

Abstract

This chapter examines whiteness and slavery and explores how, for many late-nineteenth-century commentators, the idea of whiteness was a contested racial identity. It will explore historic attempts to define race and historiographical and pedagogical responses to these attempts, starting with an examination of the photographs of ‘white’ slave children of New Orleans in the 1860s. The chapter will also look at the phenomenon of ‘passing’ and the ways that, prior to the 1910 Mann Act, progressives’ responses to prostitution as ‘white slavery’ change our understanding of the intersection of race and slavery. It will discuss the work of scholars such as Mary Niall Mitchell (‘Rosebloom and Pure White, or So It Seemed,’ in *American Quarterly*, 2002), Allyson Hobbs (*A Chosen Exile: A History of Racial Passing in American Life*) and Brian Donovan (*White Slave Crusades: Race, Gender and Anti-Vice Activism*) and also explore the challenges of taking this research into the undergraduate classroom.

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Fashioning Whiteness

Teaching the Ways That Slavery Defined Race Before and After the Civil War

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Researching the evolving conceptions of the meaning of whiteness in the Civil War era, and in doing so reclaiming some of the voices of those who have been historically marginalized, is producing exciting and innovative results, but this chapter argues that such developments must be considered alongside pedagogical questions about how best to teach the historical context of racial identity.

Teaching Atlantic world slavery and race in the high school and undergraduate classroom has always been problematic. First is the problem of American exceptionalism—how often the antebellum US case study is taken to stand for slavery and race throughout the Atlantic world and, more broadly, for global slavery due to the availability of source material in English to study this topic. But more crucial are the sensitivities of teaching slavery in classrooms where race identity and memories of such painful histories have immediate and lasting impacts on students, as descendants of slaves or perpetrators, or where students are simply trying to understand how to work with the realities of the horrors people inflicted on one another in the past (and by implication the present too). Many of the questions concerning slavery and race revolve around questions of blame, and these can all too easily be essentialized into a black versus white dialogue, polarizing and

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harming the student dynamic, especially among young people who struggle to conceptualize and articulate their own place in the world. But these painful questions must be confronted as we use slavery and its legacy to help students learn to be active participants in democracy.¹ As William Faulkner's often-paraphrased statement from his novel *Requiem for a Nun* runs, "The past isn't dead. It isn't even past."²

Teaching race has itself had a fascinating history, including during the World War II era's paradigmatic shift, according to Zoe Burkholder, as scientific, anthropological ideas of race gave way to the 'race as culture' model still current in today's classrooms.³ Innovators such as Rachel Davis DuBois taught that all cultures brought unique gifts because of their folkways, and in the late 1930s, this approach developed into the conception of tolerance as a bastion against Nazism. However, part of this process involved the consolidation by American high school teaching materials of racialized whites into a single monolithic race: divisions within whiteness collapsed as whiteness was portrayed as a monolithic entity, associated with skin color.⁴ Academic freedom to teach tolerance and inclusiveness was limited during the McCarthy era when an assimilationist agenda dominated, as white middle-class values were taught as normative. It was from this era that the trend of teaching racial blindness emerged.⁵ Attempts to use culture to teach students moral character development have been contested since the 1960s, especially the controversial idea that there is not one universal set of values, but that students should develop their own. More recently in the 1980s' educational battlefield, the New Right argued that children should be protected from painful pasts and that values should be taught in the home or the church.⁶

This chapter proposes a new way of considering the pedagogy of race and slavery, by taking as its case studies three examples of racial liminality: the 'white' slave children of abolitionist campaigns in the antebellum and Civil War eras, the widespread phenomenon of 'passing' and the 'white slave' panic of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in which the words 'white' and 'slave' were brought together in the public mind again, several generations after the publication of the photographs purporting to highlight white children caught up in chattel slavery. This new pedagogy, when used in the United States, will help to, as Joy Leighton puts it, break down the old dichotomies of North versus South, white versus black. But it can be used in the British or European classroom too, where questions of racial identity are bound up with the contentious debates over slavery and empire.⁷ Crucial to this enterprise is the acknowledgement by the teachers of the racial dynamic of their own classroom. They should feel able to talk about their own racial identity and perspective and what this brings to the history, and to ask students to confront their own racial identity: it's not only something that other students have!⁸ While US culture "vests enormous power in the

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fictions of race,” it is a teacher’s role to expose those power structures and those fictions.⁹

These case studies ask us to confront fundamental questions of race identity and politics, in the past and also in our own contemporary arena. Who decides whether someone is ‘white’ or ‘black,’ and how does that process work? The idea of whiteness in the United States was born during the 1830s and 40s in the period leading up to the Mexican War and was intrinsically connected at that time to Manifest Destiny, but what were the criteria for whiteness and how did this change over time?¹⁰ Could it be family, skin color, culture, an ability to act a certain race? What does whiteness mean? Who is trying to claim it and for what rhetorical or practical purpose? By examining these cases of whiteness on the margins, a whiteness that was claimed to justify political change or cultural identity, students will be able to reflect on their own assumptions about race and realize that the ‘discriminating look’ is fundamental.¹¹ Racial identity is not just constructed in the body of the observed but also in the mind of the observer, in the classic case recounted by Langston Hughes about his trip to Europe. When his boat stopped off in West Africa, those Africans using their unfamiliar (to Hughes) ‘sightlines’ called him a ‘white man.’ To them, whiteness was more about class, wealth, place of birth and mindset than about skin color.¹² Being able to tell a person’s race, and understand whether they were passing or masquerading, was a point of pride for many white Americans in the years immediately after slavery, and also was part of the eugenicist agenda as monitoring and profiling became part of the criminal justice system. Thus, this discriminating gaze became an important trope in the racial landscape. But early attempts to subvert these certainties existed in the form of Franz Boas’s pamphlet of 1939 entitled *Can You Name Them?* asking the audience to name the nationality of six ‘distinguished’ men of a variety of ethnic heritage, and soon after in quizzes in *Ebony* in 1952 presenting a number of mixed-race individuals asking, ‘Which is Negro, which is white?’¹³ This example reveals the constant interplay between the hegemonic racial view and those resisting it.

The perception and agency of the performing racial body is subtly illuminated by an examination of whiteness on the margins.¹⁴ It is a way of highlighting whiteness for a generation of students who may find it invisible. Whiteness studies present a more nuanced way of understanding race, combating the hyper-visibility of people of color.¹⁵ Whiteness has been closely linked with United States’ political identity since at least the middle of the nineteenth century, reinforced by ideas adapted from social Darwinism that great nations were racially homogenous.¹⁶ Ideas of racial authenticity and resistance to stereotyping have been a crucial part of racial discourse since the mid-1960s. Racial hybridity is another idea that enables history students to confront their own prejudices and fears. The idea of the heroic mixed-race mulatto, never quite fitting into either racial profile,

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appeared in novels from the Harlem Renaissance onwards, such as Jean Toomer's work.¹⁷ This also has important echoes in Native American culture from eighteenth-century novelists onwards, as it was the hybrid figures who were estranged from their reservation or tribe and who were able to achieve true psychological complexity. In the contemporary world, mixed-race individuals can occupy an unusual space in public discourse as seen, for example, by the use of the term 'black' to mask or simplify other ethnicities when talking about cultural figures such as Halle Berry or Tiger Woods.¹⁸

Passing by its very nature is a difficult phenomenon to study historically, and consequently many cultural theorists have turned to literature to illuminate the way that it has functioned in American society. Passing is an absence, a hidden, silent act. While it is a performance, it is one that desires to go unnoticed. Writing such as Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* shows the ongoing pain at being silenced, even if self-imposed, in this way.¹⁹ The history of the act of passing as an artifice, illusion, deception, or game has often been told either as an act of defiance in an unregenerate racist world or as an act of treachery, a denial of one's own birthright. In more recent decades, racial ambiguity has been celebrated by many who celebrate multiracial discourse, but at what point do perceivers of racial ambiguity fall back on the flawed justification of color-blindness? The agendas of political correctness and color-blindness thoroughly infiltrate the educational world of the millennial generation, meaning that students are hyper-aware of accusations of racism from others. This sometimes hinders the teaching of race because it presents a false sense of equality, the idea that this problem has been solved and belongs only to a historical context. This understanding of a linear progression of a history of race serves to separate students from the subjects they study in the past, meaning that they are less likely to truly understand the motivations of historical subjects and are able to dismiss them as the 'bad,' racist other.²⁰ It pushes others into a defensive standpoint, where students are reluctant to acknowledge their 'white privilege,' their own place in the systems of power that create racism.²¹ However, students' resistance is useful and productive in the classroom, and this can be a way of opening discussions about race that do not have to be dichotomous.²² Gender differences in the pedagogy of race can be a challenging topic as discussion of racial violence and prejudice can descend into a struggle between the 'care voice' and the 'justice voice' (i.e., girls' and boys' perceptions) if the teacher is not careful to give equal attention to both.²³ But the biggest challenge is to prevent the alienation of students who dare to voice opinions outside the perceived acceptable sphere within the learning group. Many students struggle between adopting an open-minded stance and policing each other for potentially racist speech. Words matter, though, and teachers should resist the temptation to bring harmony no matter what has been said. At times, students will learn how to feel a part of a group and apart from a group!²⁴

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As well as gender, another prism through which race should be viewed is class. The Marxist framework describes ways in which racial strife becomes another form of class conflict and outlines the method by which ruling classes use racism to divide and rule and the impulse behind racism is a political and economic one. In a more nuanced interpretation, Antonio Gramsci explored the ways that the dominant class did not rely on political and economic power, but rather used social, cultural and moral values to divide the races. This analysis can again cause controversy and division in the classroom as students find discussions of class challenging to their sense of self-identity. However, by examining the psychological adaptations made by the planter class following the end of Atlantic world slavery, in order to justify their former slave ownership once such a thing was considered unacceptable, helps students to understand the process by which othering and the development of dominative aversive racism happens.²⁵

Disciplinary boundaries matter too. Teaching slavery and race as part of a world history or US history module is very different in nature to teaching it as part of a black history or ethnic history module (although these are much rarer in European academic institutions than in US ones). Teaching explicitly black history can ghettoize and marginalize topics, leading students to consider that the findings are not universally relevant, that they are only for and by students from minorities. Teaching the history of a particular race can also lead to questions of authenticity from students. Is only a person of color qualified to teach black history, for example, and if so, perhaps only a person of color who presents their identity appropriately?²⁶

Case Study One: The White Slave Children of New Orleans

Mary Niall Mitchell has explored the historical significance of images of the white slave children of New Orleans for the abolition movement and in Civil War popular culture more broadly, but my area of interest is in making an examination of the legacy of the remembering of slavery and how we are to understand the diversification of victimhood, the expansion of the definition of the enslaved.²⁷ Misremembering slave experience as ‘white slavery’ can be used by reactionary commentators in the contemporary world to challenge the idea that slave pain is black pain.

‘White’ slavery as an abolitionist trope, describing cases where whites were caught up in slavery’s grasp and thus universalizing and deracializing its threat, can be traced back to the Richard Hildreth novel of 1836 (enlarged in 1852) entitled *The White Slave: A True Picture of Slave Life in America*. Hildreth’s work traces the story of Archy, a light-skinned slave who is the unknowing offspring of his white master and an enslaved mother, described in the novel as a ‘concubine.’ Hildreth’s description of race at the start of the novel, in the voice of the character of Archy, is illuminating: “the trace of African blood by which her veins were contaminated was distinctly visible,

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but the tint which it imported to her complexion only served to give a peculiar richness to the blush that mantled over her cheek.” At this time, the unique ability of women of the white race to blush was culturally lauded.²⁸ The novel also addresses, head on, racial attitudes among the enslaved population, with Archy vocalizing “at that time like most of the lighter skinned slaves, I felt a sort of contempt for my duskier brothers in misfortune.”²⁹ Teaching this aspect of racial identity is important because it shows students how the pervasive attitudes that dark skin was inferior permeated black as well as white society. But the most unusual use of the term ‘white slavery’ in this novel is the twist in the tale at the end, when the narrator Archy addresses the reader, presumably the sympathetic Northern whites, and says,

the white slaves in America are far more numerous than the black ones, not white slaves such as I was, but what slaves such as you are, made such by basic hereditary servility which methinks it is time to shake off.³⁰

Using photographs to teach slavery is often done without analysis and mindfulness. For example, the use of the almost iconic image of a male slave with iron collar round his neck makes a point about cruelty, vulnerability and perhaps also strength in the face of humiliation. Students might be told his name, the date and location of the photograph’s production, but in effect this image provides mere illustration. Wilson Chinn became for the students the archetypical slave, when in fact he was far from it.



Figure 6.1 "Wilson Chinn, a Branded Slave from Louisiana, Also exhibiting Instruments of Torture used to punish Slaves"

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Source: M. H. Kimball, photographer, New York, c.1863. Courtesy of the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.: LC-USZ62-90345.

Teaching students to use photography and understand the fashioning of images helps them to deconstruct them and avoid conceiving of them as a snapshot of reality. These images teach that objects, people and settings can be arranged and changed to reflect the requirements of the photographer, and the shot selected, and lighting and shutter speed have been chosen with an effect in mind. Even from the very earliest days of photography, scenes were manipulated by journalists who wished to convey the horror of slavery and war and yet did not have an appropriate scene before them.³¹ And so they created it! These images are not simply accidental or spontaneous, the result of an impulsive capturing of the perfect message for that moment. Each photo is a deliberate collaboration on the part of artist and subject to depict a politically loaded scene. Photographs are everywhere in our culture, so it is easy to imagine that students would be much better at ‘reading’ them than, say, early modern court records to which they have only rare access, and which are written in specific and stylized prose. But this is not the case. Students are illiterate when it comes to understanding photographic images. By juxtaposing a second photo of Wilson Chinn in a rather different pose, with the caption “Learning Is Wealth,” students can learn more about his role in the abolition and freedmen’s education movements. This image was obviously designed to encourage the education of the enslaved and free people of color and to promote their potential to morph into useful American citizens, but the depiction of racial difference is significant here. Wilson is not dressed as a member of the middle class. His skin color renders his status in society, even in a projected post-Civil War society, as unambiguous, unlike the children alongside him who will be in a much better position to negotiate their place in the world.



Figure 6.2 “Learning Is Wealth. Wilson, Charley, Rebecca & Rosa. Slaves from New Orleans”

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Source: Charles Praxson, photographer, New York, c. 1864. Courtesy of the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division (Gladstone Collection of African American Photographs), Washington, D.C.: LC-DIG-ppmsca-11128.

The photos were part of a series sponsored by the National Freedmen's Association. The five child slaves and three adults were taken north from New Orleans to New York, and there a series of photos were produced to encourage financial support for schools for black children in Louisiana. The light-skinned children on the tour were of especial interest during the 1860s: Charles Taylor, Rebecca Huger, Rosina Downs and Augusta Broujey. In these images, the girls are depicted with their hair covered in fashionable bonnets, and their skin color further masked by the positioning of the clothes. 'Charley' is depicted as next to and indeed on the union flag: 'freedom's banner.'

Students must approach the question of genre, what was the purpose of these *cartes de visite*? This was an incredibly popular genre of early photograph that had its origins in the mid-1850s in Paris, and these photographs were collectable, traded among friends and displayed in albums. They were a crucial way for soldiers to keep in touch with loved ones during the Civil War. An understanding of the genre helps to further interpret the message of these photos: to keep these children in your hearts as well as to raise money for a good cause. Many of these photographs ended up in the hands of wealthy Quakers and other abolitionists in the cities of the North, such as New York and Philadelphia, and are still found in their archives today: Swarthmore College holds a big collection.³²

Viewers' understanding of the images is shaped by the surrounding text: an 1864 article in *Harper's Weekly*. The article describes the lighter skinned children as "as white, as intelligent, as docile, as most of our own children. Yet the chivalry of the gentlemen of the slave states doom them all to the fate of swine." The accompanying letter by Charles C. Leigh of the National Freedmen's Association suggests the young black boy as less intelligent than his lighter skinned counterparts. The article finishes with an exhortation to people of the North not to be complicit with the gentlemen of the South and to "suffer the little children to come unto me." Crucially, the article also tackles head-on the reality of mixed-race children in Southern states. Miscegenation was portrayed as evil and morally wrong; white slaves are living proof of slave masters' abuses. This evil belongs to the slave past, not the free future.³³

These were not the first visual images to construct an enslaved whiteness to shock a complacent United States. In 1834, white, English-born abolitionist George Bourne alerted the American public to the case of rapacious slave owners hunting for white children, forcing young people into slavery who had been forcibly tanned or literally painted black.³⁴ In 1855, the case of Mary Mildred Botts of Virginia became a *cause célèbre*. After her case was exposed by Charles Sumner, her daguerreotype image 'went viral'

in popular media across the United States. She was born into slavery but bought into freedom by a father who was a free person of color, able to raise money to buy his entire family in Boston. A *New York Times* article described her being ‘exhibited’ once her freedom had been purchased and proclaimed: “She was one of the fairest and most indisputable white children that we have ever seen.”³⁵

It was also possible for the hunter to become the hunted in this context. The national newspapers of 1859–60 picked up a humorous account of a case in the New Orleans slave market where a dark-skinned slave trader, “Black Matt,” or Matthew Hopkins, was himself taken and sold into slavery due to the wiliness of the light-skinned enslaved man whom he had taken to market. This enslaved man, Sam, was allowed to disembark from the boat ahead of Black Matt and convinced a planter at the market that Matt himself was the slave and that he believed himself to be a white man. The planter believed this tale, bought Matt and lost his money once Matt’s true provenance was proved, while Sam was able to escape.³⁶

What do these images and stories convey about the emergence of a racial category of whiteness and where its boundaries lay in this period? Why did *Harper’s Weekly* depict some of the slave children of New Orleans as white? Attributing to these children the Victorian values of innocence and purity, abolitionists were claiming that the Civil War was not an issue of color, but of abused peoples. It directly challenged Northerners, who were unsure about the abolition case, that middle-class families looking like theirs might be touched by slavery. In “Rosebloom and Pure White, Or So It Seemed,” Mary Niall Mitchell suggests that depicting the white slave children alongside ‘black’ enslaved people who bore physical scars of abuse meant that the existence of white slaves did not threaten the audience’s self-conceived whiteness.³⁷ The true ogres were the planter class in the South. But it also reflects anxiety over the future, implicitly suggesting that the lighter skinned slaves are ready for freedom and civilization. This fits our understanding of the mid-nineteenth-century judgmental gaze in which slaves of all skin colors were ‘paraded’ for white pleasure, titillation and education. Similar daguerreotypes produced for Louis Agassiz in Columbia, South Carolina, to prove his arguments on polygenesis, were an example of the brand-new medium of photography being used to record, observe, measure and objectify. While Agassiz’s enslaved subjects were obviously black and he recorded them as representations of a type, the white slave images were also presented as depicting a type, and the subjects were then manipulated by white abolitionist campaigners for their own ends.

How do students respond while trying to work with the still raw legacies of slavery and racial discord? The possibility of some of America’s enslaved people being ‘white’ is very contentious in contemporary political discourse. Right-wing commentators are especially fascinated by the idea of ‘white slaves’ in the United States, of denying the black nature of ‘slave pain.’³⁸ Is

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it ever acceptable to collide white indenture and slavery? Would ‘forced labor’ or ‘bonded labor’ or ‘unfree labor’ be a better word? Should slavery be reserved for the black experience? Irish indentured servant experience is often referred to by ultra-conservatives, and some others, as ‘white slavery.’ The statistics of the Barbary pirate kidnappings are also hyped by the same commentators, as is the Jewish role in the slave trade, and similarly the statistics showing that the vast majority of the white population never owned slaves.

But the key issue here is that the children in the photographs were not actually genetically ‘white’ (however we choose to define that) but rather that they looked white. And this is where the issue of passing is so closely connected. Many free people of color felt that those who appeared white, and ‘behaved’ white, itself a complex historical construct, could count as white. Of course, the reality was much more varied; while on their tour of the North the slave children of New Orleans were thrown out of a hotel in Philadelphia because it was discovered that they were not truly white. Encouraging students to understand this flexible construct of racial identity can only enrich their experience and develop them as historians and students of African American culture.

Case Study Two: Passing

By putting passing into its historical context and tracing the changing meaning of passing over the last two centuries, we can better help students understand the way that ideas about racial identity impact on society today. Rejecting a dichotomous understanding of race and highlighting the way that experiments in racial performance have long been part of the history of the United States shows how ideas of blackness and whiteness as mutable and transmittable have developed.³⁹ Throughout the Jim Crow era, one of the most important justifications for cultural segregation was that blackness was contagious, with anxiety especially prevalent among poor whites who felt themselves most at risk of this blackening. And this was considered not just a cultural risk, but a biological one too: white blood could be easily tainted by black. This belief was common throughout early twentieth-century America, even as the biologically deterministic view of race was being challenged. Race was never a truly biological construct concerned only with innate differences, but always the result of an interplay between ‘blood’ and social practices and relationships.⁴⁰ Significant change at the societal level began during World War II, when the question of the viability of African American blood being used to treat wounded white soldiers brought the issue to national attention.⁴¹

There are many different types of passing ‘performed’ in American culture by people of a variety of races, some including amending behavior (if you seem white, you are white), whereas others involved changing skin color or

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adopting physical characteristics of another race.⁴² Passing by association was also possible: if you ‘behaved’ white and also had many white friends, then you may be taken for white.⁴³ Cultural passing, for example by white women in relationships with black men, in order to achieve what Marcia Aleson Dawkins calls “monoracial coupledness,” was also common and often gave rise to questions of cultural authenticity and accusations of being a ‘phoney.’⁴⁴ The desire for ‘monoracial coupledness’ was reinforced by society’s strong aversion to miscegenation, a view exhibited by both black and white Americans. In the Reconstruction era, black senator Blanche Bruce was accepted in Washington society, but his wife Josephine caused great controversy because she looked white.⁴⁵

A white man who managed to pass in black culture was jazz musician Milton Mezzrow, who described in his autobiography the idea of being a ‘voluntary negro,’ able to pass through his mastery of music.⁴⁶ Another case was the anthropologist John Howard Griffin, who passed as black in order to do fieldwork among the African Americans of the Deep South for his 1961 book, *Black Like Me*. As a black man, he became aware for the first time the minute laws of deference of Jim Crow culture, of how to behave on the street toward white women and men, and he found himself becoming the observer and the observed simultaneously.⁴⁷ White passing like this can be seen as a way of playing with identity, of challenging society’s norms, but crucially is of a different nature to the passing practices adopted by ethnic minority groups.

Passing by mixed-race Americans was always an easier option for those with ambiguous appearance because, as Frantz Fanon put it, our assumptions about racial identity are based upon an ‘epidermal schema.’ But their choice to pass was often driven by extreme social, political or economic circumstances.⁴⁸ There is evidence to suggest that from the time of slavery onwards, mixed-race populations practiced complexion homogamy (to preserve and encourage skin lightening).⁴⁹ Prior to the end of slavery, passing was a choice made by those who wanted to pass for free.⁵⁰ In a sense, color mattered less then; it was the non-slave status that was more significant. This type of passing was not playing with identity but was deadly serious. When Walter White traveled the South in the 1920s documenting lynching incidents, he was told by a white train conductor in Arkansas that any black man pretending to be white in their neighborhood would himself be lynched.⁵¹ In James Weldon Johnson’s fictional account of passing, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, he depicted it as a deliberate attempt to avoid the threat of lynching.⁵²

Even in cases where lives were not at risk, passing could involve being ostracized from one’s family, such as in the case of wealthy Detroit socialite Elsie Roxborough, leading eventually to her suicide.⁵³ According to a quantitative study of American passing from 1880 to 1940, many passers did so for economic reasons, and the change could be temporary. The

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researchers found by looking at census data that a surprising nineteen percent of black males passed for white and, among those, one in ten reverse-passed in the following census. Pass rates were higher in Northern states, where the potential for higher earnings as a white person was more marked and were lowest in the Deep South.⁵⁴

Passing involved cultural persuasion, a constant effort to convince about authenticity. But it was also an exercise of free will, of agency, a mode of resistance in the face of prejudice.⁵⁵ It could also confer power, as in court cases in which lighter-skinned slaves sued their masters for wrongful enslavement and, even more dramatically during the slavery era, in the infamous case of the Crafts and their escape to freedom. In their 1860 narrative of their earlier 1848 escape from Georgia, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*, the Crafts played on society's perceptions of performing whiteness, and also on Ellen's intersectional identity to successfully pull off their escape.⁵⁶ William performed the role of Ellen's dark-skinned slave, while Ellen, easily able to pass for white, in a triple passing performed a white, male middle-class planter. For the Crafts, passing was about a struggle for control, both within their own lives, but also more broadly as victimized people. As Langston Hughes said in 1958, bigoted whites deserve to be cheated and fooled by passing mixed-race Americans, seeing it as part of the trickster phenomenon, with its origins in slave folk tales.⁵⁷

A revealing divorce case in 1925 from among the New York elite further complicates our understanding of racial identities in the recent past. Leonard Rhinelander, son of an elite family of Huguenot descent, accused his estranged wife Alice of deceiving him and lying about her black heritage. The jury found in favor of Alice, claiming that her blackness had been visible for all to see, and so no deception had taken place. During the trial, in an example of racial surveillance, Alice's family were paraded in court as evidence of her blackness, and Alice was asked to strip off and show her own naked body as evidence of the same, tapping into historical racial ideas of the deviance of the black body. Although silenced by being unable to testify, Alice successfully claimed her cultural identity; it was Leonard who received society's censure, for defying cultural norms and entering a mixed-race marriage, for engaging in "unnatural sexual practices" as described in his letters, and also for being unable to control his wife: "he was an utter slave in her hands," claimed Alice's defense counsel.⁵⁸

Another historical space where passing had racial overtones is the related phenomenon of men 'passing' as women or vice versa. An example of this is the strange case of Geraldine Portica. She was a Mexican immigrant arrested in San Francisco in 1917 by Police Chief Jesse Brown Cook. There are official records of her arrest, but we also know about her because Cook kept a scrapbook of some of his most notorious cases. Portica's full-length photograph was pasted into Cook's scrapbook. Portica was arrested for the crime of 'female impersonation.' However, she was not a cross-dresser or

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drag artist, but transgender. She had, according to Cook's notation in his scrapbook, been raised as a girl by her mother.⁵⁹

We do not know what happened to Portica but, at the time of writing his scrapbook, Cook noted that she was awaiting deportation back to Mexico. Her ethnic origin as well as her gender identity was of interest to the authorities. In this period, many states made cross-dressing a crime. In 1863, San Francisco's Board of Supervisors passed a law that criminalized appearing in public in "a dress not belonging to his or her sex."⁶⁰ Adopted as part of a broader anti-indecency campaign, the cross-dressing law became a way to bring order to troubling gender fluidity, facilitating over one hundred arrests before the century's end. Clare Sears in *Arresting Dress* points out that at the same time as arrests for cross-dressing or transgenderism were rising dramatically, so did a love of the theatrical vaudeville involving on-stage cross-dressing both ways. Its performers were celebrities and received much media attention.⁶¹ Cook's scrapbook reflected this: he also was interested in theatrics and was part of a troupe of actors who performed in drag. A cartoon was pasted into his scrapbook showing him wearing drag. While he was controlling and punishing female impersonation, he was doing exactly the same impersonations, but in a sanctioned way.⁶² This mirrors attitudes to racial passing in which theater performers used black face regularly and very popularly, while the idea of racial passing caused cultural paranoia.

But beginning in the 1950s, following the political change because of civil rights culture and the reclamation of black identity that it involved, passing has been understood by many in the black community as painful evidence of a person in denial or confusion, unable to come to terms with their identity. As Alyson Hobbs has argued, passing in this view is a form of anxiety-inducing, self-imposed exile involving separation from family and community.⁶³ Letters to and articles in *Ebony* suggested that writers were "through with passing." Simultaneously, there were more economic opportunities for black people to work as black people in this period.⁶⁴ To withdraw from passing and to reaffirm one's blackness was often depicted spatially as "coming home."⁶⁵ Passing was now seen among African Americans as both powerful and destructive.

An understanding the histories of racial identity is crucial to help students place themselves in the world surrounding them and to understand that these identities are never fixed, but always fluid. Taking Barack and Michelle Obama and the responses to their blackness as an example, we can see that one's racial identity is historically constructed and not to do with one's appearance. Barack Obama's hesitancy to directly claim blackness for himself, and the perceived authenticating influence of Michelle's slave ancestry, show us that understanding legacies of slavery, rather than an immersion in contemporary culture, will help guide students through these challenging topics.

Case Study Three: 'White Slave' Panic

This third case study is about a short period in the early twentieth century when the words 'white' and 'slave' were linked in a different way, to refer to girls and young women forced into prostitution. By examining the portrayal of the white slave panic in cultural output, we can further illuminate what 'whiteness' was, and indeed what 'slavery' was in the complex Jim Crow era.

Scholars such as Pete Daniel, Daniel Novak and Douglas Blackmon have convincingly shown that a form of slavery continued in the Southern states of the United States after the passing of the thirteenth amendment. The only condition under which slavery was legal in the United States after that amendment was when it was used as a punishment for a crime and forced labor manifested itself in the systematic abuse of the convict labor and convict leasing systems between 1870 and 1920.⁶⁶ More broadly in the period, slavery was considered something going on elsewhere, perpetrated, ironically, by the racial other in the Middle East or Africa. There were some exceptions to this, such as the campaign against the atrocities in the Belgian Congo where King Leopold's African army oversaw a system of forced labor and genocide on the rubber plantations.

In the early twentieth century, a campaign driven by the progressive agenda aimed to expose and eradicate a form of slavery on United States soil, that of 'white slavery' in the cities of the North and Midwest. The terminology of slavery is here used symbolically, being used to describe a horrific and abusive situation rather than actual slavery itself. However, the choice of rhetoric is important and not accidental. The juxtaposition of the terms 'white' and 'slavery' was deliberately made to set off a moral panic and to ensure a reaction among middle-class and elite Americans. In the cities of the West, such as San Francisco, a corresponding 'yellow slavery' panic emerged. In this phenomenon, Chinese immigrants were accused of enslaving young women and making them perform immoral sexual acts. These stories became very popular because of their exoticism. In this case, the procurer, the slave owner and the slave were all Chinese and so the 'yellow' of the panic referred to perpetrators and victim. This situation was exposed in books such as the 1907 volume by Katherine Bushnell and Elizabeth Andrew entitled *Heathen Slaves and Christian Rulers*, in which they assert, "every well to do heathen Chinese family keeps a slave or two."⁶⁷

White slave panic literature was crucial in forming and reinforcing a culture of racial hierarchy. It defined whiteness in opposition to recent immigrants and used the ideas of the social Darwinist theorists to shore up its findings. This literature defined racial hierarchy by contrasting the identities of victim and perpetrator. The young female victims of white slavery were not only ethnically white but also more crucially often native-

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born.⁶⁸ The work that this rhetoric did was to limit the boundaries of whiteness to certain ethnic groups. It acted in opposition to the cultural tendency described earlier in this chapter to increasingly consider as white more groups, including Russians, Polish, Jews, Italians and Hungarians. The incorporation of these groups into a homogenous white identity was slow, and the white slave panic acted to mitigate this incorporation by labeling the perpetrators of these crimes from precisely those ethnic groups as morally reprehensible.

Modernity and its discontents, such as a worry about the impact of urbanization, played into concerns over white slavery. The city was seen by purveyors of the white slave panic literature as a place of especial danger for women, because of its associations with the pursuit of luxury and pleasure. Innocent women, who had been brought up in small-town America, were lured to the cities by false promises of work or marriage to an eligible young man but then fell into the hands of procurers who roamed spaces of leisure such as parks, dance halls, cinemas and department stores.⁶⁹ It was these city spaces of pleasure that transformed the country girls into city girls, causing at the same time a moral degeneration and increased vulnerability. It is no surprise that temperance campaigners, such as the Women's Christian Temperance movement, were active in the exposure of white slavery and its connection to sinful partying.⁷⁰

The white slave panic also alerts us to an interesting intersectional issue: the way that gender also played into this 'good whites versus bad whites' discussion. The image of the naïve, innocent and passive white woman needing protecting from violent men of other races was a staple of racial discourse from the earliest years after the Civil War. That argument fed directly into the white slave panic literature, as the image of the vulnerable white woman was imported wholesale. This depiction skirted over the issue that many women who engaged in sex work, then as now, did so with some degree of consent and agency. Removing that agency from them served the patriarchal and white agenda very well.

But it was the racial aspect of white slave narratives that is most relevant for our purposes here. The most notorious procurers in the white slave literature were the ethnic other, sometimes recent European arrivals, sometimes Jewish. Propensity for violence toward women was portrayed as a racial trait among the so-called 'barbarous' races in nineteenth-century social Darwinist theory. In fact, racial othering had adopted this trope much earlier, as the first European settlers in the Americas had commented pejoratively on the Native American males' treatment of women.⁷¹

This new type of slave narrative, both fictional and non-fictional, was important in books, periodicals and newspapers and it was the resonance in the mind of the reader with chattel slavery that authors hoped would cause a new abolition movement to emerge. An example of this is the story highlighted by Katherine Bushnell about the lumber towns of Wisconsin, in

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which a girl who had been forced into sexual slavery managed to escape by sleeping overnight in a swamp, but she was hunted down and returned to her place of work.⁷² This story mirrors the runaway slave narratives of the earlier nineteenth century. Occasionally during this period, authors acknowledged the economic causes of prostitution. Jane Addams wrote about how unemployment or low wages drove many immigrant women to sex work.⁷³ Female campaigners were central to the discussion of white slavery, but in other cases professionals joined the cause. Theodore Bingham's 1911 book *The Girl That Disappears* was an important contribution to the debate. He was a former police commissioner from Greater New York. In his book, Bingham suggested that thousands of young girls, whose treatment he compared to 'cattle,' disappeared every year, and that it was the American middle class's Puritan sensibilities that meant their fate was ignored.⁷⁴ Bingham directly challenged his readers to act, saying that they complacently thought that the US was morally superior. Bingham argued that ninety-five percent of the victims of the white slave trade were foreign and did not speak English, allowing the perpetrators of this crime to more easily take advantage of them.⁷⁵ Bingham's book attempted to expose the organized nature of the white slave trade, exposing a 'connected chain of men and women trafficking in girls' stretching across the Atlantic, finding vulnerable girls in London, with its headquarters in New York and Chicago, but also operating freely in San Francisco, Los Angeles, Seattle, Nome (Alaska), Omaha, Denver and New Orleans.⁷⁶ Bingham suggested as a solution having a legalized red light district where willing girls could safely ply their trade without facing fear of fines by police or violence from procurers or pimps. He offered the examples of Toledo and Cleveland, which had red light districts, where he claimed white slavery did not exist.⁷⁷ He also proposed an international effort to combat sex trafficking, which involved "a spy system in Europe to watch for trafficked women."⁷⁸

However, this debate did not simply play out in literature. A grand jury case in which white slavery was investigated included John D. Rockefeller Jr., who became an active campaigner exposing the phenomenon. This campaign acquired increasingly political overtones in New York as the Tammany Hall machine was accused of turning a blind eye to the white slave issue.⁷⁹ In 1910, after the Grand Jury case, Rockefeller Jr. founded the Bureau of Social Hygiene (which had an increasingly eugenicist tone), designed to eradicate disease, but also to preserve and strengthen the white race. Contrary to the trajectory of most of the white slave panic material, in the social hygienist view, prostitutes could be as much delinquent as victims. The trial examined the case of Belle Moore, a mixed-race procurer accused of seizing children from orphanages and putting them to work in prostitution. Moore's race was an important issue throughout the trial, as she was described as a 'mulatto, negress, colored': she was explicitly 'not white'

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according to trial documents, although elsewhere newspapers asserted that she was light skinned and could pass for white.⁸⁰ Moore was found guilty.

In conclusion, what can we gain from learning about race and identity through the history of the meaning of whiteness from the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries? First, that race matters today, just as it has always mattered. To ignore it is not to be modern and tolerant but rather to play into the hands of those who wish to negate and deny the challenging past. Second, that race is not defined simply by who your parents are, or the way you look, or the way you behave, or the way that you seem to others, or the way that you choose to define yourself, but rather a complex combination of those things, the significance of which changes over time because of political and cultural developments and also because of the intersection of race with other crucial identifiers, such as class and gender. The terms 'white' and 'black' and 'slave' have never been distinct, unique signifiers, but rather have been place and time specific, and reflecting on this specificity helps students to understand the values and culture of their own time and place. The case studies of 'white slavery,' during and after the chattel slavery era, and of passing give students an understanding of the ways in which racial identity could be liminal and negotiated on the cultural margins and, again, this will make them more aware of such phenomena in their own immediate culture.



Notes

¹ Melinda Fine, *Habits of Mind: Struggling Over Values in America's Classrooms* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995), 5.

² William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun* (New York: Random House, 1951).

³ Zoe Burkholder, *Color in the Classroom: How American Schools Taught Race, 1900–1954* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 9. For more on the development of scientific racism, see Thomas McCarthy, *Race, Empire and the Idea of Human Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

⁴ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 175.

⁶ Fine, *Habits of Mind*, 13, 139, 142.

⁷ Joy Leighton, "An 'Oriental Yankee' in Dixie or Thinking Diversely About Diversity," in Lisa Guerrero (ed.), *Teaching Race in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Palgrave, 2008), 60.

⁸ Jesse Kavadlo, "White Teacher, Black Writers, White Students," in Guerrero (ed.), *Teaching Race*, 140; Perry Greene & Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz, "Teaching Race: Making the Invisible Concrete," in Guerrero (ed.), *Teaching Race*, 166.

⁹ Gayle Wald, *Crossing the Line: Racial Passing in Twentieth Century US Literature and Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), viii.

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- ¹⁰ McCarthy, *Race, Empire*, 72. Eric Love also discusses the way that racism limited US expansionism until the 1890s: fear of contact with other races and the dilution of whiteness kept many politicians anti-imperialist. Eric Love, *Race Over Empire: Race and Imperialism 1865–1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 6.
- ¹¹ Matthew Pratt Guterl, *Seeing Race in Modern America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 2. Of course discriminating has a dual meaning here, first the idea that it is possible to easily tell the difference between races and to discriminate between them, but also in a more cultural sense that the gaze reflects the subtleties and nuances of cultural difference.
- ¹² Guterl, *Seeing Race*, 1.
- ¹³ Burkholder, *Color in the Classroom*, 59.
- ¹⁴ Spatial metaphors are very useful for conceptualizing race and racial difference, as highlighted by Judy Isaksen, “Rhetorics of Race: Mapping White Narratives,” in Guerrero (ed.), *Teaching Race*, 97.
- ¹⁵ Ibid., 98; Dalia Rodriguez, “Investing in White Innocence,” in Guerrero (ed.), *Teaching Race*, 124.
- ¹⁶ Love, *Race Over Empire*, 18.
- ¹⁷ Guterl, *Seeing Race*, 129.
- ¹⁸ Rebecca Kim, “Teaching Race at Anti-Berkeley and Beyond,” in Guerrero (ed.), *Teaching Race*, 76.
- ¹⁹ Isaksen, “Rhetorics of Race,” 101.
- ²⁰ Keating reference from Amy Winans, “Troubling History and Interrogating Whiteness: Teaching Race in a Segregated White College Setting,” in Guerrero (ed.), *Teaching Race*, 114.
- ²¹ Lisa Guerrero, “Introduction,” in Guerrero (ed.), *Teaching Race*, 5; Robin Mangino, “Teaching the Ism in Racism or How to Transform Student Resistance,” in Guerrero (ed.), *Teaching Race*, 35; Kim, “Teaching Race at Anti-Berkeley,” in Guerrero (ed.), *Teaching Race*, 75.
- ²² Alison Tracy Hale and Tamiko Nimura, “Why Do We Always Have to Talk About Race?” in Guerrero (ed.), *Teaching Race*, 87.
- ²³ Fine, *Habits of Mind*, 38.
- ²⁴ Ibid., 52.
- ²⁵ Carter Wilson, *Racism From Slavery to Advanced Capitalism* (Los Angeles: Sage, 1996), 8, 23, 79.
- ²⁶ Aureliano Maria DeSoto, “The Strange Career of Ethnic Studies and Its Influences on Teaching Race and Ethnicity,” in Guerrero (ed.), *Teaching Race*, 20–21; C. Richard King, “Minor Concerns: The (Im)Possibilities of Critical Race Pedagogies,” in Guerrero (ed.), *Teaching Race*, 52.
- ²⁷ Mary Niall Mitchell, “Rosebloom and Pure White or So It Seemed,” *American Quarterly* 54, no. 3 (September 2002): 369–410.
- ²⁸ Richard Hildreth, *The White Slave: A True Picture of Slave Life in America* (Milner: London, n.d), 9.
- ²⁹ Ibid., 18.
- ³⁰ Ibid., 384.
- ³¹ For more on this, see my textbook on using visual materials: C. Armstrong, *Using Non-Textual Sources: An Historian’s Guide* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).
- ³² The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; The Library of Congress, Washington, D. C.; The Library Company of Philadelphia; the Women’s History Archive, Smith College, Northampton, Massachusetts; The Friends’

Historical Library of Swarthmore College; the New York Historical Society; the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library; The Pennsylvania State University Libraries; and the Louisiana State Museum, New Orleans, all own collections of these images.

³³ “Slave Children,” *Harper’s Weekly* 8, no. 370 (January 30, 1864).

³⁴ Baz Dreisinger, *Near Black: White to Black Passing in American Culture* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008), 1.

³⁵ *New York Times*, March 9, 1855. available online at <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=9B0CE4D6133DE034BC4153DFB566838E649FDE&legacy=true> (accessed July 19, 2018). The ‘Slave child identified as Mary Mildred Botts,’ [photograph], [ca. 1855] is held at the Massachusetts Historical Society. See photo 1.256, Photo Archive, Visual Material, Massachusetts Historical Society.

³⁶ *Lewistown Gazette*, March 1860, available online at <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83032276/1860-03-15/ed-1/seq-1/#date1=1859&sort=date&date2=1860&words=Black+Matt&sequence=0&lccn=&index=15&state=&rows=20&ortext=&proxtext=%22black+Matt%22&year=&phrasertext=&andtext=&proxValue=&dateFilterType=yearRange&page=1> (accessed July 19, 2018).

Belmont Chronicle, St. Clairsville, Ohio, April 1860 available online at <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85026241/1860-04-12/ed-1/seq-1/#date1=1859&index=2&rows=20&words=Black+Matt&searchType=basic&sequence=0&state=&date2=1861&proxtext=%22black+matt%22&y=0&x=0&dateFilterType=yearRange&page=1> (accessed July 19, 2018).

³⁷ Mitchell, “Rosebloom and Pure White or So It Seemed,” 394–395.

³⁸ And especially of the existence of a black slave owner who owned white individuals (such as Anthony Johnson who grew tobacco first as an enslaved man and then as a freed owner of slaves and indentured servants in Virginia and Maryland during the 1660s).

³⁹ Dreisinger, *Near Black*, 4.

⁴⁰ McCarthy, *Race, Empire*, 6.

⁴¹ Dreisinger, *Near Black*, 22; Wald, *Crossing the Line*, 12, 108.

⁴² I agree with Judith Butler here: just as gender is performed, so is race. See also Nadine Ehlers, *Racial Imperatives: Discipline, Performativity and Struggles Against Subjection* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 6.

⁴³ Emily Nix and Nancy Qian, *The Fluidity of Race: Passing in the United States 1880–1940*. *National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper no. 20828* (Cambridge, MA, 2015), 12.

⁴⁴ Marcia Aleson Dawkins, *Clearly Invisible: Racial Passing and the Color of Cultural Identity* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2012), 101.

⁴⁵ Alyson Hobbs, *A Chosen Exile: A History of Racial Passing in American Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 90.

⁴⁶ Wald, *Crossing the Line*, 58.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 171.

⁴⁸ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1952); Wald, *Crossing the Line*, 99.

⁴⁹ Bodenham reference in Nix and Qian, *Fluidity of Race*, 10.

⁵⁰ Hobbs, *A Chosen Exile*, 34.

⁵¹ White discussed this in his autobiography: *A Man Called White* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995).

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- ⁵² James Weldon Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (Mineola: Dover Publications, 1995), 9 (first published 1912).
- ⁵³ Wald, *Crossing the Line*, 83. Roxborough's story was told in the 1949 Hollywood film *Pinky*.
- ⁵⁴ Nix and Qian, *Fluidity of Race*, 4, 31. The study does not look at women because of the problems of tracing them across censuses when they change their name through marriage. Findings roughly match the data from *23 and Me* (DNA Ancestry Testing), which has found that around 20% of the 2010 population considering themselves white would have been considered black under the 'one drop rule.'
- ⁵⁵ Wald, *Crossing the Line*, 35.
- ⁵⁶ Dawkins, *Clearly Invisible*, 31.
- ⁵⁷ Wald, *Crossing the Line*, 6; Hobbs, *A Chosen Exile*, 268.
- ⁵⁸ Ehlers, *Racial Imperatives*, 2, 94.
- ⁵⁹ Rebekah Edwards, "'This Is Not a Girl': A Trans* Archival Reading," *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 2, no. 4 (2015): 650.
- ⁶⁰ Clare Sears, *Arresting Dress: Cross-Dressing, Law and Fascination in Nineteenth Century San Francisco* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 2.
- ⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 120.
- ⁶² Jesse Brown Cook scrapbooks, documenting San Francisco law enforcement and history 1895–1936, available online at <https://calisphere.org/collections/5025/> (accessed July 19, 2018).
- ⁶³ Hobbs, *A Chosen Exile*, 4.
- ⁶⁴ Wald, *Crossing the Line*, 117; Hobbs, *A Chosen Exile*, 264.
- ⁶⁵ Home was also a place where the metaphorical purdah of Jim Crow could be cast off and African Americans could be themselves. Wald, *Crossing the Line*, 51; Hobbs, *A Chosen Exile*, 162.
- ⁶⁶ See Pete Daniel, *The Shadow of Slavery: Peonage in the South* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1990); Daniel Novak, *The Wheel of Servitude* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1978); Douglas Blackmon, *Slavery by Another Name* (New York: Random House, 2008). This form of forced labor was highlighted by campaigners at the time and was surveyed for the first time by Walter Wilson in his book *Forced Labor in the United States* published in 1933 (New York: AMS Press).
- ⁶⁷ Brian Donovan, *White Slave Crusades: Race, Gender and Anti-Vice Activism 1887–1917* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 116.
- ⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.
- ⁶⁹ Theodore Bingham was especially concerned about cinemas as a sight of procurement because of their darkness. He suggested that procurers had 'a great harvest' there. Theodore Bingham, *A Girl That Disappears: The Real Facts About the White Slave Traffic* (Boston: Richard G. Badger the Gorham Press, 1911), 60.
- ⁷⁰ Donovan, *White Slave Crusades*, 22.
- ⁷¹ For more on this, see Kathleen M. Brown, "The Anglo-Algonquian Gender Frontier," in Nancy Shoemaker (ed.), *Negotiators of Change: Historical Perspectives on Native American Women* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 26–48.
- ⁷² Donovan, *White Slave Crusaders*, 41.
- ⁷³ *Ibid.*, 66.
- ⁷⁴ Bingham, *A Girl That Disappears*, 10.

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⁷⁵ Ibid., 16. This was a change from earlier rhetoric by other authors which emphasized only white Anglo Saxon victimhood.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 31.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 70–71.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 85.

⁷⁹ Tammany Hall also has a checkered history regarding black chattel slavery, as desiring to form a white identity, Irish immigrants, the Catholic Church and the Tammany machine saw itself as pro-slavery. Wilson, *Racism From Slavery to Advanced Capitalism*, 142.

⁸⁰ Donovan, *White Slave Crusaders*, 99.

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