AMERICAN WRITERS OF RACIAL DECATEGORIZATION

WHAT IS BLACK, WHAT IS WHITE, WHAT IS "RACE" ?

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HØSTEN 2001

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to identify myself differently than strangers expect me to identify

to identify myself differently than how my parents identify me

to identify myself differently then how my brothers and sisters

to identify myself differently in different situations

I have the right

to create a vocabulary to communicate about being multiracial

to change my identity over my lifetime--and more than once

to have loyalties and identify with more than one group of people

to freely choose whom I befriend and love

--Maria P.P. Root, Ph.D.

Acknowledgement

I am grateful to my supervisor, Orm Øverland, for giving me the opportunity to write this thesis and for his valuable knowledge and insights. I would like to thank my mother for her help and guidance with the English language, my good friend, Ann Elisabeth, for her good ideas and many discussions. Last but not least, I owe a big thanks to Øyvind and my son, Agami, for their encouragement and patience. I would like to thank Agami for his inspiration and Øyvind for his technical skills with the computer.

Chapter 1

Mixed "Race" and Racial Identity: Ethnicity and "Race"

The relationship between "race" and ethnicity is a complex one, and it can be difficult to distinguish the one from the other. Along with the Norwegian Professor of Social Anthropology, Thomas Hylland Eriksen, in Hutchinson and Smith's anthology, and the American Professor of African-American Studies, Werner Sollors, I regard "race" as a special case of ethnicity and choose not to distinguish the two. Both categories imply common descent among their members, and the notion of "race" may or may not be present in ethnic relations (Eriksen 29-30). As Sollors says, "race" cannot be separated from ethnicity in the United States because the black literature, the black performance of rituals and the black civil rights movement of the 1960s have all been so important in the development of American identities. In a mixed ethnic society like the United States, a land of immigrants from all over the world, I think that it would be useless to talk of ethnicity without mentioning all the different "races" which are represented and which are of tremendous sociological importance. Thus, ethnicity cannot be regarded separately from "race," and it must necessarily include "race" (Sollors, Beyond Ethnicity 21, 31, 36).

Today, according to Sollors, ethnicity has the double connotation of peoplehood and otherness in the United States. Since the 1970s, to be "other" or ethnic has been in vogue and romanticized. It has become important to have another identity than just to be an American. To be ethnic is even considered as a dominant cultural trait (Sollors, Beyond Ethnicity 21, 26, 31). This romanticism has certain limits, however, as white (European American) and black (African American) are the major categories, and a mixed black and white American identity is rarely, if ever, recognized.

Fair skin has been a mark of prestige in the American society and the lighter the colour of the skin the better. To claim for instance a Swedish American identity is to be ethnic and trendy and is more prestigious than the often not chosen, but ascribed and stigmatized identity of African American or black, which is often associated with being "other" and different from the norm. Black has a more general ascription than a white identity which is usually more particularly ascribed as for example Swedish American, and may be associated with a specific nation. This tendency goes back two hundred years to the immigration records of 1790 when whites were listed by nationality and surname even though these records were not so systematic or reliable. In the first census in the same year, blacks were not listed by nationality according to the American genealogical researcher Arlene Eakle. Moreover, only free blacks who were heads of households were recorded by name and as black, mulatto or "free men of color" (Eakle 453, 579-80). "Mulatto" describes the child of a black and white parent. It is a Spanish term for a sterile hybrid or mule, and it has a derogatory connotation as mulattoes were also thought to be infertile (Sollors, Neither Black Nor White 127). Slaves, if at all named, were only given first names. They were often only counted by age and sex and recorded by their total numbers. This is evidence of the blacks' degrading status. Their various tribal and national identities were disregarded as they were all described as blacks and valued only as an economic investment and cheap labour. After the Civil War, however, blacks adopted surnames, and finally, in 1870, all blacks were listed by name in the federal census (Eakle et al. 452, 579-80).

"Race" and Mixed "Race"

Traditionally, humanity has been divided into three main "races," according to the black American professor of philosophy, Anthony Appiah: whites, blacks and Asians (Appiah 28-29). I would add the

Hispanics and the Native Americans. The strength of negroid physical features, in particular colour, are more determining factors than common descent or origin. However, modern biologists do not consider "race" a distinctive category. It is difficult to talk of fixed boundaries between "races" as there has always been interbreeding between human populations, not the least in the United States, and the distribution of hereditary physical traits does not follow clear boundaries. Consequently, the variation between individuals within a racial group is usually greater than the systematic variation between two groups (Gates 21-22, 26, 31). Appiah claims that:

> Apart from the visible morphological characteristics of skin, hair and bone, by which we are inclined to assign people to the broadest racial categories--black, white, yellow--there are few genetic characteristics to be found in the population of England that are not found in similar proportions in Zaire or in China[.. .]. A more familiar part of the consensus is that the differences between peoples in language, moral affections, aesthetic attitudes, political ideology--those differences which most deeply affect us in our dealings with each other--are not biologically determined to any significant degree. (21-22)

My opinion on "race" is similar to Eriksen's, in Hutchinson and Smith's anthology, in regarding "race" useful as a cultural construction as it can be used to account for people's actions. "Race" may be a sociological concept even though it does not refer to a biological reality (Eriksen 29).

I will follow the American literary critic Henry Louis Gates, Jr. in placing "race" in quotation marks. As he insists, "'race' is a metaphor for something else and not an essence or a thing in itself, apart from its creation by an act of language" (Gates 402). If "races" were "things" and already there, Gates says that, "we would be generalizing about observed differences between human beings as if these differences were consistent and determined, a priori" (402). According to him, the existence of "races"

is based on "reasoning" or "scientific" thinking, not on observation or empiricism (Gates 402-03). There is no skin colour that is literally black or white even though the American racial identity is most often based on this colour divide. Black and white are metaphors. Americans that I classify as mixed may have a mixture of white and black physical facial traits and skin colour and a multiracial ancestry. Most often they tend to be regarded as black, however; the powerful notion of the "one-drop rule" considers Americans of one black ancestor as black. It follows that white Americans are those who have only white ancestors. Thus, the notion of whiteness as pure is very strong and the social definition of the white "race" is exclusive. The "one-drop rule" is not so strong in all state legislation, according to the Swedish social economist, Gunnar Myrdal. In some states an individual is defined as black if one grandparent is black (Myrdal 113). However, it is the "one-drop rule" that is the most prevalent in Americans' daily life today. This is clearly shown in American film and literature. Thus, Tommy Pinelli in the American movie Blue in the Face from 1995 is regarded as black despite his strong identification with his Italian father (Esposito). Sinclair Lewis' novel Kingsblood Royal clearly illustrates the strength of the "one-drop rule" in American minds. As Neil Kingsblood traces his ancestry to find royal British blood, he finds, to his utter dismay, evidence that he is one thirty-second black, which means that his daughter is one sixty-fourth black. However, when Neil's distant black heritage comes out, he is regarded as black only and his daughter is called "nigger" (Lewis 75, 330). His life is turned upside down as his opportunities to become the bank president vanish because of his "one black drop." He ends up losing his job because the white customers will not be served by a black man. Moreover, his father-in-law threatens his marriage because his daughter's position is ruined by being married to a black man. His white friends and neighbours turn their backs on him and Neil and his family become isolated. In the end they are driven out of their home in a respectable white neighbourhood by a white mob and the

police. In the eyes of white Americans, Neil can never be forgiven for having pretended that he was white, fooled them and stained the pure white blood of his wife (e.g. Lewis 229-30, 235,262,329, 347-48). Paradoxically, he is also blamed for having caused the death of his father by revealing his and his mother's black ancestry (Lewis 250). Kingsblood Royal illustrates the devastating effects which the notion of the "one-drop rule" may have to an American with one known black ancestor.

The white antebellum slave owners in the South were probably among the first Americans to create and employ the "one-drop rule." The children of mixed "race" in the rural South at that time were usually born as the result of white masters raping their black female slaves. In most cases masters did not acknowledge their parenthood so that the children would not inherit their property nor their status as free men. According to the mixed-race American journalist, Itabari Njeri, in Gerald Early's anthology, children of mixed descent were given the same status as their slave mothers and regarded as black so as not to decrease the slave population (24-25). In Slaves in the Family Bdward Ball points out that at least seven of his white slave-owning ancestors in Charlestown, South Carolina, were most likely guilty of the sexual exploitation of black slaves (e.g. 106-07, 115, 120, 272). Although not claiming their children of mixed "race," some fathers made them free, and these children sometimes took their fathers' names. One slave owner stipulated in his will a house and money to his black common-law wife. Two other masters gave freedom to their black mistresses along with a servant or a pension at their deaths (e.g. Ball 108, 188-89, 200, 244, 273, 277). Such rare acts may be signs oflove, but the huge discrepancies in power and status as well as the secrecy, make most of these interracial relationships exploitations. Black mistresses were rarely given their freedom. Such an act would be a confession of miscegenation, which was made illegal by the Virginia antimiscegenation law of 1662 and was strictly taboo (Sollors, Neither Black Nor White 396).

Myrdal writes that it is generally agreed among researchers of antebellum miscegenation that "such relations--measured in proportion to Negro women involved--were even more frequent in the Southern cities and in the North" (126). Thus, a larger share of the blacks there were of mixed "race" than those on the Southern plantations. Little is written about miscegenation in urban communities. The interracial sexual relations there, however, had little impact on the genetic composition of the black American population. Most blacks lived in the rural South during slavery (Myrdal 126-27).

Some light-skinned Americans of mixed "race" were given their freedom before the end of the Civil War, and ended up as a special black elite aside from whites and blacks. They used to be quite privileged with more money and education than darker-skinned people. This phenomenon can be called colourism. Moreover, they were sometimes able to pass for white with all the opportunities which that entailed (e.g. Ball 208, 279-80, 288; Sollors, Neither Black Nor White 127).

The phenomenon of "colourism" was defined by the well-known black American writer, Alice Walker, as she is quoted by Njeri, and it describes "the preferential or prejudicial treatment of same-'race' people based on skin color" (Early 16). Shirlee Haizlip describes colourism more specifically as a distinctive and antagonistic relationship within the black society between persons with different shades of colour, hair texture (straight or nappy hair) and other negroid physical features. Lighter-skinned individuals with few or no negroid physical features are favoured (Haizlip 78-80). These physical "characteristics" of the black "race" are the foundation for racial discrimination in American society and Americans of mixed "race" themselves have frequently internalized these "racial criteria." Njeri thinks that colourism is prominent in today's United States and quotes Alice Walker's statement that, "unless we exorcise it 'we cannot as a people progress. For colorism, like colonialism, sexism and racism, impedes us'" (Early 16).

Njeri writes about a 1988 study by the Social Psychologists Michael Hughes and Bradley R. Hertel in which the results demonstrated the existence of colourism. They found that a dark-skinned black American earned seventy cents for every dollar a light-skinned black American made. Moreover, almost 29 percent of all white Americans were employed in high-status jobs such as professional and managerial occupations while only 15 percent of all blacks were employed in such jobs. That means that there were almost twice as many whites as blacks in high-status positions. The relationship was almost the same between light-skinned and dark-skinned blacks; 27 percent of all light-skinned blacks were in such positions compared with only 15 percent of all dark-skinned blacks. Therefore the relationship between the number of whites and blacks holding high-status jobs is almost the same as the relationship between the number of dark-skinned and light-skinned blacks holding high-status jobs. These results are very similar to the findings of other studies from 1950 to 1980 on the relationship between skin colour and socioeconomic status (Early 17). The privileged status oflight-skinned blacks may also be caused by their opportunity to pass.

The phenomenon of passing means that individuals of mixed racial heritage have hidden their black background in order to be regarded as white. It is necessary for the person passing as white to be fair skinned and have few or no negroid features. If the "one-drop rule" is followed to its extreme so that whoever has a drop of black blood is black, there must be many passers in today's United States. Most of them do not know of their mixed ancestry, however. Myrdal writes about the phenomenon of passing that:

> Passing may occur only for segmented areas of life--such as the occupational or recreational--or it may be complete; it may be temporary or permanent; it may be voluntary or involuntary; it may be with the knowledge on the part of the passer or without his knowledge; it may be

individual or collective. Usually the only kind that is important for the genetic composition of both the white and the Negro population is that kind which is complete and permanent. (129)

According to Myrdal, most of the passers have a larger number of white ancestors than black so that passing means a greater change in that person's *social* definition than in his biological identification (129).

Passing may involve drastic changes in the lives of Americans of mixed "race." It is not possible for a black person to claim a white identity and expect the surrounding community to change their classifications because of the strength of the "one-drop rule" in the United States today. The person who wants to pass as white has to move to a new city acting as if white, making social relationships with white people, living in a white neighbourhood and working as a white person. Some white Americans are unknowingly second or third generation passers. Passing typically means creating a distance to or breaking all bonds with the black part of the individual's family. This process is in most cases a very painful experience, and is necessarily quite humiliating for those left behind (Haizlip 15-16, 68-72).

Passing must not be confused with the concept of crossing the colour line. In this thesis the colour line denotes the social distinction between blacks and whites. Crossing the colour line means to go from one side to the other, usually by marrying a person with the opposite racial identity. The social distinction between blacks and whites has been trespassed, and the person crossing the line may have to live among Americans with the opposite racial identity on the other side of the line. However, the trespasser has not necessarily achieved another racial identity, unlike the passer.

Although the topic of passing is quite controversial, the literature on passing is extensive and has a long tradition going back to the time of slavery. Nella Larsen's novel Passing from 1929 describes the passing character Clare and her fear of being revealed as black. Her terror is so great that she does

not take the chance of having more than one child for fear of it turning out to be dark. Likewise, she has abandoned her black friends and black life completely. When she decides to meet her old black friends again, she carefully sees to it that they are so light-skinned that they pass in the company of her white husband. Moreover, she only visits the black community when her husband is away on business, thus living a secret black life. She does not give her address to her black friends so that she is the one to get in touch with them, and her black and white lives are carefully separated (Larsen 59, 88-90). The irony of her husband's racist conversation and of his nicknaming Clare "Nig" in the presence of three women whose true black identities are unknown to him, is amazing. Even more surprising is the overbearing manner and silence which his deeply humiliating statements are met with, showing the protective allegiance within the black community even to the extent of self-denial (Larsen 66-70). The novel The An Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man by James Weldon Johnson from 1912 describes similar episodes in which the passing protagonist is in the midst of discussions of the inferiority of blacks. To him, however, these experiences are more ironic than humiliating, and he enjoys the irony of being treated as their equal in spite of the white men's disrespect for blacks. That in itself is proof enough for him that blacks are at least as good as whites. Like Clare, he breaks all his ties with his former black community completely even though he lives in the same city as them, and he starts a new life in the white community (Johnson 3, 192, 197, 199-200).

Unlike Clare, he decides to pass to avoid the shame of blackness. As he was ignorant of his blackness until the age of eleven and was sometimes taken for white, passing is not so strange to him (e.g. Johnson 15-18, 172). His motives are not better opportunities or fear of discrimination or lynching. His experience of a black man being burnt alive makes him feel overwhelmed by shame for his "race"

and for the fact that blacks can be treated worse than animals by whites who will not be punished for their violence. It is this episode that makes him determined to pass (Johnson 186-88, 190-91). This sense of shame starts at the knowledge of his black roots and is strengthened further by his meeting with his white father and white half sister. He cannot acknowledge them because he will disgrace his father by his badge of blackness (Johnson 134-35). His mother had instilled in him this sense of shame when he was young and told him that they were unworthy of a white husband and father. As a father, he wants his children to be free from this stain of blackness. Like Clare, he experiences the unbearable fear of his blackness being revealed, in particular to his white girlfriend. He may lose her. Thus, he avoids his black school friend who may give the protagonist's "race" away (e.g. Johnson 43,200,202, 210-11).

Clare, Neil and Johnson's protagonist all pass completely and permanently. In Johnson and Larsen's novels passing is voluntary, and the protagonists know that they are actually passing. In Kingsblood Royal, however, Neil is passing unknowingly and involuntarily. Lewis' social satire is an example of how many Americans who consider themselves and are considered by others as white, do not only have white ancestors, but also black and Native American roots. White Americans may also have Asian or Hispanic ancestors. Their physical facial features or their colour do not always distinguish them from whites who only descend from whites. Similarly, Americans who consider themselves and are considered by others as black, do not only have black ancestors, but may also have white, Native American, Asian or Hispanic roots. They are just not aware of them and have little or few of the peculiar white, Native American, Asian or Hispanic physical features. Nevertheless, the difference in skin colour between an African and a black American is easily noticeable, and this visible lightness of skin colour is in itself a reminder of the blacks' white ancestors. Thus, there are many more

Americans of mixed ancestry than those who are obviously mixed. It goes without saying that the "one-drop rule" has hidden the white ancestry of many blacks. Because of the inclusive definition of the black "race," the number of Americans considered as black is increased, according to Myrdal (114). Moreover, the black "race" embraces individuals of a greater variety of ancestry than it would if the "race" were defined more specifically in accordance with the distribution of ethnological or biological criteria. Most Americans are probably of mixed ancestry. In this thesis I will investigate whether it is possible to create an intermediary position between the American division into black and white "races." I will discuss this question with regard to the autobiographies of three mixed Americans who are mostly of white and black descent. Shirlee Taylor Haizlip and Scott Minerbrook also have Native American roots.

Despite America's long history of miscegenation neither American laws and custom nor the blacks themselves have been willing to recognize their multiethnicity, according to Njeri (Early 37). The American author, Thomas Pettigrew, claims that early research estimated that between 72 and 83 percent of black Americans have at least one white ancestor. He refers to a morphological study on blacks' ancestry carried out by the American social scientist, Melville J. Herskovits, in 1930. This study was based on the reconstruction of ancestral lines and showed that one seventh of the blacks had a predominately white heritage. Moreover, Herskovits' research showed that one fourth of blacks had at least one known Native American ancestor (Pettigrew 68). Herskovits was criticized for having chosen his sample from a group of upper class blacks with a remarkably high percentage of white ancestors. According to Myrdal, this selective choice of informants was balanced partly by the unknown number of white ancestors in the black population in general. Partly it was evened by the increase in the number

of white-black sexual relations and the offspring resulting from such relations after his study was carried out. In the 1950s serological studies by the American social scientist Glass showed approximately the same results as Herskovits' study, apart from a lower number of blacks with Native American ancestry. These studies were based on blood system genetic methods. The similar results of the morphological and serological studies prove that white genes have spread extensively among the black population (Myrdal 132-33; Pettigrew 68-69). The multiracial American Studies Professor, Jon Michael Spencer, writes that, according to the United States Bureau of the Census, at least 75 percent of black Americans are ancestrally multiracial (xii). The American writer and Professor, Gary Nash, operates with a slightly higher number of 80 percent. Their percentages from the 1990s are in accordance with the results of studies from the thirties, fifties and sixties. Nash claims that, by the end of the twentieth century "only one in six Americans will be able to trace direct descent from white Europeans. Always multicultural, America is moving toward a time when 'whites' will be a minority" (Nash 175).

Eakle reminds us that while more than 5 million immigrants arrived in America from 1607 to the civil war, more than 40 million came in the period from 1860 to 1980. Only one in nine of all immigrants entered the New World in the period of slavery. Most white Americans have ancestors that came after 1865 and the emancipation of the slaves. Moreover, very few of the whites who lived in America during the period of slavery were slave owners. As a consequence there are not many whites that descend from slave owners today. Likewise, not all blacks descend from the nearly 450,000 black slaves who were brought from Africa to the later United States from the 1600s onwards. Ball claims that approximately forty percent of American blacks have slaves as their ancestors (190). Moreover, as

many as one in eight blacks were free by 1860 according to Eakle (453-54, 579).

However, black Americans who have and are conscious of their slave ancestors, often do not want to acknowledge that they have any white masters in their family. This unwillingness to remember partly results from their shame of their black pride and partly from the fact that these forefathers were many times guilty of raping and of incest (Early 38). To these blacks slavery is a sad chapter in American history and in their family's history and is better forgotten.

Slavery is a shameful chapter in history for all whites. The white American, Edward Ball, investigates his ancestry of slave owners to find out whether there were any black-white sexual relations and whether he has black roots. According to him, it is especially the older generation in his white family that is angry about his genealogical research, and worries about him changing the family story and condemning their ancestors. The young generation, on the contrary, is more positive and encouraging. The old generation is ashamed of the revelation of the truth about slavery; the hard work, the many beatings and episodes of torture, and the fact that many families were separated by slave owners. This separation of families particularly happened after their master's death when they were put up for sale. The sexual exploitation of slaves by slave owners is a taboo topic as is the hypothesis that there might be black blood in the family resulting from such miscegenation (Ball 62-63, 72-75, 126, 394). As a consequence, many Americans who descend from slaves and slave owners, are not aware of or will not accept the fact that they often have black and white ancestors.

Identity and Racial Identity

It is only since the second world war that the importance of identity has been recognized, according to

the British social psychologist, Barry Richards in Gaber et al.'s In the Best Interests of the Child. In the United States there has been a reaction against conformity followed by the notion of an experienced authentic identity. By the early 1960s the concept of identity was firmly established in much academic thinking and had become part of everyday language. The establishing of an identity has been regarded as critical to mental health. The black civil rights movement in the 1960s considered black identity as a civil right, the right to be a black American and enjoy the same rights as other American citizens. Because of the "one-drop rule" black pride was instilled in those of known mixed black and white ancestry as well, and it became particularly important for them to identify as black at this time (Gaber et al. 79-80).

Richards makes a distinction between an official and bureaucratic identity and a subjective, personal and experiential identity. Both terms "rest upon individuals and their individuality being accepted as basic elements of the social world" (Gaber et al. 77). I will mainly discuss subjective identity in my thesis rather than official identity. Subjective identity has two components--personal and social identities. The latter relates to membership in certain social groups. Some kinds of classifications are more important than others in defining social identity, such as "race," religion, nation, rural and urban, and Southern or Northern background. Other significant social identifications are class, school, occupation and age. However, Americans vary in how they usually classify others and they also differ widely as to which group memberships they feel are important (Gaber et al. 81).

Personal identity concerns what distinguishes one person from another and it has "to do with the way in which we are formed through our relationships with other individuals rather than through our relationships of belonging or not belonging to social groups" (Gaber et al. 81). Family relations and

choice of partners and friends are significant factors. This kind of identity also describes "the particular qualities, weaknesses and resources that are unique to the individual as a result of the unique relationships within which that individual grew up" (Gaber et al. 81). There is no absolute distinction between the personal and social identity although a distinction may be there. They are both subjective, and "the personal identity is ultimately 'social"' because it is the product of all the social forces which have acted upon the persons with whom that individual has grown up. These forces might concern poverty or privilege, oppression or opportunity among others (Gaber et al. 82). According to Richards, "it is the personal identity which provides the main basis for a sense of emotional security. A strong personal identity based on solid family relationships can lead to a competent response to contradictions in the domain of social identity" (Gaber et al. 84). These contradictions can for instance be a racially mixed background. Thus, an individual's personal identity may have an impact on that person's racial self-perception.

The concept of identity contains a tension within itself as it embodies difference and simultaneously sameness and the sense of belonging to a particular group. Similarly, the identity formation process is constituted by both sameness and difference. This applies both to the personal and the social identity. "Race" is relevant to this process as there are likely to be possible physical differences between the parents and the child of mixed "race." According to Richards, the significance of this difference depends on whether the parents feel a distance to the child because of racial differences or not. There have been very few studies of mixed "race" children, and in the United States mixed white and black children are considered as black today and not studied separately. This ascribed identity is very important, according to Richards, because there seems to be a relationship between the

society's perception of a child's racial identity and the child's racial self-perception (Gaber et al. 79, 85).

A social identity may describe either the way that society at large or individuals themselves define social group membership (Gaber et al. 81). Thus, a person's social identity can either be ascribed by society or achieved by the individual. I will primarily discuss social identification and particularly examine whether racial identity, as one kind of social identity, is constructed by society, which I will refer to as an ascribed identity, or whether racial identity is constructed by the individual, which I will refer to as an achieved identity. An ascribed racial identity is usually based on an *assumed* racial descent, according to Sollors, whereas an achieved racial identity is usually based on consent and more individual choice. In most cases racial identity is ascribed and the American individual is not able to go against the society's classification (Sollors, Beyond Ethnicity 37-38).

Apart from the "one-drop rule," an ascribed racial identity is typically based on physical traits such as skin colour, hair texture and colour, and facial features such as broadness of nose, fullness of lips and eye colour. Little emphasis is attributed to cultural traits by the American community. These traits are not so obvious, but they are also the basis of the classification of individuals of mixed "race" as black or white. Cultural traits on which the individual's racial self-perception is typically based, are other kinds of social classifications such as church affiliation, social network and choice of school and occupation. Also language, accent, cultural tastes and style are significant factors. Nevertheless, a person's racial identity is not always fixed and ascribed because it may change as a person goes through different stages in his or her life. A new racial identity may be achieved in the right circumstances, the right time period and the right place by passing consciously.

According to Sollors, ethnic identity, in contrast to racial identity, has most often been achieved in American society, and is most often based on consent rather than descent. The racial identity of black Americans, however, has most often been based on descent (Sollors, Beyond Ethnicity 37-38). Lewis' Kingsblood Royal emphasizes Neil's black identity showing his achievements as a white man completely worthless. There has not been much choice of identity for persons of black descent, except in the cases where individuals could pass.

Recently, there has been a discussion about the categorization of persons of mixed descent in the United States and for the census of 2000 a new category, "mixed-race" or "multiracial" was suggested. It was decided, however, that instead of checking a mixed category as first suggested, Americans were asked to check as many categories as they identified with (Nash 179-81; Spencer 2-5). These are the Americans' racial self-perceptions. Apart from the "other" category from the 1990 census, which was selected by four percent, Americans have previously been asked to check the racial classification which corresponded most closely to the way they were identified by their community--their ascribed identity. The new way of identifying "race" may be a positive sign of the American society opening up and thinking in other colours than just black and white. Moreover, it is more in accordance with the reality of today's United States. Nash among many others claim that the numbers of interracial relationships, marriages and mixed "race" children are exploding (178, 182). According to Spencer, interracial marriages increased between 1970 and 1990 from one percent to two percent. Moreover, interracial births were tripled from one percent to three percent in the same time period (Spencer 4). As the hidden and unknown numbers of interracial births and interracial Americans are huge, the official percentages are only the top of the ice berg.

In my thesis I will concentrate on three racial identities; a black, a white and a mixed identity. A few individuals refuse to identify racially. For most Americans of mixed "race," who are typically ascribed as black, the white and mixed classifications are not always possible alternatives. They have to succumb to the binary thinking that is pervasive in the American community and *either* be black or white. The motivation for identifying as black--for those who have a choice--can be a sense of belonging to the black community. Americans of mixed "race" typically receive more acceptance from the black community and their black relatives than from the white community and their white relatives. To be black typically involves few economic opportunities and a lower social status than a white identity.

According to the white American Professor of English, Maureen T. Reddy, who is married to a black man, the white category is not marked for most whites. They do not have any consciousness of their whiteness, unlike the blacks' consciousness of their blackness. In the white crowd of Americans a white individual is invisible as simply another human being. Thus, to be white is seen as the norm in the American community. For Americans of mixed "race" the motivation for passing as white is often not only the sense of belonging predominantly to the white community. It typically results from a strong wish for the kind of social mobility and privileges which are more easily available to a white person (Haizlip 64-72; Reddy 12, 21, 35). This was particularly clear in the enslaved antebellum society and in the segregated America before the 1960s. There are some Americans of mixed racial heritage who claim their mixedness and do not identify solely with the black community. Americans who know of their mixed racial heritage, are hardly able to wipe it out of their memory. Some cannot choose either a black identity or a white identity. They do not regard these classifications as totally fixed separate

entities with clear distinctions and may question these categories. They are, however, unlikely to be identified as mixed and are often met with physical and psychological abuse by black Americans because of their own internalized oppression and pain, according to Early (39). Thus, it is easier to succumb to an ascribed black identity and feel a sense of belonging to the black community than to become a lonely challenger to either racial categories and belong to neither community.

Other Americans of mixed racial ancestry are in different dilemmas. An example is a light-skinned individual that typically has an ascribed identity as white, but a black racial self-perception. The American writer and Professor of Law, Judy Scales-Trent, writes about her absurd experiences of passing--involuntarily most of the time--in her collection of autobiographical essays, Notes of a White Black Woman. She explores the experiences of people who are black but look white, and so she demonstrates the arbitrariness of racial categories. According to her, racial identity has a strong impact on people's lives, and this is especially obvious and problematic to a person who fails to achieve the desired identity (Scales-Trent 11-14). Moreover, Maureen Reddy claims that, "the color line is permeable in one direction only" (23). It is only possible to go from black to white and not from white to black.

Some Americans, especially those of mixed racial ancestry, have an ambiguous racial self-perception, and they try to step aside from the racial polarizations. Whether it really is possible, however, to achieve a raceless identity can be questioned. In the American community the significance of "race" and racial classifications cannot and should not be underestimated. Moreover, the individual's sense of belonging more to one or several certain racial communities than to others is also hard to get rid of A child usually notices the "race(s)" of its parents, who are important role models and significant

to the development of the child's identity. Thus, in the end I do not believe that the ideal of a raceless identity can become a reality, at least not in today's United States. Nevertheless, I respect the desire of some Americans to be neutral, and I think it should be paid attention to. As they do not want to be concerned with "race" or colour, they regard other aspects of their identity as more important. Their personal identity or their social classifications other than "race" may be strongly emphasized such as being a son, or an American, a Baptist or a teacher respectively. In all of these classifications "race" may be relevant, but it is not necessarily the most significant factor for the performance of these roles. In this way, Americans claiming a raceless identity stress aspects of their identity which they have in common with other Americans rather than aspects which are different. That may be a manifestation of indecision or a desire to be independent and have one foot in each racial community. Alternatively, it may be seen as a protest against their ascribed identity which is most likely to be either black or white, and as a protest against the significance attached to "race" in the United States today. These Americans do not want their opportunities to be limited by "race."

In this thesis I will discuss the racial identities of three Americans of mixed "race" from the 1950s to the 1990s. I will highlight the cultural aspects of their autobiographies. My main focus will be on the way these writers describe their racial identities as ascribed or achieved. I will also discuss their racial self-perceptions, and compare the writers' experiences concerning their racial identities and their searches for their missing families and missing links in their ancestry. In chapter two, I will investigate whether the racial identity of members of the three families can be ascribed or achieved and whether their ascribed identities are in accordance with their racial self-perceptions. Most important, however, are the racial attitudes of the writers' family members. In chapter three, I will discuss the racial identities

of the three missing families and the strength of the colour line between them and the writers' families. Moreover, I will investigate whether "race" is a source or an excuse for family conflict. Finally, in chapter four, I will look at the way the families and missing families may have influenced the racial self-perceptions of the three writers. I will also question the concepts of "race" and colour in the light of the mixedness of the three writers and Americans in general. These autobiographies represent three different perspectives on the dilemma of having both black and white roots in the United States. The three writers belong to the educated upper middle-class as adults, and I am afraid there are not many sources for the experiences of working-class Americans of mixed "race." Thus, these three books are sources for some knowledge of middle-class Americans of multiracial ancestry (Haizlip; McBride; Minerbrook).

In The Color of Water, James McBride writes a fascinating double biography comparing his black childhood and adolescence to that of his Jewish mother. In the juxtaposition of two very different childhoods, the racial polarization is weakened in this best seller from 1996. Moreover, his mother becomes even more amazing in the light of her bad childhood memories of abuse, hardships and segregation. His story is a tribute to his mother describing her as a woman who denies her whiteness and ignores the abuses of blacks and whites. Moreover, she is celebrated for seeing her children as human beings created in God's image regarding their "race" as unimportant. She is a strong and resourceful widowed woman who has raised her twelve children mostly on her own without the support of her family. Despite many obstacles of poverty and prejudice, she has made her children doctors, teachers, psychologist, professors, nurses, businessmen and journalists. Although James does not succeed in finding his white relatives, he is finally reconciled with himself and his mixed heritage. Just

like The Color of Water, The Sweeter the Juice is a story of success and the search for a racial identity. Shirlee Taylor Haizlip describes her colourful heritage in a family memoir going back six generations to when the American history of immigration begins. It is a story of the meaning of colour and "race" in her own family as well as in the American community as a whole. Her own ancestors' history and mixed heritage are extended to Americans' history and multiracial ancestry. As such The Sweeter the Juice becomes a quintessential American story in which "race" and identity are questioned. The enigma of the missing white and passing family on the writer's maternal side is described. To her and her mother these family members' rejection is beyond reason. Shirlee Haizlip writes about the process of finding this missing family and trying to understand them and their disowning. When, after 76 years of rejection, her mother finally meets her white sister, it is only to find that the choice not to pass has not made her less happy or successful. Scott Minerbrook's story, Divided to the Vein, however, does not end on such a happy note. He feels relieved to find his white relatives, but he and his mother are still not made welcome because of his father's colour. Similarly, he has been rejected by his father and paternal grandmother for not being *dark* enough. Moreover, he is disgusted with his black father's abusive behaviour and with all the suffering he has caused his family. After having met his rejecting relatives, Scott's feelings of dividedness are weakened. He ends with a note of forgiving, tolerance and wholeness.

Chapter 2

The Families

The families consist of those relatives who have regular contact with James, Scott and Shirlee in their childhoods. These families mainly consist of the writers' parents and siblings. Only Scott has a grandmother within his family, and Shirlee has a great-aunt. Apart from the writers' mothers, family members are black and from the writers' paternal side.

I will mainly describe the racial identities of those members who played the most significant part in the writers' early lives and were the writers' most important role models. These are the writers' parents, Scott's grandmother and Shirlee's great-aunt. I will discuss whether these individuals have achieved or ascribed their racial identities. Most of these family members have mixed heritages from two or three of these "races"; white, black and Native American. James' mother has Jewish ancestry. Moreover, I will describe the racial attitudes of each of the family members and, in particular, their attitudes to James, Scott and Shirlee.

Racial Identities and Racial Attitudes in the Family of James McBride

In The Color of Water James McBride's family consist of his white mother, black stepfather and black family members on his stepfather and father's side. I will refer to James McBride as James. His mother is the most prominent and the most interesting figure in his childhood. His father died before he was born, and his stepfather does not live much at home. Thus, I will mainly write about the racial identities and attitudes of James' mother, Ruth McBride Jordan born Rachel Shilsky. After her first marriage to James' biological father, Andrew McBride,

she bore the name Ruth McBride before it was changed to Ruth McBride Jordan at her second marriage to Hunter Jordan. However, I will call her Ruth no matter which time period is referred to. I will also look into the racial identities and attitudes of James' stepfather, who I will refer to as Hunter. Moreover, I will consider the relationship between Hunter and James as equal or similar to a father-son relationship and call him "James' father." The reasons are that James' biological father died in 1957 before he was born and, as McBride writes, "though he was my stepfather, I always thought of him as Daddy" (McBride 4). I will refer to Andrew McBride as "James' biological father," and Andrew. I will not discuss James' black relatives on his father's side and those of his biological father because they are not as significant in his life as are his parents. Moreover, their racial attitudes and relationships to James and his family are unproblematic and accepting, similar to those of his father.

James' mother started her life in the United States in 1923 as a Jewish immigrant from Poland with the physical traits of the white "race": white skin and straight black hair. Her racial identity is typically ascribed as white (McBride 4, 11-12, 26). Ethnically, she is a Jew because of her Jewish roots. In a marriage ceremony she attends in a synagogue long after she has left her Jewish family, McBride describes her as fitting in because of her Jewish traits: "her long nose and dark eyes seeming to blend in perfectly with the mostly eastern European faces surrounding her. She'd had no problems walking into the synagogue" (222). Apart from this episode and the occasions when she speaks Yiddish with Jewish merchants, she has left her Jewish past completely. She has become Americanized and speaks American fluently. Thus, she has achieved a new social identity as an American.

With regard to religion, she is misplaced. Ironically, she is mistaken for a devout Jew in the synagogue whereas she is seen as a misplaced white woman by the new black minister

in the church which she herself founded. In the New Brown Memorial Baptist Church she has been an active member for decades. According to McBride, she is "the only white person in the room" (197) and the new minister "treated her like an outsider, a foreigner, a *white person,* greeting her after the service with the obsequious smile and false sincerity that blacks reserve for white folks when they don't know them that well or don't trust them, or both" (McBride 198).

Ruth's cultural traits are not so easily described as white. Even as a child she stopped conforming to the segregationist policy of the little Southern town, Suffolk in Virginia. Although still a Jew, she made friends with a white gentile and dated a black boy in secrecy. It was not easy to be a Jew in Suffolk in the thirties and she and her family were victims of anti-Semitism. Naturally, blacks were also discriminated against because of segregation and had an even harder time than the Jews. This was partly the reason why she, already as a child, had stronger loyalties to the blacks than to the whites. She saw the happy families of the blacks and their happiness in Jesus, and she preferred literal to emotional starvation (e.g. McBride 31, 46, 63-64, 86). Neither did they ask what school her children attended nor question her about her wages. They were peaceful and trusting. Besides, McBride quotes Ruth Jordan saying, "in fact that's what I liked about black folks all my life: They never judged me" (83). In addition, she may have felt that by choosing the black, Christian and American side, she distanced herself from and made a stand against her racist, Jewish and Polish father who had sexually molested her as a child (McBride 33).

As a grown-up, she is the wife and later the widow of the black minister as well as the mother of his children. Her only family relations comprise her two black husbands, her children of mixed "race" and the extended black families of her husbands. Also her cultural

traits are black: "Mommy is a flying compilation of competing interests and conflicts, a black woman in white skin, with black children and a white woman's physical problem" (204). Ruth's racial self-perception is black because she describes herself as "light-skinned" (McBride 15). According to her:

> There was no turning back after my mother died. I stayed on the black side because that was the only place I *could* stay. The few problems I had with black folks were nothing compared to the grief white folks dished out. With whites it was no question. You weren't accepted to be with a black man and that was that. They'd say forget it. Are you crazy? A nigger and you? No way. They called you white trash. That's what they called me. (McBride 182)

I think Ruth understates the discrimination she suffers from blacks because she ignores the racism she experiences and she tries to lead a black life (e.g. McBride 15, 21-24). She gave up her Jewish belief to become a faithful "black" Christian. Moreover, she lives in an all-black neighbourhood and socializes mostly with black women from the church (McBride 4, 184, 199). Only in the local black church and among her extended black family is she acknowledged as a human being because they disregard her "race." Her congregation, except for the new minister, identify her as a Christian, while her in-laws from both her marriages welcome her as a new family member. Aunt Candis, one of her in-laws and the grandchild of slaves, accepts her and even helps her in times of trouble (McBride 36, 76-77, 150-51, 192-93).

Nevertheless, the black society regards her as a white intruder. Ruth will always stand out because of her white skin among her black neighbours and James' black friends and their parents. James' concern for her safety and embarrassment at being seen with her in their black

neighbourhood are caused by her ascribed *whiteness.* He does not want his friends to see her because they will tease him calling her a "honky." Besides, he is not able to sleep until she has come home from work late at night as he finds her an easy target for muggers (McBride 24-26, 76-77).

She is regarded as white by the American community, which typically emphasizes her physical traits over the cultural ones. By white Americans she is seen as pariah. In the segregated American society of the 1940s she has broken the taboo of miscegenation and is a despised member of the white "race." Thus, she suffered from continued discrimination and the McBride couple sometimes had to run for their lives to get away from a white mob (McBride 182). Just as Ruth was part of a rejected minority as a Jew in her childhood, she is still a pariah as an adult. Even to her family she is an outcast, no longer a Jew and no longer a family member. When she married her first black husband and James' biological father, she was disowned by her family and they sat shiva[1] for her (McBride 23, 167).

Ruth obviously experiences frustrations at not being accepted as black. White Maureen Reddy who has a similar position to Ruth, writes that, "I *look* white, but that white skin conceals my inner life" (22). She doubts that "a white person can really *assimilate;* the color line doesn't work that way. I'm still white. I think I stand on the color line itself, not on one side of it. Or maybe I'm like a bridge, stretching across the line, touching both sides, but mostly in the middle somewhere" (Reddy 5). Thus, Ruth cannot *achieve* a black identity and the colour line is impermeable from white to black like Reddy claims. In that respect her black cultural traits and black racial self-perception are insignificant. This illustrates that in reality there is sometimes a discrepancy between an individual's racial self-perception and the

[1] A Jewish ceremony in which the family of a diseased takes farewell with that person

way the community ascribes that individual's racial identity.

Knowing that she cannot choose her "race," Ruth emphasizes aspects of her social identity other than "race," aspects which are possible to achieve such as becoming a Christian. She has gone through a great transformation from her high school graduation ceremony, when she could not make herself enter a Christian church (McBride 121), to when she attends a Jewish marriage ceremony of her son's friend as an old Christian woman who "talked as if she were visiting a museum" (222). At this point the Jewish Rachel Shilsky is truly dead.

Ruth concentrates on her personal identity as a mother:

> Some black folks never did accept me. Most did, but there were always a few running around saying "Nubian this" and "Nubian that" and always talking about Africa and all this. Well, I'm a mother of black children, and nobody will ever deny me my children, and they can put that in their Nubian pipe and smoke it. (McBride 181-82)

As a result of Ruth's ambiguous position, she assumes the neutral stance of racelessness towards her children. She avoids topics of "race" and identity as far as possible. The American mixed-race writer, Pearl Fuyo Gaskins, thinks that parents often avoid racial issues when they have been rejected by their family for their interracial marriage because these issues are too painful (118). I think this is the case with Ruth because of her tragic separation with her family. When James finally forces her to speak her mind about his own racial identity, she only states that he is a member of the human race, all under the same God:

> JAMES. Am I black or white?
>
> RUTH. You're a human being, she snapped. Educate yourself or you'll be a nobody! (McBride 70-71)

---

declaring her or him dead.

She believes that church and school are the means to rise out of poverty (McBride 20-21). A good student and a good Christian are social identities that James may achieve. She does not want him to succumb to an ascribed identity as black and thereby limit himself and his possibilities. Rather, she wants him to free himself from the expectations of a society that makes a distinction based on colour and physical features. Thus, she wants him to be as undeterred by his ascribed black identity as she is by her own ascribed white identity.

Like Ruth, Hunter has grown up in the Southern state of Virginia, in Hemico county near Richmond. According to McBride, he is a quiet and peaceful countryman. He works as a furnace fireman and has a gentle and easygoing manner. It is his skin colour which is most significant for his black identity: "He had a lot of Indian in his face: brown skin, slanted brown eyes, high cheekbones, and a weather-beaten outdoor look about him [...]" (McBride 91). Hunter is also regarded by others as black as he has had to flee from the Jim Crow laws of Virginia. Moreover, he leads the life of a black Christian in a black neighbourhood. Thus, his black ascribed identity does not conflict with his racial self-perception. He simply performs the role of his black social status. The fact that he married a white woman, however, was unusual for a black man at that time. James thinks that he is different from the younger parents of his friends who have new cars, talk about civil rights, and dress in hip sixties wear. Hunter does not take an interest in the sixties, he drives an old car and dresses in old-fashioned clothes. Besides, he walks slowly, talks with a Southern accent, and does not socialize with the other parents (McBride 90-92, 94-95). Obviously, Hunter's cultural traits such as his clothes, accent, and life style are not the same as those of the parents of James' friends, even though they, too, are black. Hunter's different ways are to a large extent caused by geographical variations and by his belonging to an older generation.

Generally speaking, James' father does not make a point of his blackness. McBride tells that the question of "race" does not bother Hunter, and he does not mind his wife being white and his children mixed: "Race was something he never talked about. To him it was a detail that you stepped over, like a crack in the sidewalk" (95). However, he is aware of the racial differences within their family and shows his concern once. McBride writes:

> He said that since I was the oldest living at home, I had to watch out for Mommy and my little brothers and sisters because "y'all are special," he said. "And just so special to me." It was the only time I ever heard him refer to race in any way, however vaguely, but it didn't matter, because right then and there I knew he was going to die[. . .]. (97)

His personal identity as father and husband is obviously more important. He treats the McBride children as his own, and he is present at James' church confirmation. Moreover, he does all the repairs in their home and spends his life savings on a house for his wife. According to McBride, Hunter simply picks up where James' biological father left them and carries on in the same direction. Church and school are the only topics that interest Hunter (McBride 90-91, 94). In this way, he attaches importance to James' achievements as a student and as a Christian, an attitude that has been encouraged by his wife. She most probably has a stronger personality and will-power than her husband.

Racial Identities and Racial Attitudes in Scott Minerbrook's Family

Scott Minerbrook's family consist of his white mother, black father and black grandmother. I will refer to him as Scott. He has a difficult childhood because his parents are often quarrelling, and his father abuses his mother. Moreover, his tyrannical father is violent

towards Scott. His grandmother supports his father, and she has a negative effect on the interracial marriage of his parents. It is not until Scott has grown up that his mother finally divorces his father. In Scott's childhood his parents and grandmother are the most important members of his family and I will discuss their racial identities and attitudes. His mother changes her first name Audilee (Smith) to LaVerne Minerbrook after her marriage and I will call her LaVerne and Scott's father, Alan Minerbrook, Alan. Scott's grandmother on the paternal side will be referred to as Katherine as does Minerbrook.

LaVerne has white skin like Ruth. Also her physical traits are white; her parents and other known ancestors are Scots-Irish, French and Cherokee. LaVerne has a small nose, straight dark blond hair, and her mother's eyes (Minerbrook 3-4, 18, 255). She is ascribed a white identity because of her *physical* features and the fact that her Native American ancestry is unknown to most people. LaVerne has grown up in a tiny Southernlike town of Caruthersville, Missouri. Her background and experiences are similar to those of Ruth. They are both from small backward towns and have experienced poverty and segregation, although the child LaVerne was on the white side. They have both grown tired of racial prejudices and religious beliefs based on fear and the close-mindedness, backwardness, poverty and hardships of their childhood homes and decided to move away (Minerbrook 14, 22, 30-33).

As an adult, she achieves a new religious identity. She has left the revivalist faith of her parents to sympathize with the Christian Science belief of her husband's family, even though religion does not play such an important part in their lives. Moreover, she has come a long way compared to the rest of her family by advancing from working class to middle class through her successful career (Minerbrook 32, 86, 139). She has the courage and grit to stay in her unhappy marriage, and she keeps her family together for a long time. Thus, she is

victimized by unfortunate circumstances to a large extent determined by her mentally unstable husband. Her high professional status is threatened to the degree of losing work because of the visible signs of her husband's abuse (Minerbrook 159). Thus, LaVerne is dependent on the moods of her husband for success in her career as a clothes designer.

Her position is vulnerable as her personal identity as wife and even as mother is threatened. LaVerne sees a rival in her mother-in-law because her husband is to a large extent in her power, unable to choose between the two women. Apart from representing a threat to LaVerne's marriage, Katherine once tries to take over her role as mother, suggesting that she take over the upbringing of Mark and Scott and raise them as blacks. Katherine continues to attack LaVerne emotionally over a period of many years (Minerbrook 65, 69, 107-09).

Certainly, LaVerne is not blessed with the same kind of support from her black in-laws and black social network as Ruth is. The doors to black society are closed as not even her black in-laws will acknowledge her and her children, and her husband does not socialize much in the black community. As she has the wrong colour, she has a difficult time in the black South side of Chicago. Her housekeepers frequently despise and fool her, but her husband does not believe her and calls her a racist (Minerbrook 64, 73, 137). As a consequence she never desires a black identity. The Minerbrooks live among the white middle class in Connecticut, and her job career is in the white community of New York city (Minerbrook 158, 164). Thus, she only crosses the colour line when she marries a black man and has his four children. LaVerne's breach with her family and past is never final and she does not give up hope of reconciliation for a long time. She has no other family to turn to and her parents and white friends support her against her husband (e.g. Minerbrook 5, 64, 78, 166, 173). As her cultural traits are white, so is her racial self-perception.

Both sides ascribe her a perjorative white identity putting her in a difficult and stigmatized position as white to the black community and as an outcast to the white community. It is impossible for her to achieve an acceptable social status in either group and she has a pariah status like Ruth. In the white suburbs of Connecticut she is quite isolated and shunned for having married out of her "race" and is not accepted in the Congregational Church. Only professionally is she a respected person (Minerbrook 121, 159).

Despite their similar status, LaVerne has less breathing space than Ruth. She lacks the support of a black social network. In fact, she is stuck with her husband because she has crossed the line to the "wrong" and black side and has children of mixed "race." LaVerne is afraid that no white man will accept her. Minerbrook writes that, "for Dad's part, he knew he had her where he wanted her. Race became the prison they had made for each other" (105). Un1ike Ruth, LaVerne is dependent on a man to keep her life together. This dependence seems to be emotional rather than economic as she has a well-paid job and fewer children than Ruth. Her isolation as well as her abusive husband have broken her down, and she is not as independently-minded and strong as Ruth.

"Race" is a big issue in her marriage in contrast to Ruth's. Actually, Scott's mother is idealistic and wants Scott to have the opportunity to choose his racial identity himself (Minerbrook 67). Nevertheless, she stays in the background because of her subordinate position to her husband. Their racial fights and Alan and Katherine's negative attitudes to Scott's light skin are dominant.

Minerbrook compares Alan and LaVerne's marriage to a painting of a sailing ship with a tall, battered mast. Just as their marriage is dependent on Alan's unstable moods and bad temper, the sailing ship is dependent on the weather for its journey. After Scott and his

family move to Norwalk, Connecticut, his father's violent behaviour towards his mother escalates so she is sometimes hospitalized and he is afraid that his father will murder his mother. This is a turning-point in their marriage (Minerbrook 161-62, 175).

The problematic issue of "race" is latent in the ongoing war between Scott's parents and abusive insults like "nigger" and "white tramp from cotton country" (Minerbrook 104) are frequently used. According to Minerbrook, the word "nigger" is meaningless. LaVerne only uses it to hurt her husband when he is hitting her to compensate for her shortcomings in physical strength. Alan's abuse of LaVerne has a message of frustration, and Minerbrook writes that "Dad beat Mom because that was the only way he had of communicating his emotions to her: his fear of losing her because he was black and the world was against him" (106). While "race" may be an excuse for his parents' human emotions, their abusive insults pass on a negative racial attitude to Scott. They also put him in a very difficult position as he is neither black nor white.

His father, however, is "naturally" ascribed a black identity as his known ancestors are black slaves, Choctaws and whites. He has a "chestnut-brown complexion" (73) and a broad nose and full lips. Moreover, he has very brown eyes and dark curly hair. Alan spends most of his life trying to live up to the idea of being a successful black man, and at least on the surface he makes it. He succeeds in his career as a salesman in insurance, and he buys his own house, which is much more than anyone in his family has ever done (Minerbrook 2, 116, 136-37).

Despite his success, however, he cannot achieve another racial identity. Although he lives among the white middle class, he is never able to blend in because he is too dark-skinned (Minerbrook 136-37). According to Minerbrook, "he was a black man, as we would soon be, and black men had to be tough" (76). Alan is content with his ascribed black identity

and it does not conflict with his racial self-perception.

This ambitious black striver is very unlike Hunter. Their differences can be seen in relation to their different geographical backgrounds. Scott's father has grown up in the Northern city of Chicago whereas James' father spent his childhood in the Southern countryside of Virginia which was more strictly segregated. In addition, their personalities are described as different as night and day. The city man, Alan, has a restless and aggressive manner while Hunter is an easy-going and gentle-minded country man. Unlike the stable and peaceful Hunter, Alan is "an unfinished man" (Minerbrook 59). He goes in and out of mental institutions and is a drug abuser who finally ends up in prison for weapons possession (Minerbrook 8, 74-75, 177,214).

Similarly, the racial attitudes of the two fathers towards their children are completely different. Unlike Hunter, Alan has a troubled and complex relationship with his children and cannot regard them entirely as his own because they are not black in his eyes. Only once does he seem close to his children, and that is when they return from their visit to his mother, Katherine with a tan--a result of Katherine's effort to make them darker (Minerbrook 48, 73, 107-09).

Alan's distanced relationship to his children must be seen in relation to his anger and bitterness towards his paternal missing family. They were so light-skinned that they were able to pass completely, and they rejected the darker-skinned Alan and his mother (Minerbrook 47-48). Thus, his emphasis on his "race" and his black rage are partly caused by his antagonistic relationship to the white part of his family.

Like her son, Katherine has dark eyes and dark hair, but she is lighter-skinned than Alan and has thin lips. Her ancestry is black, Choctaw and white. As she had passed

temporarily as white, it is possible for her to achieve a white identity. Nevertheless, she chooses to stay on the black side of the colour line. Her occasional passing and black rage have made her sense of blackness even more important. She has friends in the high "Negro society" (Minerbrook 98), and her neighbourhood is black. Moreover, she attends the meetings of the black Christian Science church (Minerbrook 46-48, 51-52). Thus, her black racial self-perception does not conflict with her ascribed identity.

As she takes great pride in her black identity, Alan's marriage to a white woman is a severe blow to her pride. Minerbrook writes that, "Katherine interpreted the marriage as a personal insult and an encroachment on her ability to maintain power over her son. [...] A white girl had strayed into her personal territory" (65). To save face she will never acknowledge LaVerne as her daughter in-law and thinks of the marriage as a long-term affair. Thus, she does everything she can to destroy their marriage.

Minerbrook writes that, "Race is such a weak vessel for human emotion. I believe that the fear of loss was too much of a challenge to Katherine's pride (...]" (69).Thus, the contempt and rejection by Katherine is partly a result of her psychological incapacity and her possessiveness of her son. She is a cold-hearted woman, unable to give love, as she had shown by her neglect of Alan. Partly her nonacceptance is a result of the clash of cultural values between the two women. Unlike LaVerne's naive ideas about "race," Katherine is realistic and practical-minded. She wants her coming grandchildren to be raised as black in an American community where the power of the "one-drop rule" is strong (Minerbrook 65, 67-68).

Unlike Minerbrook, I think that at the bottom of the family conflicts between LaVerne and her black mother in-law is *"race"* and racial difference. I consider her intense

preoccupation with "race" and skin colour, just like her son, is more significant. The fact that Katherine had herself been rejected by *her* parents in-law may have increased her negative attitudes to light-skinned blacks, such as her own grandchild, and to whites in particular, such as her daughter in-law. Because she had been disowned by whites, she would never welcome a white woman into *her* inner circle. Alan and Katherine's nonacceptance must also be regarded in relation to their personal characteristics, however. Both of them are incapable of giving love and of maintaining close relationships. This can be illustrated by Katherine's many divorces, Alan's lack of friends and the emotional distance between mother and son.

Once, LaVerne is attacked so brutally by her husband that she is hospitalized, and she has him committed to a mental institution. Katherine, however, gets him out immediately: "No matter what he did, Katherine justified his actions. Having a white wife and half-black children was too hard for any man to bear, she said" (Minerbrook 177). Thus, she passes on a negative racial attitude to Scott. So does her undisguised contempt of his mother and her frequent emotional attacks. According to Minerbrook, Katherine blamed white LaVerne for putting her black son in danger when she married him. Because of the unpopularity of interracial marriages among blacks, she feared that he might get killed (Minerbrook 64, 70). Ironically, it is her *son* that puts LaVerne in danger by his continuing abuse.

Racial Identities and Racial Attitudes in the Family of Shirlee Haizlip

I will call Shirlee Haizlip, Shirlee, her father, Julian Tayor, Julian, and her mother, Margareth (Morris) Taylor, Margareth. She is the only one of her siblings who does not pass except for her younger brother, Michael, who died a teenager. These are the two youngest, and they are regarded as the darkest-skinned in their family. Their guardians are black so they are brought

up in a black community (Haizlip 66, 77). Thus, Shirlee's maternal family consist only of her aunt Mamie (Mary Morris) and her black guardian and relative, Bessie Clay. Shirlee's paternal family is not large either as her grandparents are dead. These relatives are her four uncles and two half-sisters, Mauryne and Doris. I will concentrate on her mother and father in addition to aunt Mamie, as these are the family members with the greatest impact on Shirlee and her racial identity.

Margareth is sometimes called "exotic-looking" (Haizlip 14) because of her mixed ancestry of Irish, Italian and black blood, and her racial identity is difficult to determine. Thus, her physical characteristics are no sure indicator of her "race," and they are quite ambiguous. She has dark eyes, thin lips and a high nose. Haizlip describes her as "a woman the color of eggnog" (17), and thinks she is the fairest in her family. Because of her light skin and straight auburn hair she sometimes passes involuntarily and unconsciously (e.g. Haizlip 78, 135). Most of the time, however, she is ascribed a black identity partly because she is the wife of a black minister and partly because of her black social network (Haizlip 134, 137). Thus, other people's categorizations of her differ according to the circumstances.

Shirlee's mother did not always feel so proud to be black. As a child she felt guilty for being disowned and regarded herself and her colour as ugly. It had become the bar to relations with her family. The way Margareth identified herself was obviously connected with her relations to her missing family. Because her missing family disowned her, she looked upon herself as darker-skinned than she actually was and identified herself with darker friends. This kind of racial self-perception as a very dark-skinned girl with a low social status conflicts with her ascribed identity as a light-skinned girl among "the top of the light and the well-to-do" (Haizlip 72). In a black Washington where social status depended on class and colour,

she was among the elite. She only had a hint of a Southern accent. Margareth's darker-skinned guardians used to consider her lighter skin an asset, be proud of her and show her off (Haizlip 78, 84, 86, 94).

As a grown-up she chooses to stay on the black side because black people had given her most support and she feels a sense of belonging to them. Haizlip says about Margareth's relationship to Julian, "In many ways, he was the father and older brothers she had lost" (136). Thus, she is quite submissive to her husband. Moreover, she is a faithful attender of his Sunday services in the black church. At last she develops a stronger sense of pride in her black self-perception. She even corrects her employer's classification of her racial identity as white to black (Haizlip 135).

Margareth either feels ambivalent about her mixed heritage or denies her white roots (Haizlip 78). Mostly, she dichotomizes whites as strangers and different from herself. Rather than blaming herself and her colour, she blames her father for the missing family's rejection of her. Still, she is an integrationist and never gives up her wish to reunite her family. Thus, Margareth has a love and hate relationship to her father. She desperately misses her passing relatives, him and Grace in particular. When she was a little girl she used to cut out pictures from magazines of girls she thought looked like her sister and went out in the streets searching for her (Haizlip 91). As a result of this longing she is melancholic and has periods of depression, especially at Christmas. Thus, she experiences pain, anger, isolation and frustration because of her many unanswered questions (e.g. Haizlip 32, 77, 92, 99).

Julian's ascribed racial identity is unambiguously black like Hunter's and Alan's. His physical characteristics are clearly black as he is "the color of fresh-baked ginger cake" (Haizlip 17) and has "nappy" or "soft" (Haizlip 30) hair and dark eyes. However, his ancestry

is not only black, but also includes three Native American groups. Julian's peaceful and calm demeanour resembles Hunter's. Unlike him, Julian is a well-educated, distinguished and sophisticated man. He is from Washington, D.C., but has no Southern accent. Shirlee's father speaks formally and precisely using Latin and Greek words in an oratorical style and is quite authoritative. Like James' biological father, he is a black minister in a Baptist church (Haizlip 15, 18, 27, 101, 103, 129-30).

Julian is ambitious, like Alan, and constantly trying to improve the opportunities for the black "race." Julian works for more education, better jobs and better housing for blacks. Later, he also joins the civil rights movement. In that respect he is a step ahead of the others, and like Alan, he is an example to other black men. Julian is Connecticut's first black delegate to the Democratic National Convention. Moreover, Shirlee's parents are the first blacks in their street to own a home and Julian has a prominent position in the black bourgoisie (Haizlip 125, 128, 178, 197). His racial self-perception is without doubt black as is his ascribed identity. He is often given a warm reception in black Baptist congregations. Similarly, the almost one thousand black mourners at his funeral clearly illustrate his position among blacks (Haizlip 175-76, 178, 224, 230).

As with Hunter, "race" and differences in colour within his family are not a problem to Julian. Neither do his brothers mind and they welcome Margareth and Shirlee into their inner circle in contrast with the missing family's nonacceptance. Julian is an integrationist, like his wife (Haizlip 171, 238). Haizlip quotes him commenting on the fact that he was asked by the governor to campaign for the senator: "For me the joy and wonder of the event was that a Jewish governor had asked a Negro minister to work as hard as he could for a Roman Catholic Irish senator who wanted to be president of the United States. I believe that's

the way our country should work" (128). He succeeds in integrating the local YMCA. Julian is very conscious about "race" and the power relations between the black and white "races." Thus, he makes sure Shirlee would not be humiliated because of her "race" by forbidding her to work for whites. Moreover, he protects her from segregation as far as he can by for instance avoiding rest rooms marked coloured in the South. Similarly, their high social status makes it possible for him to select the best recreational facilities available for blacks, and he makes the best out of his children's opportunities. Shirlee is sent to the only available black summer camp so that she will get to know other black middle-class children. Moreover, she is one of a few black pupils in a school for whites (Haizlip 145, 147-49, 165, 180, 183, 187).

Church and school are important factors in Shirlee's upbringing as in James'. She is a star student and is strongly encouraged by her father. Also cultural education, like singing and music lessons, is emphasized and Shirlee is taught to be independently-minded and freethinking (Haizlip 129-30, 136, 151). Julian has a strong sense of black pride, unlike his wife, and his goal is to pass on his black pride to Shirlee: "My father had always told me to speak up if I felt my rights were being violated" (Haizlip 194).

Unlike Julian's unquestionable blackness, the passers in the family and aunt Mamie have few negroid features and are light-skinned. Haizlip describes Mamie as a "white-looking woman with intensely blue eyes" (170). However, her *openness* about her black ancestry makes her ascribed identity black. Mamie's racial self-perception is also black even though she occasionally shifts her racial identity from black to white. She lives in a black neighbourhood in Washington. Moreover, she has taught black women and she has chosen to marry black. There is no doubt on which side of the colour line Bessie Clay belongs, however. She has darker skin and more negroid features than Margareth, let alone Mamie and

the passers in the family. In contrast to them, Margareth's guardian has a broad nose and nappy hair (Haizlip 64, 77, 80, 84).

Most probably, the missing family's distorted racial attitudes as well as the colourism in black Washington have rubbed off on Margareth's aunt. She does not value dark colour and black physical features: "Mamie called Bessie a 'pigtailer,' implying that her nappy hair made her less worthy or credible" (Haizlip 84). Mamie even threatens to sue Bessie Clay for some disagreement concerning her niece's education. On the other hand, Margareth's aunt welcomes the missing family into the inner circle of her family and travels long distances to visit them (Haizlip 68, 84-85, 171). In contrast she never visits Margareth. Thus, Mamie clearly prefers their light skin and lack of negroid features as well as their choices of white spouses.

She makes it very clear to Margareth and Shirlee that they are not accepted because of their colour. Unlike Margareth's guardians, she thinks that her niece is "too dark, revealing both the Negro and swarthy Italian strains of her ancestry" (Haizlip 77). Similarly, Mamie finds Shirlee's skin too dark and her hair too curly compared to her own children and her passing relatives. To make up for these physical disadvantages, she praises Shirlee's New England accent and proper manners. Nevertheless, Shirlee and her mother feel uncomfortable. Mamie thought that Julian was not good enough for her niece because of his colour, and that has an impact on her relationship with Margareth and Shirlee who is even darker than Margareth. Similarly, Mamie obviously does not approve of Shirlee's marriage to a man whose colour cannot be misunderstood and does not come to their wedding (Haizlip 98, 170-71, 192, 195). This kind of colourism is a contrast to Alan and Katherine's negative attitudes to Scott because of his colour. In their case, it is Scott's *light* skin which is the

reason for their nonacceptance (Minerbrook 73, 107-08). Thus, this kind of rejection can be called the opposite of colourism and it is probably a reaction *against* colourism in Alan's paternal family and in the black community (e.g. Minerbrook 46-49).

In The Color of Water and Divided to the Vein the mothers have ascribed white identities while Shirlee's mother, in The Sweeter the Juice, is often ascribed a black identity. With her ambiguous physical traits and light skin, she is the only one of the parents who might have *achieved* a white identity. The three fathers are all ascribed black identities. Another similarity is the fact that the white maternal side of the families rejects James, Scott and Shirlee's mothers and their multiracial families. Their black relatives are often more accepting except for Scott's father and grandmother and aunt Mamie. James and Shirlee, however, have good relationships with their parents.

Ruth, LaVerne and Margareth are all strong personalities and manage on their own through times of hardships. LaVerne and Margareth struggle with their families' rejection while Ruth tries to forget her family completely. Even though they are never completely accepted by blacks, Ruth and LaVerne do not give in and return to the white side of the colour line. While Ruth and LaVerne are outcasts among blacks and whites alike, Margareth is more privileged as a light-skinned woman. However, Margareth's passing family creates a missing link in her racial identity and in her life. Also Ruth has an ambiguous and problematic relationship to her own racial identity as she wishes in vain to be black. Even though LaVerne is the only mother who does not struggle with her classification--as white--"race" creates difficulties for her too. LaVerne's racial fights with her husband, Katherine's emotional attacks and the hostility of her white neighbours make her feel isolated. As I will point out in the last chapter, the mothers' inward struggles with their white rejecting families

are reflected in the three writers and in their search for racial identities.

Unlike LaVerne who is not welcomed by either side, Ruth and Margareth are more accepted among blacks than whites. Moreover, the multiracial families of the latter two are given a warm reception only by their black in-laws and categorized by the American society as black. Unlike Margareth, Ruth and LaVerne are ascribed as white. For the two white mothers to admit that their own children are black, would be to disassociate themselves from them and split the family. There might be an egotistical motive in having a sense of belonging to and of being able to trace their own physical features in their children.

Hunter, Alan and Julian on the other hand, have a more relaxed and clearer understanding of their own racial identities than Ruth and Margareth. There is no contrast between their ascribed identities and their racial self-perceptions, and, unlike Ruth and LaVerne, they are not outcasts in the American society. They may have had to cross the colour line to marry white women, but they still have the support of their black families. To Hunter and Julian, unlike Alan, their children's mixedness is not a problem.

Chapter 3

The Missing Families

The white family members on the three writers' maternal side have little or no contact with the writers' families. This "missing family" typically consist of uncles, aunts, cousins and grandparents. I will, however, limit the number of family members to be discussed to grandparents, one great-grandmother and a few aunts and uncles. These relatives are similar in that they have rejected the writers' parents. Margareth is disowned as the darkest-skinned member of her family, and LaVerne and Ruth are rejected after their marriages to black men. With all three mothers, the topic of the missing families is touchy. Ruth makes it taboo so that James becomes even more curious. LaVerne and Margareth, however, express their longing for their families. The members of these two missing families have been ascribed a white identity all their lives. Shirlee's missing family, however, have previously been ascribed a black identity, but achieve a white identity. I will put most emphasis on Shirlee's passing relatives in the following discussion as I find their attitudes to the black side of the family confusing, interesting and complex. Their white identity is fragile, dependent as it is on the silence of and broken bonds with the black side.

Shirlee's mother, Margareth, has a father called William and a namesake in her grandmother, Margareth (Maher) Morris, whom I will refer to as Margareth Morris to avoid confusion. Moreover, Margareth's oldest five siblings are her twin brothers, Eugene and Edward, who both died as young white men and her siblings, (Bill), Sumner and Grace have also passed. I will refer to James' maternal grandparents as the Shilskys, or separately as

Fishel and Hudis, and his maternal aunt is Dee-Dee. Scott's aunt is Raebeth and his divorced white grandparents are Ocieola and Clarence Smith who remarries.

I will discuss to what extent the racial identities of the white family members are ascribed or achieved, a question I find especially interesting with the passing Morrises in Shirlee's family since their racial identity changes during a specific time period. With the relatives who have ascribed identities, I will compare their racial self-perceptions with the way their identities are ascribed. Moreover, I will consider whether the colour line is strengthened or weakened by the behaviour of the missing family. Finally, I will discuss whether "race" is a source or a vessel of family conflicts and divisions; whether "race" is to blame for disharmony within the family or whether "race" is only an excuse--a vessel--so that there are other factors such as human emotions, family antagonism and dependence on the missing family, which are more significant.

The Racial Identities and Racial Self-Perceptions of White Relatives

Neither James nor Scott's maternal relatives struggle with their ascribed racial identities, but Fishel changes his ethnic identity. The Shilskys are Polish immigrant Jews while the Smiths are white Americans. Shirlee's white maternal relatives achieve their racial identities by passing as white. Only her great-grandmother is ascribed her white identity.

The ethnic Jewish identity ascribed the Shilskys is partly based on their physical features: a long "Jewish" nose, dark hair and eyes and partly on cultural traits such as the men's long beards and hats and the women's wigs. In addition to their Yiddish name and language, these are visible symbols of their pariah status in the white American society. The ethnic self-perceptions of Ruth's parents and sister were Jewish as well. They practised

Jewish religious traditions, went to the synagogue, ate kosher food and celebrated Jewish holidays. Moreover, her father is a failed rabbi who has become a shopkeeper (McBride 2, 12, 62, 82). After Ruth has moved to New York, however, Fishel achieves an American and white identity and is no longer stigmatized. He leaves Hudis for a white American woman after many years of despising his wife for her handicaps and Polishness. Thus, he has Americanized and speaks American. He has also earned a lot of money (McBride 152-53, 162). In this way, his dream has come true.

Like James' Jewish family, Scott's maternal relatives, the Smiths, are ascribed their racial identity because of their *European physical features* and *white skin.* Their whiteness has been strongly emphasized by their lives in segregated societies. Thus, they would only socialize with whites and never question their "race" (e.g. Minerbrook 10, 22, 254-55).

Margareth Morris, an Irish immigrant, is the only one in Shirlee's missing family who is naturally *ascribed* a white identity throughout her life. However, only the white Margareth Morris crosses the colour line from time to time from the white *to* the black side, starting with her controversial marriage to a black ex-slave and ending with her second marriage to another black man, in her seventies. Her position is somewhat ambiguous, being a white woman in a black marriage. Thus, she can easily be compared to Ruth and LaVerne. Margareth Morris, however, has *both* black and passing children and grandchildren (Haizlip 51, 75-77).

It is difficult to determine Margareth's racial self-perception with certainty. Nevertheless, I think her sense of racial classification can most probably be compared with that of Ruth. As with Ruth, it is only her white skin and ancestry that prevent her from identifying as black. Margareth Morris was an orphan, like Margareth, because their white fathers left them. When Margareth Morris' father claimed her on the condition of leaving her

black husband, she chose to stay on the black side because that was the only place she had found support and security as a child (Haizlip 37, 58-59). The fact that she marries black twice illustrates that her choice of black spouses is not arbitrary. Moreover, Margareth Morris' favourite child is aunt Mamie who is the only one that remains on the black side as an adult (Haizlip 75-76). Thus, the personal identity of Margareth's grandmother, based on her social network, has an impact on the way she sees her racial identity.

Unlike her, the passing Morrises have *achieved* a new racial identity. They have consciously and deliberately changed their previous identity as black to an entirely new one as white. William, Sumner and Grace's fair skin and lack of obvious black features made them able to manipulate their racial classification. Thus, they deny their own flesh and blood and move to other towns to be able to achieve a white identity. They also marry white (Haizlip 66-67, 72-74). To the passers, to be white meant to start a new life, and they attach *much* more significance to their whiteness than does Margareth Morris who takes it for granted and rather prefers a black life. Unlike her, they had to change their lives entirely to become white. They have to prove their whiteness to the American community, but most of all to themselves. Thus, like religious converts often are the most devout believers, they become very white.

The Strength of the Colour Line

For LaVerne it is not too late to return home after her marriage to a black man. If she chooses to get a divorce and abandon her children, she is welcome back in her family (Minerbrook 6-7). To her parents it is her children and husband who are black, and *they* are not part of the family. Ocieola draws a colour line, but it is not always so distinct. Although Scott is neither

welcome at his grandmother, grandfather nor his aunt's house, they all talk with him and he is not driven away. Thus, the black and the white side of the family actually meet on a few occasions. When Scott visits his grandmother in her eighties, she talks warmly of his mother telling him to say she loves her. Moreover, she only keeps his mother's photo as a child, when she was a respectable white girl. There are no photos of her black husband or children. Ocieola clearly has a strong need to keep things as they are, distancing herself from her daughter's black adult life. Thus, she only writes her daughter letters. Clarence has a similar attitude as he never comes to see LaVerne with her new family, but is still willing to speak with her on the phone (Minerbrook 232, 253-54, 258). In this way, LaVerne's parents clearly maintain the colour line. Apart from Ocieola and Scott's rare visits, they make sure that their white side do not meet with the black side of the family.

With the Shilskys, however, the colour line is very strongly emphasized. The Shilskys' pariah status and choice of home in the strictly segregated Virginia of the thirties made them unable to cross the line to the black or the white side. It was dangerous to cross this line, and those who did so could be hanged, blacks in particular. Even though Fishel's store was an extraordinary site of social interaction with blacks, he strongly emphasized the borderline between his black customers, whom he despised, and his Jewish family (McBride 44, 81, 85-86). For him this line is so important that he even chooses to sacrifice his own daughter after her marriage to a black man (McBride 167).

With Shirlee's family, the colour line is almost as strictly maintained as it is with the Shilskys. The black side never visit the passers without temporarily passing as white. Similarly, the white side never visit the black side without changing their racial identity to black once again. Even though her missing family's racial identity may change with the

situation and social circumstances, it happens in secret. Thus, the colour line is very carefully drawn so that the family is always seen publicly as belonging to one "race"--black or white. According to Haizlip, aunt Mamie is the only black relative that the missing family do not stop seeing. She is, however, so light-skinned that she can pass as white, *and* she is willing to pass temporarily. When *they* visit their black aunt in Washington, however, the missing family become black temporarily (Haizlip 68-69, 76).

Passing as white and still keeping in touch with their black aunt is only possible because the family as a whole carefully maintains the colour line by following certain conventions or rules. It is necessary to take certain precautions because of the passers' very realistic fear. Thus, the cooperation of both black and white relatives is required to uphold the colour line. The siblings, their father, uncle and aunts clearly agree as to where this line should be drawn and where each of the family members belongs. In this kind of systematization black and white relatives are carefully dichotomized. Families are split between light-skinned persons who may visit passing relatives and the darker-skinned who cannot. An example is aunt Mamie's family: she and her children have to leave her darker-skinned husband behind when they spend their summer holidays visiting their uncle and aunt passing in Buffalo. Even then they are very cautious so that any trace or talk of their black family is clearly separated from their new white lives. Margareth Morris, however, sometimes breaks this rule, and once she talks of her daughter, Mamie, to the descendant of a passing relative in Cleveland. As a result this white girl suddenly shows up in Washington to visit her great-aunt, Mamie. However, according to Haizlip, Mamie "denied her own identity to spare the girl hers" (76) so that even in this case the colour line is not broken. When black relatives visit the passers, however, the shades are usually drawn, and no white neighbours are let in.

Similarly, Grace never brings her white husband to aunt Mamie's house in Washington, thus preventing him from seeing her aunt's black husband and neighbourhood (Haizlip 68-69, 76). This kind of double life can be compared to the way that Larsson's character Clare carefully separates her black social circle from her white one so that her black life remains a secret.

When William splits up the family by only staying in touch with his passing children, he creates a dichotomy between his white family on the "right side" and the remaining black "others." His youngest children, Michael and Margareth, are abandoned to their black guardians. Moreover, the missing family disown Margareth three times by not coming to their black brother's funeral, by refusing to meet her, and by returning her letters (Haizlip 66, 77, 91-92, 96, 99). Thus, with regard to Margareth, the colour line is as distinct as with the Shilskys until she is finally reunited with Grace.

Moreover, the passers make sure that their black roots are never mentioned to their descendants so their secret goes into the grave with them. In this way the colour line is strengthened until Shirlee, in the next generation, tells her white cousins about their black roots (Haizlip 254). In the older generation Margareth is the only one who does not follow her missing family's rules--apart from her grandmother's occasional stretching of the rules--and Margareth thus becomes a threat to their hard-won white identity. She does not accept being cut off from her family. Even as a child she broke the rules of the missing family. By seeing Sumner in his white circumstances, Margareth and her darker-skinned guardian, Bessie Clay, were actually breaking a social convention. In such situations only the *white* relative may, if he wished to, visit the black side. To make amends, Margareth could not make it known that she was Sumner's sister (Haizlip 72). She had to undermine her role as sister and stress her role as a black girl. As *Sumner* never came to visit her, there were no opportunities left for

them to perform their roles as siblings and develop their family relationship. As a result the colour line was strengthened.

Another example on how the missing family strengthen the line is the fact that Grace only has one child whereas William has none with either of his two white wives (Haizlip 67, 75). This may be explained by their fear of having black children who would reveal their black roots. This kind of terror is widespread in the literature on passing, and both Clare in Passing and Neil in Kingsblood RoyaI are anxious about having a second child (Larsson; Lewis). Like her father, Grace strengthens the colour line within her family by excluding Margareth and Shirlee from her family, identifying them as black. Even after the two sisters' reunion, Grace has a need to draw a sharp distinction between blacks and whites. It is as though she has blocked out all about her own black roots: "She had no conscious memories of her colored years. In fact she had no colored memories at all" (Haizlip 250). While she is happy about meeting her lost family, she only describes them as "some friends" (Haizlip 252). They will always be black to her and she will not introduce them correctly to her neighbours. She creates a wall between Margareth and her white family saying, "I don't want my family dragged into this" (Haizlip 242).

Unlike with James' missing family, there are bridge-builders from Shirlee's and Scott's missing families between their white side and the black side. The absence of bridge-builders within James' family makes the colour line more distinct than in the other families. As the head of her family, Margareth Morris is a mediator between the two sides, although she carries out this role only to a limited degree. She sees her passing children and grandchildren, but she also visits her black daughter, Mamie, and marries two black men. Thus, she carries news from the one side of the family to the other (Haizlip 75-77). Moreover,

Margareth Morris was the only white family member to attend Michael's funeral. However, she did not visit Michael while he was alive. "To his grandmother, his death was more important than his life," writes Haizlip (91). With the exception of this occasion, she keeps a certain distance to her rejected black grandchild and excludes her from the family. Thus, her open-mindedness is limited and her role as a bridge-builder unfulfilled as she is more loyal to her passing son and grandchildren on the white side. Even though she does not preserve the colour line as strictly as the passers, in the end Margareth Morris supports it. Ocieola, similarly, ends up protecting the colour line, and her attempts to bridge the racial gap are unsuccessful. During their few brief meetings with their black families neither Margareth Morris nor Ocieola have the time to get to know their in-laws, their great-grandchildren nor their grandchildren. Later, Ocieola refuses to see Scott, his brother and even his mother (Minerbrook 9-10, 12-13).

Raebeth's daughter, however, has broken completely with LaVerne (Minerbrook 257). That means that the colour line *between* the missing and the black families will be carefully maintained in future generations as well. So will the line in James' family as his attempts to find his missing family are futile. There is little chance that the black and the missing families will ever meet. Within Shirlee's family, however, the colour line is not so distinct in the new generation, and the black and white sides are reunited. Grace's grandson claims his great-aunt, Margareth, and the black side as part of his family. He is "the first in his family to come back across the bridge that had long divided it" (Haizlip 259). Ironically, the possible marriage of Grace's child or grandchild to a black man would mean that Grace's family once again would be on the black side. The colour line would be crossed and may even be blurred by coming children of mixed "race." Also Edward Ball finds a difference in racial attitudes between the

young and the old generation on the white side of his family as the youngsters are more positive about his search for the black side (Ball 60-63).

"Race" As a Vessel or a Source of Family Conflict

"Race" is the main source of family conflict for James, Scott and Shirlee's maternal relatives. I do not think that "race" is the only factor, however, as it is sometimes used as a vessel for other reasons. To Fishel, "race" may be seen as a vessel for his rejection of Ruth. His inability to deal with her when she was no longer in his power is one reason for disowning her. He made many efforts to get her back to Suffolk and his family. As he was used to having all power in the family, he was too proud to admit that he no longer had any influence over his daughter. Thus, when he realized that his efforts were futile, he decided that *he* had to make the final break.

Ruth's mother on the other hand, was entirely dependent on her husband for a living because she was quite isolated as a crippled and illiterate non-native speaker. Thus, she could not afford to take her daughter's side and get into a conflict with her husband. In this respect "race" may be regarded as a vessel for the need of economic safety and care. That was true also of Grace, at least in the first years of her disowning of Margareth. At her mother's death Grace was in her early teens and too young to live on her own. And so she drifted along with her family leading the same life as them and passed as white. To achieve a white identity was certainly not her own choice in the beginning. It was a necessity to pass to be able to stay with her family and be taken care of economically as well as emotionally. Her father neglected **her,** but she had no one else to turn to until her brother, Bill, ended up taking care of her (Haizlip 66, 74).

Margareth, however, was too small, and "race" is only a vessel for the fact that her missing family were not able to provide for her. According to aunt Mamie and Margareth's guardians, times were hard, especially for blacks, and Margareth's siblings were hardly able to take care of themselves in the first years after their mother's death. Moreover, her alcoholic father had been unable to take care of his wife and kept losing his jobs. Later on, age differences may be a reason for the teenage siblings' lack of interest in their younger siblings (Haizlip 77).

Ruth, however, was grown-up at the time of rejection, and pride and hurt feelings created a distance between her and her missing family, in particular her sister, Dee-Dee. As Ruth broke her promise to stay, Dee-Dee blamed Ruth for leaving her. Obviously, she was very hurt and too proud to get in touch later on (McBride 155, 166-67). Similarly, LaVerne's sister, Raebeth, blamed LaVerne for leaving Caruthersville, which few inhabitants did, and for leaving her two sisters alone with the responsibility for their mother (e.g. Minerbrook 36, 71). According to Minerbrook, Raebeth was also too proud to ask for help because of "love turned away and missed" (37).

Like Raebeth, Clarence's wife makes it sound as if "race" is only a vessel for the family conflict between the black and the white side. Hurt feelings and pride are the determinant factors. It is Clarence's *wife* who tells Scott that his mother is to blame for the lost years. Thus, she thinks that LaVerne was the one who left her family and kept her distance, not phoning her father for 27 years. She even blames Scott for not getting in touch earlier. According to Clarence's wife, LaVerne was always quarrelling with his aunts, as a child, so that there were much bad feeling and family antagonism (Minerbrook 231-32).

Hurt feelings and pride may also be reasons for William's silence after his wife's

family had taken care of his two youngest children. Haizlip writes of unfriendly relationships between the maternal and the paternal side of Margareth's family, the medium brown Scots and Everetts on the one side and the light Morrises on the other. This antagonism may be caused by her neglectful and often absent father. Her siblings were divided between the mother's and the father's family in this conflict. Thus, Margareth was an innocent victim of this family conflict. As a four year old, she was too young to choose any side, but was still separated from the rest of her family. While her maternal family took care of her, the other siblings stayed close to their passing father and white paternal grandmother (Haizlip 66, 72-74, 80). Thus, "race" may be seen as a vessel for family antagonism. Moreover, I think Margareth's resemblance to her mother probably made it easier for the missing family to discard her as a Scott rather than a Morris. Similarly, it made it more natural for her mother's relatives to take care of her and regard her as family.

However, distorted *racial* attitudes are the most important reasons for the missing family's rejection of Margareth. Grace has become white to the extreme of showing racially prejudiced attitudes and she is shocked by her daughter and granddaughter's attraction to darker-skinned men (Haizlip 251). The family conflict between the maternal and paternal side may as well be caused by the colour divide as by hard feelings. Despite their light colour, the two youngest siblings were most likely classified as black already as children. In this way, the missing family simply discarded Margareth as black. Thus, "race" is the main reason for the separation of the family.

Similarly, "race" is obviously the main reason for the missing family's rejection of LaVerne and Ruth as their disowning coincided in time with their crossover to the black side. Unlike with Margareth, it was their marriages to black men that separated them from their

families. Both James' and Scott's grandfathers had racist attitudes. Fishel thought that blacks were stupid and easily fooled and he cheated them, called them bad names in Yiddish and made fun of them (e.g. McBride 44, 46). When Ruth moved to New York, he told her, "If you marry a nigger, don't ever come home again. Don't come back" (McBride 167). The family tradition is that Clarence, Scott's grandfather, threw up at the news of his daughter's marriage to a black man. Later, Scott's grandfather suggests that his mother put Scott and his siblings up for adoption because they are black and calls them "little niggers" (Minerbrook 6-7). Hurt feelings, pride and family antagonism are all mainly caused by the racial divide. Raebeth, Ocieola and Clarence are afraid that the neighbours will get to know about LaVerne's marriage to a black man. These feelings of shame and fear of revelation are some reasons for the rejection by LaVerne's missing family. Clarence's wife, however, is more afraid that Scott will harm Clarence than that their neighbours will get to know of his black grandson. Thus, she tells her neighbours about her husband's black grandson so that they can help protect him from Scott. Because of her prejudices she thinks of Scott as a stereotypically violent black criminal (Minerbrook 227-29, 248,257). Unlike Clarence's wife, Raebeth is concerned with her shame of poverty and the prejudices she has experienced. She does not want to ruin her reputation once more, like her mother, and has broken with her father's poor family. Although her sister and her black family are quite wealthy, Raebeth has disowned them too. She thinks that the shame of poverty can be compared to the disgrace of having a black family (Minerbrook 3, 22, 35). After her childhood experiences of being equated with "white trash," she has achieved a respectable position among whites. Like her parents, she does not talk about her Native American roots nor her black in-laws. Their whiteness is particularly important as a protective mask. "Race" is thicker than blood in this case because family is not

as important as close friends to Raebeth and her husband (Minerbrook 36).

Also Ruth's missing family associated the black side with shame and the loss of face. To Fishel, his daughter's marriage to a black man was unacceptable: *his* grandchildren would be black (McBride 1, 167). "Race" was ultimately the reason for Hudis and Dee-Dee's rejection of Ruth too. As they were entirely in the power of their tyrannical husband and father, they obviously had no other choice than to take part in the disowning ceremony. In the end his reason for rejecting Ruth became theirs. Similarly, Margareth Morris' decision to disown Margareth was obviously influenced by her passing family. Unlike them, she could hardly be afraid of claiming her black grandchild, Margareth, as she had a black husband. To claim her black grandchild would not ruin her reputation. Thus, her absence is most likely caused by loyalty to her passing family that is, after all, closer to her and constitute the majority of her relatives. Moreover, she avoids placing herself in a difficult and ambiguous position in the middle of the family conflict. "Race" becomes the bottom line for her absence as it is for the missing family as a whole.

I think that the fear of Shirlee's missing family, except for her great-grandmother, is much more overwhelming than the fear of Scott's and James' missing families. The passers have a constant fear of losing their white identity and their economic opportunities. What happens to Neil in Kingsblood Royal when his "one black drop" is revealed, can serve as an illustration of what the white relatives are afraid of. The missing family are worried that Margareth will come to their houses, if they claim her, and reveal their black ancestry to their ignorant white spouses and children. As a result their white families may turn their backs on them. This enormous fear can be compared to Clare's anxiety about her blackness being revealed to her racist husband in Passing.

It may be questioned whether Grace in her *eighties* really has anything to lose by acknowledging her black family and risking her achieved white identity. Passing has not given Grace much apart from her close relationship with Bill and the sporadic visits with her white relatives. They are now all dead, however. Besides, her white identity has not made her economic opportunities better as her life has been hard. She and her brother have struggled to make ends meet (Haizlip 244-46). Margareth concludes: "I guess I did have a better life, didn't I?" (Haizlip 250). Thus, Grace's whiteness has only been a false salvation from poverty. Nevertheless, her self-respect and pride depend on her achieved white identity. Thus, "race" is the main reason for also her rejection of Margareth.

Chapter 4

The Ambiguity of Racial Identities

All three writers lead the life of blacks as children. They have black friends and families and go to black churches, except for Scott who also attends a Congregational church. Like their mothers, Scott and Shirlee try hard to wipe the white or passing relatives out of their lives and memories, but they are only successful to a certain extent during their childhoods. Similarly, the three writers try hard to identify as black only. However, they are quite close to their mothers, and the absence of their maternal relatives creates a great gap in their lives. They have ambiguous feelings about their racial identities because their identities are connected with those of their mothers' and cannot be clearly separated from these. I will discuss the three writers' relationships to their missing families and the way in which their relatives' absence influences their sense of a racial identity. Moreover, I will write about the distance in time and space between the writers and their missing families. I will also discuss the way that their parents' racial attitudes and their social networks are significant for their racial self-perceptions. As grown-ups, Shirlee and Scott question the concepts of colour and "race," and I will describe the way their experiences have contributed to their deconstructions. After the three writers have found their missing families or their home places, their racial self-perceptions change. I will discuss the way they have constructed their new sense of racial identity. Just as their families have mixed racial ancestry, so has the American nation, and I will describe Spencer's attitudes to the appropriate racial classifications of multiracial Americans. Finally, I will discuss the way that autobiographies and celebrities have become

significant in the construction of a new American identity.

The Ghosts of the Missing Families

Scott's mother reminds him daily of the missing family, and his relationship with her is affected by their absence. Unlike LaVerne's break with her family, Ruth's break was clean and final. Thus, *James* is never a witness to the family conflict nor to the pain it caused his mother. When he was born, his mother was already dead to her family. As Shirlee's mother was already rejected by her family as a little child, there is no cause for Shirlee to feel guilty about the break-up. Scott, however, feels guilty for being the wrong colour as he understands that he is in his mother's way hindering her relationship with her own family (Minerbrook 5-7).

In the same way, he despises his grandmother for causing his mother to cry and for not visiting them. Scott feels deeply the loss of his missing family. Their rejection has made him feel bitterness and anger, feelings which make him too proud to claim his missing family for a long time (e.g. Minerbrook 2-3, 166). Also Shirlee is resentful towards her missing family because of the emptiness they left in her life. In particular, she misses her grandfather, her only living grandparent (Haizlip 31-32). Her rage is naturally mingled with pain for the feeling of loss she has inherited from her mother, who has told her about her own lonely loveless childhood. Moreover, she feels contempt for her maternal relatives' decision to pass (Haizlip 33, 71-72, 100). James, however, knows very little of his missing family and does not nourish such hard feelings (e.g. McBride 18).

Both Shirlee and Scott's missing families are present in their childhood lives as ghosts haunting them. Shirlee's "ghosts" (Haizlip 33) are not even among her mother's family photos

and Shirlee believes in Margareth's story of how *her* mother's ghost used to comfort her when she cried as a child (Haizlip 52, 84). Minerbrook says that "I'd become a ghost to Ocieola. And she'd become demonic to me, too" (11). Further, he calls Caruthersville a "ghost town" (21) and says that he "wanted to see the place that had haunted me for most of my life" (2). He speaks of his "haunted past" (13) and says that, "the loss of family *had* haunted me" (3). These feelings of being haunted clearly suggest that the two writers do not feel at ease with the absence of their missing families and cannot assign them to the past. They still play an important role in the writers' lives. Even though Scott and Shirlee try hard to forget them, it is in vain. Most likely they feel that they have not done the right thing by their missing families as they think of them as ghosts.

Scott sees himself in his own father, haunted by the same ghosts as him and carrying the same pain of rejection. His father's nonacceptance hurts as much as that of his missing family. However, Scott does not want to end up like his father, unable to get rid of his pain and his ghosts (Minerbrook 53-54, 208-09). The absence of James' maternal relatives is not so obvious and painful in his childhood as it is for Shirlee and Scott. Even though James felt like he "was stalking ghosts" (McBride 172) when he searched for his missing family in official records, he is not *haunted* by ghosts. His feelings are of curiosity and wonder coupled with irritation with his mother for not telling him more about her family.

On a deeper level, the ghosts are the "missing links" between the writers' ancestry and their own racial identities. Shirlee and Scott want to be rid of their fear and name the unknown. McBride, too, feels the pain of his missing half; "There were two worlds bursting inside me trying to get out. I *had* to find out more about who I was, and in order to find out who I was, I had to find out who my mother was" (208). James quits job after job trying to

run away from the pain, but at thirty he finally finds out that he cannot.

For the three writers, their missing families represent a problem of identity when they are teenagers. They only have their mothers' family stories to fill the gap. None of them feels comfortable with being only black. They have to find their missing families in order to be at peace and understand their rejection. Thus, it is important for them and their mothers to be reconciled with their white relatives to become whole. Shirlee, Scott and James want to put an end to a long process of ambivalence and of questioning the concept of "race."

Moreover, having children of their own makes the gap of their missing families even greater. The importance of knowing their family backgrounds has increased as they want to be able to tell their children about their ancestry (Haizlip 34; McBride 173). It is only with the certainty of their own roots and identities that they will become good parents and stable role models. This is particularly significant to Scott because he wants to be a better father figure than his own father (Minerbrook 258-59). He needs to learn more about his white and Native American roots. Similarly, Shirlee wants to know her passing family, and James wants to know his Jewish descendants.

A Distance in Time and Space

Apart from the racial distance and the hard feelings separating the three writers from their missing families, there is also a distance in time and space. These differences are so great that they cannot be overcome. Both James' and Scott's grandparents belong to an older generation used to racial segregation. Shirlee's missing family are also stuck in the past: Grace "would be content to see us as often as we might like to visit, as long as no one in her circle knew who or what we were. In other words, she would be satisfied to continue the pattern of the past"

(Haizlip 252). Also in Caruthersville and Lake Conway in the 1990s, the division between black and white is still sharply drawn so that the racial relations have come to a standstill. In Lake Conway, Scott is followed by a police car for no apparent reason. Similarly, when he enters a bar in Caruthersville as the only black man there, he is met with stares, laughter and the words, "neeger, ain't it?" (Minerbrook 24). Moreover, Scott spots a large advertisement there depicting the charm of slavery in the past Cotton South. Also Ocieola is racially prejudiced, like Clarence used to be, and prefers to leave things as they are, refusing to be reunited with Scott (Minerbrook 13, 23, 226-27). Even though James does not meet his grandfather, he experiences some of the racial divide that Scott meets in Caruthersville and Lake Conway. The rabbi of Suffolk will not admit him into his mother's old synagogue because he is black (McBride 173-74). James' meeting with the other few white Jews left in Suffolk, however, is surprisingly warm. He even feels that he is one of them "as if there were no barriers between us. It said a lot about this religion--Judaism--that some of its followers, old southern crackers[...], seemed to believe that its covenants went beyond the color of one's skin" (McBride 175). Moreover, Suffolk has obviously gone through a change. McDonalds has replaced his grandfather's store, and the writer describes the little town as "a mix of grand old buildings and new, more of an industrial site than a town really" (McBride 159-60).

The fact that James' and Scott's missing families used to live in Southern or Southernlike places, has shaped their old-fashioned racial thinking. Unlike these two families, Shirlee's maternal relatives were scattered in the Northern cities (Haizlip 67, 72-75). Shirlee's aunt Grace lives in Anaheim, California, close to Los Angeles, when she is finally found. According to Haizlip, "Most events are segregated" in her home town and she believes that it

is as backward in racial matters as New York (237,242). Los Angeles is notorious for the recent Rodney King case. However, police violence against blacks is a widespread problem all over the United States. Grace has lived mostly in big Northern cities so her racial attitudes are formed more as a result of her life of passing than of her home places.

Unlike Anaheim, the home towns of Scott's and James' relatives are tiny and the contrast with the Northern urbanized homes of the two writers is striking. Scott is a Northerner who has lived in large Northeastern cities like Chicago and New York as well as the tiny Northeastern town of South Norwalk, Connecticut. There is a huge difference between his Northern accent and the Southern drawl of his aunt Raebeth and his grandmother. In Lake Conway, he is very clearly a stranger not only because of his accent and haircut, but also because of his fine shoes (Minerbrook 13, 28, 30, 224). James too is a Northerner who has spent most of his childhood in New York city. When he visits his sister in Louisville, Kentucky, for his summer holidays, he is called "New York" because of his accent (McBride 113). His Northern accent clearly distinguishes him from the people he meets in the home town of his missing family. At the end of his search for them he finds Suffolk, which "looked like its sugar days were over. Quiet, empty[...]" (McBride 159). In the same way, the writer describes the synagogue as quiet and empty. He has come to a town which has been abandoned by many Jews because of their feelings of isolation and discrimination. It is frighteningly lonely to him and makes him feel imprisoned like a bird in a cage. McBride says, "the creeping loneliness [...] had begun to suffocate me. The isolation my family had felt, the heartbreak they had suffered, seemed to ooze out of the trees[...]" (174). Suddenly, the writer becomes aware of his grandmother's terrible loneliness and sorrow. To a city boy the smallness and silence become too much (McBride 171-72, 175,

178-79).

Shirlee's experience is similar; Grace's lonely life in a white working-class home is terrifying, and she is struck by the absence of family photos. Unlike her aunt, Shirlee has an active black middle-class social life. The contrast between her aunt's little old mobile home in a trailer park and her hired limousine is tremendous (Haizlip 243-44, 248, 253). It is rather ironic that now it is *Grace* who leads a solitary life seldom seeing her family while Shirlee and her mother are surrounded by a large family. Obviously, Shirlee's and Grace's lives are very different despite the short distance between their homes. Shirlee has spent most of her childhood in Ansonia, Connecticut, and as a grown-up she has lived in New York, Wellesley and the Virgin Islands as well as in Los Angeles. In contrast with her aunt's Midwestern accent, Shirlee has a Northeastern accent (Haizlip 171, 244).

Racial Identity and the Social Network

According to Gaskins, it is a common experience among mixed-race Americans to have a sense of loneliness and uniqueness. They are often asked about their racial identities by strangers, unlike perceived monoracial Americans. Thus, they become more aware of their racial identities and usually consider it important to find their racial self-perceptions and to find both sides of their families (Gaskins 5-7). This is also the case for Shirlee, James and Scott.

Shirlee understands at the age of three that she is different and has a "sense of being the Other" (Haizlip 25). At the time she is living in Waterbury, Connecticut, in a white neighbourhood where there are few blacks, and her family stands out. Luckily, she has an important role model in her fair-skinned mother, and they are treated as family by their Italian

neighbours who at first identify them as countrymen. Thus, it is not until she goes to college that the question of "race" arises and becomes a problem for Shirlee. She is asked what country she comes from--a polite question--as her fellow students are not able to place her "race." For the first time she realizes how light-skinned she is and that she need not be regarded as black. Her physical features are not so clearly black as she has dark eyes, a long nose, thin lips and dark curly hair (Haizlip 30, 188). Shirlee's ascribed identity can be a number of nationalities and ethnicities:

> I have been called Egyptian, Italian, Jewish, French, Iranian, Armenian, Syrian, Spanish, Portuguese and Greek. I have also been called black and Peola and nigger and high yellow and bright. I am an American anomaly. I am an American ideal. I am the American nightmare. I am the Martin Luther King dream. I am the new American (Haizlip 15).

Thus, she may be taken for white, black or Asian. Like Shirlee, James realizes even as a child that he is different, but his sense of difference is that he stands out from his *black* neighbourhood. Unlike with Shirlee, none of his idols resemble him, except his older brothers and sisters, who are also "mixed-up" about which colour and "race" they belong to. The siblings are all brown-skinned, and James has dark eyes, a broad nose and black curly hair. Thus, he has a "black face" (McBride 205). Nevertheless, it is his *colour* along with his absent maternal relatives that make him wonder the most (McBride 9, 16, 40-41, 69-70, 76).

As a young boy, Scott feels even more than James and Shirlee that he is different, and the writer describes himself as "divided to the vein" in his title. This intense feeling is caused by the painful awareness that his family is split by "race." Unlike Shirlee and James, who both have the full support of their black relatives, he is not really accepted by *either* side.

Minerbrook writes about his nightmare of a family:

> Their lives formed the divided root of my childhood; their notions of race and family coursed through the veins of my expectations, hopes, and dreams. My race and family were always at odds. Ocieola [...]was my mother's mother, but my grandmother in name only. [...]. Ocieola was part of my family but not my race. My father is black. My mother is white. And the meaning of the word "family" fell into the rushing waters between the two. Blood was not thicker than these racialized waters. I grew up well aware that if all my relatives were brought together in one room, there would be a race riot. [...].The violence ofrace hate has shaped the divided ground of my soul.

He has the feeling of being "too dark to be white, too light to be black" (Minerbrook 2). Scott is fair-skinned, but he has full lips, a broad nose and curly, dark hair. Because of his colour he has no white family and a complex relationship to his black father and grandmother. When Scott was a little child, however, he felt at ease with his black family and had a sense of belonging to them in contrast to his white relatives who would not acknowledge him. He had learnt that he was black because of his black father, and Scott wanted to be a black man like him (Minerbrook 8, 73, 108-09, 123, 137). As a teenager, the son's relationship to his father becomes more difficult. Unlike his brother, Mark, who is always loyal to his father, Scott's relationship with his father grows worse as time goes by. Along with Alan's increasing addiction to drugs, his violent behaviour towards his family grows worse. As a result Scott starts to distance himself from his father, despising and distrusting him. He even wants him dead to make an end to the domestic violence, but also pities him (Minerbrook 78, 144-47, 172, 175). Thus, he starts his own personal protest against his father by rejecting him as a black role model: he stops playing basketball, dates white and Jewish women only and cuts

off his afro hair (Minerbrook 178-80).

James and Shirlee are closer to their fathers than Scott. When they die, James and Shirlee are heartbroken in stark contrast to Scott. After Hunter's death James spends his time running away from his grief, freaking out completely with drugs and delinquency (e.g. McBride 106, 108). Scott, too, has a history of juvenile delinquency, and he often runs away from home (e.g. Minerbrook 104, 179). His behaviour is an escape from his unstable father.

Minerbrook claims that the fact that LaVerne raised Scott and his brothers as interracials, denied them the opportunity to learn from their grandmother's experiences of being black and about black solidarity. Unlike Scott, neither Shirlee nor James felt any pressure from their mothers to identify as white. McBride writes that, "During the rare, inopportune social moments when I found myself squeezed between black and white, I fled to the black side, just as my mother had done[...]" (205).

James strongly wished that he and his mother were not different from others. He just wanted to be one colour, preferably black, and he wanted his mother to be black too. That would have made life much easier for them. Thus, he made an imaginary figure, "the boy in the mirror" (McBride 79-80), who was simply black and whom he envied and hated. Unlike James, Shirlee's self-perception as black was an easy choice. For eighteen years she thought of herself as "a dark tan person" (Haizlip 153) like her mother had as a child. Still, Shirlee, her siblings and her mother were the lightest members in their church and the black community in Ansonia, Connecticut. It must have made the writer feel a bit uncomfortable: "I liked my color best in the summer, when I got a dark tan with red undertones" (Haizlip 152). Shirlee's close relationship with her father's family made her feel black like them. A strong personal identity based on stable family relationships is important for the construction of a

child's own sense of racial identity-a racial self-perception (Gaber et al. 84). Shirlee and James' personal identities were strengthened by their parents who were stable role models and by their supportive black families. Even though James felt different, he was not so troubled as Scott. Both James and Shirlee were made to be proud of themselves and Shirlee inherited her father's black pride.

As the daughter of a prominent black minister, Shirlee was protected and treated with respect by blacks and whites alike. Julian's congregation was like family to the Taylors. Their special status protected them and made the whites respect them and the blacks feel proud: the Taylors "were a family of 'firsts' and 'onlys,' and the 'first family' of our tiny Negro community[...]." Thus, the congregation "filled in some of the gaps created by our absent relatives" (Haizlip 153). When her father once was attacked in the street, hundreds of blacks came at his rescue (Haizlip 155-56). Her family was privileged in Ansonia where blacks and whites were for most of the time segregated. Even though James was also the child of a black minister, this status gave him few privileges. Unlike Shirlee, James was worried about himself and his mother, who were both in threatened positions. Despite his mother's fearlessness, *he* never got used to hearing abuse from blacks and whites at the sight of his mother with him and his other "mixed" siblings (McBride 23-24). Thus, I think Shirlee's skin colour must be the reason for her privileged position. Her skin must be lighter than James' as *he* never passes involuntarily nor voluntarily. As a consequence of some blacks' colouristic attitudes, she, unlike James, receives preferential treatment as a light-skinned person.

Like James, Scott feels, as a teenager, that he and his mother are in vulnerable positions because of their different "races" and colours. However, this difficulty is related to their family more so than to their neighbourhood. Alan's constant abuse of LaVerne and their

racial quarrels force Scott and Mark to choose sides. This choosing of loyalties separates the brothers who could otherwise have supported each other in their unsettled racial positions (Minerbrook 160-61, 175-76). When Scott protects his mother from his father's attacks, he is called "hinckty nigger" (Minerbrook 171). In this way, his most significant black role model turns against him. Gaskins refers to the multiracial Professor in American Ethnic Studies, Maria P. P. Root, who claims that parents' racial fights are very painful and may be hurtful for children of mixed "race," particularly if they identify with the parent who is the target of the racist remarks. The reason is that "they take it personally-they identify with that person. And it may drive a wedge between that young person and the parent making those comments" (Gaskins 108). In Scott's case, it is mainly his father who is the target of the insults, but his mother is physically attacked. Thus, he feels divided. He does not have the same kind of emotional security as James and Shirlee and his personal identity is not strong enough to construct his racial self-perception.

Scott, like James and Shirlee, had experienced that he was more welcome among blacks than among whites. Even though James and Scott suffered from discrimination from both sides, whites tended to be hardest on them. In school the two boys had white racist teachers. Scott's negative experiences and his bitterness towards his white family were projected onto his white teachers who carried racist attitudes. His teachers thought he was not likely to learn much even though he was a good student. Moreover, he was told by one of them that he could not run for class president because "a Negro didn't do such a thing[...]" (Minerbrook 157). Weakness, unworthiness and fear came to signify whiteness to Scott. Thus, he was tom between the strength and courage of his paternal relatives and the weakness of his maternal ones. He seemed to be more loyal to his paternal black family even though he

took the side of his white mother in his parents' conflicts (e.g. Minerbrook 8, 156).

Like Scott, James felt that, as the only black in his class at a Jewish school, his true nature was never apparent. His Jewish teachers frequently had racist attitudes and sometimes asked him whether he was adopted. Moreover, he was given the stereotype of the black man; a good dancer and a stupid pupil, although he was a lousy dancer and a good student (e.g. McBride 68, 80). Nevertheless, he also had positive experiences with whites as his music education was sponsored by a white couple (McBride 142). When Shirlee, as a teenager, tells her student colleagues that she is black, she is, like James, given the black stereotype that she is a good singer, and she becomes the leader of the choir. However, she does not mind being stereotyped as she likes singing. Unlike James and Scott, she feels a sense of belonging with whites even though she is one of a few blacks. Her light colour certainly makes her school years easier than for James and Scott. Even though she makes her black roots no secret, she is frequently ascribed a white identity (Haizlip 188-89). When she was younger, however, her black ancestry was well known. Shirlee had some white friends in school, but she was seldom invited to their homes. She did not care so much because "in general, white people were the backdrop and audience for the drama of our lives, aside from the special group that made up my mother's family. For me, they were in a class by themselves" (Haizlip 150). Thus, she only missed her white relatives, not a white social network. She felt different from whites, but only in colour (Haizlip 147, 150, 153).

For Scott, his difference is a problem. Sometimes he is called a "nigger" (Minerbrook 121) and experiencing such name-calling makes him feel he belongs to his father's black world. In Norwalk, however, he is not easily accepted by the white or black communities. Maya Corey, a mixed-race American teenager in Gaskins, has a similar experience: "Black

people don't completely accept me because I'm lighter, or because my morn is white. And white people don't accept me because I'm not white. So where do I fit in?" (187). According to blacks, Scott talks like a white person because of his New York accent. They also accuse him of "acting white" (Minerbrook 135) when he studies hard and fights a white boy. Blacks are expected to be good in sports, but not in studies. Thus, he does not follow their rules. Although he looks up to black basketball players and wants to be as good as them, he is against the unsaid rule that studying is reserved for whites. Minerbrook writes that, "To cope with these worlds so far apart, I found that I had to learn to speak two languages--that of the body and that of the mind" (155). To be accepted by both blacks and whites, Scott has to be twice as good intellectually as well as physically. Only in black South Norwalk is he accepted for who he is, and he does not have to prove anything to his black friends there (e.g. Minerbrook 130, 134). With his few white friends, however, he is regarded as "an exceptional nigger" (Minerbrook 165), so he feels uneasy with them.

Maureen Reddy writes that the accusations of "acting white" are often based on class divisions within the black "race" and signify that middle-class blacks are exceptional. They typically have a "white" accent and are better students than other blacks, characteristics that are regarded as more white. Thus, they are seen as snobs (Reddy 96-97). Even though Scott and other blacks' experiences indicate that racial identity may be related to performance, I agree with Reddy that this is a *class* issue rather than a racial one. As also whites may regard middle-class whites as snobs, the same kind of antagonistic relationship between classes is found on the other side of the colour line.

After the search for Shirlee's missing family has ended successfully, they have become actual faces present in their lives in the form of photographs or in flesh and blood in the cases of Grace and Shirlee's newfound first-cousins. However, Shirlee places the photos of this former missing family in a "white comer" apart from the rest of the family. Even though she has tried to reunite her family and learned about the arbitrariness of "race," she does not think it honest to integrate the pictures. When Shirlee looks at her aunt's family photos of the white members, she finds many features similar to those of her black family. Ironically, the two sisters, Margareth and Grace, have both inherited their mother's facial features, and their gestures and movements are similar. The differences are artificially created, such as Grace's brown hair and white powdered face in contrast to Margareth's gray hair and natural skin colour. "And yet," Haizlip writes, "as I looked at them I thought to myself, but they are different from me, they are white--whatever that is" (248). She cannot point to what makes the white group different from the black, and she realizes that the difference is in fact non-existent and constructed (Haizlip 244-45, 252, 266). She describes Margareth as Julian Taylor's "mostly white bride" (17). Similarly, the writer considers her own skin as light as that of a white person saying, "I am a black woman, but many of you would never know it" (Haizlip 13). Ironically, aunt Grace "was a shade darker" than Margareth (Haizlip 244). Thus, colour in itself is not a good indicator of adherance to either group. Only the members' racial self-perceptions differ. It is the *dichotomy* itself that creates the colour line. The line between the two groups exists in the fact that *she* herself and *Grace* see themselves as different and opposed to one another. Haizlip says, "I understood now in ways I had not that Grace was indeed white[...]" (252). *Perceived* colour differences are apparent in the choice of partners.

Shirlee's and Margareth's clearly black husbands are stopped by the police and reprimanded because they are driving with white women (Haizlip 173-74, 194-95). As a family they are stared at because it is difficult to determine their "race" (e.g. Haizlip 25, 135, 178). For most of her life Margareth has been rejected by her passing family and looked down on by aunt Mamie because of her "dark" skin. It becomes deeply ironic that she is regarded as white on several occasions. This tells of the *subjectivity* of colour. These instances of passing involuntarily proves that the colour line can be hard to draw, sometimes even impossible. Scott's experience of passing temporarily and consciously at Harvard also confirms the difficulty of drawing the colour line. The writer wanted to get rid of his ascribed black identity because "I was more than what I looked like, [...]. I would claim my right to make my own friends as I saw fit, choosing those I felt kindred to, black or white" (Minerbrook 195). Another irony is the fact that aunt Raebeth's husband is darker-skinned than Scott, and, still, he is ascribed a white identity (Minerbrook 38).

The concept of "race" must be questioned as Margareth and her siblings are divided into two "races" although they have the same biological parents. Shirlee used to consider her maternal relatives as blacks passing for white, but after the search the writer recognizes them as blacks who have *become* whites: "After all, if you look white, act white, live white, vacation white, go to school white, marry white and die white, are you not 'white?' Can race be simply a matter of context, whether in Buffalo, Cleveland[...] or Palm Beach?" (Haizlip 266). In this way, the writer deconstructs the concept of "race," illustrating its arbitrariness. Her opinion on "race" is similar to that of Henry Louis Gates, Jr., who insists that "'race' is[...] not an essence or a thing in itself, apart from its creation by an act oflanguage." To him, "race" is a constructed concept based on "reason" and "science," not on the empirical

observation of differences (Gates 402-03).

Minerbrook describes "race" as a "kingdom" (8), ridiculing the significance Scott's grandparents, black and white alike, attach to it: the roads to Caruthersville "had cut her [LaVerne's] people off from the future and bound them to their dream kingdom of racial supremacy" (9). Similarly, Minerbrook writes about the black family that, "Much later I saw just how far I truly was outside their kingdom of race, too, but as a boy I didn't want to see that" (Minerbrook 8). He questions the concept of the 'one-drop' rule, disagreeing with "the notion that you couldn't have a white family if you were black or a black family if you were white. You had to make a choice." Thus, he thinks that these are "false dichotomies" because a black person, like perhaps himself, may have both a black and a white family (Minerbrook 16). Ultimately, the notions of black and white are relative because of this mixed ancestry. Also the two other writers doubt these notions when they claim their white families and the white parts of themselves.

For Ruth, the genes of whiteness become the determining factor: she cannot achieve a black identity because of her white skin and white physical features. Her white colour is a bar to a new racial identity while the light skin of Shirlee's passing family makes it possible for them to pass as white. Thus, "race" is less significant than colour. The two are not interchangeable, as Haizlip claims (34). The colour of your skin determines who can pass as white and who cannot. Colour is also the most significant factor in ascribing a racial identity.

The Construction of a New American Identity

At the start of James' search for his missing family he feels lost, unable to decide whether he wants to be a musician or a journalist, and "in some ways[...] caught between the worlds of

black and white as well" (McBride 158). After his journey to Suffolk the writer is changed: "The uncertainty that lived inside me began to dissipate; the ache that the little boy in the mirror felt was gone. My own humanity was awakened[...]" (McBride 179). After seeing Suffolk and being made aware of the lives of his maternal family through the stories of their neighbours, James feels more complete. He has found the missing white and Jewish link of his ancestry. Similarly, Scott has finally found his "ghosts" after becoming acquainted with his white relatives and, consequently, with the missing link of his racial identity. After the successful end to his search he feels complete and finds peace with himself (Minerbrook 258-59). Like Scott, Shirlee has given up her ghosts. She is no longer confused about her place in the American society or about her racial identity as she was in the beginning (Haizlip 266-68). Gaskins writes that "travel is a revelation for people in search for themselves." She claims that Americans of mixed "race" who want to find their identities, frequently search for their missing families and their family histories (Gaskins 192).

The three writers' experiences can be compared to Edward Ball's feelings after his search for his black ancestors and their life stories has been completed. He has finally found himself as he has a sense of completeness and peace. Moreover, he has learnt from his ancestors' tragic stories of slavery and has bridged the gap between the black and the white sides of his family. Similarly, Scott has learnt from the past and from his father that "to choose hate was to choose despair" (Minerbrook 9). Alan had never met *his* missing family nor tried to overcome his hatred for them. Similarly, Scott has not seen his father for nearly twenty years (Minerbrook 217-18). Thus, it is necessary for Scott to pay also him a visit in order to reunite the family, and the writer says: "I knew that if I was to be free I would have to embrace these others I'd come to hate; I couldn't love myself if I hated my own flesh and

blood. And the only way I could ever be whole was to try to bind my broken past" (Minerbrook 9). Similarly, James has learnt from hls family's past. Because of the cruel ways of hls grandfather, hls grandmother and mother were denied their freedom and happiness. The misery of the home of James' missing family has taught the writer that, "the greatest gift that anyone can give anyone else is life" (McBride 179). His grandmother gave his mother such a gift when she let Ruth move away from Suffolk. Thus, he has taken a stand against his grandfather and honours the lives of his grandmother and his mother. Unlike his grandfather, James chooses not to live by strict rules and beliefs, such as maintaining the colour line, because of the hatred, bitterness and pain that they can cause (McBride 167-69, 178-79).

Shirlee has given up some of her resentment and anger towards her missing family, and to some extent at least she has forgiven and understood their choice to pass. The main reason is that "my aunt had painted a portrait of a marginal family, broken and poor, all of them victims of an alcoholic, unreliable father" (Haizlip 248, 266). Thus, the writer is:

> sorry that American life and circumstances forced her to make the choices she did. [.. .] living in constant dread and anxiety. Sorry that she could not tell her husband and child about a family who could have embraced them. Sorry that she and my mother could not comfort each other when their husbands and children died. Sorry that she is now alone, old and most of the time lonely (Haizlip 252-53).

Despite feelings of pity, it is difficult to heal the deep wound and to forgive completely after so many years of being disowned. Still, Shirlee bridges the gap between her own and her mother's generation to that of her children. Her mother has finally found her sister Grace, Shirlee her first cousins, and her daughters their second-cousins (Haizlip 256-57, 266-67).

Despite the fact that Scott, James and Shlrlee are different from their missing families,

they regard their mothers as independently-minded and are able to identify with them. The three writers look up to their mothers who have fought the racist or distorted racial ideas of their childhood homes. Minerbrook describes LaVerne as "a person who knew how to fight her family's bigotry and fears" (Minerbrook 9). Like with Ruth, she has the courage that her family lacks. In order for the three writers to understand their mothers and their white heritage, the acquaintance with their missing families becomes important.

James finds himself and decides to become a musician as well as a journalist. He has a new identity as "a black man with something of a Jewish soul." His previous feeling of shame towards his white mother has turned into a feeling of pride. As a grown-up, James thinks he is privileged because he has one foot on the white side and one on the black side. He is a Christian, but feels a sense of belonging ethnically to the Jews as half of his ancestors are Jews (McBride 79).

Scott has a more mixed racial self-perception. When he meets Ocieola, he identifies himself with her and recognizes his mother in her physical traits and voice. He thinks that he may resemble her in twenty years time, but he wants to have more Native American and black facial features than her. By reclaiming his white missing family and his mother's home place, the writer has crossed his inward boundaries: "going there [to Caruthersville], I felt that my interior landscape had changed. I felt I had pushed back a river and found fertile ground where I could allow my own dignity to take root" (Minerbrook 255, 259). Moreover, he says; "Both my father's family and my mother's family had equally strong claims to dignity" (258). In the end Scott feels black like his father's family *and* white--and Native American--like his mother's family. Naturally, he thinks that black and white "races" are false polarizations as he himself can never be able to choose the one or the other (Minerbrook 16). Similarly, Shirlee

claims to be "a person of mixed-race." Still, she feels black and prefers the company of blacks tending to think automatically of whites as "them" and blacks as "us." Nevertheless, she has undergone a development and has started to think that she belongs to "them" as well as "us" as a result of the reunion of her family's white and black sides (Haizlip 267). Thus, she has modified these formerly fixed categories in her own mind, like Scott, from the first stage when she took the "one-drop rule" for granted. Moreover, she has become more careful in classifying others. It is a common experience among Americans of mixed "race" to change their racial self-perceptions according to Gaskins: "It's a way of experiment. You keep changing hats and eventually you might make your own hat" (184).

The lives and choices of Shirlee and her passing relatives are very unlike in that she lives the life of a black woman. Nevertheless, her and her siblings' "lives have been deeply colored by our absence of deep color" (13). She has felt different because her light skin has given her more privileges than darker-skinned blacks have. This is in accordance with what Alice Walker has written on colourism. Even though Shirlee leans to the black side, she is not definite about her racial identity. She is ambivalent about the white part of herself and the circumstances of slavery which resulted in the mix. Thus, she does not long for her whiteness, but she does not deny it either (Haizlip 14, 238-39). However, she makes a clear stand against the passing members of her family stating that passing is not an option for her even though it is a theoretical possibility. The writer thinks that the costs would be too great asking a rhetorical question: "What did such distancing and denial of one's self as well as of an entire group of people do to the mind and the soul?" (Haizip 71-72).

From the fate of Shirlee's family the writer draws a parallel to American society in general and to the colour line that divides Americans. Haizlip states that every human being

has a substance called melanin and therefore has a brown shade. Moreover, it is impossible to know how many Americans have mixed ancestry, and to count the number of black and white--and Asian and Native American--genes in each person. The number and consistency of genes are arbitrary. What is certain, however, is that just as Shirlee's family have the same ancestors despite their apparent racial division, the American family have ultimately descended from the same ancestors in Africa (Haizlip 267-68). An episode can only confirm Haizlip's claim that in the end black and white Americans are part of the same family. On boarding a plane, Shirlee and her husband are told that another Haizlip couple have already checked in. It turns out that they are white. The old man is from the same little place as Shirlee's husband; Belews Creek, North Carolina. Moreover, Harold Haizlip even has the same middle name as the white man's great-uncle (Haizlip 211-12). It is clear that the family has been divided in black and white. Possibly, someone in their family has passed and left the black side, or, perhaps, the black side descended from slaves and the white from their owners. This is only one in the infinite number of incidents of Americans who have passed. Also McBride and Minerbrook illustrate that the racial categories of black and white are not so simple and should not be taken for granted. James' mother is ascribed as white, but lives a black life. In addition, his and Shirlee's father are ascribed black identities, but also have Native American ancestors. Shirlee's mother is sometimes taken for white even though she regards herself as black. Ironically, Scott's black grandmother and father have both black, white and Choctaw ancestors. Finally, his white grandparents have Native American blood as well as white. As Haizlip says, "Those who can claim to be Americans of pure African descent are few and far between. No matter what we call ourselves, the ethnic range of America lives within us" (34).

Spencer claims that the overwhelming majority of Americans are of mixed ancestry. However, in contrast to the multiracial movement, which worked for a new "multiracial" category in the census of 2000, he does not think it a good idea for Americans of mixed descent to identify as "multiracial." He does not want to create an alternative category to the existing black and white. It is quite problematic to find common cultural, ethnic and racial background for Americans of mixed ancestry other than their ambiguous status and their situational community. There are so many combinations of multiraciality that uniting these into one category becomes artificial (Spencer 133-34). This would only be essentializing "race" when it is really "a sociopolitical construct" (Spencer 66). Thus, his concept of "race" is similar to Eriksen's, in Hutchinson and Smith's anthology, who regards it as a cultural construction. It also approximates Gates' understanding of "race" as a metaphor for something else, not a thing in itself. A multiracial group would be as wide as or even wider than the white category which includes Americans of Arabic, North African and European ancestry. Such an intermediary identification would only add another racial group to the racial divide and further split the black group. Spencer does not think that identifying people of mixed ancestry as multiracial would eliminate the existing racial classifications. Rather, a third group would only strengthen the awareness of differences in phenotype and colour and deepen the racial polarization in the American society further. Thus, he is afraid of the "tribalization of American life" (Spencer 156). He also fears that internal racist attitudes within the multiracial group would result in the increase of colourism and whitening.[1] As a

[1] Spencer defines the phenomenon of "whitening" as the process of "transforming black into white through this conscious or unconscious practice of intermarriage and miscegenation so that their offspring become lighter and lighter and are eventually able to escape identification with the lowest subordinate group of society--blacks. They do this also by abandoning the identifiable cultural traits of black people" (124-25). The motive for whitening may be improved status for children and grandchildren in the future.

result race relations may be worsened (Spencer 89, 93, 106, 128). Njeri (in Early's collection of essays) also thinks that a new "mixed" category is not necessarily productive (Early 22-40). I agree with her and Spencer because creating a new kind of racial category would only be an addition to exactly that kind of division that oppression is based on. Moreover, there would obviously be a discrepancy between the colour and "race" of members of such a group. While their self-perceptions would be "multiracial," their ascribed identities would frequently be based on their colour. As Spencer says, rewriting Dubois, "the problem of the twentyfirst century is the predicament of the readjustment of the color line" (132).

He does not find a third category constructive when the aim is to get rid of racism and racial groups. However, Spencer finds it important that the multiracial ancestry of Americans should be acknowledged along with "our increased recognition that there are millions of people who cannot be put into neat categories" (Spencer 156). He is a supporter of the ideal of nonracialism like the multiracial movement, but their means of achieving this ideal is different.

Njeri thinks that if the multiracialists' "interest is the elimination of oppression[...] then the elimination of classification based on 'race' is the only solution that makes sense" (Early 40). I would rather follow Spencer's philosophy, however: "We need a frank assessment of race, indeed an obliteration of racism, before the people at the bottom of the social and economic totem of American society abandon the unity and protective barrier that race has brought them so far" (148). There is no point in getting rid of racial categories which are still there in people's minds and make a difference each and every day. Still, Spencer follows Martin Luther King, Jr. in his "ideal that people should be judged by the content of their character rather than the color of their skin" (141). Further, he values the significance for

people of mixed ancestry of having the freedom to identify as they want to. They should be able to claim more than one racial category, either of them or none of them (Spencer 142, 157-59). In this respect, his view approximates nonracialism. Finally, Spencer supports the South African Reverend David Botha's claim that, "Once black and white Americans are reconciled, the problem of classification for mixed-race people will not be there" (141). Then there will only be Americans, and Nelson Mandela's statement; "Thou shalt not racially classify" (Spencer 169) can be followed.

Recently, there has been a growth of acceptance of Americans of mixed "race," according to Gaskins, and some even consider it cool to be mixed (8, 10). Multiraciality was officially recognized in the census of 2000. Moreover, the number of support groups for interracial families and Americans of mixed "race" has increased, and there are two national magazines which write about interracial living (Spencer 5). Also the number of web sites, books and films on being mixed "race" has increased (Gaskins 254). Examples on compilations of essays are Maria Roots' The Multiracial Experience and Gaskins' Voices of Mixed-Race Young People. According to the American writer and professor of English, Laura Browder, it has become a trend in the 1990s to write "American autobiographies of racial recategorization" (275). Some examples of recently published books are Henry Neil's Pearl's Secret and Gregory Howard Williams' Life on the Color Line. In these autobiographies the concept of "race" is deconstructed and questioned as a relevant category of identification (Browder 271, 274-75). As Americans have become increasingly aware of their multiracial and multiethnic ancestry, it has become even more difficult to make a simple black and white divide. In constructing a new American identity, celebrities and autobiographies are influential factors. The number of celebrities of mixed "race" is growing

according to Gaskins (8). Gary Nash writes about the "black" Eldrick "Tiger" Woods who has become a famous American sports star in golf--a sports activity previously strictly reserved for whites with blacks only present as caddys on the golf course. Even more surprising is Tiger Woods' clear statement that he is not at all comfortable with being categorized as black because of his multiracial ancestry (Nash 184-86). Jayne lfekwunigwe explains:

> In the Spring of 1997, Tiger Woods, the youngest winner of the US (golf) Open created a storm in the United States' Black communities when, on *The Oprah Winfrey Show,* he denied his 'one-drop Blackness' (his father is African American and his mother is Thai) and instead claimed 'Caublinasian,' which is his own linguistic amalgam of his 'Caucasian, Black, Native American and Asian' ancestries. (16-17)

Sports journalists tend to accept his wishes and rarely identify him by "race." As a golf star he is an important role model for many young Americans. His deconstruction of his racial identity and construction of an original identity based on his own feelings of belonging, set an example and motivation for others to follow. Also the American jazz musician, Milton "Mezz" Mezzrow, who lived from 1899 to 1972, developed an individual racial identity. The well-known American-born clarinetist was of Russian Jewish ancestry and was ascribed as white. Still, in his autobiography Really the Blues (translated to Swedish as Dans till svart pipa in 1955) he descibes himself as black. He married a black woman, lived in black Harlem and worked mostly with black musicians. Thus, he rejected white society preferring the company of blacks (Mezzrow 283, 287, 313). In the end he even succeeded in having his chosen "race" officially recognized--in his passport. Mezzrow's passing as black was only possible because of his special status as a celebrity. This must be seen as a unique exception from the rule that the colour line is impermeable from the white to the black side.

Like Mezzrow and Woods, the three autobiographies set an example for a new more personal and creative construction of the American identity. Other possibilities than the traditional black and white polarities are opened up as the writers deconstruct their racial identities. In Slippery Characters, Browder refers to Robert Sayre and his theory on American autobiographies from Autobiography and America:

> Robert Sayre has written of American autobiographers as 'architects of American character.' The power of individual testimony can help reshape public thinking and public discourse about race [...]. Autobiography is a form uniquely suited to American mythologies. These new autobiographies of racial unmasking can help Americans rethink the meaning of racial and ethnic categories (277).

Through the search for their white missing families McBride, Minerbrook and Haizlip find the missing links in their identities and, except for McBride, they find their "invisible" descendants. Having pursued their physical and spiritual journeys back to their roots, the three write about their experiences. Moreover, the *writing* itself may be a way of finding a particular identity as part of a process of self-realization and self-justification for the three writers. Their racial identities are developed as a declaration of selfhood and independence. Thus, suggests Browder, putting pen to paper may also be a means of criticizing the racial attitudes and categorizations of the dominant culture. The writing itself becomes a process of finding a new identity other than the one assigned by birth or reconfirming an original identity. These autobiographies become part of the new American mythologies (Browder 274-76).

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