

Introduction

In 1892 Homer Plessy defied a Louisiana law that required railroad companies carrying passengers within the state to “provide equal but separate accommodations for the white, and colored, races.”¹ Fully aware of the law and intending to challenge it, Plessy took a seat in a train car designated for white passengers, announced that he was a “Negro” to the conductor, and refused to move. As he expected, Plessy was promptly arrested. In a series of trials and appeals, Plessy and his lawyers eventually took the case to the United States Supreme Court, which, despite a vigorous dissent by Justice Harlan, upheld the segregationist Louisiana law through its infamous “separate but equal” pronouncement in 1896. In the aftermath of the failures of Reconstruction, the Supreme Court ruling marked a moment when the racialization of American culture had been dramatically articulated and reconfigured. Although racial segregation had long been entrenched as a *de facto* practice in many regions of the United States, the 1896 ruling formally and explicitly hardened racialized boundaries in new ways. This legalized system of segregation recalled slavery’s racialized distinctions between “slave” and “free” but reconfigured this binary by articulating it in exclusively racial terms, the imagined division between “black” and “white” bodies. In effect, *Plessy v. Ferguson* ushered in a nationwide and brutal era of “Jim Crow” segregation, an institutionalized apartheid that lasted well into the twentieth century.²

The *Plessy* decision was only one of many sites at which antiblack violence, symbolic and embodied, was enacted during this period. The ruling legitimated the white-supremacist logic that also accounted for the unprecedented numbers of lynchings that took place between 1889 and 1930.³ Foreign policy mirrored the racialized violence taking place internally. During this same period, the United States pursued expansionism in Cuba, Puerto Rico, Hawaii, Panama, and the Philippines, justifying such domination through the discourse of a “civilizing mission”

to enlighten the “darker” races. Social anxieties about racial identity during this period led to a deluge of Jim Crow and antimiscegenation laws, laws that can be understood as an aggressive attempt to classify, separate, and racialize bodies as either “black” or “white.”⁴

Meanwhile, as racialized social boundaries were increasingly policed, so too were emerging categories of sexual identity. In 1892, exploited by a sensationalist press, the highly publicized trial of Alice Mitchell, who had murdered her female lover Freda Ward, focused public attention on the meanings of sexual attachments between women.⁵ Although Mitchell’s case hinged on whether or not she was insane, its effect was to increase public consciousness of and to criminalize a new type of woman, the female “invert.” This public consciousness of homosexuality was piqued further three years later during the trial of Oscar Wilde, which was covered widely in the popular press in the United States and Europe. Wilde was charged with “gross indecency” between men, which had been outlawed in England by the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885, known as the Labouchère Amendment.⁶ After a series of trials, Wilde was found guilty and sentenced to the maximum punishment, two years’ imprisonment with hard labor.⁷ Although Wilde’s trial and imprisonment took place in England, he became a transatlantic icon of homosexuality and decadence. According to one report, between 1895 and 1900, more than nine hundred sermons were preached against him in churches in the United States.⁸

The larger context for the cases of Wilde and Mitchell was the shift in understandings of sexual identity that occurred during the late nineteenth century. One of the most important and, by now, familiar insights developed in the fields of lesbian and gay studies and the history of sexuality is the notion that homosexuality and, by extension, heterosexuality are relatively recent inventions in Western culture, rather than transhistorical or “natural” categories of human beings. As Michel Foucault and other historians of sexuality have argued, although sexual acts between two people of the same sex had been punishable during earlier periods through legal and religious sanctions, these sexual practices did not necessarily define individuals as homosexual *per se*.⁹ Only in the late nineteenth century did a new understanding of sexuality emerge, in which sexual acts and desires became constitutive of identity. Homosexuality as the condition, and therefore the identity, of par-

ticular bodies was thus a historically specific production. In Foucault's much quoted words, "Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration, the homosexual was now a species."¹⁰ This shift brought about changes in the organization of not only bodies but knowledge itself. As Eve Sedgwick has claimed, "many of the major nodes of thought and knowledge in twentieth-century Western culture as a whole are structured—indeed, fractured—by a chronic, now endemic crisis of homo/heterosexual definition."¹¹

In this book, I ask what this "crisis of homo/heterosexual definition," which emerged in the United States in the late nineteenth century, had to do with concurrent conflicts over racial definition and the presumed boundary between "black" and "white." Although some scholarship has drawn parallels between discourses of racial difference and sexuality, their particular relationship and potentially mutual effects remain largely unexplored. I am interested in interrogating how negotiations of the color line, which W. E. B. Du Bois pronounced to be the "problem of the Twentieth Century,"¹² shaped and were shaped by the emergence of notions of sexual identity and the corresponding epistemological uncertainties surrounding them. I show that it was not merely a historical coincidence that the classification of bodies as either "homosexual" or "heterosexual" emerged at the same time that the United States was aggressively constructing and policing the boundary between "black" and "white" bodies. In doing so, this study responds to and challenges a persistent critical tendency to treat late-nineteenth-century shifts in the cultural understanding and deployment of race and sexuality as separate and unrelated. Through the study of a range of literary, scientific, and cinematic texts that foreground the problems of delineating and interpreting racial and sexual identity, I argue instead that the simultaneous efforts to shore up and bifurcate categories of race and sexuality in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were deeply intertwined.

By historicizing and denaturalizing the interconnections between late-nineteenth-century discourses of race and sexuality, I hope to rethink what have been seen as separate strands of American culture. This separation is often unintentionally reproduced through analogies be-

tween race and sexuality and between racialized and sexualized bodies. I show that these analogies have a specific history and became mobilized at the turn of the century: the formation of notions of heterosexuality and homosexuality emerged in the United States through (and not merely parallel to) a discourse saturated with assumptions about the racialization of bodies. These assumptions and the heightened surveillance of bodies in a racially segregated culture demanded a specific kind of logic, which, as I will argue, gave coherence to the new concepts of homo- and heterosexuality.

This project is directed also more broadly at a number of theoretical and disciplinary questions, including the ways in which scholarship on questions of race and sexuality has been organized institutionally. To date, the field that has sustained and produced some of the most vital work on ideologies of race and racial segregation in the United States is African American studies. Likewise, the field of lesbian and gay studies has more recently developed a rich body of scholarship on the discourses of homo- and heterosexuality. Both of these interdisciplinary areas have grown as a response to the absence of inquiry into race and sexuality in traditionally bounded disciplines. African American studies and lesbian and gay studies have been constituted out of a similar logic of identity-based scholarship and are, for me and others, the location of some of the most exciting and productive inquiry of the last two decades. Yet at this theoretical and historical juncture, the analogy often drawn between lesbian/gay and African American studies has produced unfortunate effects, including the illusion that they are parallel, rather than intersecting, bodies of scholarship. In lesbian/gay studies, questions of race and racialization tend to be subordinate to analyses of sexuality. In scholarship on race, with a few notable exceptions, there has been a general critical tendency to minimize the role of sexuality, and particularly homosexuality. The relative absence of questions of race until recently in existing work in lesbian and gay studies is partly a function of its historical position. In establishing the field, scholars have been preoccupied with distinguishing and separating categories of gender, race, and sexuality from one another. But it is now necessary to account for the ways in which these formulations have often depended on fixing other categories of difference. Biddy Martin, for example, in critiquing work that has attempted to explore the epis-

temological specificities of the homo/hetero divide, has registered her concern that “these kinds of formulations project fixity onto race and gender.”¹³ The challenge is to recognize the instability of multiple categories of difference simultaneously rather than to assume the fixity of one to establish the complexity of another.

My work builds on the analytical insights articulated most fully and consistently by critics who have challenged the tendency within dominant critical discourses to treat race and gender separately.¹⁴ Their insistence on the importance of understanding the *intersectionality* of race and gender has opened up space in turn to ask how sexuality might also intersect with multiple categories of identification and difference. Kobena Mercer and Isaac Julien, for instance, have offered suggestive comments about the historical and theoretical links between race and sexuality:

The prevailing Western concept of sexuality . . . *already contains racism*. Historically, the European construction of sexuality coincides with the epoch of imperialism and the two inter-connect. . . . The personage of the savage was developed as the Other of civilisation and one of the first “proofs” of this otherness was the nakedness of the savage, the visibility of its sex.¹⁵

Building on these preliminary insights, my study attempts to show that questions of race—in particular the formation of notions of “whiteness” and “blackness”—must be understood as a crucial part of the history and representation of sexual formations, including lesbian and gay identity and compulsory heterosexuality in the United States. I use methodologies from both African American studies and lesbian/gay studies in my readings of texts and engage them critically in perhaps unexpected ways. For instance, I focus a critical lens on constructions of race in my readings of texts that have been discussed primarily as sites for the analysis of gender and sexuality. Correspondingly, I foreground questions of (homo)sexuality in texts that have been understood previously within the framework of a critical emphasis on race. My aim is not to abandon either focus but to understand the ways in which critical questions of race and sexuality are refracted through each other in literary, scientific, and visual representation.

My methodology draws on and reformulates recent developments

loosely gathered under the approach of queer studies. “Queer” may be understood as pointedly critiquing notions of stable lesbian and gay (or “straight”) identification. Building on and simultaneously challenging earlier work that called itself lesbian and gay studies, queer theory has emerged as a site at which the very assumption of the utility of stable sexual orientations, such as “gay” or “lesbian,” has undergone critique. “Queer” approaches also bring into question received notions of evidence, proof, and argumentation. Rather than asserting its own authenticity as a discrete field of study, at its best, queer studies has implicitly and explicitly challenged the seemingly “natural” status of epistemological assumptions of established disciplines.¹⁶ However, as I will show, queer approaches have not yet been fully responsive to the ways in which these methodologies might be useful in addressing questions of race. This responsiveness is part of the goal of this study and is enabled by my training in literary and cultural studies, fields whose notions of evidence have historically been receptive to some degree of ambiguity and connotation. My method perhaps demands an even wider berth for doubt and skepticism because I ask readers to see what may be counter-intuitive, given the ways in which we have grown accustomed to dividing texts—like bodies—according to a mistaken logic of transparent racial or sexual identity. My readings, therefore, listen for “the inexplicable presence of the thing not named”¹⁷ and are attuned to the queer and racial presences and implications in texts that do not otherwise name them. I employ the techniques of queer reading but modulate my analysis from a singular focus on sexuality to one equally alert to the resonances of racialization.

Before I describe the organization of the chapters that follow, it is necessary to define two key terms that are used throughout my analysis. “Sexuality” is used throughout this study to refer to a historically and culturally contingent category of identity. As such, “sexuality” means much more than sexual practice *per se*. One’s sexual identity, while at times linked directly to one’s sexual activities, more often describes a complex ideological position, into which one is interpellated based partly on the culture’s mapping of bodies and desires and partly on one’s response to that interpellation.¹⁸ Thus there is no strict relationship between one’s sexual desire or behavior and one’s sexual identity, although the two are closely intertwined.

The term “race” in this study refers to a historical, ideological process rather than to fixed transhistorical or biological characteristics: one’s racial identity is contingent on one’s cultural and historical location. Concepts of race in Brazil, South Africa, and the United States, for example, are all embedded within histories of imperialism and slavery, but each nation uses a different (and contradictory) logic of racial classification to determine who is “white,” “black,” or “colored.”¹⁹ Similarly, even within national cultures, racial meanings change over time: Irish immigrants in the early-nineteenth-century United States were not considered part of the “white” population, but were seen as a distinct and savagelike racial other.²⁰ Although popular notions of race often assume that it refers to self-evident and visible characteristics, there exist no discrete markers of racial difference, in scientific discourse or otherwise, uniformly distinguishing one “race” from another. To avoid fixing race as a transhistorical or natural category of identity, I foreground instead processes of “racialization,” which Michael Omi and Howard Winant explain as “the extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice or group. Racialization is an ideological process, an historically specific one.”²¹ This crucial notion of racialization enables me to connect the ideological work of race to the historical emergence of models of homo- and heterosexuality at the turn of the century.

Although I trace the intersections of these two discourses of race and sexuality, I also resist erasing the important distinctions between them and the often starkly irreconcilable aspects of their cultural deployment. It is important to emphasize that I do not posit simple analogies between racial and sexual identities but rather attempt to historicize and therefore denaturalize their relationship. All too often, it is assumed that being a person of color is “like” being gay and that sexual orientation is “like” racial identity. Yet these analogies have a history and perform specific kinds of cultural work, often with contradictory political effects. In the ongoing debates about the right to same-sex marriage in the United States, for instance, activists often invoke legal precedents granting the right to interracial marriage.²² Proponents argue that the legal system eventually recognized that it was unconstitutional to prohibit interracial marriage and that, by the same logic, the courts should recognize the unconstitutionality of prohibiting same-sex marriage. On

the other hand, the analogy may be used to demonize “minority” populations, as became all too evident in the tendency to link and pathologize gay and black populations as “high-risk” groups in governmental responses to AIDS in the 1980s. In either case, whatever its other effects, the analogy obscures those who inhabit both identifications. As bell hooks has noted, “to make synonymous experience of homophobic aggression with racial oppression deflects attention away from the particular dual dilemma that non-white gay people face, as individuals who confront both racism and homophobia.”²³ Further, such analogies implicitly posit whiteness and heterosexuality as the norm. To say that gay people are “like” black people is to suggest that those same gay people are not black. The underlying assumption is that white homosexuality is like heterosexual blackness. Rather than suggesting that race, gender, and sexual orientation are somehow “natural” analogies, then, this study offers an analysis of the historical construction of intersections among these categories of identity at a particular cultural moment.

To return to that moment and the juridical landscape of the 1890s, the juxtaposition of the Plessy, Mitchell, and Wilde trials points undeniably to the institutional efforts undertaken during this period to bifurcate identity into “black” or “white,” “heterosexual” or “homosexual,” and thus to simplify socially constructed boundaries of race and sexual orientation. Importantly, these shifts were embedded in anxieties over the control of language and representation. Albion Tourgée, who oversaw Plessy’s challenge, argued that the primary question in the case was “not as to the *equality* of the privileges enjoyed, but *the right of the State to label one citizen as white and another as colored.*”²⁴ Unwilling to allow individuals to determine the racial status of their own bodies, the Supreme Court reinforced a cultural fiction of racial opposites and authorized the individual states to define and separate any bodies in question. Contests over language similarly vexed the court proceedings of the Wilde trial, a trial that revolved around the central problem of the “Love that dared not speak its name.”²⁵ As Neil Bartlett has written:

What Wilde and the court were contesting was not the evidence, but who had the right to *interpret* that evidence. It is no accident that the line *the Love that dare not speak its name* haunted the trial, and has stayed with us ever since. It is not the love itself which was on trial. . . .

What was on trial was the right to speak (invent and articulate) the name of that love.²⁶

These trials, then, reveal the existence of a cultural desperation regarding rights in language and the control of language over the social construction of identity. As Wilde himself wrote after the trial, “I saw then at once that what is said of a man is nothing. The point is, who says it.”²⁷

While racial and sexual identities were being contested discursively, their construction, of course, dramatically shaped and depended on the ways in which those identities were embodied. Plessy’s lawyers understood the problem of their case as a struggle over the control of both language and property rights. As Tourgée noted, “in any mixed community, the reputation of belonging to the dominant race, in this instance the white race, is *property*, in the same sense that a right of action, or of inheritance, is property.”²⁸ Although unsuccessful as a legal argument, Tourgée’s emphasis on the connection between racial identity and property refigured the assumptions about ownership and bodies embedded in slavery. His evocation of property rights underscores the ways in which profound material effects were and continue to be at stake in the social construction of identities. Those whose bodies were culturally marked as nonnormative lost their claim to the same rights as those whose racial or sexual reputation invested them with cultural legitimacy, or the property of a “good name.”

The following chapters foreground my concerns with understanding how a range of discourses constructed the divisions between “blackness” and “whiteness” and homo- and heterosexuality. These discourses had varying degrees of power to shape cultural understandings of bodies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the first part, I consider questions of race and sexuality in two nascent cultural institutions, sexology and cinema. That the physical body offers transparent evidence of its history, identity, and behavior is a deeply held cultural fiction in the United States, one that seems a necessary starting point for this study. During the nineteenth century, human anatomy was treated as a legible text, over which various fields of science, including the nascent field of sexology, competed for authority as literate readers and interpreters of its meaning. As an emerging (and self-consciously) “expert” discourse, sexology became a privileged, though not exclusive, site

for the explicit articulation of newly emerging models of homo- and heterosexuality. Although most of the population may not have had direct knowledge of the texts produced by sexologists and the earlier “experts” of scientific racism (comparative anatomists), their theories and conclusions increasingly assumed enormous cultural power to organize and pathologize those marked as sexually deviant or racially “other.” In chapter 1, I analyze works by late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century sexologists in order to consider the relationship between the emergent scientific discourse on homosexuality and existing scientific discourses on racial difference. My discussion centers on the rhetorical strategies and structures of important sexological works such as Havelock Ellis’s *Sexual Inversion*, volume 2 of his *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* (1897). This early work in sexology, poised at the crossroads of anthropometry and psychoanalysis, illustrates the ways in which the development of new sexual categories was mediated by methodologies and conclusions borrowed from previous studies of racial difference.

The emphasis on the surveillance of bodies that was embedded in expert discourses such as sexology was part of the profound reorganization of vision and knowledge in American culture between the 1890s and the 1920s. This period saw the emergence of a number of new visual technologies, particularly the development of cinema as a popular medium. Because race and sexuality pose representational problems centered on the possibilities and impossibilities of the physical legibility of identity, chapter 2 explores the ways in which the emergent film industry in the United States articulated and simultaneously evaded links between racial difference and homosexuality. Although recent work in feminist and early film criticism and history has begun to address questions of race and sexual orientation, there exists surprisingly little work that draws together these analytical categories in order to understand their intersections. I consider these questions through a comparison of the film comedy *A Florida Enchantment* (Vitagraph, 1914) with its literary and stage sources, asking how and why the film masks its underlying racial narrative within its overt fascination with sexual transformation and boundaries of gender and sexuality. I situate these questions in the context of the shifts that occurred in the construction of categories of black/white, female/male, and homosexual/heterosexual during the

period, and within a discussion of the vexed cultural status of the emergent film industry of the 1910s.

Stuart Hall points out that “the ideologies of racism remain contradictory structures, which can function both as the vehicles for the imposition of dominant ideologies, and as the elementary forms for the cultures of resistance.”²⁹ The second half of this book turns from the culturally dominant discourses of scientific racism and cinema to literary texts, a crucial site of African American self-representation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, particularly as the “New Negro” movement gained momentum through the 1920s. Virtually absent as subjects in dominant discourses such as sexology and the emerging film industry, African Americans found in fiction an important medium for instantiating political agency and for contesting dominant cultural stereotypes. These texts demonstrate the stakes of the emerging discourse of homosexuality/heterosexuality for African Americans in both stark and subtle ways. Because existing cultural stereotypes of African Americans were largely sexualized, the new discourse of sexual pathology was intertwined with these racialized images. To varying degrees, these authors were able to resist, contest, and appropriate these dominant cultural discourses. At the same time, they often reinscribed them. It is important to emphasize that I do not see the authors (or readers) of these texts necessarily offering heroic resistance to the pathologizing discourses of race or sexuality. Instead, what interests me is the extent to which the discourse of homosexuality began to shape their texts, and the often contradictory ways in which these writers registered its effects.

Chapter 3 shows how the discourses of homosexuality circulated in significant ways in Pauline E. Hopkins’s attempts to revise cultural constructions of black womanhood in her novels *Contending Forces* and *Winona*. As recent scholarship has demonstrated, Hopkins played an important part in the development of African American literature and an African American reading audience in the early twentieth century.³⁰ I place her work within the historical contexts not only of racial segregation but also of emerging categories of sexual identity during this period in the United States. My discussion considers how the often unstable division between homosexuality and heterosexuality circulates as part of Hopkins’s exploration of the barriers to desire imposed by the color line.

Antiblack discrimination and violence reached alarming heights in the two decades before World War I, and in response, many African Americans chose to migrate in unprecedented numbers toward northern urban centers. The anonymity resulting from this mobility made it possible for many light-complexioned African Americans to “cross the color line” into the white population at rates unparalleled during any other period, making this era “the great age of passing.”³¹ In chapter 4, I discuss one of the most important novels of passing written during this period, James Weldon Johnson’s *Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*, a text that enacted even as it narrated the phenomenon of passing. First published anonymously in 1912, the novel raised crucial questions about the epistemology of identity: just as the text’s status as truth or fiction could not be detected by its readers, so the “ex-coloured man’s” movement across the color line demonstrated that race had no ontological certainty. I show that Johnson’s innovative revisions of the genre of the novel of racial passing had to do as much with the circulation of a discourse of forbidden sexuality as with the protagonist’s liminal racial status.

In chapter 5, I focus on writing by and about Jean Toomer, whose refusal to be identified as “black” or “white” after the publication of *Cane* (1923) has tended to set the terms for the critical discussion of his life and writing. This critical focus on race has created a blind spot around the possibility that questions of sexuality circulated simultaneously with race within Toomer’s writing and life. Drawing on published and unpublished biographies, autobiographies, and short stories, I discuss first the ways in which queer theoretical approaches open up new directions for understanding Toomer’s representational strategies with regard to racial questions, and in turn how Toomer and his work demonstrate the need to resituate questions of racialization at the center of queer approaches.

It is crucial to the integrity of the arguments put forward in this study that I acknowledge their limitations, which I have either chosen in an effort to manage the scope of this project or have as yet been unable to overcome. First, I emphasize that my conclusions hold only for a specific historical period in the United States. Thus whereas some of my discussions may resonate with or even accurately describe the intersections of race and sexuality during other historical moments, the work

of characterizing the particular formations of those periods remains to be completed. Although some of the more disturbing current invocations of links between racial and sexual discourses have propelled me in this project, I would resist applying my arguments uncritically to our own historical moment (or others).

Next, the range of texts analyzed here is highly selective and is not necessarily representative of the entire historical period or the entire United States. What I have sacrificed in terms of “coverage” I hope to have compensated for in depth. My goal is to provide productive new readings of a variety of texts rather than to assert a single story that each text discretely supports. I have put a number of texts into conversation, but it is important to remember that they commanded varying degrees of cultural authority during the period under study. In limiting my study to these particular texts and to sexology, fiction, and cinema, I have attempted to be vigilant about their differing means of production and cultural authority, a vigilance that has frequently prevented me from generalizing more broadly about related medical, literary, or cinematic movements.

Further, my analysis of “race” in this study is limited to constructions of “blackness” and “whiteness,” primarily because prevailing discourses of race and racial segregation in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century American culture deployed this bifurcation more pervasively than other models of racial diversity. This framework is an obvious limitation, resulting in the omission of racial distinctions erased by the black/white divide. Significant and urgent questions remain about how those who identified as neither “white” nor “black” were situated in relation to the emergence of a discourse of homo- and heterosexuality. I do not specifically interrogate the cultural constructions of Asian, Jewish, or Native American bodies, for instance, but recent work by scholars such as Lisa Lowe, Sander Gilman, and others suggests that this line of inquiry deserves further research.³² My hope is that my focus on the black/white bifurcation, while admittedly circumscribed, will usefully inform future studies that complicate the intersecting representational histories of sexuality and race in—and perhaps even beyond—American culture.

Despite the increasingly pervasive cultural authority of the socially constructed dichotomies “black” versus “white” and “homosexual” ver-

sus “heterosexual” during the period of this study, ideological boundaries of race, sexuality, and gender were and continue to be sites of ongoing contestation. The marked proliferation of medical and scientific texts that investigated homosexuality during this period, for example, suggests that categories of sexual identity were far from self-evident. It is important to see that the particular meanings of socially constructed identities gain currency through repetition, resistance, and appropriation. The emergence of “new” sexual identities and the reconfiguration of racialized identities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were not singular “events” through which those meanings were simply established once and for all but rather ongoing processes of contestation and accumulation.