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Their Confederate Kinfolk: African Americans' Interracial Family Histories

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CHAPTER 21

THEIR CONFEDERATE KINFOLK

African Americans' Interracial Family Histories

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THE interracial mixing of American families dates back to colonial times, but the history of slavery and racism in the American South made public discussion of the subject taboo—so shameful for whites that they long repressed facts that challenged their fantasies of racial purity, so painful or politically incorrect for African Americans that they suppressed the details of their mixed ancestry. In the 1970s the popularity of Alex Haley's *Roots* (1976), and the television miniseries that followed, sparked an interest in genealogy among many African Americans, who had long given up hope of tracing African roots severed by the middle passage. Even when Haley's fame was marred by charges of plagiarism and fictionalization of facts,[1] many African American readers continued to embrace the cultural truth of his book. While a few began to search for African ancestors, even more sought cultural connections to Africa. Although some African Americans may have privately acknowledged a white branch or two on their family tree, tracing those roots held little interest in the aftermath of the Civil Rights Movement (unless perhaps they led to Jefferson's Monticello). Such lack of interest was understandable. While most African Americans did not know the identity of their white ancestors, those who did wanted nothing to do with a kinship begun by rape on southern plantations, or with white relatives who refused to acknowledge the family relationship. Some did not publicly admit mixed ancestry because they resented the white racism that persisted after the legal gains of the Civil Rights Movement; others did not want to appear as if they, like some light-skinned African Americans in the past, were ashamed of a black identity (Njeri 37–39).

By the end of the twentieth century, the social and ideological landscape began to change. The fame of racially mixed sports figures like Tiger Woods and pop music idols like Mariah Carey occasioned discussions about racial identity in popular magazines and on television talk shows, thereby bringing into public consciousness the

social construction of the old one-drop rule, which rendered black anyone with known African ancestry. The mid-1990s brought debate about, and eventual revision of, the mono-racial classifications on the U.S. Census, a change that more Americans than expected embraced. The number of first-generation, biracial, black-white children recorded as more than one race jumped from four percent in 1970, when their parents could only check "other" on the census, to fifty-six percent in 2000, when they could check more than one racial box (Sweet 295). The late 1990s also brought DNA confirmation that at least one of the male children of the slave Sally Hemings had been fathered by a Jefferson; Annette Gordon-Reed's argument, based on overwhelming circumstantial evidence, strongly suggested that this Jefferson was most certainly Thomas.[2] Since then the growing availability of public records and genealogical information on the Internet, and the ease and increasing affordability of DNA testing, despite the limitations in the databases, have facilitated genealogical research.

Inspired by Haley's *Roots*[3] but writing out of a different context over two decades later, three African American writers took another tack in researching their family histories, venturing south rather than east across the Atlantic. Carrie McCray in *Freedom's Child: The Life of a Confederate General's Black Daughter* (1998), Neil Henry in *Pearl's Secret: A Black Man's Search for His White Family* (2001), and Thulani Davis in *My Confederate Kinfolk: A Twenty-First-Century Freedwoman Discovers Her Roots* (2006) all trace their interracial family histories back to the generation of female slaves freed after the Civil War.[4] Neil Henry explains his revisionary impulse this way: "I was interested not in my genetic ties to Africa, the old and disconnected place, but in my hard-earned and far more meaningful roots here, in this dirt, in the country I call home" (288). These writers put off their research for years, in part because they all assumed that tracking down their white roots would lead to painful stories of abuse and degradation, and that the work involved would take them to a region of the country they did not wish to visit.

Shoshana Felman has argued that "testimony has become a crucial mode of our relation to events of our times" (Felman 5). In these interracial family histories, that impulse to testify has manifested itself in an interesting combination of the historian's responsibility to reveal the past as he or she has come to understand it, and the autobiographer's self-conscious desire to explore the self.[5] At the same time, these African American writers think back through not only their family's interracial history but also their own sense of self; in doing so they give their readers a complex portrait of southern Reconstruction that goes beyond simple notions of white resistance and black victimization. All three writers celebrate the strides that some African Americans made following the Civil War, an era suffused with a fighting spirit that white popular culture distorted with grotesque cartoons, racist films, and demeaning stereotypes. Riffing on television journalist Tom Brokaw's effusive praise of the World War II generation as "the Greatest Generation," Thulani Davis argues that the generation of African Americans freed by the Civil War should be equally honored for their accomplishments, especially in education. McCray, Henry, and Davis all note that during this time of change, laws were passed that crippled Reconstruction's potential to transform southern race relations, thus necessitating the Civil Rights Movement a century later. By highlighting long-term relationships between

freedwomen and the white men who employed them, these African American family histories break new ground for the general reader.[6] As one African American reviewer of *My Confederate Kinfolk* pointed out, "It's no news that white men in the south used their power to 'own' black women sexually. What is news is that sometimes those men evolved and became more responsible as a result of those 'relationships'; they took care of their children, and yes, took care of the women, too" (Nicholas 12).

Indeed, Davis did not research her great-grandmother's story for a long time because, as she frankly admits, "I thought I knew the story, and most of us kind of make that assumption.... I thought theirs was going to be a story about the coercion of a household worker" (Tilove 7). Certainly "interracial love" (if love can even be said to exist in relationships that involve power imbalances) has not been part of the popular imagination about the Reconstruction period. But these family histories testify that the period of social upheaval after the Civil War occasioned long-term interracial relationships, some of which might have become marriages had miscegenation not been outlawed in the South. In 1990 African American cultural critic bell hooks predicted that the suppressed story of white men romantically involved with slave women, if told, would explain how sexuality could serve as "a force subverting and disrupting power relations, unsettling the oppressor/oppressed paradigm."[7] Although the female ancestors whom these authors have researched were newly freed, not enslaved, their stories prove hooks's point.

In analyzing the slaveholding family histories of white writers—Edward Ball's *Slaves in the Family* (1998) and Macky Alston's documentary *Family Name* (1997)—Ashraf Rushdy has observed "a pattern of discovery and revelation" in their narratives, which move from secrecy and resistance to research, cross-racial encounters, and resolution. The African American writers whose interracial family histories I examine here share these narrative elements as well. But because these three writers have mixed-race ancestry, there are some significant differences, especially in the type of resistance encountered and in the results of the revelations. McCray, Henry, and Davis each examine not just the lingering social barriers, both black and white, to seeking and revealing the biracial truths of their family histories but their own psychic barriers as well. And while Edward Ball and Macky Alston seek new relationships with "the other," McCray, Henry, and Davis also attempt to come to terms with "the other" within themselves.[8]

Carrie McCray had always wanted to know what provoked her mother to become a "race woman," but the story that her mother's best friend, the poet Anne Spencer, told her in 1969 of the "warm loving relationship" between her grandmother, a black servant, and her grandfather, a former Confederate general, in Harrisonburg, Virginia, was not a story that Carrie McCray was "ready" to hear (7). At that time, McCray was a civil-rights activist and sociology professor at historically black Talladega College in Alabama, where she says "the Birmingham church bombings, the water hose, the dogs, and the assassination of Martin Luther King had filled me with rage." She explains that, "[d]ebilitated by anger, I could not write an honest story. As I struggled with the narrative, I heaped my rage upon Mama's father" (16). McCray's adult rejection of the complex "truth" of her Confederate grandfather's nurturing relationship with her mother

Mary parallels McCray's childhood reluctance to ask why a white man's portrait hung in her mother's bedroom (18). Years later, when McCray's brother finally identified the white man as their grandfather, McCray still sidestepped her kinship to him, thinking of General Jones as her "mother's father," almost as if he were unrelated to her.

Not until the early 1990s did McCray come to terms with the opposing facts that General Jones had fought to keep black people enslaved, only to have a lifelong intimate relationship with her grandmother Malinda and a loving relationship with her mother Mary. McCray represents her emotional struggle by recounting parallel pilgrimages to her grandparents' graves in Harrisonburg. She begins with her momentous trip to the white cemetery where she first called General Jones "grandfather," juxtaposing her softening feelings there with the "anger" that welled up when she subsequently visited her grandmother's grave, in the segregated black cemetery (24). Contrasting her grandmother's plain tombstone with General Jones's obelisk, she notes the stark differences not only in their social status but also in their ages: General Jones was fifty and Malinda Rice was sixteen when their relationship began. The many inequalities in their relationship overwhelmed McCray's earlier attempt to imagine a "love" between them. But her anger subsided when thoughts arose of General Jones teaching her mother to read, paying for her to go to college, and loving her enough to appear with her in public, even though he became a pariah in the white community. The revelation that General Jones's second wife divorced him because of his ongoing relationship with Malinda Rice provided the final proof for McCray of Jones's commitment to her grandmother—although obviously not to any gender and racial equality in their relationship. Indeed, the more McCray learned about the General, the less he and his relationship with her grandmother and her mother fit neatly into southern racial history as she had come to understand it.

Not surprisingly, McCray's own conflicting emotions about her Confederate grandfather shape the story she tells in *Freedom's Child* of her mother's childhood relationship with him. Although McCray never spoke with her mother about General Jones, she assumed that her mother must have had similar conflicting feelings, knowing that her white father was "on the Confederate side" while her mother had been "born a slave" (24). McCray highlights one incident from her mother Mary's childhood, which both embodies McCray's own troubled feelings toward General Jones and functions as an origin story of her mother's fighting spirit and lifelong affinity for activism. After repeated trips with General Jones to the white ice-cream parlor in Harrisonburg, Mary grew "troubled" when her father refused to take her darker-skinned brother, Willie, who was also his child. As a result, twelve-year-old Mary "staged her first protest" (9), asking an African American friend to accompany her to get ice cream. When the store owner refused to serve them because her friend was black, Mary told her father about the incident, expecting him to stick up for her friend, as he had stuck up for her when someone called her a "nigger bastard" (8). Instead, General Jones chastised Mary and sent her to her room. McCray fashions this family anecdote like a short story, complete with dialogue, and she returns to it again and again throughout *Freedom's Child*, embellishing the narrative in order to explain the origins of her mother's life of protest against racial injustice.

Embedded in the anecdote is also a concern with color as a criterion for privilege within the black community, which the light-skinned McCray says always "bothered" both her and her mother (80). McCray oscillates between imagining that her mother's "shame" in having a white father kept her from sharing her interracial parentage with her own children, and then wondering if her mother may have been silenced by her first husband's embarrassment about her mixed ancestry because he was a "race man" (95). This uncertainty about how to interpret the family secrets, motivations, and conflicting definitions of race, color, and kinship surfaces again when McCray finds a poem "composed by Willie" in General Jones's journal (41). McCray builds a case in support of General Jones from this slim evidence, hoping that the presence of Willie's poem in his journal may mean that he spent more time with his dark-skinned son than her mother's friend Anne Spencer had thought.

As McCray begins in earnest to research her white grandfather's life, new information comes to light not only about the General's continued and public loyalty to his black family but also about the good works he performed in Harrisonburg, rebuilding its public institutions after the Civil War. As McCray learns more, she decides that General Jones's values and interests actually resemble her mother's: his concern for the poor and the marginalized (Italians, not African Americans), his love of poetry, and his sense of humor. In something of an about-face, McCray presumes that her mother must also have been positively influenced by her white father, not simply reacting against his racist behaviors. This interpretation allows McCray to make "peace" with her grandfather (98). In *Freedom's Child* she presents her new perspective in the form of a poem, which works both to contain General Jones and to stabilize her conflicting feelings towards him—"Anger is a bitter cup, from which I no longer want to drink" (97)—so that she can move on to the story that most interests her: her mother's life as an activist.

Freedom's Child is Carrie Allen McCray's praise song to her mother Mary Rice Hayes Allen, who organized NAACP chapters in Virginia and New Jersey; worked to desegregate the Montclair, New Jersey, shops and schools; and led a letter-writing campaign to President Hayes against lynching. General Jones becomes a secondary character, but by making his love for his biracial daughter Mary the source of her confidence, her social consciousness, and her strength of will, McCray complicates southern history as it is generally known, and ultimately her own sense of self. In thinking back to the time that she met the African American poet Sterling Brown, McCray finally settles on how to define her connection with her white grandfather: "If he had not instilled in Mama a love of poetry and if she had not instilled the same love in me, would I have been able to experience so fully that hour with one of the Harlem Renaissance's greatest folk-poets? . . . Perhaps poetry is the thread that connects me most truly back to Mama's father" (210–11). It is interesting to note that although McCray states that she came to call General Jones "Grandfather," she reverts near the end of her book to calling him, "Mama's father," which suggests that the family connection never becomes one of true kinship. Unlike Neil Henry and Thulani Davis, Carrie McCray does not hunt for living white relatives, with the result that her extended family never becomes interracial, although her family tree certainly does.

In contrast, journalist Neil Henry names the transplanted Englishman A. J. Beaumont "my great-great-grandfather" from the first sentence of his family history, and he begins his search with the primary purpose of locating his living white cousins, rather than seeking a connection with his white progenitor as Carrie McCray did—and with good reason. The context is different, for although Beaumont's relationship with Henry's great-great-grandmother Laura was an intimate one that lasted for several years before their child Pearl was born, Beaumont did not acknowledge Pearl until he was on his deathbed, even though Pearl had written for his help when her marriage ended. As a result, it is not surprising that Henry focuses on Beaumont's whiteness, not his individuality: "I couldn't help seeing in his portrait the face of every white man I had ever come to despise in my life and every white man whose racism, arrogance, and privilege had translated into oppression, injustice, and untold pain for so many" (35). Henry reveals the depth of his resentment in a long passage, in which he dramatically telescopes U.S. black-white relations—from "the obscenities of slavery" and the "evils of the plantation era" through the indignities of Jim Crow, which his parents experienced, to the prejudice that "marked" his own coming of age in the 1960s in Seattle's white suburbs (35).

Obsessed for years with the possibility of searching for his southern white relatives, Henry hesitated to start, wondering if such a project was "disloyal" or even "harmful," not just to his own family but also to the black community as a whole (32). His fears were not unfounded. In the mid-1980s, when he told his mother's brother that he wanted to research their family's white roots, his Uncle Sonny was dismissive: "Forget them god-damn people. . . . If you want to write about something, write about the black folks in your family. What the hell's wrong with you?" (303). When *Pearl's Secret* was published in 2001, some members of Henry's family found "crossing racial lines to find white ancestors traitorous" because they felt it meant the black side was getting "short shrift." An African American caller to National Public Radio's "Talk of the Nation" agreed, saying that he did not feel that "putting a great deal of emphasis on this type of research is a positive thing" (Marech 1).

The expectation of this very response may have led Henry to examine his parents' lives in more detail than he had initially planned. He relates the degradation his mother suffered while traveling on Jim Crow railcars in Tennessee to attend a segregated library school and the frustration his father experienced as hospital doors were shut in his face when he sought to establish his career as a surgeon in the South during the 1950s. Reviewer Mat Johnson notes, "Although Henry's research into his distant white relatives provides the present-time structure for the book . . . his ruminations on the history of his immediate black family . . . take up most of the story" (9). Like Carrie McCray, Neil Henry wanted to understand what had provoked his parents' life choices, especially their flight from the South, a decision that directly affected his own sense of self. In *Pearl's Secret*, he expresses pride in his parents' career achievements as well as in their struggle to give him a better life in Seattle and the best higher education at Princeton and Columbia, but he worries about the effect that his total immersion in white society has had on his own racial identity. Henry's most self-probing comments reveal that the

family's move to Seattle left him feeling both disconnected from the black community and worried that he had internalized white stereotypes of black people:

> When I was feeling especially insecure about my abilities, in school and later in careers in journalism [at the *Washington Post*] and teaching [at the University of California at Berkeley], didn't I feel vaguely inferior to white peers because of my blackness? Indeed, didn't the sickness of my culture manage to seep its way through the gate to my soul, teaching me to distrust myself because of the black in me? (48)

But most of all he says he hated "the thought that I, too, had ineluctably internalized this racist pathology as the product of a privileged class. After all, didn't I prefer lighter-skinned women when I became a man, just as my society and family background conditioned me to?" (48). Much like earlier African American autobiographies, Henry's family history turns into an act of self-creation and an attempt at emancipation from self-doubt.[9]

As a result, intense soul searching permeates *Pearl's Secret* and makes the book deeply personal as well as revelatory of family secrets—not all of which are Pearl's. The source of Henry's own "greatest secret," which he "guarded closely" when he became a journalist, was that he "likely comprehended little more about the lives of ordinary black people in America than the average white reporter" (122). Growing up in a white suburb and hearing his mother talk about her childhood in St. Louis's Elleardsville, "a mecca of black culture and achievement," Henry experienced a "sense of longing and loss" (96–97) that he has struggled to overcome. Until he lived and worked in Washington, D.C., he admits that he knew very little about black people, an irony that amuses him, given that he is certain the *Washington Post* hired him in 1978 "partly because of his blackness" (122). A more surprising, although equally race-related secret, which he withholds from readers for the first one-third of his book, is that both his first wife and his second wife, Letitia, the mother of his daughter Zoe, are white. Significantly, when Henry has made a research breakthrough in locating his white family, he casually introduces Letitia into his narrative—she is making dinner—and continues for twenty pages before revealing her race. He fills his lengthy description of Letitia with circumstances that he perceives connect her to black people: from growing up without a father in a predominantly black, lower-class section of Washington, DC, to experiencing prejudice because of her social class. He describes her research in Africa, which is where they met, and her current job teaching African politics to military officers. Before introducing Letitia and thus revealing to his readers that he has married interracially, Henry also seems to need to establish his credibility as a "black" man, by detailing the instances of white prejudice that he has experienced throughout his life. Because Henry is aware that his move from Washington, DC, to Davis, California, looks very much like his parents' move west from Nashville, he takes pains to explain that he has not moved to escape black people (his initial interpretation of their move), but rather to give his own family a better life.

The truth of his parents' decision actually resembles his own, although the precipitating incident is more painful: his mother was raped by a black man in Nashville. This is

a closely guarded family secret that his mother does not reveal to Henry until he is in his thirties, but one that goes a long way toward helping him fully understand why his parents left the South. Henry reaches the disturbing conclusion that his parents were "seeking escape from *black people* in a certain sense," but not in general—more precisely, from what his mother called a pathological "element" festering in the South: "an amoral, criminal element bred by the sick system of entrenched black poverty, ignorance, hopelessness, and alienation that white racism had created and perpetuated, one represented graphically, she felt, by the wild-eyed black man who had raped her." Here Henry confronts the social construction of race in the segregated South, and at the same time does not shy away from noting the "chilling irony" that the fear his mother experienced "simmered at the heart of white racism in America" (190). Although Henry is never able to make peace with his white great-great-grandfather, A. J. Beaumont, the knowledge of his mother's rape allows him to make peace with his parents for taking him out of the black community. Finally he understands why his parents have pushed him and his siblings so unrelentingly to "rise above the base stereotypes and pitifully low expectations society placed on black men" (189).

The candor with which Henry delivers such insights contrasts with his reticence on other key subjects, such as how he and his wife will help their daughter think about her own racially mixed identity, and whether they will abide by the old one-drop rule or come up with their own new formulation. Henry also neutralizes what he has learned of his biracial great-grandmother Pearl's "sadness" and precarious position between two worlds (she marries first a black man, then a Jewish man) by summing her up this way: "Pearl, the daughter of an Englishman and a woman born into slavery, may have looked white, but she taught all of her family a great deal about what it meant to be black" (296, 298).

While most reviewers praised Neil Henry's honesty in exploring his own strong feelings, most white reviewers seemed unprepared for his conclusion that his most precious discovery was not an intellectual revelation about race relations in America, but what he terms "a slightly surer, purer, and better sense" of himself and his own identity—"as an American and, far more important, as an African American" (288). White reviewers felt shortchanged when Henry did not more directly acknowledge the change in race relations that his long-lost southern white cousin Rita points to when they meet at her home in Louisiana in 1997. Rita remarks that twenty-five years earlier her family would not have opened the door (272). At least one reviewer from outside the South was surprised that a southern white woman opened not just her door to Henry, but her arms (Johnson 9). Henry's portrayal of their meeting is positioned as the narrative climax and takes up over a quarter of the book, but one white southern reviewer wanted more. Susan Whitney wished for a photo of Henry with his white wife and biracial daughter, "a snapshot in words, if not pictures, of Pearl's family going forward," evidence that "the world has finally changed."[10] Briefly but repeatedly, Henry alludes to such a change in race relations, but only outside his immediate family. He compares his mostly pleasant encounters with a variety of white southerners who help with his research to the racial discrimination that his parents experienced. He also contrasts the downward economic

spiral of the white Beaumonts with the upward mobility of Pearl's descendants—an ironic reversal that Henry frankly delights in—but also self-consciously explores as the product of white racism which has led him, as a black man, to doubt his abilities.

By the end of the book, the two parts of Neil Henry's quest—for his own identity and his complete family history—come unglued, and his thoughtful meditations on the social construction of race become submerged in a wave of essentialized blackness. After two long chapters detailing his emotional and warm meeting with his white cousin Rita, Henry ends his memoir with what some readers have termed a "glorification"[11] of his uncle Sonny's "blackness" (291): crude anecdotes and language salted with racist and sexist epithets. Such a characterization of blackness is obviously reductive, and Henry seems to use it thoughtlessly, perhaps to prove his affinity with "black culture" after the search for his white relatives,[12] which first brought opprobrium. Certainly the momentary revulsion Henry experiences at his white cousin Rita's dinner party when he finds out that her sister married a man once active in the Ku Klux Klan (a man whom he actually meets) complicates Henry's ability to think of Rita's extended family as his family. But continuing uncertainties about his own racial identity also seem to prevent him from thinking of his cousin Rita as kin, despite her hospitality, the warm feelings they share, and the common humanity he senses in her love of family and in her niece's work with poor blacks at a New Orleans hospital. As evidence of a lack of true interracial family feeling, he describes the Beaumont-Henry relationship over the years since his meeting with Rita as an attenuated exchange of family photographs, holiday cards, and email. Henry concludes that they are not "one 'family,'" explaining that their "lives continued much as before, separately, quietly, distinctly white and black" (287). While such a summary describes the physical reality of the white and black descendants of A. J. Beaumont (who would have expected more, given the physical distance between them?), it hardly reflects the integrated life of Henry's own immediate family in California. If Henry's revelation of Pearl's secret and his subsequent meeting with his white cousins has not quite resulted in a "bridge over a chasm between white and black people" that he had hoped "to fashion" when he set out to write the book (21), surely a more intimate look at his own marriage could have produced a sturdier bridge, no matter how exceptional. Although with the completion of *Pearl's Secret*, Neil Henry accomplishes his goal of someday providing his daughter Zoe with "a better understanding" of his family's interracial history than he had growing up (13), by the last chapter his white wife and biracial daughter are nowhere in sight.

In contrast to Neil Henry's uncomfortable childhood feelings about being racially "mixed up" (38)—a light-skinned black boy growing up in a white world—the equally light-skinned Thulani Davis says she has always had "a solid African-American racial identity" (Tilove 7). She grew up about the same time as Henry, but in a black neighborhood in Hampton, Virginia, where she witnessed the Civil Rights Movement firsthand, rather than on television. Unlike Henry, when asked if her research had changed her, Davis spoke not of herself but of new connections: "I feel as if I have ties to more people, more places and more events in American history than I did before. I knew my mother was from Mississippi but I had never been there, and had this sudden intense

feeling of connection in Mississippi that's been quite strange to me. When I was young I never wanted to even go to Mississippi. It sounded terrifying. Now it's a compelling place. I find the people in Mississippi are very different from the people I meet here in New York City. They are very open people, black and white" (Tilove 7). Davis's certainty about her sense of self, coupled with her discovery that her great-grandmother's Chloe's relationship with white plantation owner Will Campbell was a lifelong one in which he acknowledged their daughter Georgia, allows Davis to be more open to kinship with her white relatives than Neil Henry is. For although her sense of her own African American cultural identity is unchanged after her genealogical search, the way she sees her physical self—her genetic identity—has literally shifted. For example, after examining photos of her white Campbell relatives, she notices that her "hairline is not a Davis trait at all," as she had thought, but a Campbell feature, and she now believes that the dark circles under her eyes and her tinnitus come from the Campbells (8). Unlike Carrie McCray, who attributes to nurture the love of poetry that she, her mother, and her Confederate grandfather share, Davis seems to envision such shared traits as passed down genetically. She is astounded when she discovers that she shares more interests with her dead white great-great-aunts than with her living black female relatives: she writes in many genres, she sends letters to newspaper editors, and she loves the theater. Davis finds this discovery "disturbing" (8), not as Neil Henry was disturbed as a child to think that an Englishman was "a part" of him (*Pearl's Secret* 10), but because "for so many years it did not even occur" to her to look for her white relatives. Davis sees her failure to look as "the barrier of imagination in a country in which racialism defies common sense" (8).

Davis addresses the social construction of race more directly than either McCray or Henry, exploring how her own lack of knowledge of her family history has actually shaped her racial identity:

> I had already been fully shaped as an African American woman, in part by the very fact of *not* knowing most of the specific history from which my own family emerged. Like many other people my sense of self and my blackness were constructed by the living example of parents and people I knew early in life and their stories, which almost always contradicted the history I was taught. My version of blackness was also shaped by their reliance upon me to construct myself in defiance of what was said about my possibilities—and what had been said about theirs. (13)

The subtlety with which Davis understands how race has been constructed in the United States, and its impact on her sense of self, perhaps helps her think of her white relatives as "kinfolk." Within the first few pages of *My Confederate Kinfolk*, Davis argues that "it would be easier to build selves less fictional and community less mythical if the truth of American heritage was accepted. This country has been crazy about deciding how to make people black or white ever since Thomas Jefferson thought a system should be devised and made law. From that moment, the lies began" (8). In 1941 Richard Wright addressed white readers about their lack of understanding of black people: "Each day when you see us black folk upon the dusty land of the farms or upon the hard pavement

of the city streets, you usually take us for granted and think you know us, but our history is far stranger than you suspect, and we are not what we seem."[13] In 2006, with *My Confederate Kinfolk*, Thulani Davis addresses African American readers, taking Wright's analysis one step further: "To some extent, we are not what we seem to ourselves" (281).

Davis examines both the black and white sides of her family tree in exhaustive detail, incorporating historians' research about the Civil War and Reconstruction to flesh out her story, a narrative choice that some reviewers have appreciated, while others have felt it interrupted her family saga. But several significant events in her family's history reflect the complexity of southern race relations during Reconstruction. First, of course, is the fact of her great-grandmother's twenty-six-year relationship with a white man. Admittedly, the nature of such a relationship is difficult to discern. Thus, like the very best literary critic who is aware of the imprecision of memory and the subjectivity of personal testimony in autobiographical writing,[14] Davis pores over the memoir her grandmother Georgia left about her parents' interracial relationship, comparing Georgia's detailed description of their romance with her own expectations that the liaison was either forced or pragmatic. But eventually Davis concludes that the circumstantial evidence of a loving relationship between Will and Chloe is overwhelming. Two significant facts, which differ from those in Henry's and McCray's family histories, convince her: Will Campbell never married a white woman, and he left his plantation to Chloe. Davis discovers that her great-grandmother Chloe was able to provide financially for family members in Mississippi and Alabama because when Campbell died, he left her not only his estate, but the know-how to become a planter herself. Davis, much like her readers, is probably most surprised by her "extraordinary" finding that the white Mississippi justice system sided with Chloe when Campbell's sister tried to contest her brother's will (264).

But Davis's research into the white side of her family tree, like Henry's and McCray's, uncovers shocking revelations that more than live up to Davis's negative expectations of white southerners. She discovers that Will's brother, a lieutenant colonel in the Confederate army, was involved in a massacre of African American Union soldiers and most probably ordered the lynching of his black opponent when he ran for public office after the war. She also learns that after a cloistered but happy childhood, Georgia struggled with her racial identity when she went away to a school for African Americans in Alabama, where Chloe's family lived. There she was taunted by her black relatives for having a white father, with the result that she grew to resent him and to wish for nappy hair and darker skin. Although Davis finds such discoveries painful, they do not prevent her from beginning relationships with her own white relatives. Nor do her encounters with these relatives lead to the awkward moments that Neil Henry experienced at Rita's dinner party, perhaps because Davis has more in common with her white relatives than Henry has. For example, Davis and her third cousin, Jack Campbell, discuss both inherited health problems and similar intellectual interests. They discover that their paths may have crossed in the 1960s when they were both at Columbia, and later when Jack's wife and Thulani Davis were in residence at the same artists' colony. Perhaps too because Davis begins her project more interested in discovering her dead white ancestors than

in locating her living white relatives, she does not have as much invested in their chance encounters, as Neil Henry had at Rita's dinner party. As a result, Davis begins these potentially awkward relationships more casually and thus with fewer expectations. They become simply her "kin," a word less freighted than "family."

In her analysis of autobiography, Julia Swindells points out that "the autobiographer's voice is often one which is oppositional, heretical or radical in some way," and in such narratives the story "moves beyond the life-story of the key individual, and focuses the use of autobiography as part of a political strategy to produce change" (205). The authors of these three very different family histories similarly oppose received knowledge, and remind Americans of what we sometimes forget: we are a racially mixed people, and so kin to one another. Indeed, Neil Henry found the black and white roots he "unearthed" to be "strong, compelling and deeply affirming in a human and archetypically American fashion" (288). Although McCray, Henry, and Davis arrive at different points in their thoughts about their own identity, they share the same goal of demonstrating that Americans are far more interracially related than we realize. Thulani Davis, in ruminating about events in the United States that occurred while she was writing her book—the disenfranchisement of black voters in Florida in the 2004 presidential election and the disproportionate blackness of poverty exposed in Hurricane Katrina in 2005—suggests, albeit idealistically, that the United States would be a better place if Americans would see these disadvantaged people as our kin. "Where compassion has failed" she writes, "perhaps history can help" (4). These interracial family histories, written for a general audience, are a start. But to see what they reveal, readers must look beyond what we think we know about interracial intimacy and race relations in the Reconstruction South, and we must look more closely at the contemporary causes of our failure to seek a more complex truth—whether it be white preoccupation with racial purity, or black preoccupation with racial authenticity.

Notes

1. Harold Courtlander and Margaret Walker sued Haley for plagiarism (Courtlander successfully), and several journalists and genealogists exposed falsehoods in Haley's family "history." See Linda Williams for a superb analysis of how Haley used the story of Kunta Kinte to fabricate his family's rootedness in Africa.
2. Defending Jefferson against charges of miscegenation dating back to his presidential election, Jefferson's family as well as historians had long held that Hemings's children were fathered by one of Jefferson's nephews, Samuel or Peter Carr. See Gordon-Reed.
3. See internal references to *Roots* in McCray 33, Henry 13, and Davis 64–66. Both Henry (4) and Davis (130) also read white writer Edward Ball's *Slaves in the Family* (1998) about the search for his family's interracial roots.
4. Haizlip's *The Sweeter the Juice: A Family Memoir in Black and White* (1993) is also the story of an interracial family traced back to the late nineteenth century. But I do not include an analysis of her book here since Haizlip's great-grandfather (the son of a Richmond, Virginia, judge and his mulatto domestic slave) and her great-grandmother (an Irish

immigrant) were able to marry legally because they lived in Washington, D.C. Haizlip's family history centers not on tracking down white ancestors (she had met her great-grandmother) but on locating her mother's estranged sister who was passing as white, and on determining why her mother had been left behind when her family left Washington.

5. Laura Marcus has influenced my thinking here (20).
6. Historians Wiencek and Bynum reveal similar instances of long-lasting interracial relationships.
7. hooks 58. *Queen*, the posthumous work by Alex Haley about his father's mixed heritage, which was completed by David Stevens and published by William Morrow in 1993, is an example of hooks's point. Haley's paternal grandmother was the daughter of a long-term relationship between a slave named Easter and an Irish American plantation owner.
8. Rushdy published his insightful article before Bliss Broyard published *One Drop: My Father's Hidden Life: A Story of Race and Family Secrets*. In her interracial family history which took her to New Orleans, Broyard, who identified as white, details her discovery as an adult that her dying father Anatole Broyard, the *New York Times* reviewer, was passing as white. Much like McCray and Davis, who try to identify which of their characteristics derive from the white side of their families, Broyard attempts to determine which aspects of her identity are "black." Her struggle, like theirs, to come to terms with her genetic identity is complicated by the old one-drop rule, which she at first thinks necessitates a change in her own racial identity from white to black.
9. Following William Andrews and Sidonie Smith, among others, Paul Gilroy argues that African American autobiography "expresses in the most powerful way a tradition of writing in which autobiography becomes an act or process of simultaneous self-creation and self-emancipation" (69).
10. Witney E5. Another white reviewer, Jarvis Deberry for the *Times-Picayune*, found Henry's portraits of his parents' lives and careers the book's only failing, a departure from the larger goal, which was to show "how two families became separated and what, if anything, can be done to bring them back together" (6).
11. See the responses of Julie Chapman-Greene on the Amazon.com website for *Pearl's Secret*, 8 June 2001, and of "A customer," on 7 August 2001.
12. See Paula Marantz Cohen's assessment of Henry's goals and attitudes (492). See also the response of "A customer" on the Amazon.com website for *Pearl's Secret*, 7 August 2001.
13. Quoted in Davis 281. Wright 10.
14. See Swindells for a discussion of the imprecision of memory and the subjectivity of personal testimony in autobiographical writing (9).

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