The Mask of Transmission: Race, Transnationalism, and the Hidden Cultural Genealogies of American Literature, 1837-1927

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THE MASK OF TRANSMISSION: RACE, TRANSMISSION, AND THE HIDDEN CULTURAL GENEALOGIES OF AMERICAN LITERATURE, 1837-1927

by

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The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we Find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards Of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.
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The Mask of Transmission: Race, Transnationalism, and the Hidden Cultural Genealogies of American Literature, 1837-1927

Thesis directed by Associate Professor Cheryl Higashida (University of Colorado) and Associate Professor Anna Brickhouse (University of Virginia)

This dissertation examines transamerican and transatlantic genealogies of nineteenth-century African American literature that are illuminated by examining masks and masking in tragic mulatto and passing narratives from France, the Caribbean, and the U.S. I show how masking permeates the formal features of these narratives; brings feminine stories of incarceration, captivity, and cloistering to bear on masculine narratives of mobility and revolution; and illuminates some of the conditions and sites through which modern black subjectivity is formed and represented. The project explores a range of disparate narratives, from Victor Hugo’s Bug-Jargal, Claire de Duras’s “Ourika,” and Gustave de Beaumont’s Marie, or Slavery in the United States: A Novel of Jacksonian America (Race in the Americas) to Victor Séjour’s “The Mulatto,” Alexandre Dumas’s Georges and The Man in the Iron Mask, to William Wells Brown’s Clotel; or, the President’s Daughter: A Narrative of Slave Life in the United States and Eloise Bibb-Thompson’s “Masks, a Story.” Although my project makes use of comparative Americas, transatlantic, and transamerican analytical frameworks, one of the objectives of this dissertation is to illustrate how the texts I explore establish the starting point for a specifically African American literary genealogy through a common discourse they engage, despite the many differences between them. Through their borrowing and sampling, these divergent texts from varied circumstances and historical moments extend the boundaries of the African American literary tradition as we know it, showing it to be self-consciously transatlantic and transamerican in ways that the Anglo-American literary tradition could not acknowledge itself to be.
Dedication

I dedicate my dissertation to my mother, Shirley L. Johnson Eblen, for inspiring me to read, and keeping me up late one night to watch a Friday night movie on TV, “Imitation of Life;” to my sister, Sharon J. Eblen, J.D., for her encouragement and example; to my late brother Jerry L. Eblen for always challenging me; to my late father, Jimmy L. Eblen’s interest in family genealogy; and to all of my advisers, friends and peers (and strangers), who endured painfully long discussions about issues they may have preferred to never consider.
Acknowledgements

This dissertation topic was inspired by many intersecting coincidences among my varied interests--literature, history, art, film, music, (especially the blues, bebop, jazz, and rock and roll), and I sincerely thank the writers, poets, troubadours, minstrels and popular culture icons who initiated the dialogues that I examine in my project. Completing this phase of my work has truly been a collective effort. I want to acknowledge and thank my exceptionally brilliant co-advisers and pedagogues, Anna Brickhouse and Cheryl Higashida, for their diligent consideration of my ideas and readings, and for their tremendous encouragement and engagement that far surpassed their duties. I am deeply indebted to Dr. Brickhouse for her advice, mentoring, and friendship throughout my master's, and doctoral studies, and continuing to do so once her career took her to the University of Virginia. I also truly appreciate her patience and tolerance during my numerous mishaps. I have been very fortunate to work with such amazingly gifted scholars, writers, and teachers at the University of Colorado at Boulder, and want to thank Martin Bickman, Kelly Hurley, and John-Michael Rivera for their insightful suggestions and support of this dissertation. I would also like to mention Larry Hartsfield, E.K. Daufin, Roland Jones, Paul Pavich, and Jim Wehmeyer for telling me the truth while never doubting my ability. I appreciate my peers that thoughtfully listened and shared ideas with me: Jennifer Armstrong, Korri Roach, Ann Stockho, Garian Vigil, and Erika Wurth. Thank you my dear friend Kirsten Love for being a woman who loves RUSH and can listen to anyone go on and on about anything, for supporting me and keeping me going through all the good and bad stuff. Thank you to Curtis and Jonathan Endicott for your continued support during the roughest times. Thank you Jon P. Allen, II for rekindling my motivation when I needed it most. A gracious thank you to the Texas Christian University English Department and the TCU library for allowing me privileges while working away from my department. Thanks mom, Sharon, Mark A. Cox and all of my SWTOR buddies online, and especially old friends in the hometown who welcomed me back.
The Mask of Transmission: Race, Transnationalism, and the Hidden Cultural Genealogies of American Literature, 1837-1927

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Introduction

French Pretense: Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity in
Ourika, Bug-Jargal, and Marie or Slavery in the United States

The recognized canon of African-American literature is fraught with questions about racial mixing, cultural admixture, and tales of blacks passing into white, U.S. society—and not just the fictions. Many of these renowned African-American thinkers and writers experienced conflict because of confusion about racial classifications first hand during their lives and careers. The prejudices and disadvantages for blacks in the early nineteenth-century United States were muddled with definitions of legal statuses, whether a blacks’ status was free or enslaved. Although France’s legislations regarding race informed the earliest statutes in the United States, there was still some romanticized or nostalgic ideal that France, and on a slightly lower scale, Britain and Spain, afforded people of African descent more opportunities, tolerance, and less discrimination, especially among the literati of Paris. In fact, there is a plethora of information regarding the positions and assimilation of blacks into French society after World War I, but fewer studies examine the atmosphere that allowed for similar emigrations in the early nineteenth-century. However, many free blacks left Louisiana after the territory sold in 1803 to relocate in Paris. Victor Séjour, who plays prominently in this study as the author of the first work of African-American fiction, traveled to France and never returned to the U.S. after publishing *The Mulatto* in 1837, enjoying a good deal of success as a playwright in the Paris

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1 Historians propose that the first African American visitor to France was likely Thomas Jefferson’s slave, Sally Hemmings, who is also recognized as the inspiration for William Wells Brown’s 1853 novel, *Clotel*. Sally was companion to Jefferson’s daughter Martha and accompanied them to Paris while Jefferson was ambassador from 1787 to 1789. [http://www.monticello.org/site/plantation-and-slavery/sally-hemings](http://www.monticello.org/site/plantation-and-slavery/sally-hemings)

theater. As a free black born to Haitian immigrants in the U.S. and an African American artist visiting France, this environment of relative freedom would have been a welcome respite from the oppression of free blacks in the U.S., and the harsh realities of slavery. The artists and literati of Parisian society could learn as much from a young traveler from the United States as they could teach him.

Similarly, in the opening pages of his *The Black Man, His Antecedents, His Genius, and His Achievements* (1863), William Wells Brown recognizes his journeys abroad and “his opportunity of research amid the archives of England and France, and his visit to the West Indies” as providing him “the advantage of information respecting the blacks seldom acquired.”

As I discuss in the following chapters, France’s own legislation surrounding racial mixing and citizens of African descent were tangled and awkward. In the decade before the French Revolution, blacks from the colonies could not enter the country legally; the laws were amended either because of anxieties about racial mixing, or the growing concerns that these free blacks would return to the colonies and agitate the slaves. For the purposes of this literary genealogy, I recognize the existence of a diasporic community of blacks and people of color in France, especially in Paris, before the French Revolution, and after. Although limits persisted, this atmosphere tolerated racial mixing among whites, blacks, and other people of color, and often nationally recognized prosperous people of color. This community emerges concomitantly with the Haitian Revolution of 1791 and is more profoundly evidenced in the literature of the early nineteenth-century French Romanticists than any other European literature, and nurtures the

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3 Brown 6, http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/brownww/brown.html#brown128
4 In his book of letters published in Britain, *Three Years in Europe; Or, Places I Have Seen and People I Have Met* (1852) Brown also describes how he met M. Eugene Sue and Victor Hugo, sees Alexandre Dumas at the theater, and was invited to a party given by Madame de Toqueville. http://www.gutenberg.org/files/15830/15830.txt letters IV and V
literature of the antebellum U.S. In many ways, the sense of community, aura of acceptance, or perhaps merely recognized cultural assimilations that took place during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century enter the literary discourses as themes of liberty, fraternity and equality, and encouraged borrowing and building upon common themes of humanistic and political interests.

These chapters isolate the processes of borrowing in literary romanticism, especially amongst three aristocratic French romantic authors, whose texts provide creative material for the earliest works of African American fiction and persist into the Harlem Renaissance, as well as modern and contemporary fictions by African American authors. Although the archetypal theme of masking or veiling as a metaphor for living a double life, or living with some kind of hidden secret persists elsewhere in literary history, these narratives are among the first to apply these devices to characters whose particular secrets or double lives exist solely because of their indistinct social and racial status. At the same time, each of these narratives shares the incorporation of code noir issues in the Caribbean colonies, whether in explicit mention, indirect allusion or setting. However, each of these narratives is strikingly different in content and tone. I recognize the device of masking in Claire de Duras, Victor Hugo, and Gustave de Beaumont’s texts as particularly important to the development of a more complex trope in the earliest African American fictions—the tragic mulatta/o and the passing narrative. Why French romanticism and what is the reason that texts from this particular period have so much influence on the development of an African American literary canon? Certainly, there are many other examples in European and U.S. literature that develop these same ideas—primarily in the themes and allusions of female-authored romantic and Victorian-era texts. However, the interconnectedness of nineteenth-century revolutionary France and the uprising in Saint-Domingue add an element
less often encountered. Many textual examples demonstrate why I understand these particular narratives as literary forebears, but in many ways, the nation of France deserves acknowledgement as well. France’s enormous colonial interests and interconnected relationships between the rest of Europe, Africa and the wider Americas, including the Louisiana Territory in North America, are the instigators for their groundbreaking legislations and concerns with miscegenation, which influenced other nations’ positions on the slave trade and racial mixing—and especially that of the United States.5

Given the vast holdings of French colonial interests in the Caribbean and Louisiana during the tumultuous revolutionary history of seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and nineteenth-century France, it is not surprising that France’s official policies on race and interracial relationships have been proposed as the most complex legislation in Europe.6 The population explosion in Saint-Domingue had the power to threaten the French plantation economy and French hegemony, thus endangering the purity of a white-European France, as well as undermining the social understandings of race. As more French colonists settled in the islands and the population of Caribbean-born French families or creoles increased, intermarriage among the various classes, colors, and “mixtures of race” amplified fears of miscegenation (though that term had yet to be coined). Set in March of 1685, the first version of the code noir enumerated official guidelines for the French slave trade and evolved toward a model for slavery legislation in the French colonies. Drawn up by Louis XIV’s minister, Jean Baptiste Colbert, who had formed the Compagnie des Indes twenty years earlier, “the Code noir or Edict Regarding the Government and the Administration of the French Islands of America, and the Discipline and the Commerce of Blacks and Slaves in the Said Countries” was frequently amended. The document becomes

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5The Louisiana Purchase established on July 4, 1803, comprises about 23% of current U.S. territory. Acquisition of the Public Domain 1781–1867.
6 Sala-Molins 219, 35
more detailed and precise with each alteration, allowing officials to minimize the ambiguities, or loopholes, that granted specific classifications of slaves certain rights and freedoms. Under the restrictions of the code noir, slaves were “portable property” and held accountable to a strict and brutal system of penalties for resisting their captivity, particularly if they attempted to cause any detriment to their owners. More distinctively, the revisions focused on the interdependent anticipations of “interracial marriage and the freeing of slaves.”

During the years leading up to the Revolution, French society’s perceptions of color, race and slavery were becoming more and more entangled with discussions of freedom. While the earliest version of the code noir stipulates: “if a free white man in the colonies marries a slave woman, she is automatically freed,” the alterations to the 1711 edition outlaw interracial marriage, which in turn eradicates one procedure through which a slave could become free. Yet a slave could still attain freedom if his or her master transported the slave to France, a disparity in the law that would prove difficult to enforce. Between the years of 1716 and 1762, various adjustments of the code attempted to seal what was clearly an easily navigated gap. Throughout my close readings of the narratives in this chapter, I recognize these penetrable legislations as failed attempts to define who can be a slave, as well as a controlling effort against the ambiguities of racial classifications, especially mixed-race slaves and free blacks in France, while also considering how these particular sets of laws penetrated the colonies and the U.S. By 1777, Louis XVI amended the code again to prohibit any “Black, mulatto, or other ‘person of color’” entry to France “on the grounds that ‘negroes are multiplying every day in France’ and that, as a result, ‘their marriages with Europeans are becoming more frequent’ and ‘bloodlines

[7 DeJean ix
[9 DeJean x
[10 DeJean & Waller x
At the beginning of the French Revolution in 1789, Saint-Domingue was the wealthiest, most bountiful, and most desired colony in the global sphere. That same year, Paris was referred to as “swarm[ing] with creole families who drew their incomes from the island… many whose political influence was great; while, in the island itself, society enjoyed semi-Parisian ease and elegance, the natural product of an exaggerated slave-system combined with the manners, ideas, and amusements of a French proprietary caste.”

In fact, near the latter part of the eighteenth century, many of Saint-Domingue’s mulattoes owned plantations and had been educated in Europe. Distinct from the division between whites and blacks, this third class, the free mulattoes, ascended in Saint-Domingue and their population swiftly matched the whites. The complexities of enforcing the code noir, together with the “race theology” contrived in Saint-Domingue, intensified concerns about interracial marriages and resulted in a system that categorized “colored” descendants within one of ten different classes. The terms *sang-mêlé* and *mulâtreé* are nearly synonymous, meaning “half-blood,” but only “the offspring of a ‘pure white’ father and a ‘pure black’ mother” were sanctioned as free mulattoes. Curiously, unlike racial definitions in the nineteenth-century U.S., where the classification of mixed race individuals followed the heritage and status of the black mother, Saint-Domingue’s unique system allowed a loophole—an almost aristocratic right of ascension in which the white father could choose whether to acknowledge a “true mulatto” as free. The class of the free mulatto prospered and in the southern regions of Saint-Domingue

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11 Sala-Molins 220, DeJean x  
13 Danner 49  
14 Although any “black blood” in an individual’s lineage would suffice to identify and label them as black or slave, a *quarteron* was half mulatto and half white, or one-fourth black; an *octroon* descended from a *quarteron* and a white; a *griffe* was half black and half mulatto, or three-fourths black. See also *Description Topographique, Physique, Civile, Politique et Historique de la Partie Francaise de l’Isle Saint-Domingue*, (1797), by M.L.E. Moreau de Saint-Méry (himself a white or possibly *sang-mêlé* colonial,) from Danner and Bongie; see also C.L.R. James for
became remarkably formidable. However, as the free mulatto class grew in population and strength, white prejudice also amplified, particularly among underprivileged whites in the colony. Therefore, mulatto allegiances split in another way, or, for the purpose of my study, doubled, as recognized through the portrayals of Duras, Hugo and Beaumont’s title characters.\footnote{See W.E.B. DuBois’s \textit{The Souls of Black Folk}; Frantz Fanon’s \textit{Black Skin, White Masks}, Werner Sollors’s \textit{Interracialism: Black-White Intermarriage in American History, Literature, & Law} and \textit{Neither White Nor Black Yet Both: Thematic Explorations of Interracial Literature}} The mulattoes were not full citizens and felt disdain toward the whites and, in certain cases, solidarity with their black mothers and other slaves; while at the same time, the mulattoes coveted the culture and lifestyle of their white European fathers and owned land and slaves— their own prosperity jeopardized by the prospect of freedom for slaves. As C.L.R. James puts it, “The advantages of being white were so obvious that race prejudice against the Negroes permeated the minds of the Mulattoes who so bitterly resented the same thing from the whites. Black slaves and Mulattoes hated each other. The free blacks… were not many, and so despised was the black skin that even a Mulatto slave felt himself superior to the free black man. The Mulatto, rather than be slave to a black, would have killed himself.”\footnote{C.L.R James’s \textit{The Black Jacobins} 42-3} In other words, these mixed-race individuals are pulled in directions that contradict their blurred social statuses. This particular conundrum of choosing death rather than be remanded to slavery links the development of the revenge tragedy and the tragic flaw in literature to being mulatto, associating ambiguous, interracial status as something ultimately catastrophic and deadly. As we shall see, this has profound consequences for the development of “tragic mulatto” literature in the United States.

Ultimately, the fascinations and concerns with the intermingling of blacks and whites in
French, Caribbean and U.S. histories are symbolic of the inherent fervor of the nineteenth-century cultural milieu. French romantic literature embraces themes of nationalism, nature, exoticism, individualism, liberalism and morality—many of the political ideals that fueled the events leading to the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the fall of the Bastille. In turn, these examples urged revolutions in both the U.S. and France, and subsequently influenced the revolt in Saint-Domingue—the Haitian Revolution of 1791. Conflicts and war, along with the political and social uprisings that accompany such events, inspired an outpouring of nationalist romantic literature that spoke to both commoners and the aristocracy, seeking to forge a connection between the classes. The planters’ perspectives on plantations and the slave trade, the revisiting of the code noir, along with the cultural climate in early nineteenth-century France, the aftereffects of the revolution, and colonial interests in the Caribbean became a vexed context for which French literary themes ultimately melded with African and African American subjects abroad in Europe, in the Caribbean, and in the U.S. In Saint-Domingue, the population of white Frenchmen numbered approximately forty thousand and governed almost five hundred thousand African slaves. Low birth rates in the colony signify that two out of three slaves were born and reared in Africa, spoke an African language, observed an African religion, and remembered what it was like to be free. By proximity, Saint-Domingue and her slaves retained a closer bond to Africa than allowable to slaves held captive in the United States. In this way, the colony became a transamerican point of cultural transmission—Africans and their descendants in the Caribbean, as well as their cultures and traditions, captivated African American intellectuals and tendered a bond to a homeland that many U.S. slaves knew little about.

The cultural context of the early nineteenth-century French literati’s fascination with abolitionism, the tumultuous events of the 1791 revolution in Haiti, the conditions of slavery in
the United States, and the revisiting of the code noir in socio-political discourse becomes the
crux of this transamerican dissemination. Reading through the lens of the code noir and its
apprehensions about racial mixing, while considering the psychological plight of the African-
descended slave or free black at the same time, sheds new light upon these French romantic
narratives’ impact upon early nineteenth-century African American literature. Early nineteenth-
century French romantic authors adapted archetypal narrative structures regarding mistaken
identity, servitude, murder and vengeance from traditional British and European literatures to the
slavery stories they were learning from the Caribbean colonies and the United States. These
narratives incorporate not only romantic and melodramatic stories of mistaken identity, but also
the curious undercurrents of nobility and aristocratic bloodlines of highborn African characters—
not necessarily magnanimous in the sense of Chateaubriand’s noble savage, but still significant
once we consider the lineages that dominated the feudal system in Europe. Individually, these
narratives are biographical melodramas, swashbuckling adventures, macabre parables, social
commentaries, or subversive treatises; while broadly the characters’ developments exemplify the
French colonizers, creole, mulatto, and slave communities in the Caribbean, as well as
descendants of Africans living in France, or slaves, free blacks, and their progenies living in the
United States. In some way, all of the tales critique the double standards at the heart of the
concept of heredity. These French narratives’ concerns with racial mixing and the striations of
economic class, together with attention to various taxonomical attributes and degrees of skin
color, become powerful fodder for masking and doubling in later nineteenth-century U.S.
fictions. The continued amendments to the code noir during this tumultuous span of late
eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century French and U.S. history also informs nineteenth-century
African American authored tragic mulatto and passing narratives vis-à-vis the authors’ attempts
to assemble and revise an African American identity.

Moreover, much as in France, the nineteenth-century U.S. intelligentsia embraced romantic models in art, philosophy, and even politics because these liberal ideals of individual freedom reinvigorated the revolutionary spirit of America just as the United States revolution encouraged the French revolution, which in turn inspired the revolt in Saint-Domingue. With these ideals in mind, we can more easily discern the appeal that these historical contexts and humanistic concerns offered early nineteenth-century African American authors. Beyond these inspirations, the literary products of these French romantic authors and earliest African American authored fictions are connected by common threads—a misunderstood threat of racial mixing, rebellion, and the melodramatic and restricted plight of their characters’ indeterminate and fluid identities. At the same time, these works cultivate the tragic mulatto/a narrative in American literature, and therefore, contribute to the rise of masking as a literary device in early African American literature. However, with the exception of chronological dates of publication and the placement of the initial framing device of the mask in each tale, the familiar characteristics and narrative attributes shared among these three texts repeat, link, and intersect without following any particular linear pattern. Although I use historical events and context as a lens through which to argue the existence of a sphere of contemporary influence for these authors, the composition of this literary history encompasses these narratives in divergent and convergent forms.

Unquestionably there were three popular, early nineteenth-century French narratives that function here as kindred literary forbears of the tragic mulatto narrative in American literature and of the development of masking as a trope in the literature of racial mixture: Claire de Durfort Duras’ 1823 novella *Ourika*, Victor Hugo’s 1826 novel *Bug-Jargal*, and Gustave de Beaumont’s 1835 *Marie, or Slavery in the United States*. 
Together these “sibling” texts, written just a few years apart, incorporate similar narrative elements that influence and advance into the earliest nineteenth-century African American authored fictions. In fact, each of these authors were born into refined liberal families, were renowned in their contemporary society—sharing interests in politics, abolitionism, and the arts—and mingled with the dwindling aristocracy, participating in literary and theatrical salons with other well-known writers and artists of Afro-Caribbean or African-American descent, including Victor Séjour, Alexandre Dumas, and William Wells Brown, who are addressed in other chapters of this dissertation. Hugo, Duras and Beaumont were not only familiar with the French works of Chateaubriand de Gouges, Madame de Staël, Honoré de Balzac and Charles Bissette, but also American writers such as Washington Irving and James Fenimore Cooper.17 Hugo’s memoirs also clarify that he had met Claire de Duras and Gustave de Beaumont, aristocrat and patron of the arts that he was, before serving alongside de Beaumont during Louis-Phillipe’s reign.18 With these associations in mind, I contend that an atmosphere of sharing—appropriation and revision of tropes, allusions, names, situations and narratological devices—flourished among the French romantic writers, especially the liberal aristocrats and abolitionists. What becomes clear is that the influence of these writers and their works about Africans displaced by the slave trade in the Caribbean, France, and even the United States, ultimately inspires a young African American writer from Louisiana, Victor Séjour, to publish the first work of African American fiction, “The Mulatto,” which I discuss in Chapter Four.

These early French fictions are not the first, however, to incorporate characters of African descent. According to John Fowles, “previous portrayals of Africans in the French tradition are

17 Chateaubriand, the first author to discuss noble savage in Atale was Alexis de Tocqueville’s uncle; also Prosper Mérimée’s Tamango incorporates the stereotype of the noble savage.
18 “A charming and very witty woman, the Duchess de Duras, used to say: ‘Desdemona, what an ugly name! Fie!’” The Memoirs of Victor Hugo (Hugo 2).
timid and vague.” For example, Olympe de Gouges’ *L’esclavage des noirs l’heureux naufragage* (1789), and Madame de Staël’s *Mirza* (1795), constitute “contrived humanitarian efforts: the black characters introduced are used to provoke reflection on the lives of slaves; they are not seen as individuals with psychological depth.”19 Examining these early literary reactions to slavery reveals something more than an intrinsic interest in and sympathy for the plights of slaves that the French public, especially intellectuals, associated with the Declaration of the Rights of Man. Instead, these texts expose French readers’ passions for the drama and adventures associated with war, rebellion, and racial and interracial identity in France, the Caribbean, and the wider Americas. At the same time, the authors of these texts extend the various thematic approaches to masking, blurring the boundaries of these devices by connecting them to interracial characters, and provoking the Code noir. The sociopolitical critiques evident in the intertextuality of these novels demonstrate how the narratives extend into an interracial and a transamerican context, especially in terms of transamerican spaces and slave rebellions, exploring specific elements within each novel that contribute to the evolution of masking as a trope in early African American literature. These characters move beyond earlier, superficial portraits of blacks by establishing a humanistic commonality and empathy; particularly Ourika’s refinement and intellect, Bug-Jargal’s sense of honor and nobility, and Marie’s strongly developed morality. Bearing these ideas in mind, the trope of the tragic mulatto/a in early nineteenth-century African American literature owes its development to the liberal French romantic fascination with the Haitian Revolution, the repeated device of the narrative mask and appropriated images and allusions of the mask, the veil and secret identities in connection with interracial legal statuses.

Each of these texts uses the literary device of a framing narrator, or mask, as well as

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19 Fowles xi
literal and metaphorical allusions throughout the works that point to masking secrets—especially in regard to disguising racial identity—to tell their stories. Duras’s novella *Ourika* takes the model of the aristocratic African a step further by exploring the tale of a young African orphan who is purchased and taken back to France and, much like a souvenir, given to a wealthy benefactress to be reared alongside her grandchildren. Ourika receives the finest education, acquires refined tastes, but subsequently learns that despite her refined qualities, she is disqualified from marrying into the society to which she has become accustomed. At the same time, exiled from her own culture and ethnic identity, she lives a doubled existence, an internal and external struggle with the statutes of the code noir by hiding her emotions and covering her blackness with a full-length veil.\(^{20}\) Hugo’s novel *Bug-Jargal* first took form as a short story, a tale of camaraderie between an aristocratic Captain in the French army and a gallant African prince reduced to slavery in Saint-Domingue. Set during the 1791 Haitian revolution, the early version of the tale explores their fraternal relationship based upon a mutual respect and admiration for their paralleled aristocratic upbringings and fundamental integrity. Although this complex relationship persists in the novel, Hugo revises the narrative to include a shared female love interest, as well as a few minor characters of indeterminate racial status in the colony, who together insert a veiled subtext of racial mixing into the plot. Tragically, the lives of Bug-Jargal and Ourika end because of two very different manifestations of rebellion linked to the French Atlantic slave trade—netted in the inability to reconcile social status and color, and symbolized by the costumed and veiled Habibrah. Finally, Beaumont’s *Marie* builds upon this association between social status and color, rebellion and masking with similar results—Marie’s family repeatedly moves her throughout the United States trying to escape the knowledge of her mother’s mixed-race, Creole status. Combining a historical sub-context of French colonization to

\(^{20}\) Perhaps inspires DuBois to incorporate and develop the metaphor of the veil in *The Souls of Black Folk*. 
the more prominent plot set in the early nineteenth-century U.S. slavery system, and offering a mixed-race main character—the first U.S.-born tragic mulatto character in fiction—Beaumont masquerades as a novel what is essentially a social critique of nineteenth-century U.S. culture. Together these three French romantic texts, written just a few years apart, incorporate narrative elements that influence and evolve into the earliest nineteenth-century African American authored fictions.
Chapter One

French Facades: Cloistering and the Subtleties of Veiled Insurgence in Ourika

Beginning with a once forgotten narrative by Claire de Durfort Duras, a duchess who created a highly acclaimed literary salon upon her return to France after the revolution, the veiled character Ourika evolved from a true story of an orphaned African girl rescued from slavery by a French aristocrat. Duras first recited the story of Ourika to a group of aristocrats in her literary salon, publishing the first editions anonymously in 1823; however, the novella’s popularity among French readers resulted in many subsequent editions and by 1824 Ourika became a “national obsession.”21 I propose the likelihood that other writers included in this dissertation, especially Hugo, Beaumont, Séjour, and Dumas, likely would have been familiar with Duras’s work through attendance at one of her salon gatherings, although escaping her novella’s widespread popularity would have been difficult. The text holds a place as the first European publication with a black, female heroine and indeed, is one of the first texts to draw public sympathy for blacks and mulattos in France. Crossing national borders, the novella’s story was so incredibly influential throughout Europe that soon there were at least four plays, two poems and a painting inspired by Duras’s narrative.22 Despite the intensity of the French abolitionist movement in the decade before Ourika was published, the success of the text amongst the “French public—a public exposed to little dialogue about slavery other than the code noir’s ever-wilder fantasies of the black threat to racial purity” renders the novella’s reception even more compelling.23 By 1786, when the Chevalier de Boufflers brings the real Ourika to France, the early stirrings of the French revolution had suspended the antiquated court system and the royal

21 During the early 1820s Duras wrote five novellas, two were published during her lifetime, Ourika (1824) and Edouard (1825), yet all of them were read or heard by her close circle of friends (O’Connell 50).
22 DeJean, Waller viii
23 DeJean, Waller x ; See also Daget 530-31
decrees on slavery and race. Regardless whether or not there were laws in place at precisely the same time, the cultural mood was one obsessed with race and color. When first published in 1823, the text itself wore a mask and bore a secret—“the title page carried neither an author’s name nor a date” and “was privately printed—only 25-40 copies.”24 The obsession with Ourika crossed national borders as well. In 1826, Goethe wrote Alexander von Humboldt, who mentioned the letter to Duras, that he had been “overwhelmed by the novel.”25

Although Claire Lechat de Kersaint, duchesse de Duras, is not as well-known as perhaps she should be, her name is readily associated with Chateaubriand as his benefactress; he called Duras his “dear sister.” She promoted his political and diplomatic career from approximately 1810 until her death in 1828.26 Born on March 22, 1777, Claire Duras, nee Claire-Louise Lechat de Coëtmempren de Kersaint was born into the generation and class most affected by the French revolution.27 Her father, the count of Kersaint, a member of the liberal aristocracy, initially favored the Revolution, yet because of the split between the conservative and radical aristocratic factions, shared the fate of many of his peers by voting against the execution of Louis XIV.28 After her father’s death, Duras escaped France with her mother, visiting a few different locations over the period of approximately fifteen years. For the purposes of this study, it is particularly significant that Duras and her mother first traveled to the U.S.—Philadelphia—and then to the Caribbean to “recover her mother’s considerable inheritance.”29 Considering the restrictions of the code noir placed on women descended from creole families, and more so, recognizing the

24 The “second edition released in three printings of one thousand copies each… sold… so quickly that …a month later two thousand additional copies were printed.” Next in that year, a pirated edition and a second ‘French’ edition published in St. Petersburg” (DeJean, Waller viii).
25 cited by Scheler 29 [n30].; DeJean, Waller viii-ix
26 O’Connell 48
27 DeJean, Waller vii
28 The Girondins were partial to keeping the deposed king under arrest, both as a hostage and a guarantee for the future. The more radical members — mainly the Commune and the Parisian deputies who would be soon known as the Mountain — argued for Louis’s immediate execution.(wiki)exec: 1793 [April 2010]; DeJean, Waller vii
29 DeJean, Waller viii
limits that would have bound Duras’s mother had she been of mixed-race ancestry, this vague information questions why the securing of a French aristocratic female’s inheritance would be dependent upon a visit to the slave colony of Martinique.\textsuperscript{30}

Some critics suggest that the Duras’s trip to Martinique exposes Clare to slavery and a large mixed-race community, thus influencing her decision to tell a story like Ourika; however, Miller discusses how Clare Duras was “directly linked to the plantation-slave system.”\textsuperscript{31} In fact, Clare’s mother was descended from “one of the most illustrious families of the island: her great-great-grandfather was Francois d’Alesso, marquis d’Eragny and governor of the French islands of America in 1691… his son stayed on Martinique, and the family became important landowners.” Although Miller cites biographical information suggesting that Clare’s mother did go to Martinique, he is quick to point out that there is no evidence to support that Clare Duras actually accompanied her. Therefore, was the trip to Martinique the only inspiration for Duras’s telling of Ourika, or is she also working through some conflict regarding a question surrounding her own heritage and also influenced by experiences in the slave colony? Any discussion of the possibility of racial-mixing in the Duras family’s colonial ancestry is also excluded from the historiographical studies of her work; yet with racial mixing being prevalent for approximately one hundred years in the French colonies, it is not too obscure an hypothesis. As one of the “largest landholding and slave-owning families on the island,” the likelihood that Clare Duras’s mother may have been descended from a mixed-race ancestry is as certain as is it ambiguous. The point here is that the tenuous classifications of nation and color surrounding French creoles born before the 1777 addendums to the code noir serve blur the rigid categories of female identity. Regardless of the bloodlines of her mother’s family, the code noir would have classified

\textsuperscript{30} See Miller 159-162
\textsuperscript{31} Miller, 159
Clare Duras’s mother as white or French because of her marriage, or, the year she made residence in the mainland, which was the case with all mixed-race individuals until later, xenophobic revisions.  

Moreover, the Durases prolonged exile included periods in vital émigré communities such as Switzerland and London, locations that I suggest would secure their ability to pass for white, if necessary, until Claire could be wedded and obtain a position. In London, Claire met the Duke of Dufort and soon to be of Duras, from another prominent French family devastated during the revolution, and they were married in 1797. The couple returned to France in 1808, and following the restoration of the Monarchy in 1814, their lifestyles were significantly different: “the duke was given important functions at court, while his wife presided over a brilliant salon in their apartment in Tuileries Palace.” While revising her own life, Claire de Duras also improved upon the true story of a Senegalese girl named Ourika, brought to France by Chevalier de Boufflers in 1786, grew up in the Hôtel de Beauvau and died at the age of sixteen. In fact, as educated and refined females whose lifestyles prepared them for marriage, Ourika’s skin color

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32 “Virtually from the beginning of its colonialist enterprise, France has instituted the most intricate official policy on race ever devised by a European nation. The earliest version of the Code noir... was signed into forbidding interracial effect by Louis XIV at Versailles in 1685, and throughout the eighteenth century was frequently reissued...[becoming] more specific in each revision, as legislators worked to close loopholes that gave some slaves rights and freedoms” (DeJean, Waller ix). The original draft of the Code noir states that if a free white man in the colonies marries a slave woman, she is automatically free; however, the 1711 version introduces laws forbidding interracial marriage (and therefore eliminating one means by which slaves could theoretically become free). A last means of escape remained, however: a slave brought to France by his or her master became free. Even this loophole was gradually closed by measures introduced in revisions of the code issued between 1716 and 1762. Finally, in 1777, the king forbade access to France to any ‘Black, mulatto, or other person of color’ on the grounds that ‘negroes are multiplying every day in France’ and that, as a result, ‘their marriages with Europeans are becoming more frequent’ and ‘bloodlines are being altered’ “ (Sala-Molins 220) (DeJean, Waller x).“It is estimated that during the entire eighteenth century no more than one thousand to five thousand slaves reached French soil—hardly the “prodigious quantity” evoked by the 1777 Code noir. (Sala-Molins 220). “…as soon as the French learned of the slave insurrection and the massacre of settlers in Santo Domingo (among the most repressive colonial regimes) in 1791, the fledgling French abolitionist movement was all but wiped out. A law abolishing slavery (although not the slave trade) was passed in 1794 but never went into effect; the Code noir was reimposed in 1802 and reaffirmed in 1805” (DeJean, Waller x).

33 DeJean, Waller viii

34 DeJean, Waller viii ; See also Miller 176
becomes her only obstacle. “Not only was Duras’s heroine brought to France after the law forbidding the country to all people of color had gone into effect; once there, Ourika proceeded to live out the very scenarios that French law had been attempting to ward off for a century and a half. She believes herself the equal of the French and even dares to fall in love with one of them.”

Ourika’s story begins during post-revolutionary France in a nunnery on the left bank of Paris, and the main character is an orphaned young girl from Senegal. The skewed migration of the racialized and masked character, transported to France rather than to a French colony, brings new problems of race, gender, and sexuality to the foreground of the narrative as it subtly critiques the stipulations of the code noir. Sheltered and privileged, Ourika’s female status is complicated only by her race. A narrative mask frames the tale, a fictional physician, who calls to examine the depressed and frail main character, Ourika; he interviews Ourika and shares her story. The doctor’s introduction not only connects the narrative style to the literary device of the mask, Ourika’s mask strongly resembles an essay of validation or a statement of honesty in the opening pages of slave narratives and other works written by antebellum minorities and former slaves. The doctor authenticates while also subtly diagnosing Ourika’s own malaise in order to let the audience to draw its own socio-cultural conclusions. Miller claims that any attempt to call this text abolitionary is miscalculated because Duras never mentions abolitionism, however, I would disagree, citing that the textual omissions are where this dialogue begins. The popularity of Duras’s text, as well as the narrative’s vague mentions about the crowds of aristocrats in Mme d B.’s drawing room discussing the revolution, whispering about slave rebellions, and questioning Ourika’s place, suggests that the French public would have considered the

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35 DeJean, Waller x
36 Miller 176
unmentioned topics in their own parlor chats. Certainly in the salons of the Parisian literati—including mixed-race authors and playwrights such as Dumas and Séjour—the topics of Africans, free blacks, and mixed-race individuals, alongside the contradictions of the code noir, slavery, and abolitionism fueled opinions and heated debates, even if public decorum required an air of covertness.

By developing her narrative from the position of a masked narrator and a veiled protagonist who hides her love for another, slowly exposed to essentially secret (at least to Ourika) social hierarchies, Duras subversively questions slavery by writing the same conclusion popular in many nineteenth-century U.S. novels—death because of unrequited love, sorrow, or outcast status. Duras literally and figuratively develops the social and psychological struggles inherent in the colonial system about living and mixing among ethnicities, races, and social classes, into a melodramatic tale about an African in France. Choosing these devices and reconciling Ourika’s suppressed status with death, Duras places her character into a literary genealogy that links masking to issues surrounding interracialism, tragic mulatto and passing narratives in African American literature. Although Ourika and Bug-Jargal share similar symbolism by incorporating a veil motif, each author indeed appropriates and explicates the literary device in very different ways. In contrast to Bug-Jargal, which in its revised novel form personifies the interracial anxieties through the ambiguous mulatto dwarf Habibrah, the historical context more subtly conveys the connections between the veil and interracialism in Ourika.\textsuperscript{37} In Ourika, the main character’s gendered and interracial status can only be metaphorical—inferred by her isolation within white, upper-class French society, which has allowed her to experience freedom and equality, but only to a certain degree, and only within the confines of a black

\textsuperscript{37} Even more subtle than the evident tensions we see within Hugo’s love triangle between Pierrot, Marie and d’Auverney.
woman’s legal status. Having grown up in France with a wealthy benefactress and treated as an equal among her family and friends, Ourika suffers upon being forced to accept her racial difference. Realizing that her status, based solely on her skin color, relegates her to separate treatment and expectations, Ourika begins literally veiling and covering any exposed skin, and by the time she tells her story, she has “taken the veil and resides in a nunnery,” which introduces a theme of racialized confinement into the literary genealogy. Certainly, these ideas are evident in a great many works by female authors during the same period, particularly in works by Mary Wollstencraft, Mary Shelley, George Eliot, Jane Austen and the Brontës, in order to comment on the subjugated status of women; however, Duras examines how race and color compound a woman’s marginalized status.38 Ourika dons the veil to hide what she is, and rather than cover a secret, she masks the color of her skin to represent her loss of personhood.

At the same time, Duras masks the fictional liberties that she has taken with the real Ourika’s history, allowing her character to live life that foregrounds the revolutionary period as an externalization of Ourika’s personal rebellion. Duras’s version takes liberties with the tradition that the young slave that Bouflers brings to France in dies at sixteen, stating instead that Ourika’s new life begins when she is two years-old. Ourika’s figurative death accompanies the realization of her color and class at the age of fifteen, her coming of age so to speak, much like female characters in other nineteenth-century novels about gender and social status, maturation, and independence. When Ourika overhears one of Mme de B.’s friends discussing her lack of position as a black African in France and the impossibility of her marrying—especially to a white man—while also pointing out that Ourika would be too highly refined and educated to be an average freeman’s prospect, the text takes a turn toward the tragic. Ultimately,

38 Informed by Gilbert & Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic.
Ourika sees no way out of her situation and chooses to join an order of Ursuline nuns where she suffers from “prolonged and acute melancholia” and dies soon after telling her story (Duras 4).

Although we have a general idea for the date of the doctor’s interview, the text lacks dates as concrete markers of time. Instead, the various references Ourika makes to actions throughout the French revolution—the death of the King, the death of Robespierre—as well as numerous slave revolts in the colonies and the U.S., evokes the chronology of the tale. In *Ourika*, the mask’s introduction, frames the tale with a prologue that reveals Ourika’s death.39 The mention of various rebellions serves to parallel the personal rebellion that Ourika fights against her racialized social status. The “anticlerical” doctor proposes that she is a “new victim of the convent system” when indeed Ourika is also a disregarded remnant, a reminder of the dissolved French colonies, aristocracy and families dissected during the slave trade, as well as disputed bloodlines (Duras 3). However, he is surprised to learn that she is “a negress” and that her sorrow stems from her life outside the cloister (Duras 4). The white-doctor endorses black-Ourika as the next narrator when he states that she possesses “welcoming grace of manner and the elegant simplicity of her language.”40 The first glimpse the narrator shares of Ourika illustrates her as marginalized and obscured: “sitting at the edge of a long hedged path, almost entirely hidden by a large black veil” (Duras 3). The description of the veil that shrouds “almost” her entire body literally masks and conceals Ourika’s features and her color. The veil also represents her religious vocation, which she romantically enters more for the love of a man than a love of God. In this way, the veil becomes more than a representation of her color, a place to hide, and a symbol of her subjugation. Here, Duras makes a distinct connection between

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39 For example the forward to Phillis Wheatley’s poetry, Olaudah Equiano and Frederick Douglass’s narratives, et al.
40 Duras 4
oppression and its effects on the psychological development of the oppressed. Ourika tells the doctor that she struggles with insomnia, fever, and “a constant feeling of being weighed down” (Duras 4). Choosing the veil and life in the nunnery signifies her marginalized status because she consents to the doctrine of her colonizer; however, her acceptance of the oppressive religious social structure becomes as deadly as rebelling against the one that constrains her.

Much like the country of France after the revolution, Ourika’s body is devastated after suffering a long battle. As the doctor describes the convent, the Church, and its cloisters and tombstones as damaged “during the Revolution,” Duras constructs a multifaceted allusion that blurs the convent’s buildings, Ourika’s body, France and the aristocracy, and the slave trade—all negated and dismembered by the revolutions in France and Saint Domingue (Duras 3). The doctor’s words “destroyed” and “broken” describe the condition of Ourika’s body as well as foreshadow her death. She confesses to the doctor that she has found “peace of mind” and is “happy,” but fears her desire to live “may be too late” (Duras 5). The doctor silently concurs, but encourages Ourika to think positively and she agrees to tell him her story. The author’s use of this fictional persona serves a purpose beyond framing the tale and points to specific allusions that develop throughout the narrative. Ourika’s heart manipulates her mental state, as well as her awareness of the ambiguities surrounding France’s perpetually changing legislations on slavery.

Setting the tale in the disingenuous space of freedom—not the Caribbean colonies, Louisiana Territory, nor the U.S., but in the space of the post-Revolutionary France—allows for a deeper exploration of the socio-psychological effects of the Black Trans-Atlantic slave trade and the ways that slavery conflicts with the occidental mythos of civilized society.41 France did not want African slavery tainting the homeland. Initially, France’s code noir limited the freedoms of

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41 France as colonizer and issuer of the code noir in 1685 and strongly exclusionary western religious hypocrisy (Louis XIV).
slaves in the French colonies and controlled the activities of their owners, but because of the “Freedom Principle,” a slave from a colony became a free individual once s/he lands in France. Understanding a slave’s status in France becomes blurred by the provisions of the Edict of 1716, which adds that slave owners could bring their slaves to France and maintain their chattel status only if the slave owner complies with certain conditions and verifies that their slaves have been brought to France for occupational or religious instruction. Unregistered, or, never officially acknowledged by the Parlement of Paris, the Edict of 1716, as well as the Declaration of 1738—which specified that slaves whose owners failed to adhere to procedure would no longer be granted freedom in France but would be instead sent to the colonies as slaves—was tenuous and difficult to enforce. As the country’s legislations became more concerned with racial mixture and the rising number of nonwhites than with freedom, Louis XVI created the “Déclaration pour la police des Noirs” in 1777, which forbade the entrance of any “Black, mulatto, or other person of color” into France and reasserted that slaves brought to France before the law’s declaration could not take legal action to fight for their freedom. Textually, Duras subtly suggests the notion that Ourika’s emancipation is masked, while contextually, the French public would have been most aware of the legal complications. Reared with all of the benefits of an education, wealth, and freedom, Ourika will never authentically know freedom because of the new provisions of race law in France.

By granting her character freedom in a space of inequality that somehow masquerades as equality, Duras indirectly asserts the psychological effects of being a slave and a victim of prejudice. But the text also foregrounds the cognitive dissonance of a larger post-revolutionary, slave-holding culture, which champions freedom as French realization while also denied upon the very soil of the homeland. Furthermore, much like the threat of interracial relationships in

42 Sala-Molins 220.
Bug-Jargal, the implied allusions to racial mixing in Ourika demonstrate a psychological conundrum for the mixed-race individual. Moreover, this is precisely the element of the text that I believe informs W.E.B. DuBois’s metaphor for the experience of a post-reconstruction antebellum black subject in U.S. society as “double-consciousness” and living “behind the veil” in his work The Souls of Black Folk. For Duras, the fear of racial mixing and oppression deemed by race represents the threat of a mixed-race coupling between Ourika and Charles; that is, the narrative’s concern with racial mixing is not embodied by a physically-imposing character, but by the French revolution and society’s standards of class and color. The mask becomes a tangible but dualistic symbol of oppression in the first few lines of the novella. Ourika tells the doctor: “I didn’t regret being black. I was told I was an angel. There was nothing to warn me that the color of my skin might be a disadvantage. I saw very few other children. I had only one friend my own age, [Mme de B.’s grandson Charles,] and my dark skin never meant he did not like me” (Duras 9). When Ourika explains how she had been reared with her benefactress’s grandchildren and given all of the same material privileges and how Mme de B. and her circle of friends spoil her with gifts and hold her “up as the most clever and endearing of children,” the text suggests that equality is a tangible conception (Duras 7). At the same time, the language suggests that the young girl is treated more as a pet or a doll. Ourika is exoticized and cloistered by the family and the French aristocracy, “dressed in oriental costume, seated at Mme de B.’s feet” while the grandchildren are sent away to school (Duras 8)\(^4\). Although Ourika’s education takes place in the isolation and safety of Mme de B.’s estate, she learns singing, painting, dancing—and to speak English and Italian. Mme de B. primitivizes Ourika when she “praise[s] her natural grace,” yet she arranges and encourages Ourika’s “extensive reading” in literature and poetry (Duras 9-43 The suggestion of being costumed and at one’s feet strongly resembles the descriptions of Habibrah as servant to D’Auverney’s uncle in Bug-Jargal.)
In many ways, the mental and physical costuming of Ourika in the text functions to deny the brutalities of revolutions and of slavery. When Mme de B. throws a lovely gathering, “a ball—ostensibly for her grandsons, but really to display [Ourika],” the text and the character become more self-aware (Duras 10). At the party, Ourika represents Africa in “a quadrille symbolizing the four corners of the globe” (Duras 10). As she believes herself to be, Ourika is the center of attention; however, neither her innocence, nor her intellect, allow her to differentiate between adoration and buffoonery—she dances what she is told is the “national dance of Africa, the comba” (Duras 10). Ourika, unaware of her precarious social status and ignorant of the codependent and slippery classifications of her race, readily performs a contrived minstrel show with a male partner who “cover[s] his face in a mask of black crepe, a disguise [Ourika] [does] not need.” She confesses to the doctor that although she reflects back on the dance and the mask with sadness, “but at the time, it meant nothing to [her]” (Duras 10). Later in Ourika’s account, this masking becomes more personal and more tangible. She removes the mirrors from her bedroom, and begins wearing glasses as well as clothing that conceals her “neck and arms” (Duras 28). When Ourika leaves the house, she wears “a large hat with a veil” that she frequently keeps on indoors, and she confesses that she pretends to be “invisible” (Duras 28).

I am stressing Ourika’s initial ignorance and naïveté regarding her color and class status, and her consequently numb and slow reactions because in these ways, her character corresponds with light-skinned, tragic mulatta characters uncertain of their parentage in nineteenth-century fictions. Similarly, Ourika becomes a prototype for African-American characters that choose to

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44 Primitivizing, but with an air of gendered marginalization, while the costuming and placement of Hugo’s mixed-race Habibrah/Obi is more so, not to mention the way D’Auverney exoticizes Pierrot by praising his aristocratic social attributes; (Duras 8).
pass, or to cross the color line, in order to enjoy the benefits their light skin grants them in white
society. Ourika has known no other way of life other than living among the French aristocracy. Therefore, her acceptance of her color and of the way the rest of society views her is perhaps
ultimately as tragic. The difference being that Ourika can only represent the threat of racial
mixing—and she will not be birthing brown nor racially indeterminate babies. The menace she
embodies becomes clear when a few days after the ball, Ourika overhears a conversation that she
describes as “end[ing] her childhood” (Duras 11). Duras not only locates Ourika outside of the
French aristocrats’ discussion, but also places the unwilling subject behind a screen at a table
where she is hidden and marginalized, her identity masked between the window and the “large
lacquer screen” as she listens to Mme de B. and the “bleakly practical” marquise (Duras 11).45
Although the marquise remarks positively about Ourika’s charm and intellect, she asks what
Mme de B. plans to “[do] with her,” to which Mme de B. replies, “the more seriously I think
about it, the further away the solution seems. I see the poor girl alone, always alone in the world”
(Duras 12). At this point in the narrative, Ourika recognizes her difference, recognizes that she is
not like those around her, but her cognition of her situation and her acceptance of it are mutually
exclusive. Ourika tells the doctor, “I comprehended it all. I was black. Dependent, despised,
without fortune, without resource, without a single other being of my kind to help me through
life. All I had been until then was a toy, an amusement for my mistress; and soon I was to be cast
out of a world that could never admit me” and “everything grew dark” (Duras 13). Walled up in
darkness, Ourika continues listening to the marquise’s position that Mme de B. is “making
[Ourika’s] misery certain” by keeping her around. The marquise’s concern is that the fifteen
year-old black girl somehow makes her own class more vulnerable, noting that Ourika’s
intelligence and education distance her from any man that would stoop to marry her “even

45 In Charlotte Brontë’s novel, the orphaned Jane Eyre hides behind a screen in a similar scene of self-realization.
supposing you could bribe some fellow to father mulatto children” (Duras 13). Mme de B. believes that Ourika “still knows nothing” about issues of color, adding, “perhaps one day she will rise above her fate” (Duras 13). In the same way that an African American passing character enters white society and struggles to maintain a white identity, the marquise is certain that Ourika “has flouted her natural destiny” and “entered society without its permission” and that [society] will have its revenge” (Duras 14). Again, Duras’s text sets the standard for this kind of racially self-conscious recognition played out with the language and dichotomies of light and dark: “illusions like daylight. When they go, all becomes night” (Duras 14).

The consistent allusions to rebellion, displacement, racial mixing, and darkness of the soul are also developed in subsequent tragic mulatto and passing narratives; and in Duras’s text, these interracial issues are played out, or projected, in the imagination.46 When Ourika explains that her “besieged” body began to feel like a warzone “hounded by contempt” and “misplaced in society,” the narrative bends toward the threat of racial mixing. Of course Ourika’s unrequited love for Charles magnifies the text’s concern with marriage and child bearing, but rather than mingle with the aristocratic class she was reared in, Ourika sees herself as “destined to be the bride of some venal ‘fellow’ who might condescend to get half-breed children on [her]” (Duras 14). Depressed by “misfortune” and “mistrust,” Ourika describes feeling her “soul had crept back inside itself” which alters her appearance like a mask, and how her facial transformations shock the family enough to send for a doctor (Duras 15).47 Ourika’s “ungrateful” darkness is “resent[ful]” and “obsessed [with] endless permutations of the same thoughts…endowed with the darkest colors” (Duras 15). As Ourika elaborates on the negative turn her thoughts take, the text allows her to view herself through the eyes of her colonizer: “my face revolted me… my

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46 Especially in publications subsequent to Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin.
47 For example in Edgar Allan Poe’s, short story Lygeia the visage transforms—also in Séjour’s The Mulatto, and especially Bertha in Jane Eyre.
black hands looked like monkey’s paws” (Duras 16). She internalizes the prejudices of the white society that once embraced her, believing she is ugly and that her skin color is “the brand of shame” (Duras 16). In fact, as she frets over being alone and unloved, her thoughts touch on important contradictions within the subtle abolitionary context; she considers being returned to Senegal but Ourika and Duras are quick to conclude that no person there “could listen… or understand [her]” and that she “no longer belong[s] anywhere” (Duras 16). Ourika’s basic desires are no different from any other orphan—she yearns for the friends she can trust and the “bonds of family” (Duras 18). She believes Charles is her only friend, but she does not vocalize this to anyone. She unwittingly concludes that despite never feeling “especially religious,” practicing religion may have the ability to soothe her tortured emotions. She claims a “more religious than emotional” connection to Mme de B., but remains in denial that her feelings for Charles are more than sisterly. After Charles and his brother go abroad to school, Ourika continues to mask her emotions in sorrow, blaming her melancholy solely on the realization of how her blackness negates her social position.

Throughout Duras’s narrative Ourika expounds the virtues of Mme de B. and Charles—intelligence, wit, common sense, etc.—but regularly contradicts her statements. Within Ourika’s contradictions, the text’s baser concerns become clearer. Her inconsistencies arise from her struggle with a form of double consciousness wherein she only knows one way of life while being conscious that upon leaving her “protectors” she will be proscribed another, decided only by her blackness. As she praises Charles’s “fine enthusiasms…for justice and for truth,” she fails to clarify how he demonstrates these admirable attributes (Duras 25). She believes that they have no secrets from each other and that “to him, [her] companionship [is] like existence itself” while admitting she never spoke with him about the “irremediable stain of [her] color” (Duras 26-7).
When Ourika relates how she convinced herself that her feelings for Charles evolved into a more maternal and brotherly love, he suddenly accepts a proposal from a young and beautiful heiress, Anaïs de Thémines, and the intensity of the revolution and of Ourika’s emotions about Charles fester. Curiously, these dates and issues also mirror Duras’s own life narrative, stemming from the death of her father, her creole mother’s position afterward, their trip to Martinique to claim inheritance, continued exile, and Duras’s need to marry. Anaïs has survived a similar fate as both Duras and Ourika: “her entire family died, and in one day, beneath the guillotine” and her elderly guardian has a “duty to marry her off as soon as possible… frightened of having to leave her niece without family and protection” (Duras 30). With the exception of color, Anaïs’s sudden and immediate circumstances literally equate Ourika’s as she too is an orphaned female whose entire outlook on life changes within one day, reared with all the benefits of wealth and education who has reached the age at which a young aristocratic woman is expected to marry. Also like Anaïs, Ourika is dependent upon marriage to secure a position in society, and she wants to marry and create a family and a sense of authentic connection; but Ourika accepts that her color is the only difference between her person and Anaïs’s person and the only thing that excludes her from the same happiness. As Charles becomes more and more enamored with his fiancé and finally weds, Ourika repeatedly refers to the time that Charles spends with his new love as abandonment, claiming she is happy for him while at the same time she questions God for “condemn[ing] [her] to exist” and prays for death, which finally affects her health (Duras 33). When Charles gushes to Ourika about how much he loves Anaïs and wants to make her happy, and tells Ourika that he wants “a trust” in his marriage “exactly like yours and mine,” Ourika is hurt because he seems so ignorant about her own precarious fate (Duras 31). Although she states
she was truly happy for Charles, when he asks God what he has done to “deserve such luck?”

Ourika questions:

Why had that same God given poor Ourika life? Why wasn’t it ended on that slaver from which she had been snatched—or at her mother’s breast? A handful of African sand would have been enough to cover my small body, and I should have found it a light burden. What did the world care whether I lived? Why was I condemned to exist? Unless it was to live alone, always alone, and never loved. I prayed God not to let it be like this, to remove me from the face of the earth. Nobody needed me, I was isolated from all. This terrible thought gripped me with more violence than ever before. I felt myself sway, I fell to my knees, my eyes closed, and I thought I was going to die right there and then (Duras 33).

While the narrative confirms that Charles “ignor[es] the solitary secret of [Ourika’s] life [and] at the same time [takes] away [her] longing to tell him of it,” the text does not mention the 1733 royal edict that reversed the legalization of interracial marriage, abolished emancipation for the spouse, and “evicted” the “degenerated whites” from society as a new class, the *affranchise*. Indeed, this fact may have kept Charles from considering marriage to Ourika or any person of color (Duras 31).48

In many ways, Duras’s tale successfully omits the aspects of Ourika’s reality in post-revolutionary France that were likely excluded from her own sheltered and prescribed education, while also masking the narrative’s own position on the subject. Through the process of Ourika’s relating the tale, time, too, becomes masked. The mention of various rebellions serves to parallel the personal rebellion that Ourika wages against her racialized social status. Although Duras

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48 Dayan 296
offers a general idea for the date of the doctor’s interview, Ourika’s narration lacks specific dates and concrete markers of time. Instead, the tale structures a chronology through the various references to actions throughout the French revolution—the death of the King, the death of Robespierre—as well as numerous slave revolts in the colonies and the U.S. Ourika’s plight reflects the limited options the code noir offer to a person of color living in late eighteenth-century France, and concurrently, her situation establishes similar issues connected to the black codes that a person of color must adhere to in the nineteenth-century United States.49 The code noir would have questioned Ourika’s status from the time she arrived in France. Legally speaking, Ourika entered the country in 1786 as a slave because the law forbade free people of color to enter after 1777. This version of the code noir held until the early stirrings of the French revolution, and although the text suggests that Ourika’s choice to enter a convent is a desire to gain independence from Mme de B., another legal loophole would have allowed Ourika sanctuary in France if she agrees to religious instruction.50

As the narrative unfolds, the events that lead to the events that lead to Ourika’s taking the veil figuratively and literally are revealed in slow progression, resulting in a full-length, full-body veiling. She covers her body not only to mask her blackness, but also to mask the shame of her desires, which are especially dangerous because the object of her concealed affections is white. When Ourika suddenly learns that law prohibits a relationship with Charles and that despite the acceptance she feels in the home of her benefactress, she will never be accepted as equal among them, the narrative focuses on the same concerns about racial mixing that are evident in nineteenth-century U.S. tragic mulatto narratives. That is, she will never be an equal in

49 Of course there were many “anti-miscegenation” laws passed much earlier, for example in Britain’s colonies Virginia and Maryland during the 1630s, and France’s 1685 code noir restricted to the Louisiana Territory.
the home and family she grew up in, nor will she be an acceptable slave. In these ways, Ourika’s perceptions become doubled and more complex. She “consistently gives voice to the opinions of her aristocratic foster family, while adding her own views as a member of a ‘proscribed race.’”

Ourika confesses an inability to feel a connection with either race. She feels “deeply affected” by the question of “freedom for Negroes” because she “like[s] to cherish that elsewhere, at least, there [are] people like [her].” Yet, “the Santo Domingo massacres [cause her] a new, excruciating pain: Until then, [she] had been distressed at belonging to a proscribed race; now [she is] ashamed of belonging to a race of barbarians and murderers” (Duras 21).

In fact, the crux of the text develops from the first mention of the rebellion in Saint Domingue and demonstrates the way Ourika’s memories are wound up with the contemporary concerns of the French public during the revolution and restoration both in the homeland and the colonies. The phrase, “not long after the departure of Charles, the Revolution [takes] a more serious turn” refers not only to the war waging in France but also to her own chaotic mental state. The narrative begins to illustrate the change in the protagonist’s consciousness about her surroundings when she shares the influence of “the vast moral and political questions” that she overhears from the aristocrats in Mme de B.’s drawing room (Duras 18). Ourika states:

The Revolution brought a change in my views of life. It gave me a wisp of hope, and for a brief while I forgot my own problems. One is quick to grasp at any consolation, and I sensed that at the end of this chaos I might find my true place. When personal destiny was turned upside down, all social caste overthrown, all prejudices had disappeared, a state of affairs might one day come to pass where I would feel myself less exiled. If I truly possessed some superiority of mind, some hidden quality, then it would be
appreciated when my color no longer isolated me, as it had until then, in the heart of society. But it so happened that these very qualities that I saw in myself soon disabused me. I couldn’t for long desire so much present evil for my own small future good” (Duras 19).

Although the revolution briefly changes the protagonist’s view of her future, the positive effects fade with society’s inability to evolve beyond social caste and prejudice, which she describes in her criticism of the “fools” who congregated in Mme. De B’s drawing room, and their “false fraternity.” Ourika enjoys listening to the discussions until “the debates degenerated into quarrels” (Duras 20). In the passage where she first mentions overhearing the topic of emancipation for “Negroes,” she also acknowledges the “Santo Domingo massacres” which cause her the “fresh and heartrending sadness,” and again, the conundrum of feeling torn between “a race of outcasts” and “a race of barbarous murderers” (Duras 21). From this point in Ourika’s narration, Duras begins to inject the tale with an insider’s view of the French revolution. She refers to the incidents leading up to the Terror beginning with the mentioning June 20 1792 and August 10 1792; in fact, aside from the mentioning the deaths of Robespierre and Louis XVI, these are the only factual dates Duras includes.53 Ourika explains how Mme de

52 “I used to tell myself that, poor negress though I was, I still belonged with all the noblest spirits, because of our shared longing for justice. The day when decency and truth were victorious would be their day of triumph, and mine. But that day was sadly remote” (Duras 23).

53 “The Reign of Terror (5 September 1793 – 28 July 1794) (the latter is date 10 Thermidor, year II of the French Revolutionary Calendar),[1] also known simply as The Terror (French: la Terreur), was a period of violence that occurred after the onset of the French Revolution, incited by conflict between rival political factions, the Girondins and the Jacobins, and marked by mass executions of "enemies of the revolution." The death toll ranged in the tens of thousands, with 16,594 executed by guillotine (2,639 in Paris),[2] and another 25,000 in summary executions across France”[3] [(wiki) May 22, 2012]. “The Attack of 20 June 1792” occurred during the crisis point of the French Revolution, and on this day crowds in Paris took over the Assembly and then the Tuileries Palace, where they “forced the King to don a Phrygian cap and drink a toast to the health of the nation” (http://chnm.gmu.edu/revolution/d/174/). The date of August 10 1792 is important as the one-year anniversary of the beginning of the Haitian Revolution, but Duras is referring to the radical Parisian ultimatum to the deadlocked Legislative Assembly—a threat of uprising if there was no action by midnight August 9. That evening, King Louis
B.’s circle of friends “disperse[s],” either by fleeing persecution abroad, or going into hiding in the provinces, and notes that “the decree announcing the confiscation of property of those who had escaped abroad was promulgated” (Duras 21-22). Therefore, “a little after the execution of the king,” Charles returns to Paris to secure the estate, and the family flees to their country home in Saint-Germain (Duras 23).

Duras further develops the motif of the mask through the subplot involving confinement and exile of Mme de B.’s family. Perhaps because of her knowledge about the foundations of the revolution in France and the colonies, Ourika briefly dismisses her fate as chattel and instead worries along with her captors. When “two of the most influential leaders during the Terror” protect Mme de B. from execution and imprisonment and keep her “guarded at home, on the pretext of ill health,” again Duras aligns themes of female oppression and confinement with Ourika’s position (Duras 24). These passages also foreshadow Ourika’s failing health. Because of their gender and ties to the family, both Ourika and Mme de B. are confined within the home and dependent upon their “protectors” for survival. Ourika believes, “misfortune had strengthened all the bonds” among the family, and by the time of “Robespierre’s death” she no longer feels like “an outsider” (Duras 24). Ourika feels accepted until her denial collapses beneath her mask when they return to Paris. At this point in the narrative, Ourika has mentioned her desire to talk with Charles about her limited choices are as a young, single, educated, refined, young, black woman in late eighteenth-century France, but she fails to act. The juxtaposition of this section of Ourika’s narration about feeling so close to the family, and then her sudden

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54 Also possible allusion to the Duras’s own experiences after her father’s death, and their family’s subsequent exile.

55 Also possible allusion to the Duras’s own experiences after her father’s death, and their family’s subsequent exile.
change in the next paragraph, is telling; especially considering how Ourika’s muteness about her situation results in a deepened obsession about her color and its hindrances. At this point in the narrative Ourika removes the mirrors from her room, begins wearing the full length veil, and “suppos[es] [she is] invisible” (Duras 28). “Toward the end of 1795” when the terror comes to an end the family’s lifestyle returns to normal, Ourika feels more like an outsider:

Every time I saw new faces arriving at Mme de B.’s house, I underwent new tortures.

The surprise tinged with disapproval that I used to observe in visitors’ expressions began to upset me. I knew at once that in a moment I should inevitably be the subject of an aside in one of the window bays, or of some whispered exchange. Naturally, the presence of a black woman enjoying the close confidence of Mme de B. had to be explained. These explanations martyred me. I should have liked to be transported back to my uncivilized native land and its savage inhabitants—less frightening to me than this merciless society that declared me guilty of a crime it alone had committed (Duras 28).

At this point in her recitation, Ourika tells the doctor she has made peace with her situation. She acknowledges the few tears as merely the remembrance of the agony she once felt. However, when she elaborates about her “secret love” and despair over being black and outcast, she equates it with death: Ourika “cut off from everyone [she] loved. They couldn’t even hear the sobbing that would have troubled their joy. [She] saw them drowned in their own intense happiness, remote from [Ourika] as [she] lay on [her] deathbed. In [her] life [she] had only them; but they had no need of [her]” (Duras 36).

Ourika is a character forever included and always already on the margins. She does share characteristics with many female characters in nineteenth-century female-authored texts, voicing an awareness of confinement within a gender, desires for a relationship, a family and a social
position. However for Ourika, she does not embody just one idea of the “angel” or the “monster,” she is a blurry depiction of both. She fits the “angel” interpretation because she is god-fearing and pure; however, because of her color she views herself as a “monster” and chooses to cover up her entire body in order to hide her shame, and in fact, she ultimately allows the internalized hatred and fear of her color to cause her illness and death. She personifies her blackness as a creature that torments her—“haunted by its sneering face. I saw it in my dreams, in every waking moment. It stood before me like my own reflection” (Duras 29). Safe from slavery within a wealthy aristocratic family, Ourika could not want for material things, however the one thing she wants more than any other is to be in a loving relationship and have children. Ourika’s goal of marriage aligns her to many nineteenth-century female protagonists, again, for example, the orphaned Jane Eyre. Her aspirations for love endear the character to her readers and make her relatable and stirs sympathy However, Ourika has no aspirations of writing or becoming something in addition to her womanhood. She believes that she would be happy being only a wife and mother. Although again unlike many other nineteenth-century female protagonists, she must surmount more than gender and social standing, and the perceived threat of racial mixing perpetuates her stasis.

Ourika’s maternal instincts begin to overpower her when Anaïs gives birth to Charles’s son, and the toll of Ourika’s melancholia on her body and mind is irreversible. “[Ourika] gut[s] [herself] emotionally on this vision of a happiness [she] could never know. Envy circled in [her] heart like a vulture. What harm had [she] ever done those who pretended to save [her] by bringing [her] to this land of exile? Why hadn’t [she] been left to follow [her] own destiny” (Duras 39)? Ourika’s double-consciousness about her position in society is the most detrimental

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56 See Gibert & Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic
57 In fact in slave narratives and other African-American authored works, a similar tactic is used, ie, Harriet Jacobs’s appeal to white women on the basis of shared motherhood.
element to her survival, and this consciousness is not only aligned with the prominent issues of equality at the core of the French revolution and women’s rights, but also similar to the tales of light-skinned African American characters in tragic mulatto and passing narratives in later nineteenth-century literature.\(^5\) Regardless of Ourika’s overwhelming need to fit in and merely have her basic human instincts met as an educated and refined black woman, there is no cultural space wherein she can neatly fit—and at the same time, she is entangled among the striations of law and society that are too narrowly and too broadly constructed. Although Ourika believes she would be happier if she were a slave, there can be no starting over for her:

> What did it matter that I might now have been the black slave of some rich planter? Scorched by the sun, I should be laboring on someone else’s land. But I would have a poor hut of my own to go to at day’s end; a partner in my life, children of my own race who would call me their mother. Who would kiss my face without disgust, who would rest their heads against my neck and sleep in my arms. I had done nothing—and yet here I was, condemned never to know the only feelings my heart was created for (Duras 39).

In fact, much like the tragic mulatto trope, which ultimately ends in death because of an inability to reconcile the protagonist’s awkward position in society and oftentimes as a punishment if that character chooses to pass, the only resolution to Ourika’s exile and pain is death. Duras’s text is self-conscious of that, and yet the moment Ourika is making her suicidal request to God, the marquise who first pointed out Ourika’s blackness, returns from exile and interrupts her prayer. Certainly the marquise has reasonable advice for Ourika, suggesting that she live rather than die—appreciating the smaller joys that are available to her, “the brighter side of things” (Duras 40-42). When Ourika replies she has no “purpose in life” and clarifies that her problems are her
“social situation” and “the color of [her] skin” and that therefore she has “no friends,” but “protectors,” the marquise presses Ourika about a secret, one tinged with the threat of miscegenation (Duras 41). “All your misery, all your suffering comes from just one thing: an insane and doomed passion for Charles. And if you weren’t madly in love with him, you could come perfectly well to terms with being black” (Duras 42).

As though coming to terms with her blackness a second time through recognition of her own self-loathing, Ourika considers the validity of the marquise’s assumptions (Duras 43). When “these terrible thoughts [throw her] into a state of collapse not unlike death” she is driven “toward God” and confesses to a priest (Duras 44). At this point in the narrative, Christianity plays an important role, and the discussion surrounding Ourika’s entrance to the convent is a product of abolitionist rhetoric while at the same time, functions as just another construct to keep her in safe company. The priest he tells her “for Him there is neither black nor white. All hearts are equal in His eyes,” and somewhat ironically encourages Ourika to accept that a nun “is not alone in the world. She has a chosen family...a mother to the orphan, a daughter to the aged, a sister to all misfortune” (Duras 45). Despite Charles begging her not to join the nunnery, Ourika takes a step toward independence when she confesses to him it is the “one place where [she] may still think of [him] day and night” (Duras 46). The placement of the light and dark imagery inherent in the phrase “day and night” emphasizes the allusions to miscegenation as primary concerns of the text, and the cloister as a place to contain a threat (Duras 46). “But it is still not too late. Perhaps God, in casting [Ourika] into this alien land, wished to bring [her] to Him without [her] knowing. He rescued [her] from savagery and ignorance. By a miracle of charity He stole [her from the evils of slavery and taught [her] His law” (Duras 46). Within the walls of the convent and behind the veil, Ourika reconciles with her fate and complies with Christian
doctrine. But Ourika fails to persevere, and the doctor who was unable to save her life concludes her story; and yet, Ourika continues to influence and inspire nineteenth-century African-American authored fictions’ fascinations with racial mixing and the development of the tragic mulatto/a trope.
Chapter Two
Lost in a Masquerade: Masking, Mixing, and Misrepresentation

Victor Hugo is one of the most renowned authors discussed in this dissertation; however, the 1826 novel *Bug-Jargal* is perhaps one of his most obscure narratives. *Bug-Jargal* first took form as a short story in 1819, the product of a friendly writing competition between Hugo and his brother. First published in 1820 in *Le Conservateur littéraire*, Hugo’s 1826 revision of the early narrative incorporates a connection between French revolutionary concerns about miscegenation through a desire for white and black coupling and becomes what is possibly the earliest tale to critique the position of a mixed-race individual and associate it with the allusion of the veil. Influenced by his peers’ cultural fascinations with slave rebellion, race and color issues, Hugo’s initial version employs the mask, or a fictional narrator, and focuses on the relationship between a French soldier and an African prince relegated to slavery in the colony of Saint-Domingue. Broadly, the swashbuckling tale of war and valor discusses the fraternal bond between a white soldier and a black slave, each antagonized by one object of desire, while also including a limited yet more detailed account of the blurred statuses of creoles and *sang-mêlé* plantation families and slaves. Moreover, Hugo includes a mysterious and veiled, mixed-race secondary character, the obi Habibrah. In this regard, Hugo may well have been influenced not only by the vexed political climate in France, and slave rebellions in Haiti and the United States to rewrite his short story, “*Bug-Jargal*,” into a larger novel, but also by the popularity and effectiveness of his friend Duras’s account of Ourika.

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59 *Le Conservateur littéraire*, in keeping with the mutable liaisons of my literary genealogy, was edited by Alexandre Dumas and his brothers.
60 Bongie 49
In the opening lines of *Bug-Jargal*, the reader encounters a third-person narrator who establishes the basic setting for the telling of the tale, and introduces the audience to the primary characters. A few French Army soldiers are sitting in a tent on a rainy evening some months after the initial events of the 1791 Saint-Domingue slave uprising, discussing their plights in battle. Their conversation turns toward a moody and misanthropic soldier, Léopold d’Auverney, an aristocrat and French Army Captain and the return of his dog, Rask. In a primitivistic turn, the story of the dog segues to remembrances of the slave character, Bug-Jargal. The idea of admiration and respect between a member of the French aristocracy and an African slave first emerges when Rask is “stolen by the English” and retrieved by Sergeant Thaddeus. The other soldiers speak amongst themselves regarding what they deem as the peculiarities in the relationship between d’Auverney and Bug-Jargal, which extend to Thaddeus and the dog.

Thaddeus admits that the first time he cried was after giving the order to execute Bug-Jargal, and validates the slave’s color by equating him with their arsenal: “He was black, it’s true, but gunpowder is also black, and… and.” Thaddeus’s inability to complete his sentence suggests more than reverence; the reciprocation of brotherly love, honor and respect draws upon the sympathies of the reader and offers a thinly veiled criticism of French slavery, as well as the color and class divisions enforced in the colony.

The passage introduces a primary concern of Hugo’s text—the notion of an aristocratic white’s ability to feel a sense of kinship with an African prince, now a slave. At this point in the framing of Hugo’s narrative, Hugo humanizes and elevates the character of Bug-Jargal as faithful and loyal, yet the connection with Thaddeus, Rask, the dog, and Bug-Jargal, suggests a dualistic symbol. On one level, the African slave is associated with a domestic animal, but also

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62 Bongie 59
63 Bongie 60
Rask is a living memorial to Bug. Rask was Bug’s sidekick, never leaving his side throughout the narrative, unless performing a duty for his master. Thaddeus explains the connection he feels to Rask—he cried when the dog disappeared that evening. While he tracks down Rask, “two Redcoats” injure Thaddeus and Rask rescues him by “grabb[ing] hold of [a Redcoat’s] neck,” strangling the enemy soldier. Captain d’Auverney asks, “How can you have been so mad as to risk yourself like that—and for a dog?” Again, Thaddeus’s reply demonstrates compassion and respect for a black slave and adversary, “It was not for a dog, my Captain, it was for Rask… the mastiff of Bug.” In this way, Hugo introduces the theme of a color-blind sense of camaraderie and brotherhood which persists throughout the narrative. By allowing his characters to feel remorse and loss while reflecting on the slain Bug-Jargal, Hugo establishes a commonality between the stifled veneration of Bug-Jargal and the aristocratic status of Captain d’Auverney.

In this way, Hugo introduces the related themes of secrecy and identity, and develops them in conjunction with a fixation on bloodlines associated with the aristocracy and the code noir. The soldiers also gossip about the “vague accounts” of d’Auverney’s “great adversity in America,” and how he lost wife and his entire family at the onset of the revolution. When the imbibing soldiers joke about d’Auverney’s attachment to a slave and his dog, they question d’Auverney’s character, describing him as “one of those men who, always inspire[s] a certain respect mingled with interest,” and mistrusting his appearance as well as his social position. Styled as “cold-mannered,” with “a look of complete indifference” d’Auverney’s men see him as solitary, unobtrusive, and committed, yet preoccupied. In many ways, Captain d’Auverney’s men view him as an aristocratic noble savage, or shall we say, noble creole—a counterpart of

64 Bongie 62
65 Bongie 63
66 Bongie 63
67 Bongie 62, Much like later descriptions of the African prince, Pierrot.
Bug-Jargal because of his loyalty to a slave and rebel leader. But more curiously, the men note that the captain lacks “that animation of gesture and speech which, in creoles [emphasis mine], is accompanied by an often graceful nonchalance.” Here the narrative points to the social distinctions between the soldiers from France who solely had commercial interests in Saint-Domingue, and those who also had familial ties—and more importantly, those who were born—in the colony, like d’Auverney. In this way, we can also connect d’Auverney’s dual status as a citizen of France and of Saint-Domingue to the plight of the property-owning mulatto factions during the revolution who felt split allegiances between family and their assets from the slave trade.

Captain d’Auverney’s men view him as an anomaly because he does not blend in among the soldiers, nor does he fit neatly into the colonial class. His relationship with Bug-Jargal compounds his sympathies toward the slave plight and inner confusion about the rebellion, and vice versa. Furthermore, the parallel characteristics between d’Auverney and Bug-Jargal serve not only to justify Bug-Jargal’s participation in the uprising, but also to highlight the themes of doubling that permeate the structure of the text. For example, rather than a two-dimensional first person narration, Hugo devises a third-person narration to construct a fictional narrator, enlists the character as a narrative mask, and allows him to tell his own story in order to relate his personal accounts of Bug-Jargal. This particular narratological device lends validity to the tale and grants d’Auverney the authority to influence the other soldiers, as well as readers, about the goodness and the honor of Bug-Jargal, not only as a slave, a leader, or a rival, but also as a

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68 This is my turn of phrase.
69 Moreover, exposed to the tropical sun in Saint-Domingue and the perils of war, the captain’s face “darken[s],” literally and figuratively: he “appear[s] to experience an intolerable weariness when it [comes] to struggles of the spirit” (Bongie 62). The secret d’Auverney bears physically affects his visage: “Just over twenty years old... [he] looks thirty, [and] you [can] see the incurable wound inside him and the tremors it provoke[s]” (Bongie 63).
human being. Again, as I assert that the narratological device of the mask in *Ourika* serves much as the white-authored validations included in published late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century slave narratives, Hugo’s use of this device in his tale serves a similar purpose. The mask authenticates the tale, however not to speak the voice of the slave, but to certify that an honorable friendship between a black man and a white man is possible. In this way the text does allow for these secret alliances to coexist within the realm of slavery, and this undercurrent in the narrative reveals Hugo’s own confusion about abolitionism and the French Caribbean colonies.

In *Bug-Jargal*, d’Auverney’s attitude toward the slave market reveals an abolitionist tendency, but an uncertain one. He criticizes one of his wealthy uncles, incidentally his soon to be father-in-law, as a “despot,” who tortures his slaves inhumanely. At the very least, this creole character displays a strong sense of morality and respect for those who venerate the etiquette and customs of any cultural aristocracy. Outside the margins of fiction, d’Auverney’s authority, belonging to a slave-holding colonial family, far outweighs that of Bug-Jargal who, despite possessing an authority of his own, remains a primitive, a noble savage removed from his homeland—requiring a white man to vouch for his story. At the same time, this aspect calls upon the idea of a paternal pardoning, which allowed “true mulattoes” in earlier forms of the code noir discussed above.

Captain d’Auverney complies with the soldiers’ requests for a story, but only after renouncing his tale as “the recital of an extremely simple anecdote,” and asserting that his own role in the story is “secondary.” The word “secondary” suggests that Hugo is quite conscious of the way he doubles the characters of Bug-Jargal and d’Auverney; yet at the same time, the character and narrator acknowledge their twinning, with the exception of color, and

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70 Bongie 65
complementary qualities. The doubled relationship between Bug-Jargal and d’Auverney persists beyond their shared characteristics. Because the two men share a similar understanding of aristocratic honor, the enemies owe each other their lives and bind to each other with the notions of “liberty, fraternity, and equality.” Their inherent morality and admiration for one another perpetuates this union until Bug-Jargal dies. Each time d’Auverney and Bug-Jargal encounter one another, the men remove another mask, or, another layer of fear and misunderstanding between them. Perhaps the most rewarding secret becomes d’Auverney’s knowledge of Bug-Jargal’s dual identity on the island. Among the slave community, he is recognized as leader and royal, Peirrot, but as a slave he is known only as Bug-Jargal. The French officer’s admiration and curiosity about Pierrot leads to many intertwined motives and interactions between the two men. Although d’Auverney belongs to a family of creole planters and is an aristocrat and a soldier, he begins feeling tremendous sympathy for the slaves and intervenes to protect them, and particularly Pierrot, more often than a typical plantation owner. Figuratively, Pierrot takes on the dual identity in the sense that, like d’Auverney, he is a royal, an aristocrat, and a soldier, who despite feeling tremendously oppressed by the planters of Saint Domingue, is “civilized” enough to respect d’Auverney although he is bound to the side of the oppressor. Quite literally, the dualistic quality of the slave prince is magnified by two identities: Bug-Jargal, the slave leader, and Pierrot, the African prince, and the fact that these two identities initially confuse d’Auverney.

Through his revisions of the original tale into novel form, Hugo elaborates these characters’ complementary attributes, complicating the relationship between the two men by incorporating a female character. Engaged to d’Auverney and admired by Pierrot, Marie’s inclusion as an object of desire for both men comments on the edict of the code noir that would
have made any union between Marie and a slave illegal. Pierrot repeatedly attempts to woo Marie, while d’Auverney also mentions another suitor—a suspected sang-mêlé that he encounters at a ball after the national assembly of France “granted the freemen of colour the same political rights as the whites.” Therefore, the relationship between d’Auverney and Bug-Jargal begins as a competition for Marie, who is set to wed the captain on his twentieth birthday, coincidentally, August 22nd 1791, the date of the first uprising of the Saint-Domingue slave rebellion. Their love for Marie becomes a battle of will and integrity as the two men continue to cross paths once the slave insurrection begins. In terms of Hugo’s approach to racial mixing, the threat of a union between Marie and Pierrot seems to be a mirror reflection to the threat in Duras’s text. By reflection, I mean, whereas Ourika has to consciously accept that her love for Charles will never be requited because of her color, d’Auverney has to repeatedly convince himself that Marie will not abandon him for Pierrot, nor the sang-mêlé planter, because of their colors.

What Hugo neglects, however, is to offer any clear physical description of Marie. I believe that Hugo deliberately neglects to include a taxonomical account of Marie’s features and color in order to subversively comment on the way a mixed-race colonial marriage could be so easily arranged. Again, the appearance of the sang-mêlé planter who could visibly pass for white man and his attentions toward Marie are the only textual hints at a question of Marie’s ancestry. Although he reveals she is d’Auverney’s cousin, the daughter of the cruel plantation owner, and therefore at least creole within the French colonial context of racial classifications, but Hugo masks Marie’s true identity by omission. In the same way, d’Auverney’s lineage may also be questioned. Moreover, Hugo’s revision allows him to elaborate the problem of the mask as a

71 Bongie 70
problem of interracialism, of the ever-present potential of racial mixing, particularly through the additional characters of the *griffe* Habibrah, a slave and attendant of d’Auverney’s uncle, and the *sang-mêlé* planter, even if Marie’s lineage is also somewhat murky.\(^72\)

Although the first two mysterious appearances of Pierrot leave him ambiguous and unnamed, his actions construct him as an ethical hero. When Marie returns frightened one morning from a small pavilion on the banks of a river where d’Auverney daily leaves her flowers, she tells him the offering had been “torn apart and trampled” and “a bouquet of freshly gathered wild marigolds” had been left in its place.\(^73\) She also mentions that she heard someone sing to her in Spanish. Presuming the rich young, *sang-mêlé* planter is infringing on his fiancé, d’Auverney resolves to lay in wait for his rival near Marie’s lodging that evening. When d’Auverney hears singing and the sound of a guitar, he leaps out toward the culprit with a dagger. Struggling in the darkness, d’Auverney loses his weapon, but Marie’s screams cause the secret wooer to freeze, and throw the dagger away, saying: “No! No! She would weep too much!” as he vanishes.\(^74\) Despite his anger, Captain d’Auverney cannot ignore the “generosity in the sentiment” shown by his rival.\(^75\) Here, Hugo lets d’Auverney share his internal dialogue, which reveals his character, especially by today’s standards, as having all kinds of ill-formed, preconceived notions about Africans and blacks. He presumes an inferior intelligence and a savage lack of morality. In fact, d’Auverney’s narrow-mindedness is why he disregards anyone but the *sang-mêlé* planter as Marie’s suitor—he believes only someone with a western education

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\(^{72}\) “Accustomed to seeing himself obeyed at the first blink of an eye, he would punish the slightest hesitation on a slave’s part with the greatest severity, and often the intercession of his children served only to heighten his anger. So most of the time we could do no more than relieve in secret the ill-usage we could not prevent” (Bongie 66). Could his heightened anger suggest a secret about their mothers, who are unmentioned? Even during the ball scene, there are no clear descriptions of Marie, only the incident with the *sang-mêlé* planter.

\(^{73}\) Bongie 71

\(^{74}\) Bongie 73

\(^{75}\) Bongie 73
could be speaking Spanish and display such chivalry. He dismisses that the foe had been a slave: “feelings such as the one that had made him cast away the dagger did not strike [d’Auverney] as the sort a slave could possess.” As d’Auverney reflects upon the scene, his deductions demonstrate his own struggle with the racial biases he has learned. d’Auverney recalls that his opponent had been “naked from the waist up” and makes a connection that “slaves were the only ones in the colony who went around half-dressed like that.” In a later passage, he concludes the slave’s knowledge of Spanish “be[speaks] a certain degree of mental culture which, as far as [d’Auverney is] concerned, [is] altogether beyond the ken of negroes.” The narration continues to juxtapose events that offer clues to Pierrot’s identity with passages of d’Auverney’s repudiations; and similarly, constructs the passages that lead to the captain’s acceptance that Bug-Jargal may be trusted before he realizes it is the same person. However, he does not accept his rival’s identity until he hears Pierrot’s serenade to Marie the next morning by the pavilion:

The land of my fathers where I was king, the land where I was free. Free and a king, young girl! I would forget all that for you. I would forget them all: kingdom, family, duties, vengeance, yes, even vengeance! [sic] I am a king, and my brow rises above those of all other men. You are white, and I am black, but the day needs to join with the night in order to bring forth the dawn and the sunset.”

The black slave’s song to the white Marie is a plea for racial mixing—an invitation to establish a new norm in colonial society—a new aristocracy. Along with the anxieties the whites and creoles of France and Saint-Domingue have about interracial liaisons, these words threaten

76 Bongie 73; I recognize this scene as another example of his complete obliviousness because he is challenged to a duel by the same planter during the ball episode and they are both injured.
77 Bongie 73
78 Bongie 80
79 Bongie 75-76
not only d’Auverney’s love of Marie, but also his own social status and ideas of ascendancy. At the same time, these words allude to the success of the slave rebellion. Although Pierrot escapes d’Auverney a second time, the captain comes to understand Pierrot as a “noble” slave, despite his “dark melancholy” (the same phrase describes d’Auverney in the opening lines of the tale), and soon learns that he is adored and venerated by the slaves of the colony. As the text touches on the threat of miscegenation between black slave and white woman, Habibrah enters the narrative as both a device and a personification, appearing at d’Auverney’s side as he searches the woods for his singing rival; the “griffe dwarf” claims to know the mysterious slave’s identity. As a curious addendum to the words of the slave king, Habibrah taunts d’Auverney’s integrity and France’s fears of altered bloodlines stating, “born of a negress and a white man… so I am more beautiful than you, si usted quiere (if you like), more beautiful than a white man.”

Habibrah’s mocking ends when a scream from Marie leads d’Auverney back to the pavilion where he sees the “young black man of colossal stature” holding Marie in one arm, and fighting off an enormous crocodile with the other. According to d’Auverney, he had to shoot the animal or “the courageous black man would have been done for,” and yet, the slave admonishes him for killing it. Certainly, d’Auverney’s gallantry comes into question when the slave scolds him, yet the text subtly suggests some sort of animism or totemism as the reason for Pierrot’s reproach.

In the lines that follow the rescue, d’Auverney’s thoughts about Pierrot fluctuate between a mixture of jealousy, fear, marvel and as a sense of gratitude and equality, but he continues to critique Pierrot by analyzing his “imposing appearance” and noting the physiognomic and taxonomic details of his “Herculean proportions.” Pierrot’s stature “suit[s] a king” with an “air of ruggedness and majesty stamped on his face,” but d’Auverney goes on to list associations

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80 Bongie 78
81 Bongie 78
82 Bongie 80
between acumen and facial features that were common knowledge among most French during the revolution.83 He describes “the width of [Pierrot’s] brow” as “especially surprising in a Negro; the disdainful swelling that imparted something so lordly and so powerful to the thickness of his lips and nostrils,” exalting “the nobleness of his bearing” and the “beauty of his form.”84 However, d’Auverney’s reverence slips backward to rejection, as he reminds himself, “King! Black! Slave!”85 Throughout the narrative, Hugo subjects us to the vulnerable mindset of the average French colonial, allowing his character to critique and catalogue the facial characteristics of the people he encounters, especially people of color, Biassou’s rebels, and Habibrah.86 The narrative associates d’Auverney’s curiosity about Pierrot and his jealousy and concern for Marie, representing a literal threat of miscegenation. At the same time, Habibrah signifies the preconceived misconceptions about mixed-race individuals in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Although d’Auverney must fight his own rigid notions of who may be a slave, his attention to the taxonomy of the code noir most clearly manifests in the slave, Habibrah; perhaps Hugo’s most calculated addition to the novel. Indeed, Habibrah is such an important character and symbol in the text that the reader encounters his detailed descriptions long before the introduction of Pierrot. Like the title character, both prince and slave, Habibrah literally has two identities, one for the plantation—and one for the rebels, who call him the “Obi,” or witch

83 “The popularity of physiognomy grew throughout the 18th century and into the 19th century. It influenced the descriptive abilities of many European novelists, notably Balzac, and portrait artists, such as Joseph Ducreux; meanwhile, the 'Norwich connection' to physiognomy developed in the writings of Amelia Opie and travelling linguist George Borrow. A host of other nineteenth-century English authors were influenced by the idea, notably evident in the detailed physiognomic descriptions of characters in the novels of Charles Dickens, Thomas Hardy and Charlotte Brontë. Physiognomy is a central, implicit assumption underlying the plot of Oscar Wilde’s The Picture of Dorian Gray. In 19th century American literature, physiognomy figures prominently in the short stories of Edgar Allan Poe.” See Erik Grayson. “Weird Science, Weirder Unity: Phrenology and Physiognomy in Edgar Allan Poe” Mode 1 (2005): 56-77
84 Bongie 80
85 Bongie 84
86 I find it compelling that he does not once look at Marie this way—she is a catalyst that maintains invisibility.
doctor. Habibrah personifies the governmental and eugenic “race theology” particular to Saint-Domingue and demonstrates how complexly Hugo viewed the political position of the colony. Recognized by many labels, Habibrah also symbolizes many misconceptions about mixed race in general, for example, misconceptions about intelligence, psychology, and physiognomy. He represents change and inspires fear, while at the same time elements of his depictions sketch out the framework for later concepts based on the “double consciousness” experienced by mixed-race individuals and living life behind a veil.

Habibrah represents “double consciousness” because he embodies two competing personalities—a slave who complacently acts as “jester” of the d’Auverney family’s plantation; and who, during the rebellion, transforms into the sinister and murderous “obi,” of the insurrection leader, Biassou. At the first mention of Habibrah, Captain d’Auverney injects the narrative with another primitive allusion to the social concerns of miscegenation—the only slave that his uncle seems to hold in esteem—“a Spanish dwarf, a griffe in colour, given to him as a toy monkey of sorts.”87 In a color-fixated society dominated by degrees of whiteness, Habibrah belongs to a hierarchy, but he is still a slave, chattel, and perhaps more humiliatingly, his master relegates his status to that of a “toy monkey,” a token, and an animal, whose remembrance accompanies the first indication of d’Auverney’s struggle with his own prejudices. Habibrah’s color allows him special privileges much like the lighter-skinned “house-slaves” common in the nineteenth-century US, while his physiognomy is macabre and in many ways represents conscious “breeding” that through generations results in genetic aberrations. In this way, too, Habibrah is a precarious symbol. As Hugo and Bongie note, early eugenical theories by Moreau de Saint Méry on race and racial taxonomies suggest the face of a griffe is typically attractive, griffes are highly sexual with a distinct odor, and griffes have advantages common to the

87 Bongie 67
mulatto.\textsuperscript{88} Despite citing these theories, Hugo’s griffe becomes a parody of Méry’s classification. Habibrah is not attractive, his sexuality is obvious but a partner to his evil, and although d’Auverney never mentions any scent associated with Habibrah, he repeatedly senses something rotten about him.\textsuperscript{89}

Captain d’Auverney describes how his uncle “transform[s] [his griffe] slave into a fool, imitating the feudal princes of old who kept jesters at their courts.”\textsuperscript{90} In contrast to the scantily clad slaves working in chains, Habibrah was dressed as a “clown [in] ridiculous outfits, gaudily strewn with ribbons and sprinkled with little bells.”\textsuperscript{91} His master exploits the other slaves by harsh labor, while Habibrah is primarily responsible for walking “behind his master carrying a large fan made of bird-of-paradise feathers to drive away gnats and mosquitos.” Hugo also aligns Habibrah with the mastiff, Rask. He sits at his master’s feet during mealtimes and receives scraps from the master’s plate. Captain d’Auverney says Habibrah went out of his way to entertain his master—“as agile as a monkey and as submissive as a dog.”\textsuperscript{92} He even sleeps in a tiny cot next to his master’s bed. Yet d’Auverney is suspicious, suggesting that Habibrah’s “servility” was “too groveling,” often times even encouraging his master to be more severe with his punishments of other slaves. The other slaves, however, [do] not appear to distrust him, but [share] a “respectful fear.”\textsuperscript{93} Habibrah’s countenance is not alluring; rather, d’Auverney views him as “monstrous.” He is a dwarf and deformed—“thick-set, short, paunchy… [with] two spindly legs… like the limbs of a spider.”\textsuperscript{94} Habibrah’s head is described as “enormous” and “awkwardly squashed between his two shoulders and bristling with crinkling reddish wool,” and

\textsuperscript{88} Bongie 66-7
\textsuperscript{89} See Bonin’s article \textit{Signs of Origin} for more on grotesque vs. sublime.
\textsuperscript{90} Bongie 68
\textsuperscript{91} Bongie 68
\textsuperscript{92} Bongie 68
\textsuperscript{93} Bongie 69
\textsuperscript{94} Bongie 68
with huge ears. His face is “one long grimace,” while his features possess a “bizarre mobility.” The image of Habibrah’s features as haphazard or incoherent, again points to Hugo’s fascination with the volatility of identity, specifically in regard to mixed race, but the deformities point to a greater threat—the stain of miscegenation.

By introducing this enigmatic and ambiguous character so early in the narrative, before introducing the protagonist, Hugo directs his readers’ attentions to the concerns of miscegenation and equates those nineteenth-century social concerns with the fear of the unknown. Although with less consciousness of them than the narrative, the character of d’Auverney voices concerns about miscegenation because he consistently fails to recognize that people are not clear-cut, or simply black and white, and struggles with his own slippery prejudices. When he returns to his uncle’s plantation and discovers nearby Fort Galifet destroyed and captured by the slave rebels, he sees Pierrot escaping with Marie. Considering the few times his mistrust of Pierrot has been unfounded, Hugo dupes Leopold’s character again: “Pierrot—so good, so generous, so devoted, and who owed me his life three times over—was now an ingrate, a monster, a rival!” Finding his uncle’s stabbed-body in bed, along with blood near the cot and on the clothing of Habibrah, d’Auverney cries for his uncle and regrets that “the jester” died because of his attachment to his uncle. Although early in the tale he shared his suspicions about Habibrah, and goes so far as to “[reproach himself] for the biases that had led [him] to make such false judgments regarding Habibrah and Pierrot.” The few times emotions emerge from d’Auverney’s hidden past during his telling of the story, his afflictions of guilt become unmasked as well, and he later learns that Habibrah had staged the entire scene.

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95 Bongie 68
96 Bonin counters these points in her article.
97 Bongie 101
98 Bongie 102
While attention to costuming and masque-like theatrical display is evident in Habibrah’s plantation identity as a “deformed clown [and an] idle slave” with his flamboyant attire, Hugo unmasks Habibrah more than once—he is identified as jester, priest, doctor, and sorcerer—magnifying the instability of his mixed race status, demonizing the dwarf mulatto and thus the interracial individual in literature by means of instilling the character with a fusion of the grotesque and the carnivalesque. Captain d’Auverney describes “another spectacle” from “the obi, who performed doubly duty in the army as doctor of the soul and doctor of the body,” which again involves costuming and props (Bongie 124). The obi “strip[s] off his ecclesiastical robes” and is brought a “large box… in which he kept his drugs and his instruments” (Bongie 124). The obi’s healing practices include bleeding and herbal remedies, but d’Auverney notes that sometimes the doctor does “no more than touch their wounds while making a few mystical signs with his hand” (Bongie 124). The narrator stresses the character’s incoherent identity when he explains how the obi switches roles: “the doctor had taken over from the priest, and now the sorcerer took over from the doctor” (Bongie 125). In the next scene, the inconstant obi is preparing to foretell the futures of his followers, once again “veiled,” seated on an “improvised altar” (Bongie 125). In this role, the obi begins practicing a type of mystical physiognomy, not entirely different from the taxonomical categorizations that d’Auverney and other characters make about the slaves or mixed-race creoles, “examining the reverent negroes, interrogating the signs on their foreheads and hands” (Bongie 126). In a propagandistic turn, the obi informs the crowd that “four lines beginning at the nose, and curving over in pairs on the forehead above the

99 Bongie 68
100 Careful to note the syncretization of “old superstitions...mixed in with...recently acquired Catholicism,” d’Auverney also mentions the use of fetish stones being placed into wounds (Bongie 124). The mention mixing of religions as well as racial mixing and blending together of other cultural practices subtly amplifies the text’s concerns with colonial issues of race and the blurring of identity.
101 In later tragic mulatto and passing narratives, details about racial markers such as skin color, the eyes, the ears, and especially the fingertips and fingernails occur frequently.
eyes, portends that some day this person will be a prisoner of war, and that he will groan in
captivity at the hands of the foreigner.” After a dramatic pause he continues, “I had observed this
sign on the forehead of Bug-Jargal, leader of the brave warriors of Morne Rouge” (Bongie 126).
This scene not only demonstrates the obi’s aptitude for salesmanship, but also “confirm[s] for
[d’Auverney] that Bug-Jargal had been captured” (Bongie 127). Habibrah’s instability frequently
aligns with d’Auverney’s obliviousness to his surroundings and to the fact that things are not as
they seem on the island—not with the character of Bug-Jargal and d’Auverney’s own prejudices,
nor in terms of the revolution’s success and the captain’s miscalculations regarding the force the
French army is fighting against. Although the dwarf mulatto concealed with a full-length veil
throughout the ceremonial episode, d’Auverney finally recognizes this member of Biassou’s
insurgent army is indeed Habibrah, and that the role as an attentive and loyal slave to his uncle
was just another mask. Revealed as the murderer of d’Auverney’s uncle, the doubled
development of Habibrah as a masked interracial figure gives rise to the persistence of the veil
motif in nineteenth-century African American literature.

Habibrah’s inclusion in the novel renders the most compelling episode in the narrative,
the ceremony that d’Auverney witnesses as a captive of Biassou and his army, which summons
the imagery of a court masque while emphasizing the secrets and veiling of Habibrah.\footnote{Quite likely Hugo pays homage to the mythical and allegorical plays popular in England during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries—John Lygate and Ben Jonson referred to these dramas as “disguisings” (Web Vallegas); particularly Ben Jonson’s racially conscious court masques: the 1605 “The Masque of Blackness” and its sequel in 1608, “The Masque of Beauty” (Web Vallegas). Jonson’s dramas demonstrate concern with African identity and the “transformation of African people to Europeans when they travel to England from Africa” (which indeed necessitates a bit more exploration in the discussion of Ourika). Hugo manipulates his literary forbearer’s drama and performance into a ritual or a ceremony of rebellion in his masque-like episode (Over 27). The character development of the Africans in Jonson’s masques are “fashioned as familiar” and “demonstrate a transformation of colonial culture to that of the colonizer but [the play] also reveals the threat to colonial identity” (Over 27). As the court masques “became more and more spectacular, and operatically splendid; to such an extent that even Jonson was disillusioned and felt that they were merely obscuring truth” (Over 27). Another way we can tie the influence of Jonson’s court masques to the ceremony in Bug-Jargal is through his innovative antimasque—also known as the antemasque, the false masque, and the antic masque—first produced in 1609. These}
Undoubtedly, Hugo complicates the theme of masking by interweaving the many symbols and layers of understanding into another literal and figurative device, and another pun—the court masque. Yet while Hugo’s masque-like episode may indeed suggest a parody or farcical performance, the dissident slave masque suggests more than an anthropological cataloguing of this slave ritual. The costuming builds upon the themes of secrecy and masking to suggest another way that identity is suppressed by outside perceptions. The rebel masque takes place shortly after d’Auverney is captured by a band of insurgents that he mistakenly presume are under the leadership of Bug-Jargal. At the time, he is not aware that Pierrot and Bug-Jargal are one and the same person. However, he slowly realizes that he is in the custody of the leader Biassou instead; whose fictional portrayal closely follows the historical accounts of Biassou’s torturous brutality. Certain that he is defenseless against “Biassou’s vengeance,” d’Auverney believes that he is fated to suffer a slow and agonizing death, especially once the ceremony begins. Describing “mobs of blacks” in the darkness and many fires burning, d’Auverney explains the insurrection ritual, which he assumes will result in his execution, noting all of the basic elements of a court masque, elaborate costumes, music, song, dancing, and poetry:

A group of negresses came and lit a fire close by me. Everything about them—the numerous bracelets of blue, red, and purple glass glittering at intervals on their arms and legs; the rings weighing down their ears, and those adorning every one of their fingers and toes; the amulets affixed to their breast; the string of ‘charms’ hanging down from performances took place before the main masque and concentrated on grotesque elements, providing a “direct contrast to the elegance of the masque that followed. In later years, “the masque developed into opera and the antimasque became primarily a farce or pantomime” (enotes.com). In Hugo’s novel, he develops this transformative idea through the aristocratic d’Auverney’s slow familiarization to the customs of the French colonies, while Pierrot, the African prince, must also change and adapt to a prescribed geographical identity that is “emblematic of cultural and psychological change” and both men struggle with their primitive statuses as mirrored minorities (Over 27).

103 Bongie 111
their neck; the apron of gaudy feathers, the only piece of clothing veiling their nakedness; above all, their rhythmic clamouring and the shadowy, frantic look on their faces—led me to conclude that they were *griotes*.\(^{104}\)

Here, d’Auverney defines *griot* and *griote* (male or female labels) as essentially the African equivalent of French *trouvères*, English minstrels, and German minnesingers—however as blacks, his definition suggests prejudice and primitivism—who are gifted with a “crude talent for poetry and improvisation that is akin to madness.”\(^{105}\) He continues that the *griotes* are “possessed by a crazed demon, accompany their husbands’ barbarous songs with lewd dances, offering a grotesque parody of the bayadéres of Hindustan and the Egyptian almahs.”\(^{106}\) The narrator’s choice of words such as “gaudy,” “nakedness,” “clamouring,” “shadowy,” “frantic,” “crude,” “madness,” “barbarous,” “possessed,” “crazed,” “demon,” “lewd,” “grotesque” and “parody” are all signifiers of negation, savageness, and masking.\(^{107}\) The attention d’Auverney pays to their facial expressions and his ability to discern these performers as *griotes* again suggests his prejudice, and an inclination to adhere to the peculiar, yet dominant, mixed-race taxonomies of race, not only in Saint-Domingue, but also in Africa. As Captain d’Auverney describes how the females form a circle, tear out handfuls of hair from their heads and throw them into the fire, “shouting ‘*Wanga!*’”\(^{108}\) According to d’Auverney, the word signals a dance and connotes a magic spell. The Captain recalls “the custom of those savage tribes who dance around their prisoners before slaughtering them, and I patiently stood by as these women performed the ballet portion of a play that was to end with me soaked in blood” (Bongie 113).
The performative elements of this episode paint an all too familiar portrait of the white European perception of African culture and religious practices, and frame the second identity of the dwarf Habibrah as the powerful obi, who interrupts when it is time for d’Averney’s torture.

In fact, the similarities between the descriptions of the griotes costuming and Habibrah “court jester” attire are adroit and compellingly juxtaposed, foreshadowing the unveiling of his own masquerade in the narrative (even though it is blatantly obvious to readers, it takes d’Auverney a few more encounters with “the griffe dwarf” to realize that the obi is Habibrah). As the dance nears its climax, an angry black man runs up, accompanied by “a rather bizarre looking” fellow:

A very thick-set, very short man, a sort of dwarf whose face was hidden by a white veil with three holes pierced in it for the mouth and eyes, in the fashion of penitents. The veil hung down over his neck and shoulders. His hairy chest, though, was left exposed; its colour seemed to me that of a griffe’s and on it, suspended by a gold chain, glittered a mangled silver monstrance. You could see the handle of a crude dagger, shaped like a cross, protruding from his scarlet belt; it was holding up a green, yellow, and black-striped skirt, the fringes of which reached all the way down to his large, misshapen feet. His arms, bare like his chest, brandished a white rod. A rosary, its beads made of azedarac, hung from his belt next to the dagger. His head was topped with a pointed bonnet decorated with bells; once he drew near I was more than a little surprised to discover that it was the gorra of Habibrah, except now, alongside the hieroglyphs that covered his makeshift mitre, you could see blood stains. Now doubt this blood was that
of the faithful jester. To me, these traces of murder seemed a new proof of his death, and they kindled in my heart one last regret."109

Like the *griotes*, the Obi wears shiny and colorful jewelry, a bare chest, and is wearing bells. The bells are on a cap that d’Auverney recognizes as Habibrah’s “gorra,” and he first assumes that this dwarf *griffe* is responsible for *killing* Habibrah. Perhaps it is regret that tinges d’Auverney’s descriptions of the veiled, *griffe* dwarf that lead him toward similar word choices in describing the “short man,” especially noting his height, girth and color, and most particularly the phrase “mangled silver monstrance.” Contrasted against his portrayal of a court jester, Habibrah as the obi is a savage and murderous creature. After the masque episode, the obi removes his veil in front of d’Auverney and confesses how he murdered the uncle and his intent to kill d’Auverney too, when Bug-Jargal and Rask intervene (Bongie 187). The confrontation between Bug-Jargal/Pierrot and Habibrah/the obi emphasizes the way Hugo counterpoises the honorable African slave prince with the subversive and mixed-race slave obi. Habibrah, willing to die to achieve his vengeance against the white man, thrusts a dagger at d’Auverney, loses his balance and falls down a precipice.110 Because of his incoherent identity, he subsequently suffers death, the same fate as more familiar tragic mulatto characters. Aside from Hugo’s likely borrowing of the veil motif from Duras’s *Ourika*, the literal veiling of the *griffe* character evolves into an essential metaphor and prominent allusion in nineteenth-century African American tragic mulatto literature.

At the same time, d’Auverney’s taxonomical gaze—the way he consistently labels, lists,
and peruses the visages of others for racial characteristics—serves as another influential aspect of the text in later literature about indistinct mixed-race individuals. For example, immediately after the obi halts d’Auverney’s proposed sacrifice, d’Auverney meets with Biassou in his grotto, noting the presence of the obi, “the flag of Spain,” and “a portrait of the mulatto Ogé,” while also deducing that quite unlike Pierrot, Biassou is “sacatra” with “ignoble features [that present] a rare mixture of shrewdness and cruelty.”111 The masque episode concludes with Biassou ordering the obi to prepare an altar for a rather syncretic prayer ceremony, he calls “a simulacrum of worship,” a mass-like ritual that seems to blend practices of voodoo or sorcery with Catholicism, to begin d’Auverney’s execution that evening.112 Additionally, the masque and the mass episodes contrast black and white not only in terms of skin color, French and creole, but also in terms of the colors’ associations with good and evil, which Hugo fleshes out through a dichotomy of occidental and primitive culture and religion. Biassou tells d’Auverney “they accuse us of having no religion. You see that it’s a slander, and that we’re good Catholics.”113 However, after a few cheers from the rebel factions, Biassou continues with a “soldierly sermon”—an anti-white, anti-colonial tirade, during which he implores to the “creole and congo blacks” to fight for “vengeance and liberty.” Appealing to the sang-mêlés to show “no mercy for the whites, no mercy for the planters,” Biassou also instructs that they should “not be the one[s] to strike down [their] own father[s].”114 The descriptions of this ceremony, together with the masque of the griotes, continue to focus the reader’s attention on the performative elements of the novel, as well as the propagandistic depictions of history. Captain d’Auverney describes Biassou’s “artful” speech as an “extraordinary pantomime” with an “indescribable power to

111 Bongie 117-18
112 Bongie 120
113 Bongie 121
114 Bongie 121-23
impress and entrance.¹¹⁵ Biassou’s “powers of persuasion” inspire a “discordant chorus of shouts, groans and howls” from the insurgents and d’Auverney describes, “the sound of guitars, tom-toms, drums, and balafos mingled with the volleys of musket fire. It was as if all hell had broken loose.”¹¹⁶ Through these dualistic applications of primitive religion and Catholicism, performance and audience, and the symbolism of black and white, Hugo’s narrative juxtaposes colonialism, the code noir and the ideals of fraternity and equality with religion and culture in the midst of savagery and war; effectively illustrating through d’Auverney’s internal monologue and his growing confusions about the slave trade why the Haitian Revolution was important fuel for subsequent humanist and abolitionist discourses.

Moreover, Bug-Jargal’s influence on the development of the tragic mulatto and passing character in African American fiction not only stems from the complex decrees of the code noir but also on the inability of the visually-based “race theory” in Saint-Domingue, and social and systematic sciences to stabilize the taxonomies of race. This aspect emerges when d’Auverney reacts to “two children dressed in slaves’ breeches, each carrying a broad fan made of peacock feathers. These two slave children [are] white.”¹¹⁷ Captain d’Auverney frequently tries to display his knowledge about the complex classifications of color in the colony and matter-of-factly tells his audience that Biassou is a “sacatra,” yet he suggests that these “slave” children are “white.” I question why he makes this presumption because of the second rival for Marie’s affections, a sang-mêlé planter who d’Auverney encounters in the earlier section of the tale, and again, the narrative’s untold secret—the possibility that Marie, too, is not what she seems. I am pointing out d’Auverney’s inability to face the facts before him, especially in the case of Habibrah, because it seems likely that Hugo has depicted him as blind to the probability that Marie’s racial

¹¹⁵ Bongie 123
¹¹⁶ Bongie 123
¹¹⁷ Bongie 117
status may be questionable. Clearly, d’Auverney is aware of this issue, but never allows his narration, or the text, to ask the question when it comes to his young cousin and bride. Very early in his recounting of the tale, d’Auverney tells the soldiers about a debate he gets involved in at a ball concerning what he calls “that disastrous decree of 15 May 1751, whereby the national assembly of France granted the freemen of colour the same rights as the whites.” He explains how when a few young colonists “were vehemently arguing about this law which so cruelly wounded the self-esteem—perhaps justified—of the whites” he sees the “rich planter… a person whom the whites only grudgingly admitted into their company and whose equivocal colour raised doubts about his origins” move toward the group. Captain d’Auverney approaches the man and loudly suggests, “Move along, monsieur. Things are being said here that would not be in the taste of someone like you, who have mixed blood in your veins.” When the planter challenges d’Auverney to a duel and they are both injured, he admits it was “wrong” to “provoke” his competitor. Captain d’Auverney claims that “the prejudice of colour” was not enough to drive him to it: rather, jealousy, because “for some time now this man had had the audacity to set his sights on [Marie].”

Together, the early mentions of the sang-mêlé planter and the white “slave” children foreshadow the scenes with Biassou, which illustrate the precarious statuses of mixed-race individuals during the revolution in Saint-Domingue; not only in regard to their disjointed statuses according to the laws and the whites in the colony, but also how they are viewed and treated by the rebel blacks. Moreover, these passages illustrate the very real circumstances among the different social classes in the colonies. As Lafontant notes, “the white knows he is

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118 Bongie 70, which would include arming the mulattos, per 1978 Lafontant article, which explores the text in French (205).
119 Bongie 70
120 Bongie 70
121 Bongie 70
white; the black knows he is black; and Hugo, throughout his novel, describes with exactness the way of thinking of the mulatto who cannot surely affirm which class he belongs to.”

When the whites call the rich planter a *sang-mêlé*, he is infuriated to the point of risking his life in a duel with d’Auverney. The ball and the duel take place at M. De Blanchelande’s residence, the governor of the colony, where members of the Provincial and Colonial Assemblies are mulling over the tenacious likelihood of the rebellion. Captain d’Auverney states that this same planter is the “first to say not to arm the mulattoes and that the ‘sang-mêlés’ are our worst enemies.”

However, when d’Auverney sees him again they are in a similar position. Captured by the insurgent black army and awaiting execution under the direction of Biassou, they both witness the torture and execution of men before them, during which the *sang-mêlé* planter’s allegiance shifts and his own conception of himself changes.

The capture and interrogation episode blends the horrors of the rebellion with the rhetoric surrounding the slippery categories of racial categories on Saint-Domingue. When Biassou sentences a *petit-blanc* sawn in half, befitting his trade as a carpenter, the psychological torment of code noir attempts to legislate indeterminate racial statuses festers and erupts before d’Auverney’s eyes. Biassou begins the next prisoner’s interrogation, “Citizen-General C***,” by listing many labels and “odious names invented by the contempt of the whites” for blacks and mixed-race individuals, and mocks his prisoners by asserting his preference of the terms “men of colour and blacks.”

In keeping with Hugo’s dualistic allusions, the rebel leader clarifies that this particular *petit-blanc* is a man “to whom [he] owe[s] this double example,” which ends up

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122 Lafontant 205
123 Bongie 70; There were civil incompatibilities between the north and the south on the island as well, illustrated by the provincial and colonial, or general, assemblies—“mutual jealousy that divided the Cape and Port-au-Prince” which is another antagonistic, doubled status? (Bongie 70) and (Lafontant 205).
124 Lafontant 205
125 Bongie 136
being death at the hands of an unskilled, mixed-race executioner.\textsuperscript{126} The “double example” Biassou offers the petit-blanc depends on the murkiness of these categories and the slipperiness of code noir definitions of mixed-race variances to function. Aligning the two captives against each other, the captor manipulates their understandings of their legislated and individual classes and colors; in other words, Biassou sets each man up for a fall. Captain d’Auverney explains that “Citizen-General C***” is a “philanthropist who corresponded with all of the world’s negrophiles” and claims he is “a friend to black people… and mulattoes.”\textsuperscript{127}

However, Biassou is familiar with Citizen-General C***’s own atrocious torture of slaves during the rebellion and chooses to make his own captive suffer in kind, while in turn torturing the sang-mêlé by eliciting his participation. When Biassou turns to the sang-mêlé planter, a mulatto in his ranks calls for his death because he is a white man. The planter’s reply demonstrates how easily one’s allegiance may change—“No, General, sir! …I am a mulatto, a sang-mêlé just like you, son of a negress just like your mothers and sisters… whites have always had contempt for me.”\textsuperscript{128} Biassou’s comrade Rigaud tells the prisoner that if he “were actually mulatto, [he] would not use that word.”\textsuperscript{129} Curiously, the sang-mêlé chooses a racial marker that comes up repeatedly in one form or another early African American passing narratives: he holds up his hands and shows Biassou “a black circle… around [his] fingernails,” but his pleas are ignored.\textsuperscript{130} Subduing the planter into believing he may redeem himself, Biassou offers him a dagger, and instructs him to “stab [the] two white prisoners to death.”\textsuperscript{131} After d’Auverney watches the planter violently bury the “stiletto” in Citizen-General C***, he realizes that he is

\textsuperscript{126} Bongie 140
\textsuperscript{127} Bongie 140
\textsuperscript{128} Bongie 141
\textsuperscript{129} Bongie 142
\textsuperscript{130} Bongie 142
\textsuperscript{131} Bongie 142
the only “white man left,” recognizing the irony that this man who almost killed him once to “prove he was a white man…[is] going to murder [d’Auverney] to prove [he] is a mulatto.” In many ways, the inconsistencies that develop the selective integrity of the *sang-mêlé* planter mirror the confused psychology of tragic mulatto characters, especially those who choose to pass for white, in nineteenth-century African American literature.132 133 134 135

The early nineteenth-century French public’s interest in the Caribbean colonies, the Haitian Revolution, and slavery in the U.S., secured that Victor Hugo’s *Bug-Jargal* was widely read upon publication. The narratological device of the mask, as well as the multilayered allusions to secrets, masks, veils, and rebellion as common motifs persist in the next three texts that I examine as forebears to the tragic mulatto/a trope in African American literature: Gustave de Beaumont’s *Marie or Slavery in the United States*, Victor Sejour’s “The Mulatto,” and Alexandre Dumas’s *Georges*. However, in these works the mixed race characters move beyond a sub-textual, secondary position and take over roles as protagonists. At the same time, the taxonomical references extend into these later narratives, and issues of skin color, racial mixing, and its aftereffects take the foregrounds. As nineteenth-century African-American writers begin appropriating the tragic mulatto/a trope in fiction and developing the passing narrative beyond

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132 Bongie 143
133 Lafontant labels this character as “the everlasting type of mulatto” (Lafontant 206).
134 As d’Auverney assumes the role of narrator and begins telling about his arrival to the island and the despotism of his uncle, one of the other soldiers makes a snide remark: “I do hope the captain won’t let the misfortunes of the deviant ‘blacks’ pass by without contributing some nice little speech on the duties of humanity, et cetera. That’s the very least we’d have been in for at the Massiac Club” (Bongie 66). Hugo includes intrusive, yet instructive, footnotes regarding the “Massiac Club” (Bongie 66), liberal “philanthropists,” and “negrophiles” (Bongie 69). “This club, formed in Paris at the beginning of the revolution, had instigated most of the insurrections that broke out in the colonies around that time.”
135 Biassou wants Leopold to proofread their letter and “correct any mistakes in our dispatch that the whites might find laughable” in exchange for his life (153). Biassou’s guards hand him over to the Morne Rouge negroes. Captain d’Auverney recognizes the terror that surrounds Biassou in a different way than “the superstitious terror which surround[s] the fool Habibrah. “Surprisingly, Biassou appoints the *sang-mêlé* “army executioner” and spares d’Auverney because he wants him to revise a letter from the rebels to the Assembly (Bongie 144).
coincidental twinning into a specifically mixed-race genre, their protagonists maintain a connection (in some cases quite tenuously) to the Caribbean colonies.
Chapter Three

“Offering truth under the veil of fiction:” Gustave de Beaumont’s Marie or Slavery in the United States and the Genetic Geography of Jacksonian America’s Mores” 136

Thus far, my study has explored narratives about an African woman taken from slavery and reared as an aristocrat in France and an African prince removed from his homeland and relegated to slavery in the Caribbean. Duras and Hugo feature the revolution in France and in the colonies together with the code noir’s blurry classifications of race in their narratives in order to explore the threats proposed by mixed-race couplings. Their peer, Gustave de Beaumont, incorporates similar devices—the narrative mask, veil imagery, and doubling—and constructs a mixed-race female character living in the U.S. and descended from France, slavery and rebellion in the Caribbean that pushes the boundaries of race and racial classifications far beyond that of Hugo’s griffe dwarf Habibrah. Beaumont’s 1835 Marie or Slavery in the United States: A Novel of Jacksonian America is the first French-authored fiction to examine the issues connected with slavery and the anxieties surrounding racial mixing in U.S. society. In fact, Marie is the first work to set a tale about the complications of slavery in society in the United States. Beaumont incorporates slave rebellions, a love triangle, and the taxonomical criticisms of the mysterious mixed-race characters in a manner similar to that of Hugo’s Bug-Jargal, while closely examining the psychological impact of racial mixing, which results in the tragic downfall of the aristocratic and black Ourika in Duras’s novella. Marie also maintains the transamerican connections

136 Interestingly, Beaumont subtitiles his book “Slavery in the United States: Catalogue of American Mores” in contrast to Tocqueville’s Democracy in America. The nation is presented by the two Frenchmen like the Greek god Janus, with two opposite faces. Beaumont remarks that some readers may think that he and Tocqueville formed very different judgments about the country they visited together, but that, Beaumont says, would be a mistake. The apparent dissonance is owing to the fact that “M. de Tocqueville has described the institutions; I myself have tried to sketch the customs. Now, in the United States, political life is far finer, and more equitably shared, than civil life.” (Beaumont 8). When Beaumont looks at America, what he sees is black and white, slavery and mastery, a massive injustice at the heart of the nation (Schaub 609).
between masking and revolution, anticipating, and indeed developing, early instances of the tragic mulatto trope and passing narrative that are prominent in early nineteenth-century African American literature.

As Andrew Jackson’s presidential term drew to a close in 1835, two “striking and prophetic studies of American government and society” were published in France: Alexis de Toqueville’s *De la Démocratie en Amérique* and Gustave de Beaumont’s *Marie, ou l’Esclavage aux Etats-Unis, Tableau de mœurs américaines*. Although Tocqueville’s text is more well-known than that of his traveling companion Beaumont, these books are “inseparably related and complementary.” The two Frenchmen came to the U.S. in 1831 on an official task of the Restoration monarchy of Louis Philippe, to conduct a study of the prison system, during which they spent nine months visiting various parts of the United States and Canada. In fact, the two men accepted the appointment with the intention of publishing a collaborative work on U.S. institutions and mores. Toqueville focused his attention on the democratic institutions of the United States, while Beaumont examined U.S. “manners and customs” for a proposed collaborative work to be published in one volume. Upon their return, they submitted a “revealing joint report” for the French government on the American penitentiary system, with Beaumont writing the text and Toqueville compiling the notes. However, each of them also completed a separate work based upon their planned collaboration. While Toqueville’s *Démocratie* was soon translated in England and available in the U.S. in 1835, Beaumont’s *Marie*, with five editions published in France, was not translated into English until 1958. Tinnin calls *Marie* an “important” book because of its “timeless and tragic theme, the fate of a slave no
longer a slave, of the black no longer a black, of the man or woman not yet recognized as a citizen in a democratic society of equals.” According to Schaub, Beaumont’s novel was a “critical and popular success” yet neglected despite a rekindled popularity in Toqueville studies since the 1950s.

During the 1830s, when few U.S. citizens had come to terms with the question of slavery, Beaumont’s narrative examines the possibilities of black and white socialization post slavery. That is, for a novel titled *Marie or Slavery in the United States: A Novel of Jacksonian America* the narrative’s focus is not on slaves, fugitives, or freedmen, nor is it set in the Southern U.S. or on a plantation. Instead, Beaumont’s tale examines “prejudice and identity” in the lives of light-skinned individuals living in Baltimore, born and reared in freedom who suddenly learn that they have African ancestry and are “black,” or, what the “one-drop rule” categorized as black. As the first fiction to examine the issues connected with slavery and the anxieties surrounding racial mixing in U.S. society, *Marie* blends stories of rebellions and the perceived threat of mixed race coupling. In many ways, Beaumont incorporates the social anxieties of color within the love triangle and taxonomical criticisms of the mysterious mixed-race characters in Hugo’s *Bug-Jargal* with the psychological depth and displacement that results in the tragic downfall of the aristocratic Ourika in Duras’s novella. At the same time, the story and the short essays interspersed among the chapters critique U.S. society and the traditions that perpetuated the conflicts surrounding the color line, and questions whether race and identity must be fluid or fixed.

Much like the narrative framing styles of *Bug-Jargal* and *Ourika*, this story is told from

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142 Tinnin viii  
143 Schaub 607  
144 Schaub 610  
145 Schaub 610
the perspective of a narrative mask, a traveling Frenchman who encounters another Frenchman, Ludovic, who has been living a solitary life in the Michigan wilderness. Ludovic narrates the tragic story of his lover’s family and their attempts to escape the confines of their secret racialized identities, persecution and marginalization by exiling, or masking themselves in various ways. In fact, in depicting his Marie, Beaumont writes the first U.S. born tragic mulatto character in literature. The narrative employs a tactic of gendered doubling—Marie and her brother George have very different reactions to their mixed-race statuses, yet neither is able to reconcile this dual status, represented by their deaths at the end of the tale. Beaumont demonstrates these issues by creating a narrative that includes characters that enter the world as white individuals, but soon “have the mask ripped away;” that is, have their lives altered when their ancestry reveals that they are black according to law and social custom.\footnote{Schaub 610} This particular plot twist is one of the most appropriated by late nineteenth-century tragic mulatto/a and passing narratives.

Transamerican racial mixing enters the foreground of the narrative in the first few pages of \textit{Marie or Slavery in the United States}. When the two traveling Frenchmen meet, the unnamed frame narrator encourages Ludovic to share the story of his adventures and hardships. Ludovic explains, he journeyed to the United States in search of better opportunities, and soon fell in love with the daughter of the family that accommodated him. When Ludovic expresses his desire to wed the young woman, her father, Daniel Nelson, exposes the truth about her heritage as well as voicing the rhetoric of the U.S. black codes. Although Marie looks like a white woman, her complexion “even whiter than the swans of the Great Lakes,” her father explains that her mother, Theresa, was “of Creole background.”\footnote{Beaumont 58, Beaumont 55} Marie’s great-great-grandmother had been a “mulatto,”
her “family had been soiled by a drop of black blood.” Ludovic requests Marie’s hand in marriage, but Daniel refuses, telling Ludovic, “if [he] contemplated reality with a less prejudiced eye… [he] would realize that a white man can never marry a black woman.” Daniel and George Nelson continue telling the Frenchman about the horrors of slavery and the positions of blacks in the United States explaining, “common practice and law alike say the Negro is not a man, he is a thing.” Unable to dissuade Ludovic, Nelson requires that Ludovic explore the U.S. for six months, observing the situations and treatment of blacks before he decides he can commit to the issues that their relationship could provoke. Although Ludovic observes many examples of racial hatred, he continues to pursue Marie. Meanwhile a villain introduced under the Spanish name Don d’Almanza trails the family and exposes their secret in Baltimore, following them to New York, where the impending marriage of Ludovic and Marie sparks a race riot. When Ludovic and Marie flee to the frontier, Marie becomes frail and dies, leaving Ludovic a lonely hermit in the wilds of Michigan.

In the opening lines of Beaumont’s story, Ludovic locates his mother-in-law, the racially ambiguous Theresa, in the geographical space of New Orleans, a city renowned for its amalgamated population and for racial legislations specifically designed to classify and draw attention to persons of mixed racial ancestry. Beaumont also recognizes New Orleans as a specifically diverse and transamerican locale. Before U.S. control of the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, the territory had transferred from France to Spain and back to France, and a great many Creole descendants and Saint Dominguean refugees dominated the city’s population during the early nineteenth century. Free people of color émigrés maintained their statuses as freedmen in

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148 Beaumont 55  
149 Beaumont 57  
150 Based on the New York race riots of 1834, the catalyst for which was indeed a number of mixed marriages and abolitionist support for such unions.
New Orleans. Such is the geographical and historical context for Marie’s story: her father, Daniel Nelson had married an orphaned woman “of Creole background” from New Orleans, Theresa, who he presumed to be white, and fathered two children with her, George and Marie.151 A scorned, wealthy Spaniard, Don Fernando d’Almanza, whose family had made their wealth when Louisiana was still a Spanish colony, had also pursued Theresa and discovered her secret origins were “soiled by a drop of black blood.”152 Because of his jealousy, he revealed Theresa’s secret. In New Orleans, Theresa died from the grief of the situation, and Daniel took his children to grow up in Baltimore, where their heritage was still a secret. George and Marie were well aware of their providences; however, George, “despite his indignation by the world’s injustice… would have revealed his origin if it hadn’t been for his sister, Marie.”153 In this way, the novel Marie connects the mixed-race community of New Orleans to the Caribbean, and takes a transamerican approach to slavery in the U.S., especially when taking into consideration the sociopolitical essays that Beaumont includes within the novel.

In fact, just as the revisions of the code noir became increasingly concerned with racial mixing in the Caribbean colonies, nineteenth-century U.S. anxieties surrounding color and mixed race classifications were intensified by ante- and post-bellum abolitionary and proslavery rhetoric. The importance of the Louisiana setting informs more than the plot and exploration of mixed-race couplings in the U.S. The changes in colonial French, British, and Spanish sovereignty over parts of the Louisiana territory—changes that resemble control over Saint Domingue—allow us to consider geographical space as a representation of contested status. After the 1803 Louisiana Purchase, the creole citizens of the state were primarily comprised of descendants from the colonial settlements and refugees from the Haitian Revolution. Of course,

151 Beaumont 54
152 Beaumont 55
153 Beaumont 56
the role that the city of New Orleans played in the nineteenth-century U.S. cultural milieu was also quite similar to the intellectual atmosphere in Paris, a place of immense wealth and extreme poverty, featuring a large mixed-race population; however, the context of slavery complicates the city’s social traditions much as in a Caribbean colony. The persistent tradition of mixed-race relationships in New Orleans, for example the regularly held Quadroon balls that allowed for white men to mingle with light-skinned, mixed-race women, was confidentially supported despite an intricate set of civic laws restricting interracial marriages.

New Orleans and southern Louisiana played an unrivaled role in the U.S. slavery system as a slave market, and especially as the end of the line for the ominous fate of slaves sent or sold “down the river.” A breeding ground for pro- and anti-slavery writings, the city was also an epicenter for the advancement of African American thought. The mixed-race population of New Orleans forged its own literary tradition during the antebellum years, aligning strongly with politically progressive French Romantic literature and activists akin to Victor Hugo and Alphonse de Lamartine, and incorporating the themes of exile and return, forbidden heritage, and sorrow triggered by caste discrepancies. After the Haitian Revolution of 1791, many slaves were inspired to revolt throughout the region, gradually resulting in more severe restraints on the freedoms of black people. Yet, the city and its surrounding environment allowed a space where escaped slaves could both mask their secrets and blend easily into the population. In these ways, New Orleans also provided abolitionist writers an ideal lens through which to censure slavery and the morality of U.S. society, and especially beneath the symbolic veil of indeterminate racial and cultural mixture. Alongside the characters of Theresa and Marie, and

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154 Solomon Northrup’s *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853), Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), the dramatist Dion Boucicault’s “The Octoroon; or, Life in Louisiana” (1859).

155 Indeed, the swamps of the region sheltered extended maroon communities (runaway slave communities operating relatively autonomously) of former slaves and their Native American allies. Pointe Coupee Parish planned a large, but unsuccessful revolt in 1795 (http://www.enotes.com/new-orleans-reference/new-orleans).
their “mulatto” stations, the multicultural divides of the initial Louisiana setting allow Beaumont to introduce the trope of the tragic mulatto/a into an already muddled nineteenth-century U.S. context. Clearly drawing a connection between legislations and limitations on blacks, women, and Native Americans in the novel, the discussions about the position of the mulatto in the United States asserts Beaumont’s observations about racial amalgamation.  

Furthermore, *Marie* is not solely a novel; instead, its peculiar form creates a “mongrel production,” a text that is part novel and part a “catalogue of American mores.” Beaumont uses the literary device of the mask, as well as other thematic elements that experiment with hybridity in terms of form. *Marie* represents the melting pot ideology of the U.S. by pointing out the ways a racially blended society may clash and how these inconsistencies create tension surrounding the ideal of freedom. In many ways, the text itself represents integration and masquerades as a novel because the text is not merely a tragic mulatto tale. Beaumont interrupts Marie’s narrative at various points in the story in order to include three essays that examine the social and political restrictions of blacks, religion, and the circumstances of Native American nations. In addition, Beaumont includes shorter observations on American women, U.S. Anglophobia, blue laws, dueling, and the theater and other arts, while incorporating a few other topics that inform his narrative. With its rebellious and violent race riot and incidents of hidden identities, *Marie* contributes to the evolution of the African American tragic mulatto tale and subsequent passing narratives in American literature. The novel’s hybrid structure offers a multifarious dialogue regarding race in pre-slavery and post-slavery transamerican societies, while also considering how this structure emphasizes the psychological and sociopolitical phenomenon of doubling, or later coined “double-consciousness,” experienced by people of

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156 Tocqueville: Book I Chapter 18 [http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/DETOC/1_ch18.htm](http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/DETOC/1_ch18.htm) final chapter, titled “The Present and Probable Future Condition of the Three Races that Inhabit the Territory of the United States,”

157 Schaub 608
African and mixed-race descent in the U.S., prevalent in these earlier foundational texts as masking. Schaub suggests the novel’s form seeks to “unite the head and the heart,” and that Beaumont’s intent with this mixed form was to draw a larger audience: the appendices and editorials would appeal to the intellectual reader, while the romantic drama of the narrative would attract a more sentimental one. At the same time, a distinct agenda encouraging reconciliation among blacks and whites persists; and, Beaumont’s *Marie* examines these issues with wider lens than a twofold analysis may offer.158

In the narrative, Ludovic's experiences learning about race relations and slavery in the United States reflect Beaumont's own encounters with race, racial mixing and prejudice.159 Beaumont aptly illustrates the awkwardness that the duplicitous ways early nineteenth-century U.S. culture defined racial statuses in his foreword to the novel when he describes an incident that contributed to the development of the Marie character. Beaumont tells about the first time that he “attended a theater in the United States, [and his surprise] at the careful distinction made between the white spectators and those whose faces were black” and how the audience was segregated based on degrees of color: “in the first balcony were whites; in the second, mulattoes; in the third, Negroes.”160 The man sitting next to Beaumont explained to him “that the dignity of white blood demanded these classifications”; however, Beaumont noted a slack in the rigidity of these taxonomical categories.161 The dialogue is relatively identical to similar passages wherein racial identity becomes unmasked in subsequent nineteenth- and twentieth-century U.S.

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158 Throughout the novel, the contrast of head and heart is prominent, particularly in the middle section where Ludovic, during his time of testing, conceives a project for enlightening public opinion and rehabilitating the image of the Negro via literature and art. He is soon disillusioned, for as he explains to his French compatriot: “I would have had to rely upon poetry, the fine arts, upon imagination and enthusiasm; as though these had any power over a practical, commercial, industrial people”(37)! The spirit of the American nation, in Ludovic’s view, is profoundly anti-poetic (Schaub 609).
159 1999 edition translated by Barbara Chapman, new intro by Gerard Fergerson XIII
160 Beaumont in Tinnin’s edition Foreword 4
161 Beaumont in Tinnin’s edition Foreword 5
narratives that include the plight of the tragic mulatto/a, or more subversively perhaps, mixed-race characters whose skin color, despite their heritage, allows them to pass for white.\(^{162}\) When Beaumont questions the man about a “young woman of dazzling beauty, whose complexion, of perfect whiteness, proclaimed the purest European blood” seated “among the Africans,” he told that she “is colored.”\(^{163}\) To Beaumont’s surprise, the American explained rather matter-of-factly, that the “local tradition has established her ancestry, and everyone knows that she had a mulatto among her forebears.”\(^{164}\) Attempting to clear the murky aspects of taxonomy in nineteenth-century U.S. social and political, Beaumont then asked the American about a “very dark” face, seated in the balcony for whites. When the man replies, “the lady who has attracted your attention is white,” again citing “local tradition [which] affirms that the blood which flows in her veins is Spanish,” Beaumont is doubly confused. The object of Beaumont’s gaze was “the same color as the mulattoes.”\(^{165}\)

In the passage above, Beaumont points out the vagueness of taxonomical classifications of racial-mixing, subtly clarifying that varying degrees of color are sometimes socially acceptable; however, not if one’s color is associated with African heritage and the institution of

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\(^{162}\) I am expanding this list to include white authors, one Mexican writer living in the US, as well as those who identified themselves as African American to emphasize the popularity of the tragic mulatto trope within the nineteenth-century US literary sphere. Noteworthy narratives include: Lydia Marie Child’s The Quadroons (1842), Frank J. Webb’s The Garies and Their Friends (1852), Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin (1852), William Wells Brown’s Clotel, or the President’s Daughter (1853), María Ruiz de Burton’s Who Would Have Thought It? (1872) wherein the plot reverses the trope, altering the color and therefore status of the protagonist from black to white, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper’s Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted (1892), Kate Chopin’s “Désirée’s Baby” (1893), Mark Twain’s Pudd’nhead Wilson (1894), Charles Chesnutt’s Marrow of Tradition (1899) and The House behind the Cedars (1900), James Weldon Johnson’s Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man (1912), Jessie Redmond Fauset’s The Sleeper Wakes (1920) and Plum Bun (1928) Nella Larsen’s “Passing” (1929) Fannie Hurst’s Imitation of Life (1933), and Langston Hughes’s “Passing” (1934). Variations of the tragic mulatto trope persists in modern and contemporary literature works by writers such as William Faulkner and Toni Morrison, and has persisted as an often revised theme in many literary works authored by mixed-race individuals, and under the heading of “ethnic-American literature.” Especially examples such as Latina,

\(^{163}\) Beaumont in Tinnin’s edition Foreword 5

\(^{164}\) Beaumont in Tinnin’s edition Foreword 5

\(^{165}\) Beaumont in Tinnin’s edition Foreword 5
slavery. Emphasizing what he recognizes as a particularly U.S. prejudice, Beaumont includes a footnote: “in January 1832, a Frenchman, a Creole from Santo Domingo, whose skin is rather swarthy, finding himself in New York, went to a theater where he seated himself among the whites. The American audience having taken him for a man of color, requested him to leave and, upon his refusal, ejected him from the hall with violence.” Beaumont’s concern with the focus of color and prejudice “on even those generations in which the color has disappeared” in nineteenth-century U.S. society reflects his understanding of the issue as a major hindrance to social and political growth in the United States, as well as an increasingly aggressive catalyst for violent behavior. In the forward he states, “It is this prejudice, born of both slavery and the slave race, which forms the principal subject of my book. I wished to show how great are the miseries of slavery, and how deeply it affects traditions, after it has legally ceased to exist.” France’s attempts to legislate color in the colonies, and particularly, the horrifically violent French and Haitian Revolutions certainly influenced Beaumont’s position on slavery in the U.S..

Working beyond French anxieties surrounding racial mixing that Duras and Hugo include in their narratives, Beaumont’s tale examines these fears in the U.S., extending his observations to the effects of prejudice on individuals who suffer the aftermath slavery. Again, writing Marie and her brother George into the transamerican literary sphere, Beaumont offers the first tragic mulatto and tragic mulatta and passing characters to nineteenth-century U.S. literature. Both aware of their origins and capable of passing for white, these two individuals, along with their white father, fail at many attempts to exile themselves, trying to escape the secret of their mother’s heritage, preferring to go underground rather than dare to cross the color line. Like the

166 Beaumont in Tinnin’s edition Foreword 5
167 Beaumont in Tinnin’s edition Foreword 5
168 Beaumont in Tinnin’s edition Foreword 6
aristocratic African Ourika, the archetypal mixed-race individuals are disheartened with living or perhaps suicidal because they are incapable of fitting neatly into black or white society. Beaumont depicts these characters as victims of the society in which they live, societies divided by race. Although female characters outnumber males in the canon of nineteenth-century U.S.-authored, tragic mulatto plots, these narratives frequently share the outcome of death as the only means to resolution to their doubled lives, and the likelihood of death is increased by those who willingly pass for white. However, Beaumont succeeds at constructing two very different paths to explore the victimization of color and violent fate that the brother and sister share. Similar to Bug-Jargal, George perishes in a rebellion alongside Native Americans and black slaves; while Marie, although she may hide the secret of her ancestry, suffers a similar fate as Ourika, always hidden away and alone, dying of a broken heart.169

Beaumont structures Marie not only on the interruptions of social commentary, but also on the intersections of gender, race, mixed-race, and political and personal rebellion against the social order and exposing principles of racial difference, inferiority and oppression in the northern and southern nineteenth-century U.S.. In the chapter “Revelation,” after Ludovic has professed his undying love for Marie, the Nelsons explain the facts behind George and Marie’s

169 For example Frank J. Webb’s The Garies and their Friends (1857) follows the lives of two middle-class black families—one of mixed ancestry and the other of pure ethnicity—in antebellum Philadelphia. Many critics label Webb’s sentimental work an unexceptional sample of the popular nineteenth-century melodramatic novel; yet suggest that the narrative is first to tackle racism and segregation in the free North, depict a racially charged mob riot, portray blacks as middle-class social climbers, and to tacitly reproach people of mixed-race who cross the color line. Certainly it may be the first African-American authored novel to discuss these issues, but Beaumont’s Marie certainly sets the bar This novel is the only one that I have located where a mixed-race, male character consciously passes for white, suffers psychologically for having done so, and dies as a result. Male characters who are of mixed-race heritage are often portrayed much like George Nelson—strengthened and empowered--masculinized by his “white blood” rather than feminized. The Garies’ cousin, George Winston passes for white, denies his black mother, and disappears from the narrative, while light-skinned Clarence Garie decides to pass for white, which results in a loss of his black identity as slowly weakening him to death.
The language of Ludovic’s passionate response is tinged with anti-American and abolitionist rhetoric:

So this is the land of the free—who cannot do without slaves! America is the cradle of equality, and no country in Europe contains so much servitude! Now I understand you egotistical Americans. You love liberty for yourselves. A race of merchants, you sell the liberty of others (Beaumont 57)!

A lengthy dialogue follows, with Daniel reiterating the misconstrued role of the black race in America as a race of slaves and dehumanized commodities, rightly prohibited from humane treatment, love, and family relationships. While George and Ludovic counter Daniel’s pro-slavery position with a militant abolitionist stance, Marie’s reconciles herself to her own hybridized construction of nineteenth-century “true womanhood.”

Marie considers herself unfit for Ludovic to love because of her mixed-race status. The disgrace she feels about her status enhances her female decorum because we see her convert her self-hatred into virtues—she nurses “the poor, the ill, and the mad” at the Baltimore Almshouse—and becomes an “angel of mercy.”

“Submissive and resigned to her destiny,” in many ways, the character of Marie exemplifies the authority that public tradition and judgment has over assigning and constructing not only race, but also female identity (Beaumont 56). Regardless of her whiteness, beauty, “intelligence, talent, and goodness” Marie can never be the equal of white women. The misconception about “white women of French or American blood”

170 See Hazel Carby, et al.
171 Schaub 611; Schaub also suggests that Marie is like Stowe’s character of Uncle Tom (written 17 years later) in many ways; however, Marie is not a “true Christian,” and Tom is. “Tom’s sublimity lies in his power of forgiveness, his ability to love his enemies. His resignation is more admirable than Marie’s because it is more knowing. Marie, despite her goodness, is pitiful. Marie dies asking for forgiveness—not of God, but of man—while Tom dies granting forgiveness. His death is redemptive, bringing freedom for both slaves and masters: first freedom of the soul and eventually freedom of the body as well.”
being of higher morality, or more female than black women echoes throughout the narrative. For example, Marie tells Ludovic that she is “unworthy” of his love, and agrees with her father that “American women are superior to women of color; they are able to love with reason” (Beaumont 57 and 61).

Beaumont, much like Toqueville, proposes that women are more malleable and victimized by public judgments than men. The circumstance of American women is the first subject Ludovic and the traveling French frame narrator discuss. The visiting Frenchman tells Ludovic how fascinated he is with American women and believes that in the U.S., “marriage is not a business, nor is love a commodity,” and he “seek[s] the love of an American girl” (Beaumont 14-15). Ludovic tells the traveler he is “pursuing… chimeras,” suggesting that what he seeks is “an unreal creature of the imagination” (Beaumont 15). However, Ludovic implies more than the intangibility of the traveler’s romantic ideal. Beaumont’s use of the word “chimera” has multiple connotations that align the position of American women with his critique of slavery and racial categorizations in U.S. society, particularly considering the broad allusion to the “incongruous composition” of a mythical monster formed from parts of various animals.

Certainly the phrase refers to his experience with the beautiful, mixed-race Marie. Aside from a slave’s loss of autonomy as captured and purchased chattel, many slaves endured conditions far worse than a working animal. Dehumanization of people of color combined with taxonomical classifications of race and attempts to discern the ethnic ratios of mixed-race individuals had evolved and migrated from the code noir in France and its colonies, to the black codes in the

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172 Schaub 612
173 OED: 3 b.) An unreal creature of the imagination, a mere wild fancy; an unfounded conception.
174 OED: 1 a.) A fabled fire-breathing monster of Greek mythology, with a lion’s head, a goat’s body, and a serpent’s tail (or according to others with the heads of a lion, a goat, and a serpent), killed by Bellerophon; 3.) fig. with reference to the terrible character, the unreality, or the incongruous composition of the fabled monster;
nineteenth-century U.S. At the same time, burgeoning studies in comparative anatomy and newly developed anthropological methods of classifying individuals into races and ethnicities splintered into a variety of pseudo-sciences related to physiognomy, such as phrenology, anthropometry and craniometry. Indeed these practices served to assess gender differences as well, directly hindering the advancement of women beyond subjugated roles as domestic chattel—for example, wives, a mothers, teachers and maids.

At this point in the narrative, Ludovic responds to the Frenchman’s impressions with a lengthy speech, which despite Beaumont’s disclaimer in the forward stating that the opinions in his narrative belong to his characters, muddles the narrator’s voice with that of the author and accounts for all of chapter two, “American Women.” Ludovic believes that unlike the French, the U.S. fails at educating women, that instead, a girl is “free before her adolescence; having no guide but herself, she walks aimlessly upon untried paths” (Beaumont 16). In many turns of phrase that over-generalize nineteenth-century American women just as much as the French traveler, Ludovic describes his “first estimate” of an American girl as having a “precocious liberty [that] gives her thoughts a serious turn and stamps her character with a certain masculinity” (Beaumont 17). Ludovic’s assessment aligns with the common stereotype of U.S. citizens as particularly brave, strong willed, and adventuresome, blurring an immigrant’s perception of revolutionary propaganda and the myth of an American Dream with the attainability of a certain type of woman. He accuses American girls of being cold and calculating.
husband-hunters, and continues that “this coolness of the senses, the supremacy of the mind, this masculine behavior, may find favor with one’s intellect; but they hardly satisfy the heart” (Beaumont 17). When Ludovic clarifies that a great number of American women share the characteristic of “artificial exaltation,” he recognizes an absence of an authentic sense of refinement in U.S. culture (Beaumont 18). For example, Ludovic tells about attending a concert with one woman he was enamored with, who “had spoken of music in general terms that enraptured [him]”; however when she speaks her mind “loudly” and “critically appraises the performance,” his fascination with her dissipates (Beaumont 18). Despite his narrator being agitated with the ease at which American women voice their opinions and wear their spectacles out in public, Beaumont concedes that U.S. women are intellectually and morally superior to American men. When Ludovic compares Marie to these other American women, he describes her as a beautiful and tender-hearted angel, “endowed with all the physical charms which give women their power,” but “she [does] not attempt to exploit them” (Beaumont 37). Yet unknown to him, some of the positive characteristics he detects about Marie, her “meekness,” “humility” and “innocence” are pronounced because of “some remorse on her conscience” and a “sense of secret inferiority” (Beaumont 37). Not only is Ludovic unaware of Marie’s mixed-race status as he begins to fall in love with her, he also does not know her “secret occupation,” only that she spends her days away from home (Beaumont 37). In some sense, for Beaumont, Marie is ideally feminine because she is not purely “American”—because, in other words, she is partially black and partially “French,” two terms which are quickly becoming interchangeable in nineteenth-century U.S. fictions of race.

Another characteristic emphasizing the intersection of racial identity and gender emerges in Beaumont’s development of Marie’s brother George. Rather than wallow and hide in shame
like his sister, he copes with his secret, denies inferiority, and is proud of his heritage. On the evening when the Nelson’s tell Ludovic about the family’s heritage, George makes a passionate speech that incorporates the taxonomical fallacies that pervade later nineteenth-century tragic mulatto/a works:

It is true that according to law a Negro is not a man; he is a chattel, a thing. Yes, but you will see that he is a thinking thing, an acting thing, that can hold a dagger! Inferior race! So you say! You have measured the Negro brain and said ‘There is no room in that narrow skull for anything but grief!’ …You are mistaken; your measurements were wrong; in that brutish head there is a compartment that contains a powerful faculty, that of revenge—an implacable vengeance, horrible but intelligent…. He grovels! Yes, for two centuries he has groveled at your feet—some day he will stand up and look you in the eye, and kill you (Beaumont 60)

George is a free man; however, he recognizes that his position in U.S. society is coterminous with the plight of the slaves, and desires liberty and vindication for his race. At the same time, his revolutionary drive draws him to assist other oppressed people, and George leaves Baltimore for Georgia to join the fight for Cherokee lands (Beaumont 69). Curiously, George is unmasked as black and run out of a New York theater because of accusations from an unknown man, and again when he accompanies his father to vote in Baltimore, the family’s secret is revealed by Fernando d’Almanza (Beaumont 87 and 118). The Nelson’s retreat to New York, where Ludovic has already relocated. In a plot twist that some critics suggest is Beaumont’s response to the Nat Turner Rebellion which occurred in the same year as Beaumont and Toqueville’s visit, George Nelson joins a group of slaves and Indians who are planning a joint rebellion.
Regardless of gender and how each character chooses to adapt to their mixed-race status, George and Marie each suffer the deadly fate of the traditional tragic mulatto/a character in nineteenth-century fiction. George follows the masculine path of rebellion and fighting against the persecution and dehumanizing classifications that his ancestors endured. Although Ludovic and Marie do marry, Marie’s feminine sensibilities and internalized self-hatred causes her to become ill from heartbreak and an inability to adjust to her newly relegated social status as a black woman, a device that repeats throughout the early twentieth century.
Chapter Four

Metaphor, Masking, and the Master: Victor Séjour’s “The Mulatto” and Alexandre Dumas’s Georges


Although fifteen years apart, one born in France and one born in the United States, the biographies of Alexandre Dumas *père* (1802-1870) and Victor Séjour (1817-1874) overlap and intersect with each other, as descendants of French, Caribbean, and African heritage, as well as literary successes. Documented as “the first in a series of distinguished African Americans who settled and wrote in Paris,” Séjour also met prominent men of color such as Dumas, and it is likely that he was acquainted with Victor Hugo and Gustave Beaumont as well. Recognized along with Hugo for introducing Romanticism to the French stage, Dumas was widely known for his swashbuckling tales of adventure, as well as his often public and sordid romantic

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177 Gates 286.
relationships. Séjour, an innovative playwright influenced by Dumas, Hugo, Schiller, and Byron, received some positive critical acclaim for his productions; however, twentieth-century assessments of Séjour’s plays assert three specific limitations: “(1) out-of-date Romanticism bordering on melodrama, (2) indiscriminate borrowing from classical and contemporary authors, [and] (3) adulation of Napoleon III.”178 These critics are correct; the themes, motifs and devices that Séjour lifts from Hugo and Beaumont pay homage to Romantic melodrama, while also adding a macabre and subversive element to the tragic mulatto trope. Curiously, Dumas and Séjour, these two mixed-race authors, both descendants of the Caribbean colonies living in France, each only contributed one work to the concerns of slavery, color and caste, but Séjour wrote his first.

Much like the heritage of Beaumont’s fictional character of Marie’s mother, Theresa, a creole born in the transamerican locale of New Orleans, Victor Séjour’s father, Louis, was a native of Haiti, and an octoroon.179 In New Orleans, Louis Séjour, a free man of color, endorsed quadroon balls in the French Quarter as early as 1816, and later he became “a dry goods merchant” and successful in the real estate market.180 Different sources make different claims about Victor’s education in the United States. Perret claims that Séjour claimed to be a graduate of a private school for free blacks in New Orleans that did not exist until 1840, ten years after he moved to France. The Norton Anthology of African American Literature states that Séjour attended a private school “where he came under the influence of a respected black journalist who wrote for French newspapers in New Orleans.”181 Victor traveled to Paris in 1830, and remained, a custom of many middle-class Louisiana blacks wishing to escape the black codes and racial

178 Perret 187
179 Perret 187
180 Perret 187
181 Gates 286
Although *Le Mulâtre* was not available in the United States and not translated into English until 1995, the persuasiveness of his antislavery narrative may have been smuggled into the country via other black expatriates, despite claims that “even the most cosmopolitan of African American writers, such as [Frederick] Douglass and [William Wells] Brown,” were unaware of Séjour’s early work.

Séjour appropriates stylistic and narrative techniques from the popular publications *Bug-Jargal*, *Ourika*, and *Marie*. Broadly speaking, Séjour’s work experiments with themes that are evident in these three earlier works, and that this study associates with masking: the framing storyteller or narrative mask, issues of race, mixed race and the offspring—whether literal or metaphorical—of such unions, an intertwining of literal, metaphorical and psychological rebellion, and suspenseful situations. More specifically, Séjour adopts the setting of Saint Domingue and its rebellious atmosphere from Hugo’s *Bug-Jargal*, but portrays, what according to the code noir, is a very different kind of creole from Captain d’Auverney. Georges’s desire to know his heritage intersects with Ourika’s longing for a husband and child. Like Ourika, Laïsa is Senegalese, and her situation as a female slave explores the psychological and social anxieties about race and mixed-race identities that Duras’s tale cannot include because Ourika is a free person of color in France and chooses to conceal herself in a veil and nunnery. As a slave, Laïsa does not have a choice; rather, she is raped by Georges’s father, and cloistered in the outskirts of the plantation. From Beaumont’s *Marie*, Séjour appropriates of the name of Georges and sets in motion a long tradition of naming rebellious, racialized males or tragic mulatto characters in African American literature.

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182 Perret 193
183 Gates 287
As the earliest recognized published fiction work of the African American tradition, Victor Séjour’s *The Mulatto* becomes the U.S. foundation of this French, United States and Caribbean literary genealogy and mixed-race transamerican connections between these early French Romantic narratives. *The Mulatto* secures this transamerican literary genealogy, not only via literary devices, characters, and political and social issues, but also by its focused and literal concern with lineage and heritage, aligning these themes with race and anxieties about racial mixing. The action of the story drives the circumstances of a masked relationship: the secret of Georges’s paternity. Not only is the father/son relationship figuratively masked, the secret is also literally masked by the small leather pouch that holds a portrait, and the true identity of Georges’s father. Séjour illuminates the precarious double standards of the code noir, slavery, gender and individual identity beyond the techniques of his predecessors through his subtle but stirring development of metaphorical masking. The doubling within the tale works to magnify the irony within the circumstances of the plot; for example, the inclusion of two masks—two fictional narrators, a slave owner imparting the circumstances and story told to him by a slave—complicates the terms of agency within the story.

Another way that Séjour develops masking is in the dualistic character development of Georges. He is described as having “all the talents necessary for becoming a well-regarded gentleman; yet he [is] possessed of a haughty, tenacious, willful nature; he had one of those oriental dispositions, the kind that, once pushed far enough from the path of virtue, will stride boldly down the path of crime” (Gates 290). By cohering to common fallacies of scientific racism, this description implies that Georges is inherently, perhaps even biologically prone to revolt against the country and society that has oppressed him and others like him for material gain. The slave rebellion in Saint Domingue lurks behind the narration; quite literally, its factions
are hidden deep within the dense forest of the island and deep within the subtext of the short story—indeed, personified by the identity struggles of the protagonist. Georges is doubly marginalized by his position as a mixed-race individual and his status as chattel, as well as his location at the outskirts of the plantation boundaries and his mother’s dying request (Gates 290).

Moreover, the narrative’s immediate focus on the island serves to foreshadow and then magnify the ways Séjour builds on these symbols of hidden visages and concealed perceptions, and evolves masking as a storytelling device that conceals and exposes secrets—secrets about identity, slavery, and racial mixture, as well as injecting this familiar trope with transamerican and transatlantic cultural transmissions. The narrative melds a sensational plot with gothic characteristics—Georges’s macabre and almost ceremonial preparation for acting on his revenge is reminiscent of the medieval trope of patricide and lineage. In this way, the tale implicitly invokes aspects of masquerade. The taxonomical attention that Séjour grants the physical descriptions of characters, especially their facial gestures, demonstrates a refined theatrical flair that he later presents in French performances of his popular plays, often described as “admitting of spectacular display and pomp” (*New York Times*), and at times closely resembles stage directions, especially in the descriptions of Antoine as he speaks about the evils and injustices of slavery. Antoine’s “face [lights] up, his eyes [sparkle], and his heart [pounds] forcefully.” The performative aspects of the reckless adventure scenes, Georges fighting the thieves and later murdering his father, also support these theatrical assertions.

The initial narrator, or mask, is a plantation owner who places an emphasis on the external beauty and wonder of this town and the island but soon unmasks the atrocities beneath—a “virile beaut[y] of creation” with “its picturesque vegetation” contrasted against the
The immediate focus on the visual representation of this island as a wavering colonial bastion foreshadows the attention paid to physical descriptions of characters, especially their facial gestures, and magnifies the very detailed physical description of the old slave, Antoine. Detailed as “an old Negro, at least seventy years of age,” with a “firm” step and a sturdy, and “imposing” form; his age revealed by only “the remarkable whiteness of his curly hair” (Gates 287). The introduction of Antoine as an old man whose mannerisms and gait would not suggest his age, or would not look seventy years old without his “[white], curly hair” also speaks to the way visual signifiers may deceive the viewer (Gates 287). Next, the mask describes Antoine as though he is in a traditional costume: “As is common in that country, he wore a large straw hat and was dressed in trousers of coarse gray linen with a kind of jacket made from plain batiste” (Gates 287).

As Antoine talks about the evils and injustices of slavery, another function of masking is revealed in the narrative. Antoine’s visage appears to transform, or become lighter: either a suggestion of some connection with the Master and initial narrator, some equalizing element that allows the two to converse, or merely a creative theatrical device to illustrate the change in tone. The transformation accompanies a self-deprecating acceptance of his role within the society.

Master, [he said,] that's quite noble-hearted of you… But you know, do you not, that a negro's as vile as a dog; society rejects him; men detest him; the laws curse him… Yes, he's a most unhappy being, who hasn't even the consolation of always being virtuous… He may be born good, noble, and generous; God may grant him a great and loyal soul; but despite all that, he often goes to his grave with bloodstained hands, and a heart hungering after yet more vengeance (Gates 287)

184 Also see Molly Kruegerenz’s “The mulatto as Island and the Island as mulatto in Alexandre Dumas's Georges.”
Therefore, Antoine suggests, the institution of slavery corrupts natural goodness: once a slave, a
great and loyal individual may change and evolve into a murderer. But as Antoine also implies
here, the slave wears a mask: his transformation will not necessarily be visible to the master at
the time of the change—just as the frame narrator and mask of the larger tale itself cannot
ultimately know the meaning of his interlocutor’s allegory here.

At the same time, the continuing emphasis on visual significations and the descriptions of
the pretty “young Senegalese woman”—which mirrors the Senegalese heritage of Ourika—both
point to the exoticization of the racialized female, a motif that carries over into subsequent U.S.
tragic mulatta narratives, especially tales that include a mixed-race female whose skin color
allows her to pass for white. Antoine juxtaposes the description of the lovely girl with the story
of Georges, the mixed-race product of the violent rape of a beautiful young slave woman, Laïsa,
and Alfred the plantation owner, offering a subversive critique of the social, economic, and
political responsibility of the burgeoning mixed-race population on the island. After Laïsa gives
birth to Georges, mother and son are relegated to a hut on the outskirts of Alfred’s property and
they barely subsist. Locating Georges and Laïsa at the borders of his plantation, Alfred is in turn
also hiding, or again, masking, the relationship he forced upon Laïsa as well as his
acknowledgement of his son, Georges. Never knowing his father, young Georges asks his mother
for the name of his father. Although she promises to reveal the secret when he reaches the age of
twenty-five, Laïsa dies, but leaves him the means to answer his question regarding paternity;
however, she asks him to keep his promise and wait until he reaches manhood.

Séjour deploys metaphorical masking in the representation of Georges himself. As we
saw before, the protagonist is described as having “all the talents necessary for becoming a well-
regarded gentleman; yet he was possessed of a haughty, tenacious, willful nature; he had one of
those oriental dispositions, the kind that, once pushed far enough from the path of virtue, will stride boldly down the path of crime” (Gates 290). This description—where outward demeanor thinly masks an internal reality—introduces the notion of warring blood within the mulatto character into African American literature, for it implies that Georges is inherently predisposed to criminality. Séjour further suggests that Georges is drawn to Alfred—“It was as if nature pushed him toward Alfred; he liked him… and Alfred esteemed [Georges]” (Gates 291). Yet where later U.S. writers—and especially white writers of race literature—would take up the theme of warring blood to argue for the tragic outcome of racial mixture, Séjour uses the discourse of racial inheritance quite differently. First, as Antoine’s descriptions of Alfred make clear, it is from his paternal, “white” ancestry that Georges inherits a “haughty, tenacious, and willful nature.” Second, as Antoine’s initial allegory of the slave suggests, it is the institution of slavery (as well as Alfred’s specifically villainous actions) that push Georges from “the path of virtue” onto “the path of crime.” Indeed, Georges begins as a virtual embodiment of Antoine’s noble, loyal slave. He runs to warn Alfred when he learns of “A band of thieves” that intend to murder his master (and unbeknownst father). When Georges speaks to Alfred in a commanding tone, Alfred’s eyebrows rise (Gates 291), especially when Georges tells Alfred that the manner in which he obtained the information must remain secret. But Georges’s secret is openly disclosed; it is a transparent withholding rather than—like the secret of Georges’s paternity, which Alfred well knows—a masking. Alfred, as the consummate wearer of a mask, can only see his own duplicity reflected in the face of the son he will not acknowledge. When he asks if Georges has weapons, his son willingly “[pulls back a few of the rags that [cover] him, revealing an axe and a pair of pistols,” but Alfred reads even this candor as conspiracy, especially when he sees “the mulatto smiling” (Gates 292). Here, too, is the larger tale’s masked agenda: the reader
sees the smile but can’t be sure (just as the frame narrator or mask can’t be sure) when the transformation in Georges takes place. We know that he becomes a murderer by the end of this familial-racial melodrama, but we do not know if he was already against Alfred on the night of the initial attack by the Saint Dominguean “bandits” who will later be known to history as revolutionaries.

Not only is the father son relationship figuratively masked by the duality of Georges’s character and his attraction to Alfred and the marginalization of Laïsa and Georges’s placement on the perimeter of the plantation, but also quite literally by the mother’s dying request. She promises Georges that she will tell him his father’s name when he reaches twenty-five years of age, and when Laïsa dies, she forces Georges to promise to continue waiting to learn the name of his father and leaves with him “as his entire inheritance, a small leather pouch containing a portrait of [Georges’s] father” (Gates 290). Perhaps, the tale suggests, this is the ultimate meaning of the Haitian Revolution: the demand for the name of the father that has been systematically denied.

Turning to Alexandre Dumas’ only novel to clearly allude to issues of slavery, race and interracialism during the years before and after the French Revolution, and probing the intellectual climate in Dumas and Séjour’s France, clarifies some of the issues presented by Séjour’s tale, while also illuminating some of the contemporary social and political implications inherent in the practice of mulatto subjects writing about mulatto topics. Few scholars of late, especially American literature scholars, have approached his little-discussed novel, Georges, in which Dumas ultimately rewrites Séjour’s story of colonial mulatto identity recasting it as a kind of rejoinder to Bug-Jargal’s veiled theme of mixed-race coupling. Similarly to Séjour’s mixed-
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race heritage, Dumas’s own pedigree—his grandfather was a French nobleman, who relocated to Saint Domingue, eventually marrying an Afro-Caribbean slave from the colony, and his father was a general in Napoleon’s mulatto regiment—would have categorized him as quadroon. However, Dumas did not identify as a black man; perhaps his aristocratic status and his location far from the colonies in France sheltered him from racial prejudices in his lifetime. Regardless, Dumas’s works gained popularity among the nineteenth-century African American readers because of how the thematic allusions to emancipation permeate the scenes of Dantes’s imprisonment in the *Count of Monte-Cristo* (1844).

Regardless of Dumas’s minimal engagement with issues of slavery and race during his career, he endures as a role model for nineteenth-century African American intelligentsia, thus further supporting my assertions that French Romanticism contributed to the development of the tragic mulatto/a trope and passing narrative in the African American literary canon. William Wells Brown, author of *Clotel; or, the President’s Daughter* (1853), made it a point to meet Dumas when he visited Paris. Frank J. Webb, primarily known for *The Garies and Their Friends* (1857), sets his “Two Wolves and a Lamb” (1870) on Saint Marguerite, the location of the Bastille as well as the setting of Dumas’s *The Man in the Iron Mask* (1847-1850). African American literary descendants of Dumas hold the writer in “high esteem as a source of racial pride and as implicitly supporting a critique of the American racial scene.” In Frances E.W. Harper’s *Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted* (1892) Leroy tells Marie that “Alexandre Dumas was

185 More information regarding the 7th Neapolitan Infantry Regiment is available in many sources about the post-revolutionary Napoleonic Wars; however, one of the most recent historiographies I recommend is Phillippe R. Girard’s *The Slaves Who Defeated Napoleon: Toussaint Louverture and the Haitian War of Independence, 1801-1804* (2011). Napoleon didn’t stand a chance against the charismatic leadership of Toussaint in Haiti. Curiously, the enlisting of black and mulatto troops to fight for France was less motivated by psychological warfare against Toussaint than by mere numbers: the blacks and mulattoes outnumbered whites on Saint Domingue.

186 The theme of emancipation in *The Count of Monte Cristo* also influenced white writers, even James Joyce; see R.B. Kershner’s *Joyce and Popular Culture* (195-209).

187 Sollors xxii

188 Sollors xxii
not forced to conceal his origin to succeed as a novelist” (Harper 84). Charles Chesnutt’s narrator in “The Wife of His Youth” (1899) says of another character that he “could give the pedigree of Alexander Pushkin” and “the titles of scores of Dumas’s novels” (Chesnutt 97). Chesnutt also delivered an address to Dumas in 1914. At the turn of the century, Dumas is revered again in James Weldon Johnson’s *Autobiography of a an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), “When I learned that Alexandre Dumas was a colored man, I re-read Monte Cristo and The Three Guardsmen with magnified pleasure” (Johnson 36). Gwendolyn Bennet published a poem, “Lines Written on the Grave of Alexandre Dumas” in the Harlem Renaissance publication, *Opportunity*. Langston Hughes and Richard Wright, who also lived in France for a time, remarked on the freedom that a black in author such as Dumas could embrace in France, contrast to the struggles of African American writers.

As his only text to confront the complexities of mixed racial identity, Dumas’s *Georges* shows the “tension between rich white creoles and equally rich but discriminated-against mulattoes on île de France.” Georges questions how the bigoted and aggressive men in the white creole Malmédie family are limited and restrained by the mixed-race Munier family, who are also rich and hold slaves. Dumas further complicates his story by incorporating the very tangible issues of interracialism within a transamerican context, especially in regard to mixed-race marriages among the aristocracy in late eighteenth-century France and in their Caribbean colonies. In this way, Dumas borrows and transposes Séjour’s character of Georges, who is also of mixed race and the son of a wealthy planter, but classified as a slave.

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189 I located this particular quote from Johnson during my own research, both Sollors and Fabre overlooked the mention.
191 Joseph McLaren mentions Langston Hughes’s affiliation with the Karamu Theater and the Dumas Dramatic Club in Cleveland when Hughes lived there from 1916 to 1920 in *Langston Hughes: folk dramatist in the protest tradition, 1921-1943* (1997), McLaren 83
192 Sollors xx
Examining this literary genealogy and transamerican revision and appropriation of various texts sheds light upon recent scholarly evidence that suggests that Dumas supervised what was once pithily called a “novel factory” (Robb 35). In 1845, Eugène de Mirecourt (a pseudonym of Charles-Jean Baptiste Jacquot) “published a pamphlet on Dumas’s ‘novel factory’: *Fabrique de romans: Maison Alexandre Dumas et Compagnie*. He accused Dumas of stealing from other writers” and offered examples of specifically plagiarized texts, further alleging that Dumas had “novels written for him by ‘collaborators’” (Robb 35). Indeed, the myth behind Dumas’s inexhaustible productivity is attributed to seventy-three writing assistants in his service. This information adds another dimension to the examination of masking in terms of literary production rather than thematic design. With this in mind, we might well ask whether this literary “sampling,” or borrowing, is indeed a crime of plagiarism or homage to the works and authors that influenced the appropriator? “Dumas himself admitted that some of his novels had been written in collaboration with a former history teacher called Auguste Maquet” (Robb 35). In fact, many critics suggest the novel *Georges* could not have been written by the same author of *The Three Musketeers* and *The Count of Monte Cristo* (Robb 36).193

Regardless of the questions of authorship, *Georges* may be read as the next literary descendant of *Bug Jargal*, *Ourika*, *Marie* and “The Mulatto” (not to mention Fanny Reybaud’s 1838 *Les Épaves*, and its 1840 adaptation by Danish playwright Hans Christian Andersen [Sollors xxii]). Dumas’s tale elaborates upon the many starting points of his literary forbears, and maintains a transamerican approach to the trope of masking. Also set in the Caribbean on the fictional island of Mauritius, it tells the story of a mulatto protagonist and hero, with the name

“Georges” in keeping with tradition of de Beaumont and Séjour, and incorporates the rhetoric of slave rebellions, evokes the code noir, and includes an episode of insurrection. Like Bug Jargal and “The Mulatto,” Dumas sets his novel in the Caribbean, but he masks any clear references to Haiti, the island of his heritage, and instead chooses a fictitious island, île de France.

The plot closely follows that of Bug-Jargal except the mulatto Georges and his wealthy, creole family are included in the narrative action, increasing the underlying tensions of interracial concerns surrounding the Caribbean colonies, and complicating Hugo’s depiction of an interracial love triangle. In this way, Georges Munier’s family may be read as the not so balanced double to the white creole de Malmédie family. Henri de Malmédie intends to marry Sara, whose affections are being pursued by the noble African, Laïza (whose name clearly recalls Séjour’s female character, Laïsa), as well as the mulatto, Georges. Taking this into account, I propose that Dumas appropriates and revises his adventure story from Hugo’s novel, and offers a mulatto character like Séjour’s Georges who is granted the benefits that wealth provides, rather than slavery, in order to concretize the ambiguities inherent between within the interracial love triangle and he pays tribute to “The Mulatto” by adopting the hero’s name. Dumas also elaborates the metaphor of masking through numerous secrets, and the novel contains countless references to masked and veiled visages, as well as situations, carrying on the tradition of coupling the nuances of masking with issues of race and racial mixing.

In 1810 when the British come to retake the island, the French garrison is outnumbered. Georges father, the wealthy mulatto planter, Pierre Munier, attempts to join the volunteers, but is refused on account of his race. Offended, Munier gathers African and mulatto volunteers and succeeds at overtaking the British, which spurs a conflict between Pierre and the leading white planter, Monsieur de Malmedie, and his son Henri. When the colony eventually falls to the
British, Munier sends his two sons to be educated in France. After a period of fourteen years, Georges returns to Mauritius endowed with wealth, and education, and falls in love with Henri Malmedie’s sister, Sara. When refused her hand in marriage, Georges challenges him to a duel, but Henri refuses to fight with a mulatto.

In Georges, Dumas clearly feels the unfairness of prejudice against free mulattos. With respect to slavery, though, he is much more ambivalent. Pierre Munier is a slave owner, but treats his slaves well, unlike the de Malmedie family. Dumas is careful to point out that Jacques, though a slave trader, has his professional ethics: he doesn't personally hunt for slaves, dealing only in the prisoners of African rulers, and refuses to overcrowd his victims on the ship.

Thus, Georges is not exactly an abolitionist tract. However, Dumas draws a sympathetic portrait of the African slave leader Laiza, a man of exemplary courage, loyalty, and honor (key Dumasian virtues), who dies trying to protect Georges. By example, if not by polemic, Dumas makes the point that Laiza is as much and as honorable a man as Georges, his position as a slave being the result of mere misfortune. Dumas was likely trying to remain a popular novelist while also promulgating a notion that was at variance with the conventional wisdom of the day: that the brotherhood of man might extend across races. And perhaps—to look forward again across the tradition of African American letters and consider a text such as Edward P. Jones’s 2003 novel The Known World—he was also exploring the complex moral inheritance of the free man of color who himself owned slaves.
Introduction

Masked Men and Women in the Attic from Post-bellum to the Harlem Renaissance

Acknowledged as the “age of revolutions,” the Romantic movement signified the political, economic, and social disruptions that linger throughout the twentieth century. The early alignments of these intrinsic rebellious energies influenced aesthetic theory and practices, and components of Romanticism persist in U.S. literature through approximately 1870. Many of the characteristic narrative devices recur in melodramatic African American-authored works well into the Harlem Renaissance. Canonical examples in literature include additional works by Dumas and Bronte, while major works by African American writers such as William Wells Brown and Harriet Jacobs also align the struggles of mixed-race characters with the trope of masking, secrets, and identity. Isolating these connections among literary devices used in the narratives by Duras, Hugo, Beaumont, Séjour and Dumas, this chapter explores how these “descendent” texts share similar discourses and shape a well-wrought trope and a specifically transamerican literary genealogy that endures throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.¹⁹⁴

Although he clearly faced prejudice as a man of African descent, Alexandre Dumas was one of the most prolific writers of the nineteenth century and held a high position in Parisian society as a renowned novelist and playwright. Critics have investigated many of Dumas’ novels as tales of emancipation both in and out of the aristocracy, above all his 1844 *The Count of*

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¹⁹⁴ Some additional major works I recognize are Francis W. Harper’s *Iola Leroy or Shadows Uplifted* (1892); Mark Twain’s *Pudd’nhead Wilson and Those Extraordinary Twins* (1894); Charles W. Chesnutt’s *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color-Line* (1899), *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900), and *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901) [and film adaptations by Oscar Mischeaux]; Jean Toomer’s *Cane* (1923); Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand* (1928), *Passing* (1929); Jessie Redmond Fauset’s *Plum Bun* (1929); William Faulkner’s *Light in August* (1932); Fannie Hurst’s *Imitation of Life* (1933); Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960); Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1974), *Tar Baby* (1981), and I would argue that the author’s *Beloved* (1987) belongs in this list, perhaps more so as a psychological descendant of *Ourika* than any other text mentioned in this study.
Monte Cristo. Aside from Georges, Dumas did not deliberately approach the practice of slavery or prejudices toward mixed-race individuals or people of color in his novels. My reading suggests that Dumas’ figure of the mulatto gives rise to one of the most famous masked figures of the nineteenth century—The Man in the Iron Mask. The last episode of the D’Artagnan romances, the story of the unknown prisoner of the Bastille and the last years of the famous Three Musketeers, holds clues, or, keys to reading the character of the man in the mask as a racialized or mixed-race figure. Perhaps in some attempt to further Dumas’s provocative tendency to infuse his works with history and political import as well as entertainment value, the prisoner may be masking more than his face, and is likely a metaphorical representation of the author’s own experiences with his mulatto heritage—and quite possibly with ghost-writers.

Dumas’s treatment of the narrative and the much-debated historical context surrounding the masked man first imprisoned on Saint Marguerite and later in the Paris Bastille, both suggest that the author may indeed have imbued his famous iron mask with implicit racial resonances.

According to the narrative, and an historical essay written by Dumas about his perceptions of the facts around the mysterious masked prisoner (or perhaps a propagandistic attempt by Dumas to obtain more readers), the author claims that Philippe, Louis XIV’s identical twin, is in fact the prisoner in the mask. Indeed, The Man in the Iron Mask could be approached as a passing narrative in the sense of passing one character off as another—the plot contains two characters that look exactly alike, twin brothers—and the existence of the doppelganger in the narrative is widely unknown, with the exception of a few elite and powerful players. But
examining this idea a step further suggests that the man in the mask is a metaphor for any individual of indistinct status and limited freedom. ¹⁹⁶

Dumas racializes the man in the Bastille though the veiling and masking of the prisoner, perhaps projecting his own mixed-race heritage, and the revolutionary events informing the tale suggest the colonial fascination with European holdings in the Caribbean and France’s inability to forget its losses. Although not clearly designated as being white or black in the novel, many passages allude to “darkness” surrounding the prisoner. Curiously, many of the sources mentioned in Dumas’ historical essay describe the shifting characteristics of the prisoner: he is well educated and aristocratic, Italian, Armenian, British, Dutch, French, “dark complexioned,” and “white.” Literally and figuratively, the man in the iron mask’s indistinct status suggests the fluidity of identity, while his incarceration demonstrates a desire to secure identity and control any further mutability. The prisoner’s confinement and the elusive terms of his imprisonment closely resemble a figurative allusion to the psychological isolation and very real suffering endured by many later characters in tragic mulatto and passing narratives. In this way, I suggest that a racialized reading of the man in the mask represents a stagnancy of discourse and anxieties surrounding interracial issues, especially miscegenation in France and abroad.

If Dumas investigates the ways in which metaphorical and physical confinements ultimately function to fix racial identity in a fluid Revolutionary world of metropolitan-colonial relations, his novel finds an unlikely counterpart across the channel, in Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre*. Both published in 1847, *The Man in the Iron Mask* and *Jane Eyre* can be approached as popular novels of emancipation that subtly react to political issues and anxieties surrounding mixed-race issues and slavery in France and Britain. With the 1833 abolition of slavery in Britain

¹⁹⁶ Mark Twain’s *Pudd’nhead Wilson and Those Extraordinary Twins* (1894) deserves mention again here, as well as *The Prince and the Pauper* (1909).
and the rhetoric and conflicts leading up to the 1848 abolition of slavery in the French and Danish colonies, issues surrounding slavery were part of the British and French intellectual consciousness, yet these two very different authors also choose to mask these concerns within their narratives. In fact, considering the timing of these works, it is quite likely that the subtexts of Dumas and Brontë’s novels are instead responding to American slavery (Meyer 71).

Despite the stark narratological differences from the Dumas’ man in the mask, Brontë’s novel makes use of her imprisoned Creole character, Bertha Mason, in much the same way—Bertha is ambiguously defined, not clearly racialized. She is described as “discoloured,” “purple,” “swelled,” and “blackened,” and Rochester refers to Bertha as “that mask” (Brontë 328-29). Several critics have approached Jane Eyre as a feminist treatise that employs the rhetoric of ethnocentric imperialism against Bertha’s character in order to elevate Jane’s own marginalized status, and as a masked or hidden critique of the Caribbean colonies and slave narratives, but the literary genealogy incorporates Brontë’s novel as a dualistic representation of confinement. Brontë holds her unknown prisoner in the attic, the nearest thing to a domestic Bastille available to a young English governess, and in doing so, transposes the theme of imprisonment from some marginalized locale to the home, setting the stage for future stories of confinement and slave narratives. That is, the imprisonment becomes more than psychological and extends the boundaries of chattel confinement beyond the plantation setting. Throughout the novel, Jane cloisters herself in a small room behind a red curtain. Jane’s confinement is doubled by the position of the Caribbean other in the attic.

The scenes of the domestic confinement of Jane and Bertha become intertwined and give way to the settings of captivity, incarceration and cloistering in African American publications that follow. My study seeks to uncover the aspects of masking characters and narratives by these
European authors—from secrets to costuming, to imprisonment and concealment—that contribute to a discussion of masking and passing in African American literature. Exploring how these themes transpose and evolve for a U.S. audience and develop within the confines of the U.S. slavery system, I investigate how these elements form the foundational attributes of abolitionist texts, the slave narrative, and the tragic mulatto and passing narrative in American literature. My study proposes that there are factors to consider beyond the authors’ attempts to represent the very real atrocities of slavery and devices of torture used against all political prisoners.

Whereas the purpose of masking in Dumas’ *The Man in the Iron Mask* and Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* is to conceal secrets and stabilize identity through the confinement of the individual, William Wells Brown’s *Clotel; or, The President’s Daughter* and Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* extend these elements of masking and confinement to also develop the themes of escape and freedom. Both narratives begin within the confines of the U.S. slavery system and through this kindred setting, as in Beaumont’s *Marie*, the texts begin to evolve the tentative and doubled status embodied by the mixed-race characters and illustrate the notions of psychological and physical confinement through disguise and mystery. Brown’s *Clotel*, and Jacobs’ *Incidents* introduce two female characters that are indeed chattel property and bound by slavery, but at the same time these characters select to be imprisoned in order to obtain their own freedom or the freedom of someone else. These characters illustrate masking through acts of subversive personal rebellions. In *Clotel*, Mary willingly exchanges clothes with her lover George and enters a jail cell in his place, while in Jacobs’s narrative, Linda Brent chooses to hide
and confine herself in a garret and a crawl space in order to escape her sexually predatory master.

At the same time, these two texts incorporate masking in very different ways.

Although many critics denote the classification as provisional, especially because of the novel’s initial publication in London rather than the U.S., William Wells Brown is considered the first African American to write a novel. Brown’s status within this transamerican literary genealogy is secured not only by his fictional contributions, but also by his notoriety as an abolitionist and lecturer, leading the American Peace Society to choose him as their representative to the 1849 Peace Congress in Paris in 1849. Provided with letters of introduction from various members of the American Anti-Slavery Society, in Paris Brown became well known in European intellectual circles—he was friends with Victor Hugo, an association that quite likely led to connections with Dumas and Séjour, or at least allowed Brown to be familiar with their works.

In light of Dumas’ methods of literary production touched upon in Chapter Four, we note here the practice of borrowing from previously published works, and again, must question the curious practice of naming mixed-race literary descendants George or Georges and Mary or Marie, evident in Brown’s subplot, the story of Clotel’s daughter and her lover. Additionally, the form of *Clotel*, its methods of production and multiple narrative revisions, suggests the significance of authorial masking. In each version of the narrative, Brown adjusts certain points in the narrative to speak to a specific socio-cultural audience at a particular historical vantage point, while maintaining that freedom can only exist for these characters in France, or in a transamerican context.

Brown admits to the appropriation of narrative fodder from a variety of sources, especially Lydia Marie Child’s short story, *The Quadroons*, but does not freely disclose all of his
sources. For example, he neglects to mention that Clotel’s disguised escape is based on the story of William and Ellen Craft’s escape from slavery, but in his fiction, he names the male character that Clotel assists, William. The words of other authors are masked as Brown’s words: “Viewed one way, this kind of borrowing can be seen as one author's attempt to pass off another's words and ideas as his or her own. Viewed another way, this act can be seen as a type of performance in which one author costumes himself in the words of another” (Schell).

Returning to the narrative of Clotel, I would suggest that Brown progresses the trope of confinement and masking through a literal attention to dress, at least, as Michael Berthold suggests, an “ideology of dress” that “informs the pervasive costumings, disguises and mistaken identities of Brown’s 1853 Clotel.” Scenes of masking are juxtaposed alongside descriptions of incarceration and punishment. The three episodes of cross-dressing (Clotel first disguises herself as “Mr. Johnson” in order to escape with William, then as an Italian or Spanish gentleman to avoid recapture; and later, Clotel’s daughter, Mary, disguises herself as her lover, George Green, exchanging clothing and identities in order to allow his escape from execution) in Brown’s novel meld into an elaborate literalization, a culmination of the various devices associated with masking, in order to represent “racialized, gendered, and class-based identities” and to “undermine the idea that identity is fixed and stable because they are consummate actors and changelings, capable of assuming a variety of complex, culturally scripted identities” (Schell). The entanglement of masking and rebellion in Brown’s novel enhances the performative aspects and dramatic effect of the narrative.

Tracing the transmission of transamerican aspects of masking, especially in terms of concealment and rebellion in narrative critiques of U.S. slavery, Harriet Jacob’s Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (1861) infuses the first female-authored U.S. slave narrative with fictional
devices handed down and revised by a variety of literary offspring. Descended from a Caribbean family on the island of St. Augustine, Jacob’s mask, Linda Brent, illustrates “how racialized and gendered national agendas have been ‘mapped’ onto the bodies of captives,” or slaves, through masked, incarcerated and hidden characters, perpetuating the persistence of cultural narratives that contributed to the development of an African American literature (Faery 9).

Moreover, at the time of its publication, questions regarding the validity of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* were motivated by Jacob’s unique narrative form. Her story strays from the chronological plotting of heroic escapes and dangerous encounters prevalent in the majority of male-authored U.S. slave narratives; rather, much like the narrative forms of Beaumont’s *Marie* and Brown’s *Clotel*, Jacobs disrupts her storytelling to include brief discussions regarding social and political issues, slavery, the church, the effects of the Fugitive Slave Law on runaways, or the Nat Turner Insurrection. In the introduction to Jacobs’s narrative, Lydia Maria Child personifies the gender treacherous experiences of slavery imparted in the narrative as a “veiled” and “monstrous” creature whose features must be revealed, “the veil withdrawn” (Jacobs 8). Like the character of Clotel, Linda Brent is a light-skinned mulatto, masked by heritage, agency and identity—stifled by gender and slavery. Moreover, critics assert that Jacob’s narrative portrays Linda much more like the tragic heroine of British romance novels than as a black female slave struggling to survive and that her escape from slavery becomes a sacrifice of her own sexuality. Jacobs borrows confinement, cloistering and gendered status from *Ourika* and Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*. But unlike Jane, who marries Rochester despite his hidden wife, secrets and deceit, Linda does not have marriage as an option, so building on the agency that Bertha Mason lacks, Linda chooses to conceal herself in a friend’s home and later in her grandmother’s garret for seven years. Linda’s cloistering as a means of escape demonstrates a
masked rebellion, a passive and hidden reaction against the oppressions of slavery in contrast to running or physically fighting back. Broadly, the themes of masking, confinement, rebellion form the foundational attributes of abolitionist texts, certain slave narratives, the tragic mulatto trope and passing narratives in African American literature, from Brown’s contemporaries such as Frank J Webb (*The Garies and Their Friends*, 1857) and Harriet Wilson (*Our Nig* 1859), Charles Chesnutt (*House Behind the Cedars*, 1900 and *Marrow of Tradition*, 1901), Pauline E. Hopkins (*Contending Forces: A Romance Illustrative of Negro Life North and South*, 1900), W.E.B. Dubois(*The Souls of Black Folk*, 1901 and *Darkwater Voices from Within the Veil* 1920), James Weldon Johnson (*Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, 1912), Zara Wright (*Black and White Tangled Threads*, 1920) and many more the contributions from the Harlem Renaissance and more recent contemporary works.
Chapter Five

Transamerican Interracialism: The Politics of Literary History, National Identity and Genetic Inheritance in Eloise Bibb-Thompson's “Masks, A Story”

In 1836, William Wells Brown visited Cuba and Haiti as an active member of the abolitionist movement in order to investigate emigration possibilities for African-Americans. During the period from 1849 to 1854, Brown delivered antislavery speeches comparing Britain's emancipation of slavery in the West Indies with slavery issues in the United States, suggesting that the latter country needed to recognize the revolution in Haiti as an example of a successful slave revolt. In other words, he appropriated the history of the West Indies as a successful rhetorical device in his lectures, contrasting the Haitian past with the institution of slavery in the United States.

Reinforcing his growing antislavery activism, William Wells Brown was writing a Haitian history— a speech documenting the Haitian revolution— while he was writing, what is (at least now) understood to be the first African-American novel, Clotel, or the President's Daughter (1855). Primarily an abolitionist text, Clotel takes place in the antebellum south and critiques the politics of interracialism by establishing the tradition of the African-American authored passing narrative. Brown introduces what was soon to become the familiar trope of the tragic mulatta heroine through his female protagonist Clotel, whose name in varied spellings and

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198 Brown's history of the Haitian revolution, St. Domingo: Its Revolution and its Patriots, was delivered as a lecture in London and Philadelphia in 1854 and published in Boston in December of the same year (though the publisher's imprint is 1855) <http://www.wm.edu/Whitman/Dickinson/analogue9.html>.
narrative revisions eventually came to comprise four versions of his groundbreaking text.\textsuperscript{199}

Through the subject of slavery, \textit{Clotel} portrays a world preoccupied with false constructions of “black” and “white” differences, while also illuminating the color prejudices toward variable degrees of skin color amongst “Southern Negroes.”\textsuperscript{200}

In Brown's older, less complicated model of the tragic mulatta trope, his fiction ultimately flees the context of the United States, locating his light-skinned African-American characters in an ideal space of relative racial equality — France. As a result of Clotel's racial passing, she dies in front of the White House; Clotel's daughter Mary, however, who passes as a man in order to free her lover from jail, survives to be reunited with him years later in France. Although the masquerade of passing prevails in Brown's novel as a means to escape slavery, future African-American authors expanded literary incidents of racial passing to suggest the evasion of blackness, or the conscious rejection of African-American descent and culture.

During the latter years of the Harlem Renaissance, Clotile, a clear literary descendant of William Wells Brown's heroine, reemerges in Eloise Bibb-Thompson's “Masks, A Story,” published in a 1927 edition of \textit{Opportunity}.\textsuperscript{201} While acknowledging the literary lineage of the


\textsuperscript{200} See \textit{Clotel or the President's Daughter} from \textit{Three African American Novels} Henry Louis Gates, Jr., (Ed.). pages 95 and 213.

\textsuperscript{201} Although Bibb-Thompson's work has been available for the past fifteen years, "Masks" has appeared in two anthologies, while Bibb-Thompson's poetry is available in another. Conversely, Bibb-Thompson's work finds no place in any scholarly study. Bibb-Thompson contributed articles on race to various periodicals until 1927, when her husband was hired as business manager of National Urban League's journal \textit{Opportunity}, which published "Masks" and another piece, "Mademoiselle 'Tasie." Both short stories deal with interracialism and class in nineteenth-century New Orleans, and involve "quadroon" characters, which speak in a Creole patois. Perhaps Bibb-Thompson's New Orleans upbringing as the daughter of a US customs officer who quite possibly oversaw the international traffic between New Orleans and the wider Caribbean gave her insight into transamerican crossings. Lowney states that \textit{Opportunity} is the African-American journal that devoted the most attention to Haitian cultural
tragic mulatta and passing figure in early nineteenth-century American literature, Bibb-Thompson complicates the narrative by assembling transamerican elements; she elaborates the trope through the incorporation of internalized racism while refusing an embrace of the ideal European space in an attempt to demonstrate how these pathologies intensify with each succeeding generation. This little-studied text revolves around four generations of a family descended from a “native of Hayti” named Aristile Blanchard. Julie, his light-skinned granddaughter, consciously chooses to marry a light-skinned African-American male in order to ensure her children’s place in society via a resulting skin color that can never reveal the ancestral past of her offspring. Julie's mother, Clotile, dies and leaves Julie in Aristile’s custody. The tale is narrated through the perspective of Julie's husband, Paupet, who never met the Haitian grandfather. Instead, Paupet learns the stories of Aristile's life in Haiti from Julie's brother Paul, and visits Aristile's deserted workshop. Set within the Quadroon Quarter in early nineteenth-century New Orleans, the narrative dates itself by the “motto written in 1832” on Aristile’s granddaughter’s tombstone. Manipulating the tragic mulatta narrative toward a different end, Bibb-Thompson offers the reader a culturally threatened character who sees “with the eyes of her grandfather [and dies] at the sight of her babe’s face” — a face too dark to become the human mask she has attempted to produce biologically. Through “Masks,” Bibb-Thompson responds to the early African-American literary tradition, to early 1920s Harlem Renaissance discourse on politics in the late 1920s, and that after a "half-decade" of minimal attention to Haiti, the years 1926-27 saw a resurgence of African-American interest in the Haitian response to the recent U.S. Occupation (Lowney, 420).

202 Knopf, 211.

The surname "Blanchard" is a derivation of the French word blanc or blanche meaning white; white part; or white man. Blancheur connotes whiteness, pallor; or purity. Blanchir means to bleach; to whiten; to clean; or to fade.

203 Knopf, 210

204 A section comprised of three small districts on the outskirts of the French Quarter, where only Afro-Creoles and free people of color were allowed. (Coincidentally, 1832 is the same year that Nicholas Eustache Maurin’s new lithograph inspired by the negative French perceptions of Toussaint appeared in Iconographie des contemporains. The profile portrait depicts Toussaint as ape-like, and became the most widely reproduced image of Toussaint.) <http://www.lcwebz.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:cstdy:cstdy@efield(DOC1D+ht0017)>

Haiti, and to the wide-spread rise of racial science and eugenics in the early twentieth-century United States.

In alluding to *Clotel*, Bibb-Thompson is clearly working from a different foundation than prior African-American writers; rather than romanticizing her tragic mulatta, her narrative aims to shock the reader with the violent consequences of internalized racism. Infusing the abolitionist subtext of *Clotel* with events of the revolution in St. Domingue, “Masks” confronts the reader with the intricate history of miscegenation and amalgamation, both in the United States and abroad, and the instabilities of racial identity that have marked this history. The themes of racial justice, secrecy, exposure, and a return home are woven with the characters’ attempts at racial passing, especially within the multifaceted allusions to masks that permeate the narrative.206

The themes of racial passing in Bibb-Thompson’s narrative enable her to explore political and ideological tensions in the characters’ quests for autonomy by avoiding racial definition, blurring the boundaries of identification and representation for the reader. Throughout the history of early African-American passing literature, the development of heroes or heroines who are considered to be “legally black” is closely connected with the characters’ struggles with the pros and cons of identifying with whiteness. Confronting racial injustice and oppression, each protagonist also receives inevitable class advantages and ascendancy. Passing is presented as an inconsistent means to transcendence because the characters are shown as socially and economically improved by negating their blackness, even as they lose ties with their family and friends and suffer from the anxieties and extreme guilt, which manifest from attempts to control

206 The "mask" metaphor often functions much like W.E.B. DuBois’, and other writers’, metaphor of the "Veil," highlighting an awareness of "double consciousness." Brown also uses this metaphor in *Clotel*, and in one instance with the word masquerade (Gates, 62).
their racial definition. This instability can only be resolved by the passer’s refusal of passing, yet failure to pass results in death.  

Tragic mulatta characters die as the only clear resolution for slippage between social constructs of racial identity, as is the case in Brown and Bibb-Thompson’s narratives. In both of these tales, the characters make a conscious decision to pass in order to exile themselves from one group and infiltrate another for reasons of opportunism, love, politics, curiosity, and even excitement. The instances of death in these passing texts place the protagonists into metaphorical situations that cause them to flee from their past and future; by fleeing in an unknown direction, they are immediately set free by death. Yet Bibb-Thompson adopts Brown's conception of passing as a resourceful and morally justifiable transgression precisely to complicate the instability and fluidity of racial representation by infusing it with a specifically inter-American history.

At the same time, situating Julie's New Orleans’ narrative within the inter-American context of Aristile's story, Bibb-Thompson focuses on the convergence of Haitian sociopolitical and cultural segregative practices with the migratory variables that permeated the lives of free people of color in New Orleans. Furthermore, “Masks, A Story” employs ambiguous narrative voices and chronological overlaps that collectively emphasize the inextricability of Haitian and United States' national histories, interweaving its 1830s New Orleans' setting with allusions to events, names, and places that are essential to the impending sequence of reactions that initiated and sustained unrest in St. Domingue in 1790, and later still, in Haiti.

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207 See Gayle Wald’s *Crossing The Line*, pages 25-29.
208 See Werner Sollors’ discussion of Sterling A. Brown's “Typologies of Passing” in *Neither White Nor Black Yet Both*, page 250.
Indeed, throughout the narrative of Aristile, Bibb-Thompson literalizes and extends the metaphorical border crossing of the trope of passing into the context of the wider Americas by incorporating class inequalities among the *colons*, or French plantation owners; the *gens de couleur libres*, or free people of color; the *petit blancs*, or poor whites; and the *noirs*, or slave class during the Haitian slave revolt. Segregatory practices similar to those employed in St. Domingue and Haiti were also evident in nineteenth-century New Orleans, and often attributed to the colonies’ shared history of Western occupation by Spain, France, and Britain.

Further emphasizing the fraught connections between U.S. and Haitian histories, Bibb-Thompson uses words that allude to plague and illness to represent Aristile's influence on that line of his family that is U.S. born: Aristile had come to “New Orleans in 1795 when the slave insurrection [in Haiti] was hottest” and “set up an atmosphere of revolt as forceful as the one he had left behind him.”\(^{209}\) Described as “an enigma to the whole Quadroon Quarter of New Orleans,” Aristile is a “man to be pitied,” seized by a “hallucination,” whose “baneful influence” upon Julie after her mother died “blighted [her] young life.”\(^{210}\)

Bibb-Thompson isolates the influence of the class distinctions that inevitably spur the slave revolts in the colony of St. Domingue through her classification of Aristile as a young “quadroon” of the privileged class of the *gens de couleur libre*. Keeping with the tradition of fortunate Haitian families, Bibb-Thompson endows Aristile with a French education.\(^{211}\) Furthermore, Bibb-Thompson constructs her narrative to revise official versions of European

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\(^{209}\) Knopf, 211: On February 4, 1794 the French free the slaves of the colony; February 5, 1794 a mixed delegation of representatives was seated at the Paris National Convention; June 4, 1794 Port Au Prince falls to the revolution; July 22, 1795 Spain and France sign a treaty giving the Spanish part of Hispanola to France.

\(^{210}\) Knopf, 210

\(^{211}\) Knopf, 211: This practice was also common among Mulatto, Quadroon, and Octoroon communities in the southern United States, especially New Orleans (Heinle, 63). Many gens de couleur who were educated in France transcended the color line by select marriage, and/or the purchase certificates of authentication which stated that they were white (Heinle, 33). Also similar to Victor Séjour’s upbringing and education.
history, in particular the French Revolution, through the specifically inter-American tale of Aristile. The narrative locates Aristile in France, on July 14, 1789 during the siege of the Bastille, stating that the revolutionary slogan “‘Liberty, Fraternity, Equality’ [becomes] the very air he breathed.”\textsuperscript{212} The political and social turmoil in France would have been a strong influence on an individual like Aristile, growing up well apprised of the conflicts inherent within a caste-system. The political particulars of slavery and economics in St. Domingue were essential to the issues and events leading to the fall of the Bastille. On October 5, 1789, Louis XVI sanctioned a manifesto written by La Fayette, the “Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen,” which was endorsed by the French Assembly.

The “Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen” directly affected the white planters of St. Domingue: its first article proclaimed specifically that “All men are born and live free and equal in their rights.”\textsuperscript{213} The collective political divisions of revolutionary France, along with the augmented racial and social tensions in St. Domingue, inspired regular chaos in the colony. Disapproving of efforts for monopoly by the French government and entrepreneurs, some French planters attempted to gain economic emancipation for St. Domingue while a related but very different issue was intensifying—anti-slavery. Thus, Aristile returns to Haiti with enthusiasm to serve his country and fight for liberty and equality—an enthusiasm which the text ascribes to “revolutionary tendencies [awaiting] but the opportunity to blossom into the strongest sort of heroism.”\textsuperscript{214} However, this anticipation of heroism hints at Aristile’s inability to follow through with these inclinations and mirrors the French Assembly's inconsistent commitment to the application of its own legislation. Like Aristile, Bibb-Thompson implicitly argues, the French Assembly loses sight of its practical goals in the self-indulgent nature of its own rhetoric.

\textsuperscript{212} Knopf, 211
\textsuperscript{213} See Heinle, pages 38-39
\textsuperscript{214} Knopf, 211
Through Aristile's narrative, Bibb-Thompson foregrounds the historical fact that clashes between the *gens de couleur* and *colons* were becoming commonplace in the colony. “Although [Aristile] burned to be of service to his race, on returning to his native land he forced himself to resume his usual tenor of life.”

Aristile apprentices himself to an “Oriental mask-maker,” and the reader learns that he has “always had a strange fascination” for masks—a phrase which foreshadows Aristile’s impending obsession, as well as his acquisition of skills for a lucrative profession that will ultimately dement his U.S. born offspring.

As Aristile is torn between his livelihood and his passion, Bibb-Thompson contrasts his “conflicting emotions” with the continuing controversies surrounding the judgments of the French National Assembly. On October 22, 1789, the French National Assembly accepted a petition of rights signed by “free citizens of color” from St. Domingue, and finally, on March 28, 1790 granted rights to “all persons aged twenty-five, owning property, or failing property ownership, to taxpayers of ten years standing.” Since “all persons” clearly included *gens de couleur*, the dispute between the white planters and free people of color loomed over St. Domingue. The agitation in the colony overwhelms Aristile, and he postpones his mask-making when he learns of the “French slave owners assembled at Cape Haitien to formulate measures against the free men of color to whom the National Assembly in France had decreed full citizenship” and “head[s] to the revolt that follow[s].”

The revolt to which Bibb-Thompson refers here is the insurrection in the North led by Vincent Ogé on October 12, 1790.

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215 Knopf, 211  
216 Knopf, 211  
217 Knopf, 212  
218 See Heinle, page 39  
219 See Heinle, page 39  
220 1670 Cap Français, often referred to as Le Cap, a new settlement began by the filibusters, or *filibustiers*, near what is now Cape Haitien, and in the northern region where the Santa Maria sank in 1692.
which demanded the application of the Assembly's latest decrees. Bibb-Thompson associates Ogé's rebellion with Aristile's spontaneous actions in order to signify the expansive insurrection in St. Domingue, while at the same time strengthening the emphasis upon the episodes of displaced identity that Aristile assumes later in the tale.

At this point in the story, Bibb-Thompson advances the narrative a few years from the first major revolt following the Assembly’s decree of citizenship in 1790 to the beginnings of British occupation of the colony. Thus, the text indicates that Aristile has remained active in the St. Dominguean slave rebellions, which by 1791 had evolved into the Haitian Revolution. He gives “himself to the cause of France” under the charge of André Rigaud, whom Bibb-Thompson designates as “the mulatto captain of the slaves.” This reference to the renowned anti-noir leader marks the beginning of a crucial commentary upon Aristile's future rejections of blackness. Throughout this section of the narrative, Bibb-Thompson focuses her critique most clearly on previous passing narratives, especially in regard to William Wells Brown's Clotel. The characters who consciously pass in Brown's text can only transcend the boundaries of race by altering their physical appearance— both Clotel and Mary dress as men and successfully pass on two separate occasions. In Bibb-Thompson's text, Aristile volunteers to spy on the British expeditionary force when they occupy Jérémie, a Grande-Anse town almost entirely owned, populated, and run by gens du couleur on September 20, 1793. Like Brown's heroines, he is disguised as a white man as he enters the port of Jérémie. He might have succeeded, but as the text explains, a “native white planter all too familiar with his African earmarks” suspects him.

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221 See Fick pages 83 and 9; and Heinle, page 39
222 Knopf, 212
223 Knopf, 212: See also <http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/43a/104.html>
224 Knopf, 212
Aristile’s “African earmarks” are physiognomic characteristics that were often listed as
distinguishable attributes, or “racial signs,” which ostensibly allowed whites to see through a
passing character’s masquerade. Bibb-Thompson thus applies the basic tragic mulatta element
of unmasking a fictional character both literally and figuratively to frame her entire tale while
also patterning the devastating punishment Aristile receives for passing upon historical accounts
of prosecution during the Haitian Revolution. In this way, the narrative offers an international,
transamerican, and more concretely historical context to the passing figure that was so prevalent
in U.S. literary history. Apprehended not only for espionage, but also for the threat that he poses
to white racial authority, Aristile is “forced to relinquish” his work spying on the British, and is
“seized, flogged unmercifully and thrown in a dungeon to die.” The text's description of
Aristile's punishment is strikingly similar to Bibb-Thompson's account of the imminent demise
of Toussaint, a hero of the Haitian Revolution and a supporter of the abolition of slavery, who is
also “thrown into an ignomious dungeon.”

After an indefinite narrative omission, Aristile is rescued by an “Octoroon planter”
between the years of 1793, when the British landed at Jérémie, and 1795, when Aristile and
Clotile are relocated to New Orleans. Characterizing Aristile's liberator as a *gens de couleur* who
had “identified with whites all his life because of a face that defied detection,” Bibb-Thompson
complicates the hierarchy of race and entitlement by demonstrating the fallibility of racial signs
and the unreliability of physical appearances. The “Octoroon” rescuer forges a relation with

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225 As Sollors notes in *Neither White Nor Black Yet Both*, Nella Larsen’s 1929 text, *Passing* catalogues a variety of
these "racial signs": "fingernails, palms of hands, shapes of ears, teeth..." (Larsen, 150), while Richard Badger (in
Reuter) lists everything from body odor to hair on the back of the neck (Sollors, 277).
227 Knopf, 212
228 Knopf, 212: An interesting parallel here is that Halloween, a holiday closely associated with masks is called "la
veille de la Toussaint" in French. The word "veille" connotes "watching, vigil, staying awake."
229 Knopf, 212
Toussaint who eventually led the slaves in liberating Haiti— but Aristile, removed from his homeland, festers in the racism that had not emerged before his transition to a U.S. context. The fact that the “Octoroon” accomplishes this feat, while the “Quadroon” had failed in the same capacity initiates the downfall of Aristile. Displaced to New Orleans, the seed of Aristile's internalized racism begins to take root. Again, Bibb-Thompson presents the complex overlap of Haitian and U.S. histories— how systems of color and caste in the former French colony transform insidiously within the more rigidly binaristic racial context of the United States.

Although Aristile is bestowed with the life of a free person of color in New Orleans, Bibb-Thompson reveals that he remains imprisoned by the trauma of his failure to act in the Haitian Revolution. “This incident ha[s] a lifelong effect upon Aristile,” and he gradually takes on the qualities of a man overcome by his own cultural paranoia, inherently affected by the events surrounding the Haitian revolt.230 Despondent and disappointed by failing in the work he “set himself to do with the enthusiasm and glow of a martyr,” Aristile obsesses upon “the facial lineaments that had brought about his defeat.”231 The word “martyr” positively suggests the later vilification of Toussaint, while attributing the negative connotations of the word to Aristile. He believes that “Fate” and “Nature” are against him, and that “it was never meant that [he] should do the thing [he] burned to do.”232 Bibb-Thompson further expounds his justifications for internalized self-hatred, noting that he becomes convinced that his broad lips and nose defeated his enthusiastic work for liberty, and that he would exclaim, “Cheated out of the opportunity of doing the highest service because of a face four degrees from the pattern prescribed for success: why did not Nature give me the face of my father? Other Quadroons have been so blessed. Then

230 Knopf, 212
231 Knopf, 212
232 Knopf, 212
all things would have been possible to me.”\textsuperscript{233} Bibb-Thompson's phrasing here, her use of the word “to” rather than “for,” connotes Aristile's inability to satisfy himself with what he has achieved; he sees himself as an object and not a subject. The metaphoric artificiality of passing further suggests the multiple implications brought forth by the word “Nature”: from one's own essential qualities, to hereditary determinants of personality, to the corporeal power that is basic to all things in the material world.\textsuperscript{234}

Despite the lingering affliction imposed upon Aristile by “Nature” and his own failure, his mood changes after a time, and believing he has “found the formula for greatness,” he establishes a workshop in the Quadroon Quarter and attempts to make the perfect disguise for those of African descent: a racial mask that will “defy Nature herself.”\textsuperscript{235} What follows directly echoes the French Assembly’s Declaration of the Rights of Man:

There shall be no more distinct and unmistakable signs that will determine whether a man shall be master or slave. All men in the future shall have the privilege of being what they will.\textsuperscript{236}

Aristile's allusion to the French Assembly's statement, “All men are born and live free and equal in their rights” suggests a powerful distortion of these revolutionary principles within racial hierarchies of the French colonial context— as well as the francophone New Orleans context that was its legacy. Through Aristile's obsessive reconfiguring of the French Assembly's declaration, Bibb-Thompson again expands upon an implicit revision of a Eurocentric historical narrative by examining the same historical events from an inter-American perspective.

\textsuperscript{233} Knopf, 212, 213  
\textsuperscript{235} Knopf, 213  
\textsuperscript{236} Knopf, 213
Indeed, Bibb-Thompson explains that “while Negro supremacy exist[s] in his beloved country,” Aristile nevertheless repents for his disqualification as a soldier in Haiti by enthusiastically working toward his “cherished dream” of achieving whiteness in order to return to Haiti and serve as a spy against the continuing onslaught of imperial European forces.237 Learning about Toussaint's capture, “the savior of his race [being] tricked and thrown into a French prison to die,” on June 7, 1802, Aristile is “plunged into the deepest sorrow,” and abandons his self-designated purpose: the production of his masks.238 As Aristile's money dwindles, he finally succumbs to necessity, and expands his creations to include “limp figures in sweeping gowns… designed for standing in the farthest corner of the room— grotesque figures wearing hideous masks, the reflection [of] clowns and actors of the comic stage.”239 The inclusion of these limp, marginalized, yet comic figures suggests Bibb-Thompson's conception of the debilitating status of the traditional tragic mulatta passing character in U.S. literary history as itself a kind of mask, in need of serious literary modification in order to encompass the broader complexities inherent in a transamerican, diasporic African-American culture.

At the same time the “hideous” images also represent Aristile's double-edged success. His shop is “frequented by patrons of the Quadroon Masques [and] Voodoo Carousels held in Congo Square [and] actors from the French Opera;” Clotile works in the shop sewing gowns and wraps that are rented by these patrons.240 Although Aristile works diligently, his mind nonetheless dwells perpetually upon his failure to pass for “white” and his dislocation from

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237 Knopf, 213
238 Knopf, 213
239 Knopf, 214
240 Knopf, 214: Between 1808 and 1809, the Francophile fervor of the creole population in New Orleans was stimulated by the arrival of more than 5,000 San Domingo refugees; many were skilled craftsmen and much of the sophistication that came to be associated with New Orleans creoles dates from this influx. San Dominguan creoles were responsible for the opening of the city's first theater and the publication of the first newspaper, and was the first U.S. city to have a regular opera season (Searight, 51).
Haitian history. Aristile cannot seem to escape his “two-ness”— to modify W.E.B. DuBois's influential formulation— “an American [Negro] and a [Haitian Negro]; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one [marked] body.”242 In this way, Bibb-Thompson seems to be internationalizing and complicating Du Bois's nationalist version of African-American identity— fusing Du Bois's metaphor of the “veil” and “double-consciousness” with Aristile's masks and his inter-American status in order to invoke a more varied and intricate commentary on the transnational consciousness of people of African descent in America.

The narrative further elucidates the implications of this cross-cultural dialogue by introducing the character of Julie into an environment of decay and disillusionment, which is magnified by the fate of Haitian independence. Bibb-Thompson notes that the “revolution had long been over… when Julie entered the world,” that by the time Julie is born, Toussaint had been “moldering in the grave some five years or more.”243 The text offers no birth date, but approximates one by alluding to historical evidence of Toussaint L'Ouverture's death on April 7, 1803. Resonating with the tragic demise of Brown's Clotel, Clotile dies, leaving Julie to take over the work in an “atmosphere of depression.”244 During Julie's formative years, she “listen[s] to her grandfather's half-crazed tirade against Nature's way of fixing a man to his clan through the color of his skin” (Knopf, 214). Under similar constraints, Julie recognizes the validity of Aristile's ravings, appropriating his negative rationalization in order to explain her own legal status in New Orleans— where she is not allowed to wear “the headgear of the times, although much of it was made by her own fingers” (Knopf, 214). Bibb-Thompson is alluding to legislation

241 Knopf, 214
243 Knopf, 211
244 Knopf, 214
against *femmes de couleur* in 1800s New Orleans, which forbid free women of color to wear “silk, plumes, and jewels” in public. Free women of color in 1830s New Orleans were “decreed” a handkerchief to wear in order to distinguish them from white ladies.

In this way, the social conditions that Julie is forced to adhere to within the strictly segregated Quadroon Quarter deepen her resentment of Aristile's failure in “the making of a mask that would open the barred and bolted doors of privilege for those who knocked thereon.” Julie, like her grandfather, is “a brunette-like Quadroon,” and she considers herself superior and marginalizes the darker slaves and peddlers that sometimes enter the Quarter. Julie begins to “reason that color and not mental endowment or loftiness of character determined the caliber of a man.” Concluding that one's complexion is the only factor contributing to one's success, Julie formulates a new kind of racism, misguided by her grandfather's magnified conceptions of superior and inferior, but without a historical understanding of the complex foundations surrounding his own prejudice.

While Bibb-Thompson complicates the U.S. literary tradition's trope of the tragic mulatta by deploying it within an inter-American historical context, her narrative also intervenes within a contemporaneous inter-American political scene. During the time of the publication of “Masks,” the role of US imperialism in Haiti was resurfacing in various African-American journals, and being widely discussed and critiqued by Harlem Renaissance writers. The Pan-African movement focused on the correlations between European colonialism in Africa and U.S. actions

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245 See Searight’s *New Orleans* (107) regarding reenactment of the Code Noir by Spanish occupied New Orleans. Also see Nieman and Waldrep's *Local Matters* (55) for a further discussion on the Louisiana Crimes Act of 1805, and the varying legislation against whites, free people of color and slaves.

246 Knopf, 214

247 Knopf, 215

248 Knopf, 215

249 After a half decade of minimal attention to Haiti, the years 1926-27 saw a resurgence of African-American interest in the Haitian response to the Occupation (Lowney, 428-29).
African-American reactions to the discourse of paternalism in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century consisted of social, political, and institutional collaborations, which expanded the contexts of interracial and antiracist activism to include the U.S. occupation of Haiti in 1915. That same year, following in the tradition of William Wells Brown and Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. DuBois, as editor of *The Crisis*, and a member of the Pan-African movement, spoke out on the significance of Haiti's self-governance, asking his readers to oppose the occupation of Haiti.

Aside from the discussions put forth by African-American journals, established organizations such as the NAACP promoted these issues, while newer groups were formed in order to confront them: most notably the Santo Domingo-Haiti Independence Society, which had published James Weldon Johnson's four-part essay titled “Self-Determining Haiti.” Johnson's stance strongly influenced the dominant opinion of the Harlem Renaissance by speaking out against U.S guidance for Haiti, which he saw as an excuse for disciplinary violence against people of color.

Bibb-Thompson complicates this 1920s Harlem Renaissance discourse on Haiti, which characterized the nation as an ideal site of blackness and masculinity because of its successful anti-colonial uprising, by reminding readers through her narrative that the history of the Haitian Revolution involved enigmatic racial politics and strife between *noirs* and *gens de couleur* that had a lasting effect on Haiti as well as Haitian emigrants to the United States. In other words, just as Aristile comes to the U.S. and praises Toussaint while erasing the history of his own elite

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250 See Renda, 269
251 See Renda, 263
252 Lowney, 413
253 See Jim Zwick's "Santo Domingo-Haiti Independence Society"
alliance to the anti-noir Rigaud, perhaps some of these more notable Harlem Renaissance writers were guilty of similar omissions in their uncomplicated conceptions of Haitian history.

But if Bibb-Thompson's narrative serves as a response to the prevailing Harlem Renaissance discourse on Haiti, it also offers a trenchant critique of the widespread interest in eugenics and the dramatic consequences of its rise in popularity during the early twentieth-century United States. Attempts at scientific classifications of race were prominent in the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth centuries.\textsuperscript{254} These systems were built upon the foundational theories of physical anthropology and widespread responses to Darwin's \textit{Origin of Species}, Spencer's applications of evolution to the social sciences, and the rediscovery of Mendel's groundbreaking botanical experiments, which ultimately sought to explain familial traits and the history of life itself.\textsuperscript{255} In 1826, Robert Owen first used the “Scale of Human Faculties” to evaluate children's developmental progress.\textsuperscript{256} These types of standardized evaluations of human capabilities were adopted and manipulated over time in order to encompass factors of racial and hereditary identities, and to create arbitrary classifications of people of color: what were then considered objective scales useful for measuring and comparing racial genealogies.\textsuperscript{257} However, many of these strategies claimed that the second and subsequent hybrid generations of these mixtures were segregated in variable ways.\textsuperscript{258} Despite the obvious controversies behind the

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[254] Sollors, 113
\item[255] Stein, "Landmarks in the History of Genetics": In the eighteenth century, European scientists such as Petrus Camper (1722 - 1789), Georges Cuvier (1769-1832) and Johann Friedrich Blumenbach (1752-1840) established the foundations of nineteenth-century physical anthropology.
\item[256] <http://www.wku.edu/~kuhlenschmidt/mttmln.htm>
\item[257] In 1854, Frederick Olmstead catalogued the terms used by the French in the southern U.S. to classify "colored people" in \textit{A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States} (Reuter, 12). In 1913, Charles Davenport’s \textit{Heredity of Skin Color in Negro-White Crosses} studied interracial families (Sollors, 135-6).
\item[258] Sollors addresses a variety of these systems in his chapter, "Calculus of Color" (112-141) in \textit{Neither White Nor Black Yet Both}. Books like Reuter's \textit{The Mulatto in the United States} contained chapters on "Leading Men of the Negro Race" predominantly listing people classified as mulatto, including men and women as Frederick Douglass, Frances Harper, Sojourner Truth, W.E.B. DuBois, and James Weldon Johnson.
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reasoning of these theories, eugenics was widely accepted by the American public. From 1900
on, the eugenics movement exerted a profound influence on American public policy and
contributed to the anti-immigration movement of the early twentieth-century United States.259

Bibb-Thompson uses her narrative to give a powerful fictional voice to the anti-eugenics
movement that was opposing this dangerous kind of logic, and alludes to the dualistic nature of
the intellectual climate of the 1920s by incorporating the concepts of relatively new social
sciences through her descriptions of the narrator. Paupet, Julie's husband, is described as a
“natural psychologist… accustomed to ponder… peculiar mental traits and their similarity to
those of their parents.” Awakening to Julie's “peculiarity” when she becomes pregnant, Paupet
reflects upon Aristile's personal, national and ethnic background as an explanation for Julie's
death “at the sight of her babe's face.”260 This explanation also alludes to the questionable
existence of “la psychologie Haitienne,” a specifically Haitian instance of cultural paranoia,
which was attributed to the five centuries of domination endured by the Haitian people.261

Further complicating the possibility of migrant pathologies and the stigmatized nature of
these traits within a U.S. national context, Bibb-Thompson carefully critiques the calculated
methodology of genetic inheritance embraced by the eugenics movement. A few months after
Aristile's death, Julie wakes “trembling with a great discovery.”262 She has wondered for years
about the failure of her “revered relative's” attempts to make a mask to change a man's future.263
Yet on this morning Julie decides that the reason for Aristile's failure in creating the perfect

260 Knopf, 210
261 See Heinle (6) for a discussion of Robert Rotberg's "The Politics of Power." Dash clarifies the racist foundations
of Rotberg's ideas (114).
262 Knopf, 215
263 Knopf, 215
racial disguise is gender-based, and that her feminine intuition has just “whispered [the secret] to her.” Julie whispers to herself in what Bibb-Thompson renders as a creole Patois:

'To po' lil' me. An' I know it ees tr-true, yes. It got to be trrue. 'Cause madda Nature, she will help in de work, an' w'at else you want? Now we will see, she told herself exultantly, 'Ef my daughter got to wear a head handgcher lak me. Fo' me it ees notting, I cannot help. But jes' de same a son of mine goin' be king of some Carnival yet. You watch out fo' me.'

Julie's attempt to negotiate her child's racial representation characterizes her as “an experimentalist in the mating of cross-breeds, painfully nervous and full of the greatest anxiety over the outcome of a situation that she had been planning so long.” Convinced of her ability to predict her offspring's physical appearance through her union with Paupet, “the whitest Octoroon she had ever seen,” Julie asserts that “her trials would not be her infant's.” The text places Julie's faith in the effectiveness of a simplified equation of inheritance by emphasizing Julie's idealized vision of an infant the color of Paupet, who “therefore could choose his own way in life unhampered by custom or law.” In the same way that Julie agonizes over these possibilities for her child, the eugenics movement in the U.S. was popularizing the supposed threat of “hereditary defectives and degenerates” and the amalgamation of the races. The future of Julie's child, “the whiteness of whose face would be a charm against every prevailing ill” successfully blurs the boundaries of this pseudo-science of white supremacy with the anxieties of internalized racism. When Julie dies upon witnessing the failure of her eugenic project— inscribed in the

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264 Knopf, 215
265 Knopf, 215
266 Knopf, 215
267 Knopf, 215
268 Knopf, 216
darkness of her newborn's face— the tale powerfully registers its final vision of the violent realities inherent to the eugenic thinking that was widespread throughout the Americas of the early twentieth-century.

Ultimately, Bibb-Thompson's narrative offers readers an intriguing way to reconsider the issues of miscegenation and literary nationalism, history, and the rise of racial science within an inter-American context. “Masks, A Story” examines the psychological ramifications of such persistent enigmas as the “color line” and the spurious classifications of “mixed bloods” in the United States. Illustrating the effects of racial and class hierarchies that migrated with Haitian gens de couleur to New Orleans, Bibb-Thompson suggests that the racial pathologies of the colonial Caribbean find new, more insidious forms in the United States. At the same time, Bibb-Thompson uses her narrative to appropriate and critique the themes found in the activism associated with the Harlem Renaissance, as well as any number of prior American and British writers concerned with the politics of reproduction, including Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allan Poe, Mary Shelley, and Kate Chopin, all of whom take up figures of “monstrous offspring.” Recontextualizing this ubiquitously nineteenth century theme in a racialized and inter-American context, Bibb-Thompson offers us a compelling way to rethink the connections between United States and Haitian histories—as well as the intertwinment of the French and African-American literary traditions, from the nineteenth century through the twentieth.
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