



## Romanticizing Slavery: Dangerous Crossings in Child, Twain, and Chase-Riboud

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In Mark Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894), a slave woman in antebellum America stands with her newborn baby in her arms before the unwatched cradle of her master's son. She thinks that her heart will break if her baby, who is as white as the master's child, is sold as a slave to the deep South. Bemoaning fate, she asks "What has my po' baby done, dat he couldn't have no luck?" (13). Then, reaching a sudden decision, the mother switches her "colored" baby with the white infant. Thus begins Twain's novel of what happens when a legally black child gets raised as white, while the white boy grows up a slave.

Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson* addresses topics as varied as slavery, race, law, and scientific criminal investigation, and to this day exercises an influence on American criticism and literature. Under the critical reign of New Historicism in the 1980s and 1990s, for example, this novel was reread in its historical context in such collections as *Mark Twain's Pudd'nhead Wilson: Race, Conflict, and Culture* (1990) edited by Susan Gilman and Forrest G. Robinson. A century after *Pudd'nhead Wilson*'s publication, Barbara Chase-Riboud wrote a revision of Twain's novel retold from an African-American woman's point of view. Her historical fiction, *The President's Daughter* (1994), centers on the daughter of Thomas Jefferson and his slave mistress, Sally Hemings. In this postmodern romance, whose title is reminiscent of William Wells Brown's *Clotel, or the President's Daughter* (1853), Chase-Riboud exquisitely appropriates Twainian scenes of "passing" for her version of the scandal of Thomas Jefferson. DNA evidence from Jefferson family descendants both black and white in the 1990s proved that the third president of the United States and one of its Founding Fathers had fathered slave children

despite his public repudiation of interracial relationships.

Chase-Riboud leads her readers to expect a story based on *Clotel*, often hailed as the first African American novel, and indeed even embeds in her own alternate historical fiction, *The President's Daughter*, an episode where Harriet reads her fictional biography by Brown with “an eerie feeling of jubilation” (327). But Chase-Riboud is not only interested in the African American literary canon; interestingly enough, she also chooses three epigraphs for her novel that reveal her challenge to white male literary canonical works’ treatment of miscegenation in the nineteenth-century. In these epigraphs, she quotes from James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826) and Mark Twain’s *Pudd’nhead Wilson*.<sup>1</sup>

The differences between Mark Twain, a white male writer, and Barbara Chase-Riboud, an African-American female writer, are apparent at the level of race and gender. It is not surprising that Chase-Riboud uses her imaginative power to subvert dominant canonical or white male perspectives, even tackling head on the hypocrisy of the “respectable” slave-owning President of the United States and his mixed-raced children. Twain and Chase-Riboud’s relationship becomes more complicated, however, when Lydia Maria Child, who played an active role in the nineteenth-century anti-slavery movement, is brought into the mix. Child’s literary career started in 1823 with the novel *Hobomok*, which featured an interracial relationship between an Indian man and a white woman. Child stressed the significance of racial issues in both fiction and nonfiction throughout her life. After the Civil War, Child published *A Romance of the Republic* (1868), in which child-switching by a slave woman raises serious questions about skin color and identification just as in Twain’s *Pudd’nhead Wilson*. Child’s romance was published twenty-seven years before Twain’s *Pudd’nhead Wilson*.

The late nineteenth-century works of Child and Twain, and Chase-Riboud’s novel a century later, each foreground racial miscegenation in their fictions, thus asserting the centrality of these intertwined problems in American literary history regardless of authorial differences in race and gender. Examining together these three very different writers, I pursue their connections and distinctions in order to reevaluate Romance as an apt forum for addressing racial problems. Indeed, reading these texts together may afford us the unique opportunity to appreciate the genre of Romance from a multiculturalist point

of view.

## The Evolution of American Romance

Child's *A Romance of the Republic*, Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, and Chase-Riboud's *The President's Daughter* all deal with the mixing of races through the medium of Romance. Reviewing the critical history of Romance highlights the complex implications of racial transgression when Romance serves as its medium, demonstrating a reciprocal relationship between theme and literary form. In other words, writing Romance with its emphasis on strong imagination while also elucidating the truth of the human heart allows authors to cross socially constructed and instituted borders.

Romance has been an established genre of American literature at least since Nathaniel Hawthorne contrasted "Romance" and "Novel" in his famous preface to *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851). Requiring Romance to be, in effect, "art for art's sake," Hawthorne allowed writers of the genre a wide range of imagination, stipulating only that they not "swerve aside from the truth of the human heart"(1). If a Romance writer commits the "literary crime" of sacrificing reality to his own creativity and taste, he should not be discounted, says Hawthorne, for if he had not done so, his writing could not be called "Romance"(1). Expanding upon this idea in the preface to *The Blithedale Romance* (1852), Hawthorne repeatedly identified Romance as a neutral territory of imagination and reality, arguing that Romance works are "not to be put exactly side by side with nature," and that the writer "is allowed a license with regard to every-day Probability" (2).

The question arises then as to what gives American Romance the capacity to describe the ambiguities of binary oppositions — reality and imagination, natural and supernatural, present and past, or white and black. The literary rhetoric of Hawthorne derives to some degree from his contemporary political context, upon which the concept of compromise exercised great influence. Sacvan Bercovitch identifies compromise as the predominant rhetorical instrument of American political ideology in the 1850s, one that necessarily affected the literary imagination. Illustrating the political context from which this rhetoric arose, Bercovitch delineates the political ambiguities that triggered the Compromise Resolutions to the Fugitive Slave Act and their role in transforming political conflict into

consensus via compromise (55).<sup>2</sup> Just as with literary history in Bercovitch's reading, the rhetoric of compromise affected literature too. In a sense, we can say the ambiguous literary ground of Romance negotiates a compromise between imagination and reality in Hawthorne's, and other Romance writers,' works.

The 1850s also witnessed increasing controversy among both scientists and Christians with Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life* (1859). Darwin's polemic actually reinforced the discourse of miscegenation, arguing in the chapter "Natural Selection" for "the general law of good being derived from the intercrossing of distinct individuals of the same species" (49). In his later chapter on "Hybridism," Darwin indicates his strong doubts regarding the commonly held idea that interbreeding between different species results in sterile offspring (136). In this way, the Darwinian theory of natural selection investigates the role of hybridity as part of the emerging discourse of evolution in the 1850s.

Hybridity and its social influence had already been discussed by Thomas Jefferson in *Notes on the States of Virginia* (1781). In Query IV on America's natural environment, Jefferson challenges French naturalist George Louis de Buffon, who insisted on the inferiority of Native Americans in conjunction with his analysis that animals in America were smaller and less various in species than those in Europe. Jefferson, while paying the appropriate respect to Buffon, nonetheless defends the natural superiority of Native Americans with illustrations of interracial marriage between white men and Indian women (58). Jefferson's paradoxical comments in Query XIV on the necessity of segregation together with the emancipation of slaves, however, illuminates the difficulty of interracial harmony between whites and blacks, and also implies fear of racial miscegenation (138-39). That black-white racial mixture was already commonplace remained the open secret in not only Jefferson's *Notes* but also in much of American society.

The discourse of miscegenation prevailed throughout America politically, scientifically, and socially. Compromise, ambiguity, and miscegenation — all of which can be associated with hybridity — gained such currency that Hawthorne inevitably foregrounded these concepts in his theory of Romance, as did later critics of his work such as Richard Chase, Daniel Hoffman, and others.

The tradition of Hawthornian Romance was further explicated by Chase in *The American Novel and Its Tradition* (1957). Declaring Romance to be the quintessence of American literature, Chase argues that the American Romance — which, in his view, includes the works of the American Renaissance — is different from European Romance. For Chase, American Romance works are “literary hybrids unique only in their peculiar but widely differing amalgamation of novelistic and romance elements” (14). Following Hawthorne’s theory that Romance is based on both imagination and “the truth of the human heart,” Chase demonstrates that Romance comprises a fusion of reality and imagination in which American writers have been able to convey inner reality through literary fantasy, offering as examples Herman Melville, Henry James, and Mark Twain, besides Hawthorne himself.<sup>3</sup> Romance, furthermore, does not require the “sincerity of the novel” (24) for Chase, although its improbable or impossible events have allegorical and symbolic meaning that speak to our subconscious. The identifying quality of American Romance for Chase, in sum, is a literary hybridity in which probability and improbability are amalgamated. We should not ignore that Chase’s operative terms for the peculiarly American Romance traditio — “hybridity” and “amalgamation” — were also terms used to indicate racial mixture.

Daniel Hoffman develops the theory of Romance further in his *Form and Fable in American Fiction* (1961), arguing that American Renaissance writers employed allegory not in the service of religion like their ancestors, but rather as an aesthetic expression of skepticism towards the very “Truth” from which received allegorical forms arose (4-5). Hoffman ultimately identifies the nature of Romance as “the discovery of identity and of meaning” (358), for which purpose American Romance writers weave stories combining reality and the supernatural (358). Hoffman emphasizes the presence of a supernatural element in American Romance, embodied in literary materials such as myth and folklore, because the supernatural is the origin of the American writer’s power of imagination. The amalgamation of the “real” and the “marvelous” signals, for Hoffman as well as for Chase, an indispensable and privileged theme in American Romance.

## Romancing Race — Passing in *A Romance of the Republic*

Romance involves hybridity not only of literary forms including myth, folklore and superstition, but also of reality and imagination. Hybridity furthermore offers a compelling reason to revisit Lydia Maria Child's *A Romance of the Republic*, whose interracial "happy union" romance (Perry 173) has been long forgotten in American literature. Child's fiction illuminates the ongoing theoretical linkages between "union" and "hybridity" that critics such as Lynne Pearce identify, redefining romance as the genre best suited to illustrate the process of "romantic union" between two different races. Romance is inherently tolerant in its content, because it is a literary hybrid accepting of imagination, even imagination of the wildest kind.

As *Hobomok* and her subsequent writings reflect, Child was concerned with the issue of interracial relationships throughout her literary career. After writing *An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans* (1833), Child was roundly criticized for calling so openly for an end to prohibitions against interracial marriage: her friends avoided her on the street; subscriptions declined for *Juvenile Miscellany*, a magazine Child edited; her honorary privileges at the Boston Athenaeum were repealed; and Boston literary society persecuted her (even Catherine Maria Sedgwick, the author of *Hope Leslie*, apparently cooled her relationship with Child) (Baer 67). In *An Appeal*, Child appreciates the risks of speaking out even as she measures the necessity of doing so:

[A]n unjust law exists in this Commonwealth, by which marriages between persons of different color is pronounced illegal. I am perfectly aware of the gross ridicule to which I may subject myself by alluding to this particular; but I have lived too long, and observed too much, to be disturbed by the world's mockery. [. . .] I know two or three instances where women of the laboring class have been united to reputable industrious colored men. (187)

This radical statement was effective in marking Child as the abolitionist she was, but she paid heavily for it. Child became, in effect, a blacklisted writer (Karcher, Introduction of *Appeal* xlv).

Despite her predicament, however, Child maintained her commitment to the

abolitionist movement, and continued writing about interracial relationships in sentimental stories such as “The Lone Indian” (1832), “Indian Wife” (1832),<sup>4</sup> “Chocorua’s Curse” (1830), and “The Quadroons” (1842)<sup>5</sup>, and in the novel, *Romance of the Republic*. Thus contaminated by her fictional themes of miscegenation, Child’s literary reputation had to overcome barriers. Her work evoked fears of the contamination of blood. In Toshio Yagi’s insightful analysis, fear of interracial marriage is rooted in the communal American fantasy active since at least the colonial era that dark blood signifies confusion and disorder. The fear of dark blood also represents sexual vulnerability and exploitation, themes which haunt sentimental fiction. These fears have long rendered obscure those writers who dared to depict such racial issues. Child too was long lost to literary history until she was “discovered” again by feminist critics such as Carolyn L. Karcher, Nina Baym, and Karen Sanchez-Eppler in the mid-1980s when multiculturalism and feminism both gained critical currency.

The nineteenth-century relationship between sentimental fiction and feminist -abolitionist movements was not accidental. White female reformers linked the plights of women and slaves, both of whom were considered exploited in the patriarchal institutions of marriage and slavery. Sentimental fiction of the time depicted horrible situations of social and sexual oppression that its characters endured in order to make the reader shed cathartic and uplifting tears. Sentimental fiction also introduced racial problems stemming from slavery, usually with the “tragic” figure of the mulatto or with mothers sexually exploited as female slaves.

Let us turn now to a romance richly informed by Child’s views on the issue of race, *A Romance of the Republic*. The story opens with a description of a wealthy, New Orleans merchant family. The father, Mr. Royal, lives happily with his two daughters, Rosa and Flora, but after his death, the daughters are revealed to be octoroons. Mr. Royal’s deceased wife, it turns out, had been a quadroon slave whom Mr. Royal never freed after purchasing her from a Spanish merchant. Attempting to save the beautiful sisters from slavery, a white planter named Gerald Fitzgerald proposes marriage to Rosa, and helps her and her sister flee New Orleans to his secret cottage. There Rosa and Flora begin a life in which they “pass” as whites because of their fair skin. They enjoy a period of calm during which Rosa’s baby is born, but soon a terrible secret is revealed: Rosa finds out that her marriage

to Fitzgerald is illegitimate and, what is worse, that he is already married to a lawful wife, Lily. Terrified that Fitzgerald is going to sell her and her baby, and filled with despair and insanity, Rosa switches her slave child with Fitzgerald's legitimate child — Lily's son — just as Roxy does in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*.

The contrast between the lives led by the two children Rosa had switched as babies are rich with the ironic discourse of race. The “white” slave holder's son, Gerald, grows into a pro-slavery rich young man, while the “slave” with fair skin, George, falls in love with a slave girl. Unaware of his actual origins, Gerald receives an outstanding education in which he excels, and he is beloved by his grandfather, an anti-abolitionist Southern slave owner. One day Gerald's grandfather discusses with him a matter of some runaway slaves:

“[. . .] You see, Gerald, it is every way for my interest to make sure of returning those [fugitive] negroes; and your interest is somewhat connected with mine, seeing that the small pittance saved from the wreck of your father's property is quite insufficient to plenty your rather expensive wants.”

“I think I have been reminded of that often enough, sir, to be in no danger of forgetting it,” retorted the youth, reddening as he spoke. . . . “How much trouble these niggers give us!” thought he, as he adjusted his embroidered cravat, and took his fresh kid gloves from box [en route to his meeting with the captain of a slave ship] (311-12)

Gerald plays his role as a southern pro-slavery gentleman to perfection, not knowing his legal race.

Yet after learning the shocking truth from Rosa, who had become well known in society as the beautiful wife of Mr. King, Gerald decides not only to continue living as a *white* but also to fight against the Confederates as a member of the Union Army.

I write to you [Mr. King] that they are forming a regiment here to march to the defense of Washington, and I have joined it. Lily-mother was unwilling at first. But a fine set of fellows are joining, — all first-class young gentleman. (403)



Though he sides with the Union, Gerald denies his racial origins and lives his whole life performing his identity as a white man, aware all the while that he is legally black.<sup>6</sup>

Like Gerald, George too ends up playing the role he was assigned — in his case, the role of slave — though for different reasons. George becomes a fugitive looking for the “land of freedom” (309) and accidentally encounters Rosa, who offers him security and financial support. Unlike Gerald, however, he never learns of his real origins because Rosa takes her husband’s advice not to tell George the truth. In other words, George has to remain black, ignorant of his real origins.

I think Rosa is right about taking charge of Henriet [George’s wife] and educating her. It seems to me the worst thing you could do for her and her husband would be to let them know that they have a claim to riches. Sudden wealth is apt to turn the heads of much older people than they are; and having been brought up as slaves, their danger would be greatly increased. (414)

Defining race by blood makes little sense in Rosa and George’s America. People “brought up as slaves” are best served by an education appropriate to their status in order to be treated better in white society. George is offered no choice but to continue to be black. Rosa and Flora, despite being legally “colored,” continue to pass as whites in upper-class white society. The multiple racial transgressions of “passing” and interracial marriage in this Romance implicitly critique the essentialism underlying racial discrimination against African-Americans. In Child’s *Romance*, the truth of biological origins does not necessarily help characters; rather, the way they are raised and how they perform their learned identities are more important for helping them lead successful lives.

Child’s stated purpose in writing *A Romance of the Republic* was to “take more hold of the public mind” (*Selected Letters* 482) — to heighten the American public’s awareness of social problems — but her imagination’s provocative portrayals of passing and crossings, carries the romance far beyond her original intentions. The world Child created in the Romance points towards her vision of an ideal America — a nation with complete liberty and moral rectitude — and this vision is stimulated by hybridity; indeed, as one of her characters says, “most romantic stories in the country have grown out of the institution of slavery” (157). As if trying to prove this maxim-like assertion, Child loads her romance

with numerous improbable, even if not impossible, events that introduce disorder rather than order into the story: These events include the adultery of Fitzgerald; the insanity of Rosa; the danger of incest; and the oppression of the legal heir. In romancing the institution of slavery with chaos, Child creates in *A Romance of the Republic* a masterpiece of Romance.

Child's achievement in *A Romance* was anticipated in an earlier story she wrote that appeared in *Juvenile Miscellany*, "Mary French and Susan Easton" (1834). This story concerns a white girl named Mary who is kidnapped by an unnamed peddler, stained black, and sold into slavery. At the end of the story, Mary's tears wash the stain from her face, saving her from slavery, while her black friend, Susan, must remain on the plantation as a slave. Karen Sanchez-Eppler critiques the implicit racial hierarchy revealed in Child's story; that is, dramatically contrasted, the fates of Mary and Susan suggest that "rubbing off blackness" is the only solution to racial prejudice (31). Yet Sanchez-Eppler neglects a more important aspect of the story, namely, Child's rhetorical use of Mary's pseudo-blackness. It is noteworthy that Mary "becomes" black as a result of the white kidnapper's actions; in itself this plot device makes the rhetorical argument that racial identity can be easily constructed or removed. Mary's blackness is not natural, and whether or not she maintains an identity as black of her own free will, her racial disguise anticipates the "passing" stories developed in *A Romance of the Republic*. What Child's *A Romance* offers is the subversive and appealing mutability of races.

### **Minstrel America — "Imitation Niggers" in *Pudd'nhead Wilson***

Hybrid romance traces its cultural roots back to the tradition of the minstrel show, one of the most popular entertainments in nineteenth-century America. This tradition of white vaudevillians singing and dancing in "blackface" was popularized by a troupe called the Virginia Minstrels, who started presenting an "Ethiopian Concert" in 1840s. The simple stage of the original minstrel show gradually grew into a great spectacle of full orchestras and gaudy settings by the 1870s, and the stereotypical image of the "happy darkie" was reinforced by the performances of white actors masquerading as blacks.

According to Eric Lott, these whites enacted the roles of blacks "not only to 'befriend'

a racial Other but to introject or internalize its imagined special capacities and attributes”; that is, this was one way that African-Americans could become “a part of white’s self” (Lott 477). This was reinforced for whites by the failure of black performers in minstrel shows to alter the stereotypes held by whites; indeed, a complex theatrical form evolved in which black people imitated white pseudo-blackness by appearing with “blackface” makeup over their genuinely black faces. As a result, even more complex and deeply entrenched white stereotypes of black people became subsequently reproduced and integrated into the performances of whites (Douglas 77). Minstrel actors thus did not have to be either white or black, so long as white audiences could readily identify a performer’s assumed race according to its predictable representative attributes. The success of the minstrel show demonstrates that, in social terms, white can be colored, while itself race becomes equivalent to a role performed in a play. This does not necessarily mean, however, that such performances always displace racial identity.

While the theme of race as role-playing is an important part of Child’s *A Romance of the Republic*, this theme is developed with an eye to the limits of passing and personal identification in Mark Twain’s *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, a work which can also be read as a hybrid Romance. In this novel, Twain employs “a tragic octoroon,” a stock character of sentimental fiction, to assert his belief in determinism over free will and also depict the same fictionality of race that Child’s works do.

In *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, the octoroon servant, Roxy, is responsible for the care of both her master’s baby Tom, and her own son Chambers, both of whom are so similar that only Roxy can tell them apart. After overhearing the master threatening to sell another slave to a plantation in the deep South, Roxy becomes terrified that she will be separated from Chambers; she therefore exchanges him with Tom. Subsequently,

Tom [ex-Chambers] got all the petting, Chambers [ex Tom, a rightful heir] got none. Tom got all the delicacies, Chambers got mush and milk, and clabber without sugar. In consequence, Tom was a sickly child and Chambers wasn’t. Tom was “fractious,” as Roxy called it, and overbearing; Chambers was meek and docile. (28)

In describing the influence of such social conditioning on Tom and Chambers, Eric

Sundquist argues that Twain shows how the category of “nigger,” not to mention other social hierarchies, is created by “imitating, training, and practicing” (Sundquist 231). Reconsidering legal and racial status from the Reconstruction era leading up to *Plessy v. Ferguson*, Eric Sundquist also contends that racial imitation existed within a context of tautologies of law and nature, justifying the confusing legal status of African Americans no matter their skin color (240-41). The ambiguity of legal racial status based on contemporary rulings promoted the notion that race was not an essential attribute, but rather one acquired and learned in society.

Tom and Chambers unknowingly act out their assigned roles, and only by these roles can the two be differentiated, since their appearance does not distinguish them. In light of this, the cry of “imitation nigger,” which Roxy shouts at Chambers in a moment of anger and Chamber’s response, “Bofe of us is imitation white,” ironically makes the fundamental point that both of them “play minstrel roles as ‘imitation niggers’” (Sundquist 229). The category of race hereby reveals its fictitiousness, a representation produced and defined by external factors.

In order to expose the artificiality of race, Nancy Bentley explains that the category of mixed race did not even exist, legally speaking, in the nineteenth century; there were only two kinds of people: whites and others (504). Of course, the mixed-race category was acknowledged socially, but “white” slaves such as Rosa, Flora, and Roxy, as well as mulattos and octoroons, were all legally “black.” Such hybrid children were thus compelled either to learn and assume the attributes of an officially recognized race — white or other — or to remain nobody. Even after assuming one or the other race, their existence remained circumscribed by the “racial fiction of American constitutional law and social custom” (Sundquist 229).

Rosa and Flora in *A Romance of the Republic*, successfully pass for white without being doubted; however, the effects of passing on their personal identities and characteristics goes unexplored. While Child’s work does not investigate the problem of identity construction and its social effects, Twain caricaturizes the category of race as one culturally defined in his depictions of Tom and Chambers. When Tom and Chambers are babies, only Roxy can tell them apart:

“How do you tell them apart, Roxy, when they haven’t any clothes on?”

Roxy laughed a laugh proportioned to her size, and said: “Oh, I kin tell ‘em ‘part, Misto Wilson, but I bet Marse Percy couldn’t, not to save his life.”  
(emphasis in the original 9)

However, as the boys grow older, their differences become more marked as their adopted categories of race take hold, with Tom conforming to the category of white and Chambers that of “nigger.” The language, attitude, and behavior of the two are contrasted conclusively in the following exchange, for example. Tom, when rescued by Chambers just as he is about to drown to death, gets infuriated at some white boys who insult Tom by calling Chambers “Tom Driscoll’s Nigger-pappy” (21).

“Knock their heads off, Chambers! Knock their heads off! What do you stand there with your hands in your pockets for?”

Chambers expostulated, and said — “But Marse Tom, dey’s too many of ‘em — dey’s —”

“Do you hear me?”

“Please, Marse Tom, don’t make me! Dey’s so many of ‘em dat —” (21)

Tom commands; Chambers obeys. Tom’s pride is thoroughly wounded not only by the suggestion that Tom owes his life to a slave but also the disparagement by others that implies a biological relationship with the black Chambers. Ironically enough, each can cross strict racial borders regardless of his racial origins, merely by imitating the necessary racial category and thereby assuming his appropriate “place” and teaching others theirs. Tom demonstrates this by arrogantly teaching his biological mother Roxy “her place” when “she had ventured a caress or a fondling epithet in his quarter”(21).

Much like Gerald in Child’s *A Romance of the Republic*, Tom in *Pudd’nhead Wilson* thus unknowingly disguises himself as white. However, as if this were not transgressive enough, Tom eventually graduates to gender-crossing as well: finding himself in need of money to pay huge debts of honor, Tom dons women’s clothes to disguise himself for the burglary of a neighbor’s house. In preparing for his crime, Tom reads “a suit of girl’s clothes [. . .] in a bundle as a disguise for his raid,” and this, surprisingly, is none other

than “a suit of his mother’s clothing” (46).<sup>7</sup> Tom’s gender transgression is thus more narrowly specified as maternal in orientation, suggesting Tom’s impulse to become the one who defines him racially and controls his destiny.

Diverse aspects of identity, including race, gender, and maternity, are thus absorbed via representations of the Other. Twain’s story appears to take up ideas of the collapse of a mythical essential human identity in the last decade of the nineteenth-century, as well as the replacement of this myth with a vision of the variety and malleability of identity (Knoper 89). In view of this collapse, the question arises as to how Tom can be defined beyond categories such as gender and race — the question of what makes Tom himself. For Twain, science ultimately places a limit on the excessive diffusion of identity. It is Tom’s fingerprints — collected to prove Tom guilty of murdering his uncle Judge Driscoll — that exposes Tom as not only a criminal but also an African American. The use of fingerprints in criminal investigations, pioneered in 1888 by Francis Galton, made a great impression on Twain, and by means of this plot device Twain makes clear that his intention in *Pudd’nhead Wilson* was not to denounce racial discrimination or the social construction of race; on the contrary, Twain seems to support racial separation on the basis of physical evidence — that is, fingerprints, a feature which no one can change — and thus tacitly to support an essentialist view of race.

Chronologically, Twain succeeded Child, but both dramatized racial fictionality by complicating the switched-child plot with issues of passing or racial disguising. Child’s *A Romance of the Republic* was published in 1867, and it is not inconceivable that Twain read it; if so, Twain may have appropriated the switched-child plot from Child, in effect stealing her textual offspring. If so, in proceeding from Child, a sentimental Romancer, to Twain, a realist writer, Romance may be said to have pursued its own Darwinian evolution into hybrid Romance. Hybrid Romance continues to evolve, exploring new dimensions of racial mutability and passing, as well as the problems of class and identity in works such as Barbara Chase-Riboud’s *The President’s Daughter* (1994), a radical revision of *Pudd’nhead Wilson* to which we now turn our attention.

## Beyond Hybrid Romance — A Lost Child in *The President's Daughter*

Thomas Jefferson, an author of the Declaration of Independence, is now a hot topic in the field of American cultural studies. New Historicism has empowered critics to reconsider even political documents such as the Declaration of Independence with literary tools,<sup>8</sup> and the development of such criticism has enabled one fiction writer to defy the long-standing taboo against addressing the rumored relationship between Jefferson and his slave mistress Sally Hemings. Chase-Riboud wrote her first novel, *Sally Hemings*, featuring Jefferson's creole slave mistress in 1977, though this novel was soon out of print and remained so until its sequel, *The President's Daughter*, featuring Harriet, a daughter of Sally and Jefferson, appeared in 1994.

Thanks to changing public attitudes and the evolution of criticism, racial transgression has become a topic fiction treated increasingly in recent years, but Chase-Riboud remembers a different social climate in the 1970's, which she describes in her memoir as follows:

Fifteen years ago, when I first published *Sally Hemings*, many factors differed greatly from what they are today. [ . . . ] Black studies were in their infancy in American universities and the name Sally Hemings was totally unknown to the general public. Everyone involved with publishing *Sally Hemings*, including the author, underestimated the emotion and controversy that would swirl about a novel that gave flesh, blood, and sinew to a long-held and much discussed conviction that Thomas Jefferson had a slave family by the half-sister of his dead wife. (345)

Chase-Riboud's memoir reflects the critical climate of the seventies, which was not conducive to any challenge to the American myth of the Founding Fathers. Recent critical trends, in contrast, encourage the search for new significance in the historical context of American romance. Moreover, the article on the result of DNA testing that appeared in *Nature* in 1998 settled the long-lasting controversy on "the first U.S. presidency sex scandal" (Lander 13). For nineteenth-century writers such as Child and Twain, as well as for a postmodern writer such as Chase-Riboud, critical tools have become available for engaging the discourses of multiculturalism and heterogeneity.

Chase-Riboud's *The President's Daughter* is replete with the theme of passing: The protagonist, Harriet Hemings, is the illegitimate daughter of the third president of the United States and "white enough to pass for white" (33). Harriet leaves the Virginia plantation of Monticello, where she has been a slave, for Philadelphia, where she begins her life anew as a twenty-one-year-old white "lady." Harriet reflects upon her new identity:

I noticed white people's eyes no longer slid off me as if I were invisible at worst, a bale of cotton at best. They neither focused their eyes over my shoulder nor glazed them over in nonrecognition of my humanity. They now looked me square in the eye, curious, friendly, appraising, teasing. Miss Harriet, a young lady. Little Miss. (52)

Harriet's successful passing for white is just the first of numerous transgressions; in order to become white she must furthermore imitate white aristocracy and heterosexuality (Tatsumi, *Nyuu Amerikanizumu* 278). As Harriet's story develops, her racial passing invariably leads to transgressions of not only slavery but also sexuality. The relationship between Harriet and her life-long friend Charlotte, for example, is much more lesbian than sororal:

Charlotte's face was pressed close to mine [Harriet's], and her breath fanned the tendrils of my hair. She flung her arms over mine, and still panting, rested her head on my chest. (59)

Harriet marries Thorn Wellington, a pharmacist, in order to pass as heterosexual, and continues her lesbian relationship with Charlotte in secret, asserting that "sexual love between women of our class was one of our best-kept secrets" (272). While black female characters are often sexualized by white male desire — sensationalized as miscegenation — in sentimental fiction of the nineteenth-century, what Chase-Riboud offers instead is sexual bonding between women whose female desires can be safely expressed and protected.

Besides passing for white and heterosexual, Harriet's most significant deception is



passing as an orphan to conceal her past as a slave: “[n]ot only had I forgotten myself, I had forgotten my mother, my father; I played the orphan perfectly” (73). Much as Roxy makes Chamber play the role of “imitation nigger,” and Tom “imitation white,” Harriet adopts the role of what might be termed “imitation orphan,” for she has to create a new past to hide her real origins. Thus disguised, Harriet is free to pursue her unconventional family relationship with Charlotte, unhindered by the cast of the traditional family scenario with heterosexual roles of father, mother, and children. A final form of passing also appears briefly in this romance; according to the story, women were not allowed in the law library of University of Pennsylvania at the beginning of the nineteenth century, so Harriet has to disguise herself as a man to enter (87).

Ultimately, Harriet’s transgressions become permanent. Disclosure through fingerprints — the device that unmasks Tom in *Pudd’nhead Wilson* — is seen to threaten Harriet as the only way to prove her true identity as a slave:

“And yet it [a fingerprint] is the only true identity fixed by God?” [said Harriet].  
 “Nature,” said Thance, confused yet moved.

“God has created us separate, with a separate, unique destiny, and then given us proof of it — given us proof of our own uniqueness of soul, our own God-given peculiarity, right here in our hands.” (79)

Just as the fingerprints that identify Chambers and Tom corrupt Roxy’s design, Harriet’s fingerprints threaten to betray all the life history she has so desperately made up. However, this menace is eliminated, rather ironically, when Harriet slips and falls in Thorn’s laboratory, burns her fingertips on chemicals spilled on the floor, and finds her fingerprints erased: “[i]n shocked disbelief, I realized that I no longer had fingerprints!” (279). Harriet’s “unique destiny” and “uniqueness of soul” (279) disappear, since the only physical evidence that can identify her as an individual is erased. Thereafter, Harriet always feels as if she is “acting out a fictional scene in a novel” (104); everything — including her parentage, color, gender, sexuality, race, and even freedom turns out to be illusion. Chase-Riboud thus expands the possibilities of transgression into a terrain where

illusion and reality crisscross like the scars on Harriet's palm. Harriet's fingerprints are gone; fingerprints themselves are no longer the final arbiter of her racial identification. It is ironic that four years after Chase-Riboud's *The President's Daughter* was published, DNA testing verified that Jefferson fathered at least one of Heming's children. Advanced technologies such as DNA testing appear to narrow the possibilities today for such transgressions as Harriet's, but in the future they too may fail to hold back newly versatile postmodern artificers, perhaps finally going the way of the fingerprint in *The President's Daughter*.

An African-American woman writer, Chase-Riboud rereads and rewrites Mark Twain, a white male writer's construction of race, family, and identity. Viewing *Pudd'nhead Wilson* through the lens of *The President's Daughter* shows us a complex revision of the transgressive sexuality, orphanhood, and racial heterogeneity in Twain's text. Where Twain ultimately retreated from his portrayal of racial fictionality, betraying an essential identity attested to by fingerprints, Chase-Riboud advanced her portrayal of the fictionality of identity by wiping away fingerprints through the agency of science. Chase-Riboud removes the last traces of her protagonist's essential identity — race, gender, sexuality, family structure, and even the U.S. Constitution — revealing all as fictional. Ceaselessly transgressed, reality is depicted as heterogeneous and ever more chaotic, the very basic conditions out of which the American Romance arose.

Having considered the history of transgressive romance through Twain and Chase-Riboud, let us return briefly to Lydia Maria Child's *A Romance of the Republic*. Though this novel deals only with racial passing, and thus seems less complex than the works of Twain and Chase-Riboud, *A Romance* gains significance in view of Child's own identity as a transgressor.

As Carolyn Karcher and other critics have pointed out, Child supported her husband through her writing, and it was not her Romances that brought in substantial income but pioneering books on home economy and child education such as *The Frugal Housewife*, *The Girls's Own Book*, or *The Mother's Book*. Thus, Child played her roles as good wife and wise mother in her works — and played these roles outstandingly — and while she was indeed a good wife to her husband, she never became a mother in her own life. She

writes, “I do wish I could be a mother,” in a letter to her mother-in-law on June 23, 1831 (*Selected Letters* 17), but her wish was never fulfilled.<sup>9</sup> Never a mother, Child played the role of “imitation mother” through her fiction. In fact, Child shared with her readers her view that maternity was not essential to women’s nature but rather merely one of many “roles” we perform with purpose. In the preface to a new edition of *The Mother’s Book* published in 1844, Child writes that “Childless myself, I can only plead my strong love for children, and my habitual observation of all that concerns them” (qtd. in Karcher, *The First Woman* 138). Child’s actual transgression as a writer clearly reveals the essence of American Romance in that Child’s *A Romance of the Republic* not only represents an ordinary abolitionist ideology but also reveals the lived realities of women’s lives, fertile with hybridity and transgression rather than sterile with stereotypes and normative demands.

The evolution of hybrid romance from Child to Chase-Riboud via Twain reveals the endless variety of transgressions characteristic of “the life of illusion” (Chase-Riboud 183) that we all live. The motif of racial transgression expands in significance as it shifts back and forth among political and literary texts and contexts, and it is this proliferating hybridity which opens the way for the revision of American Romance. In the genealogy of a heterogeneous literature that links Lydia Maria Child, Mark Twain, and Barbara Chase-Riboud, hybrid Romance inevitably eclipses reality, ever expanding its territory.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Chase-Riboud gives a quotation from Cooper that describes the complexion of Cora, a dark heroine, which “appeared charged with the color of rich blood”; and two quotations from Twain: “By the fiction created by herself . . . deceptions intended solely for others gradually grew into self-deceptions as well; the little counterfeit rift of separation between imitation-slave and imitation-master widened and widened, and became an abyss, and a very real one — and one side of it, stood Roxy, the dupe of her own deceptions, and on the other stood her child — her accepted and recognized master” and “Make upon the window the fingerprints that will hang you.”

<sup>2</sup> In viewing the middle of the nineteenth century as an age of compromise, Bercovitch

offers an important perspective for any reconsideration of the history of romance. According to Bercovitch, the national consensus at which the American Revolution aimed was endangered by slavery, and this made compromise mandatory. The Fugitive Slave Act approved in 1850 was a symbol of this compromising. When the California territory joined the Union, a major argument developed between abolitionists and anti-abolitionists concerning the status of the territory as a slave state or a free state. Congress desperately worked out a solution known as the Compromise of 1850, in which it was agreed that California would enter the Union as a free state, but that slaveholders in California would enjoy the protection of the Fugitive Slave Act, which provides for intensive manhunts for fugitive slaves, even in free states. By this compromise, slaveholders could thus return fugitives to slavery even if the slaves were manumitted in the North (Franklin 176-77). Compromise thus emerged as a political ideology with the resolution of the problem of California, and this highly political decision strongly influenced intellectual culture.

<sup>3</sup> Chase tries to establish an American literary tradition distinct from the British tradition examined by F. R. Leavis's *Great Tradition* (1955). In his first chapter, "The Broken Circuit," Chase explains that the American writer "seems less interested in redemption than in the melodrama of the eternal struggle of good and evil, less interested in incarnation and reconciliation than in alienation and disorder" (11). He continues, saying that this aesthetic imbues American romances, in contrast to European romance, with elements such as "harmony, reconciliation, catharsis and transfiguration" (2). It is noteworthy that Chase, trying to establish a national literary history, evaluates Romance as an American genre characterized by chaos and contradiction inclusive of various differences within, which gives us a clue to reading American literature of not only the 1950s but also the postmodern era.

<sup>4</sup> This story was later revised to be "Legend of the Falls of St. Anthony" (1842).

<sup>5</sup> An African-American writer, William Wells Brown produced one of the first American fictions published by a black, *Clotel, or the President's Daughter* in 1853. Brown appropriated the middle part of Child's "The Quadroons" for his eighth chapter, with an acknowledgement at the end of the story. However, Brown deleted this passage from subsequent editions. Apparently he did not want his work to be a hybrid production of his own efforts and Child's.

<sup>6</sup> According to Nancy Bentley, mulattos were not recognized legally. That is, the law recognized whether one was white or black, and those with black ancestors were categorized as black no matter how white they appeared to be (504).

<sup>7</sup> My discussion of mother-dressing is indebted to Mari Kotani's "Boso no Sekushuariti" ("Dressing Motherhood"), in which Kotani eloquently examines how maternity developed in social and historical significance to reach its current configuration of social conventions. Kotani explains how gay couples often pattern their relationships after mother-child relationships, rather than father and child relationships. Finally, Kotani demonstrates the possibility of maternity as a virtual attribute which everybody — regardless of sex, gender and age — can incorporate within his/her identity.

<sup>8</sup> Michiko Shimokobe addresses *The President's Daughter* in "Tomasu Jefason Sairiyo: Konketsu to Nashonariti," ("Reusable Jefferson: Mixed Blood and Nationality"), arguing that the relationship between race and "the construction of American-ness" was indispensable for American nation building (346).

<sup>9</sup> Milton Meltzer and Patricia G. Holland state that economic problems made it impossible for the Childs to have children until the 1860s (*Selected Letters* 17). Karcher develops her own interesting analysis in *The First Woman in the Republic* to the effect that David Child has a sexual dysfunction, a trait incorporated into a character in *Philothea* (234).

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