RICHMOND School of Arts & Sciences

University of Richmond
UR Scholarship Repository

English Faculty Publications

English

2005

Interracial Love, Virginians' Lies, and Donald McCaig's Jacob's Ladder

Suzanne W. Jones
University of Richmond, sjones@richmond.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarship.richmond.edu/english-faculty-publications

Part of the African American Studies Commons, American Literature Commons, and the Race and Ethnicity Commons

Recommended Citation
Jones, Suzanne W. "Interracial Love, Virginians' Lies, and Donald McCaig's Jacob's Ladder." In *Virginia's Civil War*, edited by Peter Wallenstein and Bertram Wyatt-Brown176-185. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2005.

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the English at UR Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of UR Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu.

Interracial Love, Virginians' Lies, and Donald McCaig's *Jacob's Ladder*

SUZANNE W. JONES

The Old South's taboo against love between blacks and whites has cast a long shadow. No cross-racial relationship has been so pathologized by American society.[1] Even in 1967, when the Supreme Court finally declared antimiscegenation laws unconstitutional in the case of *Loving v. Virginia*, sixteen states still prohibited interracial marriage, down from thirty states as recently as 1948.[2] Not until 1998 and 2000 did ballot initiatives in South Carolina and Alabama finally eliminate the last of the antimiscegenation laws, although no one had tried to enforce them for years. Recent U.S. census figures show interracial unions increasing—up from 3 percent in 1980 to 5 percent in 2000, or just over 3 million couples. But American inhibitions about black-white marriages still remain comparatively strong. The United States has the lowest black-white intermarriage rate among Western nations, and the 450,000 black-white couples make up only 14 percent of all interracial marriages in the United States, although the numbers are increasing among young people—young blacks are marrying across the color line at double the overall average, with 11 percent marrying outside their race. Although 40.1 percent of the black interracial marriages occur in the South (as compared to 19.3 percent in the Northeast, 21.3 percent in the Midwest, and 19.3 percent in the West), a 1997 survey by *Interrace* magazine does not list a single Southern city in its top ten cities most hospitable to interracial couples.[3] Contemporary Southern fiction is only somewhat more hospitable—even when the author's heart is in the right place—in large part because this fiction is almost always set in the past.

Although the burden of Southern racial history automatically precludes happy endings, these contemporary historical novels do complicate the regional story of race and sex as it has been traditionally told. Contemporary writers are interested in the very stories that bell hooks argues have not been told: stories that examine the conditions under which interracial sexuality served "as a force subverting and disrupting power relations, unsettling the oppressor/oppressed paradigm."[4] These recent fictions, even though set in the past, explore interracial relationships of mutual desire and examine contemporary social concerns without neglecting the exploitation of black women or the demonization of black men that white prejudice both produced and denied. This recent outpouring of historical fiction set in the South expresses a deep need to recover repressed truths about past interracial intimacy that a great many people, white Southerners especially, have refused to acknowledge. Perhaps this fiction also reflects a need to better understand the past before turning to the present or imagining the future. Whether this focus on the past also betrays a reticence to represent interracial love in the present is difficult to determine. What is clearer, and perhaps more significant, is that readers of these historical Southern fictions—which invariably end in thwarted interracial love, no matter the hope embedded in their plots—may find it surprising that today twice as many interracial couples in which one partner is African American live in the South as in any other region of the country.

In the nineteenth century, both before and after the Civil War, white novelists, though rarely from the South, employed the love affair between a white man and a black woman as a vehicle for illustrating the common humanity of blacks and as a hope for racial reconciliation, but many African American novelists treated interracial sex as a sad fact of life or a threat to black solidarity. While events of the 1960s released a flood of fiction examining black male-white female couples, treatment of white male-black female couples, so prominent in nineteenth-century fiction, dwindled. But this tide seems to have turned at the very end of the twentieth century. Interracial intimacy between white men and black women has figured in much recent nonfiction about the Old South. Among such works are Carrie Allen McCray's *Freedom's Child: The Life of a Confederate General's Black Daughter* (1998),

Edward Ball's *Slaves in the Family* (1998), Henry Wiencek's *The Hairstons: An American Family in Black and White* (1999), and most notably Annette Gordon-Reed's *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Scandal* (1999), which ultimately argues that white male historians did a disservice not only to black Americans but to all Americans in refusing to see the truth of interracial intimacy. Twenty years after historian Fawn Brodie's speculations in *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History* (1974) and Barbara Chase-Riboud's fictional follow-up in *Sally Hemings: A Novel* (1979), Americans seemed more willing to accept a founding father's transgressions. As a result, popular culture could not get enough of this story, which many white male historians thought they had laid to rest in the 1980s. The lingering doubts about the story's veracity, which helped make the Merchant-Ivory film, *Jefferson in Paris* (1995), a flop at the box office, were much less in evidence four years and several DNA tests later, when the television miniseries *Sally Hemings: An American Scandal* (1999) made its debut.

Annette Gordon-Reed has said that Chase-Riboud's novel "has been the single greatest influence shaping the public's attitude about the Jefferson-Hemings story."[5] Contemporary fiction may have a similar effect in shaping future attitudes about interracial love, especially if the stories are bought by Hollywood. In *Jacob's Ladder: A Story of Virginia during the War* (1998), Donald McCaig revisits Virginia's Civil War and its aftermath—not only to prod readers to rethink the war but also to reconsider interracial intimacy and racial identity in the Old South and perhaps, most surprising, to contemplate the social mobility afforded a few poor whites and some light-skinned African Americans. The plot of *Jacob's Ladder* is driven by the ironies generated when Southern honor intersects with cross-racial desire, when the racial codes of Southern society conflict with traditional chivalric gender roles, and when reputations of racial identity belie the truths of racial genealogy.

In *Jacob's Ladder*, young Duncan Gatewood becomes intimately involved with the contradictions in Southern society after he falls in love with Midge, a mulatto slave, and conceives a child with her. His father, a prominent landowner in the Shenandoah Valley, tries to erase this fact by marrying Midge off to a slave she does not love and by exiling Duncan to Virginia Military Institute. At the end of the college term,

Duncan's father administers the ultimate final examination by forcing Duncan to meet Midge's new husband and to accept his own son Jacob as his slave. McCaig employs a familiar nineteenth-century trope, making Jacob "as white as" Duncan and forcing Duncan to contemplate his son's future as "a field hand perhaps, a woods worker like Rufus or a house nigger like Pompey."[6] Still in love with Midge and falling in love with their child, Duncan angrily raises his hand to strike his father. However, equally determined to be the Southern gentleman his father expects him to be, Duncan restrains himself only by biting his own hand so hard that blood spatters onto Midge and the child. Duncan's reflex reconsideration of his seemingly instinctual paternal response symbolizes both the contradictions inherent in the Southern code of honor and the epistemological problems of racial and familial identity in the nineteenth-century South. In protecting his father from the blow, Duncan has protected the Gatewood family reputation, but harmed himself. By honoring his father's desire that the Gatewood bloodlines remain pure, he dishonors the new family he has created with Midge—producing the very Southern family fictions that have turned contemporary Southern historians, both professional and amateur, into detectives.

When Duncan later fails to persuade his father to allow him to marry Midge and to recognize Jacob as his son, his father sells both Midge and Jacob. In doing so, Mr. Gatewood effectively banishes the muse who has provoked Duncan's preliminary but "imaginative" new thinking about Southern race relations (70). Duncan's inchoate questions about his society's racial code are not powerful enough to throw off the heavy mantle of Southern honor and the awful reality that the woman he loves is a slave. After a period of dissipation in which Duncan attempts to forget his sorrows by drinking and gambling, he joins the Confederate army, hoping that "Honor will be retrieved" (93). Although the war deprives Duncan of his youth, his good looks, and his right arm, he feels that courageous military service has restored his honor. He never once considers that a bolder move would have been to join the Union army and fight for Midge's freedom. McCaig suggests that even a sensitive, thoughtful, rebellious Virginia gentleman's imagination could not make such an enormous leap in the nineteenth century.

McCaig employs the women who love Duncan—Midge and Sallie—to reveal how Southern notions of both honor and racial identity have been deceptive. For Sallie, the white woman who nurses Duncan in a Richmond hospital, the war restores nothing, but rather takes away life and limb, health and well-being, all for an ignominious cause. To Sallie, honor is an empty abstraction that keeps men enthralled. She responds to Duncan's rhapsodies about Dixie, the Confederate battle flag, and General Lee's army by averting her face and declaring, "I have seen too much of honor" (305). For Midge, whom Duncan later meets by chance at a party in Richmond, "honor" is a commodity, which can be "preserved" only because "southern gentlemen . . . can sell their embarrassments" (335). For Donald McCaig, honor is a poignant metaphor for the sad charade that Southern white men lived. What the war has really done for Duncan is to restore his public reputation as a gentleman by allowing him to fight honorably for the Confederacy. But privately he finds that he must come to terms with his own guilty conscience for allowing his father to sell his son into slavery and for giving up the woman he loved. Guilt continues to eat away at Duncan, because during the war he sees, by chance, the beautiful Southern lady Midge has become—a fact that produces the change in ideology his youthful imagining failed to provoke. Slowly, Duncan realizes that the cause he has fought for was not just. Only then does Sallie consent to marry him.

In *Jacob's Ladder*, McCaig exposes racial identity as a charade as well. What the war has done for Midge is to establish her reputation as white. Eric Sundquist argues that under the Southern taboo of miscegenation, identity became "a radical act of imagination": "either in an act of self-recognition or in the attribution of identity to another."[7] McCaig employs this idea when Midge and Duncan meet in Richmond. Midge tells Duncan how she let her imagination run wild during their youthful affair. "I pictured us married! Me: the mistress of Stratford! Ignorant pickaninny playing the lady. Imagine!" (336). Although Duncan never acts on his own radical act of "imaginative" thinking, Midge does, but it takes a poor white partner who is also a Southern social climber to assist her. Silas Omohundru, the upwardly mobile slave trader who bought her from Mr. Gatewood, falls in love with her. Unlike Faulkner's Thomas Sutpen in *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), Silas believes that what he can hide will not hurt him or his de-

sign. Silas proposes to Midge once they have left Virginia and moved to the more cosmopolitan port city of Wilmington, North Carolina. There Silas abandons slave trading for the lucrative and glamorous job of blockade running. Midge seizes this opportunity to pass as white and easily becomes Marguerite, Silas's beautiful Bahamian wife. Although she does not love Silas, marriage to him ascribes to her son, Jacob, the racial identity that his biological father Duncan denied him. This marriage also unexpectedly allows her to prove to Duncan, when she later encounters him at that Richmond party, that her Southern racial identity did not have to be her destiny. At first he does not recognize her, but then heartbreakingly he realizes that she has become "the lady" he once fleetingly imagined she could be. McCaig titles the chapter in which they meet "Charades" after the parlor game played that evening, but also to signify the racial masquerade that Marguerite has embarked on and that Duncan poignantly pledges he will not divulge—an illusion of white racial purity that many white Southerners still believe in, the Southern family fiction they have been reluctant to confront.

Although Marguerite cannot give Jacob the Gatewood family name, her choice to pass as white eventually makes Jacob the son of a Confederate war hero, if not a descendent of one of the First Families of Virginia (FFV). While Silas's blockade running in Wilmington makes him rich during the war, he cannot buy his way into Southern high society, because he is a bastard, so he enlists in the Confederate army to enhance his status. Eventually Silas posthumously earns his reputation as a Southern gentleman by dying for the lost cause—with the result that Marguerite's position in Richmond society is also secured. She becomes a wealthy, well-respected Confederate widow, and as a result she succeeds in making Jacob both a gentleman and a graduate of Harvard Law School. By the 1930s, when she chooses to end her masquerade, Marguerite Omohundru is the aging matriarch of a prominent "white" family, who lives in "one of the grandest homes" in Richmond (247) and who belongs to the Virginia Historical Society—not quite FFV, but not bad for a slave named Midge. Or so Donald McCaig seems to want his readers to think. And yet the narrative frame around his Civil War story suggests that he is striving for much more.

Unlike most African American novelists on the subject of passing, McCaig, who is white, does not ascribe guilt to Marguerite's mas-

querade, but he does register her anger at not having been able to fulfill her own potential without the white mask. As recompense he gives her pride of accomplishment in having given her child a better life, and no small amount of pleasure at having deceived Richmond aristocracy. The way McCaig frames Marguerite's story suggests that his ultimate target is really the contemporary white myth of racial purity, not the older story of blacks passing as white. McCaig registers the shock of realization that he must have hoped many white readers would experience through the perspective of his unnamed young white WPA worker, herself a member of Richmond high society. Expecting to talk with Marguerite's black servant Kizzy about her life as a slave, the young white woman is speechless, when she learns that it is Marguerite whose oral history she will be collecting. But she is willing to listen. Her family, however, pronounces Marguerite Omohundru "not herself" (247), and the young white woman's father urges her to read Thomas Nelson Page's short stories in order "to know" what Virginia's past was really like (295). The attempts by the woman's family to deter her from taking Marguerite's story seriously call attention to Southern white power in ascribing meaning to race and in controlling the South's interracial history.

Donald McCaig is a transplanted New Yorker who considers himself a Virginian after living twenty-five years on a farm in the Allegheny Highlands. He clearly sees himself as telling a different "Story of Virginia during the War" (the subtitle of his novel) than Virginia's nineteenth-century chronicler, Thomas Nelson Page, told.[8] In the collection *In Ole Virginia* (1887), Page blames Southern problems on Northern interference, rather than on slavery and the contradictions inherent in Southern racial codes and social customs. McCaig assigns blame very differently. His Confederate veteran Duncan Gatewood—eventually judging himself "a damned coward" (299) for allowing his son to be sold into slavery—subsequently views Virginia plantation society, the slavery that supported it, and the Confederacy that defended it as causing the South's demise. In this final reassessment, Duncan's position resembles Robert E. Lee's 1869 comment, which provides McCaig his "Afterword": "So far from engaging in a war to perpetuate slavery, I am rejoiced that slavery is abolished. I believe it will be greatly in the interests of the South" (527).

The difference between Page's and McCaig's choice of frame narrator for their Civil War stories is equally significant. In Page's "Marse Chan," a former slave tells a Northern tourist a fanciful story of happy darkies and genteel Southern families, a romanticized tale of Southern honor and Confederate glory. A century later, in *Jacob's Ladder*, a former slave who is passing as white tells a native Virginian a revisionary story of Southern dishonor and Civil War horrors, and a cautionary tale about the bloodlines of Virginia's finest white families. Page was trying to convince skeptical nonnatives that Virginia's way of life was honorable; McCaig is trying to convince skeptical native Virginians that stories like Page's have deprived them of the truth. By having the WPA worker choose Marguerite's oral history over Page's published stories, McCaig unseats Page as Virginia's Civil War chronicler and suggests that there is a hidden Virginia history that at least some white Virginians may be ready to hear.

McCaig's decision to create a light-skinned African American woman for his white male characters to fall in love with allows him to interrogate the social construction of racial identity. But it can also be read as reifying white definitions of female beauty. Aware that such a charge could be made, McCaig has Marguerite self-consciously assess this literary practice in historical terms: "'It is *curious*, is it not, that the lighter-skinned we are, the more anxious the dominant race is to mate with us. Those first white men to sleep with the dark-skinned daughters of Africa were such bold pioneers!' She raised her invisible eyebrows mockingly. 'I suppose it is more agreeable to make love with creatures that closely resemble oneself. Narcissism is one of the South's notable frailties'" (20). In some respects Marguerite can also be seen as a figure similar to nineteenth-century literature's "tragic mulatta": beautiful (according to white definitions), accomplished, moral, but mistreated.[9] However, McCaig does not fully follow nineteenth-century abolitionists' conventions. Although he does not shy away from depicting white racism's effect on African Americans, he is intent on showing how it deformed the lives and minds of his white characters as well. Marguerite is far from a tragic victim; she is depicted as strong, resourceful, and imaginative, unlike the weak white man Duncan Gatewood, who loves her.

Despite the difficulties of living in a racist society, Marguerite does

not let her life slip totally out of her control. In *Jacob's Ladder*, true love is thwarted because of race, but McCaig uses this plotting device to begin his novel rather than end it, as was the custom with nineteenth-century novelists. McCaig makes Midge/Marguerite the mistress of her own fate, although her life never again includes romance. Significantly, McCaig represents the African American woman as initiating the interracial affair. Given the Southern history of white male aggression toward black women, he may be reluctant to have his white male protagonist make the first move in a novel of interracial attraction. In *Jacob's Ladder*, however, the end of the interracial affair is as heartbreaking for the white man, Duncan Gatewood, as it was for the black woman in nineteenth-century fictions.

In a published conversation with C. Vann Woodward, William Styron, and Robert Penn Warren, novelist Ralph Ellison argued that "one of the important roles which fiction has played, especially the fiction of southern writers," is "to tell that part of the human truth which we could not accept or face up to in much historical writing because of social, racial, and political considerations."[10] Donald McCaig is but one example of a growing number of Southern novelists, both black and white, who are telling the South's repressed stories. These historical novels about interracial intimacy not only revisit old taboos but also expose continuing psychic burdens. There are no happily-ever-afters in these novels. Given the preponderance of historical fiction about interracial love, it appears that serious literature about interracial intimacy in the contemporary South will be written only when the burden of Southern history does not weigh so heavily on novelists' imaginations.

Notes

Portions of this essay appeared in *Race Mixing: Southern Fiction since the Sixties* by Suzanne W. Jones, ©2004 The Johns Hopkins University Press, reprinted with permission of The Johns Hopkins University Press.

1. Robert P. McNamara, Maria Tempenis, and Beth Walton, *Crossing the Line: Interracial Couples in the South* (Westport, Conn., 1999); but also see Paul C. Rosenblatt, Terri A. Karis, and Richard D. Powell, *Multiracial Couples: Black and White Voices* (Thousand Oaks, Calif., 1995), which shows that the pathologizing occurs north of the Mason-Dixon line as well.

2. Peter Wallenstein, *Tell the Court I Love My Wife: Race, Marriage, and Law—An American History* (New York, 2002), and Robert E. T. Roberts, "Black-White Inter-marriage in the United States," in *Inside the Mixed Marriage: Accounts of Changing Attitudes, Patterns, and Perceptions of Cross-Cultural and Interracial Marriages*, eds. Walton R. Johnson and D. Michael Warren (Lanham, Md., 1994).
3. Statistics about intermarriage in this paragraph are from Darryl Fears and Claudia Deane, "Biracial Couples Report Tolerance," *Washington Post*, 5 July 2001, A1, 4; and Robert Suro, "Mixed Doubles," *American Demographics* 21, no. 11 (November 1999): 57–62. The region the U.S. government defines as the South includes Delaware; Maryland; Washington, D.C.; Virginia; North Carolina; South Carolina; Georgia; Florida; Alabama; Mississippi; Louisiana; Texas; Oklahoma; Arkansas; Tennessee; Kentucky; and West Virginia. For international comparisons, see Thomas F. Pettigrew, "Integration and Pluralism," in *Eliminating Racism: Profiles in Controversy*, eds. Phyllis A. Katz and Dalmas A. Taylor (New York, 1988), 26. Results of the *Interrace* questionnaire are reported in *Jet* 92, no. 20 (6 October 1997): 25.
4. bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston, 1990), 57–58.
5. Annette Gordon-Reed, *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy* (Charlottesville, Va., 1997), 4. See also Jan Ellen Lewis and Peter S. Onuf, eds., *Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson: History, Memory, and Civic Culture* (Charlottesville, Va., 1999); Eugene A. Foster, M. A. Jobling, P. G. Taylor, P. Donnelly, P. deKnijft, Rene Mierenet, T. Zerjal, and C. Tyler-Smith, "Jefferson Fathered Slave's Last Child," *Nature* (5 November 1998); and the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation's research report, made public 26 January 2000, which concluded that based on new research there is "a high probability that Thomas Jefferson fathered Eston Hemings, and that he most likely was the father of all six of Sally Hemings's children."
6. Donald McCaig, *Jacob's Ladder: A Story of Virginia during the War* (New York, 1998), 69. Subsequent quotations are identified parenthetically in the text.
7. Eric J. Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* (Cambridge, Mass., 1993), 398.
8. McCaig gives this information in his acknowledgments, 522.
9. See James Kinney's definitions in *Amalgamation!* (Westport, Conn., 1985), 47, 90, 111, 194–95.
10. Ralph Ellison, William Styron, Robert Penn Warren, and C. Vann Woodward, "A Discussion: The Uses of History in Fiction," *Southern Literary Journal* 1, no. 2 (Spring 1969): 70.