

JULIA SATTLER

"I AM THE NEW AMERICA"*Representing and Negotiating American Families in Mixed Race Memoirs*

ABSTRACT: This article provides an analysis of two mixed race memoirs, Shirlee Taylor Haizlip's *The Sweeter the Juice. A Family Memoir in Black and White* (1994) and Neil Henry's *Pearl's Secret. A Black Man's Search for his White Family* (2001). Texts of this kind, which have emerged in abundance since the 1990s, center on the process of solving a supposed family secret about racial transgression and have contributed the establishment of a normative profile of people of mixed descent in the United States. Using rather traditional media such as family trees and family photographs to inscribe these mixed race families into the national story, and centering on narrators constantly reflecting their family history and identity, these memoirs help understand the complex intersections of race and family at a moment when the American nation at large is trying to come to terms with its past.

KEYWORDS: Family, Slavery, History

Introduction

The subject of race mixing has long been central to the American national and literary imagination. Since colonial times, it has been the subject of political debates and law-making, giving birth to terms such as "mulatto"¹ and "miscegenation,"² as well as

¹ A term to refer to people with one White and one Black parent. It was used during slavery and beyond, but is outdated and considered derogatory today.

² This term was common to refer to the mixing of different racial groups. Like mulatto, it is outdated today. It is not a neutral term, but implies disapproval.

concepts such as “passing”³ and the “one drop rule.”⁴ Even in the new millennium, it continues to give shape to how the American nation as a whole, or each individual family, are discussed from the classroom to the courtroom to the church and the kitchen. These debates are intimately intertwined with questions of power, agency and citizenship: they refer to who can and should be considered “American” at a specific point in time. They tackle the fault lines in American society with regard to conceptions of opportunity and entitlement, of social uplift and participation in the national project (Sattler 2012, 11ff.).

The dynamics of the debate around mixed heritage certainly did not remain stable over time, but changed significantly following the so-called *Loving* decision that in 1967 declared the ban on interracial marriage unconstitutional on the federal level,⁵ and then again in the 1990s, when the so-called multiracial movement⁶ gained traction across the United States. In the 2000 U.S. census, it was possible for the first time to declare one’s mixed ancestry by marking more than one racial category on the form.⁷

In the 1990s and early 2000s, public debates addressing the concept of multiracialism, as well as the crucial role of slavery for American national development, often led by the country’s most famous departments of African American Studies, among them Harvard’s Department of African and African American Studies, and specifically by Henry Louis Gates, Jr.,⁸ gained a lot of traction: the U.S. saw the emergence of discussions, for example, around the spatial and visual memory of slavery and segregation. The attention given to the meaning of the Confederate Flag, the naming of

³ In his comprehensive study *Neither Black nor White yet Both. Thematic Explorations of Interracial Literature* (1997), Werner Sollors establishes that the term “passing” can be used in reference to “the crossing of any line that divides social groups” (247), but that it is most frequently used in the U.S. context when addressing instances of crossing the “color line” from black to white, thus when a person or a character in a text *passes* for white, often with complex implications for their identity. While generally considered a phenomenon of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, I argue that a similar mechanism is at work for the memoirs discussed in this article – these are texts that literally *pass* into mainstream narratives of Americanness.

⁴ A 19th century principle of legal classification in the United States that renders a person with Black ancestor Black. It became codified into some state laws. The concept is an example of hypodescent – the assignation of children from a mixed union into the group with the lower social status.

⁵ This Supreme Court Case legalized interracial marriage in the United States. It has led to the increase of interracial marriages over time.

⁶ The multiracial movement is not a unified group, but rather, the expression refers to a diversity of advocacy groups claiming that people with more than one racial ancestry should be recognized as their own group of people and should have their own category on the U.S. Census form.

⁷ This became known as the so-called “MOOM” (Mark-One-Or-More) option. Before 2000, you could only indicate your belonging to one racial group (see e.g. Williams 2006)

⁸ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., is a very well known American literary critic, professor and public intellectual. He has published extensively on the subject of African American lives. He teaches at Harvard University.

streets or public places after Confederate generals, or the ways the past should be exhibited in museums or monuments was literally unprecedented, pointing toward what Rushdy (2001) has termed a “moment of anti-nostalgic reflection [which] also constitutes an important development in the ongoing conversation about the meaning of race in contemporary America” (135). In the context of these negotiations, the topic of mixed race families and mixed heritage became the subject of countless publications and media releases interlinking the past and the present and asking complex questions about the role of said past for the American nation at that time. This includes, for example, the TV-miniseries *African American Lives* (PBS, 2006-2008, directed and presented by Henry Louis Gates, Jr.), the drama *Sankofa* (1993, dir. Haile Gerima) or the Hollywood blockbuster *Amistad* (1997, dir. Steven Spielberg), but also book collections such as *Slavery and Public History: The Tough Stuff of American Memory* (2009, ed. James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton), or the fictional *The Known World* (Edward P. Jones, 2003), depicting the issue of black slave ownership in antebellum America.

The public debate around these topics was likely eased by the fact that more generally speaking, the 1980s and 1990s were characterized by a trend to attest to the role of personal histories in their larger contexts. Sharon O’Brien (1996) has shown that this period was a time of “breaking silences” in writing. At the same time, she argues that “[w]riters [were] challenging the boundaries supposedly distinguishing fiction from nonfiction, memoir from biography, essay from poetry, autobiography from criticism” (1).

Taking these findings into account, in this article, I will focus on 1990s and early 2000s mixed race memoirs and their participation in discourses of mixed race heritage and race relations of their time. These texts are characterized by a hybrid stance interlinking the private and the public, and, while commonly characterized as first-person memoirs, include features of detective stories – such as the quest as central motif – as well as of family novels. Establishing a rather closely circumscribed and fairly predictable narrative about mixed race heritage across multiple generations, the mixed race memoir of the 1990s and early 2000s constructs and re-constructs American families by taking into account their mixed race dimension. Overall, these narratives contest the idea of the monoracial American family and place race mixing at the core of the family as well as of the national story: To be an American, and to be an American family is to be mixed. At the same time, these texts use mainstream storylines – from the American Dream to the idea of immigration – as well as mainstream media from the family album to the family tree to do so. Thus, despite their potential for innovation, these memoirs still confirm and conform to predominant narratives of American-ness, instead of composing an alternative American history publicly exposing racial injustice, exploitation and the violent loss of agency that oftentimes went along with race mixing. Thereby, they

contribute to rendering these topics unspeakable. By aspiring towards inclusion into the mainstream corpus of stories of American-ness and by seeking connection to their white ancestry, the black-identifying narrators in these texts attest to the fact that even at the end of the twentieth century, inclusion into the national project still more than anything else depends on whiteness.

More than a marginal phenomenon, publications such as Shirlee Taylor Haizlip's *The Sweeter the Juice. A Family Memoir in Black and White* (1994), Neil Henry's *Pearl's Secret. A Black Man's Search for his White Family* (2001), or Thulani Davis' *My Confederate Kinfolk. A Twenty-first Century Freedwoman Confronts her Roots* (2006) have, according to Michelle Elam (2011), significantly contributed to the formation of "a normative profile of mixed race people" (10) and by extension, their families and tactics of relating to both, the family's past and American history at large. According to these texts, people of mixed descent tend to be interested in encounters with their white ancestors, are generally willing and able to go a long way to find information about these extended families, seek reconciliation with their white-identifying family members, and, by extension, with the past at large.

Family Secrets, Family Legacies

The mixed race memoir of the 1990s and early 2000s is a narrative about the exploration of the narrator's family's racial history, usually taking into account a period of about 150 years – from before the outbreak of the Civil War, thus, when slavery still existed, into the 1990s – and looking from the present's perspective into the past. At the central locus of this type of text is a family secret about black/white racial transgression. In the memoir's plot, the narrator, oftentimes a journalist, writer, or other character affiliated with the humanities, speaks from an autobiographical perspective and tells the story of a personal quest for the family's origins.

The family secret at the center of this type of text is not the mixedness of the family as such, but rather, the text explores how exactly the family's mixedness has come to be. Without the family secret, there would not be a plot – the family secret motivates all the protagonist's actions, but it is also the underlying feature of all communication in these texts. As central element of the narrative being told, the black identifying narrators inquire how the family members related to each other in the past, and even more specifically, how exactly contacts between supposedly "black" and supposedly "white" family members played out. It also investigates the role of *passing* for the family, and the impact the past has on the contemporary family.

Addressing these types of questions and linking the family to a white ancestor seems rather counterintuitive at first, as the narrators describe themselves as firmly located in

the black community. But their family history and the exploration of the family's racial past matters to them as they aim to find answers to questions that have accompanied them since their childhood. In Neil Henry's *Pearl's Secret*, the narrator early on becomes fascinated by his white forebear who is sometimes brought up in conversation and whose photograph is kept by the family when he is a child: "The white man's name was rarely mentioned in our house when I was growing up, and when he was referred to, my mother and her family would lower their voices, as if they were telling a secret too sensitive or perhaps even shameful for outsiders or youngsters to hear" (10). Of course, this type of secretive behavior on the side of the adults in the text leads to fascination with the secret and the man behind it, whose name must not be mentioned. By the same token, it also triggers the reader's immediate interest.

Through their research, the narrators wish to find closure: it is their goal to be able to tell their children a family story that is "more complete." Often, the question of when exactly different branches of the family lost touch with each other and why this happened is of great importance to the narrators, who make the – usually successful – attempt to re-establish a connection to their supposedly "lost" family members in the present. These family members are either white or have *passed* into white society and have thus broken all ties to those for whom it was impossible to *pass*. While certainly, *passing* was not generally judged negatively in all cases, as it enabled people better economic and social opportunities, in these texts, *passing* goes along with negative consequences that manifest themselves at the time of narration.

In bringing up questions of intergenerational responsibility and the idea of encountering family members living as white, the mixed race memoir of the 1990s and early 2000s is framed by ethical concerns. It seeks to establish supposedly more complete family stories, but also knowledge about, for example, the exact conditions under which the family lived, and under which circumstances the family split.

The process of investigating mixed race heritage, a search that often goes along with significant complications – from lost documents to unhelpful family members and false traces – leads the narrator to follow the family story back in time using different methods of investigation: from archival data to maps to photographs of former family homes, from family album to family tree, all the way to DNA tests – all of these are featured in this highly conventionalized genre which can and needs to be read in the tradition of Alex Haley's *Roots* (1976), that at its time of publication offered an accessible and relatable story to every African American family. Along similar lines, *Roots* has also contributed to the popularization of family research in African American families (see e.g. Woodtor 1999), which in turn impacts the emergence of mixed race narratives in the 1990s and early 2000s.

This particular type of 1990s response, that frames its exploration of mixed race origins in a rather predictable storyline leading the reader from the question of family

origins via the exploration of the supposed “roots” to a resolution in which the family members meet and get to know each other, seemingly offers a comprehensive family story to all mixed race families in the United States of America. Interestingly enough, by framing racial transgression and the silence around it in a more or less conventional love story, this type of narrative excludes rape. Significantly, the 1990s and early 2000s mixed race memoir, which firmly locates the family story that is explored, as well as the individual family members portrayed in it, in the middle class. As a genre, it builds on the notion that there is an inherent “truth” about the family that can, and in fact *needs* to be discovered to establish a sense of wholesomeness or conclusion, both for the family at large and for the narrator as an individual. Along similar lines, national reconciliation across racial lines is alluded to in these terms.

This kind of idealization may not be all that surprising, since by the 1990s, within the US mainstream, “mixed race [had become] represented as hip testimony to American democracy, the corporeal solution of racial diversity and national unity” and was thus considered “the painless antidote to the centuries-old practice of racial passing” (Elam 96) – a dangerous reduction of the actual complications emerging out of mixed race heritage and claiming a mixed identity. The idea of the “painless antidote” suggests that the nation can and finally should come to terms with its past and with the harm that has been inflicted especially on the African American community by incorporating mixed race as an inherent part of its national identity and history without however acknowledging and addressing ongoing systemic discrimination, colorism,⁹ and white privilege.¹⁰

While it is certainly possible to claim that slavery continues to haunt the American nation in its entirety, thus affecting Americans who conceive of themselves as black and those who conceive of themselves as white, this process is not nearly the same for the different groups – even today, white privilege is well and alive, as becomes evident from the events of Charlottesville, VA, in 2017, and the government’s response to them,¹¹ as

⁹ Discrimination based on skin tone. Generally, people with lighter skin experience less discrimination.

¹⁰ Meaning the ways in which people benefit from the fact that they are not a racial minority, but considered “White.” White people are not confronted with negative racial stereotypes, for example. They have access to social and cultural privileges they often remain unaware of. White privilege negatively affects the lives of those not considered White.

¹¹ I refer to the August 2017 “Unite the Right” rally in response to the removal of a Robert E. Lee statue, and its violent escalation. Instead of speaking up against the upsurge of racially motivated violence in the United States, President Trump condemned the “hatred, bigotry and violence on many sides,” thereby clearly not taking sides against the Right. <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/08/12/politics/trump-statement-alt-right-protests/index.html>.

well as from countless instances of police violence against African Americans that led to the formation of the *Black Lives Matter* movement.¹² Arguably, it is specifically due to the pervasiveness of white privilege that the idea of black/white mixing is still central to the American imagination in the 21st century: it bears witness and gives proof to what Elam has called “the paradox of unequal entitlement in the land of equality” (118); the fact that there was so far never a period in American history in which opportunities for all people were indeed similar. While the social shifts and changes in the United States following the Civil Rights Movement are certainly significant, it remains “safe to say that the black-white distinction [was] as sharp as it has ever been” (Zack 2010, 876) at the time of the memoirs’ publication, and continues to be so today. By the 1990s, following the emergence of Critical Race Theory,¹³ it had been established that “much of what is broadly associated with distinct racial groups is the result of history, custom, and legalized injustice” (878). In tune with this recognition, the mixed race memoirs note that there is a crucial difference between macro (national) and micro (family) history, and that different members of the same family can be affected by the same event or fact in radically different ways.¹⁴

Much in tune with the topics debated around the time of their emergence, mixed race memoirs of the 1990s and early 2000s hence attempt to reconcile mixedness and American-ness. This is done by rooting people of mixed descent in central moments of American history. It is important to recall that the narrators in these mixed race memoirs are intergenerationally mixed, meaning that their family has been mixed for several generations. In their narration of mixed race family histories, mixed race memoirs emphasize the centrality of racial mixing to American families, and, by implication, to the nation: while interracial marriages remained illegal into the second half of the twentieth century, the families portrayed in the text became mixed even before the Civil War. Due to the legal limitations, however, the relationships leading to this could never be made official and hence led to the family falling apart into a “black” and a “white” family. Thus, this centrality of mixed race does not go along with state recognition of these unions, or

¹² An international activist movement that originated in the African American community. It speaks up against police violence against the Black population, against racial profiling, and racial inequality.

¹³ Critical Race Theory (hereafter CRT) formally emerged in 1989 and builds on the recognition that race – rather than being a biological fact – is a socially constructed concept created by the white population that works to maintain the interests of the white population. Due to this construction, racial inequalities – e.g. in the economic and legal sectors – emerged and were upheld, also by way of laws and policies which are biased against people of color. Inspired and informed by the Civil Rights Tradition, CRT was created by activist scholars such as Derrick Bell, Patricia Williams, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw and Mari Matsuda.

¹⁴ These differences could be due to numerous factors including but not limited to, skin color and the effects of colorism in American society, gender, and sexual orientation.

the children that resulted from them. Hence, the narratives can claim to unveil a heretofore-silenced aspect of American history: they point to "open questions" in the public negotiation of subjects such as race, family and national identity.

Readings in Dialogue

The emergence of a great number of texts in which a black-identifying narrator makes an effort to understand where and how the family came to be mixed and following the urge to begin a dialogue with these people in order to understand, and by implication, humanize them – the development Paul Spickard (2001) has referred to as "the boom in bi-racial biography" (76) – coincides with the publication of a similar type of narrative in which white-identifying protagonists question their family's role during slavery as well as later in American history and up to the present moment. Though fewer in number, texts like Edward Ball's *Slaves in the Family* (1998), or Macky Alston's documentary film *Family Name* (1998) address a similar set of questions while coming to terms with their family members' role during slavery and thereafter. Ashraf H. A. Rushdy has qualified this kind of text as "palimpsest in white" (146ff.). While the protagonist's outlook in these texts is radically different, especially with regard to the negotiation of national identity, these narratives also speak to a family legacy of slavery and its aftermath, including *passing* and segregation, albeit from a white perspective.

In my dissertation, I discussed both these types of text in dialogue and established the genre of the *memoir of the search*, characterized as a mixed race genre speaking to notions of race and inheritance, and featuring a protagonist who is directly involved in the story. I have borrowed the expression "memoir of the search" from Henry's *Pearl's Secret*, in which the protagonist establishes the text as "a memoir of [his] search and the story he discovered on the other [white] side of the [family] tree" (Henry 14). The idea of a memoir based on the search for belonging and identity points to the formative importance of this process. As a genre, these texts supposedly uncover silenced aspects of the protagonists' families and their becoming. It was productive to read memoirs featuring black-identifying protagonists in dialogue with memoirs featuring white-identifying protagonists as both types of texts claim to discuss a shared past and shared history and point to the idea of a possible reconciliation within the family, but also with the past at large – certainly a complicated idea as it would necessitate critically addressing and acknowledging white privilege on part of the white narrators; a dimension that is only marginally taken up in these texts. Still, as the protagonist in *Slaves in the Family* explains with regard to his motivation for bringing the different branches of the family together, "I thought we should meet, share our recollections, feelings, and dreams, and make the story whole" (Ball 1999, 14). This statement points to the idea that "sharing" will lead to a more comprehensive and inclusive understanding of history – while it also

bears the notion of being able to reconcile very different experiences, which is, as these texts also prove, a complicated assumption.¹⁵

My reading of these texts as family stories was supported by insights from narrative psychology, and specifically by Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy's Contextual Family Therapy (hereafter CFT). Applied to literary analysis, CFT helps uncover hidden or silenced layers of the texts that result from family secrets and intergenerational trauma. CFT builds on relational ethics: "every relationship has at least two sides of entitlement, obligation, interest, need, merit and benefit" (1987, 201). While a balanced relationship built on trust and support is based on mutual give-and-take, an imbalanced one is characterized by a degree of unevenness, by neglect, and – as a result – lack of trust. The family secret determines family structures, leads to power imbalances within the family, and hinders the emergence of open communication structures (referred to as "real dialogue" in CFT). This concerns black-identifying as well as white-identifying families portrayed in the *memoir of the search*,¹⁶ thus pointing to the need for a common resolution – a "coming clean with the past" of sorts – in order to establish balance. The uneven communication and power structure in the family has been perpetuated over multiple generations, as the family secret is the result of a break of trust due to *passing* or the neglect of a partner and child several generations ago.¹⁷ This makes the "balancing of accounts," to speak with CFT again, a significant effort on all parts. In their negotiation of the difficulties when investigating the family history and the re-establishment of contact, the narratives speak to these efforts, at least at the micro level of the individual family.

It is crucial that different practices of intergenerational relating play into the stories told, and that patterns of obligation and implication in one's ancestors' actions are important concerns to the narrators. In these terms, the *memoir of the search* follows a moral agenda and considers secrecy about the past a negative factor leading to a lack of understanding and inclusion in the family, as well as in American society at large. Hence,

¹⁵ The imbalance of power between Black and White in these texts is for the most part not overcome. Generally, the recognition is that while it is possible to engage in a conversation with each other, too much has happened to reconcile the pain caused. In *Slaves in the Family*, the protagonist also begins to understand that his seeking forgiveness may well come too late, as those directly affected by slavery and its aftermath have passed away.

¹⁶ This is however not to state that the family secrets and their implications are the same for black and white families.

¹⁷ As stated before, the families portrayed in this type of text have been mixed for a long time. The interracial unions addressed here bear no relation to the *Loving* decision. The *memoir of the search* makes the claim that even if the event as well as its immediate negative consequences (such as the loss of a family member due to this person *passing* into white society) occurred long ago, these continue to affect the present family.

the emphasis in these texts is on the – however complicated – effort to come to terms with the past via the discovery of “what (supposedly) really happened.”

Understanding these underlying patterns opens the path to reading the *memoir of the search* as part of a larger undertaking to speak a painful truth and to reflect upon the complicated dynamics of guilt vs. responsibility for the past. If nothing else at all, reading these texts together points out that testimony plays an important role in the specifics of the past’s negotiation in the present. It also makes clear that the dynamics between descendants of victims and perpetrators transcend this past as they take place in the here and now, but that they are charged with their particular histories.

Representing Mixed Race Families – Exposing American Families

So far, I have by and large discussed mixed race narratives of the 1990s and early 2000s as reflections by a first-person narrator on one individual family that is portrayed in detail. But it is also possible to read these texts in a larger frame, namely as comments on the national family. At least on the surface, these texts’ tactics of addressing heretofore silenced transgressions challenge not only the individual family narrative, but also the American national story at large. Both these stories, so goes the argument, lack completion and need to be re-told in terms of the newly discovered mixed race past.

To illustrate my points, I will use two prominent examples of the genre, the aforementioned *The Sweeter the Juice* and *Pearl’s Secret*. Both focus on the sharpening of the narrator’s understanding of being American in the late twentieth century, and on dealing with a family legacy of racial *passing* and familial neglect. In *Pearl’s Secret*, the protagonist, a professor of journalism, traces his great-great-grandmother’s romance with a white plantation overseer, while the narrator in *The Sweeter the Juice* searches for her mother’s family members who have *passed* into white society in order to enable a family reunion before her mother passes away: “As my mother approached her eightieth birthday, I made a conscious decision to use whatever means possible to find her family” (Haizlip 1995, 33). While these two storylines may sound very different from each other, both texts center on the solution of the family secret of “mixed race” and lead the reader to accompany the narrators on a detailed process of investigation of their family legacy and their identities as members of specific families, as well as of their role as American citizens. The narrators claim that their family story is representative of the American story at large: “We’ve got America in us [...] We’ve got the story of America” (Henry 2001, 50). By including specific narrative structures and incorporating family trees and photographs, I argue that these texts confirm dominant narratives of family building and nation making, all the way to the necessity of including whiteness.

By way of close reading, it becomes possible to analyze the narrators and their ways of relating to their individual and national families. In both, *The Sweeter the Juice* and *Pearl's Secret*, the black-identifying narrators grow up in families characterized by the palpable presence of insecurities about the past. The narrator in *The Sweeter the Juice* explicates these insecurities using the metaphor of a quilt, a metaphor well-established in African American literature at large: "Putting together the bits and pieces of my past creates a quilt of melanin patches shading from dark to light, red to brown, tan to pink. There are ragged edges and missing segments. I dream I will find some of myself in those holes and gaps. I need to finish the quilt, wearing it smooth until its edges feel soft to my touch, blending its clashing colors to my own notion of harmony. Only then can I store it away in a safe place, taking it out every once in a while to look at it" (Haizlip 1995, 14). This image points to the "patchwork" that is the twentieth century American family, but it also transcends it: not only does it make evident the "missing" elements and "ragged edges" the narrator observes – places where the story does not "fit" – but it also shows that she cannot find a sense of peace ("store it away") before the quilt has been restored and she has had the chance to get used to it ("wearing it smooth"). The palpable absences of family that become clear, for example, in the explication that "[t]here were no gray-haired grandparents waiting to welcome and spoil me on holidays or vacations. There were no letters or presents or cards from the parents of my parents. There were no stories about my mother when she was a little girl" (31-32) continue to haunt the narrators as adults raising their own families. The narrator in *The Sweeter the Juice* claims to carry "her mother's pain" (33) about the family's separation due to *passing*,¹⁸ an injury she absorbed by "osmosis" (33) – with said "osmosis" being an unavoidable biological process. Hence, the protagonists feel obliged to spare their children the confusion they experienced and feel triggered to investigate the "family secret:" "Put simply," explains the narrator in Henry's *Pearl's Secret*, "I wanted to be able to offer my daughter someday a better understanding of my family's racial history than I had when I was coming of age and a clearer picture of the dynamic complexity of race and prejudice as they are woven into the fabric of America" (13). It is significant that the narrator considers the "complexity of race and prejudice" as an inherent part of the United States' conception: the metaphor of the fabric to talk about American national history and collective identity rhetoric suggests that race and prejudice are part of the structure, pointing to the tight relationship between race and nation the texts speak to. This also firmly establishes the Henry family as an African American family – due to white privilege, a white father would not have to introduce his young daughter to racism and the dangers of racial stereotyping

¹⁸ In the text, the mother is left behind by her family of origin as she is too dark to *pass*. Her close family members, including her sister, start living as white and she does not hear from them until her daughter re-establishes the contact. In *The Sweeter the Juice*, the mother is deeply insecure and depressed, and becomes skeptical of all light skinned blacks, including her own son.

in a similar way, and at such a young age. This attests to the ongoing precariousness of black lives in the USA.

Establishing their story as part of the American national story is of special concerns to the narrators. They need to demonstrate, so to say, that they, too, are Americans. This does not only become evident in the prominent and quintessentially "American" image of the quilt used in *The Sweeter the Juice* but also in *Pearl's Secret's* allusion to the "fabric" of America – essentially, this fabric can be read as a type of quilt, as well. Both use further similar strategies to broach the relationship between family history and American history at large. They incorporate intratextual features contributing to the construction and representation of mixed race families: family trees as well as family photographs are used to attest to past lives that "matter," but also to give visual "proof" to the mixedness of the family. By including the photographs, it becomes clear that members of the same family can have very different skin tones, indeed. At the same time, these media and the fact that they are accessible – that the narrator knows how and where to look for them – clearly locate the mixed race memoirs in the educated middle class. Establishing a coherent and visually supported family narrative of this kind is most likely a matter of impossibility for poor families, be they black or white.

Conventionally, genealogical methods stand in opposition to egalitarian or democratic visions of American society (Watson 1996, 298). Genealogy traditionally "values origin, stock, race, blood, in an increasingly heterogeneous world" (ibid.) and thus becomes used to focus on purity rather than diversity. Standing in line with conservative, patriarchal and heteronormative assumptions about what the family is or can be, the making of a family tree, as a non-neutral cultural practice "produces rather than describes kinship, as genealogical knowledge is bestowed as a gift, shared or exchanged to create or recreate family trees" (Nash 2004, 5). But while it is generally used to silence the racial dimension by excluding, for example, illegitimate children, in the memoirs discussed here, the family tree is used to highlight it. The mixed race root of the family is clearly visible in the family trees shown. Genealogy is helpful in the context of these texts because it "makes truth claims about the knowability of family history and its power to authorize the individual while actively resisting the incursion of autobiographical storytelling" (Watson 1996, 299): it thus attests to a specific fact, namely that the family came into being at the moment the racial mixing occurred.

Along similar lines, the supposed "family album" attests to family members of many different skin colors: they represent a visual imagery of the legacy of racial transgression in the family. It is apparent that older photographs do not show family members who identify as black and family members who identify as white together. This is visual proof of the separation of the family: There was no contact across the so-called color line; people did not meet with each other, they did not attend each other's family events. They

could have been *one* family, but they were *two* – because of the complexities of race in America.

Taken together, these medial forms serve to create a comprehensive family structure in the present. They point to the idea that where there used to be a nuclear family with only few members, a large circle of cousins, aunts and uncles, emerges in the process of the narrator's investigation, completing the legacy across previously set borders. These media show who is considered part of the family both before and after the narrator's quest and contribute to the normalization of racial transgression across American history – this is so easily possible and acceptable since despite the pain that was inflicted by way of the family's separation, the mixing itself was the result of a romantic union rather than a forced sexual encounter. Taken together, the family trees and family photographs function as a limited mixed-race family archive, which is a missing piece of both these family's individual history and American history at large.

At the same time, these media simplify the idea that two (or more) families that have been divided by race for a very long time can be re-united easily via the visual integration of their family tree and family album: As the narrator in *Pearl's Secret* emphasizes, "our lives continued much as before, separately, quietly, distinctly white and black" (287). Along rather similar lines, the narrator in *The Sweeter the Juice* states that "[i]t is a satisfaction to have traced the missing branches of the family tree," but that in the long run "[she does] not know if [she] can ever connect their lives with [hers]. [Their] circumstances have been too different" (264). This is a rather bleak conclusion to reach, of course, as it is not unity but division that becomes evident – a message that contradicts the healing of families alluded to before.

Still, and even with this tension between the plot and its visual integration, it is clear that by the end of the twentieth century, racial transgression can be formulated using conventional media of family memory. Along similar lines, a mixed-race family with a family tree and family album, no matter how deep the schism on the inside, is an American family. Mixed race heritage hence becomes a central part of being American: "I am an American anomaly. I am an American ideal. I am the American nightmare. I am the Martin Luther King Dream. I am the new America" (Haizlip 1995, 15), as the narrator in *The Sweeter the Juice* attests: at least on the surface, the process of inclusion is the American Dream and the Civil Rights Movement's vision of equality fulfilled. At the same time, the allusions to both James Baldwin and Malcolm X in the above quote make evident that this is not a smooth process and that below the surface, the family is lacking the tools to advance cross-racial communication and understanding in the larger sense.

Re-telling the National Story

Mixed race memoirs contribute to the re-telling of the American national story in yet another way. The narrators point out that their family's story "mirrors the lives of tens of thousands of Americans who have racial schisms in their own families" (Haizlip 1995, 34) and establish that they are both, a "normality" in the nation, and significant to the writing of a more inclusive American history. Throughout the narrative, narrators intertwine different moments in American history with their own family's story: they show where their family members have encountered others who have shaped the nation, how family members were involved in central events in the United States, from the Civil War to the Civil Rights Movement, and how their family's "Americanization" came to be.¹⁹

While the narrators in both texts clearly conceive of themselves as African Americans, they tell the story of their white male forebears' immigration to America. They do so using a standardized scheme of talking about immigration from Europe with the dream of a better life in the New World: it is the story of "an idealized progenitor constructed as a stunning combination of religious pilgrim, pioneer, patriot and entrepreneur" (Gardner 2003, 149), who is being paid much attention to throughout the text – more so than any other progenitor mentioned. The texts are very aware of the "American-ness" of the story depicted: "My mother's story begins as many American stories begin, with a transatlantic journey. The year was 1860, and the family travelers were Irish, from County Tipperary" (35), relates the narrator in Haizlip's *The Sweeter the Juice*, thus emphasizing not the story of the violent passage of her African ancestors, but rather the story that conforms to the standard narrative of U.S. immigration.²⁰ At a later point, this gap is pointed to by expressing that the narrator does not know "which country or tribe claimed [her] people" or "the circumstances of their capture and enslavement" (104). Along similar lines, the narrator in Henry's story, whose progenitor was of French descent, but immigrated to America from England, emphasizes the transatlantic passage of the white man rather than alluding to the Middle Passage of his black ancestors.

¹⁹ The concept of "Americanization" of course seems very much at odds with the idea of a heritage of slavery. I am using it here to refer to the texts' emphasis of a white ancestor's immigration to the New World. By implication, the narratives inscribe themselves into the more optimistic narrative of immigration, rather than the more vindictive one that might include, for example, the question of long-term reparations for the suffering endured by African Americans throughout the Middle Passage and beyond.

²⁰ It may seem particularly ironic in this context that the Haizlip family's white ancestors are Irish by heritage, since the Irish immigrant population also faced significant hurdles and was often treated just as badly as the black population in the early phase of their American presence (see, for example, Ignatiev 1997).

It is remarkable that this story of immigration is paid so much attention to – it enables these texts to “normalize” the family’s narrative. The texts tell an immigration story that is not exceptional, but rather, stereotypically “American.” The narrators establish themselves as descendants of Anglo immigrants in a nation shaped by this population group in most significant and most palpable ways – it is a strategy of writing their family story as quintessentially American and themselves as true “Americans.” In tune with this, both narrators emphasize that while they visited Africa – not as a private undertaking, but rather in the context of a professional engagement – America is the locus of their story (see e.g. Henry 89). Hence, they see themselves as black Americans and descendants of slaves, but not necessarily as specifically affiliated with Africa, or a particular country or region in Africa.

Just like the immigration story, the family’s participation in the American Dream is a typical feature of both, again inscribing the family narrative onto the “less problematic” success story of national inclusion and placing them together with countless other (European) immigrant groups. The ability to tell this type of story places the families in a position of economic privilege and success: the family must have proven at one point in time that it is possible to get ahead and ascend the social ladder. In *Pearl’s Secret*, the story of economic success and the achievement of middle class status for the black family is explicitly linked to and contrasted with the downfall of the white family: “During the century and a quarter that followed, the black family steadily climbed upward somehow to realize many of its dreams, with careers in medicine, engineering, education, and journalism, despite the obstacles of American racism. At the same time the far more advantaged white family seemed to suffer a mysterious and devastating fall after the patriarch’s death in 1901 – a decline I first began to glean in the courthouse records in Vicksburg and now badly wanted to find out more about” (227). A similar fate affects those members of the Haizlip family who have *passed* into white society. In this narrative, the idea of the American Dream, while significant to tell a story about attaining upward social mobility for African Americans, is decidedly ambivalent for the fate of the family as a whole. The idea of rising from nowhere also enables certain – phenotypically white – family members to leave behind those who cannot *pass* and to cause significant pain to those remaining behind. By consequence, the narrators raise critical questions about decisions made by specific ancestors, hence speaking to the ethical dimensions of the past and the idea of a common responsibility for building a different future. They do not, however, speak up for political, legal or even narrative revisions, but rather, by re-telling the American story, issue a call for the recognition of the importance of past personal decisions – such as whether to *pass* or not – for the present status of race relations.

The American Dream is intimately intertwined with the more general storyline of “Americanization.” In *The Sweeter the Juice*, the narrator capitalizes on the process of “Americanization” her African forebears accomplished by their mere presence on

American soil and despite the multiple oppressions they had to face: “[as] much as they might want to,” the narrator says with regard to her African ancestors, “they would never be African again. They would remake themselves into Americans. They would distill drops from the American dream to water their minds and flood their souls. They would become Negroes, mulattoes, colored, black and African American. They would become me” (104).²¹ Despite the coercive quality of slavery, the forebears “remake themselves,” and despite the names being used for them by whites at different times in an objectifying manner – “Negroes, mulattoes, colored, black [...] African American” – the ancestors would move on, thus gaining agency and setting in motion a complex chain of transformations that results in the narrator herself – the literal “new America” – a person who is phenotypically black, but whose story can be made to conform to established ways of narrating American-ness.

What we hear in these texts is thus not a story of difference, but a story that confirms the existing master narrative. These texts do not focus on the differences that emerge from a heritage of slavery, but instead buy into the immigrant experience, ignoring that up to this day African American culture remains distinct from mainstream American culture in so many ways, and not commenting on white privilege. By including – or erasing, depending on point of view – the racial transgression into a story of immigration and Americanization, this story is normalized. It is not exceptional – it is “American.” Writing issues of race and of racial transgression into the white story of immigration is almost unbelievable. The detailed evaluation of how the ancestors became Americans, how they like all other Americans at one point immigrated into the country and how they struggled to follow their personal version of the American Dream can be read as a response to the widespread assumption that in one way or another, “the only viable model for nation-building is a process of ‘Americanization’” (Berlant 1997, 192). This is clearly evident in the mixed race memoir, which alludes to all conventional processes subsumed under the header of “Americanization.”

The notion that the earlier generations, the narrators’ ancestors, played such an essential role in the shaping of “America” and in what it meant to be American in the past, counteracts the notion that mixed race heritage poses a threat to national integrity and especially to whiteness. The texts essentially state that to be “American” means being mixed, and has always included being mixed. While this points to the idea that by the 1990s, stories of transgression can both be made public when paired with conventional narratives of American-ness, it also makes evident that notions of citizenship are still closely intertwined with questions of conformism to cultural and societal norms: The family is no longer ethnically homogeneous, but rather, family membership defined by

²¹ This passage would make for an interesting read together with other texts addressing the idea of becoming American, e.g. Crèvecoeur’s “Letters from an American Farmer.”

telling the same story, even if it is the same story told from different vantage points – there is apparently now a shared story of immigration and Americanization to refer to independent from one's slave heritage. The narrators in these texts establish themselves at the center of American culture by showing – and actually documenting – how they are connected to others, and how their story has remained true to the "American ideal" despite their mixedness, that is still intimately linked to whiteness and European immigration.

Conclusions

Focusing on the representation of mixed race families in a specific genre of literature that emerged in the 1990s and early 2000s I have attested to the challenges the American nation found itself confronted with when addressing the subject of racial transgression. I have explored how mixed race memoirs communicate a specific image of mixed race families and their identities shaped by questions of dealing with the past, of intergenerational responsibility, but also by the idea of inscribing a mixed race story into the established narratives of American-ness via the use of storytelling and the inclusion of media of memory that suggest arrival in mainstream American society. Interestingly enough, the narrators in these texts are very much concerned with exploring the so-called "white" branch of the family history and to learn more about family members who have *passed*. This may at first seem rather surprising, as these are the family members who have abandoned, neglected and disappointed their ancestors, and people they feel close to – hence, even from a relational perspective, and using CFT, it would be very understandable if they wanted nothing to do with this particular branch of the family.

According to these memoirs, however, the family's inception and genesis is rooted deeply in America and give proof that the families portrayed in them identify with genuinely white American values and stories, such as the story of the American Dream, for example. Using family trees and establishing a mixed race "family album," they inscribe mixed race heritage into mainstream American history. They speak to the subject of past transgression from the point of those who have – at least in the overall scheme – "made it." While certainly these narratives contribute to the normalization of mixed race heritage, they also add to silencing parts of the story. They prescribe a way of reconciling mixed race history with American history and becoming American that relies on sameness rather than difference, hence, leaving unspeakable other stories that may not be as conforming to the mainstream stories as theirs, be it due to violence committed or due to, for example, the family not fitting into the heteronormative patterns commonly assumed by mainstream society. This idea is not even touched upon in the memoirs discussed here. Despite the narrators' acknowledgements of their feelings of inadequacy and incompleteness, they show how their families have gone through the

process that seems required in order to become an adequate national subject: "Americanization" – hence, on a meta level, these texts allude to similarity and similarity only. While this may be useful to begin a conversation about the past, its re-negotiation would demand also addressing differences of history, memory and legacy.

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