was easy to dismiss novels like *The Clansman* not because they were racist but because they were “bad,” offering critics a way to keep the American canon (allegedly) free of racism without really addressing the problem of racism. Not surprisingly, the formal judgment has proven easier and less messy than the ideological judgment, since the ideological judgment may raise other, equally messy questions: for example, “What if American literature, as well as our study of it, actually bears something of a structural relation to American racism?”

But given the shift that Tompkins's argument helped inaugurate, it is no longer possible to take the easy way out. We can no longer say that overtly racist novels are beneath our critical attention because

they are melodramatic or because they are conventionally plotted. If this is the case, and given their tremendous sales, what excuse do we have to ignore them? That they are racist? Even a sympathetic glance at the heart of the American canon would prove that this hasn't previously been a criterion for exclusion. That they are explicitly racist? This would surely involve us in a labyrinthine hypocrisy, forcing us to admit that we prefer our racism to be implicit. That we prefer “literary” racism to “trashy” racism. That racism is tolerable if it's embedded in a New Critical subtlety.

The fact that these novels are explicitly and proudly racist does not justify our lack of attention to them. Rather, their racial hatred actually requires our attention. Those of us engaged in antiracist work within the academy can't afford to turn away from the overtly racist work that precedes us. Rather than ignore the textual racism of the literary past precisely because it's in the past, we should let it tell us as much as it can about that past, as well as the present. Although there's a risk that the spotlight I'm calling for may simply revivify some of the ugliest currents of American literary history, I believe that the current moment requires us to take that risk. With racial violence and white-supremacist organizing once again on the increase, we neglect at our peril these surreal visions into the workings of white racial anxiety and hatred. Although it's become something of a cliché to argue that you have to understand racism in order to deflate it, it's no less true.

In addition to this overtly political justification, there are other reasons for our attention to the fictions of white supremacy, reasons having to do with the construction of American literary history. To ignore these often repugnant texts would be to participate in that most long-lasting of American critical fictions: that American literature is always a heroic literature, that it has always been a literature of subversion (even revisionists like Tompkins fall into this pattern). We like to imagine American writers as lone voices speaking truth to power, as heroic individuals resisting the contaminating taints of modernity. The reality has been, as we should surely know by now, too often the reverse, and time spent with the novels I examine here may go a long way toward revising a vision of American literary history that is, perhaps, too comfortable for its own good—and for ours.

Another benefit to be derived from a serious attention to the literature of racial hatred relates, somewhat ironically, to African American literary history. The texts I examine made up the difficult con-

text for much African American literary production in the mid- to late nineteenth century, and a detailed understanding of their inner workings will give us a much clearer sense of the task facing African American writers during this period. Although others have described the vexed space of nineteenth-century black writing—the difficulty of writing under the simultaneous burdens of entertaining a mass audience and proving one’s humanity—the texts I examine here offer a more detailed vision of the literary landscape facing writers like Douglass, Jacobs, Harper, Chesnut, and others.¹² For example, an awareness of Victor’s *Maum Guinea and Her Plantation “Children,”* a dime novel published in the same year as Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, enlarges our appreciation of Jacobs’s ability to create a new genre out of the inadequacies of those available to her. An understanding of the racist theology I take up in chapter 3 provides a necessary context for novels like Pauline Hopkins’s *Of One Blood*, a novel that dramatizes the difficulties of negotiating and appropriating a racist science for antiracist purposes. Familiarity with this anti-black theology also deepens our appreciation for the ways in which black writers continued to claim and reinvent the Christian tradition as a space of hope and liberation, despite the steady and often surreal drumbeat of biblically sanctioned racism. An understanding of Thomas Dixon’s almost monolithic dominance of race fiction at the turn of the century gives us new insight into the challenges facing Charles Chesnut, Sutton Griggs, and Pauline Hopkins, all of whom wanted not only to sell books but to wrest away from Dixon the terms of racial discourse. In other words, although white-supremacist fiction bears an obviously antithetical relationship to African American literary history, a true appreciation of that history is only possible when we know what it was up against.

Whiteness/Heterosexuality

This attempt to shift the geography of American and African American literary history comprises a significant part of what I hope to accomplish here. In addition, however, and on a more theoretical level, this book intervenes in a body of work that is coming to be known, for good or for ill, as whiteness studies. In short, this book extends the growing critical emphasis on whiteness as a form of textual, political, and sexual anxiety. The virulent racism of the texts I read here

brings whiteness forcibly into view as both normative disciplinary presence and anxious response. Although “whiteness” and “white supremacy” don’t name the same thing, white supremacy turns out to be a particularly good lens on whiteness. White supremacy is a form of whiteness, one of its particular manifestations. It usually describes a specific and historical eruption of white political energies, as in the Dixon novel I examine in chapter 5. In part, white supremacy makes whiteness possible because it allows whiteness the space of moderation and normality that it needs to survive. White supremacy, so often imagined as extreme, allows whiteness once again its status as the nonthreatening, as the good. White supremacy, then, becomes something of a scapegoat for whiteness, the convenient location of white violence and lawlessness, distracting our attention from the violence and lawlessness of whiteness itself. Although whiteness and white supremacy are certainly related, they do bear important differences, and I attempt to hang onto those differences in the pages that follow. However, since I’m interested in disrupting the false binary between “good” and “bad” forms of whiteness, there will be times when whiteness and white supremacy do in fact take on the same meaning in my analysis, when whiteness becomes white supremacy, and vice versa.¹³

Although I want to defer until my epilogue a fuller treatment of the possibilities and perils of whiteness studies, I do want to highlight here my primary angle of vision on whiteness: its ambivalent proximity to, and interaction with, heterosexuality. A central contention of the readings that follow is that whiteness works best—in fact, that it works only—when it attaches itself to other abstractions, becoming yet another invisible strand in a larger web of unseen yet powerful cultural forces. My focus on avowedly white-supremacist texts forces into relief the alliances on which white supremacy depends. Dixon’s concern with racial purity, for example, makes his novel a better place to understand how gender and sexuality make whiteness a literary and cultural possibility. His single-mindedness on race exposes things about sexuality—specifically heterosexuality as simultaneously a normative standard and a deeply ambivalent structure of desire—that might be left unseen in another work lacking Dixon’s polemical drive. I’m interested in whiteness at what could be called its most transparent moments, precisely because in these moments we’re able to see its location within a larger system of oppressive and normalizing structures.

For my purposes, the chief ally in whiteness's normalizing mission is heterosexuality, which Monique Wittig defines, with admitted difficulty, as "a nonexistent object, a fetish, an ideological form which cannot be grasped in reality, except through its effects, whose existence lies in the mind of people, but in a way that affects their whole life, the way they act, the way they move, the way they think. So we are dealing with an object both imaginary and real" (40-41). In Wittig's thinking, heterosexuality's power to promote its own invisibility is so complete that "the straight mind cannot conceive of a culture, a society where heterosexuality would not order not only all human relationships but also its very production of concepts and all the processes which escape consciousness, as well" (28). Those "processes which escape consciousness" are the primary breeding ground for heterosexuality's normalizing and self-generating power. And the same holds true for whiteness. As an example, reread the first passage from Wittig quoted above, but imagine that she's defining whiteness, not heterosexuality. What she's talking about is the very air we breathe, the stuff that creates us with no reminder that it is doing so.

What's alluring about Wittig's definition of heterosexuality, however, is also what makes it problematic. In Wittig's hands, heterosexuality becomes a universal force, always already the invisible stuff of the universe. As a mystical presence, it lacks material particularity. However, as scholars are now demonstrating, heterosexuality has a discrete history, one that allows us to avoid too much dependence on the provocative vagaries deployed by Wittig. Jonathan Ned Katz traces this history in medical literature of the late nineteenth century, charting the ways in which heterosexuality made its gradual journey from perversion to its modern incarnation as an immensely powerful normalizing force. According to Katz, *heterosexuality* first appeared in the American medical lexicon in 1892 in an article by Dr. James G. Kiernan (19).¹⁴ For Kiernan, *heterosexuality* signified the perverse, since it referred, in part, to male/female sexual behavior divorced from reproductive imperatives. Since reproduction normalized different-sex eroticism, sexual pleasure occurring outside a reproductive context was seen by Kiernan and others as unhealthy, as pathological. At the time of Kiernan's article, Richard von Krafft-Ebing was also using the word *heterosexual* in his landmark study, *Psychopathia Sexualis*. Krafft-Ebing shares Kiernan's sense that "heterosexual" signifies a

nonreproductive, pleasure-centered pathology, but, contrary to Kiernan, Krafft-Ebing begins to position heterosexuality as a normalized, healthy, different-sex erotic standard. Because Krafft-Ebing discusses heterosexuality alongside case studies of men troubled by homosexual desire, heterosexuality begins to assume its shape as a cure for deviance, as a thing to strive for. The process of normalizing heterosexuality was continued by Freud in his "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality," where "heterosexuality" comes to mean the healthy, natural endpoint of one's sexual maturation. As Katz writes, Freud "helped to constitute our belief in the existence of a unitary, monolithic thing with a life and determining power of its own: 'heterosexuality'" (66). Katz continues, "Freud's explicit uses of the word *heterosexual* helped to constitute a different-sex eroticism as modern society's influential, dominant norm" (66).

Although I've taken the space to sketch this brief history, a history that coincides with the period under consideration in this book, we must keep in mind an important qualification. What I'm talking about here is, to some extent, a history of language. Although it's possible, à la Katz, to construct an etymological history of heterosexuality's birth, it's important not to overestimate the extent to which this history tells us something about the lived experience of the time. To imagine that the appearance of words like *heterosexuality* in medical journals exists in a causal relationship with people's sexual behaviors is to overestimate the popular currency of medical discourse and to underestimate the unchartable complexity of sexual behavior. George Chauncey Jr. makes this point in his pioneering work on early medical uses of the term *homosexual*:

It would be wrong to assume, I think, that doctors created and defined the identities of "inverts" and "homosexuals" at the turn of the century, that people uncritically internalized the new medical models, or even that homosexuality emerged as a fully defined category in the medical discourse itself in the 1870s. Such assumptions attribute inordinate power to ideology as an autonomous social force; they oversimplify the complex dialectic between social conditions, ideology, and consciousness which produced gay identities, and they belie the evidence of preexisting subcultures and identities contained in the literature itself. Although the literature is one of the sources most easily accessible to historians, we must

guard against attributing to it a more central role in the formation of sexual identities than it actually may have played. (115)

We ignore such a warning at great cost.

This does not mean, however, that words don't matter. Rather, the shifting medical terminology of this period marks the public face of liminality. It suggests that sexual behaviors, as well as the names for those behaviors, are in a period of flux and transition, that categories are being made and unmade in response to the anxieties that attend any period of upheaval. We shouldn't imagine that etymology tells us anything precise about "heterosexuality," but we shouldn't underestimate how language comes to signal and mirror a period of uncertainty, a period of movement. Katz recognizes as much when he writes that "in the last decades of the nineteenth century, the new term *heterosexual* moved into the world, sometimes linked with nonprocreative 'perversion,' sometimes with 'normal,' procreative, different-sex eroticism" (55).

Although it is impossible to pinpoint a precise moment when *heterosexuality* came to mean what we now take it to mean, it is possible to use this changing language as the visible sign of a broad shift from a reproduction-based sexuality to a pleasure-driven heterosexuality, and it is this broad shift that I want to hang onto. For whiteness bears a necessarily anxious relation to reproduction, a relation mediated through the not-always-dependable structure of heterosexuality. As Richard Dyer writes, "All concepts of race are always concepts of the body and also of heterosexuality. Race is a means of categorising different types of human body which reproduce themselves. It seeks to systematise differences and to relate them to differences of character and worth. Heterosexuality is the means of ensuring, but also the site of endangering, the reproduction of these differences" (*White* 20). The Women's Christian Temperance Union understood as much when, in 1885, its Social Purity Division adopted the slogan "The White Life for Two," a phrase that economically figures one aspect of the relation between whiteness and heterosexuality (D'Emilio and Freedman 153). Through its use of this slogan, the WCTU signaled the centrality of heterosexuality to the maintenance of both the white race and a "white" morality.

As Dyer points out, although heterosexuality is absolutely necessary to the reproduction of whiteness, it is also the means through

which whiteness can lose itself. At the heart of both outcomes lies the tricky matter of desire, an inherently unstable quantity—part longing, part repulsion, part fascination, part horror. The texts I examine here reveal what happens when race and sexuality meet, when the desire for whiteness meets its own ambivalence. The result, not surprisingly, is an obsessive attention to amalgamation, that site where heterosexuality endangers rather than ensures white reproduction. Robert J. C. Young suggests that racial theory is itself invested in—if not defined by—the compulsive imagining of interracial sex. As he puts it in this wonderfully over-the-top passage, racial theory has historically depended on a

voyeuristic tableau of frenzied, interminable copulation, of couplings, fusing, coalescence, *between races*. At its core, such racial theory projected a phantasmagoria of the desiring machine as a people factory: a Malthusian fantasy of uncontrollable, frenetic fornication producing the countless motley varieties of interbreeding, with the miscegenated offspring themselves then generating an ever-increasing *mélange*, "mongrelity," of self-propagating endlessly diversifying hybrid progeny. . . . Nineteenth-century theories of race did not just consist of essentializing differentiations between self and other: they were also about a fascination with people having sex—interminable, adulterating, aleatory, illicit, inter-racial sex. (181)

With such amalgamationist terror at its root, it would be surprising if the relationship between whiteness and heterosexuality were neat and tidy. The truth of desire is messy.

Partly responsible for this messiness, in addition to the amalgamationist fervor described by Young, is a homosocial desire that I take to be a constitutive component of both whiteness and heterosexuality. In the readings that follow, I'm interested in how white women become silent markers in the systems of exchange that make both whiteness and heterosexuality cultural givens. Simultaneously imagined as the key to whiteness's future and its weakest defense, white women enable whiteness at the same time that they are denied its fruits. They make it possible, yet are kept from the fullness of its franchise, given their status as women in the always patriarchal shape that whiteness assumes. At the same time, I emphasize a similar role played by black men, who, through the hysterical imaginings of

white men, become the sexual threat and object of sexual desire that simultaneously threaten and buttress the heterosexual expectations of whiteness. White supremacy, then, can be usefully understood as a homosocial network that commodifies and appropriates the bodies of white women and black men in order to consolidate both whiteness and heterosexuality as governing ideologies, ever present abstractions, condensed forms of panic, and political structures.

By invoking the category of the homosocial, I mean to borrow from and extend the work of Eve Sedgwick, whose model of the homosocial triangle (itself borrowed from Claude Lévi-Strauss and Gayle Rubin, among others) continues to have enormous critical currency. By homosocial, Sedgwick means the structural logic of male/male relations that requires a woman in a mediating position, in a position of exchange. Like Sedgwick, my goal is to “draw the ‘homosocial’ back into the orbit of ‘desire,’” positing “the potential unbrokenness of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual” (*Between* 1). As others have pointed out, however, Sedgwick’s homosociality becomes something of a different creature—more complicated, less universally applicable—if we consider how race, as well as gender, determines the workings of desire.¹⁵ Although I explore this in more detail in chapter 5, for now let me simply point out that the homosocial may be a necessary component of any attempt to keep whiteness white, to keep whiteness pure. If, as Dyer points out, “race is a means of categorising different types of human body which reproduce themselves” (*White* 20), white reproduction becomes a necessarily unstable process. To reproduce whiteness sexually is to risk contamination, and so heterosexuality becomes a threat to whiteness, one that can only be avoided if that heterosexuality is ultimately less important and less central than the homosociality that it facilitates. Homoeroticism becomes, paradoxically, the only structure of desire that can keep whiteness white. Thus the homosocial becomes not merely a constitutive element of patriarchy, or of the sex/gender system, or of heterosexuality, à la Sedgwick, but of whiteness.

White Weddings

Our critical attention should be focused on race and sexuality as equally important and interdependent categories, since whiteness and heterosexuality come most clearly into view in proximity to one

another. Their invisibility depends on the invisibility of the connective threads that link them together. It’s my goal here to make this connective tissue visible. Whereas whiteness appears more often than not as an ideological abstraction, heterosexuality is made visible primarily through its forms, the chief of which is marriage. Of course, marriage and heterosexuality don’t name the same thing; rather, marriage is a structure of heterosexuality, a visible form of heterosexual desire. Katz emphasizes the materiality of marriage by defining it as “a social organization of kinship relations, of economic alliances, of property transfer, and of pleasure” (175).¹⁶ Although this definition might seem to take the romance out of its subject, it’s useful to us for precisely that reason. The relations of money and property, of pleasure and kinship—and I would add politics—reveal the social infrastructure that marriage is at least partially designed to create.

Time after time in the readings that follow, marriage becomes the mannequin on which whiteness and white supremacy are draped. Marriage consolidates white-supremacist desire, often providing the political motivation for that desire. The link between marriage and whiteness can be seen most clearly as a generic property. Most of the works I read here depend on that most dependable of plots: the complicated yet ultimately satisfying journey toward marriage. The presence of this plot itself is far from remarkable. But what happens, we might ask, when the marriage plot becomes the narrative superstructure on which an avowedly white-supremacist polemic is hung? What happens at the intersection of the white-supremacist plot and the marriage plot that makes each a central component of the upcoming narrative closure? If both white supremacy and marriage must be established facts by novel’s end, what is their real relation to one another, both within and without the pressures of narrative? The symbiotic relationship between these racial and sexual compulsions is so tightly woven that it’s worth prying them apart in order to witness their separate shapes and the congruity that these shapes allow, and even demand.

As a way to untangle and clarify the symbiotic relationship I’m describing, we might ask what structural similarities plots of besieged heterosexuality and besieged whiteness share, and why these plots tend to demand wedding bells as a salvational trope. Richard von Krafft-Ebing’s famous case studies of heterosexually challenged Victorians offer a useful parallel to the white stories I read here,

since they also depend on marriage for both political and narrative closure.¹⁷ After hypnotism, a Mr. von X, who had complained of “unnatural” thoughts and acts concerning other men, “still had sympathetic feeling for some men, but never anything like love. He occasionally had pleasurable coitus with women, and now thought of marriage” (Krafft-Ebing 342). A Mr. von Z., having undergone Krafft-Ebing’s treatment, is described as “lastingly cured,” and “occupied with thoughts of marriage” (347). And after forty-five treatments, a Mr. R. “became engaged to a young lady some weeks later, and presented himself again, after six months, as a happy bridegroom” (354). In all these cases marriage comes to the rescue of besieged masculinity, making that masculinity whole again by redirecting its supposedly pathological sexual desires.

Although I don’t mean to suggest that the white-supremacist texts I examine enact the same type of conversion narrative, where homosexuality is the disease and marriage the cure, I do think the structural similarity between the plots of beleaguered homosexuality and beleaguered whiteness is enormously instructive. In the case of the white-supremacist texts, marriage often carries with it the same magical, curative properties described by these nineteenth-century sexologists, though the pathology differs. In the works I read, the disease isn’t homosexuality, but a weakening and sickened form of whiteness. Marriage becomes the restorative, the social form that buttresses whiteness in its cultural decline.

Or at least that tries to. In this formulation—with marriage successfully coming to the rescue of whiteness—whiteness and heterosexuality become normative copartners, both invested in buttressing and feeding off of the cultural normativity of the other. This is, in fact, often the case, as chapters 1 and 2 demonstrate. I should add, however, that this only tells part of the story. As I argue in chapters 4 and 5, as “heterosexually” becomes, around the turn of the century, a more visible and scientifically demarcated category, its infrastructure actually becomes less, rather than more, stable, particularly in relation to the structures of whiteness. Although the forms of heterosexuality—marriage, for example—pretend to create racial order out of mongrel chaos, the pretense is never entirely persuasive. In some cases, heterosexuality’s “coming to the rescue” not only doesn’t “save” whiteness; it in fact reveals things about heterosexuality—and about whiteness—that their adherents would be shocked to discover. There’s an impor-

tant sense in which whiteness and heterosexuality actually threaten one another, a way in which the system of desire unleashed by a newly emergent heterosexual pleasure principle threatens the racial purity on which whiteness depends. Given this ambivalence, it’s worth charting the movements of these two structures of feeling, hoping, in the process, to get a more accurate picture of the early days of white heterosexuality.

In short, I’m interested in determining when whiteness and heterosexuality are playing for the same team, and when they are not. Or, to borrow a much richer metaphor from Richard Dyer, I want to examine heterosexuality as “the cradle of whiteness” (*White* 140). In this formulation Dyer implies not only that heterosexuality gives birth to whiteness but that it nurtures whiteness, attending to its needs and soothing away its anxieties. Heterosexuality becomes the loving parent. This is certainly true, but only up to a point. For as we all know, parent/child relationships aren’t always healthy. Envy, jealousy, anxiety, selfishness, overinvestment, underinvestment, abuse—this is also the stuff of the cradle, a cradle that heterosexuality can rock with a vengeance. Only by allowing whiteness and heterosexuality the freedom to be themselves—multiple, fractured, incoherent—will we get a sufficiently nuanced picture of the true relation they bear to one another as they struggle to define, once and for all, the color of sex.

ness studies has a role to play in this unsettling. Its articulation of white power and white vulnerability is a necessary step forward.

That said, we need to be very humble about the claims we make. Whiteness studies isn't going to end racism. This merely states the obvious, of course, but it's important to say it anyway. In fact, whiteness studies may not even make a dent in racism. Given the history of the best of white intentions, this shouldn't surprise us. Despite our desire to believe otherwise, we need to accept a realistic vision of what's to be gained from this renewed attention to whiteness. If we stop pretending that whiteness studies will lead us to the promised land of a new racial justice, we can pay attention to more prosaic claims, to more realistic payoffs. We can say, at the very least, that the study of whiteness adds to our knowledge about race and ethnicity in American culture. We can say that it gives us a new and richer way of thinking about class, gender, and sexuality. Humble claims? Perhaps not. To claim this much is actually to claim a great deal. And so we go forward, poking and prodding whiteness until it ends up where it never meant to go—until it divulges secrets it didn't even know it was keeping.

Notes

Introduction: White Fictions

1 For discussions of Jacobs's location within the literary confines of sentimental fiction see Valerie Smith's introduction to the Schomburg edition of *Incidents* and Jean Fagan Yellin's introduction to the Harvard edition.

2 Henry Louis Gates Jr. describes the dynamic I'm tracing here as "the curious dialectic between formal language use and the inscription of metaphorical racial differences" ("Writing 'Race' and the Difference It Makes" 6). For more on the ambivalent connections between race and writing see this essay and the volume it appears in, *Race, Writing, and Difference*.

3 In other contexts Helper did indeed propose many of these "solutions." His goal was the complete removal of blacks from the presence of whites, and he didn't limit his suggestions to the purely discursive realm. The irony of his racist activism lies in his staunch antislavery beliefs, which were based on an economic argument against slavery's continuance in the southern states. For more on Helper see Fredrickson's introduction to *The Impending Crisis*.

4 Fredrickson suggests that "*Nojoke* is the product of an unbalanced mind" ("Introduction" li) and describes Helper's racism as "pathological" (lvii). Although grounds for these assessments certainly exist, I worry that pathologizing Helper in this way can create a false distinction between "crazy racism" and "sane racism," when it would be more accurate to see racism itself, no matter what the flavor, as a pathology. Helper's title (*Nojoke* = no joke) warns against taking his efforts too lightly.

5 Although Darwin is often assumed to have breathed new life into mid-nineteenth-century scientific racism, this assumption actually depends on a misreading of *On the Origin of Species* (1859). Midcentury scientific racism was increasingly based in physical anthropology, and as Peter Bowler argues, "there is little evidence . . . that the Darwinian theory of evolution had any major influence on physical anthropology" (139). In fact, Bowler argues, Darwin's theory of evolution through natural selection actually made it harder to sustain the view of a hierarchy of races with the "white race" on the top. As Bowler writes, "Although many Darwinians adopted the conventional attitude toward race, it can hardly be said that Darwin's particular theory of evolution flourished because it could be used to support the racial hierarchy. In fact, [Darwin's] image of branching, haphazard evolution was difficult to reconcile with the belief that the white race is in some absolute sense the most developed form of the human species" (163).

This does not mean, however, that Darwin doesn't bear some responsibility for the "survival of the fittest" language of Social Darwinism. George Fredrickson quotes Darwin from 1881: "Looking at the world at no very distant date, what an endless number of lower races will be eliminated by the higher civilized races throughout the world" (qtd. in *Black Image* 230). And as Darwin wrote in *The Descent of Man* (1871), "At some future period, not very distant as measured by centuries, the civilized races of man will almost certainly exterminate and replace the savage races throughout the world" (qtd. in *Black Image* 230). These predictions arise naturally from *Origin's* subtitle, *The Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*.

Nancy Leys Stepan and Sander L. Gilman attribute the uses and misuses of Darwin to his reliance on “charged and metaphoric language” (80). As they write, “Darwin could not keep control over the metaphors he introduced. . . . Nearly every term he used was multivalent and was appropriated in selective and varied ways by very different groups for different purposes” (80). See also Thomas F. Gossett, *Race: The History of an Idea in America* (esp. 67–69, 145). For a more detailed discussion of the racial implications of Darwinism see Nancy Stepan, *The Idea of Race in Science*; Gould, 416–20.

6 Jennifer DeVere Brody points out this danger in her review of Ruth Frankenberg’s *White Women, Race Matters*. Concerning Frankenberg’s general exclusion of nonwhite responses to the narratives of whiteness she offers, Brody writes, “This tendency to marginalize women of color or, rather, to reference them without really using their differing ideas as tools for thinking about the simultaneity of race, class, and gender is one of the risks of recentring whiteness in an effort to make it visible in all its multiplicity” (157).

7 Lincoln’s alleged familiarity with Victor’s novel may be apocryphal. Kathleen Maio writes that *Maum Guinea* “is said to have been praised by both President Lincoln and Henry Ward Beecher” (303), and Charles Harvey tells a similar story, but I’ve been unable to document the source of this hearsay.

8 In choosing this methodology, I’m loosely following Richard Dyer’s suggestion in “White” that close study of “images of the white race in avowedly racist and fascist cinema” might yield a clearer picture of whiteness as a lived cultural and representational form (46).

9 My decision not to focus on canonical representations of whiteness is also rooted in the encouraging fact that good work is already being done there. See Mary Sisney, “The Power and Horror of Whiteness: Wright and Ellison Respond to Poe”; J. Lasley Dameron, “Melville and Scoresby on Whiteness”; Toni Morrison, “Romancing the Shadow” in *Playing in the Dark*.

10 In positioning Tompkins’s work in this way, I do not mean to imply that it is without flaws, simply that it marked a shift in institutional thinking. For critiques of Tompkins see Lauren Berlant’s review of *Sensational Designs* in *Modern Philology* and Ann Cvetkovich’s argument in *Mixed Feelings* (125). For a useful overview of the debates that Tompkins’s book both participated in and prompted (particularly its relation to Ann Douglass’s *The Feminization of American Culture*) see Laura Wexler’s “Tender Violence: Literary Eavesdropping, Domestic Fiction, and Educational Reform.”

11 Agreeing with Cvetkovich, Rita Felski writes, “Rather than either reproducing or heroically resisting a univocal dominant ideology, popular fiction can more usefully be read as comprising a variety of ideological strands that cohere to or contradict each other in diverse ways” (142).

12 See, for example, Gates, “Writing ‘Race’ and the Difference It Makes.”

13 Cornel West dramatizes this necessary slippage in an interview with Noel Ignatiev and William “Upski” Wimsatt. At one point he “want[s] to insist on a distinction between whiteness and white supremacy” (180), but later he collapses that distinction when he says, “And so when we talk about whiteness, we talk about white

supremacy. I think in the end, that’s the bottom line” (198). See West, “I’m Ofay, You’re Ofay.”

14 The word had made its first appearance—along with *homosexual*—in the private correspondence of German sex-law reformer Karl Maria Kertbeny in 1868 (Katz 52).

15 See, for example, Susan Fraiman’s “Geometries of Race and Gender: Eve Sedgwick, Spike Lee, Charlayne Hunter-Gault.”

16 Katz is following Foucault’s discussion of the “deployment of alliance: a system of marriage, of fixation and development of kinship ties, of transmission of names and possessions” (Foucault, *History* 106). For Foucault, marriage is a structure used to produce and regulate “sexuality,” which he defines as “a great surface network in which the stimulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasures, the incitement to discourse, the formation of special knowledges, the strengthening of controls and resistances, are linked to one another, in accordance with a few major strategies of knowledge” (105–6).

17 I was alerted to this matrimonial trend in Krafft-Ebing’s case histories by Katz. See *The Invention of Heterosexuality*, 21–32.

1. “*De White Man in Season*”

1 Reprinted from the *Pennsylvanian* in the *Liberator*, June 11, 1852.

2 Peterson actually published the novel under the pseudonym J. Thornton Randolph. I use his real name throughout, however, since that was the name he was most widely known by.

3 See chapter 12 of Gossett’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin and American Culture* for a descriptive catalog of anti-Uncle Tom literature.

4 As Anna Julia Cooper points out, however, not all novels about slavery were equally worthwhile. As Cooper writes, “Not many have had Mrs. Stowe’s power because not many have studied with Mrs. Stowe’s humility and love. . . . Some have taken up the subject with a view to establishing evidences of ready formulated theories and preconceptions; and, blinded by their prejudices and antipathies, have altogether abjured all candid and careful study. Others with flippant indifference have performed a few psychological experiments on their cooks and coachmen, and with astounding egotism, and powers of generalization positively bewildering, forthwith aspire to enlighten the world with dissertations on racial traits of the Negro” (186).

5 The primacy of slavery as the new middle-class entertainment extended beyond the written page. According to an ad in the *New York Tribune* of November 5, 1852, readers could now enjoy “the NEW and INTERESTING GAME of UNCLE TOM and LITTLE EVA,” priced at twenty-five cents. The ad continues: “The interest which one may take in this Game is considerable, and the more it is played the greater the desire for it. . . . The execution of the cuts, which are colored, representing the characters of UNCLE TOM’S CABIN, are beyond all censure. They are life-like and expressive. For the workmanship displayed in getting up this Game, for the pleasing and endless enjoyment one may derive in its study, and for the extraordinary low price at which it is offered, stamps it the Game of the season [*sic*].” The point of the game was apparently to rescue slaves from slavery and to reunite broken families. That the cuts