✦✧✦✧ Abstract ✦✧✦✧

This project interrogates how early American literature stages the racialized body as a contested site of power, perception, and discipline through the work of William Apess's *Eulogy on King Philip* (1836), William Wells Brown's *Clotel, or The President's Daughter* (1853), and Sui Sin Far's *Its Wavering Image* (1912). Through a historical materialist lens, I trace the afterlives of colonialism and slavery—ongoing structures of violence that sediment in the racialized ordering of the social—and examine how these texts mobilize narrative as a fugitive strategy, locating in the margins of literary form a critique of dominant racial ontologies. While the figures at the center of these texts are often retroactively framed within a "mixed race" discourse, my analysis resists imposing contemporary identity categories, instead attending to the historical and epistemological work of racial ambiguity: how it becomes legible to the state, how it is surveilled, eroticized, commodified, and ultimately weaponized in service of racial capitalism and settler sovereignty. Apess's eulogy functions as a counter-historiography, reclaiming Metacomet not only as a symbol of Indigenous resistance but as a rupture in the settler colonial narrative of inevitability. Drawing on Judith Butler's theory of performativity, I argue that Apess stages race as an unstable and contested construct, using performance as a mode of political intervention that resists fixed racial legibility and asserts Indigenous futurity—a fugitive practice resonant with Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's Undercommons. Brown's Clotel, situated at the nexus of race, gender, sexuality, and labor, exposes the libidinal economy of slavery and the contradictions embedded in Jeffersonian democracy. Rather than succumbing to a narrative of tragic archetype, Clotel's racial and gendered position destabilizes legal and ideological boundaries, foregrounding Black female body as both a juridical problem and a theoretical site. Far's Pan occupies the racial threshold marked by Xine Yao's term "oriental inscrutability"—her perceived unreadability becomes a mechanism through which white desire and nationalist anxiety co-produce her racialization. Across these texts, I argue that narrative form becomes a method of dissent, a praxis of disruption wherein authors refuse the coherence of racial ideology and instead foreground race as a structure of feeling—unstable, relational, and always already in crisis. These works not only historicize the emergence of monoracial paradigms but also render visible the affective and political stakes of ambiguity, situating racial perception as a battleground through which the violences of nation-building are both masked and maintained.

Mixed-Race Fugitivity: The Politics of Identity, Abolition, and Racial Performance in 19th Century American Literature

By Amanda Lee Adams
Advisor: Professor Alex Moskowitz

A thesis submitted to the English Department in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts with honors.

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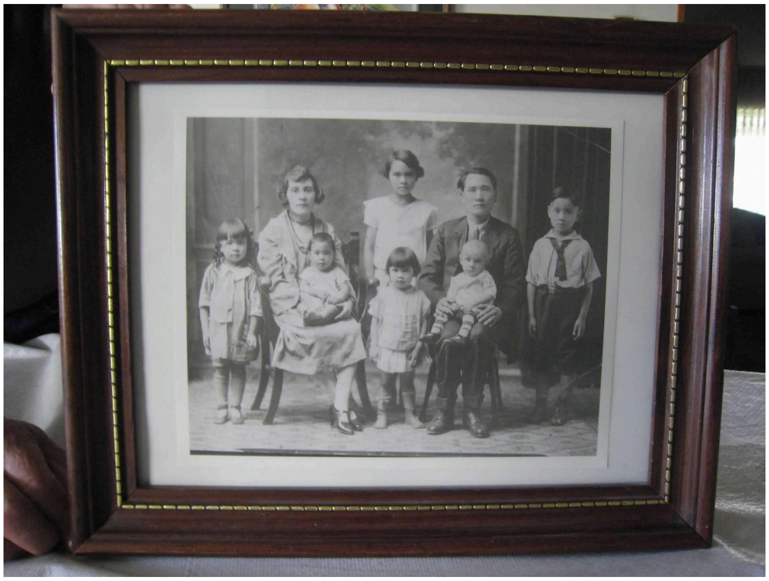
✦✧✦✧ Acknowledgements ✦✧✦✧

This thesis is dedicated to my family and ancestors who crossed borders, built lives, and endured struggles they never asked for. The reason I wanted to write this thesis is to better understand their experiences in the 19th century, when they first arrived and settled in Arizona — a land already marked by centuries of colonial violence and resistance. Like so many multiracial families, their history is one of migration, labor, and survival in a world that was designed to leave them invisible.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As I look at old photographs, including the one I have here, I'm reminded of all the stories they carry, often unsaid. In this particular photo, my great-grandmother, the eldest daughter, stands with her family. My great-great-grandmother Theresa Morales was mestiza, of mixed Indigenous and European ancestry, and my great-great-grandfather had immigrated from Guangzhou, China, speaking only Cantonese. She spoke Spanish, with little English. Together, they built a life in a place that was unfamiliar to where they were raised.

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[1] Theresa Morales and Fong Ling. *Family Portrait with Their Children*. Early 1900s. The portrait includes their six out of eleven children standing, with the tallest and oldest child in the center being Elizabeth, my great-grandmother, as a child. Theresa Morales and Fong Ling are my great-great-grandparents. Family archives. Photographer unknown.

[2] *Portrait of Elizabeth and Sam as a Young Couple*. Early 20th century. This photograph features my great-grandparents, Elizabeth and Sam, in their youth. Family archives. Photographer unknown.

When my family first arrived in Arizona, they worked in whatever jobs they could find — cattle ranching, railroad construction, and later opening a small grocery store. They were an interracial family raising mixed-race children in a society that defined itself by exclusion and violence. Their labor helped build the infrastructure of the West, but they were never fully seen as part of the landscape they helped create. The research I've done on their lives has revealed gaps in the historical record — stories lost to the ways in which power decides what is worth remembering.

While this thesis focuses on mixed-race identity, it specifically explores how mixed-race characters were represented in 19th-century American literature. I'm not here to tell a definitive story of how multiracial people lived in that time, but my family's history, and my own experience as a mixed-race person, have shaped how I approach these narratives. Their resilience, their refusal to be erased by the forces of race and empire, are at the core of this project. I also understand that their views on race were shaped by their time — different from how we speak about it today. It's a reminder that race is always changing, shaped by the systems in place, and those systems are always being resisted.

This acknowledgment would be incomplete without honoring the student organization I founded during my first year at Mount Holyoke: the Mixed Identity Student Collective. Growing up in Nashville, Tennessee, I never encountered a community that could fully acknowledge or hold space for my multiracial identity. After being excluded from other student organizations in college—with comments such as "you're not Asian enough" or the ever-persistent question, "what are you?"—I felt compelled to create a space for students whose experiences extend beyond monoracial categories. MISC began as both an affinity space and a platform for critical conversations—because many students, like myself, had never been in community with others who shared similar experiences until they arrived at college. Over the years, it has become more than just a club; it's become a reason why some students have chosen to attend Mount Holyoke at all.

But MISC has never been just about individual identity—it's been about a collective mission to move past subjecthood and toward solidarity. Our work centers the belief that understanding our mixed-race identities must include an understanding of their intersections with global systems of oppression. The struggle for racial justice cannot be separated from international liberation movements. Our conversations have extended beyond the personal to embrace solidarity with the global struggles for a free Palestine, Congo, and Sudan. Founding this organization has been one of the most meaningful parts of my time at Mount Holyoke, and I am continuously inspired by the students who carry this mission forward even after I graduate.

I am especially grateful to AJ Johnson, who, during my sophomore year, entrusted me with the roles of executive producer and assistant director on their thesis film, *And/Or*, a project that explores the nuanced realities of being both mixed-race and queer. That collaboration marked a turning point in my life—it was the first time I saw a reflection of myself on screen. The experience ignited a deep passion for film and storytelling, eventually leading me to pursue studies in film, media, and television at NYU. Since then, AJ and I have had the extraordinary opportunity to travel together and share our film across the country—from Hawaiʻi to Ohio to Nashville. Those journeys have not only broadened my understanding of the impact of storytelling but have also strengthened a creative partnership rooted in mutual trust and shared identity.

I would also like to thank Professor Moskowitz, who has not only been a steady and generous guide throughout my thesis process, but also someone who helped me realize that I could use my degree for more than just studying old, dead white men. From the very beginning, he encouraged me to bring my full self into the classroom—including my interests around mixed-race identity, queerness, and the politics of representation. Whether I was getting the entire class to chant Bartleby the Scrivener's iconic line, "I would prefer not to," or showing up in costume as characters or historical figures we were studying (yes, that actually happened), he never batted an eye—just laughed along and made space for me to be both serious and silly, rigorous and ridiculous. And of course, who could forget the shared class laughter when a new "Professor Moskowitz tweet just dropped." Even when I repeatedly told him, "I would prefer not to" do this thesis, he patiently stuck with me anyway. Exploring 19th-century literature through a lens of historical materialism with his support has been one of the most unexpectedly joyful and rewarding parts of my college experience.

My academic and creative work has opened doors I never imagined possible. I've had the privilege of interning with the Critical Mixed Race Studies Association and now serve on its executive board, where I am currently helping to organize our 2026 conference at UCLA. I am also deeply thankful to Dr. Annabelle Atkin and Nathan Lieng, whose encouragement and mentorship have supported my research on the Multiracial Families Project within the Arise Lab at Purdue University.

And finally, I want to express my deepest gratitude to my mom. Her love has been the grounding force behind everything I've been able to pursue. From an early age, she fostered a sense of curiosity, creativity, and self-inquiry, even when we didn’t always have the language for what we were seeking. She has supported me with unwavering openness as I’ve explored questions of identity, history, and belonging—not just intellectually, but personally. The countless conversations we’ve had about our family’s past—often piecing together stories that were never written down, or that others tried to erase—have been acts of reclamation and healing. In those moments, we’ve both become students of our own lineage. Her willingness to walk beside me, to learn with me, and to hold space for complexity has given me the courage to step fully into who I am.

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✦✧✦✧ Introduction ✦✧✦✧

In this project, I explore how early American texts grapple with the constructs of race, identity, and power, particularly through the perspectives of marginalized figures. I focus on three primary texts: William Apess's *Eulogy on King Philip* (1836), William Wells Brown's *Clotel, or The President's Daughter* (1853), and Sui Sin Far's *Its Wavering Image* (published within *Mrs. Spring Fragrance*, 1912). Each work reflects, challenges, and critiques dominant narratives of race, nationhood, and belonging during critical periods in American history.

Thus, at the core of this project, I question how authors from marginalized backgrounds deploy narrative strategies to resist dominant racial ideologies and to reframe historical and cultural memory from perspectives that Western settler-colonial frameworks often erase or distort. Through these texts, I also trace the racial afterlives of colonialism and slavery — that is, the persistent material and structural conditions shaped by historical processes of racial violence and exclusion — and how they manifest differently across time.

It is important to note that although contemporary scholarship and popular readings sometimes refer to the figures in these works as "mixed race," I am not assigning that label as their self-identified identity. At times in this project, I do refer to them as mixed or offer a mixed race critique, but my aim is not to retroactively impose a modern understanding of mixed race subjectivity onto them. Rather, I am interested in the rhetorical and material consequences of how their perceived racial ambiguity was understood, exploited, and disciplined by the dominant systems of their time. The periods these works engage with helped lay the structural and ideological foundations for the rigid monoracial identities that later came to dominate American racial thinking — identities that positioned racial mixing as a site of anxiety and contradiction. Following a historical materialist approach, I recognize that history builds upon itself: the forms of mixed race identity we see today are deeply shaped by these earlier processes of racialization, legal codification, and social policing. Thus, my focus is not on identity formation per se, but on the politics of racial perception, the performances of ambiguity, and the ways in which these figures expose the contradictions and violences underpinning settler colonialism, the institution of slavery, and orientalist constructions of Asianness.

I argue that these authors use storytelling and recollections of lived/real experiences not only to expose the moral and political failures of the dominant society but also to offer complex, dynamic portraits of racialized subjectivity—portraits that resist simple categorization and underscore race as a constructed and performative identity shaped by power, desire, and violence. By the time we reach *Its Wavering Image*, we see how these racial afterlives continue to operate in new but intimately connected ways, shaping both the possibilities and limitations of Pan's identity and treatment within American society.

Chapter Roadmap

Chapter 1: William Apess's *Eulogy on King Philip* ✦ ✧ ✦ ✧

In Chapter 1, I analyze William Apess's *Eulogy on King Philip*, a speech delivered in 1836. Apess, a Pequot minister and activist, recounts the story of Metacomet (King Philip), the Wampanoag leader who resisted English colonial expansion. Apess's intervention is crucial: through his Indigenous lens, he reclaims King Philip as a symbol of resistance against settler-colonial violence and genocide. As a descendant of King Philip and a Methodist minister, Apess exposes the moral hypocrisy of a settler society that claims Christian virtue while perpetrating atrocities. I argue that Apess's narrative challenges dominant historical memory and asserts Indigenous sovereignty and resilience as foundational, not peripheral, to American history.

Reading Apess through the framework of the *undercommons*—as articulated by Stefano Harney and Fred Moten—I interpret the *Eulogy* as a fugitive act of refusal and insurgent thought. In speaking back to the dominant archive and reshaping collective memory from the margins, Apess does not seek recognition within the existing order but gestures toward an alternative mode of being, one rooted in Indigenous sovereignty, memory, and survival beyond the grasp of settler-state legitimacy. His narrative resists assimilation into the liberal politics of inclusion and instead inhabits a fugitive space of epistemic disobedience, one that foregrounds collective refusal and ungovernability.

Apess's speech also disrupts prevailing narratives of freedom and citizenship emerging from the antislavery movement. Deeply inspired by abolitionist thought, Apess echoes the antislavery movement's critiques of American hypocrisy, invoking Christian ideals and Enlightenment principles to call out systemic injustice. Apess demands a deeper reckoning with the settler-colonial foundations of the U.S. nation-state—an origin predicated on attempted genocide of Native peoples. In this context, Apess's intervention complicates and expands the political imaginary of abolition, urging a convergence of Black and Indigenous struggles for liberation that interrogates not only chattel slavery but also land theft, genocide, and the racialized structures of settler rule. I argue that Apess's *Eulogy* challenges dominant historical memory and asserts Indigenous sovereignty and resilience as foundational, not peripheral, to American history—offering a fugitive and radical critique from within the cracks of empire.

Apess also demonstrates through his own identity the performative and strategic dimensions of race, particularly in the context of being mixed-race. He selectively reveals and conceals aspects of his identity throughout his writings, at times emphasizing his Pequot lineage, at other times leaning into Christian universality or invoking a shared American moral conscience. This rhetorical flexibility allows him to maneuver within—and critique—the racial logics of his audience, using familiarity to unsettle comfort and sameness to expose contradiction. His mixed-race identity thus becomes not only a site of personal complexity, but also a political strategy for challenging settler-colonial binaries and destabilizing dominant narratives of racial purity and national origin.

I interpret Apess's *Eulogy* as a fugitive act of counter-memory and insurgent critique. Rather than seeking incorporation into the dominant historical record, Apess speaks from a position of epistemic refusal, articulating a politics of survivance, fugitivity, and radical critique. His work resists both settler recognition and liberal reformism, offering instead a vision of American history grounded in Indigenous resistance and the ongoing refusal to disappear or be forgotten.

Chapter 2: William Wells Brown's *Clotel, or The President's Daughter* ✦ ✧ ✦ ✧

In Chapter 2, I turn to William Wells Brown's *Clotel*, the first novel published by an African American. Written in 1853, *Clotel* weaves three interconnected plotlines, using newspaper articles and contemporary media to critique the institution of slavery and the racial and sexual anxieties that undergird it. I focus particularly on the figure of Clotel, the fictional mixed-race daughter of Thomas Jefferson. I argue that Brown's portrayal of Clotel highlights the contradictions of American racial ideology, especially the obsession with racial purity and Christian morality. Rather than centering on Clotel's mixed-race identity as tragic, Brown constructs her as a character through whom the racial economy of desire, exploitation, and ambiguity can be analyzed. Throughout this chapter, I explore how Clotel's body is commodified and disciplined within a system that entangles race, sexuality, and labor, offering a broader commentary on the cultural construction of race.

Brown foregrounds the sexual and libidinal economy of slavery, illustrating how Black women's bodies—particularly those marked as mixed race—are rendered as sites of both desire and domination. Through Clotel's racial ambiguity—her skin "as fair as" the white men bidding for her—Brown exposes the moral hypocrisy of a system that enslaves its own kin while claiming to uphold liberty and Christian virtue. Clotel, positioned within the social category of the "quadroon," inhabits a liminal space that reveals the instability and violence of racial classification. The one-drop rule, a legal and social mechanism that deems anyone with any trace of Black ancestry as Black, operates in this context to disrupt any understanding of desirability. This rule illustrates how social discourse and prevailing racial attitudes concurrently shape the law, reinforcing a system that legally and culturally denies the possibility of racial ambiguity. It forces the reader to confront how whiteness is both fetishized and fiercely protected, even as it is genealogically entangled with Blackness. Clotel's very presence troubles the boundaries of racial and sexual propriety, rendering desire itself unstable and politically fraught.

While the novel grants only partial access to Clotel's interiority—often depicting her as acted upon rather than fully self-determined—I argue her story resists reduction to a tragic arc. Particularly in the novel's final movements, Clotel's trajectory offers a refusal of sentimental closure and a haunting critique of the structures that commodify her. This chapter also takes up the intersections of labor and exploitation, examining how Clotel's value is tethered not only to her racialized gender but also to the productive and reproductive labor she is expected to perform. Brown's depiction of the enslaved woman's condition underscores the entwinement of economic utility and sexual vulnerability under slavery.

Further, I diverge into a discussion of fugitivity as a mode of resistance—both literal and symbolic—in Brown's narrative. Though Clotel's flight does not lead to liberation in a conventional sense, her fugitive movement destabilizes the logics of ownership, inheritance, and nationhood.

Chapter 3: Sui Sin Far's *Its Wavering Image* ✦ ✧ ✦ ✧

In Chapter 3, I analyze *Its Wavering Image*, a short story from Sui Sin Far's *Mrs. Spring Fragrance* collection. *Its Wavering Image* is the most recent piece in this project, and I read it as a culmination of the racial afterlives explored in the previous chapters. Sui Sin Far, the author of *Mrs. Spring Fragrance*, was a Chinese American writer who worked to challenge the racial stereotypes imposed on Asian Americans in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Born in 1865 as Edith Maud Eaton in London to a Chinese father and an English mother, Far became one of the first Asian American writers to gain recognition in the United States. Her works, which include short stories, essays, and articles, often focus on the complexities of mixed-race identity, cultural assimilation, and the experiences of Chinese immigrants. Through characters like Pan, Far critiques the racial logics that shaped the American social landscape, offering a nuanced examination of racial and ethnic identity often influenced by her own experiences.

This story specifically focuses on Pan, a mixed-race Chinese and white woman. Before meeting Mark Carson, a white journalist, Pan never questioned her identity. It is only through his gaze that the story is narrated and the external projections placed upon her that she begins to confront the complexities of her racial identity. Was she to be a Chinese woman or a white woman? The ambiguity of her mixed-race heritage is exacerbated by the Orientalist notion of inscrutability, as she is forced to navigate being neither fully Chinese nor fully white, but instead, an elusive figure who cannot be easily understood or defined by the white gaze. Using Yao's understanding of oriental inscrutability, Far presents Pan as the object of Mark Carson's projections, Far highlights how racialized identities are often shaped and constrained by external forces, particularly the desires and assumptions of others. Yao's concept of oriental inscrutability fits well here, as it addresses how Pan's mixed-race identity is perceived through the lens of exoticism and racial stereotyping. The expectation that Pan should embody an elusive, mysterious persona—a hallmark of the inscrutable "Oriental" stereotype—becomes central to the way others view her, particularly through the gaze of Carson. In this way, Pan is reduced to the projections of others, which restricts her ability to fully define or explore her own identity.

Rather than allowing Pan to fully explore and define her own identity, she is trapped in a performance dictated by the stereotypes of Orientalist thought, where she must constantly navigate and negotiate these expectations. Drawing from Judith Butler's theory of performativity, I suggest that Pan's identity is not merely something imposed upon her but something that she is forced to continually perform to meet the desires and expectations of those around her. Additionally, Lisa Lau's work on racialized performance helps further contextualize Pan's experiences, where identity becomes a battleground of external definitions, complicating the performative aspects of race. Far critiques racial essentialism by showing how Pan's identity is shaped by these external desires and projections.

However, by the end of the story, Pan's return to inscrutability—embracing the very stereotype that seeks to reduce her—becomes a form of safety. In the face of constant projection and racialization, the inscrutable, enigmatic persona that others expect from her offers a protective barrier. It allows her to evade the invasive and limiting definitions imposed upon her by the white gaze. In a sense, her ambiguity, initially a source of conflict, becomes a shield—a way for Pan to resist being fully defined or trapped within the narrow confines of either racial category. This turn towards inscrutability, while deeply tied to racialized stereotyping, also represents a reclaiming of autonomy, as Pan uses this external projection to create space for herself, distancing herself from the demands to choose and conform.

Moreover, the story reflects the ongoing material and structural realities of racialization, especially the legacies of colonialism and exclusionary nationalism. *Its Wavering Image* works to reconfigures racial logics, connecting them to the violence of racial construction that persists in different forms into the twentieth century, aligning with earlier works like *Eulogy* and *Clotel*.

CHAPTER 1

MIXED AS A FUGITIVE STATE: REIMAGINING NATIVE PRESENCE AND PERFORMATIVE HISTORIOGRAPHY IN WILLIAM APESS'S EULOGY ON KING PHILIP

✦ ✧ ✦ ✧ Eulogy on King Philip By: William Apess ✦ ✧ ✦ ✧

In *Eulogy on King Philip*, William Apess transforms the eulogy into a critical tool for reclaiming not only the memory of King Philip (Metacomet) but also the broader history of Indigenous resistance that has been systematically erased or distorted by colonial narratives. Apess’s rhetoric cuts through the layers of settler-colonial mythmaking, challenging both the moral foundations of European settlers and their self-righteous claims to civilization. Through sharp irony, pointed moral critiques, and personal testimony, Apess underscores the cruelty of colonial conquest while positioning himself as both a spiritual heir to the Pequot lineage and a vocal critic of the settler imagination that has long defined Native peoples as subhuman. Apess's invocation of his Pequot identity—distinct yet interwoven within his Christian beliefs—represents a powerful example of religious syncretism, where he merges his Indigenous heritage with his Christian faith, thus creating a unique space in which both identities coexist. As a preacher, Apess strategically uses Christianity not as a tool of colonization, but as a platform for Indigenous resistance and dignity, reinterpreting Christian doctrine through an Indigenous lens.

It is important to clarify that "King Philip" is not a European monarch but the English-assigned name for Metacomet, a Wampanoag leader who played a central role in resisting colonial expansion during King Philip’s War (1675–1678). In this paper, I use both

"King Philip" and "Metacomet" to refer to the same historical figure. The title “King Philip,” while a colonial imposition, is significant in Apess’s eulogy because it strategically positions Metacomet within a framework of imperial legitimacy and sovereign resistance. By invoking the term “king,” Apess challenges colonial narratives that cast Indigenous people as subjects without political power or moral authority. Instead, he elevates Metacomet as a dignified leader whose resistance was rooted in justice, not savagery. This rhetorical move complicates dominant histories and asserts Indigenous sovereignty within the very language of empire.

The complexity of William Apess’s racial identity—confirmed as Pequot and white, though possibly also of African American descent—highlights how racial categories in 19th-century New England were both fluid and tightly policed by Euro-American society. *A Son of the Forest*—one of the first of its kind written by an Indigenous author—Apess details his lineage, claiming that on his mother’s side he was of Pequot royalty in relation to the Wampanoag leader King Philip (Metacomet). This assertion not only situates Apess within a powerful historical legacy of Indigenous resistance, but also foregrounds his intent to reclaim and reframe Native identity through his own lived experience. His writing serves as a deliberate political and cultural intervention, challenging dominant narratives of Indigenous disappearance, degeneration, and savagery. Apess skillfully subverts Euro-American representational systems by appropriating the very discourses—Christianity, republicanism, and historical narrative—that were often weaponized to marginalize Indigenous peoples. His multi-layered engagement with both Native and White Christian identities offers an insightful critique of historical erasure, showing how memory itself can be a tool of resistance against both cultural and physical extinction. Unlike the abstract, dehumanized portrayals of Native peoples in colonial literature, Apess speaks from lived experience, asserting himself not as an ideological symbol but as a real person with deep ancestral ties. He reminds his audience that the figures he writes about—King Philip, the settlers, and fellow Indigenous people—are not mythologized archetypes, but real individuals whose lives and legacies have been manipulated or have been influenced by attempted erasure. By confronting the moral failings of settler society, Apess demands recognition of Indigenous humanity: "Every white that knows their own history knows there was not a whit difference between them and the Indians of their days."[3] In reclaiming the stories of King Philip and his Pequot ancestors, Apess urges his readers to reckon with the violent legacies of colonialism and reconsider who is remembered, and who is unjustly labeled "savage."

At the heart of this chapter is a central question: how does William Apess, a mixed-race Pequot Christian preacher, use his multiracial identity to critique settler colonial narratives and resist dominant racial logics? I argue that Apess's multiracial position operates not as a site of confusion, but as a fugitive stance—one that destabilizes colonial demands for purity, loyalty, and assimilation. Drawing on Fred Moten and Stefano Harney's theorization of fugitivity as "being separate from settling," I situate Apess's rhetoric and self-presentation as forms of "fugitive planning" that refuse settler colonial logics of racial categorization and control.[4]This chapter thus reads Apess's *Eulogy on King Philip* as an act of multiracial resistance—a fugitive performance that reclaims Indigenous sovereignty, kinship, and historical memory. His use of Christian rhetoric, access to white-coded platforms, and affiliation with settler institutions is not assimilationist but performative, a deliberate occupation of space that enables him to critique the very systems that exclude and erase Indigenous people. Through his writing, Apess not only counters the settler narrative of the "Vanishing Indian" but actively constructs a multiracial critique that insists on Indigenous presence, survival, and sovereignty. This chapter examines how Apess reclaims multiracial identity as a site of agency—framed not by biology but by performative allegiance, kinship, and resistance.

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[3] Apess, 305
[4] Harney et al., 11

In this chapter, I want to highlight how William Apess, as a mixed-race Pequot man, utilizes his identity not as the central theme but as a strategic tool to disrupt settler logic, settler history, and ideas of status. His mixed-race subjecthood acts less as a defining focus in the eulogy for King Philip and more as a way to challenge the dominant historical narratives that have marginalized or erased Indigenous people. Apess brings up his identity towards the end of the eulogy, after establishing a deep connection to King Philip and offering a reframing of history Indigenous history within a Western context. This timing is deliberate: his racial identity, intertwined with his personal history, serves as a pointed critique of the colonial ideologies that shaped both his life and the broader context of Indigenous dispossession.

This chapter is noticeably different from the others I've written because William Apess was not just a historical figure—he was a real person, with a voice, a memory, and a larger lineage of culture. This chapter stands in contrast to the others I've written so far because William Apess was not a fictional character, but a real person—a mixed-race Pequot man who wrote about his own life, his ancestry, and his experiences with startling clarity and purpose. While future chapters will examine literary portrayals of mixed-race identity, shaped by the ideologies and imaginations of their authors, Apess provides a rare and invaluable firsthand account of what it meant to live as a Native person in early 19th-century America. Throughout his tumultuous life, marked by abandonment by his parents, near-fatal abuse at the hands of his Pequot grandmother, and repeatedly being sold into indentured servitude, Apess sought refuge in religious communities—particularly evangelical sects—that offered him a rare spiritual and emotional sanctuary amidst the systemic rejection he faced. As one O'Connell notes in Apess's introduction, “His identity as an outcast child, an Indian no one wants, is connected to his attraction to evangelical sects.”[5] These religious spaces offered him a sense of belonging that was otherwise denied to him by both white society and his fragmented family life. At the same time, Apess strategically utilized the language of Christianity to critique the very social structures that oppressed him, blending spiritual conviction with political resistance. His participation in these religious communities was not simply assimilation—it was reclamation, adaptation, and protest. However, his writings also demonstrate how he blamed white settlers for the dysfunctions and struggles within his own people, holding them accountable for the dehumanizing effects of colonialism.

I want to bring in David Walker here not because this piece is focused on his rhetoric, but to acknowledge how his *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* resonates with William Apess’s *Eulogy on King Philip* and helps illuminate its rhetorical stakes. While I structure this piece explicitly through the theoretical lens of *The Undercommons*, I wanted to situate Apess’s work within a broader tradition of resistance—one that includes Walker’s radical Black critique. These frameworks belong together because the enslavement and exploitation of Black communities and the genocide and forced displacement of Indigenous peoples are interconnected through the shared systems of settler colonialism and racial capitalism. Apess and Walker both use the dominant moral and religious language of their time—not to seek assimilation, but to strategically undermine the legitimacy of white supremacy from within.

Understanding Apess’s ministerial background was key for me in making sense of his rhetoric, which I initially found difficult to access at first. His use of Christian discourse is not a sign of compliance but a fugitive maneuver—what Fred Moten and Stefano Harney describe as “stealing away into the alternative.” By speaking in a form legible to white Christian audiences,

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[5] Apess, lv

Apess turns those forms against their foundational violence. This rhetorical fugitivity also aligns with Judith Butler’s notion of performativity: Apess’s performance of moral and spiritual authority as a Native man becomes a destabilizing act that challenges both racial and religious norms. His eulogy is not merely a sermon or historical reflection; it is a refusal—an assertion of Indigenous presence, grief, and sovereignty in defiance of erasure.

This move—this refusal—also reorients how we understand the role of Indigenous peoples and Black communities within the broader historical narrative of American democracy. Rather than merely seeking inclusion within a system built on their oppression, both Apess and Walker present alternative visions of history and identity that insist on alternative modes of existence. These alternative narratives don't just disrupt; they create space for new forms of being, memory, and community. In considering Apess’s eulogy through the lens of fugitivity, we are challenged to think beyond inclusion or assimilation. We are asked to reckon with what it might mean to disrupt history itself, to “steal away” from the conventions of the settler state, and to claim a future outside its structures.

Apess as a person disrupts the mainstream historical memory, especially as he does not conform to the typical narratives that sought to erase or marginalize Indigenous identities. Despite having white ancestry, Apess boldly identifies as Pequot, a claim that not only challenges the racial categories imposed by settler society but also defies the erasure of Indigenous peoples from the cultural consciousness. His acknowledgment of his direct relation to King Philip (Metacomet) further complicates the dominant narrative, insisting on the legitimacy of his Indigenous heritage despite the prevailing ideologies of racial purity and colonial superiority. By claiming King Philip as an ancestor, Apess forces his audience to confront the legacy of Indigenous resistance, linking himself to a figure often demonized and forgotten by mainstream histories.

Apess's choice to align himself with his Indigenous Pequot identity, rather than occupying a space of racial in-betweenness, reflects how identity during this period—and arguably still today—is less about biology and more about allegiances. Being mixed race is not a biological fact so much as it is a socially constructed position shaped by power, history, and context. In the 19th century, one could not easily claim both whiteness and Indigeneity without being forced to negate one in favor of the other, especially within a settler-colonial framework that demanded clear, racialized lines of belonging and exclusion.

Racial identity was often interpreted as a declaration of thought and loyalty. Whiteness wasn't just a matter of skin—it was tied to land ownership, Christianity, civility, and control over historical narratives. To claim Indigeneity, then, as Apess boldly does, is to refuse assimilation and to position oneself in direct opposition to the ideological and physical violence of settler society. But Apess doesn't simply reject settler values—he strategically reclaims and reinterprets them. As a Christian preacher, he asserts his right to speak with moral authority from within the religious tradition so often weaponized against his people. He takes up Christianity not to conform, but to challenge the racist and exclusionary theology of the settlers from within.

By identifying with King Philip and the legacy of resistance, Apess constructs his identity not as a biological amalgam, but as a historical allegiance. He stakes a claim in the very arenas—religion and historical memory—that settlers believed were theirs alone to define. His rhetorical strategy reframes mixed heritage not as in-betweenness, but as a form of resistance rooted in historical continuity and moral clarity. Through this, he critiques the settler narrative that treats racial mixing as something to be corrected or hidden, and instead reclaims it as a site of strength, memory, and confrontation.

William Apess's *Eulogy on King Philip* performs an act of historical revisionism. Rather than pleading for Native inclusion in the American national narrative, Apess reframes Indigenous sovereignty as central to the very foundation of the United States. Apess begins his eulogy with a striking rhetorical move, invoking not only Indigenous but also Euro-American revolutionary figures, "I do not arise to spread before you the fame of a noted warrior whose natural abilities shone like those of the great and mighty Philip of Greece, or of Alexander the Great, or like those of Washington—whose virtues and patriotism are engraven on the hearts of my audience."[6] In these opening lines, Apess frames his subject—Metacomet (King Philip)—not as a defeated enemy of the state, but as a patriot whose leadership and martyrdom rival that of America's founding heroes. He strategically includes Philip of Greece and Alexander the Great—figures of classical power—before landing on George Washington, the very icon of American liberty. By placing King Philip within this genealogy of greatness, Apess challenges dominant historiographies that cast Native leaders as savages or obstacles to American progress. His use of the phrase "engraven on the hearts of my audience" is a particularly sharp rhetorical jab—it acknowledges the reverence white Americans have for Washington while laying the groundwork to argue that King Philip, too, deserves that same memorialization.

Later on within the same page, Apess deepens this parallel when he states, "Washington lives endeared and engraven on the hearts of every white in America, never to be forgotten in time—even such is the immortal Philip honored by the degraded but yet grateful descendants who "appreciate his character; so will every patriot, especially in this enlightened age, respect the rude yet all-accomplished son of the forest, that died a martyr to his cause though unsuccessful, yet as glorious as the American Revolution”[7]. Here, Apess underscores the hypocrisy of white reverence for their own revolution while ignoring or condemning Native struggles for sovereignty. By calling King Philip “immortal” and a “martyr to his cause,” Apess flips the dominant narrative: Philip’s defeat is not a failure but a sacrifice akin to those made by American revolutionaries. His phrasing—“as glorious as the American Revolution”—demands that readers confront the selective memory embedded in their nationalism. This is not a plea to join whiteness; it’s a declaration that Indigenous resistance is already a part of the American revolutionary legacy, whether white America chooses to acknowledge it or not.

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[6] Apess, 277

When Apess elevates King Philip to the ranks of Alexander and Washington, he performs a radical recoding of national memory. But this rhetorical move is also made possible by Apess’s own embodied ambiguity: he can speak *into* settler genealogies of heroism because he is, in part, their product—Christianized, literate, English-speaking—yet also Pequot, resistant, and remembering. His invocation of “Philip of Greece” and “Washington” isn’t just rhetorical—it is *performativity as infiltration*. Apess knows the codes of settler reverence and inserts a “savage” into the pantheon, not to seek inclusion, but to reveal the violence that lies beneath the American mythos. His multiracial body, read as white by some, as Indigenous by others, makes this gesture legible, slippery, and ultimately subversive.

At the beginning of Apess’s eulogy, he addresses the audience directly, questioning the types of history they have been taught. He points out that no one remembers Metacomet/King Philip except his descendants, who "appreciate his character," which underscores the deep erasure of Indigenous peoples from the collective historical memory.[8] Apess’s identification as Pequot and his claim to King Philip’s lineage disrupt this erasure, asserting a sense of Indigenous presence and legitimacy where it has been systematically denied. This acknowledgment of his heritage is not only personal but also political, as it demands recognition of both the trauma and resilience embedded in the histories of Native peoples.

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[7] Apess, 277
[8] Apess, 277

Apess continues his critique by addressing the cruelty of settlers who justified their actions as "improving our race and correcting our errors"—a statement that calls out the settler-colonial project for its dehumanizing treatment of Indigenous peoples. The phrase "Held in memory by the degraded" adds further irony, Apess rejects the notion that settlers, as the dominant race, could correct the "errors" of Indigenous peoples, a presumption that deeply entrenches racist ideologies.[9] At this moment, Apess is not speaking from a place of racial ambivalence, but rather from the lived experience of the oppressed, insisting that Native people, and not settlers, are the true bearers of memory and history. There are even many implications for Apess's own complex, multi-layered identities. While his Pequot and white ancestry may have positioned him to feel more liminal in a racialized society, his identification with "our" signals that his Native identity is central to his sense of self. Apess's simultaneous identification with both his Indigenous roots and his experiences within evangelical communities illustrates the intersection of these identities, which he does not see as contradictory but as intertwined parts of his lived experience.

Apess's challenge is most evident in his statement about the settlers' claim to the land, which is "only by the right of conquest." This is not just a historical observation, but a moral indictment of the very basis of settler society, which Apess critiques as built upon violence and injustice. The line, "Melt the prejudice that exists in the hearts of those who are in the possession of his soil," is a call to reckon with the racial and cultural prejudice that continues to inform settler identities and their claims to land. Apess's claim that "the blood of a denominated savage runs in his veins" serves as a powerful rebuttal to the racist ideologies of his time, asserting that Indigenous blood is not something to be ashamed of but rather a symbol of strength, survival, and continuity.

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[9] Apess, 277

In aligning Metacomet with these imperial figures, Apess doesn't simply mimic Anglo-American rhetoric—he masterfully manipulates it. As Lisa Brooks observes, Apess is not merely requesting inclusion but "establishing Native space, with its long history of colonial violence, as the very foundation of the country."[10] His rhetorical strategy is, in part, visual: by evoking the imagery of great men etched into national memory, he inserts Indigenous presence directly into the American political imaginary. As Zuba has noted, this is no passive act, "Such a masterful appropriation and manipulation of imperial iconography demonstrates William Apess's profound engagement with the visual sign systems developed by Anglo-Americans to justify their conquest of indigenous peoples."[11]

Apess's use of language functions like iconography—summoning the grandeur and gravitas of the empire to argue for Native legitimacy. He takes the tools of conquest and retools them for anticolonial memory work. This is not assimilation—it is reclamation. Crucially, Apess does not rely solely on heroic comparisons. He builds a historical counter-narrative using settler sources themselves. One of the most striking examples is his invocation of Mary Rowlandson's captivity narrative — Mary Rowlandson was a colonial settler in 17th-century New England, best known for her captivity narrative, *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God*, in which she recounts her experience of being captured by during King Philip's War. Her narrative portrayed the Native captors as barbaric and savage, reinforcing colonial stereotypes and justifying the violence of settlers.[12] It became a key text in shaping public perceptions of Native peoples and served to legitimize the colonial project by depicting it as a righteous struggle against perceived savagery. However, in his *Eulogy on King Philip*, Apess challenges this portrayal, “It appears that Philip treated his prisoners with a great deal more Christian-like spirit than the Pilgrims did; even Mrs. Rowlandson, although speaking with bitterness sometimes of the Indians, yet in her journal she speaks not a word against him. Philip even hires her to work for him, and pays for her work, and then invites her to dine with him and to smoke with him. And we have many testimonies that he was kind to his prisoners; and when the English wanted to redeem Philip's prisoners, they had the privilege.” [13]

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[10] Brooks, 216

[11] Zuba, 672

[12] Rowlandson, Mary. *Sovereignty and Goodness of God: Narrative of the Captivity and*

This passage is explosive in its rhetorical implications. Apess not only inverts the moral binary of “civilized” and “savage”—he does so by quoting a figure revered by Puritan memory. That Rowlandson speaks “not a word against him” becomes Apess’s strongest evidence of Philip’s character. The suggestion that he paid her, dined with her, and offered her dignity, throws settler cruelty into sharp relief. It is also a stunning claim of moral superiority: Philip, not the Pilgrims, exemplified Christian compassion.[14]

These moments together form a consistent rhetorical strategy: to unsettle settler consciousness by wielding its own texts, heroes, and values against it. In this way, Apess constructs a powerful Indigenous counter narrative—one that refuses to be supplemental, even as it infiltrates settler discourses. His mixed-race identity is a rhetorical position, but not the site of emotional or political investment. Instead, his allegiance is clear: to the memory of Indigenous resistance, to the sovereignty of Native nations, and to the moral exposure of colonial hypocrisy.

This strategy is further exemplified when Apess recounts a specific historical moment involving a Native man who worked for King Philip and was married to a white woman. This

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Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson. Bedford/St. Martin’s; Edition Unstated, 1682.

[13] Apess, 300

[14] Apess, 300

man, loyal to his family and culture, is condemned as a "traitor" by the Pilgrims, who see his interracial union and cultural allegiance as threats to the colonial order. Apess juxtaposes the man's act of loyalty—choosing to stay with his wife and children—even at the cost of his life, against the backdrop of settler colonialism, emphasizing how the Pilgrims' condemnation stems from a racist and religiously charged worldview. By labeling him a "heathen," the Pilgrims mobilize dehumanizing religious rhetoric to rationalize their violence, casting Indigenous kinship as dangerous and disloyal. Apess exposes this logic as deeply hypocritical by portraying the man's familial devotion as an act of profound moral clarity. In doing so, he challenges the settler framework that equates whiteness and Christianity with virtue and casts Indigenous humanity as inherently suspect.

The use of the term "heathen" and the description that "a few tears were shed at his funeral" underscore the Pilgrims' emotional detachment and moral hypocrisy.[15] Yet Apess pushes deeper: this moment becomes a powerful inversion of the figure of the *race traitor*. Throughout history, the notion of a race traitor has been wielded to police racial boundaries, often with violent consequences. In white supremacist discourse, a white person who forms alliances or romantic relationships with people of color is seen as betraying the purity and supremacy of their race. In Black and Indigenous contexts, the term can also be used internally—often controversially—to critique perceived collaboration with systems of racial oppression. Across contexts, "race traitor" reveals the ways racial categories are actively maintained through both ideological policing and material violence.

Apess turns this concept on its head. Here, the so-called "race traitor" is not the white woman who married a Native man, but the Native man himself, condemned by the colonial regime for his refusal to sever ties to his family and community. He is punished not for betraying his race, but for maintaining love and kinship that cross racial boundaries. In Apess's retelling, the true betrayal is not the man's refusal to assimilate, but the colonists' moral and spiritual failure to recognize his humanity and bonds of kinship with his family. The term "traitor" thus becomes a weapon of the settler colonial imagination—used to manufacture racial enemies and justify domination.

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[15] Apess, 300

In this way, Apess reveals that racial allegiance is not a natural category but a colonial construction, produced through legal, religious, and social warfare. The figure of the "race traitor" is not evidence of innate disloyalty, but rather the result of a settler system that defines Native peoples only in opposition to itself. By centering this story, Apess not only critiques colonial violence but also intervenes in the broader conceptual apparatus that defines race through opposition and betrayal. For Apess, as someone with white ancestry and the capacity to pass, he too might have chosen to assimilate. But like the man in the story, Apess chooses not racial purity, but relationship. He reclaims betrayal and reframes it as *refusal*. In this way, Apess flips the settler fantasy—where to be mixed is to be divided—and reimagines it as a powerful act of continuity and care.

This intervention opens space to read mixed-race identity not as a site of confusion or divided loyalty—as it is often framed in dominant discourse—but as a fugitive position. The mixed body, especially one like Apess's that refuses assimilation and instead aligns with Indigenous sovereignty, becomes unruly to the colonial imagination. It slips through the binaries of colonizer/colonized, Christian/heathen, white/Native, and instead exists in refusal of those structures. The "race traitor," reimagined through Apess, is not one who betrays a people, but one who betrays the settler demand for racial purity and loyalty to the empire.

To be mixed, in this framing, is to occupy a fugitive position—a condition of ungovernability, of not fitting the logics that stabilize settler rule. As Fred Moten and Stefano Harney suggest, fugitivity is not simply "escape", but a form of living otherwise: a way of being that refuses capture by the terms of domination, "fugitivity is being separate from settling". Apess's mixed identity—and the way he wields it rhetorically—can thus be seen as a strategic fugitivity. He refuses to perform the role of the grateful assimilated Native or the disavowed "half-breed." Instead, he mobilizes his mixedness to critique settler hypocrisy, affirm kinship ties that cross racial boundaries, and expose the constructedness of racial loyalty altogether.

Apess's storytelling refuses restoration to settler norms. His invocation of the so-called race traitor reveals that loyalty to settler racial orders is not only artificial but violently policed. The Native man's punishment for staying with his white wife, like Apess's own political alignment with Indigenous resistance, shows that what is deemed betrayal is often a refusal to surrender one's humanity to the colonial demand for purity and order. In this way, Apess participates in the making of a fugitive public—a community formed in opposition to domination, sustained by those who take each other in, and defined not by purity or allegiance, but by care, critique, and continuance.

In this sense, the mixed-race figure is not a passive recipient of colonial contradiction but an active disruptor of its racial logics. By reclaiming the figure of the race traitor and placing it in the context of familial love, political allegiance, and moral clarity, Apess transforms betrayal into an act of fidelity—to Indigenous life, to cross-racial kinship, and to radical survivance. Mixed identity, then, becomes fugitive not just in its social placement, but in its political potential to unmake the very structures that define and constrain it.

Near the end of the eulogy Apess offers an anecdotal passage further deepens his critique of settler hypocrisy and racial exclusion, especially within institutions and ideologies that claim moral or spiritual superiority. His stories about being denied basic hospitality—by fellow Christians, no less—reveal not only the interpersonal racism he endured, but also the structural and theological roots of that racism. When Apess writes that "the prayers, preaching, and examples of those pretended piousness has been the foundation of all the slavery and degradation in the American colonies toward colored people," he indicts the entire religious framework that secured settler colonialism.[16] Christianity, far from being a force of liberation or charity, is exposed as a vehicle for control and dehumanization.

Christianity, in Apess's text, is both a weapon and a shield. As a preacher, he occupies the religious structures designed to erase him. Yet rather than assimilate, he turns these structures inside out. His sermons and writings use biblical morality to indict colonialism: "The prayers, preaching, and examples...has been the foundation of all the slavery and degradation in the American colonies."[17] This is not a rejection of Christianity—it is a *fugitive inhabiting* of its space. Apess performs piety to unmask settler hypocrisy. His mixed identity gives him access to the pulpit—and once there, he does not ask for acceptance, but for accountability. Religion becomes a space where he refuses the demand to disappear.

The humor Apess employs—mentioning how Connecticut residents are "so pious that they kill the cats for killing rats, and whip the beer barrels for working upon the Sabbath"—is biting satire. It underscores the absurdity of settler religiosity, which obsesses over the enforcement of doctrine while failing the most basic ethical obligations to fellow human beings.

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[16] Apess, 305

[17] Apess, 305

These are not random anecdotes; they serve as a structural argument that settler Christianity is less about spiritual integrity and more about racial discipline.

In Apess's recounting this visit to Connecticut, he describes how, despite the severe cold of the winter night, a supposedly pious man offers him some firewood but denies him a bed, leaving him to freeze on the cold, hard ground. Apess writes, "My reception, however, was almost as cold as the weather, only he did not turn me out-of-doors; if he had, I know not but I should have frozen to death. My situation was a little better than being out, for he allowed a little wood but no bed, because I was an Indian."[18] This stark image serves as a vivid critique of settler colonialism's moral contradictions. On the one hand, the man is supposedly a devout Christian—someone who belongs to the same church as Apess and claims to uphold the Christian values of charity and brotherhood. On the other hand, this very man, because of Apess's Indigenous identity, denies him the basic hospitality and warmth that would be extended to any other Christian in need.

The coldness of the man's reception reflects not just personal animus but also a systemic and racialized disregard for Indigenous peoples' dignity and survival. Apess is not only denied comfort but is physically left to suffer—his humanity dismissed by the very people who would claim to represent the highest moral and religious standards. The image of Apess left to freeze on the ground starkly contrasts with the pious man's claim to uphold Christian values. Apess's very presence disrupts the settler's comfortable racial and religious order. The chilling image of Apess on the ground symbolizes how, in colonial society, Indigenous people were often left to perish—whether in literal, physical ways or through systemic exclusion and neglect. This moment speaks to the broader colonial practice of stripping Indigenous people of their basic humanity, even as settler society, cloaked in its Christian morality, claims to be the beacon of civility and compassion.

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[18] Apess, 305

This irony also connects to another moment Apess recounts from later that cold evening, involving a different white Christian man who invited him to dine, only to awkwardly place his meal behind the door—a gesture that simultaneously "invites" and rejects Apess's presence.[19] It echoes Mary Rowlandson's own ambivalent experience with King Philip and his people, where she was treated kindly and even invited to dine with them.[20] However, sson's narrative also reveals the discomfort of being placed in such a position—being a captive in an Indigenous space, yet shown hospitality that unsettled her colonial worldview. In Apess's retelling, the man who puts his food behind the door, though attempting an act of civility, still operates from a place of colonial distance and dehumanization. Apess's interaction—both with the man who fears him and the one who offers food in a gesture that both invites and alienates—complicates the traditional narrative of Indigenous passivity or docility.

The phrase "I thought this a queer compliment indeed" captures Apess's disbelief and the absurdity of the situation.[21] Despite the outwardly polite or Christian gestures of offering a meal, the underlying prejudice turns the gesture into something grotesque, and the irony of the situation is not lost on Apess. This moment reflects the dissonance between the supposed ideals of Christianity and the reality of how white settlers treated Indigenous people, even when they shared religious affiliation. Apess's sarcastic tone reveals a keen awareness of how these acts of kindness, when filtered through the lens of racial prejudice, are hollow and insincere.

Apess's layered irony intensifies in the moment when he recounts the gentleman at the Lexington inn. While traveling during a cold New England winter, Apess stops at an inn—an ordinary moment of rest that quickly becomes a scene of racial rupture. When a white guest assumes Apess is white and casually states that “they [Indians] ought to be exterminated,” Apess chooses not to immediately rebut the comment[22]. Instead, he waits. This is not a passive act of assimilation, nor is it an attempt to maintain a passing performance. Rather, it is a moment of strategic withholding—a controlled silence that lets the settler reveal himself fully. Then, Apess intervenes. He writes that he “coolly” announced his identity, deliberately disrupting the settler’s racial fantasy and forcing a moment of shocked recognition.

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[19] Apess, 305
[20] Apess, 300
[21] Apess, 305

Apess’s interruption isn’t just a correction—it is a performative rupture. He chooses the moment *after* the settler has spoken freely, laying bare the unfiltered violence of settler ideology. This isn’t passing in the sense of maintaining a false identity. It’s temporarily occupying the space of presumed whiteness in order to dismantle it from within. His rhetorical strategy allows the settler to reveal the moral contradictions of his worldview, and then *shocks the system* by refusing to play along. Apess’s delivery of commentary isn’t complicity; it’s setup. The power lies in his timing, in how and when he breaks the illusion of perception.

When the man at the inn realizes Apess is Indigenous and suddenly fears being murdered in his sleep, it not only reveals the settler imagination's projection of its own violence—it also becomes almost comically tragic. What exactly does he think Apess, a Christian minister, is going to do? *Hit him with a Bible? Preach him into submission?* This is no absurdist fantastical enemies to lovers… The absurdity of the fear only underscores its deep roots in settler guilt and fantasy.

This moment also exposes the entangled logic of race, class, and power. The settler does not simply misread Apess’s race—he cannot fathom that a man who is of religious authority could be Indigenous. Apess’s presence is disruptive because it violates the settler imagination’s expectation of what Native identity looks and sounds like. He is unplaceable—and thus threatening.

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[22] Apess, 305

His body becomes a text—one that can be read wrongly, then revealed to be the very thing settlerism wishes gone: an articulate, Christian, angry Indigenous man who refuses invisibility. In this moment of the text, Apess does not pass—he *interrupts*. His intervention is not just rhetorical; it is existential. It asserts Indigenous survival and sovereignty in the very heart of settler fantasy. His body, his voice, and his timing become tools of a multiracial critique that refuses erasure, refuses assimilation, and insists on being seen—on his own terms.

Apess's biting comment that the man's conscience "pled guilty" suggests that the settler's fear wasn't rooted in Apess's presence, but in the weight of historical violence.[23] The man wasn't afraid of Apess murdering him—he was afraid of being caught. He was afraid of the fugitive knowledge that Apess carried: not only of the Gospel, but of the truth of what settler society had done to Native people, and how it continued to hide behind "piety" while leaving them out in the cold.

In this way, Apess's mixed-race identity, his presence in Christian spaces, and his sharp political awareness combine to destabilize settler fantasies of innocence and supremacy. He is a disruption, not just of racial categories, but of the spiritual and moral coherence that settler colonialism claims for itself. His presence is a reminder that Indigenous life persists, critiques, and refuses to be frozen out—even when made to sleep by the fire, even when assumed to be exterminable.

This moment, like others, reframes mixed and Indigenous identity as *fugitive, as mode* of being that resists capture, assimilation, and domestication. As they write, "fugitive publics do not need to be restored"—they emerge in the spaces of rejection, mistrust, and misrecognition, building solidarity and meaning in the margins.[24] Apess does not seek refuge in the structures that reject him. Instead, his speech bears witness to the failures of those structures while creating a counter-public. His refusal to be "turn[ed] out of doors," and his insistence on challenging this treatment, underscores how he was not going to accept their mistreatment.[25] By highlighting the hypocrisy of the settlers who mistreated him, Apess makes a deliberate statement on how they misunderstood and misrepresented his people—not as "heathens" or "savages" but as fully human, deserving of dignity and respect. His recounting of these experiences serves to challenge the settler-colonial history that would have erased his people from the story of America. This passage, like much of Apess's work, illustrates the way in which his Indigenous identity, specifically his Pequot background and connection to King Philip, rendered him a target of settler hostility and suspicion, even within the religious and supposedly pious communities he encountered.

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[23] Apess, 305

Apess's multiracial identity is not incidental to his project—it is the condition of his resistance. It allows him to pass through settler spaces, to claim rhetorical authority, to speak the language of conquest while flipping it toward decolonial ends. His choice to identify as Pequot, to align with Indigenous sovereignty, to reject the comfort of whiteness—this is the fugitive act. As Moten and Harney write, fugitivity is not simply escape, but "being separate from settling."[26]Apess refuses to settle into settler categories—racial, religious, or historical. Instead, he writes a multiracial critique rooted in loyalty to those cast out, to stories untold, and to futures not yet foreclosed.

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[24] Harney et al., 63–64
[25] Apess, 305
[26] Harney et al., 11

Chapter 2:

THE AESTHETICS OF FUGITIVE DESIRE: RACIAL ANXIETY AND THE FETISHIZATION OF THE MIXED-RACE BODY IN CLOTEL

✦ ✧ ✦ ✧ ***Clotel, or The President's Daughter By:*** **William Wells Brown** ✦ ✧ ✦ ✧

In William Wells Brown's *Clotel*, the eponymous mixed-race protagonist embodies the contradictions and fears of her time. Under the doctrine of partus sequitur ventrem, racial identification was ritualized within institutions to ensure the perpetuation of slavery which was the foundation of the economy during the 19th century. Clotel, though nearly indistinguishable from her white counterparts, is enslaved because - "a child inherited its status from its mother. Without regard to whether the father was free, enslaved women gave birth to enslaved children. This rule proved to be of immense economic and political significance." [27] As the fictionalized daughter of Thomas Jefferson, she embodies this tension between both whiteness and Blackness, where her beauty is not just an aesthetic feature, but a critique of the racialized and gendered social order that seeks to control her body and labor.

During the 19th century, ideals of beauty were built off the foundations of whiteness, privileging features associated with Eurocentric standards. In Clotel, the protagonist is described as "having a complexion as most of those waiting with a wish to become her purchaser", positioning her as desirable precisely because she embodies traits associated with her whiteness.[28] Clotel's physical description is not an affirmation of her individuality but a tool to enhance her marketability. This contradiction is central to Brown's portrayal of Clotel: she reveals the instability of the racial order. Mixed-race individuals like Clotel demonstrate that racial categories are not fixed or natural, but social constructs created to uphold slavery and white supremacy. By making racial boundaries appear permeable, Clotel threatens the foundations of an American society built on strict racial divisions.

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[27] A. D. Davis, 459
[28] Brown, 49

Throughout the book, little is revealed about her interiority, her thoughts, or her individuality are largely left unexamined. The emphasis on her physical appearance is one of the few aspects of her character described in depth, but it reveals a troubling contradiction. While Clotel as a character may seem hollow, this paper will examine how Brown's use of racial aestheticization of Clotel as a mixed race woman in the way that it unravels the fabric of racial construction by demonstrating the permeability of racial boundaries and fragility of a social order built on top of slavery. This duality pokes at the deep anxieties in a society dependent on racial hierarchies to sustain its economic foundations. As Angela Davis argues, "the invention of racial categories was closely tied to the economic interests of the slave system." [29]Similarly, Elise Lemire emphasizes that racial identity was historically linked to perceived sexual desirability, further destabilizing ideas of inherent racial difference.[30] Brown's depiction of Clotel participates in these historical tensions, exposing how race was constructed in service of power.

By opening the novel with the dialectical assertion, "With the growing population of the slaves in the Southern States of America, there is a fearful increase of half-whites, most of whose fathers are slaverowners and their mother slaves," Brown introduces the classification of "mulatto" as both a racial and social problem.[31] This growing "mulatto" population was seen as a destabilizing force, one that could lead to a rupture in the nation's racial and political order, particularly due to this nation's economic and societal structures being inextricably tied to slavery. Far from being a passive victim of oppression, Clotel embodies the fear that the traditional racial and political structures are unsustainable. Her existence, as the product of both an enslaved Black mother and a white enslaver—specifically Thomas Jefferson—forces a confrontation with the reality of America's racial contradictions, offering a critique of the nation's racial politics on the brink of the Civil War. Her story is not just one of personal tragedy, but a larger commentary on the ways in which the racialized body — particularly the mixed-race female body—was constructed as both a threat and catalyst for social upheaval. Rather than simply embodying the tragic fate often attributed to mixed-race characters in 19th-century literature, Clotel's story offers a commentary on the racialized female body as both a site of exploitation and resistance, serving as a metaphor for the nation's crisis of identity and reckoning with the logic that has been used to justify slavery.

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[29] Davis, 7
[30] Lemire, 1
[31] Brown, 45

Brown is setting up the reader by emphasizing the moral contradictions that will shape the trajectory of Clotel's life that follows the classic 'tragic mulatto' trope. While Clotel's narrative engages with the pervasive anxieties surrounding America's demographic future in the Antebellum period. William Wells Brown uses hypervisibility and commodification of mixed-race women to critique the social and moral contradictions of slavery and American racial hierarchies. Even the text's description of mulatto and quadroon women emphasizes their distinct position within the racialized economy of slavery.

These women, "distinguished for their fascinating beauty," are simultaneously objectified and commodified.[32] The scene that this is most illuminated is when Brown situates his critique within the social content of "Negro balls and parties," spaces that serve as microcosms of the larger societal dynamics of fetishism and anti-Blackness.[33] At these gatherings, mixed-race women are showcased as spectacles, their beauty not only celebrated but commodified. Brown writes, “Many of these women are the favourites of persons who furnish them with the means of paying their owners, and not a few are dressed in the most extravagant manner.”[34] This description paints the picture of how despite their apparent privilege—fine clothing and financial support—it is entirely contingent on their exploitation.

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[32] Brown, 46

[33] Brown, 46

Angela Davis’s observations sharpen this critique by also emphasizing the compounded vulnerabilities of enslaved women under slavery. Davis writes, “As females, slave women were inherently vulnerable to all forms of sexual coercion. If the most violent punishments of men consisted in floggings and mutilations, women were flogged and mutilated, as well as raped. Rape, in fact, was an uncamouflaged expression of the slaveholder's economic mastery and the overseer's control over Black women as workers.”[35] The fetishized treatment of mixed-race women at such events like the “Negro Ball” aligns with Davis’s analysis as it reflects how these woman’s bodies are doubly exploited—for their labor and as objects to be sexually dominated. These women are granted visibility and adornment, but insofar as they serve the desires of white men who maintain control over their lives. This exemplifies what scholar Elise Lemire identifies in her book *Miscegenation* that the 19th century “the invention of ‘race’ as a set of traits that are more or less sexually desirable.”[36] This dynamic illuminates how race, in this context, was not a biological reality as some may assume but rather a social construct defined through traits that rendered certain bodies as more sexually desirable or economically advantageous. Clotel herself embodies the constructed traits that render this “mulatto class” of women sexually desirable and commodifiable. Her beauty and light complexion both position her as a prize and pawn within the oppressive systems of slavery.

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[34] Brown, 46

[35] Davis, 7

[36] Lemire, 1

Clotel's mother, Currer, navigates these oppressive structures of enslavement shaped by the imposed "matriarchal structures" forced upon Black community under slavery.[37] Thomas Jeffereson, Clotel's fictional father in the book is absent for he is dead, and he bears no responsibility for their offsprings. While Clotel's narrative is fictional, it parallels the historical reality of Thomas Jefferson's relation with Sally Hemings, an enslaved Black woman. Jefferson in the *Richmond Recorder* was accused of having sex with a woman to whom he is not married to, all of whom were born into slavery and legally classified as either "bastards or slaves themselves."[38] While Clotel's narrative parallels the historical reality of Thomas Jefferson's relationship with Sally Hemings, Brown's portrayal of Jefferson's absence is not about Clotel inheriting value through him. Instead, Jefferson's ghostly presence underscores the hypocrisy of a nation that proclaims liberty while perpetuating slavery. The silence surrounding Jefferson's responsibility reveals the moral emptiness at the heart of American democracy. Jefferson's absence in her life is not merely physical but also symbolic, as his name becomes a hollow marker of her worth. Clotel is technically his daughter, except rather than granting her freedom as a legitimate heir, it becomes a tool to commodify her in the marketplace slavery. Her value is not tied to familial kinship or connection, but to the social capital of her association with a prominent white man.

Brown's portrayal of Jefferson's absence is not about Clotel inheriting value through him. Jefferson himself is almost irrelevant to the story, appearing only briefly in the novel's first chapter and then disappearing entirely. His absence emphasizes that familial ties to whiteness, no matter how prominent, offer no real protection under the system of American slavery. In contemporary discussions of privilege, particularly in Critical Mixed Race Studies, advantages are often associated with a combination of familial ties to whiteness and appearance. Sociological frameworks like "white privilege by proxy" describe how individuals with a White parent may access valuable systemic resources, such as housing or legal protection, even if they are not perceived as fully White.[39] "White privilege by proxy" has become a prominent term within Critical Mixed Race Studies, helping to explore how proximity to whiteness can sometimes afford advantages to mixed-race individuals. However, these frameworks do not neatly apply to Clotel's historical context. Currer, Clotel's mother, recognizes that her daughters' appearance might offer them a slightly better life and raises them to perform in social spaces where their beauty could serve as a form of currency. Clotel's physical appearance, influenced by her being light skin, offers her access to different kinds of labor. On one hand, she might be allotted domestic labor, such as working in the household of an enslaver, where her looks may allow her to move in spaces of greater comfort or with a higher status than others. On the other hand, her beauty may render her more susceptible to sexual exploitation, as her appearance becomes a tool for objectification and commodification within the racialized economy. Both of these forms of labor—though distinct in their nature—are still forms of labor under the oppressive system of slavery.

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[37] Davis, 13

[38] Lemire, 12

These privileges tied to her appearance—access to certain types of labor or a particular social status—are paradoxical, however. They do not shield her from the brutal realities of slavery. Clotel may be allowed a different type of labor, but it is still labor within a system that seeks to exploit and dehumanize her. Her appearance, like her association with Jefferson, ultimately exposes the complexity and irony of her position: she may be granted slightly better circumstances in some regards, but these privileges are not a shield from exploitation. They do not offer her autonomy or true protection. At the end of the day, all the labor Clotel is allotted—whether domestic, sexual, or otherwise—is shaped by her commodification in the system of slavery.

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[39] Waring, 63

Yet, despite Currer's efforts, the systemic violence of slavery denies Clotel and Althesa any true protection, autonomy, or escape from commodification. Clotel's association with Jefferson does not grant her privilege; it becomes yet another tool for exploitation. As Dr. Chandra Waring describes, "white privilege by proxy" involves "valuable resources afforded through a White parent"—but in Clotel's world, even the bloodline of one of America's most powerful men cannot shield her.[40] Brown's portrayal of Clotel thus exposes the brutal racial economy of 19th-century America, where whiteness, unless fully embodied and legally recognized, remains inaccessible to those marked as Black.

This brings me to an ironic observation: at the beginning of this paper, I mention Thomas Jefferson far more frequently than he actually appears in the novel. In fact, Jefferson doesn't even make a physical appearance in the text—he is merely mentioned, a fleeting reference that emphasizes the paradox of his significance. This is itself a pointed commentary on how we, as readers, may place disproportionate emphasis on his role or influence in discussions of race, privilege, and legacy. In the novel, Jefferson's presence is limited to being a distant name, a connection that Clotel and her family can never truly access, and yet his mention dominates critical discussions, both in the book and in modern discourse.

Clotel's world, while fictionalized, is fundamentally a reflection of historical material reality. Brown's depiction is grounded in the material conditions of antebellum America, where racial identity was not simply a matter of appearance or bloodline, but a structural product of slavery's economic imperatives. From a historical materialist perspective, the contradictions Clotel faces throughout the novel—being simultaneously hyper-visible and powerless—emerge directly from the economic foundations of American slavery, not from accidents of individual morality or prejudice alone.

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[40] Waring, 63

Currer's role in raising her daughters, Clotel and Althesa to perform in these spaces, where their appearance and charm become commodities designed to appeal to the white men who attend "Negro balls" aligns with Althusser's concept of the Ideological state Apparatus (ISA).[41] While these gatherings are called "Negro balls," the majority of the attendees are white.[42] These events, described as having a "degree of gentility and decorum," serve as preliminary auctions, where women like Clotel are displayed, evaluated, and effectively pre-sold.[43] Clotel's mother envisions these performances as a means of achieving relative safety and security for her daughters. By engaging in these performances, Currer enacts the ideologies of the slave system, where her daughter's visibility and value are entirely contingent upon their capacity to perform within these oppressive structures. Currer's complicity in these performances, born out of her desire to secure better futures for her daughters, highlights this paradox of slavery where survival and care necessitate engaging with the very structures that perpetuate violence. Yet, the narrative reveals the inherent fragility of such hopes when a man such as Horatio Green waltzes into Clotel's life at one of these balls.

Brown's depiction of Horatio Green's decision to purchase Clotel was at one of such balls, long before her official auction. Brown writes that, "It was at one of these parties that Horatio Green, the son of a wealthy gentleman of Richmond, was first introduced to Clotel."[44] This moment is critical because it sets the stage for how these social spaces function as a marketplace for desire and power. By the time Clotel reaches the auction block, her fate has already been determined. The public sale only formalizes a transaction that began in private, at a ball where her value was assessed not as a person but as a product. Horatio Green's promise to Clotel, "You shall soon be free and your own mistress," is symbolic of the hollow assurances that sustain the illusion of mobility and autonomy within a system fundamentally designed to strip away both.[45] The fetishization of Clotel's beauty and proximity to whiteness might make her desirable, but it does not protect her from exploitation or grant her true agency. Instead, it reinforces her commodification, with Horatio's promise serving as another layer of control disguised as liberation. While he speaks of freedom, he simultaneously reaffirms the power structures that deny it, as he asserts and exercises control over her body and future.

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[41] Althusser, 96
[42] Brown, 48
[43] Brown, 48
[44] Brown, 48

The men who first encountered Clotel at the ball, captivated by her beauty and charming aura, reappear at the auction block, now prepared to purchase her. This transition from the ball to the auction block reinforces the role of fetishism in revealing the underlying transactional nature of their gaze. The auctioneer's introduction, proclaiming Clotel as "Miss Clotel," a "real Albino fit for a fancy girl for any one," encapsulates this duality.[46] It's noticeable how this aestheticization of Clotel's mixed race identity operates as both a rupture and a reinforcement of racial hierarchies. Clotel's physical appearance, described as "features as finely defined as any of her sex of pure Anglo-Saxon," functions to render her body a contested site for reinforcement and disruption of racial purity narratives.[47] Clotel's physical appearance, despite being praised for its alignment with Eurocentric standards of beauty, destabilizes these fantasies of racial purity, as it highlights the permeability of racial boundaries in a society that insists on their immutability.

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[45] Brown, 48
[46] Brown, 49
[47] Brown, 49

Brown does not merely depict stereotypes like the Jezebel or the tragic mulatto; he mobilizes them strategically. By foregrounding the contradictions between the romanticized beauty of Clotel and the brutal commodification of her body, Brown exposes the dehumanizing logic underlying American slavery. His use of stereotype becomes a tool for critique, revealing how even "privileged" bodies remain ensnared in systems of exploitation.

The portrayal of Clotel as being an “intelligent”, morally upright, pure, and “virtuous creature” is even more ironic when examined under the lens of the pervasive anxiety that surrounded interracial marriage in the Antebellum period of America.[48] The very idea of the auctioneer naming these ‘marketable qualities’ to a group of horny, married men is very disturbing for it raises uncomfortable contradictions in the context of society that criminalized and spread societal paranoia around interracial relationships. In an environment, steeped heavily in anti-Blackness, the notion of a white man like Horatio Green coming in to purchase a woman to be his “wife”—in the legal sense—underscores the instability of racial boundaries. Especially since anxiety over racial boundaries extended far into the realm of marriage, where the intersection of race and romantic relationships were viewed as a violation of social order and racial hierarchies. It was Black and white in the sense that Blackness, in particular, was often seen as a moral stain—that became wrapped into the biological inheritance of undesirable traits that threatened the “purity” of the white race. The notion of racial purity is undermined by the fact that mixed-race people like Clotel are simultaneously fetishized and discarded, their value contingent upon how closely they approximate white beauty and behavior.

Clotel as a character is the embodiment of a lot of the anxieties of the time that threaten the rigid constructs of race and marriage that reinforce an economy of exploitation. She is both desired and objectified, sold and commodified, but never truly perceived as an equal or a person with autonomy over her own body and future. While her proximity to whiteness renders her desirable, it also renders her a spectacle—one that is a grotesque painting of sexual fantasies and exploitation. This is illustrated in the scene of Clotel standing, "with tears in her eyes," as people are, "laughing, joking, swearing, smoking, spitting and talking."[49] In this horrific scene, Clotel's commodification is not only an act of physical and sexual violence but also heavily racialized. The crowd's indifference to her suffering, contrasted by this terrifying voyeuristic enjoyment of the spectacle, bears the truth that the commodification of her body is not just a personal violation, but a societal one. As a woman who approximates the idealized white and carries the mark of Blackness, she embodies the anxieties of a society that is desperately trying to maintain control over such transgressions.

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[48] Brown, 50

Horatio Green, captivated by Clotel's light complexion and allure, purchases her and establishes her in a romanticized domestic setting as "the mistress of her own cottage." Within this idyllic imagery depicted in the chapter "The Quadroon's Home," Clotel is isolated, left alone with her child while Horatio pursues his rising political ambitions.[50] As Clotel is stepping into her role as the "mistress of her own cottage," paired with also her new role as a mother, evokes a familiar trope in the 19th century of domestic bliss central to romantic fiction of rural beauty and tranquility.[51] The scene is depicted as a pastoral cottagecore dream with, "The tasteful hand of art had not learned to imitate the lavish beauty and harmonious disorder of nature but lived together in loving amity, and spoke in accordant tones."[52] Even the idea of a "harmonious disorder" in nature could be a subtle nod to this racialized view on mixed-race women, as it evokes an image of something out of balance or misaligned with the natural order of things. The cottage, with its seemingly ‘harmonious relationship between nature and art, can thus be read as an ironic setting—a space that, like Clotel’s position within it, is full of tension between the ideal and the real, between what society claims to be “natural” and what it deems “unnatural” in the biological sense.

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[49] Brown, 50
[50] Brown, 64
[51] Brown, 121
[52] Brown, 64

This is critique has many layers for it exposes how the romanticized setting itself is entangled with the racial ideologies of the time, where beauty and order often aligned with whiteness and “purity,” while the “disorder” of mixed race identity was portrayed as a deviation from the natural and social order. Ultimately, the chapter’s romantic veneer is a facade, as Clotel’s so-called “home” is a gilded cage, a space that reinforces her vulnerability rather than providing refuge. While the genre often celebrates love as redemptive and triumphant in conquering all evil in this world, Clotel’s idyllic trad-wife relationship with Horatio underscores the hollowness of marriage within the context slavery. Even Horatio’s promise to rescue Clotel’s family— “he pleaded that he was unable, owing to the fact that he had not come into possession of his share of property, yet he promised that when he did, he would seek them out and purchase them” — reveals his love to be an illusion of care rather than genuine commitment to Clotel’s liberation.[53] Brown uses the collapse of this romanticized narrative to draw attention to how Horatio’s neglect of Clotel and empty reassurances mirror the broader failures of the systems that enslave and commodify her, but Clotel does not remain defined by these betrayals.

Clotel’s life takes a sharp and harrowing turn when Horatio sells her to Mrs. French, a decision that not only abandons Clotel into a much harsher existence but also separates her from her child. This act of betrayal marks the culmination of Horatio’s neglect, for he prioritizes his ‘real-world’ ambitions over his responsibilities to Clotel and their daughter. When Horatio’s wife and father-in-law demand Clotel’s removal from the state, she is treated not as a person but as a threat to Horatio’s already fragile domestic arrangement. For Mrs. French the presence of Clotel in her home becomes a reminder of her own vulnerability within this system. Even though she is a white woman married to a man of power, she feels threatened by the beauty and charm of Clotel, fearing her husband might be enticed by her. The statement, “Every married woman in the far South looks upon her husband as unfaithful and regards every quadroon servant as a rival,” speaks to the deep seated fear and paranoia, rooted in the racial and social hierarchies that defined and justified slavery.[54] The fear was not just that white men might be sexually attracted to enslaved women, but that the relationships between white men and this class “mulatto” women—especially those who embodied some of the physical features of whiteness—would destabilize the rigid racial purity standards that slavery was built on top of. These fears manifested not only in jealousy of white wives but also in legal and social measures designed to prevent miscegenation, such as anti-miscegenation laws that sought to prevent interracial marriages or relationships.

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[53] Brown, 65

For Mrs. French, Clotel’s beauty and light complexion challenges the rigid racial boundaries that were supposed to keep white women and Black women separate and distinct. Mrs. French’s decision to cut Clotel’s hair— “as short as any of the full-blooded Negroes in the dwelling” — represents an effort to strip her of her femininity and desirability, reducing her from an object of sexual desire to an object of subjugation.[55] Mrs. French’s attempt to strip Clotel of her femininity by cutting her hair can be interpreted as an effort to subvert Clotel’s perceived sexual power and control the ways in which her body is viewed. Unlike Mrs. French, whose jealousy is rooted in a sense of competition over her husband’s affections, the men’s desire for Clotel is driven by their fetishization of her appearance and the fantasy of under-the-table affairs, which are justified to them because women like Clotel are property. Andrienne Davis confirms this, noting that "without marriage or human rights, the female slave is a sexual vessel as well as chattel. There is no patriarchy to protect her unless the master assumes the role of her protector, that is, if she is his concubine and has his children.[56] Rather than confronting her husband, Mrs. French directs her jealousy and anger towards Clotel, seeking to strip her of the very qualities that make her desirable. In Mrs. French's eyes, Clotel's virtue and beauty are not innocuous, they represent a potential threat to her own social position within the domestic space which was the only place she could control—which fuels her paranoid need to control and strip Clotel of her power.

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[54] Brown, 121

[55] Brown, 121

She believes that Clotel's beauty and proximity to whiteness make her a sexual threat—a perception rooted in the Jezebel stereotype—even though nowhere throughout the novel has Clotel acted in any sexually inappropriate manner.[57] The stereotype works to amplify and legitimize Mrs. French's fears and make her actions towards—like cutting her hair—seem justified in her mind. Overall, this perception reflects the power of the stereotype itself—it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy in Mrs. French's mind. By buying into this paranoid view of Clotel, Mrs. French creates an environment in which Clotel is further marginalized and isolated even from the enslaved folks. Clotel's lightness, far from shielding her from exploitation, subjects her to additional layers of violence, jealousy, and control. Brown's description of Clotel as "handsome" yet leading "a secluded life" underscore the deliberate loneliness imposed on her—an isolation as much social as it is physical.[58] By interweaving the Jezebel stereotype with Clotel's 'tragic' arc, Brown's portrayal of Clotel reveals the insidious ways in which slavery manipulated beauty, femininity, and racial identity in order to maintain its power—while also demonstrating how these dynamics fractured relationships among the enslaved people themselves. The stereotype isn't just a personal belief for Mrs. French; it's a larger ideological state apparatus that upholds power structures and divides people, ensuring that those at the top of the social hierarchy can maintain control.

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[56] A. D. Davis, 459

[57] qtd. in Pilgrim

[58] Brown, 121

However, even in her diminished state, Clotel still remains striking within her appearance. Brown writes, "Even with her short hair, Clotel was handsome. Her life had been a secluded one, and though now nearly thirty years of age, she was still beautiful." This lingering beauty becomes also a point of contention, particularly among the other enslaved servants in the household, who mock Clotel, by saying, "She tinks she white, when she come here wid dat long har of hers."[59] The other enslaved servants' ridicule, exposes the complex interplay of jealousy and resentment towards Clotel, whose light complexion and former 'privileges' alienated her even among others within the enslaved community. Their comments, such as "Miss Clo needn't strut round so big, she got short nappy har well as I," reflects how Clotel's forced transformation is perceived as a leveling act.[60] Except, what the other enslaved people and Mrs. French are failing to realize that Clotel's transformation complicates her identity as it masculinizes her appearance, allowing her to navigate the world in a more fluid way, playing with both racial and gender boundaries. Clotel's new, more androgynous appearance, though initially seen as a means of subjugating her more, paradoxically grants her an opportunity for agency and mobility within the constraints of the system.

Mr. French's decision to sell Clotel, was driven by the urge to avoid the responsibility of her death, for the family observed that Clotel had been "refusing to eat" due to the grief of being "seperated from her dear child" and was "dying from grief."[61] This emotional turmoil had brought Clotel so close to the brink of death, but rather than offering her solace, Mr. and Mrs. French saw her distress as an inconvenience. This decision, rooted in self-interest and preservation of the families' image, inadvertently leads Clotel to meet William, another enslaved person in her new enslaver's household. Clotel's interactions with her new enslavers, however, reveal a weary disillusioned woman. Unlike before with Horatio, she no longer responds to flattery or gifts with the same eagerness. Her new enslaver showers her with material possessions— "a gold watch and chain, and other glittering presents" —but for Clotel she shows no interest in them. Clotel's disinterest in the material gifts from her new master reflects a deeper realization about the false promises of liberation and fulfillment she once believed in.[62] From her childhood, Clotel and her sister Althesa had been conditioned to think that their beauty, social status, and romantic relationships, such as her involvement with Horatio, could offer her a way out of enslavement and secure her a better life. Her mother Currier believed that allowing her daughters to attend "Negro Balls" and marrying someone of higher social standing would be the key to her freedom or to gaining a position of respect.

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[59] Brown, 121
[60] Brown, 121
[61] Brown, 122

Now, in her more weary and disillusioned state, Clotel recognizes the reality of her situation. Her previous illusions of freedom through romantic affection or material wealth are not longer sufficient enough to truly mask the truth: as a light-skinned sexually desirable woman in the eyes of enslavers, she remains in many ways a convenient object of sexual desire—much like a sex worker her worth is defined her utility to others. This reduction of her identity mirrors the broader historical exploitation of mixed-race women. K. Sue Jewell observes, "Many of the slavery-era black people sold into prostitution were mulattoes. Also, freeborn light-skinned black women sometimes became the willing concubines of wealthy white southerners. This system, called placage, involved a formal arrangement for the white suitor/customer to financially support the black woman and her children in exchange for her long-term sexual services. The white men often met the black women at "Quadroon Balls, a genteel sex market."[63] Clotel exists within a system that commodifies her body, reducing her worth to her physical beauty and her ability to perform a certain role in the fantasies of those around her.

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[62] Brown, 141

Except a shift occurs when Clotel finds the comfortability to confide in William that, "If I had the money," continued she, "I would bid farewell to this place," her words are a reflection of her understanding of freedom and she begins to articulate her desire for autonomy that is grounded in her own agency.[64] In this disillusioned state, she is no longer under the illusion freedom can be earned through placing in faith in promises of love or hollow realities of social mobility under the facade of whiteness. Clotel is beginning to disentangle herself from the illusions that once defined her aspirations for freedom, she starts to realize that true liberation will never be handed to her by the oppressors who keep her enslaved for their benefit. Instead, her freedom resides within her own hands, offering a new path forward—not just for her own liberation, but for the possibility of freeing William as well.

In this context, William offers a different kind of gaze—one that is not rooted in fetishization or jealousy, but rather in shared suffering, respect, and empathy. His words, "you look a good deal like a man with your short hair," are really not meant to objectify her rather it speaks to her transformation.[65] William does not see Clotel as a mere object of desire or someone to compete with in the household, but rather someone shaped by the same traumas and loss, that allows him to see past her appearance. He is not enamored with her beauty or "mulatto" status; he is simply moved by the resonance of their shared suffering. His acknowledgment of her as someone who has also lost everything, creates a foundation for genuine kinship. For the first time in her life, she has the space to speak openly about her aspirations without being dismissed, and it is with William, who has also dreamed of his freedom and who seeks his own liberation, who listens without judgement. Her response, “I have often been told that I would make a better looking man than a woman,” reflects her growing awareness of how her altered appearance—specifically her short hair and more androgynous looks—allow her to fluidly bend traditional gender roles, even within the confines of enslavement.[66] Clotel’s acknowledgment that she could be perceived as more masculine paired with her light skin, allows her to recognize that it has some utility in her life, signaling a shift in how she understands her identities.

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[63] qtd. in Pilgrim
[64] Brown, 141
[65] Brown, 141

Brown’s portrayal of Clotel’s gender fluidity reveals the intertwined nature of racism and misogyny. As soon as Clotel performs masculinity, she accesses a measure of freedom otherwise denied to her as a mixed-race woman. In doing so, Brown critiques the ways gender and race co-construct systems of oppression, showing that liberation requires dismantling both hierarchies simultaneously.

William does not view Clotel as an object of fetishization or a subject of tragedy. In this way, William to some extent helps to facilitate Clotel’s undoing of these damaging stereotypes expected of her by readers at the time, offering a vision of her not as a tragic victim or a sexually available object, but as a woman capable of taking control of her own fate. Brown introduces William’s gaze as a radical departure, where he challenges the dominant tropes of the tragic mulatto and the Jezebel. In the 19th century, the literature of that time often depicted mixed race women as either pitiable victims of their racial ambiguity or hypersexualized objects of male desire. William’s respect for Clotel runs deep, for it is rooted in this solidarity within their shared struggles, and it disrupts these conventions by offering her to envision how she is capable of claiming agency over her identities by subverting the gaze that has been used to oppress her.

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[66] Brown, 141

Of course, even with William's encouragement, Clotel still has doubts. Every illusion of freedom she once held, whether through romantic affection or her class status as a mulatto woman, denied her autonomy by reducing her to an object to be exchanged/discarded and exploited for her utility to others. Clotel's internalized doubts are evident when she immediately retracts her earlier comments about freedom, nervously dismissing her words about leaving with, "I am always talking nonsense."[67]. Which speaks to how deeply the systemic denial of her agency has shaped her psyche, leading her to censor her own aspirations, even in conversation with someone she eventually develops trust with. William, however, refuses to let Clotel's self-doubt linger unchecked, for his response is not of judgement or condescension but empathy—his heart "felt for others," and he was deeply moved by her pain.[68] While he deeply feels her pain, it does not stem from seeing her as a tragic figure but recognizing in her a suffering he intimately understood for he too "had been separated from near and dear relatives."[69]

William's offer of his hard-earned savings— "There, Miss Clotel, you said if you had the means you would leave this place; there is money enough to take you to England, where you will be free" — is an expression of his solidarity with Clotel's pursuit of freedom.[70] At the same time, this sentiment acknowledges the societal privileges tied to proximity to whiteness when he observes, "You are much fairer than many of the white women of the South, and can easily pass for a free white lady."[71] This statement reflects William's internalized awareness of their society, where lighter skin or passing as white is perceived to be able to afford greater mobility and legitimacy. Yet, Clotel's response to William disrupts this dynamic for she refuses to leave without him, by giving him the ultimatum that, "I will take the money only on one condition," said she; “and that is, that I effect your escape as well as my own.”[72] Her refusal to leave without him demonstrates a deliberate rejection of the racial hierarchies that position her as more likely to succeed while diminishing his potential. Similarly, her belief in his agency and potential, counters the racial hierarchies that position darker skinned individuals like William as inherently subordinate. Her insistence on mutual liberation counters the systems that privilege her appearance while devaluing his.

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[67] Brown, 141
[68] Brown, 142
[69] Brown, 141
[70] Brown, 142
[71] Brown, 142

Clotel’s plan not only bends gender expectations placed on her as a woman but also subverts the racial boundaries of the 19th century. She states, “I will assume the disguise of gentleman and you that of a servant, and we will take passage on a steamboat and go to Cincinnati, and thence to Canada.”[73] By taking on the guise of a gentleman, she is crossing societal lines that normally work to confine her. Throughout Clotel’s life, she was conditioned to seek freedom through the mechanism of white male privilege, playing into the tragic mulatto trope, where “mulatto” women are portrayed as seeking salvation or escape through the intercession of white men. However, instead of relying on a white man’s protection or aid, she uses her light skin and short hair to assume the disguise of a white man herself. She plays into the racialized and gendered readings of her body, but instead of being confined by them, she uses them as a tool for their escape.

Visually, the plan Clotel and William had devised is nearly foolproof, for it leverages both the performance of gender, race, and class to navigate across different societal structures of the time that would have otherwise posed a significant threat to their freedom. Even the fact that Clotel is able to procure clothes for her disguise and, in such a short time, transform into “Mr. Johnson” speaks to how carefully thought out and strategic their escape plan was. Her choice of attire was— “a neat suit of black, she had a white silk handkerchief tied round her chin, as if she was an invalid. A pair of green glasses covered her eyes” — works on multiple levels, for her appearance lends herself to being less approachable, thereby decreasing the likelihood of detection.[74] This visual deception is very critical for it not only allows Clotel to pass as a white man but also mitigates any suspicion of her being a runaway slave, which could have arisen if she had traveled openly as just herself. By assuming the role of a white man in this performance, Clotel can access a level of mobility and agency that would have been otherwise inaccessible to her.

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[72] Brown, 142

[73] Brown, 142

Whereas, William, as a Black man, plays into the racialized expectations that see him as an inferior, subjugated being. His role as the servant in this subversion thus mirrors the same societal frameworks that pits him against Clotel—at least in terms of their perceived social statuses. As William talks loudly about his Master’s wealth, saying “I don’t like dees steam boats no how,” and lamenting, “I hope when marser goes on a journey agin he will take de carriage and de hosses” —he is not simply “playing along”; on the contrary he is exaggerating the behaviors to such a degree that it becomes caricatured.[75] William ensures that no one will suspect his true intentions—which allows for him and Clotel to pass unnoticed and remain undetected by those who might otherwise gain suspicion of this being an escape plot. Without the disguises, Clotel and William could have easily been perceived as an interracial couple, which would have surely put them under suspicion, and their escape would likely have been thwarted. By disguising themselves, they effectively play into the performance of identity, manipulating societal expectations around race and gender. They defy the assumptions of the society around them, avoiding paranoia and scrutiny that could come from being seen as a couple that crosses racial and gender conventions of the time.

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[74] Brown, 143

[75] Brown, 143

Ultimately they make it to freedom, except Clotel decides to return to the South in search of daughter after all the risks they have taken to escape. Despite William's protests Clotel is willing to risk everything for she recognizes that her freedom would be meaningless without her daughter Mary. By choosing to return to Virginia, Clotel challenges the notion of freedom as solely a physical escape from slavery. Her choice complicates the traditional narratives of freedom because it refuses to accept a vision of liberation that comes at the cost of their very bonds of kinship that the system seeks to destroy. Even William, though freed from the chains of enslavement, ultimately realizes "that prejudice followed the coloured man into every place that he might enter" as even in the Northern states, the specter of slavery continues to poison the American landscape for it is the foundation of American democracy.[76] Clotel's willingness to return to Richmond in search of her daughter is a self-determined act of maternal affection that subverts the narrative of tragic mulatto victimhood, demonstrating her resolve and refusal to be constrained by societal expectations of what freedom should look like. In this way, Clotel defies the stereotype of the passive, victimized woman and embraces an active, maternal love that often these attempts to strip from Black and "quadroon" women like her, which "True to woman's nature, she had risked her own liberty for another."[77]

Clotel's final act, where she is recaptured and chooses to leap from the bridge, is her own decision and not one of despair in her "condition" of being mixed race, but an assertion of control over her fate in a system that has relentlessly sought to control her body and her life. As the novel describes, "Her resolution was taken…and then, with a single bound, she vaulted over the railings of the bridge, and sunk for ever beneath the waves of the river!"[78] This moment reflects her defiance in choosing her own fate— "death is freedom"—for it is a refusal to be re-enslaved and redefined by others. It is not simply a personal tragedy, but a fugitive refusal—a radical assertion of autonomy in the face of re-enslavement. It is what Fred Moten might call a form of *undercommon fugitivity*: an insurgent flight from the structures of governance and visibility that define Black life under racial capitalism. In choosing death over capture, Clotel stages an exit from the dominant social order that refuses to recognize her full humanity. Her leap becomes a rejection of the terms offered to her and a gesture toward the undercommons—a space outside of legibility, where refusal becomes a form of life

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[76] Brown, 150

[77] Brown, 178

In this light, Clotel is not simply the "tragic mulatto," a trope often used to signify the doomed fate of mixed-race figures who belong nowhere. Rather, her death represents a disruption of that narrative. She does not die because she is mixed, or because her identity is inherently tragic; she dies because the system refuses to see her as anything but property. The title of "tragic" is thus not intrinsic to Clotel, but is imposed by a system that racializes her being and forecloses her freedom. It exemplifies what Fred Moten describes when he writes: *"T*he movement of things can be felt and touched and exists in language and in fantasy, it is fight, it is motion, it is fugitivity itself. Fugitivity is not only escape, 'exit' as Paolo Virno might put it, or 'exodus' in the terms offered by Hardt and Negri, fugitivity is being separate from settling.*"*[79] In this sense, Clotel's leap is not a surrender, but a motion away from capture—a refusal to settle into the roles scripted for her by racial capitalism and enslavement. Her death is a movement, a disruption, a refusal to allow the state to write the conclusion of her story.

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[78] Brown, 185

[79] Harney et al., 11

The novel's conclusion further underscores the deep contradictions of American slavery: how a woman, the daughter of Thomas Jefferson, could have been celebrated as a heroine in any other national context, yet was relegated to invisibility and isolation. "Had Clotel escaped from oppression in any other land, in the disguise in which she fled...no honour within the gift of the American people would have been too good to have been heaped upon the heroic woman. But she was a slave, and therefore out of the pale of their sympathy. "[80] Her life is marked by hypervisibility in her racialized body, yet profound invisibility in her interior life. This stark juxtaposition encapsulates the violence of the "tragic mulatto" narrative—a violence Clotel ultimately rejects through her own fugitive resolution. In leaping into the river, she refuses the state's claim on her, refuses the narrative that would consume her, and enacts a final undercommon gesture of resistance.

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[80] Brown, 185

Chapter 3:

TO BE READ WRONG: ORIENTAL INSCRUTABILITY AND THE MIXED-RACE SUBJECT IN ITS WAVERING IMAGE

✦✧✦✧ Mrs. Spring Fragrance By: Sui Sin Far ✦✧✦✧

In Sui Sin Far's short story *Its Wavering Image*, the protagonist Pan embodies the tensions and contradictions of multiracial identity as a biracial woman navigating the racially stratified landscape of late 19th-century San Francisco. Positioned between her Chinese father's community and the pull of white American society, Pan must contend with externally imposed definitions, racialized desire, and the demand to choose a singular identity. This chapter examines how Pan's mixed-race identity is not only shaped but actively constrained by those around her—especially Mark Carson, a white journalist whose desire depends on her assimilation into whiteness. Drawing on Xine Yao's concept of "Oriental inscrutability", Judith Butler's theory of performativity, and and Lisa Lau's framework of re-orientalism, I argue that *Its Wavering Image* reveals the structural limits placed on multiracial identity by dominant racial and cultural narratives. While Yao and Butler help illuminate how identity is surveilled and performed under white supremacy, Lau's theory of re-orientalism underscores the ways in which even narratives that appear to center Asian voices can reproduce orientalist tropes by conforming to the expectations of Western readership. Rather than seeking clarity or coherence, Far's story suggests that resistance for a character like Pan lies in embracing racial ambiguity and refusing the reductive legibility imposed by both white desire and orientalist narrative frameworks.

This internal struggle, as Carol Roh-Spaulding argues, positions Pan as the "wavering image"—a symbol of unstable self-perception that reflects the broader complexities of racial identity in a society invested in rigid categories.[81] The narrative further interrogates the restrictive power of racial laws, such as the Chinese Exclusion Act, which not only codified Chinese identity but also reinforced exclusionary social boundaries. Although Pan's American citizenship theoretically grants her 'legal equality', her racial identity renders that status precarious. Her story ultimately illuminates the emotional and legal tensions of being multiracial, revealing how racial identity is not simply a matter of heritage but is deeply shaped by social perception and systemic discrimination.

Pan's multiracial identity is not just a personal struggle but a site of control—particularly in her relationship with Carson. It's important to note that Sui Sin Far writes much of the story from Carson's perspective, limiting access to Pan's interiority. This narrative choice positions us in a space where Pan's identity is largely constructed through the lens of an outsider's gaze, revealing how her self-definition is shaped by the perceptions and desires of others—particularly those of Carson, a white man who sees Pan through the narrow confines of racialized and gendered expectations. Throughout the text, Carson infantilizes Pan, treating her not as a fully realized individual but as someone whose racial identity must be explained, shaped, and corrected by him. His condescending approach reduces her to a passive, impressionable figure, reinforcing his dominance in their dynamic. Carson's desire for her is shaped by the tension between her whiteness and Chineseness, and in many ways, his attraction is contingent on the possibility of "rescuing" her from her Chinese identity. This is clear in moments where he insists that she is white, as if his affection depends on her rejection of the Chinese side of herself.

Pan's position as the child of an interracial marriage places her socially below her white suitor, Mark Carson. This reflects the broader reality that legal recognition does not equate to social acceptance, particularly in the context of anti-Chinese sentiment during the Exclusion Era.

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[81] Roh-Spaulding, 172

The irony in the ending is striking: while American law does not explicitly force Pan to choose between being Chinese and American, societal expectations and racial prejudice make the decision unavoidable. Carson's insistence that she must reject her Chinese heritage to belong reveals the rigid racial boundaries of the time, highlighting the painful reality that Pan, though legally American, remains excluded from full societal acceptance.

"It's Wavering Image" connects to broader themes of desire and perception, particularly in the way racial identity is constructed and constrained by societal expectations. In both *Clotel* and *A Wavering Image*, desire plays a significant role in shaping how characters are perceived and how they perceive themselves. Desire—whether romantic, social, or economic—alters racial perception, as seen in Mark Carson's expectation that Pan should assimilate into whiteness to maintain his attraction to her. His love for her is conditional on her rejection of her Chinese identity, revealing how whiteness is positioned as the desirable, dominant identity, while non-whiteness is something to be erased or excluded. Desire, in this context, is not merely an emotional or romantic feeling but is deeply entwined with social and racial hierarchies. Carson's desire for Pan is not simply for her as an individual but as a racially categorized object—a woman who, in his eyes, must assimilate into the whiteness he believes is ideal for a romantic partner. Angela Davis's quote—"The master in his mansion and his colored mistress in her special house nearby represented the final triumph of social ritual in the presence of the deepest feelings of human solidarity"—captures the ways in which social structures of race, power, and desire shape intimate relationships.[82] The "colored mistress" in Davis's quote is similarly reduced to a figure who exists within the "special house" defined by social rituals, where she is segregated by race, no matter the emotions or desires involved. The desire here is transactional: it is dependent on her ability to conform to his racialized desires.

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[82] Davis, 26

This dynamic can be understood through the **historical structure of desire** that originates in slavery and Blackness. Before moving further, it is important to introduce a key concept that informs my reading of Pan's portrayal: Xine Yao's idea of *Oriental inscrutability*. In *Disaffected: The Cultural Politics of Unfeeling in Nineteenth-Century America*, Yao defines Oriental inscrutability as a racialized trope that casts Asian individuals as emotionally unreadable or inaccessible. This stereotype not only flattens Asian identity but also denies agency by rendering the subject unknowable through the lens of white perception. For Yao, inscrutability is a colonial inheritance—part of a broader literary and cultural history that marks Asian characters as mysterious and emotionally opaque, often to justify their marginalization. As I will show, Pan is subjected to this trope by Carson, who continually fails—and refuses—to understand her on her own terms.

Under slavery, the desire for control over Black bodies was foundational to both economic exploitation and social hierarchy. This structure of desire—where whiteness is both the ideal and the standard, and non-whiteness is defined in opposition to it—extends beyond Blackness to other racialized groups, including Chinese Americans in *A Wavering Image*. Even though Pan is legally American, her racial identity places her outside the boundaries of full inclusion, much like mixed-race characters in *Clotel* who struggle with their legal status and racial identity under slavery. It is important to acknowledge that Pan's experience, however, is still different. While she, too, faces the demand to conform to whiteness, her mixed-race identity offers her more fluidity than Clotel's fixed position within the slavery system. Pan is not entirely bound to a singular racial identity but is caught between two worlds—white and Chinese—each with its own set of expectations and limitations. The challenge Pan faces is not one of overt slavery or ownership, as Clotel experiences, but the subtle, insidious pressure to erase her non-white heritage to fulfill the desires of those around her, especially Carson. This is where the idea of Oriental inscrutability comes into play, as Carson's perception of Pan's emotional complexity is clouded by his racial assumptions. While both characters are subjected to racialized expectations of desire, Pan's mixed-race identity presents a different yet similar set of challenges, as she is caught between competing racial demands and social rituals that seek to define her identity.

Carson's infantilization of Pan exemplifies how this structure of racialized desire operates on an interpersonal level, *"Oh, Pan! Pan! Those tears prove that you are white."*[83] Here, he reduces racial identity to a simplistic, emotional reaction, as if her ability to feel deeply can be used as proof of whiteness. This not only dismisses Pan's autonomy in defining herself but also reinforces a racial hierarchy where whiteness is associated with humanity and emotion, while her Chinese heritage is implicitly devalued. Carson does not ask Pan how she sees herself; instead, he dictates the terms of her identity, reinforcing a paternalistic dynamic where she is expected to accept his judgment. He does not recognize Pan's feelings as evidence of her own lived experiences, but rather as proof she belongs to whiteness. His assertion that she must be white because of her tears reflects a broader historical tendency to deny emotional legitimacy to racialized people while simultaneously using their expressions of emotion as tools for racial classification.

The concept of Oriental inscrutability is particularly interesting in the case of Pan, as being mixed inherently involves a sense of "otherness." The short story highlights an important point: Pan didn't begin questioning her identity until Mark Carson entered the picture for "It was only after the coming of Mark Carson that the mystery of her nature began to trouble her."[84] She wasn't experiencing an internal dilemma about whether she was white or Chinese. However, Mark introduces a new pressure for her to choose an identity, pushing her to conform to his view of her as a white woman where to himself upon first meeting he questions — "What was she? Chinese or white?"[85] His inability to understand that, as an Asian woman, she can have emotions—like tears—embodies the stereotype of Oriental inscrutability being imposed on her. Mark manipulates this perception, reducing her to an inscrutable figure based on his own limited understanding. The real "inscrutability," however, lies not in the inherent nature of the individual but in the misunderstandings between different cultural perspectives. It is also a reflection of the broader racialized perception in sentimental literature that Chinese people were inscrutable and emotionally distant, whereas white individuals were expressive and "knowable."[86]

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[83] Far, 64
[84] Far, 61

This is a form of epistemic violence—Carson is not only making an observation but actively shaping Pan's understanding of herself through a lens that denies her the right to exist as both Chinese and white on her own terms. He enjoys her exoticism, her proximity to Chinatown, her ability to grant him access to a world otherwise closed off to him because she "she could tell me more stories about the Chinese than any other person in this city."[87] Yet, at the same time, his desire hinges on the erasure of her Chinese identity. He wants Pan to choose whiteness—not just for her own sake, but as a condition of his continued affection. Mark wants to extract a Chinatown story, believing that her mixed-race status makes her a "neutral" figure capable of granting him insight. Desire itself becomes a site of violence, where love is indistinguishable from the demand for racial assimilation.

Carson's infantilization of Pan extends beyond explicit statements about race; it is also embedded in how he describes and interacts with her. He views her as *"pretty Pan, clever Pan,*

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[85] Far, 61
[86] Yao, 190
[87] Far, 61

amusing Pan"—a list that frames her as a source of entertainment and admiration rather than an equal partner.[88] He delights in her eagerness to listen to him, reinforcing the idea that her role is not to be understood, but to affirm his presence and authority. By treating Pan as someone who exists primarily for his validation, Carson ensures that she remains in a state of arrested development—never fully allowed to claim her own identity on her own terms.

Carson's perception of Pan as an innocent, exotic, and free-spirited figure deeply reflects his misunderstanding and manipulation of her multiracial identity. His view of her as "bewilderingly frank and free" is rooted in a superficial understanding of her identity, failing to acknowledge the complexity of her being both Chinese and white.[89] In his eyes, Pan's mixed-race identity becomes a puzzle he cannot quite comprehend, leading him to infantilize and romanticize her. This perspective aligns with the broader societal tendency to flatten multiracial identities, reducing them to simplistic, stereotypical roles that serve the needs of the dominant culture. Rather than seeing Pan as an individual navigating the complexities of her heritage, Carson views her through a lens of exoticism and curiosity, reinforcing the idea that her multiracial background makes her different, mysterious, and "other."

Even Far's description of Pan as "born a Bohemian" suggests she exists outside of racial and gender norms—a romanticized in-betweenness that may seem liberating on the surface but ultimately reinforces the trope of the exceptional mixed-race woman whose value lies in her ability to transcend boundaries rather than challenge them. Pan's perceived exemption from "conventional restrictions" masks the reality that her identity is still being defined by others—by her father's idealization, Carson's objectification, and even the narrator's framing.[90]

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[88] Far, 64
[89] Far, 62
[90] Far, 62

The way Sui Sin Far writes Pan's father's reverence—seeing everything she does as "right" because she is the daughter of a white woman—reinscribes the association of whiteness with virtue and superiority.[91] Rather than showing Pan's agency as rooted in her own subjectivity or cultural heritage, her power is derived from her mother's whiteness and her father's uncritical devotion. This positioning implicitly upholds the colonial logic that whiteness civilizes and elevates, especially when paired with the exoticization of her Chinese father's loyalty.

Moreover, the assertion that "he would be a brave man indeed who offered [an insult] to childish little Pan" infantilizes her, romanticizing her liminal identity as both untouchable and fragile.[92] This type of characterization flattens her complexity and reinforces the idea that her worth lies in how others view and protect her, not in her own voice or actions. While the story aims to humanize a mixed-race character, it does so by leaning into stereotypes of racial exceptionalism and gendered vulnerability, rather than offering a fuller, more self-determined representation.

Ultimately, Carson's treatment of Pan exemplifies the way white paternalism operates in multiracial narratives, dictating not only the terms of belonging but also who gets to define racial identity. Rather than recognizing Pan's ability to hold both her Chinese and white heritage as part of a singular, complete self, Carson forces her into a framework where whiteness is the ideal and anything else must be diminished or erased. His condescension is not just about gender or romantic power dynamics—it is a fundamental refusal to acknowledge Pan as a fully formed individual with the right to define herself. Carson's perception of Pan as emotionally inscrutable echoes the stereotype of Oriental inscrutability, where her emotions are seen as unknowable and mysterious to him. This projection of inscrutability onto her serves as a tool to further dismiss her agency, reducing her to a racialized "other" whose complexities he refuses to understand. As one Yao observes, "the inscrutability of Chinese characters as a language is intertwined with the racial and cultural essence of Chinese character and, I suggest, in turn molds the writing of Chinese characters in literature."[93]. In this sense, Carson's behavior throughout the narrative exposes how the stereotype of inscrutability is used to maintain control and assert dominance—not just through personal dynamics, but by invoking a deeper historical genealogy of misreadings that mark the Chinese face and body as sites of inscrutable otherness. "In what follows, I look to the proto-anthropological tradition of travel and missionary writing cited by Far to explore how the unfeeling trope of Oriental inscrutability coheres a messy racialized genealogy of misreadings, practices, and resistances that focus on the corporeal, cultural, and symbolic Chinese face as the signifying zone of contact."[94] In this way, Carson's use of the inscrutability trope is not incidental, but deeply rooted in a colonial tradition of racialized misunderstanding and control. His inability—or refusal—to read Pan on her own terms mirrors the colonial gaze that constructs meaning through distance, distortion, and domination. In doing so, the narrative reveals how racialized tropes like inscrutability do not simply obscure, but actively reshape the possibilities of subjecthood, belonging, and resistance for multiracial characters like Pan.

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[91] Far, 62
[92] Far, 62

This dynamic is not just a reflection of Carson's personal biases but part of a larger historical pattern in which racial identity is constructed through systems of power and exclusion. Carson's desire for Pan is conditioned by the same structures that determine who is fully included in whiteness and who stays on its margins. In this way, his infantilization of Pan is not just about their relationship—it is part of a larger historical process that enforces racial boundaries and dictates the limits of belonging. Race is not an innate or fixed category but a product of historical materialism, shaped by economic and social structures. Slavery established a racial hierarchy that defined non-whiteness through control and exclusion—hierarchies that persisted long after abolition. Likewise, anti-Chinese policies such as the Chinese Exclusion Act reinforced the boundaries of whiteness, ensuring that non-white racial identities remained subordinate. Carson's assertion that Pan's tears prove her whiteness is not just an act of racial gatekeeping; it reflects a broader system in which racial identity is shaped by the desires and fears of those in power.

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[93] Yao, 180
[94] Yao, 180

Carson's insistence that Pan must choose between being Chinese or white reflects the rigid racial binaries of the time, where mixed-race individuals were denied the possibility of dual identity. His statement—"You cannot be both"—imposes a forced choice upon her, assuming that whiteness is the natural and superior option. However, Pan resists this idea, rejecting Carson when he pressures her to deny her Chinese heritage. Her response, *"I do not love you when you talk to me like that,"* signals her realization that his love is conditional on her erasing her Chinese identity.[95] This moment marks a turning point where Pan asserts agency over her racial self-definition, choosing to align herself with the community that fully accepts her rather than the one that seeks to erase her heritage.

This analysis challenges the notion that Pan's identity remains ambiguous. Instead, it reveals the societal pressures that demand racial categorization and the emotional toll of navigating a mixed identity in an exclusionary society. The story ultimately critiques how racial identity is constructed through both personal choice and external forces, illustrating how whiteness operates as an exclusive space that demands assimilation, while non-whiteness—though marginalized—offers a sense of belonging and cultural continuity.

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[95] Far, 63

Throughout *Its Wavering Image*, Pan struggles with the pressure to assimilate into whiteness, but her moment of emotional vulnerability—marked by her kiss with Carson—is at once undercut by his self-serving motives. The abrupt shift from their intimate moment to Carson beginning his article exposes the transactional nature of his relationship with Pan. While she momentarily considers passing as white to be with him, Carson's goal is to use her for an exposé on Chinatown, reducing her identity and community to mere journalistic material. This stark contrast between their perspectives devastates the reader, who has grown sympathetic to Pan's internal conflict.

Carson's betrayal extends beyond Pan; it is a violation of an entire community—a rupture not just of trust, but of cultural intimacy. As a white journalist granted access to Chinatown through Pan's affection and vulnerability, Carson turns this proximity into a means of extraction. Man You's curse—"Cursed be his ancestors"—registers collective outrage, but it is Pan who most viscerally absorbs the weight of the betrayal. In one of the story's most emotionally charged passages, the narrator observes: "Ah, well did he know that the sword which pierced her through others would carry with it to her own heart, the pain of all those others."[96] Here, the sword functions as a loaded metaphor, signifying the intertwined nature of personal and collective harm. Pan is not only wounded by Carson's violation of her trust, but also bears the compounded grief of being the medium through which her community's stories have been violated. Her body becomes a site of convergence for private betrayal and public spectacle.

Carson's "stab" is not physical, but metaphorical—an act of betrayal masked as intimacy. The narrator describes how, "with her kiss upon his lips," he "carelessly sung her heart away" and "stabbed her." This juxtaposition of affection and violence captures the cruelty of racialized romantic consumption—the way love can serve as a vehicle for domination. Carson sees Pan not just as a woman, but as a symbolic insider—someone with enough proximity to Chinatown to offer access, but enough racial ambiguity to make that access marketable to a white readership. Despite Pan's acceptance within her Chinese community, Carson never sees her as fully of it. Instead, her racial ambiguity marks her as a translator of secrets, an exoticized intermediary whose very liminality becomes the source of risk. As such, her community is betrayed not despite her loyalty, but *through* it. Carson's quest is not only personal or romantic—it is a journalistic project of exposure, and Pan, in his eyes, is the key to unlocking what should remain sacred and protected.

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[96] Far, 64

This betrayal exposes the unequal power dynamics of narrative control: Carson has the authority to expose Pan's world, while she is left to bear the emotional and communal consequences. His actions strip her of her agency, turning her from a subject into a tool of narrative extraction. Pan's pain is not only the loss of romantic trust, but the realization that her voice and identity have been used to serve an audience that will never understand her. This is made even clearer when Carson asserts: "Because I am a Chinese woman," she answered. "You are not," cried Mark Carson, fiercely. "You cannot say that now, Pan. You are a white woman—white. Did your kiss not promise me that?" Carson's reaction reveals the underlying racial tensions at play. Despite Pan's cultural belonging and her identification with her community, Carson's definition of her shifts dramatically, reducing her to an ambiguous racial identity that can be manipulated for his own ends. This moment underscores the racialized dynamics of power, where Carson's white gaze seeks to impose a new identity upon Pan, one that serves his narrative and desire.

When Pan asserts, "she, who was of the race that remembers," she reclaims a lineage not of racial ambiguity, but of cultural memory, survivance, and resistance. She is not merely betrayed as a mixed-race figure—she is implicated in the broader violence of racialized mediation, where identity becomes a form of access, and access, in turn, a source of harm.

This betrayal reveals the unequal dynamics of narrative power: Carson has the authority to publish her world, while she is left to carry the emotional and communal consequences. His actions transform her from a subject into a tool of narrative extraction, severing her from self-definition. Her anguish is not only the pain of romantic loss, but the realization that her voice and identity have been used to serve a readership that will never understand her. When Pan asserts, “she, who was of the race that remembers,” she reclaims a lineage not of racial ambiguity but of cultural memory, survivance, and refusal. She is not merely betrayed as a mixed-race figure—she is implicated in the broader violence of racialized mediation, where identity itself becomes a mode of access, and access a source of harm. In this moment, Far critiques not only the structures of racial desire, but the conditions under which intimacy becomes a form of imperial knowledge production.

After the kiss, Carson and Pan take two months apart—time that Carson conveniently frames as a necessary hiatus for "business" (though it’s clear he’s really just avoiding the emotional fallout of his actions — typical). During this separation, Carson does what he does best: he spins a narrative in his own mind, convincing himself that all will be well when he finally returns. His internal struggle, however, is far less about genuine reflection and more of a self-congratulatory exercise in rationalizing his behavior. When he finally comes back to the city, he convinces himself that Pan, sweet naive Pan, would have forgotten about their prior conflict and moved past it. “Why should a white woman care about such things? Her true self was above it all,” he muses (Far, 65), completely missing the mark on who Pan actually is. In his mind, Pan has transcended all those "complicated racial issues" because she must be—*after all*, according to Carson, she's white. He imagines her as someone who shouldn't be bogged down by the struggles of her heritage or the complexities of identity. These thoughts are less about Pan's reality and more about Carson's comforting delusion, one where he's free of responsibility for the complexities that people like Pan face.

This dismissive attitude is all too familiar—it's the broader societal demand that mixed-race individuals simplify themselves into neat little boxes, usually with a preference for the "whiteness" that Carson perceives in Pan. And so, when he finally sits down before a statue of Robert Louis Stevenson—because nothing says "deep reflection" like contemplating colonial-era adventure stories—he's less interested in genuine remorse and more about how to make himself feel better about what he's done. Carson wonders, "Why bad Pan failed to answer the note I wrote her about my assignment and my oh-so-important absence," as though it's an affront to him that she didn't wait on him hand and foot.[97] Never in this narrative is there any concern here for Pan's feelings or the emotional mess he's left behind. His self-centered thought process is clear: he's just trying to justify his own absence and make sense of it in a way that doesn't paint him as the bad guy.

This moment underscores Carson's perspective of Chinatown—and by extension, Pan—as an exotic space to be explored, commodified, and consumed by his eager audience of readers. In his eyes, Pan is just another object for his curiosity, not a fully realized person with her own cultural depth and emotional complexities. Carson's "guilt" is not about understanding or atoning for the harm he's caused. No, his guilt is a shallow attempt to smooth over his conscience, to tell himself a story where he is still the charming, well-meaning man, even though his actions prove otherwise. Carson is more concerned with how his behavior will be perceived by others—and by himself—than with any actual consequences to Pan. His guilt isn't rooted in true remorse; it's rooted in *how* he can spin his story to make himself feel justified.

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[97] Far, 65

When Carson and Pan meet again after their two-month separation, Pan is dressed in traditional Chinese attire. Carson's response to this moment, where he speaks dismissively and Pan remains silent, underscores the profound disconnection between them. **"Mark Carson felt strangely chilled. Pan was not herself tonight. She did not even look herself. He had been accustomed to seeing her in American dress. Tonight she wore the Chinese costume. But for her clear-cut features she might have been a Chinese girl. He shivered."**[98] This description reveals how Carson perceives Pan's cultural identity as something foreign, unsettling, and separate from her usual, more familiar "American" self.

Ultimately, Carson's treatment of Pan exemplifies the way white paternalism operates, dictating not only the terms of belonging but also who gets to define racial identity. Rather than recognizing Pan's ability to hold both her Chinese and white heritage as part of a singular, complete self, Carson forces her into a framework where whiteness is the ideal and anything else must be diminished or erased. His condescension is not just about gender or romantic power dynamics—it is a fundamental refusal to acknowledge Pan as a fully formed individual with the right to define herself.

This becomes especially clear when Carson asks, "Pan," he asked, "why do you wear that dress?"[99], framing her choice of attire as something odd or inexplicable. His discomfort at seeing her in Chinese attire exposes how thoroughly he has filtered his understanding of Pan through whiteness, expecting her to conform to his idealized image and rejecting any expression of identity that unsettles that expectation. Pan's hands, "struggled together within her sleeves," a small gesture that reveals her internal tension, but "her face and voice were calm."[100] This powerful contrast between her external composure and internal struggle speaks to her resilience and self-possession, even in the face of Carson's racialized discomfort. Pan remaining silent in the face of his remarks is a powerful statement in itself, marking her refusal to engage in a dialogue that reduces her complex identity to a mere spectacle for Carson's consumption. Until she finally responds to his inquiry, "Because I am a Chinese woman," she answered.[101] This simple yet profound assertion of her identity defies Carson's attempts to define her based on his racialized framework. Pan's answer is an act of reclaiming autonomy within this performaticity, resisting the forces that would reduce her to a mere object of Carson's narrative control.

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[98] Far, 66

[99] Far, 66

Judith Butler's theory of performativity is key to understanding how identity functions in *Its Wavering Image*. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler argues that identity—particularly gender identity—is not a stable or innate truth but is constituted through repeated acts, gestures, and performances that align with social expectations. Crucially, those who fail to perform identity "correctly" risk facing punitive consequences.[102]While Butler's focus is on gender, her framework extends readily to racial identity, where external markers like clothing, speech, and emotional expression are used to interpret—and police—who someone is.

For Pan, the demand to perform an "authentic" identity—whether Chinese or white—highlights the socially constructed nature of racial categories and the violence that underlies their enforcement. Butler notes that much of what we read as identity comes from how individuals present themselves visually, especially through dress: "we derive that knowledge from the clothes that the person wears, or how the clothes are worn. This is naturalized knowledge, even though it is based on a series of cultural inferences, some of which are highly erroneous.”[103] In this light, Pan’s traditional Chinese clothing is not merely a cultural expression but a site where assumptions about race, belonging, and legibility converge. Her attire becomes a catalyst for Mark Carson’s discomfort, revealing how racial identity is not only performed but surveilled and misread through dominant cultural codes. with the instability of gender categories, her analysis also underscores the performativity and constructedness of identity more broadly. In Carson's case, his perception of Pan's clothing—and by extension, her identity—is shaped by racialized assumptions that treat racial categories as stable, visible truths. Yet race, like gender, is socially constructed, and the meaning imposed on Pan’s dress reveals more about Carson’s racial imagination than about Pan herself. As Butler continues, “even ‘seeing’ the body may not answer the question: for what are the categories through which one sees?”[104] This question becomes critical when the categories used are racially loaded and shaped by colonial histories of misrecognition.

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[100] Far, 66
[101] Far, 66
[102] Butler, 178

This suspicion toward Pan’s emotional and cultural legibility is not just personal but deeply embedded in racial discourse. As Yao observes, “distrust of Chinese faces as illegible and nonhuman goes beyond the scapegoating of the racialized face as the embodied and symbolic site of emotional expressiveness. ‘Face’ in Chinese culture articulates a complex cluster of social behaviors.”[105] Carson’s failure to understand Pan, then, is also a failure to engage with the cultural meanings she embodies. In his eyes, her racial identity becomes a costume, her emotions a puzzle, and her face a blank screen for projection. His perception is governed not by curiosity or empathy, but by the desire to control how Pan is read and who she is allowed to be.

The irony, of course, lies in Carson’s role as a journalist—a person whose job is ostensibly to observe, interpret, and communicate truthfully to the public. His racialized misreadings of Pan are not confined to private thought; they are filtered into the public sphere through his writing. As someone with the power to shape public narratives, his failure is not just one of perception, but of representation. People will read what he says about Pan and her community, taking his limited, biased perspective as authoritative. In this way, the personal becomes political, and the narrative exposes how racialized tropes like inscrutability and costume do not merely obscure identity but actively distort and constrain the possibilities of subjecthood, belonging, and resistance for multiracial characters like Pan.

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[103] Butler, xxii
[104] Butler, xxii
[105] Yao, 180

Carson's treatment of Pan exposes the contradictions embedded in the concept of racial authenticity—contradictions that have long been interrogated by scholars in Critical Mixed Race Studies (CMRS). Within this field, authenticity is not understood as a fixed or recoverable trait, but as a racialized demand imposed on multiracial individuals, often forcing them to "prove" their legitimacy to both white and nonwhite communities. As such, the very notion of an "authentic" mixed-race identity is called into question. Pan's racial ambiguity threatens dominant frameworks of identity because it cannot be easily reconciled with essentialist understandings of race. Rather than being allowed to occupy a fluid or complex subjectivity, she is continually pressured to resolve her identity into one legible, racialized category.

In this way, *authenticity* becomes a site of conflict—less about personal truth than about the gaze that defines which performances are seen as legitimate. His dismissal of it as a "costume" reveals a deep-seated assumption that Pan's display of cultural identity is performative or inauthentic. This reaction not only underscores how authenticity is policed by dominant racial expectations, but also how mixed-race individuals are especially vulnerable to having their self-identifications scrutinized or invalidated.

Lisa Lau's observation that "the reins of dominant representation may have shifted... but the Orient continues to be orientalised" deepens this critique by showing how even when the figure representing the culture is an insider—or perceived to be one—the structures of Orientalism persist.[106] In Pan's case, her attempt to assert her Chineseness does not escape the colonial gaze but instead becomes a new site of re-orientalism, where authenticity is still determined externally. Her identity performance is not viewed on her own terms, but through a framework of "flexible positional superiority," as Edward Said describes, in which dominant viewers maintain interpretive authority[107].

Thus, rather than offering empowerment, the act of asserting cultural identity becomes a negotiation under surveillance, constantly mediated by others' assumptions and power relations. For mixed-race subjects like Pan, authenticity is not a stable claim to heritage but a contested, shifting performance shaped by external judgment—what Lau calls a "site of conflict."[108] This analysis suggests that in a re-orientalist framework, the performance of cultural identity, even by those with legitimate ties to it, may still be reduced to spectacle, reinscribing the very power imbalances it hopes to challenge.

Drawing on theories of re-orientalism, we can see that even insider or diasporic representations may reproduce Orientalist structures, especially when they are evaluated within frameworks still shaped by white, Western norms. Pan's identity performance becomes a response to an impossible position—too "Chinese" to be neutral, too "Western" to be authentic—revealing how authenticity, for mixed-race individuals, is a contested and unstable terrain. As Lisa Lau's insight underscores, this is less about self-expression and more about managing how that expression is received and policed.

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[106] Lau, 573

[107] Said, 7 & Lau, 573

[108] Lau, 573

I am not sure, however, that fugitivity is the most accurate framework here. While fugitivity often suggests subversion or escape from dominant systems, Pan's situation seems less like a withdrawal from racial legibility and more like a strategic navigation within its constraints. Her performance is not about evasion, but negotiation—making visible a racial identity that is always at risk of being misread or rejected. In this way, the story suggests that for mixed-race subjects like Pan, authenticity may never be fully reclaimed, only re-staged again and again in a shifting field of power, desire, and surveillance.

The shift in Carson's perception of Pan based solely on her outward appearance underscores the superficial and constructed nature of racial identity. The irony lies in the fact that, as a journalist, Carson's role is supposedly to observe, interpret, and communicate nuanced truths to the public. Yet his limited and racialized reading of Pan directly contradicts the journalistic duty to present complex, multi-dimensional narratives. This disconnect speaks volumes about how identity is often distorted and simplified in the public sphere, particularly for racial minorities. People will read what Carson writes about Pan and her community, taking his limited, biased perspective as authoritative, thus reinforcing the very racialized stereotypes that limit the possibilities for how multiracial identities are understood. As Yao writes, "Oriental artifice in ways that complicate desires for the transparency, authenticity, and scrutability of a sentimental woman writer and, specifically, a Chinese woman writer during the Exclusion Era."[109] Carson's approach to Pan, framed through the lens of racialized authenticity, is steeped in this same desire for "authenticity"—a term which is often deployed to exclude, dismiss, or simplify the lived realities of those who do not conform to prescribed categories.

For authors like Sui Sin Far, this idea of "authenticity" was particularly fraught, as it was often used to undermine the voices and agency of Asian American writers, especially women, who were expected to conform to the dominant racial and cultural narratives of the time. The very act of writing and representing oneself as a Chinese woman during the Exclusion Era was an act of resistance to these imposed, limiting categories of authenticity. In a similar vein, Yao also argues that "What I believe is overlooked in the scholarly discussion is that Pan's closing resistance involves her reclaiming of Oriental inscrutability—according to which she, like Far, identifies herself as Chinese rather than white (in Pan's case, in opposition to Mark's desires)."[110] This reclamation of inscrutability is significant because it highlights Pan's resistance not only to the dominant racial frameworks imposed upon her but also to the notion that her identity must be legible or easily understood by the white gaze.

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[109] Yao, 198

Her reclaiming of inscrutability becomes a fugitive move—embracing ambiguity not as lack but as a survival strategy, a way to resist the totalizing grasp of racial domination. Like Far, Pan uses opacity not as concealment but as a political refusal of the narrative frameworks that render mixed-race identity visible only through erasure or commodification. Yet this gesture toward fugitivity also raises a pressing question: *can Pan ever fully escape commodification*? Even in reclaiming inscrutability, her identity continues to be interpreted, consumed, and misread—by Carson, by her father, and by the narrative itself. In this sense, her refusal to be fully legible might delay or disrupt commodification, but it may not be able to dismantle it entirely. Pan's opacity becomes both a tool of resistance and a reminder of the persistent structures that seek to translate racial ambiguity into marketable or controllable forms. The story leaves us with the tension between strategic refusal and systemic containment—between what fugitivity makes possible, and what it cannot undo.

For Sui Sin Far, the reclamation of one's own identity in opposition to the racialized norms of the time was not just a personal act of self-definition, but a political and literary act of defiance. By embracing the complexity and inscrutability of her own identity, she is attempting to resist the notion that Chinese womanhood—or any racial identity—could be distilled into a singular, transparent narrative.

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[110] Yao, 194

Carson's discomfort with Pan's appearance highlights the contradiction at the heart of authenticity in multiracial contexts. As Yao further explains, "Although there are mixed children who enjoy the attention they receive for that 'indescribable' element that marks their Chinese heritage, not all share this willingness to accept the white gaze in exchange for privilege."[111] This quote speaks to the complexities of multiracial identity and how the external gaze, particularly the white gaze, often compels multiracial individuals to perform or accommodate an image of "authenticity" that aligns with racialized expectations. Pan's discomfort in this moment is not just with Carson's gaze, but with the broader societal pressures to embody an identity that is palatable to those who hold power. Carson's failure to engage with Pan as a whole person—her lived experiences, her complex identity, her agency—is reflective of the broader cultural tendency to reduce multiracial individuals to a singular, simplified identity that aligns with dominant racial frameworks.

Carson's treatment of Pan exposes the dangers of using "authenticity" as a standard by which identity is validated. The idea of authenticity is not just a matter of self-expression; it is a social construct that is often policed by cultural expectations. Carson's reaction reflects the racialized understanding of authenticity, where a person's identity is only considered valid when it fits within the confines of dominant racial norms. By refusing to engage with Pan's authentic, complex multiracial identity, Carson's actions reinforce the idea that racial identity must conform to one of two categories—white or "other"—and that the in-betweenness of multiracial individuals is something to be rejected or misunderstood.

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[111] Yao, 199

In this way, Carson’s actions expose how racialized tropes like inscrutability and costume do not merely obscure identity but actively distort and constrain the possibilities of subjecthood, belonging, and resistance for multiracial characters like Pan. His treatment of Pan—and the public’s potential acceptance of his view—reinforces the dangerous cycle in which multiracial identities are either overlooked or distorted to fit into an idealized, simplified version of racial authenticity. These simplified categories do not leave room for the complexities of individual experience, subjectivity, and agency, ultimately rendering multiracial individuals like Pan invisible in ways that limit their ability to define themselves on their own terms.

This moment emphasizes how easily racial identity can be manipulated by others, particularly those in positions of power, and how identity itself can be molded to fit societal expectations rather than reflecting a true and complex self. In many ways, clothing is a direct manifestation of how people are seen and treated in society. For instance, the materiality of Pan’s traditional Chinese dress is not just about fabric and style—it is a direct challenge to the limited roles and identities that have been imposed upon her. Carson's discomfort upon seeing her in this attire speaks to the fact that clothing carries not only personal or cultural significance but also broader social meanings. As clothing becomes a visible indicator of one’s identity, it also becomes a point of intersection for societal expectations. This material reality of clothes, and the way they embody and signify racial identities, is crucial in understanding the tension between individual self-definition and external impositions. For Pan, it is a powerful statement of selfhood—by choosing to wear her heritage proudly, she challenges the framework in which Carson has confined her, rejecting the narrow roles he had imagined for her and reclaiming her own agency. By rejecting the narrow boundaries Carson has placed on her, Pan attempts to reclaim her own agency, pushing back against the reductive expectations that seek to diminish her complexity. However, this act of self-definition is flipped: while it is an empowering choice for Pan, it also highlights the way in which acts of selfhood can be co-opted and distorted. Rather than simply being accepted as an expression of autonomy, Pan’s pride in her heritage becomes yet another site of racial exploitation. Carson’s reaction to her shift in appearance is not just an acknowledgment of her self-definition, but a reinvestment in the very system that seeks to commodify her identity.

Navigating one’s place in society requires an ongoing negotiation with structures of power, often forcing individuals to choose how they want to be seen—and exploited—within capitalism. As a mixed-race woman of Chinese and white descent, her existence disrupts the rigid racial binaries that Western society depends on to categorize and control people. Yet rather than granting her freedom, this duality leaves her in a constant state of negotiation—caught between visibility and erasure, agency, and objectification. Pan’s decision to identify more closely with her Asian heritage is an act of resistance, a way of standing firm in an identity marginalized by the Western imperialist gaze.

Her choice to embrace her Asian identity is an assertion of self in a world that seeks to diminish her, but it also marks her as a subject of exoticization. Mark Carson, a journalist, does not see her as an individual but as a gateway to Chinatown, someone whose identity can be mined for access and authenticity. His fascination with Pan is not rooted in who she is, but in what she can provide—a racialized lens through which he can craft a marketable story for white audiences. In this way, Pan’s identity is never fully hers; it becomes a site of extraction, something that can be reshaped and sold under the logic of capitalism.

Even acts of self-definition can be co-opted, turning resistance into another avenue for exploitation. Pan’s mixed-race identity illuminates this contradiction even more starkly. Because she exists between two racial categories, her self-identification is always scrutinized, always questioned, always subject to outside interpretation. When she leans into her Chinese heritage, she is treated as an exotic informant. Yet, if she were to align with her whiteness, she would not truly belong there either—her racial ambiguity ensures that she can never be fully accepted as white. Instead, she would be absorbed into a system that has historically benefited from her partial exclusion, granting her only conditional access while maintaining the boundaries of whiteness. Either way, capitalism offers no true autonomy—only different modes of commodification.

Yao critiques the New York Times' portrayal of Sui Sin Far's characters, particularly the stereotype of Chinese women who "refuse to be anything but intensely Chinese." The newspaper praises the elucidation of this stereotype, yet also laments that Far "did not even seem to have tried to see inside the souls of her people."[112]. In this, Yao is highlighting the racialized gaze that views Chinese women who assert their identity as simply perpetuating a stereotype, as though their authenticity can only be seen through the lens of exaggerated cultural adherence. This mirrors Pan's situation, where her embrace of her Chinese heritage is not seen as a legitimate part of her identity but as an oversimplified, essentialized performance of racial authenticity that feeds into dominant narratives of exoticism.

For Pan, it's not as simple as choosing one identity over another, but rather rejecting the one Mark imposes upon her. In rejecting Mark's idealization of her whiteness—his desire to see her as a reflection of his own racialized fantasies—Pan feels the need to overcompensate, embracing her Chinese identity in a way that feels almost performative, as if she must prove something in contrast to Mark's gaze. This is not an act of merely selecting one side of herself, but a reaction to being dehumanized and reduced to something that fits within Mark's narrow perception of what she should be. She does not seek to diminish or erase any aspect of her identity, but to assert a version that is true to herself, one that does not require approval or validation from a white, patriarchal lens.

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[112] Yao, 197

In this rejection, Pan also embraces what Yao identifies as “Oriental inscrutability”—a tactic of resistance that allows her to defy the simplistic, imposed narratives of racial and gender identity. By asserting her cultural and emotional ambiguity, she resists the very desire for transparency that Carson and others demand of her. The real “inscrutability” lies not in any inherent quality of Pan’s character but in the misunderstandings and misinterpretations that arise when different cultural perspectives collide. Her “inscrutability” becomes an act of reclamation, a rejection of the gaze that seeks to reduce her to an easily readable identity. This embraces a strategy of survival, echoing the performance of identity described by Judith Butler, where gender and identity are acts, and those who fail to “perform” according to societal expectations are punished.[113] In Pan’s case, embracing this inscrutability allows her to push back against the binary choices forced upon her by white, patriarchal systems, rejecting both the exoticization of her Chinese heritage and the erasure of her racial complexity.

This dynamic speaks to the contradictions within the racial and gendered performances that Pan navigates. As Judith Butler asserts, gender, much like race, is a performative act, and there are “punitive consequences”[114] for those who fail to perform in ways that are deemed acceptable. Pan’s act of embracing her Chinese heritage, in the face of Carson’s discomfort, pushes back against these expectations. But in doing so, she is simultaneously subjected to the exploitative process of being reduced to a stereotype. The act of rejecting the white gaze—of not performing a version of herself that aligns with the dominant system—becomes an act of resistance, but one that risks being co-opted by the very forces she is fighting against.

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[113] Butler, 178
[114] Butler, 178

Yao's critique of the New York Times' frustration with Sui Sin Far's refusal to comply with the idealized narrative of Chinese assimilation emphasizes how cultural and racial identity is both imposed and distorted by external forces. Far's characters, like Pan, who assert their racial authenticity, are punished not for embracing their identity, but for doing so in ways that resist the constructed and commodified expectations of white, mainstream society. This continuous tension in the multiracial experience—between resisting imposed racial identities and the pressure to conform to a simplified, palatable version of self—highlights the broader cultural tendency to dehumanize and commodify those who exist in racial liminality. In Pan's case, her identity is both her resistance and the battleground on which larger cultural and social systems are waged. Through the embrace of inscrutability, Pan rejects the fixed and narrow boxes that Carson, and society at large, try to place her in, asserting her own multifaceted identity in a world that insists on simplifying it.

Multiracial identity shifts depending on context, shaped by external perceptions, social environments, and power dynamics. However, racial segregation determines what those contexts are and who is included or excluded in them. Pan is not simply choosing her identity in a vacuum—she is navigating a system where her racial categorization is dictated by the spaces she is allowed to enter. Her proximity to whiteness may grant her conditional access to certain opportunities, but her Chinese heritage ensures that she remains an outsider in predominantly white spaces. This dynamic is central to her relationship with Mark Carson. As a white journalist, Carson embodies the structures that define the boundaries of racial inclusion and exclusion. He can move freely between Chinatown and the white-dominated publishing world, while Pan is in between, never fully belonging to either. To Carson, Pan's mixed-race identity makes her uniquely useful—close enough to whiteness to be palatable to white readers, but Chinese enough to authenticate the story he wants to tell. He values her not as a person but as a tool, someone who can provide access to a world he wants to commodify but cannot fully enter on his own.

Pan's exclusion from whiteness is what makes her desirable to Carson—he sees her as an "insider" to Chinatown, yet he simultaneously reinforces her outsider status in the world of journalism and publishing. He holds power over how her story is framed, determining how her identity will be presented to white audiences. In this way, Pan's struggle reflects a broader reality of multiracial identity under capitalism: her identity is not only shaped by personal choice but by external forces that dictate how, when, and why she is included or excluded. The very aspects of her identity that she embraces as acts of self-definition are the same ones that Carson exploits, demonstrating how racialized individuals can be granted visibility only under terms that serve those in power.

This tension between self-assertion and exploitation is vividly illustrated in Pan's confrontation with Carson, particularly in her choice to wear traditional Chinese attire. Her decision to reclaim her Chinese heritage, in stark contrast to the American dress Carson is accustomed to seeing her in, represents a powerful act of resistance—a declaration of her complex, mixed-race identity that refuses to be co-opted by the expectations of whiteness. Carson's reaction to her appearance— "She did not even look herself"—shows how deeply his understanding of Pan's identity has been shaped by his own biases and his desire to possess her within a framework of white dominance.[115] For him, Pan's 'transformation' into a Chinese woman disrupts the idealized version of her he had projected, forcing him to confront the limits of his own control over her.

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[115] Far, 66

When Carson insists, “You are not [a Chinese woman],” and attempts to redefine Pan as “a white woman—white,” his words reflect the underlying assumption that Pan’s racial identity is something he can dictate.[116] He fails to see her as a full, autonomous individual; instead, he demands that she align with the whiteness he associates with belonging and privilege. This moment highlights the precariousness of Pan’s identity under Carson’s gaze—how her self-definition is continuously contested, not just by external forces but also by the desires and expectations of those around her.

Pan’s defiance, however, is clear when she responds, “I would not be a white woman for all the world.”[117] In rejecting Carson’s vision of her, she reclaims agency over her identity, asserting her Chinese heritage in a direct challenge to the racial hierarchies that attempt to erase or subordinate it. Pan’s rejection of whiteness is not merely a personal rejection of Carson’s desires; it is a broader rejection of the social system that demands/pressures people like her to assimilate into whiteness in order to be accepted. Her words express a profound resistance not only to Carson’s view of her but also to the larger racial order that seeks to erase the complexity of multiracial identity in favor of a simplified, homogeneous ideal. In this moment, Pan underscores the struggle for selfhood in a world that profits from racial division and exploitation, refusing to be absorbed into a system that demands her conformity.

This theme of resistance continues in the final scene with the child, which both complements and complicates Pan’s act of defiance. Just as the child’s innocent comfort brings a fleeting sense of solace to Pan, the narrative offers the illusion that generational continuity—especially through motherhood—could provide resolution for the racialized suffering she endures. The mother's hopeful but hollow words, "Thou wilt bear a child thyself some day, and all the bitterness of this will pass away," suggest that Pan's pain could be soothed through assimilation into prescribed gender roles like the dutiful mother.[118] However, this moment ultimately highlights the limitations of such roles within a system that continuously marginalizes nonwhite identities. Pan's emotional response to the child, coupled with the superficial comfort offered by the mother, reveals the way society attempts to assimilate or erase Chinese American identities by confining them to stereotypical roles, offering only fleeting relief in a system that perpetually marginalizes them. This scene mirrors Pan's earlier rejection of Carson's idealized version of her, reinforcing the narrative's broader critique of a racialized system that seeks to homogenize and erase the complexities of multiracial identity.

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[116] Far, 66

[117] Far, 66

This dynamic resonates with Sui Sin Far's refusal to present Chinese Americans as passive victims of exclusion, and instead, her characters, including Pan, are shown as actively negotiating their identities in response to the demands of a white-dominated society. Pan's rejection of her proximity to whiteness, and her final choice to embrace her Chinese heritage more fully, mirrors this negotiation, and is an act of resistance that resists assimilation and challenges the racial and cultural homogenization America demands. As Pan rejects the role of the passive victim, she also defies the narrow definitions of belonging that exclude non-white people, even those born in America, from full inclusion in the American narrative.

By rejecting the false hope of assimilation embodied by the mother's words and the child's innocence, Pan's story critiques the very structural injustices of a society that frames citizenship as conditional on one's ability to conform to Anglo-American ideals. In this way, Pan's story is not merely about personal identity, but about survival—finding ways to exist within a system that constantly seeks to dictate the terms of belonging, even while exploiting the very existence of those who do not conform. Sui Sin Far’s portrayal of Pan’s mixed race identity challenges the exclusionary laws of the time, offering a really interesting exploration of how racial and cultural erasure persists through systemic forces, and how those at the margins resist, survive, and refuse to be consumed.

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[118] Far, 66

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