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Passers and Pluralists: Subverting the Racial Divide

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Multiracial Americans of European and African descent have historically faced unique identity issues because of the respectively dominant and subordinate positions of their two ancestry groups in the social hierarchy of races in the United States. This situation has arisen out of the fact that Anglo-Americans, as part of the strategy for preserving their dominant status, have enforced a "policy of hypodescent" that has designated as Black everyone who is not "pure" White (Harris, 1964), and have maintained both legal and informal barriers restricting the contact as equals between individuals of African descent and Whites in the public as well as the private sectors, particularly in the area of intermarriage. Multiracial individuals for the most part have accepted the racial status quo, and have identified themselves as Black. A significant number of individuals, however, have chosen the path of resistance, such that European American control over the boundaries between White and Black, and between dominant and subordinate, has always been relative rather than absolute.

Individual resistance has taken the form primarily of "passing," a radical form of integration whereby individuals of a more European phenotype and cultural orientation make a clandestine break with the

African American community, temporarily or permanently, in order to enjoy the privileges of the dominant White community. Collective resistance has included the formation of pluralistic elites within the African American community, as seen in the phenomenon of blue-vein societies, or the formation of pluralistic enclaves on the periphery of both the African American and European American communities such as the triracial isolates and the Louisiana Creoles. Membership in these societies has been determined by individuals' phenotypical and cultural approximation to European Americans, creating at least the illusion of having escaped the taint of subordinate group status, if not the actual achievement of equality with Whites.

Going Underground: Passing

The most frequent individual strategy of resistance is commonly called *passing*. As a form of radical integration, passing among individuals of African descent has generally meant shifting one's racial reference group from Black to White. When compared with dramatic frontline battles waged against racial inequality by individuals of African descent, passing thus may appear on the surface to be a form of opportunism, selling out, or a full acceptance of the racial status quo. If viewed as part of a spectrum of tactics, however, it is clear that, while some strategies in the fight against oppression aim to liberate individuals from its chains, passing is an underground tactic, a "conspiracy of silence" (Stonequist, 1937) and a form of racial alchemy that seeks to best oppression at its own game by subverting both the comportment line between dominant and subordinate and the arbitrary line between White and Black.

Sociocultural approximation to European American norms is important in this process. Yet, all else being equal, passing, by its very nature, is necessarily employed by individuals who are already genotypically and phenotypically more White than Black (Day, 1932). Those unable to pass as Anglo-American have often adopted Latin or other non-English names; some have passed as members of other groups of color, such as Asians or Native Americans, that are perceived to have been allotted a more privileged status in the social hierarchy of races (Williamson, 1984).

Considering the clandestine nature of the phenomenon, it is possible neither to pinpoint when passing first occurred nor to do more

than conjecture about its quantitative dimensions (Spickard, 1989). Some individuals born from the first contact between Africans and Europeans in the early colonial period may have passed. For the most part, however, these offspring would have been discernibly enough of African descent to have been prevented from passing, even if they had so desired. Quite likely, passing became a greater possibility as the crossings of successive generations of multiracial individuals with each other, as well as with Whites, increased the numbers of individuals having greater phenotypical approximation to European Americans (Day, 1932). It certainly must have become more attractive in proportion to the increase in legally sanctioned discrimination associated with the codification of slavery in the late seventeenth century, the restrictions on Free People of Color in the late eighteenth century, and the implementation of Jim Crow segregation at the turn of the twentieth century (Williamson, 1984).

It would be difficult to say whether passing has actually decreased with the dismantling of segregation and the implementation of civil rights legislation during the second half of the twentieth century. It would be safe to conclude, however, that these changes have cumulatively given Americans of African descent greater access to sectors of society from which they were previously barred, such that the most immediate impetus behind passing has been removed. This is borne out by the fact that during the era of segregation the most common form of passing is believed to have been of the discontinuous type (Spickard, 1989). Whether done for reasons of practicality, out of a spirit of revenge, or for amusement, this generally involved a brief trip across the color line by individuals who presented themselves as White or, more often, simply said nothing about their racial identity, in order to enjoy an evening in a White restaurant or theater, or a more comfortable seat on a train. Some individuals have held day jobs as Whites, but have returned to the African American community at night. Others have passed in various parts of the country, but have returned home periodically to visit family and friends. All have faced the anxiety of operating in two not merely different but antagonistic worlds, while struggling to keep each world and its respective intimacies clearly separate, lest an acquaintance either wittingly or unwittingly unravel their disguise (Spickard, 1989).

Continuous passing, which involves a complete break with the African American community, has been the most sensational sort of crossing over, though it probably has involved fewer people than is

generally thought. Considering the need for spatial mobility and anonymity, continuous passing is generally thought to have involved more men than women, and to have occurred more frequently in the urban North than in the rural South (Stonequist, 1937; Williamson, 1984). Like discontinuous passing, it has most often been a means of gaining access to positions of wealth, power, privilege, and prestige normally barred to individuals of African descent. Some people who choose continuous passing may also find it a way of escaping taunts and other forms of social stigmatization from African Americans who have viewed them as being less than bona fide Blacks (Stonequist, 1937). Seldom, however, does an individual of a more European phenotype grow up as African American and then suddenly make an intellectual decision to pass. Rather, continuous passing is a gradual process in which emotional ties to African Americans are severed as ties to European Americans are achieved (Berzon, 1978; Drake & Cayton, 1945). The final break comes when the benefits of becoming White are felt to outweigh the costs of being Black.

However, it should not be assumed that continuous passing exacts no price. One of the most difficult things a person can be faced with is saying farewell to family and friends, or even having to leave without saying anything at all. If some passers have become "White liberals," opening doors that otherwise would be closed to individuals of African descent, others, out of feelings of being impostors and the constant fear of exposure, have adjusted to their new identities by overcompensating, surpassing even the most rabid racists in order to prove their credentials as Whites (Berzon, 1978; Spickard, 1989).

The Light Brigade: Blue-Vein Societies

Passing is necessarily a highly individualistic strategy available to a small percentage of African-descent Americans, and probably only a minority of individuals who could pass actually have done so. Those who were unwilling or unable to pass sought collectively to counter systematic subordination and to compensate for the arbitrary line between White and Black through the formation of pluralistic elites within the African American community where the degree of acceptance was granted in accordance with one's approximation to the dominant "psychosomatic norm image" (Hoetink, 1971). By emphasizing light skin, straight hair, and sharp features, as well as European

culture and thought, multiracial individuals were able not only to distance themselves from the image typically held of Blacks, but also to achieve in this way vicarious, if not actual, parity with Whites (Berzon, 1978).

In support of this strategy these pluralistic elites argued that their sociocultural and physical "Whiteness" entitled them to special privileges over the Black masses and made them more deserving of full integration into the mainstream of American life (Bone, 1958/1965). This attitude indicates that they were casualties of the deeper racial oppression embedded in the fabric of American society, and that by having so internalized this oppression, they were themselves in no small part perpetrators of a rather divisive and pernicious colorism among individuals of African descent. Yet, by re-creating the dominant psychosomatic norm image within the subordinate caste, they did bring into sharp focus the "illogical logic" in the rule of hypodescent, which deemed as inferior, and as "Black," individuals who were culturally, and in many cases phenotypically, different from Whites in name only.

The formation of multiracial elites was primarily an urban phenomenon, since rural African American communities generally tended to be too poor for color stratification actually to develop. This is not to say that there was no evidence of rural color consciousness, but rather that color differences were relatively less important because other criteria were absent (Mencke, 1979). In urban areas, however, color combined with sociocultural factors to heighten differences among individuals of African descent. Cities such as Charleston, Washington, Philadelphia, Nashville, Louisville, New Orleans, Boston, New York, and Atlanta, to mention only a few, were well known for their "blue-vein" societies, their "Four Hundred" or "Talented Tenth" (Berzon, 1978; Bone, 1958/1965; Mencke, 1979; Wright, 1985).

Whether it was in the community of a church, college, literary society, or social club, European ancestry (preferably aristocratic), a more European phenotype—specifically, skin coloring that was light enough to make visible the blood running through one's veins—education, industry, thrift, sobriety, fastidiousness in speech habits, manners, and dress, wealth, and, sometimes, close social contact with Whites, in conjunction with professional standing, all combined to qualify one for membership or marriage into a numerically small and select elite (Berzon, 1978; Mencke, 1979; Williamson, 1984). African American colleges such as Howard, Atlanta, Hampton, and Fisk

became bastions of the multiracial elite (Bone, 1958/1965; Spickard, 1989). Though it is uncertain whether there actually existed churches with front doors painted a certain shade of light brown to discourage entrance by persons of a darker hue, religious affiliation did frequently follow color, cultural, and class lines. Multiracial individuals gravitated toward Episcopal, Congregational, Presbyterian, and Catholic churches and away from the Baptist or Methodist, though there were numerous congregations, such as that of the Fifth Street Baptist Church in Louisville, that were exceptions to this rule (Berzon, 1978; Wright, 1985).

This multiracial elite, which evolved directly out of the antebellum Free People of Color, was derived from varied sources: those who gained their freedom by enlisting in either the British or American forces during the American Revolution, those who had been emancipated by legislation or court decisions, those who had gained freedom through self-purchase or whose relatives or friends had purchased their freedom for them, those who were born of free parents or of mothers who were free, and those who were runaway slaves (Berlin, 1976; Foner, 1975). More specifically, this elite originated through the preferential emancipation from servitude—both indentureship and slavery—often granted to the offspring of interracial unions, who were "generally freed after a specified term of servitude if the mother was White, or perhaps manumitted by a conscience-stricken White father" (Berlin, 1976, p. 3).

Throughout the antebellum period, the characteristic condition of most individuals of African descent, multiracial as well as Black, was that of slavery. In Anglo-America, there is no evidence to support the notion that multiracial individuals were invariably chosen as house servants or concubines. In the main, they worked in the fields alongside Blacks. Yet, in all regions of the United States, they were, when compared to Blacks, disproportionately represented among the free (Berzon, 1978; Mencke, 1979; Spickard, 1989). European Americans successfully prevented these multiracial individuals from integrating into the mainstream of society as their equals, such that most of them remained illiterate, propertyless, and poor (Berlin, 1976; Foner, 1975). Long before the abolition of slavery, however, many had achieved a certain amount of education and economic security and had established life-styles that not only differentiated them from the slave masses—and by extension the masses of Blacks—but that paralleled, and in many cases mirrored, the social and cultural life of Whites. A

natural consequence of these factors was that a more European phenotype and sociocultural orientation among African Americans became visible markers of elite status (Berlin, 1976; Berzon, 1978).

Despite regional variations, European Americans in general had little inclination to recognize distinctions among individuals of African descent. In each census year from 1850 to 1920, except 1880 and 1900, an attempt was made to count African Americans as Black or mulatto; in 1890, the count was further broken down into quadroon and octoroon. The methods, however, were often sloppy and the definitions of *multiracial* varied. The fact that census takers used visual criteria certainly led to an undercount of the numbers of African Americans of partial European descent. In actual practice, the differences between words describing varying degrees of African ancestry were semantic rather than social, and had little or no significance beyond their usage in the creation of a pecking order among individuals of African descent (Mencke, 1979; Williamson, 1984).

The Civil War and Reconstruction brought an end to the previous distinction between slave and free, and the implementation of segregation at the turn of the twentieth century drew an even sharper line between White and Black. The loss of those few privileges that had been associated with color by virtue of freedom during the antebellum period, plus the overwhelming hostility of the larger White world, led to a marked shift of the political consciousness of the multiracial elite in the direction of an alliance with Blacks. In this coalition they provided a not insignificant number of leaders in the early fight for civil rights due to the relatively better opportunities for social, cultural, and intellectual advancement their color had given them in comparison to the masses of Blacks (Berlin, 1976; Mencke, 1979). This diminished somewhat the emphasis that had previously been attached to color. In addition, the cumulative effects of forced endogamy and "internal miscegenation" (Williamson, 1984) between multiracial individuals and Blacks reached such a point by the 1920s that the majority of African Americans were not only well on their way to becoming more or less multiracial, but the census ceased to enumerate multiracial individuals separately from Blacks. Officially and informally, as more Blacks became multiracial, individuals of a more European phenotype gradually came to regard themselves, and were regarded, less as multiracial and more as light-skinned Blacks (Mencke, 1979; Williamson, 1984).

These seismological sociocultural shifts eclipsed the comparatively privileged status that the multiracial elite had maintained for several hundred years. By the end of the first quarter of the twentieth century, individuals of varying degrees of African ancestry were more equally scattered throughout the upper, middle, and lower sectors of the African American social structure; wealth and cultural attributes had became more important than color alone in determining social prestige. Nevertheless, a large or disproportionate number of the elite remained considerably more European in appearance and culture than the masses of individuals of African descent (Mencke, 1979). This was due in part to the fact that these individuals continued to benefit from the advantages vested in them over generations. Also, despite changing political alliances, many sought to resist their loss of status by withdrawing ever more self-consciously into themselves.

Runaways and Refuseniks: Triracial Isolates

Scattered throughout the eastern United States, particularly in the South, there are some 200 or more communities commonly called *triracial isolates*. They are pluralistic in nature, like the blue-vein societies, yet whereas the latter formed an urban elite within the African American community, the former live apart from both Blacks and Whites in communities on the fringes of villages and towns, or in isolated rural enclaves. Many individuals from these groups have migrated to the cities, and some communities can boast of prosperous farmers, professionals, and college graduates, yet vast numbers remain in their rural communities as unskilled laborers or as impoverished tillers of the soil (B. Berry, 1963).

Though these communities have much in common, it would be erroneous to think of them as one identifiable group. While most are small and located in hilly, swampy, or densely wooded areas not accessible to the general public, the Lumbees of Robeson County, North Carolina, for example, have had as many as 30,000 members (B. Berry, 1963). Commonalities among these communities have less to do with actual cultural bonds than with similarities in experience and in living conditions that unite them in their refusal to accept a binary system of racial classification in which individuals suspected of having any African ancestry are necessarily considered to be Black (Wilkins, 1989).

In the American South, any term describing racially blended ancestry generally has included African descent, has been equated with mulatto, and has been translated into Black. Most of these communities thus affirm only two components—Native American and European—if they acknowledge their multiracial ancestry at all (Blu, 1980). In this sense, their quest for identity appears to be more reactionary than revolutionary (Wilkins, 1989). Yet, if they are victims of Anglo-America's binary racial epistemology, these communities are also victors who have created their own third racial identity by manipulating that epistemology to their advantage, and have destabilized binary racial thinking in the process (Wilkins, 1989).

The triracial isolates are known by a wide variety of names. New York is the home of the Van Guilders, the Clappers, the Shinnecock, the Poospatuck, the Montauk, the Mantinecock, and the Jackson Whites. In Pennsylvania, they are called Pools; in Delaware, Nanticokes; in Rhode Island, Narragansetts; in Massachusetts, Gay Heads and Mashpees; in Ohio, Carmelites. Maryland has its Wesorts; West Virginia, its Guineas; and Tennessee, its Melungeons. There are the Ramps, Issues, and Chickahominy in Virginia; the Lumbees, Haliwas, Waccamaws, and Smilings in North Carolina; Chavises, Creels, Brass Ankles, Redbones, Redlegs, Buckheads, and Yellowhammers, all in South Carolina. Louisiana is the home of a host of triracial communities (B. Berry, 1963).

Considering that documentary evidence is scanty, the exact origins of these groups and their names are unknown. This uncertainty is compounded by the fact that at different times in the antebellum period, depending on the determination of the enumerator, the same families in some communities were listed variously as White, mulatto, and Free People of Color (Blu, 1980). To complicate matters further, it was not until the mid-nineteenth century that the last term came to be more or less interchangeable with the categories of Free Mulatto and Free Black. Up to that time, it had actually been a rather illusive term that included Native American reservations; Native American rural communities, multiracial populations of Native American, European, and African descent; multiracial populations of European and African descent; and Free Blacks (Blu, 1980; J. D. Forbes, 1988a). In all probability, the communities evolved from frontier settlements that became magnets for runaway slaves, trappers, homesteaders, adventurers, deserters, outlaws, outcasts, and nonconformists of all racial

backgrounds, but "internal miscegenation," fostered by self-imposed isolation, led to a generalized blending over time (B. Berry, 1963).

Appellations such as Chavis and Creel are family names, though many others, such as Brass Ankle and Redbone, are externally imposed, and are clearly meant to be epithets. As such, they are anathema to those who bear them. Names such as Chickahominy and Nanticoke, which suggest Native American derivation, are borne proudly. Some individuals in these communities would in fact readily be taken as Native American. Others are indistinguishable from Whites; a good many clearly show varying degrees of African ancestry in combination with European and/or Native American descent. Enclaves in St. Landry Parish, Louisiana, in Gouldtown, New Jersey, and in Darke County, Ohio, have always acknowledged their African ancestry, though they have somewhat isolated themselves from the mainstream of society and have drawn a line between themselves and other locals of African descent. Most triracial isolates, however, tend to deny African ancestry and hold on to aboriginal descent as a prized possession, despite the fact that they retain little or nothing of Native American culture, have no recollection of their tribal affiliations, and are culturally indistinguishable from local Whites (B. Berry, 1963; Wilkins, 1989).

This positive bias toward aboriginal ancestry is explainable in part by the fact that although both Native Americans and Blacks were enslaved by European Americans, and still experience oppression in one form or another, aboriginal ancestry has never carried the stigma that has been consistently attached to African descent (Crowe, 1975). Not only could the smallest amount of Native American ancestry qualify one for federal assistance, voting rights, and land claims—meager privileges that have not always been available to Blacks—but also, by the twentieth century, the Native American threat to continued Anglo-American territorial expansion had been sufficiently neutralized so as to make possible the romanticization of Native Americans, affording many Whites the luxury of viewing any aboriginal ancestry of their own as a source of pride (Blu, 1980; Crowe, 1975; Snipp, 1986; Spickard, 1989).

Moreover, if racial composition and ancestry have always been dispositive in determining who is Black, there is by contrast no universally accepted definition of Native American (B. Berry, 1963). The U.S. Census Bureau and the Bureau of Indian Affairs have had definitions that have often been at odds with each other, and both

have shifted policies over time. The Bureau of Indian Affairs includes on its rolls only those individuals entitled to bureau services. Acceptance by a tribe, however it may be defined, in conjunction with proof of at least one-quarter degree of aboriginal ancestry, is generally required. For census purposes, self-definition has been the prevailing policy for all ethnicities since 1960. In the past, however, enumerators were instructed to record as Native American only those individuals enrolled on reservations or listed in agency rolls, persons of one-fourth or more aboriginal ancestry, or individuals regarded as Native Americans by their communities (B. Berry, 1963). Though these regulations were applied primarily to multiracial individuals of Native American and European descent, or to individuals who were perceived to be completely aboriginal in ancestry, some state codes, and the census in 1930 and 1940, have applied the same criteria to multiracial individuals of Native American and African descent as well as to those of Native American, African, and European descent. For the most part, however, such individuals have been classified as Black (J. D. Forbes, 1990).

Thus prevented by society from affirming all of who they are without also being classified as Black, yet unable to claim residence on a reservation or prove that they meet the ancestry quantum requirements, various triracial communities have, nevertheless, used the flexibility in the definition of Native American to their advantage. By 1980, the Lumbees of North Carolina, the Nanticokes of Delaware, the Houma in western Louisiana, and the Poospatuck of Long Island, New York, after a prolonged struggle, had succeeded in officially changing their earlier classification as mulattoes to nontreaty Native Americans. This status excludes them from government benefits, but it places them squarely on the aboriginal side of the racial divide (B. Berry, 1963; Blu, 1980; R. Thornton, 1987; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1980). Many, however, have become active in Native American affairs, only to have their claims to aboriginal status meet with reluctance, if not resistance, from treaty or reservation groups such as the Cherokee, the Comanche, and the Choctaw, who do qualify for federal subsidies (B. Berry, 1963; Blu, 1980).

Though African Americans accuse these communities of donning feathers in order to escape the stigma of being Black, various triracial groups have cast their lot with African Americans, and some individuals have committed the "unforgivable sin" of marrying Blacks. Most have long maintained a strong anti-Black prejudice that has in no

small part helped bolster support for their own identity by Whites. The clearest example of this was during the era of segregation. Denied entry into White schools, numerous communities not only refused to attend schools and use public facilities for Blacks, but gained support for establishing their own public restrooms and education facilities, as well as separate sections in churches and theaters (B. Berry, 1963).

Groups such as the Jackson Whites and the Issues have succeeded in negotiating alternative identities as "other non-Whites" (B. Berry, 1963; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1980). Though some individuals have always passed for White, groups such as the Brass Ankles and the Melungeons, who have persistently fought for legal status as White, have met with success in their local communities, if not actually with the government (B. Berry, 1963; Blu, 1980). Other communities enjoy a status just barely below that of Whites; elsewhere their status is hardly distinguishable from that of Blacks. Overall, they seem to have a status intermediate to both. The price for all this, however, has been the denial of African ancestry, sometimes the casting off of darker relatives, and the avoidance of every suspicion of association with Blacks (B. Berry, 1963).

The French Resistance: Louisiana Creoles

The history of multiracial individuals in the state of Louisiana is in many ways a synthesis of other resistance strategies, but with unique features of its own. This stems largely from the fact that the early patterns of settlement in the lower Mississippi Valley, the Gulf Coast, and South Carolina, respectively, differed from those in North Carolina and in the states northward and westward. The Upper South was settled by large numbers of White families and experienced an early balance in the numbers of White males and females. Neither these demographic factors nor the larger ratio of Whites to Blacks prevented miscegenation, yet they quantitatively reduced the amount of racial blending that occurred. In the Lower South, following the Latin American model, White settlers were small in number and primarily single males, who formed liaisons initially with Native American women and, after the introduction of slavery, with women of African descent. As in the rest of the Americas, there were formidable barriers to intermarriage. Informal unions, however, were more or less approved, if not encouraged, by the prevailing moral code and led to

miscegenation on a broad scale (Berlin, 1976; Mencke, 1979; Williamson, 1984).

Pervasive miscegenation and the tendency to give multiracial slaves tasks symbolizing greater personal worth and requiring greater skill, in conjunction with the preferential liberation of slave mistresses and their multiracial offspring, made it possible for multiracial individuals early in the colonial Lower South to enter the free classes, where they filled interstitial economic roles, particularly in the artisanal, manual, and skilled trades, for which there were insufficient numbers of Whites. By virtue of this smaller ratio of Whites to Blacks in the Lower South than in the Upper South, the former tended to view Free People of Color as an integral part of the economy. Furthermore, considering that Whites and most Free Coloreds shared bonds of ancestry and culture, the former viewed the latter as natural and valuable allies against the Black slave majority. This often included the suppression of slave uprisings, as well as the catching and returning of fugitive slaves (Berlin, 1976; Mencke, 1979; Williamson, 1984). This comparatively more favorable situation in "Latin North America" was enhanced by the fact that during the colonial period the distant monarchs of Spain, France, and England saw Free Coloreds in the region as a military "balance-wheel against independence-minded Whites" and necessarily provided some protection of their rights (Berlin, 1976). By granting multiracial individuals an intermediate status and privileges superior to those of Blacks but inferior to those of Whites, both the Crown and the colonists in the Lower South won the loyalty of the Free People of Color while maintaining White domination and control (Berlin, 1976; Mencke, 1979; Williamson, 1984).

The large number of Whites in the Upper South not only diminished the need for Free Coloreds to fill interstitial roles in the economy and for their collaboration in protecting the status quo, but this composite of variables precluded the differentiation of multiracial individuals from Blacks. Although Free Coloreds made up a larger percentage of the total population of African descent in the Upper South, there were proportionately more Blacks in their ranks, and the multiracial segment was predominantly rural, of humble White origins, and of modest means. Free Coloreds in the Lower South were smaller in number, but were from comparatively well-to-do White origins, tended to be urban, and were predominantly multiracial. Despite the generally oppressive conditions in both regions, Free

Coloreds in the Lower South thus not only secured a comparatively more favorable status, but also in Charleston and in gulf ports such as Natchez, Mobile, Pensacola, and New Orleans, they formed one vast blue-vein society and enjoyed the most secure position of any Free People of Color in the South (Berlin, 1976; Mencke, 1979).

The largest community of multiracial individuals resided in New Orleans. Overall, however, Louisiana was the home of the most numerically significant and most economically integrated population of Free Coloreds in the South. They worked as carpenters, ironsmiths, tailors, dressmakers, barbers, hairdressers, and the like, and "reached up into business and the professions" (Williamson, 1984, p. 19). The arrival in Louisiana of large numbers of prosperous multiracial individuals fleeing the Haitian revolution in 1804 not only augmented the ranks of Free Coloreds, but certainly enhanced their socioeconomic status and reified the distinction between multiracial and Black (Berlin, 1976; Haskins, 1975; Rankin, 1978).

Many of Louisiana's multiracial citizens were slaveholding planters in parishes such as St. Landry, Iberville, and Plaquemines (Williamson, 1984). Wealth not only made it possible for some to live in luxury and receive an education in Europe, but, most important, it gave them the means "to maintain themselves with poise and dignity in a White-dominated world" (Williamson, 1984, p. 22). One of the most prosperous of these communities was composed of the descendants of an African woman and a Frenchman named Metoyer who inhabited Nachitoches Parish along the Cane River. Initially, the Metoyers often found it necessary to marry among themselves due to the limited numbers of other Free People of Color in the immediate vicinity, the legal restrictions against marriages between Whites and all individuals of African descent, and the taint of slavery that would be attached to marrying Blacks. With successive generations, however, the Cane River colony sought multiracial spouses either from among families newly arrived in the area or from New Orleans, through a process of careful selection in which a more European phenotype and French cultural orientation were highly esteemed. Over time, the multiracial clan expanded in numbers and in wealth, and emerged as a pluralistic enclave much like the triracial isolates in Anglo-North America (Mills, 1977).

All of this changed when the composite Creole population, including Spanish- and French-speaking Whites as well as people of color, in Louisiana and around Mobile and Pensacola came under Anglo-

American control with the annexation of Louisiana (1803) and the Floridas (1810, 1819). Overwhelmed by an English-speaking majority, Creoles of all racial backgrounds remained aloof from the new arrivals, whom they perceived as a threat to their cultural and political survival (Berlin, 1976; Dominguez, 1986). They fought to maintain French civil law, their unique cultural traditions, the teaching of French in public schools, and Creole dominance over local and regional governments. With Americanization, Creoles of color began the long quest to preserve their intermediate status, as they watched Louisiana's ternary system of racial classification polarize into Black and White (Dominguez, 1986).

By the time of the Civil War the tension between Anglo-Americans and Creoles of European descent abated as the former concentrated on securing economic, political, and social dominance by building a united White front against all individuals of African descent. To achieve this they supported ideas of racial purity and devised new criteria of race in which *Creole* was redefined on the premise of having only Spanish and French ancestry (Dominguez, 1986). Abandoned by their White brethren, Creoles of color nevertheless had a vested social and economic interest in the southern way of life (close to one in every three families owned slaves) and thus supported the Confederacy in a desperate attempt to arrest any further erosion of their status (Dominguez, 1986; Haskins, 1975; Rankin, 1978). With the Union capture of New Orleans, most switched their loyalties, hoping that with emancipation, racial prejudice also would fall. However, Union victory not only brought a loss of wealth and property, but dealt another blow to their former status, since all individuals of African descent were now free. Many Creoles of color resisted this decline by denying any similarity or community of interests with the sea of ex-slaves and English-speaking Blacks. Others, benefiting from the social, cultural, and intellectual advantages vested in them over generations, provided a majority of the political leadership of the Black masses, serving as state senators, representatives, and even state officials in the Reconstruction government imposed by a victorious North on a very resistant South (Dominguez, 1986; Haskins, 1975; Rankin, 1978).

The withdrawal of federal troops brought the winds of change to post-Reconstruction Louisiana. A backlash by southern Whites against any ideas of racial democracy thwarted attempts by Creoles of color to hold on to the hard-won franchise and to arrest the

segregationist tide. It is no accident that the illogic of Anglo-America's policy of hypodescent played itself out in Louisiana in the 1896 Supreme Court case involving a Creole of one-eighth African descent, *Hommère Plessy v. Ferguson*, which established Jim Crow segregation in public railway transportation and, shortly thereafter, in public facilities and schools (Haskins, 1975; Rankin, 1978).

The full installation of segregation thus dealt Creoles of color the final blow. Some responded by casting their lot with Blacks and became champions in the fight for civil rights. Many left for Mexico and the Caribbean, where racial lines were more fluid, and where color rather than ancestry was the primary criterion used to define race. Others moved to Florida, Kansas, or California, where they crossed the color line or congregated to form Creole residential enclaves. Large numbers went North, where they passed for White. A smaller number passed for White in Louisiana by destroying the birth records in St. Louis Cathedral that were the only legal proof of their ancestry. In a desperate search for solace and seclusion, still others refused to learn English, remained staunchly Catholic, and sought refuge within the narrow confines of their own world in the downtown section of New Orleans north of Canal Street, particularly in the Seventh Ward (Dominguez, 1986; Haskins, 1975; Rankin, 1978).

After more than a century and a half of resistance to Americanization, most Creoles, with the exception of some of the older generation, no longer speak French or the Louisiana variant commonly called *patois*. Though a few French words remain in their vocabularies, they have incorporated a number of "African Americanisms" into their speech and other aspects of their culture. Younger Creoles have felt the "heightened pride and consciousness" (Dominguez, 1986; Haskins, 1975) that have affected all individuals of African descent in the last two decades. Many have begun to realize, like others before them, that it is advantageous to join forces, at least politically, with Blacks in the fight for civil rights, where unity among all individuals of African descent is essential if gains for Creoles as well are to be made. As a consequence of these influences, traditional attitudes toward the color line have softened (Dominguez, 1986; Haskins, 1975). Yet, if Creole identity is changing, it is no less intact. It is a long-established means of fostering a sense of solidarity, belonging, and self-pride that was mobilized in defense against a binary system of racial classification in which one is necessarily either Black or White, and that has relegated to subordinate status individuals who, by virtue of ancestry

and culture, were in the past accorded partial rights to the privileges of the dominant Whites.

Conclusion

Anglo-Americans, in order to neutralize the threat to White dominance implicitly posed by multiracial individuals of partial European ancestry, enforced a policy of hypodescent, which relegated these individuals to the subordinate group by designating as Black everyone who was not pure White. The legal and informal restrictions that have historically barred individuals of African descent from access to avenues of contact with Whites as equals has not, however, prevented multiracial individuals from assuming that by virtue of their physical appearance and cultural behavior they should be accorded the privileges of the dominant Whites. Generated by racist pressure that has rewarded Whiteness and punished Blackness, the tactics that multiracial individuals have devised in order to resist the rigid binary racial epistemology and the corresponding dominant-subordinate hierarchy in the United States have themselves tended to be hierarchical and less a reaction to the forced denial of European ancestry than to subordination and the denial of privileges that such ancestry implied. Despite their patent Eurocentrism, these strategies—whether integration through passing or the formation of pluralistic elites and isolated rural enclaves—may be legitimately viewed as diverse tactics of resistance to oppression utilized by individuals of African descent. While some individuals may seek to confront oppression head-on, passers and pluralists seek to turn oppression on its head by subverting the racial divide.

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RACIALLY MIXED PEOPLE IN AMERICA

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