FRANK J. WEBB'S *THE GARIES AND THEIR FRIENDS*: A RECONSIDERATION OF AN EARLY AFRICAN AMERICAN NOVEL

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Dedicated with immeasurable love and gratitude
to my parents

Miles and Charlyne Dennis

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CHAPTER ONE:

INTRODUCTION

> The existence of a "gentleman" with African blood in his veins, is a moral and physical impossibility, and … by no exertion can anything be made of that description of people.
>
> (The sentiments of Mr. Priestly, a Northern white gentleman, regarding all free African-American men.)
>
> *The Garies and Their Friends* (Webb 4)[1]

The Garies and Their Friends (1857) has earned Frank J. Webb credit for being the first African American novelist to write about free blacks in the antebellum North. Webb is one of the earliest black writers to address color discrimination, mixed marriage, mob violence, and the phenomenon of passing as a white person, themes that would be critical to African Americans throughout the twentieth century. Until very recently, however, scholars have largely dismissed Webb's achievement. Because it does not directly confront slavery, and because it appears on the surface to be merely a sentimental novel of bourgeois manners where black characters adopt and imitate the values of the dominant culture, *The Garies* has been "not so much forgotten, as ignored" (Reid-Pharr vii). This unfortunate neglect has resulted in a failure to fully recognize Webb's significant contribution to the discussion of race relations in nineteenth-century America.

Embedded within the text of *The Garies* is a deeper and more far-reaching objective than simply telling a conventional sentimental tale or even describing the

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[1] *The Garies and Their Friends* by Frank J. Webb (1857). Intro. Robert Reid Pharr. Baltimore: The John Hopkins UP, 1997. All further page references to Webb's novel are from the 1997 edition of *The Garies* and will be cited parenthetically in the text.

visible effects of urban racism. Frank Webb sought nothing less than to examine the intersection of race and class in nineteenth-century Philadelphia in order to deconstruct the complex components that contributed to racist thinking and racist actions. Using the vehicle of the sentimental novel, Webb challenged and destabilized white racist assumptions that sought to permanently associate and confine "blackness" to the lowest rung of American society, even in the non-slave-holding North.

Webb's overarching objective was to challenge race and class stereotypes, and demonstrate the absurdity of assumptions based on skin color, and at the same time, lay claim to the American ideal of class mobility for black as well as white Americans. In *The Garies*, Webb forcefully argues that skin color does not and should not automatically designate social class, and moreover, that social class itself does not indicate the moral character of any individual. Influenced more by the "sophistication and sentimentality of the Euro-American literary tradition than by the African-American oral traditions and slave narratives" (Bell 50), and poised between the Victorian novel and the dawn of the realistic novel, Webb synthesized his own particular hopeful, yet uneasy vision of the future for black Americans, insisting that African Americans be fully included in American society.

Although *The Garies* would be forgotten in the wake of the Civil War and Jim Crow, the ideas in Webb's first and only novel in many ways anticipate the post-Reconstruction sentimental Victorian novels and historical protest novels written by African Americans during the decade of the 1890s and the first years of the twentieth century. Frank J. Webb's *The Garies and Their Friends* is a distinctive and important work, an insightful, multi-layered contemplation of, and incisive commentary upon, mid-

nineteenth-century urban American race and class relations that deserves much closer examination.

Biography of Frank Johnson Webb

Frank Johnson Webb was born in Philadelphia on March 21, 1828. Little is known about Webb's early years, but the novel itself shows that Webb acquired an education well beyond basic skills and was familiar with popular literary conventions, certainly read Dickens' *Bleak House* and perhaps Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, and possibly read or spoke French. In Webb's young adulthood, his brother (or paternal cousin) married into the Forten family, one of the most distinguished and wealthy black families in Philadelphia.[2] This intimate connection with the lives of black elites may have later informed many of the story details of *The Garies*.

Frank's marriage at the age of seventeen to Mary E. (maiden name unknown) had the unintended but fortunate consequence of associating Frank Webb and *The Garies* with the celebrity of the most famous author of the day, the white abolitionist Harriet Beecher Stowe. After their marriage, Frank and Mary, both classified as Mulattoes in the Census of 1850 (Sollors 2), had settled in Philadelphia. City directories published between 1851 and 1854 list Frank as a designer, or commercial artist in the printing trade

[2] There is no specific evidence of how Webb acquired a working knowledge of French. However, the Forten children, whom Webb probably knew, were educated at the Pennsylvania Abolition Society's Clarkson School, a private school for African American children. The curriculum included novels, poetry, theological works, and histories. In addition, the wealthy James Forten also hired tutors to teach his children music and French at home (Winch *A Gentleman of Color* 117). Perhaps young Frank Webb, because of his association with the Forten family, also attended the Clarkson School and was included in these private tutoring sessions.

(Lapsansky 35).[3] In 1855, Webb's business failed and Mary, who had studied oratory and had always shown "elocutionary talent," began to support the couple by giving public dramatic performances of the works of Shakespeare, Sheridan and Longfellow.

It is not known where or when, but at some point, Stowe saw Mary Webb perform, and was so impressed by Mary's talents, that Stowe dramatized a version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, called *The Christian Slave,* specifically for Mary Webb to perform. Mary "performed Stowe's play solo in its debut in the winter of 1855 at Boston's Fremont Temple. She attracted an audience of 3,500 on that occasion and similar audiences in a subsequent tour of the Northern States" (Meer 186). [4] Then in June of 1856, bearing letters of introduction from Stowe, Frank and Mary departed for a performing tour of England. Mary was a great success in England, where the Webbs were welcomed and embraced by British abolitionist aristocrats. Although he may have been working on his novel earlier, it seems likely that Frank wrote much of *The Garies* in England during the approximately fifteen months that he accompanied his wife on tour.[5]

Stowe helped Frank Webb in another significant way: in addition to writing *The Christian Slave* for Mary Webb, and providing the Webbs with letters of introduction, Stowe also wrote the preface to *The Garies and Their Friends*. In it, she authenticates the

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[3] Lapsansky notes that the occupation of Webb's character Charlie Ellis was a commercial artist in the printing trade, implying that Webb may have drawn on personal experience to inform his character's occupation (Lapsansky, P. "Afro-Americana" 35).
[4] The racial make-up of Mary Webb's audiences is not known. However, reviews and advertisements about her performances often mention Mary Webb's race, color and facial features, so, as Eric Gardner suggests "at least part of her popularity came from the curiosity of mostly-white audiences" (Gardner, "Stowe Takes the Stage" 80).
[5] Gardner writes that the first known mention of the novel comes in a letter tentatively dated October 23-26, 1856, from Mary Beecher Perkins, Stowe's sister, to Catherine Gilman, noting that "Mr. Webb has written a story & we hope it will take" (Gardner, "A Gentleman of Superior Cultivation" 300).

text by saying that the "author is a coloured young man, born and reared in the city of Philadelphia." She poses the question "Are the race at present held as slaves capable of freedom, self-government, and progress?" She then appears to answer her own question by offering the novel as proof of an affirmative answer. She tells the reader that in the city of Philadelphia, "the frontier between free and slave territory," a large class of "escaping fugitives or of emancipated slaves" now constitute "a peculiar society of their own, presenting many social peculiarities worthy of interest and attention" and that "the representations of their positions as to wealth and education are reliable, the incidents related mostly true ones, woven together by a slight web of fiction." She concludes by taking pleasure in "recommending this simple and truthfully-told story."[6] Stowe's willingness to preface the novel undoubtedly aided Webb in securing publication; indeed her world-famous name was featured prominently in advertisements promoting the book and on the cover.

The Garies and Their Friends was published on September 10, 1857 by the London firm of G. Routledge and Company. Two editions were published simultaneously, 2,000 copies of a higher-priced version bound in cloth, and 12,000 copies of a popular, cheaper edition (Crockett 203). Routledge advertised the novel widely, announcing the publication in newspapers throughout England and as far away as Scotland and Ireland. Webb's agreement with Routledge promised him £75 for the first

[6] A second preface, dated three weeks before Stowe's also accompanies the book. Apparently, as the book went to press, it was unclear whether Stowe would be able to fulfill her promise to submit a preface due to some "domestic affliction." Lord Brougham, an influential, aristocratic British statesman and lifelong supporter of the abolition of slavery, stepped in and wrote a preface dated July 29, 1857. Stowe's preface, however, dated August 17, 1857, did arrive in time for publication. The publishers decided to include both prefaces, possibly to avoid offending Lord Brougham, or perhaps concluding that his name would only increase book sales.

10,000 copies and £25 for the next 10,000 copies, and an additional £25 if more than 20,000 copies were needed. The novel seems to have been well received, with one ad claiming that demand was so great "that the first edition was all sold on the day of publication" (*Morning Herald*, September 19, 1857). Company records show that Webb received £75 on September 29th. No further payments were recorded (Crockett 203).

Shortly after the publication of *The Garies*, Mary Webb's declining health forced the Webbs to leave England to seek a warmer climate. With help from British friends, Frank was able to secure an appointment to the Post Office of Kingston, Jamaica. After a winter respite in the south of France and a brief stop in Philadelphia, the Webbs sailed for Jamaica on March 28, 1858, where Mary Webb died at the age of thirty-one less than two years later.

Webb subsequently married a native Jamaican woman named Mary Rodgers, and together they had four children. Webb returned to the United States in 1869, having left his family behind in Jamaica. He lived in a boarding house in Washington D.C. and apparently took courses at Howard University Law School and clerked for the Bureau of Refugees, Freedman, and Abandoned Lands, better known as the Freedman's Bureau (Sollors 3). During this time, Webb published several pieces of his writing in *The New Era*, which billed itself as "a Colored American National Journal." Two novellas ("Two Wolves and a Lamb" and "Marvin Hayle"), three articles on racial prejudice, and two poems were all published between January and April of 1870.[7] [8]

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[7] Webb's *New Era* writings appeared for the first time in book form in Sollors 2004 *Frank J. Webb, Fiction, Essays, Poetry.*

[8] Historian Eric Gardner wonders about the relationship between Frederick Douglass and Frank Webb. The moment Douglass took over The New Era, Webb departed. Taken together with Douglass' scant coverage of Mary Webb's readings, and Douglass'

It is unclear why Frank Webb left his job as a clerk, but by 1871 Webb was living in Galveston, Texas. Ships logs reveal that his family joined him there in 1872. Gardner notes that Webb's reasons for choosing Galveston are "hazy at best" (Gardner 304). Galveston and the surrounding areas had a large black population that included many former slaves who were very involved in local and state politics. Perhaps Frank Webb saw in Texas a 'new frontier' for the black man and an opportunity for an educated man such as himself to help lead the way. In Galveston, Webb appears to have edited the short-lived, "assertively black *Galveston Republican* radical newspaper from January to August 1871" (Austin 2273),[9] and also worked as a postal clerk from 1872 to 1880, and possibly as principal and teacher at the Barnes Institute School, a public school for colored children.

Frank Webb died on May 7, 1894 at the age of sixty-six. His obituary in the *Galveston Daily News* mourned him as "an esteemed resident of this city," and he was buried at Lake View Cemetery (Sollors 4).[10]

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apparent failure to ever directly mention *The Garies*, Gardner questions their relationship - or lack thereof.

[9] No copies of the *Galveston Republican* have yet surfaced.

[10] Of all the incomplete data about Webb's life, one detail is particularly intriguing. On May 5, 1870, while presumably still in Washington D.C., Frank Webb wrote a letter to journalist Miss Mary Wager [Fisher] at Howard University. In the letter, Webb refers to a five hundred-page novel entitled "Paul Sumner" which, he tells Miss Wager, he has forwarded to Harper's publishing house. He hopes it is "in every sense a much better book" than *The Garies*, and that Harper's "or some other publisher may accept it and that it may have a little success" (Webb 432). No trace of this novel has yet been found. Scholars of Frank Webb, therefore, must be satisfied at present to look closely at his one and only known novel, *The Garies and Their Friends*.

Historical and Cultural Context for *The Garies and Their Friends*

Frank Webb came of age during the first half of the nineteenth century, a tumultuous and defining period in American history. White Americans had begun to construct a "New World" identity for themselves and their country separate and distinct from the "Old World" of Europe. Much of that new American identity was based on its claims to freedom; alongside that freedom, however, remained the unresolved and increasingly volatile issue of slavery and the broad racial repercussions that derived from it. Author Toni Morrison writes, "What was distinctive in the New [World] was, first of all, its claim to freedom and, second, the presence of the unfree within the heart of the democratic experiment" (Morrison 48). In 1850, the population of the United States was approximately twenty-five million people, four million of whom were black. Of that number, approximately three and one-half million blacks were slaves and one half-million were free (United States Census, 1850). The immense contradiction between American ideals of freedom and the enslavement of blacks was a difficult demon for white Americans to acknowledge and examine. The 1850s, when Frank Webb wrote *The Garies*, was a critical decade for white and black Americans alike "as they witnessed the dramatic deterioration of race relations marked by the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law (1850), the Kansas-Nebraska Act (1854), and the Dred Scott decision (1857), as well as the growing exclusion of blacks from industrialization in the North and increased demand for slave labor in the South" (Peterson 561).

Related to, but separate from, the issue of slavery, Americans were also deeply divided in their opinions on racial equality and concomitant citizenship for free blacks. Even those white Americans who denounced slavery did not necessarily believe that

blacks were equal to whites. In their famous 1858 debates, remarks by both Stephen Douglas and Abraham Lincoln indicated the contemporary thinking. On August 21, 1858, for example, Stephen Douglas declared: "I am opposed to negro citizenship in any and every form. I believe this government was made on the white basis. I believe it was made by white men, for the benefit of white men and their posterity forever, and I am in favor of confining citizenship to white men, men of European birth and descent, instead of conferring it upon negroes, Indians, and other inferior races." A month later, on September 18, 1858 at the Fourth Debate with Douglas, Abraham Lincoln said:

> I will say then that I am not, nor ever have been in favor of bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the white and black races – that I am not nor ever have been in favor of making voters or jurors of negroes, nor of qualifying them to hold office, nor to intermarry with white people; and I will say in addition to this that there is a physical difference between the white and black races which I believe will forever forbid the two races living together on terms of social and political equality. And inasmuch as they cannot so live, while they do remain together there must be the position of superior and inferior, and I as much as any other man am in favor of having the superior position assigned to the white race. I say upon this occasion I do not perceive that because the white man is to have the superior position the negro should be denied everything.
>
> (Basler 145-146)

Lincoln's position, recognizing inalienable rights for blacks but denying equality, represents the most progressive sector of American polity when *The Garies* was published, and demonstrates the difficult racial climate that Webb as a free black man sought to overcome with *The Garies*.

Intertwined with issues of race, Americans in the mid-nineteenth century also struggled with definitions of class identity. White Americans wanted to believe that their society was essentially "classless," that what made America new and better, and unlike the old world of Europe, was the equality and mobility of their society. In America, so

the thinking went, individuals (white males at least) could move from poor to wealthy if they worked hard enough. American society would therefore be mostly free from class distinctions and class struggles. At mid-century, Americans in fact felt a "deep unease that attended the naming of class" (Lang 4). The reality of American society, however, was far different from what white Americans wanted to believe. There was an "enormous concentration of wealth in the hands of a few - by some estimates, more than half of nation's wealth was held by 5 percent of the population by 1860 - and the concomitant impoverishment of the many was a conspicuous feature" (Lang 2) of urban life. Reluctant to use the terminology of class distinction, Americans tended to cast economic differences between people in terms of gender, ethnicity and most especially race. Frank Webb's *The Garies and Their Friends* interrogates both threads of this mid-nineteenth century American identity crisis – race and class.

With *The Garies*, Webb also inserted himself into the national conversation among black leaders over the future of blacks in America. Of crucial importance to black leaders in the 1830s and 1840s was the strategy of "elevation," which was seen as an optimistic way forward for African Americans. Elevation meant the self-improvement of blacks through education, hard work, temperance and moral restraint. Elevation, it was thought, would benefit the race in a number of ways. First, as blacks improved themselves, whites would realize that their prejudices were in error and would begin to grant blacks full equality. Second, elevation would improve the lot of blacks themselves as they became less degraded and more respectable. Third, the rising condition of northern free blacks would demonstrate the humanity and potential of all black people and bring about the end of slavery. Black leaders before mid-century believed that whites

despised blacks primarily because of their widespread poverty and degraded condition, and that self-improvement would ameliorate the race and result in a decrease in prejudice and an increase in equality. Frederick Cooper writes that before 1850, black leaders "never fully realized they faced a race problem. So inextricable was the link between inequality and degradation in their minds that most felt that once blacks raised themselves through their own efforts, prejudice and discrimination would disappear" (Cooper 624). [11]

After 1850, however, black leaders began to realize that elevation was not working; whites, they realized, "might hate an educated black as well as an ignorant one, that whites might not want to live and work with proper, abstemious blacks any more than with black drunkards" (Cooper 624). In fact, it can be argued, the more blacks improved themselves, the more whites resented them. Frank Webb's examination of race and class in *The Garies*, written around 1856, also chronicles the failure of elevation as a strategy because it shows black characters who have worked to "elevate" themselves, but find as a result, increasing, not decreasing, racial prejudice, hatred and violence.

M. M. Bakhtin has written that in moments of crisis, when "a national culture is decentralized and loses its sealed-off and self-sufficient character," fiction, and specifically the novel, may appear as a response to the crisis (qtd. in Peterson 561). White authors like Edgar Allan Poe in *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*

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[11] Implicit in this view was the notion that prejudice was a black problem – caused by the deficiencies of blacks themselves, rather than a white problem – the result of deeply ingrained biases and an oppressive social system. Obviously, this idea is distasteful to modern readers; however, as Frederick Cooper notes, it is "important to try as best one can to understand the perspective of these men in the 1830s and 1840s rather than to assume they conformed to today's notions of how a black leader should think" (Cooper 605).

(1838), and Herman Melville in *Moby Dick* (1851) and *Benito Cereno* (1855) began to use the novel as a way to engage, however more or less obliquely, with the issues of race in the United States. And of course, in 1852, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* set in motion a worldwide condemnation of American slavery but at the same time fixed racist stereotypes of black Americans that persist to this day.

African American authors, too, Frank Webb among them, responded to the growing crisis. For the first time in the 1850s, African American authors began to use the form of the novel as a way both to communicate their experiences and to participate in the expanding market for fiction. Prior to this time, African Americans had documented their histories largely through oral traditions such as spirituals and gospels, secular rhymes and songs, work songs, and folktales (Gates vii-ix), and a few had published written works of poetry, letters, speeches and articles (Gates ix-xi). Slave autobiographies, often under the aegis of white abolitionists, had also been a genre for African Americans to chronicle their lives. In the 1850s, black authors began to make a gradual shift from slave autobiography to novel and from first- to third- person narration (Peterson 563). They produced their fiction as a commodity to be sold for profit; they also perhaps found in the novel a vehicle capable of making "stronger, more universal statements about many facets of the African American experience" (Graff qtd. in Peterson 562) – in short, to define their own identities. *The Garies and Their Friends*, published in 1857, was the second of only five novels written by African Americans before the Civil War.[12] Frank Webb, a free, African American, urban, middle-class,

[12] The other novels written by African Americans are *Clotel or The President's Daughter* (1853) by William Wells Brown, *Our Nig* (1859) by Harriet E. Wilson, Harriet Jacob's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), and *Blake; or the Huts of America* (1859-62)

highly educated man – chose to write about the lives of free, urban African Americans and consider not only issues of race, but also the intersection of race and class.

The Significance of Philadelphia: A Place and an "Experiment"

That Webb's home city was Philadelphia is critical to an understanding of *The Garies*. Philadelphia was not only the setting for the novel, but it was also a unique place for African Americans living in antebellum America. The African American community in Philadelphia had deep roots going back to the founding of the nation. While many of the characteristics of the Philadelphia black community were shared by other urban communities, "what made the Philadelphia community unique was its size, wealth, stability" (Lapsansky "Separate Churches" 60) and its number of high-visibility elite blacks. The African American population of Philadelphia in 1848 was about 20,000 or five percent of the total population of the city (Winch *Black Elite* 152). While the "great majority of black households had no real property and only negligible personal property" (Lapsansky "Separate Churches" 57), a small percentage of the black community in Philadelphia had become very wealthy and highly visible. Among the total population, a survey published in 1845 listed approximately 1,000 economically "substantial" black citizens in Philadelphia, and listed six African Americans among the city's several dozen wealthiest people (Lapsansky "Separate Churches" 57). As a result of the number, wealth, and high visibility of the African American community, the critic Samuel Otter

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by Martin R. Delany. Two other early texts by African Americans are: Frederick Douglass's *The Heroic Slave* (1853), a historical novella based on the life of Madison Washington, and *The Bondwoman's Narrative, By Hannah Crafts, A Fugitive Slave Recently Escaped From North Carolina* (1853-1860) probably written by a fugitive slave named Hannah Craft, and was recovered only recently in 2002.

writes, "Philadelphia was seen by residents and observers as the laboratory for a social experiment with international consequences. The city would be the stage on which racial character would be tested and possible futures would be played out for the United States after slavery" (Otter 3). Frederick Douglass, the single most important black leader of the time, attached great significance to Philadelphia as a place, "which more than almost any other in our land, holds the destiny of our people" (Winch *Philadelphia's Black Elite* 1). As a black man living in Philadelphia during this time, Webb was himself part of the "experiment," but his novel shows that he also thoughtfully observed, recorded and analyzed much of what he saw from his ringside seat.

For a young black man like Frank Webb, Philadelphia provided opportunities and experiences not available to the vast majority of black Americans. The African-American community in Philadelphia had well-established neighborhoods and institutions such as churches, Masonic lodges, black-owned businesses, places of entertainment – and most especially schools for black students. Because black leaders believed that education would lead to the elevation of the race and eventual full equality for blacks, education of black youth was a major goal of the black elite of Philadelphia. There were public and private schools, schools for youngsters, and institutions of higher learning such as the Institute for Colored Youth, which provided classical education for black scholars. Although no school records have yet surfaced, and it is unknown who might have paid for or encouraged Webb's education, the literary feat of his novel proves that he benefited from the educational opportunities available in Philadelphia for a young black man.

The Philadelphia black community also afforded Webb examples of and contact with, wealthy, elite blacks. When his cousin (or brother) married into the wealthy, black Forten family, Webb presumably had at least peripheral access to the rarefied air of Philadelphia's black elite. When he began to write his novel, he drew upon what he knew perhaps from personal experience: Frank Webb's fictional Ellis family probably falls within the economically "substantial" group of Philadelphians, and the wealthy real estate developer Mr. Walters certainly would be considered one of few most wealthy blacks. Webb's characters and his story, then, are drawn from a very, very small, elite group of antebellum African Americans, but his characters nonetheless are based on historical types known to Webb in Philadelphia.

Philadelphia also provided Webb with a stimulating intellectual climate. In addition to hosting five of the first six national black conventions held in the 1830s, the black elite of Philadelphia actively promoted abolition, worked to defeat legislation intended to undermine the rights of free blacks, promoted moral and social reforms, and fiercely debated the topics of emigration, colonization, education, temperance, moral reform, racial consciousness, and social elevation (Otter 7). Further, middle- and upper-class blacks enjoyed a wide range of additional opportunities for intellectual and cultural enrichment, which included concerts, lectures and meetings of literacy, debating or library associations. "Webb's obvious literacy suggests that his family was active in such groups as the Philadelphia Library Company of Colored People, the Rush Library Company and Debating Society, the Desmosthenian Institute, the Minerva Literary Association, the Edgeworth Literary Association and the Gilbert Lyceum, all black literary and educational organizations active during Frank's youth" (Lapsansky "Afro-

Americana" 36). A tantalizing detail suggests Webb's active participation: a reference from the 1854 Banneker Institute meeting minutes announces that Frank Webb gave a public lecture on "The Martial Capacity of Blacks." Unfortunately, there is no record of Webb's remarks or of any surviving text. The Banneker Institute, however, was composed of some of black Philadelphia's brightest young men who became leading community figures in the later nineteenth century, so Webb's association with them demonstrates their, and his, intellect and activism.[13]

Yet despite the development of a nascent upper and middle class, data indicates that most antebellum free blacks in Philadelphia actually experienced overall a rather remarkable deterioration in socioeconomic conditions from 1830 to the Civil War. African Americans were the victims of half a dozen major anti-black riots, there was an overall decrease in per capita value of personal property and total wealth, and residential segregation steadily rose (Hershberg 187-189). Job discrimination was "complete and growing: blacks were excluded from new areas of the economy, uprooted from many of their traditional unskilled jobs, denied apprenticeships for their sons and prevented from practicing the skills they already possessed" (Hershberg 192). Particularly disturbing to the black elite, in October 1838, the new state constitution changed voting requirements so as to include more white men, but specifically excluded all black men, even those of

[13] I am deeply grateful to Phillip Lapsansky, retired Research Librarian at the Library Company of Philadelphia, who corresponded with me regarding this obscure reference. Lapsansky found the reference to Webb's lecture in the meeting minutes and was kind enough to share with me the reference that can only be found in Lapsansky's research folder on Webb at the Library Company of Philadelphia. Given that Webb features L'Ouverture's portrait in a military uniform in *The Garies*, it is indeed unfortunate that we do not have the text of Webb's lecture on the "Martial Capacity of Blacks."

property.[14] Moreover, middle- and upper-class blacks became the object of caricature in print and derision on the minstrel stage for their social aspirations. For black leaders, the optimism of the 1830s and 1840s gave way to an era of crisis in the 1850s. *The Garies and Their Friends* portrays both the historical successes of the black middle and upper classes and at the same time, shows the increasing violence and discrimination to which they were subjected.

Synopsis of *The Garies and Their Friends*

The plot of *The Garies and Their Friends* is multilayered and complicated. *The Garies* is essentially the story of free middle- and upper-class black people living in antebellum Philadelphia at a time when the vast majority of American blacks were held as slaves. The story turns upon the lives of the mixed-race, upper-class Garie family, the middle-class black Ellis family, the wealthy black Mr. Walters, and the white Stevens family. In addition, there are approximately twenty-five less central characters who inhabit the story in lesser or greater ways. These include the white lawyer, Mr. Balch; the white-skinned southern mulatto, George Winston; the rather minstrel-like black character, Kinch; the social-climbing white, Mrs. Thomas; the Irish thug, McCloskey; and many, many others.

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[14] Black voting in Pennsylvania had been ambiguous before this point. The original state constitution said that all "freemen" could vote without specifying skin color. Although laws did not forbid blacks from voting, it seems that blacks in general did not vote, "owing to custom, prejudice or design" (Winch, *Black Elite* 136). The new constitution of 1838, therefore, did not much change actual voting habits, but was seen by black elites as an important symbol of their increasingly restricted position.

The novel opens on the Georgia plantation of Mr. Clarence Garie.[15] Mr. Garie is a wealthy white plantation and slave owner, and Emily is his beautiful mulatto mistress whom he purchased as a slave ten years before. They live as husband and wife and have two exceedingly white-looking children, also named Clarence and Emily. When Emily finds herself pregnant for a third time, she convinces Clarence that they must move to the northern states, where their children can be free. This desire by Emily to avoid giving birth to another "inheritor of chains" (Webb 55) sets in motion the Garies' move to Philadelphia, where the rest of the novel takes place.

Once in Philadelphia, the Garies settle into a home owned by the wealthy real estate developer, Mr. Walters, and are befriended by the Ellis family. Their new next-door neighbor is one George Stevens, known as "Slippery George," a corrupt white lawyer whose "cadaverous skin" and hair on his head that imitates a "pair of horns" foreshadow his villainous role in the story (Webb 124-125). Indeed, a moment of high narrative drama in the story occurs when Mr. Stevens and his wife discover that their new next-door neighbors, whose "white" children have become playmates of their own, are a mixed-race couple. With this and other incidents, the Garies soon discover, that despite their hopes for a good life in the "free" North, northern racial prejudice is heartless at best and deadly at worst, for mixed-race couples and their children.

Meanwhile the reader has come to know the Ellises, a "highly respectable and industrious coloured family" (Webb 16). Mr. and Mrs. Ellis have three children: Esther, a beautiful and amiable girl; Caddy, an ill-tempered daughter who obsesses over

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[15] Mr. Clarence Garie has a son, also named Clarence Garie. To aid the reader and provide clarity, hereafter, Clarence Garie (the father) will always be referred to "Mr. Garie," while Clarence Garie (the son) will always be referred to as "Clarence" or "Clarence Garie."

housekeeping; and their younger brother, Charlie, "clever at his lessons" possessing a "boy's fondness for play" with a "lively affectionate disposition" (Webb 17). Webb invites his reader into the intimate domestic world of the Ellis family – the reader is privy to their conversations, their teas, their daily activities, and also their experiences outside their home as black people negotiating the racist world of antebellum Philadelphia.

A central dramatic event in the novel is a violent riot in which white rioters attack black homes. The riot has been orchestrated by Mr. Stevens in order to drive black people from their homes for his own financial gain. Stevens also has a second, secret motive for the riot, known only to himself: he has learned that Mr. Garie is his first cousin. Stevens directs the rioters to attack the Garie home and murder Mr. Garie so that he (Stevens), as Garie's only surviving white relation, will inherit the Garie fortune. The action of the riot unfolds in three vignettes: first, the reader is inside Mr. Walters' home as the black characters assemble and bravely defend themselves. Next, the reader follows Mr. Ellis as he is pursued by a gang of white rioters and hurled from the roof of a building. Lastly, the riot scene shifts to the attack upon the Garie home during which Mr. and Mrs. Garie both meet brutal deaths. In the chaos after Mr. Garie's death, no last will and testament can be located. Without the will, the Garie children have no legal standing; because of the laws of the day, they are now merely the offspring of a mulatto slave woman. George Stevens' scheme, then, succeeds, and he, as the only living white heir, inherits the Garie fortune.

After the riot, the lives of the Ellises, Mr. Walters, the Garie children - now orphans - and the Stevens family, are traced. Little Emily Garie remains with the Ellis family and eventually makes a happy marriage with Charlie Ellis. Charlie, whose life is

closely followed in the tale, rejects employment as a domestic servant and pursues his education. After being repeatedly rebuffed because of his race, he finally secures employment as an engraver and succeeds, ultimately marrying Emily.

Young Clarence Garie is sent away to be raised as white and becomes estranged from the black community. Some years later, passing as a white man, he is engaged to marry "Little Birdie," the daughter of a prominent white family. The truth of Clarence's heritage is revealed (by George Stevens Jr., son of the arch villain) and the engagement is abruptly called off. Forbidden to ever see Little Birdie again, Clarence rapidly deteriorates both mentally and physically.

The last three chapters of the novel are highly dramatic and pull together many narrative threads. The third-to-the-last chapter focuses on Lizzie, the daughter of the villain George Stevens, as she returns to Philadelphia in search of McCloskey, the Irishman who led the riot so many years before, and who has been blackmailing her father. She discovers that McCloskey has died, but not before revealing to the authorities that her father was in fact the person who murdered Mr. Garie during the riot. She rushes back to New York City, but arrives too late to prevent her father from throwing himself off a balcony, committing suicide ahead of the approaching law.

The next chapter draws a sharp contrast with the previous one. On the same night that Lizzie Stevens roams the lonely back alleys of Philadelphia, a "scene of mirth and gaiety" (Webb 369) is taking place at the mansion of Mr. Walters as the black community celebrates the wedding of Emily Garie and Charlie Ellis. The wedding and lavish supper that follows the ceremony are described by Webb in extravagant detail, emphasizing the

happiness, success, refinement and cautious hopefulness of the black community, as opposed to the sadness, despair and death that Lizzie Stevens is suffering.

During the supper, the lawyer Mr. Balch, a wedding guest, is called away to the confessional deathbed of a man who turns out to be McCloskey. In an effort to clear his conscience before dying, McCloskey confesses to Balch that Stevens was in fact Mr. Garie's murderer during the riot so many years before, and moreover, that McCloskey is in possession of the long-sought and here-to-for missing Garie will, which will restore to the Garie children their fathers' fortune. The reader is reassured that "with such celerity did Mr. Balch work in behalf of his wards, that he soon had everything in train for the recovery of the property" (Webb 380).

The final chapter entitled, "And the last," tells the poignant story of Clarence Garie's return to his sister's home and the black community. He has been convalescing in Europe to recover from both consumption and the heartbreak of losing his beloved Little Birdie, but it is clear that he is dying. Clarence writes a note to Little Birdie, asking to see her one last time before he dies. She, having never stopped loving him, rushes to his bedside, but, alas, arrives literally moments after he has died, "a poor victim of prejudice … that malignant sentiment that persecuted [him] and has crushed energy, hope, and life from many stronger hearts" (Webb 391). After this dramatic and heart-wrenching climatic moment, *The Garies and Their Friends* concludes with the omniscient narrator's brief summary of the future lives of the major characters, which includes happy marriages, healthy and beautiful children, and long lives all around.

Nineteenth-Century Critical Response to *The Garies*

Nine critical reviews of the novel appeared in British newspapers and journals in the month after its publication.[16] The theme that appears most consistently in these reviews is a discussion of the question raised in the preface by Stowe, of whether or not this novel by a black man is sufficient proof of the intellectual capability and equality of black people. Reviewers come to different conclusions, but even reviewers who exhibit obvious racism credit Webb's literary skill. For example, the critic writing in *The Athenaeum* on October 24, 1857, concludes that because most of the characters in *The Garies* "have an admixture of European blood in them; the question intended to be at once raised and answered by this work – whether slaves are capable of self-government – is not fairly stated." For this anonymous reviewer, it is the infusion of "European," or white, blood that has made the characters civilized and moral, yet even he admits that *The Garies* is "interesting and well written." Another critic is intrigued with the way that the black characters in *The Garies* laugh, telling his reader that "laughter with negroes is a convulsion, a physical eccentricity that may help to account for the manner in which the people in this book laugh." For this critic, the laughter of the black characters "distinctly mark(s) its origin and testif(ies) to its authenticity." This writer is satisfied, therefore, that *The Garies* was written by a black man because the characters laugh in a way, according to the reviewer, particular only to blacks. He also accuses Webb of putting "bravest airs

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[16] *Literary Gazette & Journal of Archeology, Science, and Art* (September 26, 1857): 917; *John Bull and Britannia* (September 26, 1857): 619; *Sunday Times* (September 27, 1857): 2; *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper* (October 4, 1857): Issue #776; *The Morning Post* (October 6, 1857): Issue #26136; *The Standard* (October 7, 1857): 3; *Daily News* (October 9, 1857): Issue #3557; *The Examiner* (October 10, 1857): 645; *The Athenaeum* (October 24, 1857): 1320. In addition, *The Garies* was also widely advertised in British periodicals.

and gaudiest tinsel" on his black characters, but at the same time, he says that the novel conveys a "just and practical moral" and "cannot fail to make an impression upon the society whose failings he rebukes" (*The Literary Gazette*, Sept. 26, 1857). Writing in *The Morning Post* (October 6, 1857), one critic sniffs: "Everywhere the negro and half-caste characters are placed in a favourable light, and in some cases the pictures are so charming, … that one might suppose the object of the author to be to prove the superiority of the coloured population over their white-faced brethren." Yet he admits that the novel will find an audience.

Two of the nine British reviews were exceedingly positive. A review in *The Standard* dated October 7, 1857 suggests that Webb didn't need Stowe's patronage at all and that he could have brought *The Garies* "fearlessly before the British public and trusted to its own merits for success." He writes that the work was a "production of great promise in itself, and not less as the production of an oppressed race, which has been inconsiderably thought incapable of exercising the higher intellectual powers; Mr. Webb's work will dispel that weak and unworthy notion."

Of particular significance is the other positive review published in the *Daily News* on October 9, 1857. This review applauds *The Garies* as a book that will be read with much interest not merely on account of its above average "intrinsic merits," but from the "gratifying fact, which is vouched upon the highest authority, that it is the veritable production of a coloured man, and gives, in the main, a faithful picture of coloured society in the United States." The reviewer then goes on to utterly reject Stowe's question posed in the preface – are the negroes capable of freedom, self-government and progress? The reviewer writes that it is a question "we have never thought of asking" and dismisses

Stowe by calling her question "bosh." The writer then indicts "our cousins on the other side of the Atlantic" for using the false argument of the black man's inferiority to justify slavery. "If Mr. Webb," the reviewer writes, "therefore has taken up his pen merely to prove that a negro or a mulatto is capable of writing a tolerable work of fiction, he might have saved himself the trouble, as far as we were concerned; but if he has turned author in order to give us some true idea of the inner life of his race, he has done good service to the cause of humanity and progress, and deserves all encouragement at the hands of the critics and the public." The review then goes on to quote long passages of the story, including the maiming of Mr. Ellis during the riot, the attack on the Garies' house, the death of Mrs. Garie, and the "American supper" scene at the end.

This positive review is especially significant because it is the only review that appeared in American newspapers. To be clear, no original contemporary American review of *The Garies* has yet been found. This British review is evidently the only reference to *The Garies* in the American press at the time. The review appeared on December 4, 1857 on the front page of the *Frederick Douglass' Paper*. The review was reproduced word-for-word, including the reference to "our cousins on the other side of the Atlantic" without any additional commentary. This review from the *London Daily News* stands as the single review of *The Garies* published in the antebellum United States.[17]

[17] It was not unusual that Douglass reprinted the British review word-for-word in his paper. In fact, Robert Levine has noted, "Douglass initiated the practice of reprinting formal testimonials from British antislavery groups." For example, Douglass reprinted the London *Examiner's* glittering review of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* on October 15, 1852 (Levine, 'Uncle Tom's Cabin in Frederick Douglass' Paper' 76).

Modern Critical Response to *The Garies and Their Friends*

Modern critical response to *The Garies* has been sparse and tends to credit Webb with many "firsts" but inadequately considers his ideas about the intersection of race and class. The work did not receive serious critical attention until it was republished in 1969. In his introduction to that edition, Arthur P. Davis credits Webb with having written the first examination of the black experience in the antebellum northern United States, but faults Webb for his lack of a "frontal attack on slavery" and writes that it was "not the kind of protest novel one would expect from a free Negro in 1857." In 1973, James DeVries argued *The Garies* was essentially a sentimental novel, while B.F. Bogardus wrote that because Webb was a black man experiencing the realities of antebellum Philadelphia, his novel went beyond popular melodrama and was a "partly successful attempt" at literary realism. Other criticism of *The Garies* from the 1960s and 1970s finds fault with Webb because his black characters appear to have adopted "white," bourgeois values, not black consciousness, in order to achieve the American Dream. Webb's novel was largely dismissed because it did not seem to offer the sense of black pride that critics from that era were (apparently) seeking.

Scholarship on Webb broadened somewhat in the 1990s. In her dissertation on *The Garies*, Rosemary Crockett identified "the themes set forth in *The Garies* – the lives of free blacks, mixed marriage, racial violence and passing" as those that would dominate much of twentieth-century African American literature. Other scholars have approached *The Garies* by way of various entry points. Robert Reid-Pharr, for example, has posited that Webb represents an "ideological orientation that emphasizes the family and family life as the wellspring of black economic, political and social development" and

challenges miscegenation as a viable avenue for racial assimilation and modernization in American society. Werner Sollors and M. Giulia Fabi focus on the "passing" theme in Webb. Carla Peterson argues that "the novel openly endorses capitalism as an economic model for black empowerment" but celebrates collectivity rather than individual achievement, while Anna Mae Duane sees *The Garies* as one of the first texts in the black feminist tradition. Samuel Otter, in a 2010 publication, situates Webb within the context of other antebellum Philadelphia literature. Webb's novel, Otter writes, interprets the social texture of antebellum Philadelphia with "tests of character, reports on the condition of the free people of color, sketches of manners, and narratives of violence." All these scholars note that Webb's characters are middle- and upper-class, but do not focus on race and class specifically.

A handful of scholars have considered Webb's views on race and class. Robert S. Levine, for example, situates Webb's novel within the black antebellum temperance movement and notes that Webb's portrayal of the riot in *The Garies* "takes into account the involvement of all classes of whites." Levine's focus, however, is on the role of temperance in black elevation, not specifically Webb's treatment of race and class. Anna Engle, focusing on the Irish characters in *The Garies*, argues that Webb used Irish-American characters to demonstrate that categories of blackness and whiteness were not separate from but intricately entwined with class categories. In her book *The Syntax of Class* (2003), Amy Schrager Lang argues that while at its center, *The Garies* is about the social, economic and political struggles of African Americans to secure a home and be "at home" in America, she also offers a brief but excellent analysis of one key passage in *The Garies* where race and class are strikingly intertwined. Robert Nowatski, in a 2005

article, posits that Webb's depictions of prosperous northern blacks, mulattoes and Irish immigrants disrupt the racial ideologies of native-born white Americans. All of these are important contributions to understanding Webb's views and make an excellent starting point, but there is much more to say about Frank Webb's exploration of race and class.

An Expanded Consideration of *The Garies and Their Friends*

Taking the work of previous scholars as a starting point, this thesis will extend those discussions and probe more deeply Webb's views on race and class. Utilizing a close textual reading and keeping always in mind the historical and cultural context of antebellum America, this thesis will demonstrate that *The Garies and Their Friends* mounts a highly effective challenge to nineteenth-century assumptions that sought to permanently associate black skin with the lowest social status – a challenge that in and of itself marks yet another groundbreaking achievement on the part of Frank Webb.

Chapter One of this thesis will show that Webb used the literary device of mistaken identity in *The Garies* to demonstrate the artificiality and impermanence of racial categories in order to challenge and destabilize his white readers' assumptions, and to suggest that moral character resides not in any particular race or class, but in the individual. While some scholars have highlighted selected moments of mistaken identity in the text, this chapter will greatly expand upon the scholarship to consider the numerous and varied ways that Webb used mistaken identity for his purposes throughout *The Garies*.

Chapter Two focuses on the central dramatic event of *The Garies*, a violent urban riot. This chapter posits that Webb used the riot as a framework to interrogate the

complex interconnectedness of race, ethnicity and all social classes in antebellum Philadelphia. This section will carefully analyze the relationships between the upper-, middle- and lower-class characters in the riot - black, white and Irish - and will argue that Webb's objective was to use the riot to show that conflicting class realities were often entangled beneath the banner of racial hatred.

Chapter Three of this thesis will show that Webb forcefully defied racist categories by creating a new kind of black hero – a gentleman hero in the character of Mr. Walters. This chapter will challenge earlier scholarship that did not categorize Mr. Walters as an heroic figure and will argue that Mr. Walters merits inclusion with other black heroic literary figures of 1850s. Further, this chapter will espouse two new interpretations of Mr. Walters not previously addressed in the critical literature: one, that in his characterization of Mr. Walters, Webb prefigured the "double-consciousness" that W.E.B. Dubois would famously evoke nearly half a century later; and two, that Mr. Walters was a direct response to Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

The final chapter will suggest the overarching significance of the novel. The thesis will demonstrate that Frank Webb's *The Garies and Their Friends* is not merely a sentimental or melodramatic novel. It is an insightful and significant contribution to the history of race relations in urban antebellum America and to American literature.

CHAPTER TWO:

MISTAKEN IDENTITY: WEBB'S USE OF LITERARY ILLUSION TO CHALLENGE RACE AND CLASS ASSUMPTIONS

In *The Garies and Their Friends*, Frank Webb repeatedly raised questions about African-American identity and the permeability and fluidity of race and class in nineteenth-century America. One of the methods he used to do this was the narrative device of mistaken identity. The use of mistaken identity as part of plot development was not unusual in nineteenth-century fiction. In *Bleak House* (1853), Charles Dickens disguised a heroine in the clothing of a servant in order to conceal her upper-class identity.[18] In Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), a number of black characters escape from slavery by donning disguises that conceal their African heritage. In these examples, the characters are purposefully and temporarily hiding their identities, in one case to camouflage social class and in the other to conceal ancestry. In *The Garies*, Webb uses mistaken identity in a different and more complex way by overlapping the two categories and examining the space where race and class intersect. With three notable exceptions, none of Webb's characters are deliberately trying to conceal their identities; they are in fact going about their lives in straightforward fashion while others repeatedly make assumptions about them based on either skin color or class signifiers, or both. Woven into and throughout the text of *The Garies* is a series of subtle and not-so-subtle

[18] Webb most certainly read Charles Dickens' *Bleak House*. The urban setting of *The Garies* and the focus on class issues and conditions within the city are similar to those in *Bleak House*. More definitively, Webb's two main female characters are named Esther and Caddy, identical to Dickens' heroine Esther Summerson and her friend Caddy Jellyby.

incidents of mistaken identity that challenge nineteenth-century white assumptions about African American identity and the mutability of race and class that Webb seeks to illuminate and dissect. Webb uses his characters, his plot and his very language to call into question the presumed rigid racial and class delineations of nineteenth-century Philadelphia. He places incidents of mistaken identity throughout the text in order to reinforce his larger themes, to create a sense of instability for the (white) reader, and to pose profound questions about the definitions and presumed boundaries of racial and class identity in nineteenth-century America. Using the literary contrivance of mistaken identity, Webb challenged prevailing attitudes about racial and class categories.

Emily: Slave Mistress or "True Woman"?

From the opening pages of *The Garies,* Webb uses mistaken identity to challenge his readers' expectations about race and class. The title of chapter one, "In Which the Reader is Introduced to a Family of peculiar Construction," signals to the reader that something unusual may be coming.[19] The opening scene describes a sumptuous luncheon at the home of a rich Southern planter, Mr. Garie. The narrator describes Mr. Garie as having "the ease of manner usual with persons whose education and associations have been of a highly refined character" (Webb 1-2), confirming that Mr. Garie is not only wealthy, but also a gentleman, and no doubt in the mind of the white reader, a white gentleman. Joining Mr. Garie and "presiding at the tea-tray, sat a lady of marked beauty"

[19] Webb's opening chapter title precisely mirrors Stowe. The opening chapter of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is entitled "In Which the Reader Is Introduced to a Man of Humanity." In addition, Webb's use of the word "peculiar" is meant to resonate with "peculiar institution" or slavery, as a signal to the reader that this story will somehow reference slavery.

(Webb 2). This woman, named Emily, who sits beside Mr. Garie and acts as hostess over the home, is described as having "gloriously dark eyes," "a fine profile and perfectly moulded form," with the "faintest tinge of carmine" visible in her light-brown complexion (Webb 2). By placing this beautiful woman as hostess beside the wealthy gentleman, Webb sets the reader's expectations that an upper-class lady and gentleman are enjoying their luncheon. Then Webb stuns the reader: "No wonder that ten years before, when she was placed on the auction-block at Savannah, she had brought so high a price. Mr. Garie had paid two thousand dollars for her, and was the envy of all the young bucks in the neighborhood who had competed with him at the sale" (Webb 2). By revealing that Emily was purchased by Mr. Garie at a slave auction, and adding the crass details of the price paid for her, and the fact that Garie competed with other "young bucks" to purchase her, Webb creates dissonance for his readers. Even though he has remarked upon Emily's light-brown complexion, Webb has also connected her with signifiers of class that most nineteenth-century white Americans would correlate with a white-skinned person: he refers to her as a "lady"; he has associated her with a wealthy white man; and he has shown that Emily has the gentility and refinement to preside over a formal tea. All these signifiers of class have led the reader to assume that Emily is an upper-class white woman. The abrupt revelation that she is in fact Mr. Garie's African American slave jars the reader's sense of reality.

Webb constructs this case of mistaken identity to shock his (white) readers in order to blur the lines of race and class. Webb's intention is to challenge and refute nineteenth-century dominant culture essentialist stereotypes that associated blackness only with low social class, poverty, ignorance and a lack of cultivation. Webb seeks to

expand the reader's definition of the category of "lady" to include an African American woman. It is significant that this early incident of mistaken identity in the novel is between Webb and his readers, not between the characters in the story. Webb thereby signals the reader that he intends *The Garies* to be both didactic and polemical, that his goal is to shift the reader's point of view.

Webb misleads his readers in another significant way about the identity of Emily Garie. He refers to her in the text as "Mrs. Garie" and the "wife" of Mr. Garie. It is not until fully one-third of the way through the novel, however, that the omniscient narrator reveals "to Emily Winston we have always accorded the title of Mrs. Garie; whilst, in reality, she had no legal claim to it whatever" (Webb 133). In the Garies' home state of Georgia, marriage between a white man and a "mulatto" was invalid. It is not until the Garies move to the North that they are able to legally marry.

Webb deliberately deceives the reader by repeatedly referring to Emily as Mrs. Garie. It would certainly not have been shocking for antebellum white audiences to read about a white slaveholder who kept a slave woman as a mistress; indeed, the tragic mulatta was a stock figure in mid-century literature. Emily Garie in many ways "reflects the popular literary conception of vulnerable and victimized black women" (Duane 203), comparing easily with Lydia Maria Child's Rosalie or William Wells Brown's Clotel. Tragic mulattas were always of barely visible African ancestry, exceptionally beautiful, and highly cultivated in mind and manners. Wealthy white men purchased them as slaves but also often pledged undying love. After bearing children to their white owners, they were almost always abandoned to terrible fates, usually culminating in death. Emily fits the description of the tragic mulatta: she is fair-skinned, very beautiful, skilled and

educated in all the social graces, but a slave nonetheless, and like other tragic mulatta figures, she will meet with a very bad end.

In one important way, however, Emily Garie is different from other tragic mulattas: she actually does become Mr. Garie's legal wife. Through the first third of the novel, Webb grants her the title of 'wife', even though it is legally inaccurate; in the remainder of the novel, until her death, she is in fact legally wed to Mr. Garie. Webb creates this case of mistaken identity for Emily as Garie's wife in order to legitimize Emily in the minds of the readers. Calling her Garie's wife separates her from the tragic mulatta; it elevates and legitimizes Emily until they can legally marry. By referring to her as Garie's wife, Webb demands respect for her, even though the reader knows she is black and a slave. In the nineteenth century, wife was not a label regularly used to describe black female slaves partnered with wealthy white plantation owners. Webb fashions the mistaken identity for Emily as 'wife' early in the novel to push the boundaries of nineteenth-century social categories to include a black woman as legitimate wife of a white man.

Webb had a second purpose in deceiving his readers about Emily's lack of legal marital status. Webb wanted to establish in the reader's mind that Emily was worthy of inclusion in the "cult of true womanhood," the nineteenth-century ideal of femininity, defined by the four cardinal virtues of piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity (Welter 152). In the first third of the novel, Emily is portrayed as a devoted wife and mother, and has "right understanding and faithful and cheerful performance of social and family duties" (Welter 162). Nineteenth-century readers would not have thought of a slave mistress or tragic mulatta as a "true woman." By imparting the qualities of ideal

female virtuousness to Emily, and referring to her as Garie's wife, Webb allowed the white reader to settle into a relationship with (black) Emily that forced the reader to confront their racist assumptions. By the time that Webb reveals that Emily is not married to Mr. Garie, she has earned the reader's sympathy: Emily might have African blood in her veins, but she was a true woman, wife and mother, nonetheless. Webb misrepresented Emily's identity as Mrs. Garie until she legally owned the title as a strategy to disturb the boundaries of race and class, in order to make the point that a woman of African ancestry could be a worthy wife and also a member of the "cult of true womanhood" as much as a white woman.

A "Christian" Minister

When Mr. Garie and Emily finally do have an opportunity to marry in Philadelphia, Webb again uses mistaken identity as a mechanism to highlight hypocrisies within his society. Mr. Garie summons Dr. Blackly, a white minister, to their home to perform the marriage ceremony. Upon seeing the assembled group of the "thoroughly Saxon" Mr. Garie and the "coloured" Emily, Dr. Blackly says "I think there has been some mistake here," and expresses surprise that a gentleman of Garie's "evident intelligence should seek such a connection" (Webb 136-137). Dr. Blackly refuses to perform the marriage because he does "not believe in the propriety of amalgamation, and on no consideration could (he) be induced to assist in the union of a white man or woman with a person who has the slightest infusion of African blood in their veins. I believe the negro race," Dr. Blackly continued, "to be marked out by the hand of God for servitude" (Webb 137). Mr. Garie angrily dismisses Dr. Blackly, stating "I mistook you for a

Christian minister, [emphasis Webb's] which mistake you will please to consider as my apology for having troubled you" (Webb 137). On the recommendation of a black friend, a different (white) clergyman, Father Banks, is summoned, and in short order, the Garies are legally wed.

Webb uses mistaken identity in this scene for biting social commentary. By highlighting the minister's mistaken assumption that the white Mr. Garie will marry a white woman, and his adamant refusal to perform the ceremony once he realizes the bride has black blood, Webb shows a specific example of urban race prejudice in the North, reflecting the historical reality.

The minister's reason for refusing to perform the marriage, that "the Negro race is marked out by the hand of God for servitude," refers to the "Curse of Ham," a well-known antebellum rationale for enslaving blacks. The myth of the Curse of Ham operated on the level of popular belief and mythology. It claimed that God had put a curse upon the descendants of Ham, and that the physical result of the curse was a blackening of the skin that marked them for perpetual, divinely sanctioned slavery (Fredrickson 43, 45). It is interesting to note that in this scene, however, Emily Garie is not a slave, but a free woman, yet the white northern minister makes no distinction between free blacks and enslaved blacks with regard to his attitudes. The Curse of Ham is the epitome of the collapse of race with class; in the minister's thinking, black skin always equals the lowest social class, and the connection between black skin and servitude is innate, permanent and unbridgeable, regardless of the circumstances of any specific individual.

With the angry but proud dismissal of Dr. Blackly, the "prejudiced old sinner" (Webb 137), Webb pointedly rejects the validity of the Curse of Ham and the joining of

race with class, and goes a step further to accuse the minister of wearing a false identity as a Christian. Webb does not reject Christianity itself, but rather rejects the hypocrisy of those who call themselves Christian but behave in decidedly un-Christian ways. Webb's bitterness is palpable in his use of italics upon the words "Christian minister," and there is deliberate irony in Webb's naming the minister 'Dr. Blackly.' In this scene, Webb not only uses mistaken identity to highlight an example of race prejudice, but in a brilliant reversal, he also uses mistaken identity to reject a symbol of essentialist thinking about race and class and to condemn those who would use religion to justify confining blacks to servitude.

A Dimly Lit Room – The Process of Assumption-Building

The character of Mrs. Garie provides Webb with a further opportunity to challenge his reader's assumptions about race and class through yet another instance of mistaken identity. After the Garies have relocated to Philadelphia with their two children, they settle into a rented home, and the reader is introduced to their next-door neighbors, (the white) George and Jule Stevens, and their two children, George Jr. and Lizzy. Mr. and Mrs. Stevens make the erroneous assumption that the wife of their new neighbor, Mr. Garie, is a white woman. To create the opportunity for the false assumption, and to build narrative tension, Webb deliberately conceals the racial identity of Mrs. Garie by confining her character to her new home with a difficult pregnancy. The reader, of course is well aware that Mrs. Garie is a bi-racial woman; this time it is the characters in the story that are acting under false assumptions, while the reader has an omniscient point of

view. Drawing on signifiers of race and class before actually meeting her, Mr. and Mrs. Stevens erroneously conclude that Mrs. Garie is a white woman.

One factor that does not figure in the Stevens' assessment is their proximity as neighbors in a residential area. In the time frame depicted in the novel, likely the 1830s and 1840s, neighborhoods in Philadelphia were racially mixed. "Colored people lived side by side with whites in working class neighborhoods, ... in the middle class Garie-Stevens neighborhood, and some few had access to the wealthy section(s) of town.... The novel thus accurately present(s) the mixed-color living patterns of antebellum Philadelphia" (Crockett 167). [20] When Mrs. Stevens first meets Mrs. Garie, before she is aware of her ancestry, she confesses that she and her husband had been "tormented with the suspicion that (the landlord) would put a family of niggers" (Webb 129) in the house. Because Philadelphia neighborhoods at this time were racially mixed, the Stevens' cannot deduce anything about the racial background of their new neighbors just from the fact of their renting a home in that neighborhood. The Stevens certainly hoped that their new neighbors were white, but there were no rigid residential patterns that guaranteed segregation.

Mr. and Mrs. Stevens believed that Mrs. Garie was white partly because they had met Mr. Garie, and he was a white man. Interracial marriage, in fact interracial socializing of any kind, was uncommon in mid-century America and was an extremely volatile issue. There were a number of reasons for the many violent racial riots that

[20] While residential neighborhoods were racially mixed, cultural activities were clearly separate. For further discussion of the institutions of nineteenth-century Philadelphia's black community, see Lapsansky, "Separate Churches."

occurred in Philadelphia from 1829 to 1849,[21] but white fear of the sexual mixing of races was often an underlying provocation. For example, on May 17, 1838, a white mob set fire to and destroyed the African-American institution, Pennsylvania Hall, a grand auditorium that was to have been a venue for social change. Newspapers reported that "the immediate cause of this popular outbreak is said to have been the ridiculous and ostentatious amalgamation of colors in Ches(t)nut street, during the hours of fashionable promenading" and that the sight of the light-skinned (black man) Robert Purvis helping his darker-skinned wife Harriet from her carriage had fueled the riot (Otter 134). On October 9, 1849, a white mob attacked the California House, a structure that housed a tavern that attracted interracial patrons and was owned by a mulatto man who had married a white woman (Otter 137). Interracial social contact was not the single cause of Philadelphia's race riots, but it was an underlying factor in many. When Mr. and Mrs. Stevens saw that Mr. Garie was a white man, they inferred that Mrs. Garie was white based on the overwhelming racist assumptions of the culture in which they lived.

Further, the Stevens and Garie children had been playing together, and the Garie children, named Emily and Clarence, were so fair-skinned that they "showed no trace whatever of African origin" (Webb 2). The Stevens knew that Mr. Garie was white, and they observed that the Garie children were light-skinned. The imperfect visual cue of light skin mistakenly signaled to the Stevens that Mrs. Garie, too, was white.

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[21] Historians debate the causes of Philadelphia's racial violence. These reasons include technological change inspired by the industrial revolution, factory servitude, rapid increase in the white laboring population, economic depression, expanding gap between rich and poor, inadequate housing, and political incompetence and corruption, to cite a few. For a fuller discussion of the riots of Philadelphia in the nineteenth century, see Otter, *Philadelphia Stories* 131-210.

The information that his new neighbors were "from the South and very rich" (Webb 125) also contributed to the Stevens' assumptions regarding Mrs. Garie. Stevens correlated great wealth and Southern provenance with white-skinned people. Mr. Stevens made the assumption that if Mrs. Garie was wealthy and from the South, then she must be white.[22] Calculating that it might be of some future benefit to him, Mr. Stevens instructed his wife to encourage the friendship between the children. Using the inexact visual marker of light skin color and assuming that wealthy southerners were by definition white people, Mr. and Mrs. Stevens mistakenly concluded that Mrs. Garie was white.

The face-to-face meeting between Mrs. Stevens and Mrs. Garie ultimately disabuses Mrs. Stevens of her misconceptions. When Mrs. Stevens is finally invited into the Garie home to meet Mrs. Garie, Webb heightens the drama for the reader because "the lamps were not lighted when Mrs. Stevens was introduced, and faces could not, therefore be clearly distinguished" (Webb 129). Chatting in neighborly fashion, this is the moment that Mrs. Stevens tells the Garies that she is quite relieved that the house was not purchased by a "family of niggers" and that those blacks "that are not slaves ought to be sent out of the country back to Africa, where they belong: they are without exception, the most ignorant, idle, miserable set I ever saw" (Webb 130). Mrs. Stevens' comment exemplifies the white nineteenth-century American association of black skin with the lowest social class and particular negative traits such as ignorance, idleness and

[22] Stevens' assumptions associating southern provenance and wealth with whiteness were supported by the fact that very, very few southern blacks attained any level of prosperity. For a full discussion, please see Schweninger's "Prosperous Blacks in the South, 1790-1880."

wretchedness, which apply "without exception" to all blacks.[23] Mrs. Stevens' racial attitudes are precisely the conflation of race and class that Webb hopes to acknowledge, challenge and recast for his readers.

Mr. Garie replies to Mrs. Stevens that he can show her at least "one exception," at which point he moves a lamp near his wife so that her face is revealed to Mrs. Stevens. Webb describes Mrs. Stevens' reaction:

> As the light fell on [Mrs. Garie's] face, their visitor saw that she belonged to the very class that she [Mrs. Stevens] had been abusing in such unmeasured terms and so petrified was she [Mrs. Stevens] with confusion at the faux pas she had committed, that she was utterly unable to improvise the slightest apology. (Webb 130)

With great dignity and scathing refinement, Mrs. Garie leaves the room. Mrs. Stevens "suffered herself to be politely bowed out of the house," then ran through the garden and leaped a fence in order to rush home and tell her husband the news that Mrs. Garie was in fact a "nigger woman" (Webb 131). The sharp contrast between Mrs. Garie's dignified exit from the room, and Mrs. Stevens' inelegant running from the house and leaping a fence, further emphasizes Webb's point that skin color does not automatically determine ladylike behavior, that, indeed, an African American woman can be quite cultivated and dignified, while a white woman can be quite the opposite.

Using signifiers of race and class, but without having met her, the Stevens concluded Mrs. Garie was a white woman. Based on their observations of her white

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[23] Mrs. Stevens' comment that blacks "that are not slaves ought to be sent out of the country back to Africa, where they belong" refers to one proposed solution to slavery and race relations that was seriously debated in America from 1817 until the early 1860s. It held that blacks should be returned to Africa, specifically to a Liberian colony. Although William Lloyd Garrison and the abolitionist movement largely discredited colonizationists after 1830, there was "renewed interest in black expatriation or colonization in the 1850s" (Frederickson 115) and the idea persisted until around 1863. For a detailed discussion, please see Fredrickson, 1-42, 115, 130-164 and 166.

husband, her seemingly white children, their Southern provenance, and rumors of their vast wealth, the Stevens' mistakenly assumed Mrs. Garie was white. When they believed that Mrs. Garie was white, the Stevens' behavior toward the Garie family was solicitous in the extreme. Once they learned that Mrs. Garie had African blood, their behavior immediately changed. Mrs. Stevens, for example, promptly escorted little Clarence Garie from her house telling him "Don't come in here any more – I don't wish you to come into my house" (Webb 132). From then on, the Stevens children were forbidden to associate with the Garie children. Based upon the new information about Mrs. Garie's heritage, the Stevens' behavior and attitudes towards the Garies transformed instantly from friendly to actively hostile.

Webb carefully crafted this incident of mistaken identity, giving his readers more information than the individual characters in the story possessed. Webb allowed the reader to observe from an omniscient viewpoint how and why the Stevens' gathered information and made assumptions, all the while knowing that the Stevens' conclusions would be proved wrong. Knowledge of the true identity of Mrs. Garie heightens the dramatic tension as the reader anticipates the approaching and inevitable moment when her identity will be revealed.

In addition to this, however, Webb's purposeful narrative structure may be reaching for something new in African-American fiction, an attempt to sort out and account for the process by which people construct ideas about social and racial categories, and to further point out the illogic of the meanings that people attach to those categories. Webb clearly means to suggest to the reader that assumptions about racial identity based on appearances can be wrong. He points out the absurdity and

impossibility of making accurate judgments based on skin color, and he shows the catastrophic impact those assumptions carry, when acted upon. Webb wants his reader to see and feel the absurdity of the change in interactions between the two families, most significantly for the children, not because of any difference in the individuals, but because of a shift in perception on the part of the Stevens'. Webb's textual build-up to the moment when Mrs. Garie is revealed to be black, attempts to deconstruct the components and account for the circumstances that lead to the Stevens' mistaken assumptions about Mrs. Garie. In this sense, Webb may be anticipating the twentieth-century idea of the social construction of race.[24]

Mistaken Identity and the Trope of "Passing"

Webb further mines the mechanism of mistaken identity through his use of the trope of "passing." Passing, the conscious decision by a light-skinned African American to cross over or "pass" into white society and live as a white person, has a deep history in the African American literary tradition.[25] Webb's use of this trope places him firmly within this tradition. In contrast to characters like Mrs. Garie, who makes no effort to conceal her heritage, Webb's characters George Winston and Clarence Garie (Garie's

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[24] Historian Robert Nowatzki concurs, noting, "this aspect of Webb's novel can be better appreciated now than in 1857, when the notion of race as a biological essence was more deeply entrenched in the minds of Americans. While the idea of race as a natural category has been slow to die, it has been steadily undermined and replaced with the notion of race as a socially constructed identity" (Nowatzki 52).

[25] Werner Sollors notes that the "first American instances in which the word "passing" was used to signify "crossing the color line" would seem to have appeared in notices concerning runaway slaves, and the term "passing" – first for "free," and then for (its later part-synonym) "white" - may have entered American fiction through the citing of such bills." (Sollors 255). For an overview of the literary use of the trope of passing, please see *Passing and the Rise of the African American Novel* by M. Giulia Fabi.

son), are both light-skinned, upper-class African American men who deliberately conceal their antecedents in order to enter white society. Given their lighter skin color and their upper-class refinement, neither character has any difficulty passing for white; in fact, Webb seems perfectly confident that each man could pass without challenge into white society at will, perhaps reflecting the historical reality that passing was fairly common. Although Webb uses these two characters in different ways, his larger objective with the use of passing is to demonstrate the virulence of anti-black sentiment and the artificial, illogical and permeable nature of racially constructed barriers in nineteenth-century Philadelphia.

George Winston: The "Passer" as Trickster Figure

Webb's George Winston passes into northern white society as a temporary measure in order to assess the viability of relocating his business to the northern states. As the "offspring of a mulatto field hand and her master" (Webb 8), Winston, a former slave and now successful businessman, is both light-skinned and quite wealthy. His objective in passing is to investigate how African Americans are treated in northern white society. During his northern tour, Winston has been accepted by upper-class whites as one of their own and has seen

> enough of Northern society to convince him, that, amongst the whites, he could not form either social or business connections, should his identity with the African race be discovered; and whilst, on the other hand, he would have found sufficiently refined associations amoungst the people of colour to satisfy his social wants, he felt that he could not bear the isolation and contumely to which they were subjected. He, therefore, decided on leaving the United States, and on going to some country where, if he must struggle for success in life, he might do it without the additional embarrassments that would be thrown in his way in his native land, solely because he belonged to an oppressed race. (Webb 14)

By passing as white, Winston has gained knowledge about northern society. He has mingled with whites and heard and observed their unguarded words and actions with regard to blacks. This has led him to conclude with certainty that the same whites that welcomed him as a wealthy white man would instantly reject him if they knew his heritage. For Winston, the racism of whites precludes his ever making a home in the north, or anywhere in the United States for that matter. Webb uses Winston's experience as a white passer to verify the pervasive racial prejudice of northern whites from an "insider" or white point of view.

Webb presents Winston's passing as something of a trickster tale. The trickster, another trope in African American literature and oral traditions, is a heroic black folk figure, sometimes an animal, and sometimes a person. The trickster's primary role within a narrative is to break the rules of conventional behavior as a form of rebellion against an oppressive system in order to provide some "social protest or psychological release" (Levine, Lawrence, *Black Culture* 102) for the black audience.[26] Although not wholly a trickster figure, Winston's conversation with Mr. Garie relating his experience as a passer has elements of the trickster.

As Winston and Mr. Garie lunch together, Garie asks Winston if the whites ever suspected that he was "coloured," and Winston replies that "they had not the remotest idea of such a thing" and that he was treated "with the most distinguished consideration" (Webb 3). Winston tells Mr. Garie that the wealthy white Mr. Priestly even encouraged

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[26] For an excellent discussion of the trickster figure in African American literature, please see *The Signifying Monkey* by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. Gates begins with the African roots of the Yoruba trickster figure of Esu-Elegbara and traces its history through current African American literature.

Winston to escort his daughter to a grand ball. Mr. Garie's response is to exclaim in delight:

> "Well, Winston, that is too rich," slapping his hand on the table, and laughing until he was red in the face; "too good, by Jove! Oh! I can't keep that. I must write to them, and say I forgot to mention in my note of introduction that you were a coloured gentleman. ….. It will be a great triumph for me. The old man prides himself on being able to detect evidences of the least drop of African blood in anyone…. It will convince him, I hope, that a man can be a gentleman even though he has African blood in his veins." (Webb 3-4)

Mr. Garie and Winston enjoy a hearty laugh over the fact that Winston has fooled the white Mr. Priestly, so much so that Priestly delivers his daughter into the hands of Winston as an escort, perhaps hoping that Winston, who he thinks is a wealthy, southern white gentleman, will marry the girl. With this scene, Webb pushes high-stakes nineteenth-century sexual taboos by suggesting that a white girl could unknowingly marry a "black" man. Webb tempers the suggestion by having the white Mr. Garie as the one most amused, and by having Garie then launch into a lengthy summary of Mr. Priestly's disingenuous and sham regard for blacks. Like a trickster figure, however, Winston has broken the rules of society by passing into the white world then enjoying the success of his ruse.[27] Mr. Winston enters white society temporarily and for his own purposes. Webb uses this version of mistaken identity, Winston's passing, to verify northern white racism from an "insider" point of view, and to show the permeability of racial barriers through the double-edged humor of the trickster figure.

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[27] It is fascinating that during this entire 4-page passage, Mrs. Garie, who is also present at the luncheon, is silent. Perhaps she, as a black woman and mother of biracial children, does not find the story as amusing as her white husband. The next time she speaks in the scene, it is to ask Winston to tell her about the "coloured folks; they are the ones I take the most interest in" (Webb 7).

Webb makes further use of Winston's passing with a clever incident of double mistaken identity when Mr. Winston, passing as a white man, and a group of black hotel waiters misidentify each other. In the course of his travels, Winston stays the night in a hotel in Philadelphia. Unbeknownst to Winston, most of the black waiters employed at the hotel are "connected with the Vigilance Committee of the Under-ground Railroad Company – a society formed for the assistance of fugitive slaves" (Webb 40).[28] Because of his physical appearance and his stated hometown of New Orleans, the waiters assume Winston to be a rich white Southerner, and consequently target him as the object of a moneymaking ruse to benefit the coffers of the Vigilance Committee fund. One of the waiters approaches Winston, and speaking in an affected dialect, tells him "I often wish dat I was back agin on the old place – hain't got no kind marster to look after me here, if I was only back on de old place" (Webb 39). The waiter hopes his appeal will solicit money from Winston because he believes Winston is a white, pro-slavery Southerner, and will support the waiter's return to "marster." In actuality, because the waiter is an agent of the Underground Railroad, any funds collected will in fact go to help fugitive slaves escape slavery. Much to the waiter's surprise, Mr. Winston is indignant and tells him that "Any man that prefers slavery to freedom deserves to be a slave – you ought to be ashamed of yourself" (Webb 40). The waiter departs, realizing he has "made a great mistake this time; a very queer kind of Southerner that is" .... talking as correct English,

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[28] Webb here draws upon historical fact. The Vigilance Committee, begun in 1837, was organized by a group of Philadelphia blacks to aid "colored persons in distress." Philadelphia's proximity to the slaveholding South meant that there was a constant stream of fugitive slaves making their way to north to freedom and applying to the committee for aid. Funds were never sufficient to meet the needs of the fugitives and the committee, continually running into debt, welcomed financial assistance from anyone willing to give it. By the summer of 1839, the committee was aiding one person a day. The committee disbanded around 1844 (Winch, *Black Elite* 88-89).

and with as pure Northern an accent as any one could boast" (Webb 40). The waiter's affected dialect when in conversation with Winston, in contrast to his use of "correct English" when not speaking to Winston, further emphasizes the waiter's disguise of his true identity. The waiter still believes Mr. Winston is a white man, but is perplexed that his politics are not typical of a white Southerner.

It is a case of mistaken identity on both sides. The waiter drew conclusions about Winston based on his skin color, his behavior and the fact of his registering as a visitor from New Orleans. Because of his outward appearance and conduct, the waiter perceived and treated him as white. Mr. Winston, for his part, believed that the waiter was a foolish man who wished to return to slavery when in fact, the waiter was an agent on the Underground Railroad helping blacks escape from slavery. Mr. Winston is obviously fair-skinned enough to pass for white, and is in fact, actively passing for white; the irony, of course, is that Winston himself was a former slave. Both Mr. Winston and the waiter conceal their true identities, Mr. Winston as a black man and former slave, and the waiter as a member of the Underground Railroad.

Winston never reveals to the waiter the facts of his history, and the waiter never reveals to Winston his affiliation with the Underground Railroad. It is rather the reader of Webb's novel who knows the true identity of each man and therefore comprehends the irony of the interaction. Webb's clever use of double mistaken identity in this scene is meant to suggest to his reader that external cues such as skin color, behavior, and linguistic patterns can be misleading, and do not necessarily indicate any finite truth about an individual, black or white. Once again, Webb uses mistaken identity to remind his readers that things are not always as they appear on the surface.

Clarence Garie: The "Passer" as Tragic Figure

If Webb uses Winston's passing as a trickster story, he uses his other passing character, Clarence Garie, in a far different way, not as a trickster figure, but rather, as a tragic figure. Clarence is the son of the white Mr. Garie and the mulatta, Emily Garie; therefore, Clarence is a quadroon, a person having one-quarter black blood. As Webb notes, the "casual observer would have passed him by without dreaming that a drop of negro blood coursed through his veins" (Webb 3). When his parents are killed during the riot, Mr. Balch, the Garie's sympathetic white lawyer and Mr. Walters decide that the boy's African heritage should be concealed and that he will be sent away to be raised, educated and live life as a white person. [29] For Clarence, then, the stakes of his passing are much different from Winston's: Clarence has passed into white society permanently, and at least initially, without his making that choice. As an adult, Clarence chooses to keep the secret of his heritage and live as a white person, yet Webb makes it clear that as a child, Clarence was given no choice and had no say in the decision. By the time he is an

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[29] For a full discussion of Mr. Walters' part in this decision, please see Chapter 4. Also, there is a marvelous passage when Clarence arrives at his new "white" home in Sudbury that suggests that Webb has read some of the romance literature of the period, such as Melville's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1837-38). Webb's description of the town of Sudbury is bathed in white – the town "shone white and sparkling .. as if built of salt"; it is covered with snow, icicles glisten, and there is a "cotton-mill" and a "silver cap upon a mountain of snow." Webb definitely uses the color white to set the mood and signify Clarence's transition into white society. The use of the color white as a symbol to invoke deeper meaning recalls the final pages of *Pym* where the characters are on a boat surrounded by all things white - white linen shirts as a sail for their boat, light gray vapor around them, milky water, a white handkerchief, a fine white ash-like powder falling from the air, a mysterious white marine animal that floats past, pallid white birds flying by, and finally a chasm that opens where they are received by a mysterious shrouded human figure "and the hue of the skin was of the perfect whiteness of the snow." The precise meaning of Melville's passage is debated, but both Melville and Webb saturate their scenes with the color white and imbue that color with deeper meaning. Possibly Webb was familiar with *Pym* and tried to model his scene on Melville's.

adult, he has grown used to living as a white person, and cannot imagine suffering the "degradations" to which blacks are subjected. With Clarence's passing, Webb shows the terrible and tragic psychological and social costs of racism.

Webb frames Clarence's life as a passer in direct contrast to his sister, Emily, who does not pass into white society. Like Clarence, Emily shows "no trace whatever of African origin" (Webb 2), but Balch and Walters conclude that she is too young to keep the secret of her background. It is decided that while Clarence will be sent away to live as a white person, Emily will remain with the black Ellis family. As the siblings grow up, each falls in love and makes plans to marry. By contrasting the way their marital dreams unfold, Webb makes a powerful statement about the price Clarence must pay for living a false identity in a racist society.

Emily identifies fully and happily as an African American and becomes engaged to marry Charlie Ellis, a black man. When Clarence tries to persuade her to abandon Charlie and the black community and join him in passing, she rejects the idea, telling Clarence, "You walk on the side of the oppressor – I, thank God, am with the oppressed. How much happier am I, sharing their degradation, than you appear to be" (Webb 336). Indeed, Emily's full acceptance and happy immersion into the black community is highlighted in the extravagant wedding and feast scene at the end of the novel. Webb notes that just before the ceremony, "there was a deeper colour than usual on her cheeks" (Webb 373), indicating Emily's identification with her African American heritage. After the ceremony, she is embraced in Mrs. Ellis's arms, called "daughter, and kissed … with such warm affection that [Emily] no longer felt herself an orphan" (Webb 375). Emily never considers passing for white, and she never wavers about her identity as an African

American. Webb affirms Emily's choices by rewarding her with a happy marriage and a loving family and community. In Webb's eyes, Emily has made the right decisions.

Clarence, on the other hand, conceals his origins and does not fare as well as his sister. Like Emily, Clarence has fallen in love and plans to marry. Passing for white, he has become engaged to Miss Anne Bates, or as he calls her, Little Birdie, the daughter of a wealthy white man. Clarence has not told Birdie or her family that he is "coloured." They are deeply in love, but he is afraid that if he tells her the truth, she will reject him. Keeping the "tormenting secret" of his heritage has caused Clarence to break down mentally and physically "until it has crowded out every honourable and manly feeling" and his fear of exposure has gnawed away at him "until it has almost eaten [his] heart away" (Webb 325). Webb portrays Clarence as utterly miserable, wasting away physically and emotionally. Even though Clarence resolves to confess all to Little Birdie, he cannot bring himself to do it. Inevitably, Clarence's identity is revealed to the Bates family by George Stevens, Jr. son of the arch villain, George Stevens. Mr. Bates forbids the couple to ever meet again, telling Clarence "Had you been unaware of your origin, and the revelation of this gentleman [George Stevens Jr.] been as new to you as to me, you would have deserved sympathy; but you have been acting a lie, claiming a position in society to which you knew you had no right and deserve execration and contempt" (Webb 353-354). Clarence spends the remainder of the novel literally wasting away, growing more and more feeble, until he returns to his sister's home to die. Webb concludes Clarence's story by telling the reader, "they buried Clarence beside his parents and … coloured people followed him to his last home, and wept over his grave" (Webb 391).

Unlike his sister's happy life, Clarence suffers greatly. As an adult, he chooses to hide his mother's lineage and pass for a white man. Clarence creates this mistaken identity for himself, but fear of exposure of his true heritage haunts him every moment of his life and destroys his happiness and his health. He cannot marry the love of his life, and dies utterly estranged from the white community. The fact that Clarence returns to his sister's home, an African American home, to die, and that "coloured people" buried him, signals Webb's belief in the strength and solidarity of the African American community.

Webb uses Clarence's mistaken identity to show the extreme psychological and social suffering of an individual in Clarence's situation. Moreover, Webb utilizes Clarence's passing to condemn the systemic racism of nineteenth-century America that would create such a situation for a person like Clarence. Certainly, Webb portrays Clarence as a weak, "unmanly" character with many unappealing traits. For example, Clarence sometimes joins other whites in their "heartless jests" (Webb 325) against blacks, or he avoids black "dearest friends" encountered in public places, and he tries to convince his sister to join him in passing for white. Much of Clarence's story revolves around the fact that he cannot summon the personal courage to reveal his secret and tell his white fiancé that he has African blood for fear that she will reject him. Webb draws Clarence as effeminate, cowardly, and despicable.

Yet, even with all that, at the end of the novel, a reader feels sympathy for Clarence. Webb creates sympathy for Clarence because he repeatedly reminds the reader that whatever Clarence's personal failings may be, he is in fact, a victim of the racist circumstances in which he lives. As a child, he is sent to live as a white person because

Balch and Walters conclude he "will be better off" (Webb 275), acknowledging the pervasive racial prejudice of nineteenth-century America. When Mr. Bates demands the return of Little Birdie's love letters from Clarence, and Clarence promises upon his honor to send the letters the next day, Bates sneers, "A nigger's honour!" and Clarence responds

> "Yes, sir – a nigger's honour!" repeated Clarence, the colour mounting to his pale cheeks. "A few drops of negro blood in a man's veins do not entirely deprive him of noble sentiments. Tis true my past concealment does not argue in my favour. – I concealed that which was no fault of my own, but what the injustice of society has made a crime." (Webb 355)

Although Clarence admits that he did disguise his identity, he did so because of the "injustice" of a racist society that has made even a drop of African blood a crime. In this passage, Clarence momentarily becomes a passionate and articulate defender of not only himself but of all African Americans, as Webb connects him to his African American blood by restoring the "colour to his pale cheeks" (Webb 355). Clarence's words express the wider experience of all nineteenth-century African Americans.

Webb's omniscient narrator then pronounces that Little Birdie and Clarence were both victims of systemic racial prejudice. After Clarence dies,

> They gently bore [Little Birdie] away. That dull, cold look came back again upon her face, and left it never more in life. She walked about mournfully for a few years, pressing her hand upon her heart; and then passed away to join her lover, where distinctions in race or colour are unknown, and where the prejudices of earth cannot mar their happiness. (Webb 391)

And on the final page of the novel, the narrator declares

> We, too, Clarence, cast a tear upon thy tomb – poor victim of prejudice to thy colour! And deem thee better off resting upon thy cold pillow of earth, than battling with that malignant sentiment that persecuted thee, and has crushed energy, hope, and life from many stronger hearts. (Webb 391)

The lovers leave behind a world of "malignant sentiment" and join one another "where distinctions in race and colour are unknown." [30] The pair cannot be united because of the injustices of this world and must die in order to be together in the next world. Webb's intention is to stir the emotions of his readers and arouse their sense of outrage at the unfairness of their racist world.

Webb uses the trope of passing as a form of mistaken identity with Winston and Clarence to show the permeability of nineteenth-century racial barriers and the depth of anti-black prejudice. He uses Winston as a trickster figure. With Clarence, Webb creates a gut-wrenching, melodramatic plotline in order to show the devastating consequences of racism upon individuals. Webb's repeated references to the wider society contextualizes Clarence within the racist world of nineteenth-century America and broadens Webb's purpose, which is to remind his reader of the real reasons that Clarence suffers.

"Mrs. Thomas Has Her Troubles" - Humorous Uses of Mistaken Identity

Webb also uses mistaken identity in humorous ways within his plot to disturb his readers' assumptions. His amusing vignettes involving the white Mrs. Thomas and her black servant boy, Charlie Ellis are meant to amuse his readers, but also to offer biting social commentary. Webb pointedly shows that despite Mrs. Thomas' white skin, upper-class status, and pretensions of her own refinement, in reality it is the black servant boy Charlie who is educated, cultured, and intelligent. To get Charlie to work for her, Mrs.

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[30] It is interesting that Little Birdie loves Clarence, even after learning about his African American mother. It is also interesting that Webb unites the lovers in the next world. Once again, Webb violates a major nineteenth-century sexual taboo by having a white woman knowingly love and accept a "black" man.

Thomas tells Charlie's mother that Charlie will only benefit from "coming into daily contact with refined and educated people" (Webb 25-26) such as herself. Mrs. Thomas' assumption, that white, wealthy people are by definition more refined and educated than black, middle-class people, is another fallacy that Webb seeks to refute.

Mrs. Thomas is a "silly" woman, affected "with an intense desire to be at the head of a ton" (Webb 73).[31] She is but two to three generations removed from her working-class ancestors, which makes her all the more determined to "look down upon the rest of the world from the pinnacle on which [she] imagined [herself] placed" (Webb 73). It is critical to Mrs. Thomas' sense of her own superiority that she be known as a cultured, refined, upper-class lady, though the reality is something quite different. For example, she hosts extravagant dinner parties where she

> would sit for hours, mumbling dishes that disagreed with her; smiling at conversations carried on in villainous French, of which language she did not understand a word; and admiring the manners of addle-headed young men (who got tipsy at her evening parties), because they had been to Europe, and were therefore considered quite men of the world. (Webb 73)[32]

Webb, however, tells the reader that after the parties were over and the guests had gone home, Mrs. Thomas "would console herself with a dinner of boiled mutton and roasted turnips, as a slight compensation for the unwholesome French dishes she had compelled herself to swallow" (Webb 73). Boiled mutton and roasted turnips, a simpler fare,

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[31] The word "ton" was originally derived from the French "le bon ton" meaning "the right tone", and refers to people of fashion and fashionable society. It was commonly used in the nineteenth century to refer to British high society. ("ton n.3b". Oxford English Dictionary Online. March 2013. Oxford UP 25 March 2013).

[32] It is obvious from *The Garies* that Frank Webb understood French. The entire text is littered with French words. One cannot help but think that Mrs. Thomas' lack of French was a dig offering personal satisfaction for Webb.

connect Mrs. Thomas with her lower-class heritage. Webb's intention is to set aside Mrs. Thomas' affected identity and reveal her true identity.

One early textual example shows the contrast between white pretensions of education and Charlie's actual education. Charlie is assisting at a formal dinner party given by Mrs. Thomas and her daughter Mrs. Morton. The guests begin to debate the origins of the use of the word 'salad' in English poetry, when one gentleman asserts that it was nowhere to be found in any of the old English poets. Charlie, who was listening to the conversation, became so excited that he could no longer contain himself, and despite the frowns of the hostess, exclaimed

> "Yes it can, it's in Chaucer; here,' he continued, taking out a book from the book case, 'here is the very volume,' and turning over the leaves he pointed out the passage, to the great chagrin of the reverend gentleman and to the amusement of the guests. (Webb 6)

The mortified hostess dismissed the extreme breach of etiquette with a racist joke about the intimate relations into which ham and salad were frequently brought, ham being an allusion to Charlie's black skin as a child of Ham. Webb shows that Charlie is educated and familiar with English poetry, having immediate and accurate recall of the reference well beyond the level of the assembled white upper class guests. In the text of *The Garies*, in fact, Webb footnotes the specific Chaucer reference that Charlie quotes, *See Chaucer, "Flower and the Leaf" (Webb 6), thereby authenticating the accuracy of Charlie's information. [33] This scene is meant to be funny, but more importantly, Webb wants his reader to see that it is a case of mistaken identity based on white assumptions about blacks. The guests assume Charlie is uneducated because he is black and a servant.

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[33] The footnote also confirms, coincidentally but certainly not accidentally, Webb's own level of education.

Webb shows that Charlie's black skin and lower social standing do not in reality signal a lack of intellectual capability; on the contrary, in this case, Charlie's knowledge surpasses that of the white, upper-class guests. Webb then adds one further detail in this scene that defines Charlie not only as an intelligent boy, but also as a gentleman-in-the-making. As the guests leave the dinner party, Charlie "handed [a guest] his coat, admiring the texture and cut of it very much as he did so" (Webb 36). Charlie took notice of the fine clothing of a gentleman, noting the fabric and the tailoring. With this small gesture, Webb implies that Charlie, the black serving boy, inherently possessed the sensibilities of a gentleman. Webb's point is that the qualities of character that define a gentleman reside within an individual and are not determined by race or social class.

Webb continues to draw a contrast between Mrs. Thomas, as a pretentious, rather stupid woman, and Charlie as an intelligent, winsome boy, through a series of humorous incidents. One of the "modern fashions" adopted by Mrs. Thomas is the setting apart of one morning of the week for receiving visitors. On all other mornings, Mrs. Thomas instructs Charlie to lie to visitors and say that she is "not at home," even though she is home. On days when she was "not at home," Mrs. Thomas, Webb tells the reader, had "an entirely different appearance to that which she assumed on gala days" (Webb 74). She wore a handkerchief instead of her wig, a muslin cap with "ruffling which flapped up and down over her spectacles in the most comical way possible" and she donned a short flannel gown of "antique pattern and scanty dimensions" (Webb 74). Charlie sees an opportunity to advance his plan to be fired when a visiting British nobleman, Lord

Cutanrun, stops by to visit Mrs. Thomas on a morning when she was "not at home."[34] Charlie, playing the innocent, shows Lord Cutanrun into the drawing room, whereupon they surprise Mrs. Thomas in her muslin, ruffling, and scanty attire. In her agitation and horror, Mrs. Thomas spills a basin of water on Lord Cutanrun, and flees the room, screaming at Charlie, "You knew I was not at home!" (Webb 75). With an air of innocence, and the deliberate adoption of an affected dialect, Charlie replies "Why, where are you now? If you ain't in the house now, you never was" (Webb 75). Webb uses this passage to provide an amusing story for his readers, and to make fun of the affected, shallow pretensions of social-climbing whites. Webb exposes the true identity of Mrs. Thomas both to Lord Cutanrun and to the reader, and shows Charlie to be quite a capable, intelligent, and determined young man.

In a final example, Webb includes another humorous episode where Charlie literally exposes Mrs. Thomas' true identity. At a lavish dinner party given by Mrs. Thomas, Charlie has been assigned the duty of removing the cover from the soup-tureen. Clever Charlie manages to secretly affix a pin to the elbow of his sleeve. When he lifts the cover of the soup bowl, he adroitly hooks the pin into Mrs. Thomas' wig and "in a twinkling had [the wig] off her head" (Webb 76).

> The guests stared and tittered at the grotesque figure she presented, her head being covered with short white hair, and her face as red as peony at the mortifying situation in which she was placed. As she rose from her chair, Charlie presented himself, and handed her the wig, with an apology for the *accident*. In her haste to put it on, she turned it wrong side foremost; the laughter of the guests could now no longer be restrained, and in the midst of it Mrs. Thomas left the room. (Webb 76-77)

[34] Lord Cutanrun is just one of Webb's many marvelous Dickens-like, language play with proper names.

Webb takes great delight is literally unmasking Mrs. Thomas and revealing her true "grotesque" identity to the characters at the dinner table and to the reader. In these multilayered comical scenes, Webb juxtaposes mistaken identity and true identity in order to challenge nineteenth-century conflated assumptions of race and class that equated upper class with white skin, education, refinement and character, and black skin with lack of education, inferiority and crudeness.

"Mr. Stevens Falls Into Bad Hands" – An Incisive Use of Mistaken Identity

Webb's most penetrating dissection of the interrelatedness of race and class occurs when Mr. Stevens, the white arch villain of the novel, experiences a dizzying series of five identity changes in a mere ten pages of the novel. As Lang remarks, "this chapter focuses on a sequence of transformations, voluntary and involuntary, in the course of which the effects of the arbitrary ascriptions of class and race are starkly revealed" (Lang 59). Webb wants his reader to see that each time Stevens' appearance changes, those around him treat him differently based on their derivative assumptions about outward markers of race and class.

Stevens' first change of identity is across class lines when he transforms himself from a gentleman to a working-class Irishman. In order to facilitate his nefarious riot scheme, Stevens plans to meet with McCloskey in the lower part of the city. In order to be unrecognizable, Stevens decides to buy a disguise of used clothing. He enters a used clothing shop owned by a black man. Kinch, son of the owner, happens to be working there. Stevens greets Kinch with the insult, "Well, Snowball, do you keep this curiosity

shop?" to which Kinch indignantly replies, "My name is not Snowball, and this ain't a curiosity shop. Do you want to buy anything?" (Webb 183). Lang notes that "Steven's sarcastic greeting intimates his assumption that white men are in control not only of their own identities but the identities of others as well, but it also forecasts the series of mislabelings to which [Stevens] will soon find himself subject" (Lang 59).

Stevens purchases a used coat, trousers and hat and changes into the garments. The change from the clothes of a gentleman to the ragged clothes "completely robbed [him] of all appearance of respectability." Kinch "wonders" at the change and remarks, "Why, you don't look a bit like a gentleman now, sir," while Stevens thinks to himself "I never knew before how far a suit of clothes goes towards giving one the appearance of a gentlemen" (Webb 184). Stevens then goes to a working-class Irish tavern, where "his appearance amongst them excited but little attention" (Webb 185). He is able to blend in unnoticed with the other working-class Irish tavern patrons. Mr. Stevens has donned a disguise that has transformed his identity from middle-class gentleman to working-class Irishman. In this instance, his disguise and change of identity serve his purpose and are successful.

Stevens' second change of identity also occurs as a result of his different clothing, but this case of mistaken identity is unplanned and unwelcome. Unbeknownst to Mr. Stevens, the coat that he purchased designates the wearer as a member of a particular gang – a notorious Irish fire company. Unfortunately for Mr. Stevens, as he departs the tavern, "his way home lay directly through the camp of their bitterest and most active enemies" (Webb 186). The rival gang members recognize Stevens' coat as the habiliment of their hated enemies, and they approach and attack him. He protests that they are

mistaken about his identity, but they reply, "No, we ain't mistaken, either; you're one of the rangers; [we] know you by your coat" (Webb 188). Stevens understands that his disguise has brought him this unwanted attention and, although he claims, "Oh, it is not my coat – I only put it on for a joke" (Webb 188), they do not believe him and he is severely beaten. Stevens' identity shifts from a simple working-class Irishman to a notorious gang member based only on the particular item of clothing he was wearing. The gang members judge him solely by his appearance and act violently on their assumptions. His disguise is once again successful in hiding his true identity, but the results are not what Stevens anticipated, and he must suffer the consequences of the gang's assumptions.

Stevens' third change of identity is across racial lines, from white to black. As part of their torment, the gang decides to coat Stevens' face and hands with black tar. When they had finished embellishing him, the gang exclaimed, "Oh! don't he look like a nigger! When he gets home, I guess he'll surprise his mammy" (Webb 188-189). The working-class firemen, therefore, "express their power over [Stevens] by transforming a class similarity into a racial difference, painting the supposedly working class Stevens black" (Engle 8). The tar together with the beating transforms Stevens' appearance so that "his lips were swelled to a size that would have been regarded as large even on the face of a Congo negro" (Webb 189). Engle rightly notes that by "comparing Stevens not to an actual African American but to a grotesque caricature, Webb highlights the artificiality of this blackening" (Engle 8). Mr. Stevens, known to the reader as a white gentleman, has now been transformed into a lower-class black man.

Stevens' identity shifts again when a group of upper-class white men mockingly pretend to turn this "black" man into a "white" man. After the gang members depart, Mr. Stevens takes a seat on the steps of a nearby mansion in order to recover himself. Almost immediately the mansion door opens and suddenly he is surrounded by a group of young, drunk white men, who exclaim "Hallo! Here's a darkey! Now for some fun!" (Webb 189). Because of the tar, the white men think Stevens is a black man. They torment and humiliate him by making him jump in and out of a barrel of water and gleefully dance around him. Mr. Stevens pretends he is mute as he knows these men socially and does not want them to recognize him. One of the tormentors decides to streak Stevens' face with lime in order to make this "darkey" into a "white" man, saying, "I'm making a white man of him, I'm going to make him a glorious fellow-citizen, and have him run for Congress" (Webb 191), making great fun out of turning this "black" man into a "white" man. The white man's taunt as he limes Stevens also makes a point about nineteenth-century American definitions of citizenship: for a man to be a "glorious fellow-citizen" and "run for Congress" he must first be a white man. Stevens' identity therefore, shifts from a white man, to a black man, and then briefly back to a white man.

Stevens' fifth change of identity is from black back to white. One of the drunken men, Mr. Morton, takes pity on the old "darkey" and escorts him away from the group. Out of hearing of the group, Stevens says to him "Don't you know me, Morton?" (Webb 191). Stevens' appearance is so altered that Morton is not convinced that this is his friend until Morton, at Stevens' urging, touches his face and confirms that the blackness is tar. Stevens and Morton make their way to Stevens' house, stopping once at a pump to try to wash the "obnoxious tar" from his face, but only manage to "rub it in more thoroughly"

(Webb 192). When they arrive at Stevens' house, Mrs. Stevens is reluctant to open the front door. Morton tells Stevens' wife that "he has brought a gentleman from Africa with him" (Webb 192), and when she finally opens the door and sees him "she could not repress a scream of fright at the hideous figure he presented" (Webb 192). Stevens' transformation is so complete that Mrs. Stevens does not recognize him as her husband at first. He convinces her of his identity through the sound of his voice. Mr. and Mrs. Stevens then attempt to remove the tar from his face, with only partial success, and finally, he crawls off to bed "with the skin half scraped off his swollen face" (Webb 193). With that, Stevens returns to his privileged identity as a wealthy, white, native-born American.

That Webb stresses the difficulty Stevens has in removing the tar from his face is significant. Nowatzki argues that Webb means to imply that "Stevens' whiteness, upon which his race privilege and racism are based, is not as permanent as he assumes" and in fact, "compromises the notion of a stable white American identity" (Nowatzki 50-51). Lang takes a slightly different view and writes that, "Stevens can, with difficulty, remove the tar and resume his usual clothing, but he cannot shed his essential villainy" (Lang 62). Lang does not mean to suggest that blackness is a sign of villainy, but rather that Webb's objective in this scene is to "demonstrate that neither class nor race is a proxy for character" (Lang 62). Stevens is a villain not because of his working- or upper-class status, and not because of his race, either black or white, but because of his inherent wicked moral make-up.

For his nineteenth-century audience, Webb perhaps intended this scene to be comedic, the villain of the novel played for laughs. It is clear, however, that Webb also

used the humorous vignette to suggest to his audience, and call into question, the absurdity and unreliability of "definitions" of racial and class identity. In antebellum Philadelphia, outward representations of social circumstances, class origins and racial identities were an utterly comprehensive aspect of daily life. All social life was rigidly defined by these categories, and the assumptions associated with those categories. By having the character of Mr. Stevens change identity from gentleman to working-class, from working-class to gang member, from white-to-black-to-white-to-black-to-white, Webb makes a statement about the fluidity and instability of these categories. Webb allows his reader to observe the scene and be amused by it, and at the same time, invites his reader to contemplate how differently Mr. Stevens is treated, when only his outer appearance is altered. Most especially, Webb wants his reader to see that when Mr. Stevens is seen as a black man, the treatment he receives is cruel, humiliating and degrading – that when he's seen as a black man, he is treated as almost less than human.

Chapter Summary

The use of mistaken identity occurs so frequently in the pages of *The Garies* that one must conclude that it was integral to Webb's purpose. He used mistaken identity again and again in many different forms, to surprise his (white) readers, to render biting social commentary, to suggest the socially constructed nature of racial categories, to poke fun at upper-class whites, and to arouse the emotions of sympathetic readers. Frank Webb certainly used mistaken identity to enhance his plot, but his larger goal was to use it as a didactic tool within his narrative to challenge prevailing race and class stereotypes and

assert that the moral character of an individual inheres, not in social circumstances, but rather in the essential self of that individual.

CHAPTER THREE:

WEBB'S URBAN RIOT: A FRAMEWORK TO INTERROGATE RACE AND CLASS IN ANTEBELLUM PHILADELPHIA

One central event in *The Garies and Their Friends* is a violent urban riot. During the riot, African Americans and their homes are attacked by a frenzied white mob. According to one critic, Webb's descriptions are "among the most graphic fictional depictions of racial riot in the North before the Civil War. They constitute the only sustained literary account from an African American point of view" (Otter 249).[35] Webb indeed wrote a realistic and effective representation of an anti-black riot as seen through the eyes of the black characters, and it makes for thrilling reading. Awaiting the rioters, for example, one black character exclaims, "The whole of the lower part of the city appears to be in a blaze, look at the flames – they [the mob] are ascending from several places. They are at their work; we may expect them here soon" (Webb 211). Webb provides realistic detail while also building heart-pounding dramatic tension.

Webb, however, had a deeper objective in mind than simply depicting a realistic anti-black riot. Webb complicated his narrative by including carefully placed details that reveal the interconnectedness of race and class in antebellum Philadelphia. Webb had a unique viewpoint: as a black man, he was acutely aware of racial concerns; and as an educated, urban dweller, he was an astute observer of the ways in which race and class

[35] Otter uses the term "racial riot" to describe the riot in *The Garies*. Webb and his contemporaries, however, would not have used the phrase 'race riot'. According to the OED, the term appears not to have entered the American English dictionary until after 1880. Significantly, and sadly, the term 'race riot' may have originated in America. ("Race riot, n.6". OED online. March 2013. Oxford University Press, 25 March 2013. http://www.oed.ezproxy.stanford.edu/view/Entry/157031.

intersected in the city. Webb used the riot to examine and comment upon the broader social and class roles and conflicts of Philadelphian society. Through the character of George Stevens and the organizational details of the riot, through the role of the Irish, through details about the actions of the mob, and through the valiant black response during the riot, Webb demonstrates an incisive understanding of the complex social texture of his world. In Webb's thoughtful hands, the riot is not merely melodrama, but becomes a nuanced rendering of the intersection of race and class in antebellum Philadelphia.

Historic Philadelphia Riots in the 1830s and 1840s

Although Webb does not identify a specific date for his fictional riot, he draws upon the details of several major riots that occurred in Philadelphia in the 1830s and 1840s. In all likelihood, Frank Webb, born in 1828 in Philadelphia, was a firsthand witness to racial violence within his own community. As Webb was growing up, racial riots occurred in Philadelphia in 1829, 1834, 1835, 1838, 1842, and 1849, earning the city notoriety as "the queen of violence" (Otter 131). Contemporary newspaper stories about these riots report factual details that reverberate through the pages of *The Garies and Their Friends*. For example, on May 17, 1838, when young Frank Webb was ten years old, a white mob became outraged at what they perceived to be an "amalgamation of colors" fueled by the sight of light-skinned African American Robert Purvis helping his darker-skinned wife Harriet from her carriage. The mob thought this was a case of a white man "mixing" with a black woman; their response was to riot, set fire to and

destroy Pennsylvania Hall,[36] burn a black orphanage, and attack a black church (Otter 138-147). The cause of the riot was white outrage over the suggestion of interracial social mixing. Traces of this real-life riot echo through the pages of *The Garies* as Webb's fictional rioters also rally to the cry of "Down with the Abolitionist - Down with the Amalgamationist" (Webb 221), and threaten to "fire one of the coloured churches" (Webb 208).

One of the worst Philadelphia riots occurred on August 1, 1842, when Webb was a teenager. Frederick Douglass would later recall that African American "houses were burnt down in different parts of the city, and their churches were burned to the earth, themselves turned out of the city, and the city authorities did nothing to prevent it. (Douglass, "Intemperance" 57). During the riot in *The Garies*, African American homes in different parts of the city are attacked, blacks flee, and the white authorities are indifferent. There is a striking similarity between Douglass' report of the facts of August 1842 and Webb's narrative.

In October 1849, a twenty-one-year-old Frank Webb would most certainly have been aware of the mob attack against the California House, a tavern in the largely African American Cedar neighborhood in south Philadelphia. The tavern attracted interracial patrons and was owned by a black or mulatto man married to a white woman. A mob, including members of an Irish Catholic gang, attacked the tavern and obstructed the work of volunteer fireman who tried to put out the resultant fires. African Americans made a stand within the California House, but ultimately more than thirty buildings in the

[36] Built by the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society, Pennsylvania Hall was a grand auditorium that was to have been a venue for social reform. Rioters burned it three days after it opened.

neighborhood were burned and two African Americans were slain.[37] In *The Garies*, black characters make a stand in, and bravely defend, a black home, and the Irish and firemen figure prominently, if not favorably, in Webb's text. Although no definitive evidence has surfaced, it is reasonable to assume that as a black man living in Philadelphia during this time, Frank Webb had personal knowledge, and perhaps personal experience, of the racial violence of his city. He used this knowledge to inform his "graphic fictional depictions of racial riot in the North before the Civil War."

Mr. Stevens: White, Upper-Class Instigator of the Riot

Webb's imaginary riot in *The Garies* was conceived, promoted and organized by the character George Stevens, the white next-door neighbor of the Garies, and arch villain of the novel. [38] Webb's plot is rich with detail about why and how Stevens organized and implemented the riot, but a closer reading of the story reveals a subtext that is infused with Webb's keen observations about the class realities of his world. Webb used the character of George Stevens and his role in the riot to draw attention to the subtle and intertwined realties of race and class in antebellum Philadelphia.

For modern readers, Mr. Stevens would properly be termed a middle-class professional. By profession, Stevens was a "pettifogging attorney" known by the moniker "Slippery George" for his skill at slipping in and out of questionable dealings and his

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[37] For a detailed description of this riot, please see Laurie's *Working People of Philadelphia, 1880-1850*, 156-157.

[38] When introducing the character, Webb initially refers once and only once to Mr. Garie's next-door neighbor as "Mr. *Thomas* Stevens" (Webb 104). Thereafter, Stevens is always called *George* Stevens. Was this an error on the part of the author, the editor, the publisher? The answer is unknown, but it is clear as the novel proceeds that Thomas Stevens is most certainly George Stevens.

ability to produce witnesses and alibis at will (Webb 125). Despite his middle-class standing, Webb depicts Stevens using both his upper- and lower-class connections to orchestrate the riot. Indeed, for Webb, the nickname "Slippery George" likely also applied to Stevens' ability to "slip" between social classes. Webb uses the structure of the riot to show that upper- and middle-class whites did not hesitate to use the lower classes for their own purposes. Webb also uses his language and skill as a writer through the character of "Slippery George" Stevens to emphasize the point that in antebellum Philadelphia, appearances could be deceiving with regard not only to skin color, but also with regard to social class.

Webb writes that Stevens was "considered by the swell gentry of the city as their especial friend and protector" (Webb 125).[39] When the reader first learns of the riot plot, Stevens is in consultation with the wealthy, white Mr. Morton.[40] Stevens has discovered the secret that he (Stevens) is related to Mr. Garie and likely the only living white heir to the Garie fortune. He tells Morton his scheme to raise a white mob against black sections of the city in order to make the district unsafe and thereby reduce property values, then purchase and resell those properties at low prices to make a huge profit.

Stevens tells Morton that he can manipulate existing racial tensions between lower-class whites and blacks to achieve their ends. He explains to Mr. Morton, that a "very strong feeling exists in the community against the Abolitionists," meaning that

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[39] According to John Bee's *Slang: A Dictionary* (1823), a "swell" was a stylishly dressed person of unusually high social station. See footnote in *Bleak House*, page 244.

[40] In 1839, Dr. Samuel Morton of Philadelphia published *Crania Americana*, which supposedly proved scientifically the intellectual inferiority of black people based on measurements of the cranial capacities of white and black people (Crockett 49). Perhaps Webb's decision to name an evil white character in *The Garies* 'Morton' is in response to Dr. Morton's publication. Perhaps it is only a coincidence that a shady character named Morton also appears in Webb's novella *Two Wolves and a Lamb*" (1870).

whites already harbor deep resentments and prejudices against blacks, and that "this feeling requires to be guided into some proper current, and I think we can give it that necessary guidance, and at the same time render it subservient to our own purposes." (Webb 166). Stevens further tells Morton that he has "men enough at [his] command to effect" the riot and the ability to "control the elections in the district, through these men, as to place in office only such persons as will wink at the disturbances" (Webb 166). Unbeknownst to Morton, Stevens has an additional, hidden, even more nefarious goal in mind: he intends to use the violence of the riot as a cover to murder Mr. Garie in order that he (Stevens) can inherit Garie's fortune.

Stevens is more than willing to use the power of his upper-class white connections to manipulate the racial prejudices and actions of lower-class whites against blacks for his own financial profit and that of other moneyed men. In order to foment the riot, Mr. Stevens writes a series of editorials that are published in local white newspapers:

> Leading articles daily appeared in the public journals (particularly those that circulated amongst the lower classes), in which the negroes were denounced, in the strongest terms. It was averred that their insolence, since the commencement of the abolition agitation, had become unbearable; and from many quarters was suggested the absolute necessity for inflicting some general chastisement, to convince them that they were still negroes, and to teach them to remain in their proper place in the body politic. (Webb 176) [41]

[41] Webb's fictional description of Stevens' editorial resembles an editorial published by the white newspaper, the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, and republished on March 14, 1828, by *Freedom's Journal*, a black newspaper. Ridiculing a lavish African American ball, the white author wrote: "It is worthy of remark, that many of the coaches containing these sable divinities were attended by white coachmen and white footmen. It is indeed high time that some serious attention was paid to the conduct and pursuits of the class of persons alluded to, and it may be well to inquire if matters progress at this rate how long it will be before masters and servants change places." The tone of the article implies that whites ought to take action against blacks, much like Steven's fictional editorial. As at other moments in *The Garies*, Webb seems to draw upon actual events. *Freedom's Journal*, Mar. 14, 1828. (Rpt. From *Pennsylvania Gazette*.)

Stevens is able to have these articles widely circulated because of his connection with the rich, white Mr. Morton, who exercises his influence over white newspaper owners. Stevens' awareness of his purposeful provocation of the white "lower classes" against blacks is made clear by his particular choice of journals "that circulated amongst the lower classes." Stevens does not hesitate to utilize the journalistic tools of dominant, upper-class white society to incite lower-class whites against blacks.

To initiate the riot, Stevens must recruit lower-class white "manpower" that he can effectively control. He accomplishes this by blackmailing an Irishman named McCloskey. Stevens has been retained to defend McCloskey against the charge of murder and has managed to get McCloskey under his control by bribing an eyewitness, one Whitticar, to leave town without testifying against McCloskey.

Stevens' clandestine meeting with Whitticar is worthy of lingering attention because it shows Webb's ability to render class distinctions through the smallest details of language. Stevens meets with Whitticar at Whitticar's tavern in the "lower part of the city, a shabby district" (Webb172). Webb's description emphasizes the low social standing of the tavern:

> On entering, [Stevens] found two or three forlorn-looking wretches clustering around the stove, endeavouring to receive some warmth upon their half-clothed bodies, - their red and pimpled noses being the only parts about them that did not look cold. They stared wonderingly at Mr. Stevens as he entered; for a person so respectable as himself in appearance was but seldom seen in that house. (Webb 173)

In his word choice of "forlorn-looking wretches," "half-clothed bodies," and "red and pimpled noses," Webb leaves no doubt as to the low economic and social status of the inhabitants of the tavern and pointedly tells the reader that a person as respectable "in

appearance" as Stevens was rarely seen at the tavern. The reader understands that Mr. Stevens, who appears to be a higher class of gentleman, is out of place in this setting.

Webb then adds the smallest of details that shift the reader's perception of Mr. Stevens. Whitticar cautiously peaks through the door to survey the visitor, and "on ascertaining who it was, entered the room. "You've quite upset the family; we all took you for a constable," said [Whitticar], approaching Mr. Stevens, who shook hands with him heartily, and then, laying his arm familiarly on his shoulder" (Webb 173), guides him to a small back room to talk. Obviously, Stevens is well known to Whitticar; Whitticar recognizes him on sight, "heartily" shakes his hand, and lays his arm on Stevens in very familiar fashion. The familiarity of their greeting implies that the unprincipled, lower-class Whitticar and Mr. Stevens have had many previous dealings. Webb's intention is to show the contrast between Mr. Stevens' "appearance" as a gentleman and the reality of his close association with a man of not only low social standing but also questionable moral character.

Webb first indicates to his reader that Mr. Stevens is a gentleman. Then through carefully placed details, Webb inverts that perception. Webb creates a literary optical illusion: one moment Mr. Stevens is a gentleman; the next moment he is a low-class scoundrel. Webb wants his reader to see that Mr. Stevens is both a gentleman and a scoundrel simultaneously, that one does that preclude the other. Webb wants his reader to question surface appearances, not only with regard to skin color, but also with regard to class status and most especially, character. He wants his reader to look beyond and beneath surfaces and realize, as in this case, that outward markers of upper social class do not necessarily indicate individuals of high moral character. Webb's intention is to tease

apart conflated assumptions about race, class and character in order to challenge assumptions that associate "white" with elevated status and high moral character, and conversely, "black" with degradation and corruption.

The specifics of the deal between Stevens and Whitticar suggest that Webb believed that local government could be very corrupt indeed. Stevens wants Whitticar to leave town so that Whitticar cannot be called as an eyewitness at McCloskey's trial. If Whitticar leaves, Stevens will have leverage to force McCloskey to do his bidding during the riot. Whitticar does agree to leave town in exchange for cash and the promise of a nomination to the office of alderman. Stevens tells Whitticar, "I'll see to your nomination. I'm all right down here, you know; I own the boys in this district; and if you'll say put some little matters through for me after you are elected, I'll call it a bargain" (Webb 174). Stevens wields influence enough to assure Whitticar that he can secure for him the position of alderman, and he implies that because he "own[s] the boys in this district," he can guarantee that Whitticar will be elected. Stevens adds the proviso that once Whitticar is in office, he will be required to "put some little matters through" which is Stevens' way of ensuring that after the riot, officials in charge will only "wink at the disturbances" (Webb 166) and "blind the public with a sham investigation" (Webb 175). It is clear that Stevens understands local politics and the value of having well-placed allies within the local political system. It is also clear that Stevens has the power to manipulate the political system and has no scruples against wielding that power. Webb is making the point that corrupt whites could dominate local political systems. After 1838, blacks in Pennsylvania were not allowed to vote, let alone hold office, so they were utterly at the mercy of the (sometimes) corrupt white officials. The deal struck between

Whitticar and Stevens shows that Stevens' white skin and his class status allow him to control the local political system in unfair and racist ways.

Certainly, Frank Webb is interested in the fact that the riot is racially motivated, but he complicates the picture by folding in issues of class. The riot is indeed white versus black, but through George Stevens, Webb makes clear that the rioting whites are drawn exclusively from the lower classes, controlled from afar by the white middle and upper classes. Webb represents George Stevens as a middle-class white man with upper-class connections who can manipulate "various forms of power – newspapers, real estate markets, government agencies and political figures" (Levine 359) to achieve his goals. As Levine notes, "the point that Webb [emphasizes] about the riot represented in *The Garies*, is that to regard it simply as an expression of working-class whites' resentments of blacks during a period of economic depression fails to take into account the involvement of all classes of whites in the disturbance" (Levine 359). George Stevens' role in the riot demonstrates that all classes of whites – not just working class whites – participated in mob violence against blacks.

The Irish: White, Lower-Class Rioters

Webb further complicates the racial and class dimensions of his fictional riot by emphasizing the role of the Irish. The fact that Webb specifically names the Irish as participants in the riot reflects the historical reality of the Irish presence in Philadelphia and their involvement in racial violence. Webb's negative and stereotypical portrayal of Irish characters reflects the popular culture of the day and points to the animosity that existed between lower-class Irish workers and the African American community.

The Irish were indeed a significant presence in antebellum Philadelphia. During the decade of the Irish Potato Famine, from 1845 to 1855, approximately one-and-a-half million Irish arrived in America, the majority of whom "were extremely impoverished and poorly educated. Although not enslaved, in their educational and financial status Irish immigrants in this decade resembled the majority of African Americans" (Engle 1). By 1850, there were 72,312 Irish-born residents in Philadelphia, or 18% of the total population. In the second ward of Moyamensing and other lower-class neighborhoods, the percentage of Irish-born inhabitants was even higher, at approximately 28% of the total community (Clark 29, 42).

Because the Irish immigrants were generally poor and uneducated, native-born white Americans did not welcome them. In fact, in their endeavor to safeguard whiteness as the ultimate definition of citizenship, native-born whites did with the Irish as they had done with African Americans: they designated the impoverished, uneducated group as racially distinct and therefore inferior. Essentially, they "painted [the] Irish-Americans black," associating their low-class status with "alleged physical or even racial difference from other Euro-Americans" (Engle 2),[42] and then relegated them as a group to a low rung of society. Depictions of Irish-Americans from this period are overwhelmingly negative, focusing on their reputed violent nature, lack of intellect, lowbrow and savage physical appearance, and excessive drinking. The Irish were deemed "black – or at least

[42] The term 'black Irish' has a complex history going back many centuries. It has been used to describe people of Irish origin who had dark features, black hair, dark complexion and eyes. There are a number of conflicting claims as to the origin of the term. One theory holds that the 'Black Irish' are descended from any number of foreigners who came to Ireland, including Vikings and Spanish traders, but it seems more likely that 'Black Irish' is a descriptive term rather than an inherited characteristic. For further reading, see, www.ireland-information.com and *How The Irish Became White* by Noel Ignatiev.

not entirely white" (Engle 3).[43] In antebellum America, "whiteness" was a mutable category, and both before and after the Civil War, "many Euro-Americans tenaciously insisted that class difference was racial difference" (Engle 5).

When the Irish immigrants arrived, most Philadelphian African Americans found themselves sharing their occupations, neighborhoods, and economic conditions with the new arrivals. Unlike the African Americans, however, Irish-Americans were able to purchase "limited acceptance from native-born whites by distancing themselves – often violently – from working class Northern blacks" (Nowatzki 32). In *The Garies*, Frank Webb captures this "dual role of the Irish as victims of and accomplices in oppression" (Nowatski 32).

McCloskey: Leader of the Irish "Gang"

Webb asserts the role of the Irish in his riot by creating a specific individual Irish character named McCloskey, the "leader of the gang" (Webb 223) on the night of the riot. Webb provides extensive descriptive detail about the actions and movements of the rioting mob, but no specific information on individual rioters. The reader is meant to infer that McCloskey, whom the reader knows well, is representative of the Irish rioters perpetrating the violence.

Webb's McCloskey is a fully drawn character who reflects the popular antebellum stereotype of the Irishman as poor, uncouth, drunk, uneducated, and prone to physical brawling. The reader knows that McCloskey has a "usually red face" (Webb

[43] For an exhaustive study of popular references to Irish-Americans from 1820-1860, see *Paddy and the Republic: Ethnicity and Nationality in Antebellum America* by Dale T. Knobel.

163), he wears "thin and dilapidated" boots (Webb 316), and he puts his "dirty feet" (314) on the furniture. Significantly, Webb never refers to him as "white," but rather always as "Irish." He is repeatedly portrayed as drinking to excess; at one point, for example, he misses an important meeting because "he was very far gone; he had been crooking his elbow pretty frequently, and was so very drunk that [he was advised] to go home and go to bed; so he took another dram and went away" (Webb 185). In addition, McCloskey speaks in an Irish brogue that implies he is uneducated, and he is under an indictment for murder because he killed a man during a tavern brawl. He is an immigrant, not native-born, because at one point, Stevens asks him if he should "like to return to Ireland a moneyed man?" and he replies that he "should like it well enough, to be sure" (Webb 177). McCloskey does, however, own property, "a house, and a good horse and dray" (Webb 164), which Stevens forces him to sell in order to fund Whitticar's bribe. Webb's description of McCloskey accurately mirrors the stereotypes of the Irish found in antebellum popular culture and literature.

Stevens and McCloskey – A Vexed Alliance

It is through McCloskey's relationship with Stevens before and after the riot that Webb makes his most nuanced observations about the relationships between the lower-class, not-entirely-white Irish Americans, the African American community, and middle- and upper-class white Americans. A close reading of an exchange between Stevens and McCloskey reveals Webb's awareness of the social complexities of nineteenth-century Philadelphia. As described above, Stevens holds power over McCloskey because Stevens has bribed Whitticar, the eyewitness to McCloskey's crime, to leave town. In addition,

Stevens has promised to pay McCloskey and his men to carry out the actual violence of the riot. Stevens has ordered McCloskey and his gang to attack random blacks a week ahead of the riot in order to raise tensions. In this passage, Stevens meets with McCloskey to see how things are progressing:

> Mr. Stevens turned to his visitor, and inquired, "What was done last night – much of anything?"
>
> "A great deal, yer honour," replied McCloskey; "a nagur or two half killed, and one house set on fire and nearly burned up."
>
> "*Is that all*?" said Mr. Stevens, with a well-assumed look of disappointment. "Is that all? Why you are a miserable set; you should have beaten every darky out of the district by this time."
>
> "They're not so easily bate out – they fight like sevin divils. One o' 'em, night before last, split Mikey Dolan's head clane open, and it's a small chance of his life he's got to comfort himself wid."
>
> "Chances of war – chances of war!" rejoined Mr. Stevens, - "mere trifles when you get used to 'em: you mustn't let that stop you – you have a great deal yet to do. What you have already accomplished is a very small matter compared with what is expected, and what I intend you to do: your work has only just begun, man."
>
> "Jist begun!" replied the astonished McCloskey; "haven't we bin raising the very divil every night for the last week – running a near chance of getting kilt all the time – and all for nothing! It's getting' tiresome; one don't like to be fighting nagurs all the time for the mere fun of the thing – it don't pay, for divil a cent have I got for all my trouble; and ye said ye would pay well, ye remimber."
>
> "So I shall," said Mr. Stevens, "when you do something worth paying for – the quarter is not accomplished yet. I want the place made so hot down there that the niggers can't stay. Go a-head, don't give them any rest – I'll protect you from the consequences, whatever they be: I've great things in store for you." (Webb 176)

This passage shows that Stevens is not himself directly involved in the violence at this point, but that he is directing the Irish attacks on blacks, financing the operation, and offering protection if needed. Stevens is disappointed with what has been accomplished

so far, telling McCloskey "Why, you are a miserable set," indicating that he perceives the Irish as a separate, and despicable group. He needs their services nonetheless.

With McCloskey's responses to Stevens in this conversation, Webb adds shading that speaks to the complex relationship between the Irish and African Americans. McCloskey's response that the blacks are "not so aisily bate out – they fight like sevin divils" indicates direct knowledge of, and implies grudging respect for, the black man's ability to fight back and defend himself. Also, when McCloskey replies "It's getting' tiresome; one don't like to be fighting the nagurs all the time for the mere fun of the thing," it certainly shows his racism because beating up black people is sometimes fun for him but it also suggests that he is beyond the point of doing it for "fun," and is now just doing it for the money. McCloskey's responses to Stevens suggest that while the Irish certainly did not embrace African Americans, they did in some way respect them. The Irish violence against blacks was sometimes less about racism and more about the dominant white groups using economic power to pit the Irish and African American communities against each other. Although during this period, no major black leader "conceived of a cross-racial political union among the working classes" (Lapsansky, 'Separate Churches' 77), McCloskey's responses to Stevens suggests that Frank Webb discerned a class similarity between the working-class Irish and African Americans.

Webb sheds further light on the social complexities between the Irish and middle- and upper-class whites through yet another exchange between Stevens and McCloskey. McCloskey finds himself utterly under Stevens' control. Stevens tells him in no uncertain terms "You shall do as I wish; you are in my power! I need your services, and I will have them – make up your mind to that" (Webb 177). In addition to leading attacks against

blacks, Stevens expects McCloskey to carry out the murder of Mr. Garie under cover of the riot. Stevens tells McCloskey that Garie's murder "can be done in a crowd – at night – no one will notice it" (Webb 179). McCloskey does not want to commit the murder and tells Stevens "you talk of murder as if it were mere play" (Webb 179). McCloskey then asks Stevens "what has the man [Garie] done to ye's, squire, that you're so down upon him?" (Webb 179). Stevens' response is that Garie "is one of those infernal Abolitionists, and one of the very worst kind; he lives with a nigger woman – and, what is more, he is married to her!" (Webb 179).

> "Married to a nigger!" exclaimed McCloskey – "it's a quare taste the animal has – but you're not afther killing him for that; there's something more behind; it's not for having a black wife instead of a white one you'd be afther murthering him – ye'll get no stuff like that down me."
>
> "No, it is not that alone, I acknowledge," rejoined Mr. Stevens, with considerable embarrassment. "He insulted me some time ago, and I want to be revenged upon him." (Webb 180)

McCloskey, the low-class, uneducated, uncouth Irishman, perceives that the middle-class Stevens' vendetta against Mr. Garie is not motivated solely, or even entirely, by Garie's interracial marriage. Although Stevens does not admit the truth of his economic motive, McCloskey senses that "there's something more behind," and that the "something more" is not racial. The supposedly obtuse McCloskey accurately intuits that Stevens is using "race" as a convenient excuse, when the truth is something else. Webb even goes so far as to write that Stevens, momentarily exposed, suffers "considerable embarrassment."

Webb allows McCloskey this moment of insight to suggest that lower-class whites were aware that upper-class whites sometimes used skin color as a way to divide

the working-class Irish from working-class blacks in order to maintain class dominance. The Irish were eager to elevate their position in American society, so they participated in the racial violence, but they were victims themselves, being manipulated by the upper classes.

Webb certainly represents McCloskey in a poor light, but unlike Stevens, Webb affords McCloskey a few moments of redemption. During the riot, for example, McCloskey cannot bring himself to murder Mr. Garie. Garie is shot "when a pistol was discharged close to his head and he fell forward on the entry floor lifeless" (Webb 223). The reader does not discover until the end of the novel, fifteen years after the riot, that George Stevens himself murdered Mr. Garie. In one climactic scene at the end of the novel, McCloskey, on his death bed, "atone[s] for the past by making an ample confession" (Webb 378) of his part in the scheme to murder Mr. Garie, of his failure when the time came, and of Stevens' guilt. McCloskey also reveals that he is in possession of the missing will that will at long last legitimize the Garie children's claims to their father's estate. McCloskey is not an admirable character, but, unlike Stevens, he is not wholly evil. He cannot commit murder in cold blood, and he confesses all at the end of his life in order to try to set things right before he dies. Contrast this with Stevens, who hurls himself off a balcony rather than face any kind of justice. Stevens is wholly unredeemable. Webb's treatment of McCloskey suggests that although McCloskey was a racist thug, in Webb's view, he was not as immoral as Stevens. By redeeming McCloskey even a little, Webb separates him from the utterly evil Stevens. Perhaps Webb grants McCloskey, the Irishman, these small moments of redemption in recognition of the analogous class standing of the Irish and working-class blacks as victims of middle- and

upper-class whites. Dominant white groups used race to separate two groups of people who otherwise might have found affiliation. Webb's slender redemption of McCloskey is a nod to the class similarity that existed between the Irish and other lower-class, working whites and working-class blacks, and an acknowledgement of their comparable status as victims of middle- and upper-class white manipulation.

The Irish Mob During the Riot

If Webb's portrayal of McCloskey offers a flicker of sympathy, his representation of the anonymous rioting "mob of wretches" (Webb 205) offers no such redemption. Webb's depiction of the mob is unforgiving and condemning: they are a "tide of lawlessness flow[ing] on unchecked" (Webb 203); they taunt women carrying babies; they cruelly hurl an innocent man from a rooftop simply for the pleasure of it. Woven into his dramatic portrayal, however, Webb inserts narrative details about the movements and actions of the mob that draw attention to the complex race and class realities of nineteenth-century urban Philadelphia.

First, Webb confirms that the mob is drawn from the working classes. Through earlier conversations between Stevens and McCloskey, the reader expects that the rioters are from the working classes, but Webb reaffirms this fact in an interesting way. He tells the reader that the black, working-class Ellis family must flee from their home in the lower, working-class section of the city, and come for protection to the home of the black, wealthy Mr. Walters in the upper part of the city. The Ellis home, Webb writes, "was quite indefensible (it being situated in a neighborhood swarming with the class of which the mob was composed)" (Webb 203-204). Since the Ellis' are decidedly working-

class, this detail confirms that the mob was made up of working-class people. It also validates the historical reality that black and white working-class people in nineteenth-century Philadelphia shared neighborhoods. Significantly, the neighborly proximity of the Ellis family and their similar class standing did not stop the mob from burning the Ellis home to the ground. Economic and residential commonalities meant nothing: the Ellis' black skin became the single determining factor that made them targets of violence.

The mob's movement towards a specific affluent neighborhood and their particular choice of the home of Mr. Walters as their target demonstrates the manipulation of this working-class mob by the middle and upper classes. As the rioting mob has made its way to the affluent, upper part of the city, the excitement of the rioters has grown: "the houses of various prominent Abolitionists had been threatened; … an attempt had been made to fire one of the coloured churches; and that, notwithstanding the rioters made little scruple in declaring their intentions, the authorities were not using the slightest efforts to restrain them, or to protect the parties threatened" (Webb 208). As they approached Mr. Walters' house, "the noise of their voices became almost deafening" and most of the rioters "were armed with clubs, and a few with guns and pistols" (Webb 211). The rioters attack Mr. Walters' home, and after a fierce battle, are repulsed by the defenders inside the house.

The white rioters specifically seek out and target the home of Mr. Walters. In a neighborhood of many wealthy homes, Walters' house is the only one that is attacked. The rioters are inflamed by cries of "The house is full of niggers! – the house is full of niggers! Shoot them! Kill them!" (Webb 213), so it is clear that race is an inciting factor for the mob. However, the reader is well aware that the rioters have been instructed and

paid by Stevens to target Walters' home. The rioters do not attack Walters' home because he is wealthy; they attack his home because they are being paid to do so, and because his skin color inflames their racist passions and justifies their actions. Mr. Stevens has orchestrated the attack on Walters far more because of Walters' wealth and upper-class status than for his African American heritage. The rioters are merely the tools of Stevens and his cronies who want to destroy Walters for financial gain. The movement of the crowd to the affluent neighborhood and their specific attack upon Walters' home attest to the successful manipulation of lower-class whites by upper- and middle-class whites in order to achieve financial gain.

Webb's description of the behavior of the mob as it approaches and reaches the home of Mr. and Mrs. Garie shows the complicated overlap of race and class in Webb's novel. As the mob approaches, (the astoundingly naïve) Mr. Garie does not realize that the mob is headed for his house until the crowd is sufficiently near for him to understand their cries of "Down with the Abolitionist – down with the Amalgamationist! Give them tar and feathers!" (Webb 221). Even then, he says, "It's a mob – and that word Amalgamationist – can it be pointed at me? It hardly seems possible; and yet I have a fear that there is something wrong" (Webb 221). Indeed, unfortunately for the Garies, something is terribly wrong.[44] The mob presses forward into Garie's garden, and begin to throw stones at him. He is able to get his wife and children out the back door of the house, just as the mob breaks in through the front door of the house. Mr. Garie, now

[44] Mrs. Garie, on the other hand, immediately realizes the danger, and tries to alert her husband. He dismisses her concerns until the last minute. It is certainly significant that Webb allows the African American woman to understand precisely what is happening well before the white man. Perhaps Webb was suggesting that African Americans had a much clearer understanding of the reality of race relations than whites.

armed with a gun, attempts to defend his home from the intruders, but in the exchange of gunfire, "a pistol was discharged close to his head and (Garie) fell forward on the entry floor lifeless" (Webb 223). Emily Garie and her two children evade the mob by hiding in a shed in the backyard. Unfortunately, while in hiding, Emily goes into premature labor, delivers a stillborn baby, and dies in childbirth. Neighbors find young Clarence and his sister Emily in the morning, now orphaned, both of their parents having died as a result of the mob attack.

It is clear from Webb's narrative that the mob has targeted the Garie home because Mr. Garie is a white man married to a black woman. He is an "Amalgamationist" and an "Abolitionist," both highly inflammatory terms in antebellum America. There is no question that the mob's violence is racially motivated. However, Webb's description of the behavior of the mob once they are inside the Garie home suggests that they are animated more by class and material concerns than by racial prejudice. The mob runs through the house, "stealing everything valuable that they could lay their hands upon, and wantonly destroying the furniture" and "for two long hours they ransacked the house, breaking all they could not carry off, drinking the wine in Mr. Garie's cellar, and shouting and screaming like so many fiends" (Webb 223). This working-class mob loots the house of its valuables. The fact that Mr. Garie is a white man married to a black woman no longer seems their main concern. Rather, they see an opportunity to steal from a wealthy man, and they do it. The detail that the mob began "drinking the wine in Mr. Garie's cellar" is especially telling. That Mr. Garie maintained a wine cellar confirms his wealth and high social class. The fact that the mob descended on the wine cellar and drank the wine on the spot draws an association between intemperance and low social

class and poor character.[45] Webb associates the drunkenness of the mob with both low social status and low moral character. Webb's description of the behavior of the mob inside the Garies' home focuses on class distinctions, not race distinctions.

In *The Garies*, the rioting mob becomes almost a character unto itself. Webb does not does identify any individuals in the crowd, so the anonymous mob moves as one, thinks as one, acts as one. And although the mob is surely motivated by a desire to harm African Americans, Webb's storytelling highlights details of class realities which define the mob as working-class, as doing the dirty work for middle- and upper-class whites, and as resentful of the wealth of those upper groups. With the white rioting mob, Webb shows how conflicting class realities are entangled beneath the banner of racial hatred.

The African American Response During the Riot

While Webb's depiction of the rioting mob probes class distinctions within white society, his representation of the African American response to the attack shows a black community united despite class differences. As the mob approaches Mr. Walters' house, Webb keeps the reader's point of view tightly focused from inside the house; the reader is placed side-by-side with the African Americans who are defending themselves. Webb writes a realistic, harrowing scene of great danger, preparedness, leadership, and courage under fire. For good measure, Webb even provides moments of comic relief. But Webb's larger intention, as historian Carla Peterson correctly notes, is that the defense of Walters' house "during the riot emblematizes black community interdependence as men

[45] For an excellent discussion of the influential antebellum reform movement of temperance and its relevance to "black elevation", see Robert S. Levine, "Disturbing Boundaries: Temperance, Black Elevation, and Violence in Frank J. Webb's *The Garies and Their Friends*."

and women of all social classes come together to protect it" (Peterson 579). Indeed, a close reading of the scene supports Peterson's viewpoint.

The characters that Webb places inside Walters' home during the attack are all black. Even though in other parts of the novel there are a few supportive and sympathetic white characters, there are no white characters present inside Walters' home during the attack. As an African American, Webb was making a powerful political statement that blacks must unite and defend their community on their own terms, sometimes without white support. By excluding whites from this scene, Webb seems to be aligning himself with prominent black intellectual leader Martin Delany who believed that blacks must improve their situation only through their own efforts, with no help whatsoever from whites. Delany's view was at odds with African American leader Frederick Douglass who maintained that sincere white support was always welcome. Webb seems to take a different stance at the end of the novel when specific white guests are included at the wedding feast, but here in the riot scene, Webb clearly asserts the power of an exclusive black response to the violent attack.

The black characters defending Walters' home are drawn from all strata of black society. Mr. Walters, the homeowner, is an upper-class man, wealthy and extremely refined.[46] The Ellis family who take refuge in Walters' home are working-class people. Mr. Ellis is a laborer who makes things with his hands, and his wife and daughters, Esther and Caddy, take in sewing. The Ellis family owns their home in a working-class neighborhood, but their home will be burned to the ground during the riot. The character of Kinch also helps defend Walters' home: Kinch is a lower-class young man whose

[46] Please see Chapter 4 - "Mr. Walters" for a full analysis of this important character.

father makes a living with a second-hand clothing shop.[47] Although Kinch is portrayed throughout the novel as something of a minstrel character, used frequently for comic relief, Webb also redeems Kinch by making him smart and capable, as demonstrated during the riot scene when he and Caddy invent a novel way to douse the mob with hot pepper water. Webb gathers black characters of all social classes, upper, middle and lower, to unite and defend the home of Mr. Walters from the white mob.

Three individuals deserve particular mention among Webb's band of assembled blacks. First, the actions of the Ellis sisters, Caddy and Esther, during the riot are remarkable. Neither young woman removes herself from the center of danger as the mob attacks, nor hesitates to participate fully in the action. Caddy, together with Kinch, invents a unique way to use her domestic skills to help fend off the mob by dumping hot pepper water onto their heads. Esther expresses rage over the mob's terrible treatment of a black woman carrying a baby and says, "I could have strangled them: had I been a man, I would have attacked them on the spot" (Webb 205). Esther then plays an essential role in the action first by coolly extinguishing an errant flame that would have blown the home apart, and then by fearlessly loading gun after gun during the attack. Historian Anna Mae Duane rightly argues that these two African American women "defy the standard [antebellum] conceptions of womanhood" and that Webb has created "an alternative model of womanhood applicable to the experience of black women" (Duane

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[47] Although scant evidence about Webb's life has surfaced, historian Eric Gardner points out that the US Census of 1850 lists Webb's occupation as "clothing store." The lack of an amount in the "value of real estate owned" column in the census suggests that Webb was renting a shop, or more likely, working for someone else. See Gardner "A Gentleman of Superior Cultivation and Refinement: Recovering the Biography of Frank J. Webb" (299). Was Webb's character of Kinch working in a clothing store informed by Webb's own experience?

208, 203). The inclusion of Esther and Caddy Ellis shows that Webb recognized the critical importance of strong black female figures in a united black community.[48]

The third noteworthy character that Webb includes in Mr. Walters' home is one Mr. Dennis, a black man of "fair complexion" (Webb 215). It is significant that Webb identifies and includes Mr. Dennis under Walters' roof because, although light-skinned blacks were not a distinct social class, they sometimes lived in a liminal space outside either the black or white community. Webb's inclusion of the fair-skinned Dennis signals that for Webb, all African Americans are welcome, regardless of skin tint. Webb's black community was all-inclusive.

Webb's African American characters gathered in Walters' home fight a fierce battle against the rioting throng. Under Walters' leadership they successfully repel the mob with stones, guns and boiling water. The defenders of Walters' home represent Webb's vision of the black community writ large. Black men from every social class, black women, and blacks of all complexions are united in the objective of protecting Walters' home. Webb's representation of the united African American response to the rioting mob suggests that in Webb's view, in the African American community, and in contrast to white class stratification, race solidarity overrides class difference in order to protect the black community.

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[48] Duane goes on to say that "we must consider *The Garies and Their Friends* as one of the first texts to deserve inclusion in the black feminist literary tradition" (211). A full research project devoted wholly to the female characters in *The Garies* would be a worthy endeavor indeed.

Chapter Summary

Webb's portrayal of the riot in *The Garies* is partly an effort to tell a rousing dramatic tale, but more importantly it is also an attempt by Webb as a middle-class, educated free black man to dissect and comprehend the race and class realities of violent antebellum Philadelphia. Through the lens of the riot, Webb examines the manipulation of lower-class whites by upper- and middle-class whites, he notes the class similarities between the Irish and African Americans while condemning the brutish Irish mob, and he esteems a strong, unified black community where race solidarity trumps class difference in the face of white attack. Webb's fictional riot is one framework that Webb uses in *The Garies and Their Friends* to interrogate the complex social texture of his world.

CHAPTER FOUR:

MR. WALTERS, A GENTLEMAN HERO - WEBB'S NEW VISION OF AN AFRICAN AMERICAN HEROIC FIGURE

Webb's most forceful and direct challenge to race and class stereotypes is embodied in the character of Mr. Walters, the wealthy black real estate developer. Mr. Walters is rich, educated, refined, proud, and decidedly black. With Mr. Walters, Webb emphatically challenges prevailing nineteenth-century racist assumptions that associated black skin with slavery, poverty, coarseness and degradation. Webb goes even further, however, and positions Mr. Walters not only as an upper-class gentleman, but also as an heroic figure. In nineteenth-century black literature, a "strong, courageous, full-blooded black hero who resists oppression" (Yarborough 72) was the exception, not the rule. Cast in the mold of other heroic black literary figures of the period but responding differently because of his status and circumstances, Webb's Walters represents a new conception of an African American hero – not an heroic black slave, but an heroic black gentleman. In addition, intertwined with Webb's development of Mr. Walters as a hero, Webb uses the character in a strikingly new way, to acknowledge and illumine the bicultural identities of antebellum African Americans who found themselves, on the one hand, part of American culture, and on the other, excluded from it. Webb's portrayal of Walters may indicate a literary foreshadowing of the concept of double-consciousness, the sociological idea of the "two-ness" of being black in America, famously articulated by W.E.B. DuBois almost fifty years after the publication of *The Garies*. There is no moment of mistaken identity or irony about Mr. Walters; what he presents to the world is exactly who he is: a proud,

intelligent, articulate, successful black man. Webb uses Mr. Walters to directly challenge white racist assumptions, to create a new kind of black heroic figure, and to articulate an emerging sense of black self-consciousness in antebellum America.

"As Black As a Man Can Conveniently Be" - Mr. Walters' Physical Appearance

Webb's physical description of Mr. Walters both establishes his African heritage and emphasizes his heroic status. Walters is described "as black as a man can conveniently be" (Webb 50), "above six feet in height, and exceedingly well-proportioned; of jet-black complexion, and smooth glossy skin. His head was covered with a quantity of woolly hair, which was combed back from a broad but not very high forehead. His eyes were small, black, and piercing, and set deep in his head" (Webb 121-122). Unlike Mrs. Garie or the Garie children, who are light-skinned, Mr. Walters' African ancestry is never in question. Because he is "as black as a man can conveniently be" and "of jet-black complexion," it can be assumed that Mr. Walters is a full-blooded (not mixed race) black man. With Mr. Walters, Webb shifts the variable of skin color from inconclusive or undefined to definitively black.[49]

Mr. Walters' physical traits are similar to other antebellum heroic black male literary figures. Along with being a full-blooded black man, Walters is tall and strong, and has smooth, glossy skin, and piercing eyes. Madison Washington, the hero in

[49] It is interesting that Frank Webb, listed in the US census of 1850 as a mulatto man, chose to make his hero a full-blooded black man. Perhaps he was foreshadowing an idea that will be articulated by African American author Martin Delany in his novel *Blake or the Huts of America* (1859), where he writes that "the instant that an equality of the [full-blooded] blacks with the whites is admitted, we [mulattos] being the descendants of the two, must be acknowledged the equals of both" (Delany 261).

Frederick Douglass's novella *The Heroic Slave* (1853), for example, is described as "of manly form. Tall, symmetrical, round, and strong .... The strength of a lion, arms like polished iron, his face black, but comely. His eye, lit with emotion, kept guard under a brow as dark and as glossy as the raven's wing." (Douglass 28). In William Wells Brown's *Clotel* (1853), William, the slave who courageously helps Clotel escape from slavery is "a tall, full-bodied Negro whose very countenance beamed with intelligence." (Brown 113). And perhaps the best known literary black hero of antebellum America, Tom, from Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), was described as "a large, broad-chested, powerfully-made man, of a full glossy black, and a face whose truly African features were characterized by an expression of grave and steady good sense." Webb's description of Mr. Walters follows this archetype and conveys to the reader that Mr. Walters, like other black male heroic figures of the period, is a full-blooded black man of imposing physical presence.

Suddenly, however, Webb's physical description of Walters does something unexpected: Webb takes hold of the black heroic trope and turns it sideways: "His aquiline nose, thin lips and broad chin, were the very reverse of African in their shape, and gave his face a very singular appearance" (Webb 122). Webb first pointedly asserts that Mr. Walters is a man of full African blood, then renders his facial features as the "very reverse of African," which presumably for Webb, meant that Mr. Walters' "aquiline nose, thin lips and broad chin" appeared "white." Webb presents the reader with a strong black hero figure then undermines the white readers' sense of stability by giving his black hero "European" facial features. To a white nineteenth-century reader, Webb's description of Mr. Walters might be understood to signify a black man longing or

striving to be a white man, his "white" features somehow accounting for Mr. Walters' success in business. A white reader of *The Garies* would be reassured that this black man was no doubt successful because he showed evidence of "whiteness" in his appearance.

The description of Mr. Walters' facial features, however, is so striking and unexpected that it deserves further discussion. Although Webb's explicit intentions cannot be known for certain, at least three possible explanations come to mind. First, perhaps Webb rendered Mr. Walters' facial features as "white" in order to make the point that the very idea of what an "African" looked like was itself a stereotype, and that because of miscegenation and the natural physiognomic variation within "full-blooded" Africans and African Americans, that there was a wide degree of variability in African American appearance. Nowatzki in fact, writes that "Webb's description makes it difficult if not impossible, for readers to rely on visual racial stereotypes in imagining Walters" (Nowatzki 38), which supports Webb's larger argument that visual cues are imperfect signifiers of race.

Secondly, Webb may have anticipated that his mostly white readers would not accept a man with truly "African" features as a "gentleman." Because white readers associated wealth with whiteness, perhaps Webb gave Walters "white" facial features in order to reinforce Walters' position of wealth and upper-class status in the readers' minds.

A third possibility is that Webb rendered Walters' features "the reverse of African" in order to slyly satirize "blackface" minstrel shows. These shows were hugely popular forms of entertainment in antebellum America. White men would perform what they claimed were African American dialects, songs and jokes in blackface makeup. It

was extremely demeaning and racist towards African Americans, portraying blacks as dim-witted, lazy and buffoon-like.[50] By giving the heroic, refined Mr. Walters "white" facial features, perhaps Webb was ironically expropriating and reversing the motif of blackface in order to subvert and challenge the demeaning portrayal of blacks in minstrel shows. Whatever his reasons for the intriguing use of "white" facial features in his heroic black figure, the rest of Webb's physical description of Walters certainly verifies his African heritage and establishes his heroic stature.

"One Hundred Brick Houses" – Dark Skin and Economic Power

Webb further disrupts the assumptions of white Americans by portraying Mr. Walters as very wealthy. Webb writes that Walters is "worth half a million dollars," owns "one hundred brick houses," and has "at least ten thousand dollars' worth of [railroad] stock" (Webb 50). Although there were a handful of wealthy blacks in antebellum Philadelphia, the vast majority of blacks were extremely poor.[51] Robert Nowatzki writes that the "combination of Walter's dark skin and his economic power threaten[ed] the racial logic of white Americans" (Nowatski 38). Nowatzki also correctly asserts that Webb used Walters to "comment on how money can make up for a lack of racial privilege" in a racist society (Nowatzki 39). In one incident, for example, Mr. Walters is refused service in a restaurant because he is black. Walters returns the next day and purchases the entire restaurant and hotel, telling the landlord

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[50] For a full discussion of the minstrel show, see Robert C. Toll's *Blacking Up, The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America*.

[51] Phillip Lapsansky has suggested that Mr. Walters may be "modeled on several wealthy black community leaders who would have been known to Webb, such as James Forten, Joseph Cassey, and Robert Purvis, all with extensive property holdings in the city" (Lapsansky "Afro-Americana" 31).

> Sir, I came to your house and asked for a meal, for which I was able to pay; you not only refused it to me, but heaped upon me words such as fall only from the lips of blackguards. You refuse to have me in your house – I object to have you in mine; you will, therefore, quit the premises immediately. (Webb 126-127) [52]

Walters' wealth allows him to right the injustices of racism, at least in this one specific incident. Webb implies "that for blacks, wealth can make up for a lack of whiteness in a society where whiteness and money rule" (Nowatzki 39). Walters' wealth and concomitant economic power directly challenges the racist assumptions of antebellum whites.

Further Signposts of Mr. Walters' Upper-Class Status

Webb continues to unsettle white expectations by uniting Mr. Walters with elaborate signposts of upper-class status. Not only was Mr. Walters very wealthy, he had a "handsome residence" with a "shining silver door-plate," "a well-dressed servant," and an elegant parlor (Webb 121). Webb tells the reader that Mr. Walters took great care with his clothing and his appearance: "His linen was the perfection of whiteness, and his snowy vest lost nothing by its contact therewith. A long black frock coat, black pants, and highly-polished boots, completed his attire" (Webb 122). Webb's lavish detail shows that Mr. Walters was not only wealthy, but also had the social awareness and sensibilities of a mid-nineteenth-century gentleman.

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[52] In 1838, prominent black Philadelphian John C. Bowers had traveled to Harrisburg for the first convention of the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society. Returning home after the meeting, he was refused a meal at a hotel in Lancaster. His outrage was tempered by his gratitude to his white colleagues, who rose from the table and accompanied him to another hotel. (Winch, *Elite of Our People* fn 78, 153). Perhaps this incident was known to Webb and inspired this passage about Mr. Walters.

Webb portrayed Mr. Walters so meticulously as a gentleman specifically to counteract demeaning popular images of prosperous blacks that appeared on the antebellum minstrel stage and in racist cartoons such as Edward Clay's "Life in Philadelphia" series. In the cartoons, for example, affluent blacks were pictured with the outward trappings of wealth, but at the same time were represented as coarse buffoons, clumsy, lacking in manners and education, and speaking in dialect. The message was that even if some blacks did manage to accrue wealth, their blackness would always ultimately define their true inferior and degraded nature. Mr. Walters, a refined and educated gentleman, directly refuted these popular negative stereotypes. The combination of an unapologetically wealthy black man connected directly with the markers of upper-class society and behaving exactly as a white gentleman would behave, created a jarring incongruity for the nineteenth-century reader. Mr. Walters represented the opposite of the dominant culture's alignment of blackness with poverty, ignorance, and crudeness. Webb's objective was to stun his readers with a bold and direct inversion of their assumptions about both race and class.

Mr. Walters' Parlor

A careful consideration of Mr. Walters' elegant parlor offers further evidence that Webb's intention was to disturb and unsettle white expectations about race and class. In nineteenth-century urban America, the parlor was not only the setting for a variety of social activities but also functioned as a carefully constructed public representation of self. John Kasson notes that, "the parlor became a kind of "memory place" of culture, a miniature museum thick with meaning, an artful declaration of its owners' sensibility"

(Kasson 176). Webb's detailed description of Mr. Walters' parlor, therefore, conveyed important information to readers about Mr. Walters:

> Its furniture indicated not only great wealth, but cultivated tastes and refined habits. The richly-papered walls were adorned by paintings from the hands of well-known foreign and native artists. Rich vases and well-executed bronzes were placed in most favourable situations in the apartment; the elegantly-carved walnut table was covered with those charming little bijoux which the French only are capable of conceiving, and which are only at the command of such purchasers as are possessed of more money than they otherwise can conveniently spend. (Webb 121)

Mr. Walters' parlor indicated not only a man of great wealth but also a gentleman of cultivated tastes and refined habits. That Mr. Walters was a black man created a sense of disequilibrium for the white reader, who could not precisely categorize Mr. Walters according to contemporary expectations. Webb anticipates and mirrors his white readers' reaction to Mr. Walters' parlor by noting that when (the white) Mr. Garie entered the parlor, he was taken "completely by surprise" (Webb 121) by the elegance of the room. Webb mocks the racist assumptions underpinning Mr. Garie's "surprise" by having Mr. Walters espy Garies' reaction and respond knowingly - perhaps bitterly, perhaps self-righteously - with a "smile slightly curl[ed] upon his lip" (Webb 121). Webb understands that the white reader, like the white Mr. Garie, does not expect a refined and cultured black man, and therein lies Webb's ironic intention.

Having thus established Walters' refinement and taste, Webb uses the motif of the parlor to make a political statement. Prominently displayed in the parlor is a portrait of Toussaint l'Ouverture, the black military officer who led the Haitian Revolution. Portraits hung in nineteenth-century parlors, like the furnishings, were meant to reflect the values and ideals of the homeowners. In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, for example, when the reader first enters Uncle Tom and Aunt Chloe's slave cabin, hanging over the fireplace is a portrait

of "General [George] Washington" (Stowe 19). By connecting the slaves with George Washington, Stowe meant to establish in the reader's mind that the slaves were devoted patriots and loyal to American values. Webb places Toussaint in Walters' parlor to assert Walters' point of view and to associate Walters with Toussaint's heroic status.

Mr. Walters has arranged his parlor so that the portrait of Toussaint is the first thing that visitors see when they enter, and so that he can observe their reactions. When Mr. Garie entered the parlor, the portrait of the "negro officer" which hung prominently in the room immediately intrigued him. Walters notices and remarks, "So you, too, are attracted by that picture," said Mr. Walters with a smile. "All white men look at it with interest. A black man in the uniform of a general is something so unusual that they cannot pass it with a glance" (Webb 122). Mr. Garie replies that it is "rather a novelty" and asks who it is. Mr. Walters tells him "That is Toussaint l'Ouverture, and I have every reason to believe it to be a correct likeness. … That looks like a man of intelligence. It is entirely different from any likeness I ever saw of him. The portraits generally represent him as a monkey-faced person, with a handkerchief about his head" (Webb 123). Mr. Garie responds, "This [portrait] gives me an idea of the man that accords with his actions" (Webb 123).

For Frank Webb to place the image of Toussaint L'Ouverture so conspicuously in Mr. Walters' parlor aligns Mr. Walters with Toussaint. Toussaint was the black leader of the Haitian Revolution (1791), which successfully transformed a society of slaves into a free, self-governing people. Toussaint's military genius and political acumen led to the establishment of the independent black state of Haiti (Bell, M. 3-4). The Haitian Revolution had a profound and long-lasting effect on both white and black Americans,

but in very different ways. White reaction to the revolution was shock and fear with the realization that enslaved blacks could organize, resist and successfully overthrow their white masters; whites responded with increased surveillance and draconian laws towards blacks (Jackson 13).[53]

African Americans, on the other hand, saw in Haiti and in the mythic figure of Toussaint the grand possibilities of their race and its movement toward freedom. Black leaders in America linked L'Ouverture and the Haitian Revolution to antebellum black self-consciousness and the African American struggle for freedom and civil rights. Their identification with Toussaint and the Haitian Revolution allowed African Americans and their white allies to invoke revolutionary subversive alternatives to white supremacy and to affirm black manhood (Jackson 4). In some cases, Toussaint and the revolution served not only as an inspiration, but also as a call to arms (Jackson 13).

There is no direct evidence, but it is possible, perhaps even likely, that a then-twenty-six-year-old Frank Webb may have attended a lecture given on December 20, 1854, by African American author, activist and lecturer, William Wells Brown. Delivered at St. Thomas' church in Philadelphia, the title of the lecture was "African Americans and the Haitian Revolution." In the speech, Brown recounted the glorious history of the Haitian Revolution and extolled the character, bravery, intelligence and selflessness of Toussaint in mythic terms: "He laid the foundation for the emancipation of his race and

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[53] In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Stowe made the Haitian Revolution and Toussaint L'Ouverture a subject of philosophical debate between two white slaveholders. The "kindly" slaveholder Augustine argues that the "masses are to rise, and the under class become the upper one" as in "Hayti" (Stowe 246), while his brother, Alfred, a cruel master, counters with "as if we hadn't had enough of that abominable, contemptible Hayti! The Haytiens were not Anglo Saxons; if they had been, there would have been another story" (Stowe 246). Toussaint and the Haitian Revolution had a deep impact on the consciousness of both white and black Americans.

the independence of the island." Brown then went on to note that Toussaint "will lose nothing by comparison with [George] Washington. Each was the leader of an oppressed and outraged people, each had a powerful enemy to contend with, and each succeeded in founding a government in the New World." Brown points out that Toussaint's new government made liberty its "watchword" and abolished slavery, while Washington enslaved a portion of his people and supported the institution of slavery. Brown finished his speech by quoting the Declaration of Independence and his hope that the sentiments of equality expressed therein would soon by realized for African Americans (Brown qtd, in Jackson 188). Brown's lecture is representative of the emotion attached to and the symbolic importance of Toussaint L'Ouverture to African Americans.[54]

Whether or not he attended this particular lecture, it is reasonable to assume that Webb was most certainly aware of the heroic story of Toussaint and what it represented to the African American community. By placing Toussaint's portrait in Mr. Walter's parlor, Webb was making a political statement about proud black masculinity and voicing the right of black Americans to demand justice and equality. Because the portrait shows Toussaint in a military uniform, it is also implied that if the rights were not forthcoming, then blacks had the moral and historical high-ground to claim them by force. The critic Cynthia Wolff has noted that "the relationship between militancy and "manhood" was deeply vexed for African Americans, and unlike white men, the black men of America had never been allowed the option of aggression, conquest and domination as a mode of asserting their masculinity – in public or in private" (Wolff 603). By featuring the

[54] It is worth considering that if Webb heard or read this lecture by Brown, perhaps his use of Toussaint's portrait was a direct response to Stowe's use of Washington's portrait in the slave cabin in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Perhaps it is an example of Webb in conversation with Stowe.

portrait of Toussaint in a military uniform in Walters' parlor, Webb was boldly declaring the political right of the African American man to assert his manhood, by force if necessary. By making an unequivocal association between the heroic Toussaint and Mr. Walters, Webb reinforces the heroic nature of Mr. Walters.

Between Two Cultures

The portrait of Toussaint connects Mr. Walters with black heroism, but it is interesting to note that Webb places the portrait in a room filled with a long list of expensive, Eurocentric objects: "elegantly carved walnut table," "charming little bijoux which only the French are capable of conceiving," "luxuriously-cushioned chair" among the paintings, vases and bronzes mentioned above. Mr. Walters was a wealthy man and Webb no doubt meant these objects to convey Mr. Walters' financial prowess and high social class. However, to argue, as Arthur P. Davis has done, that Mr. Walters' pride "was more of a class than a race pride" (Davis v) is to fail to acknowledge Walters' position between two cultures.

Webb locates Mr. Walters as an American, and as an upper-class, wealthy Philadelphian; his wealth and position gave him access to the finer material aspects of the dominant white culture in which he lived. Yet, the prominent portrait of Toussaint in his parlor shows Walters' – and Webb's – heightened consciousness of blackness and whiteness, and Walters' unwillingness to forego his black heritage. The juxtaposition of Toussaint's portrait alongside sumptuous objects of the dominant Eurocentric culture is evidence of Mr. Walters' position as an African American man living within the dominant white culture. His acquisition of high-priced furnishings for his parlor,

evidence of his upper-class status, in no way diminishes his sense of his own black identity. The two cultural statements exist in one room, side by side, perhaps suggesting Webb's anticipation of the idea of "double-consciousness," a concept that will be famously articulated fifty years after *The Garies* by brilliant African-American historian and sociologist W.E.B DuBois. "Double-consciousness" was described by DuBois as the phenomenon that an African-American "ever feels his two-ness, -- an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body..." (DuBois 5). Webb's description of Mr. Walters' parlor in which both its fine Eurocentric objects and the portrait of Toussaint hold equal value, is perhaps an early African American literary expression of double-consciousness and Webb's representation of the duality of identity of black Americans. While decidedly a black man, Mr. Walters is at the same time a full participant in the values and ideals of the wider, white-dominated culture; in Mr. Walters' parlor, the two identities are expressed simultaneously. Moreover, the portrait of Toussaint specifically associates Walters not only with his black heritage, but also with a sense of black pride and black militancy. Webb's description of Mr. Walters' parlor acknowledges and illumines the bicultural identities of antebellum African Americans who found themselves, on the one hand, part of American culture, and on the other, excluded from it, and suggests an emerging sense of double-consciousness in nineteenth-century black American identity.

Mr. Walters' Heroic Deeds

Having established that Walters is an heroic figure by his physical description and by his association with Toussaint, Webb's plot then places Mr. Walters in situations

where he must act heroically. Richard Yarborough has defined the ideal traits of a full-blooded, black antebellum literary hero as physical strength combined with "intelligent leadership, undeniable bravery against greater numbers, limited and discriminate use of violence, with ultimate success" (Yarborough, "Depiction of Blacks" 82). Mr. Walters fits this description, yet Mr. Walters is different from other black antebellum heroes. Mr. Walters is not a slave; he is a free black man. Moreover, Mr. Walters is wealthy, refined, educated, and a city-dweller - in short, an upper-class, urban gentleman. With Mr. Walters, Webb creates a new kind of black hero, not an heroic black slave, but an heroic black gentleman.

Mr. Walter's heroic traits as a leader and his upper-class status are fully on display during the riot scene when a violent white lynch mob threatens black homes throughout the city. In the hopes of averting violence ahead of the riot, Mr. Walters first goes to see the mayor in order to enlist police protection for the African-American community. Because of his upper-class station and economic power, Mr. Walters is well known to the mayor and politely received. Mr. Walters tells the mayor that there is an "organized gang of villains, who are combined for the sole purpose of mobbing us coloured citizens; and, as we are inoffensive, we certainly deserve protection" (Webb 202). The mayor, however, is apathetic and indifferent to Walters' concerns and offers to send only "two or three policemen for [Walters'] protection" (Webb 202). Mr. Walters, with rising indignation, departs, telling the mayor "I must do what I can to protect myself. ... If I am attacked, they will find I am not unprepared" (Webb 202). Mr. Walters' upper-class status and wealth give him access to the mayor; he uses this access to make a plea on behalf of the entire African-American community. Speaking as their leader and

affirming their standing as citizens of the city, Mr. Walters tries to work within the system and enlist the protection of the law. When that fails, he voices the right of the African-American community to defend itself. Mr. Walters behaves heroically by choosing to utilize his upper-class status on behalf of the wider black community.

When it is clear there will be no assistance from the authorities, Mr. Walters takes charge in heroic fashion. He sends messengers to warn black families to leave their homes or to prepare to defend themselves. A few of Walters' male friends, and the entire Ellis family, congregate at Mr. Walters' mansion in his upper-class neighborhood. They convert his home into a "temporary fortress" (Webb 203), shuttering the doors and windows, and stockpiling guns, cartridges and powder. With [Walters] as "the commander of this fortress" (Webb 207-208), they hunker down to await nightfall and the approaching mob.

Black Violence, Black Manhood, and White Readers

For the white reader, Mr. Walters' high-class status and wealth did not counteract deeply engrained racist thinking that assumed all black men were inevitably violent. Webb therefore had to confront the dilemma of representing a strong black heroic figure without offending the sensibilities of his largely white audience. Webb had to tread carefully in order to maintain Walters' heroic status and at the same time make his black hero acceptable to white readers. As a heroic figure, Mr. Walters needed to respond to the physical challenge of the mob, yet because he was a black man, Webb had to consider white "stereotype[s] of colored men as uncontrollably violent" (Crockett 61). Webb's answer to this dilemma was to position Mr. Walters firmly within the literary tradition of

a black hero fighting defensively against white men for a just cause, and only when no other option was available. As they await the white mob, Mr. Walters says,

> We are not the aggressors, thank God! And the results, be they what they may, are not of our seeking. I have a right to defend my own: I have asked protection of the law, and it is too weak, or too indifferent, to give it; so I have no alternative but to protect myself. (Webb 208)

With this statement, Webb claims the moral high ground for his hero and at the same time reassures the white reader that this black hero's use of violence is limited and justified. Mr. Walters' declaration harks back to the speech of Madison Washington, the black hero of Douglass's "The Heroic Slave" (1853). Washington defends his violent takeover of the slave ship by stating,

> You call me a black murderer. I am not a murderer. God is my witness that Liberty, not malice, is the motive for this night's work. I have done no more to those dead men yonder, than they would have done to me in like circumstances. We have struck for our freedom, and if a true man's heart be in you, you will honor us for the deed. .... We do not thirst for your blood, we demand only our rightful freedom. (Douglass 66-67)

Like Madison Washington, Mr. Walters makes it clear that he asked for only what was rightfully due him, that he had no other choice but to fight, and that he was fighting for a just cause, "defending his own." Further, Mr. Walters responds to the mob only defensively, and only in-kind (stones in response to stones, guns in response to guns, etc.). Webb, like Douglass before him, transforms his hero's fight from one of black versus white to one of justice versus injustice. Although violent in nature, Mr. Walters' defense of his home can then be understood by both white and black readers in universal human terms. While Madison Washington and Mr. Walters both fight for justice, the circumstances of the fight are quite different: Washington is a slave fighting for freedom from bondage aboard a ship on the high seas; Walters is a wealthy, free citizen of

property defending his home in an urban neighborhood. Webb has retained the heroic traits of the slave rebel but transposed them onto a free, upper-class, and urban gentleman, thereby creating a new conception of a black antebellum hero.

When the mob attacks, Mr. Walters is fully in charge. He positions each of his men, he orders them to wait for his signal before firing their weapons, he orchestrates shining a bright light onto the attackers in order to bring them into full view, and he instructs his men to hold back their fire until they can be sure of the targets. Ultimately, the group is able to successfully hold off the attack of the mob, which moves on to other targets.[55] During the riot scene, Mr. Walters demonstrates the heroic traits of intelligent, forceful leadership, bravery against greater numbers, discriminate use of violence, and ultimate success. He also demonstrates allegiance and solidarity with his community.[56]

There is, however, one moment during the riot when Mr. Walters' heroic nature seems to falter. When it is learned that the mob intends to go up "Winter-Street, to give a coat of tar and feathers to a white man, who is married to a nigger woman" (Webb 216),

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[55] During the attack of the mob, two of the younger characters, Kinch and Caddy, rig up a kettle filled with hot water and cayenne pepper, which they drop from the second story window onto the heads of the attacking whites. It is fascinating that one of the emblems of the West African god Eshu Elegba was an earthen pot turned upside down (Sundquist 61). Also, cayenne pepper was a key ingredient in the famous Philadelphia street-food known as "pepper pot," a Caribbean dish that was likely derived from an earlier version of a West African okra-based gumbo (Harris 72-73). By having two of his African American characters attack the white mob by upending a kettle filled with hot water and cayenne pepper, was Webb making a subtle reference to the African cultural heritage of his black characters?

[56] In addition to Mr. Walters, Kinch and Caddy, at least three other black characters behave heroically during the riot scene. The first is the fair-skinned Mr. Dennis, who goes out into the white crowd as a spy; another is Mr. Ellis, who bravely tries to make his way through the mob to the Garie house in order to warn them of the impending danger. The third is Esther Ellis, who learns to load pistols to assist in their defense, and who saves the group from a potentially deadly powder keg explosion. Mr. Walters is the leader, but Webb makes it clear that other blacks also act heroically.

in other words, to attack the Garie home, the group agrees that someone must go and warn the Garies. Esther Ellis wants to go, but Walters forbids her to leave. Walters says he himself would go "but it would be certain death to me: my black face would quickly obtain for me a passport to another world if I were discovered in the street just now" (Webb 216). Mr. Ellis, himself black-skinned, volunteers to brave the mob and warn the Garies, saying, "It's my duty. Garie would do the same for me" (Webb 216). Mr. Ellis is ultimately pursued, nearly killed, and permanently maimed by the white rioters. By his unwillingness to risk his own life, and his willingness to let another black man assume the risk, Mr. Walters appears in this moment to lack personal courage.

In her dissertation on *The Garies*, Rosemary Crockett has argued that Webb could not allow Mr. Walters, the hero of the novel, to "suffer such physical abuse," that "Webb had to make [Walters] resemble white [literary] male heroes, who meted out rather than suffered physical abuse. Therefore Walters led the community's defense against the mob attack, but was never himself placed in personal physical jeopardy. Like a white literary hero, he was never physically violated" (Crockett 60).

Webb again follows the literary example of Douglass's black hero, Madison Washington, who is physically unharmed during the violent revolt aboard the slave ship. Douglass accomplishes this feat not by having his hero refuse to give battle, but by having a white sailor, "knocked senseless" during the heat of the mutiny, recount the story of the rebellion. The sailor reports,

> When I came to myself, (which I did in a few minutes, I suppose, for it was not yet quite light,) there was not a white man on deck. The sailors were all aloft in the rigging, and dared not come down. Captain Clarke and Mr. Jameson lay stretched on the quarter-deck, - both dying, - while Madison himself stood at the helm unhurt. (Douglass 66)

By drawing a veil over those few moments in the revolt when Washington would have been engaged in physical conflict, Douglass is able to preserve Washington's physical being in pristine condition, and maintain his heroic status intact. Webb seeks to accomplish the same goal, but does so somewhat less elegantly than Douglass, leaving a minor chink in Walters' heroic armor.

The authorial choice to keep Mr. Walters from physical harm also allowed Webb to use the crippled and incapacitated character of Mr. Ellis throughout the remainder of the novel as an ever-present reminder of the racial violence of antebellum Philadelphia. Mr. Walters' lack of heroic action in this instance was primarily a literary decision that compromised some, but not all, of Mr. Walters' heroic veneer.

Webb's careful literary balancing act between portraying heroic black manhood while mitigating white stereotypes of black violence speaks to Webb's own acute sense of double-consciousness as a nineteenth-century black man. He was a black man writing about a black hero within the constraints of the dominant white society. Webb's black hero proudly, almost defiantly, displayed Toussaint L'Ouverture's portrait in his parlor, yet when that very parlor was under mob attack, Webb had to find a way to justify the black hero's use of force in order to mollify white readers. This writerly act is evidence of Webb's awareness of his position between two cultures, and of his own "two-ness."

In a separate incident in *The Garies*, Webb further extends the definition of heroic black manhood to include a black gentleman-hero. When it is revealed in a melodramatic plot twist that Mr. Stevens, the arch villain of the novel, is the legal heir to the Garie fortune, it is Mr. Walters who fiercely confronts Mr. Stevens with the (accurate) charge that Mr. Stevens murdered Mr. Garie in order to steal his fortune. When Mr. Stevens calls

Mr. Walters a liar, Mr. Walters responds instantly and violently "with the ferocity of a tiger, … seizing him by the throat, [shaking and whirling] him about as though he were a plaything" (Webb 255). Mr. Balch steps in to convince Mr. Walters to loose his hold upon the throat of Mr. Stevens, and Walters leaves the room so that Balch and Stevens can negotiate provisions for the Garie children. For a black literary figure to lose his temper and physically attack a white man is striking and unusual but not unprecedented in antebellum literature.

Perhaps the most famous antebellum literary account of a physical altercation between a black man and a white man occurs in the autobiographical *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, written by Himself* (1845). In it, Douglass recounts the capricious cruelty of his master, Mr. Covey; one day, writes Douglass, "I resolved to fight; and suiting my action to the resolution, I seized Covey hard by the throat" (Douglass, *Narrative* 50). A two-hour battle between the master and slave ensued, with Douglass emerging clearly the physical and psychological victor. Douglass writes, "This battle with Mr. Covey was the turning point in my career as a slave. It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my own manhood" (Douglass, *Narrative* 50). Douglass associates the physical act of defending himself against injustice with a sense of his own manhood, that "crucial spiritual commodity that one must maintain in the face of oppression in order to avoid losing a sense of self-worth" (Yarborough "Race" 167). Douglass establishes a connection between black manhood and physical resistance to white oppression.

Douglass's autobiographical account and Webb's fictional scene have similarities and differences. Both show black men pushed to the limits of tolerance, responding with

physical violence towards evil white men; both are one-on-one encounters in which the black man prevails physically. Douglass's account is between a master and a slave, while Webb's scene is between two free men, but in both cases, the black man fights for justice. Out of the battle with his master, Douglass the slave recovers a sense of his manhood. Webb's fictional Mr. Walters, a free and well-established gentleman, displays no doubts about his manhood and behaves as if the prevailing definition of masculinity entitles him, even requires him, to defend his honor and fight for justice. It is significant that the final straw that causes Mr. Walters to attack Mr. Stevens is Stevens' calling Mr. Walters a liar, an insult to his character. Mr. Walters responds as any nineteenth-century gentleman would: he defends his honor against a slur on his character. Webb makes an assumption that a black gentleman can and will behave like a white gentleman regarding a question of honor. Walters' actions demand respect from the reader and "endow him with authentic manhood, in the sense both of forceful manliness and of his identity as a full human being " (Bryant 23). Webb drew upon accounts of heroic slave resistance, and then superimposed those traits onto the wealthy, urban Mr. Walters to create a new type of black heroic figure, a black gentleman. By portraying Mr. Walters in this way, Webb demanded an expanded nineteenth-century definition of masculinity and of gentleman that included black men.

"It is of Incalculable Advantage to be White" – Heroic Self-Doubt

Webb's Mr. Walters displays yet another characteristic of the hero figure: self-doubt. As with other antebellum heroic traits, this characteristic takes on new meaning when applied to the wealthy, urban Mr. Walters. In order to add depth and humanity,

heroic literary figures often are made to experience moments of personal crisis. Through these moments of self-doubt, the interior psychological struggle of the hero is often revealed. Mr. Walters experiences just such a moment when he and the (white) lawyer, Mr. Balch, decide that Clarence Garie, the fair-skinned, orphaned son of Mr. and Mrs. Garie, will be sent away to live with, and be raised as, a white person, to conceal his African heritage and "pass" into white society.

Mr. Balch proposes that both the Garie children should "pass" into white society, Clarence immediately, and Emily when she is old enough to keep the secret of her mother's background. Since their mother, their only relative with distinguishable African heritage, is dead, and the children themselves are exceedingly fair-skinned, Mr. Balch reasons that their parentage will never come to light. He argues that passing will ensure their happiness and he says to Mr. Walters, "You must acknowledge that as white persons they will be better off" (Webb 275).

Mr. Walters' response is a heartrending, naked and deeply revealing statement of his sense of his position as a mid-nineteenth-century free, northern African American man:

> "I admit," answered Mr. Walters, "that in our land of liberty it is of incalculable advantage to be white; that is beyond dispute, and no one is more painfully aware of it than I. Often I have heard men of colour say they would not be white if they could – had no desire to change their complexions; I've written some down fools; others, liars. Why," continued he, with a sneering expression of countenance, "it is everything to be white; one feels that at every turn in our boasted free country, where all men are upon an equality. When I look around me, and see what I have made myself in spite of circumstances, and think what I might have been with the same heart and brain beneath a fairer skin, I am almost tempted to curse the destiny that made me what I am. Time after time, when scraping, toiling, saving, I have asked myself. To what purpose is it all?—perhaps that in the future white men may point at and call me, sneeringly, 'a nigger millionaire,' or condescend to borrow money of me. Ah! Often, when some negro-hating white man has been forced to ask a loan at my hands, I've thought

of Shylock and his pound of flesh, and ceased to wonder at him. There's no doubt my dear sir, but what I fully appreciate the advantage of being white. Yet, with all I have endured, and yet endure from day to day, I esteem myself happy in comparison with that man, who, mingling in the society of whites, is at the same time aware that he has African blood in his veins, and is liable at any moment to be ignominiously hurled from his position by the discovery of his origin. He is never safe. I have known instances where parties have gone on for years and years undetected; but some untoward circumstance brings them out at last, and down they fall forever." (Webb 275-276)

Mr. Walters' soliloquy is a critical passage in *The Garies and Their Friends*. In it, the reader has access to the hero's, and perhaps the author's, innermost thoughts as a mid-nineteenth-century black man. Walters reveals the pain he has experienced as a result of racial prejudice and his bitterness at the overwhelming injustice of it. The use of language and the ironic thread that runs through the passage, however, anchors the hero - and the reader - so that both feel the pain of his situation, but also his strength and determination to carry on. Webb's use of the word "sneering" twice in the passage emphasize Mr. Walters' anger and fighting spirit, indicating a not-yet defeated man. The fact that he was "almost" tempted to curse his destiny as a black man says that although pushed to the brink, he in fact does *not* curse his destiny. His references to "our land of liberty" and "our boasted free country" are ironic political commentary, meant to point out that nineteenth-century America is neither a land of liberty nor a free country for blacks. Webb allows the reader to feel the hero's despair, but holds him back from truly tipping over into hopelessness.

The passage is especially significant for what it reveals about the socio-psychological mindset of African Americans within American society in the antebellum north. Mr. Walters, a strong black hero figure, directly admits that within his world, "it is of incalculable advantage to be white," "it is everything to be white," and he "fully

appreciate[s] the advantage of being white." Richard Yarborough has argued that these statements render Walters' heroic "status and accomplishments hollow and distasteful" (Yarborough "Depiction of Blacks" 137). This is perhaps too harsh and dismissive of both Mr. Walters, and of Frank Webb. Although the statements may be disagreeable to the modern reader, they are in fact an accurate reflection of the reality of the situation and the resulting socialized ambivalence of some nineteenth-century African Americans. To be sure, some nineteenth-century blacks embraced a strong sense of uncompromising black pride, but there were also many African Americans who found their identities shifting between the values of the dominant white culture and the subordinate black culture. Historian Frederick Cooper has written that while black "acceptance of middle class values might strike the modern reader as a capitulation to white society, … in their own frame of reference these values were the key to self-respect" (Cooper 623). In the 1850s, African Americans had not yet reconciled the dialectic in American society between black and white, and it was a major source of tension. The social ambivalence reflected in Mr. Walters' soliloquy is an aspect of nineteenth-century African American double consciousness and part of the historical quest of African Americans towards "full development and unity of self" (Bell 12). Acknowledgment of this unsettled conflict in Mr. Walters' identity in no way diminishes his heroic status.

Indeed, other black antebellum literary heroes experience moments of questioning and self-doubt and remain heroes. Douglass's Madison Washington, for example, expresses self-doubt when he says,

> What, then, is life to me? It is aimless and worthless, and worse than worthless….. But what is freedom to me, or I to it? I am a slave, - born a slave, an abject slave, - even before I made part of this breathing world, the scourge was platted for my back; the fetters were forged for my limbs.

> How mean a thing I am. … I neither run nor fight, do meanly stand, answering each heavy blow of a cruel master with doleful wails and piteous cries. I am galled with irons; but even those are more tolerable than the consciousness, the galling consciousness of cowardice and indecision.
> (Douglass 27)

His self-doubt leads to self-evaluation, and ultimately, a renewed sense of self-determination.

Tom, the hero of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* has what Stowe describes as a "dread soul-crisis" (Stowe 357). Beaten down physically and mentally by his evil master Legree, Tom was pressed to "the lowest level at which endurance [was] possible" and "though the hand of faith still held to the eternal rock, it was with a numb, despairing grasp. Tom sat, like one stunned, at the fire" (Stowe 356-57). Tom is ultimately redeemed from his despair by a religious vision of Jesus:

> How long Tom lay there, he knew not. When he came to himself, the fire was gone out, his clothes were wet with the chill and the drenching dews; but the dread soul-crisis was past, and, in the joy that filled him, he no longer felt hunger, cold, degradation, disappointment, wretchedness. (Stowe 357)

Tom's sense of himself as a Christian was severely tested; he worked his way through the crisis and was thereafter surrounded with an "inviolable sphere of peace" (Stowe 358). For the remainder of the novel, Tom is an heroic example of Christian faith; when he dies, the expression on his face is that "of a conqueror" (Stowe 382).

These examples show that other heroic black antebellum literary figures experienced inner self-doubt and still maintained heroic status. Mr. Walters affecting soliloquy is just such a moment of despairing self-doubt. As with these other literary figures, Webb allows the reader to feel the depth of Mr. Walters' despair, yet that does not negate his status as a hero.

However, Mr. Walters' soliloquy is not a speech by a slave against slavery, but rather a statement by a northern free black man against the deep-seated injustice of racial prejudice. Seen in a wider historical context, Mr. Walters' speech reflects the frustration of free Northern blacks about a crucial issue of the time – the "elevation" of the black man. Elevation was a major theme of most black leaders in the 1830s and 1840s and was seen as an optimistic way forward for African Americans. After 1850, however, black leaders began to realize that elevation was not working; whites, they realized, "might hate an educated black as well as an ignorant one, that whites might not want to live and work with proper, abstemious blacks any more than with black drunkards" (Cooper 624). Mr. Walters' soliloquy, probably written by Webb around 1856, reflects both sides of this arc. Mr. Walters is clearly an individual who has successfully improved himself through hard work, education, and "scraping, toiling and saving." He has followed the guiding principles of elevation and become, presumably, an ideal example of the potential of "elevation." Yet, for all his success, whites do not treat him as an equal. He wonders what he would have made of himself "with the same heart and brain beneath a fairer skin" and is still referred to by white men as a "nigger millionaire." As a young, educated, free black man living in Philadelphia, Webb had seen any number of intelligent, hard-working, upstanding, successful black businessmen suffer the limitations, humiliations and sometimes physical danger of racial prejudice. In terms of full inclusion, however, Mr. Walters' upper-class status, wealth and accomplishments did not, and would not, make up for his black skin. Walters' soliloquy reflected Webb's acknowledgement of the deep frustration, heartbreak and disappointment of the African-American community at the failure of elevation as a strategy to decrease racial prejudice.

A Moment of Misjudgment

Despite grave reservations, Mr. Walters consents to Balch's plan to send Clarence Garie to live among whites: as an heroic figure, this decision is Mr. Walters' most serious misjudgment. Even though he has deep concerns about placing the boy in such a situation, he says "I'll make no farther objection; I would not have the boy say to me thereafter, 'But for your persisting in identifying me with a degraded people, I might have been better and happier than I am.' However, I cannot but feel that concealments of this kind are productive of more misery than comfort" (Webb 276). A hero is allowed moments of reflective self-questioning, but readers want their heroic figures to ultimately make courageous and morally correct decisions. Certainly Mr. Walters has lived his own life unapologetically as a proud black man, but he cannot bring himself to make that choice for Clarence Garie. It is understandable that Mr. Walters wants to spare Clarence the pain of racial prejudice and give him the advantages of being white in a racist society. At the same time, however, Mr. Walters is keenly aware of the precarious position of a "black" person passing as a "white." The heroic choice would have been to reject Mr. Balch's plan and insist that Clarence remain with his sister within the black community. The decision reveals, not a lack of race pride on Mr. Walters' part, but rather the terrible, almost unfathomable power of racial prejudice in antebellum urban Philadelphia. In a tiny detail, Webb hints at Walters' error: when Clarence was called into the room, having a choice where to stand between Balch and Walters, the boy "plac[ed] himself beside the chair of Mr. Walters" (Webb 277), aligning himself symbolically with his black heritage.

If Mr. Walters fails to make the heroic choice for little Clarence Garie, there are many other moments throughout *The Garies* where he exhibits a strong sense of race

solidarity. Early in the novel, for example, Mr. Walters makes an impassioned declaration that young Charlie Ellis should not be sent to work as a domestic in the wealthy white Thomas household. Walters believes that by sending young black boys to work as servants in white homes, they become dependent and are prevented from learning how to make an independent living. Walters says

> Do you ever find [whites] sending their boys out as servants? No; they rather give them a stock of matches, blacking, newspapers, or apples, and start them out to sell. What is the result? The boy that learns to sell matches soon learns to sell other things; he learns to make bargains; he becomes a small trader, then a merchant, then a millionaire. Did you ever hear of any one who made a fortune at service? Where would I or Ellis have been had we been hired out all our lives at so much a month? It begets a feeling of dependence to place a boy in such a situation. .... It is impossible to have the same respect for the man who cleans your boots, that you have for the man who plans and builds your house. (Webb 63)

He thinks sending young blacks into service contributes to whites' perception of blacks as fit only to be servants, and believes that young blacks must be educated above all else.

In another example of Mr. Walters' sense of black community, when the Ellis' home is destroyed during the riot, Mr. Walters shares his home and his money with the Ellises until they can support themselves. When Mr. and Mrs. Garie die during the riot, it is Mr. Walters who steps in to care for the orphaned Garie children and make arrangements for the interment of the Garies in the graveyard of the "coloured Episcopal church" (Webb 234). Furthermore, some years after the riot, when Mr. Walters is happily married to Esther Ellis, the reader is told that there are no reminders of the riot in their parlor "save the bullet-hole in the ceiling, which Mr. Walters declares shall remain unfilled as evidence of the marked attention he has received at the hands of his fellow-

citizens" (Webb 333). Mr. Walters keeps the bullet hole, as a powerful symbol of his concern for his community and of his ever-vigilant watchfulness on their behalf. Mr. Walters becomes the memory keeper and the guardian for the community. Finally, it is to Mr. Walters' home that everyone gathers to celebrate the joyous wedding of Charlie Ellis and Emily Garie at the end of the novel, implying that Walters' home is the center of social life of the community. Despite his acquiescence in sending Clarence Garie to pass for white, Mr. Walters is most certainly the proud black leader of this African American community.

Mr. Walters as a Response to Stowe's Uncle Tom

Webb's heroic Mr. Walters may have been a direct response to arguably the most famous black heroic literary figure of the nineteenth century – Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Sophia Cantave remarks that "after the publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* [1852], African Americans who wanted to speak about blackness in America and be heard had to do it through Stowe or not at all" (Cantave 589). Frank Webb, an African American, used Mr. Walters to speak about blackness in America, but rather than speaking *through* Stowe, as Cantave suggests, Webb *answered back* to Stowe by offering a new kind of heroic black figure. Webb owed a huge debt of gratitude to Stowe because she wrote the preface to *The Garies*, thereby providing an entrée for Webb's novel.[57] But what Webb did in the pages of his novel and most especially with

[57] The Garies has a number of significant parallels with *Uncle Tom's Cabin* that may be "answering back" to Stowe or perhaps just imitating Stowe. One example, previously mentioned, is the portrait of Toussaint in Walters' parlor and the portrait of George Washington in Tom's parlor. Further, Stowe remarks that Americans welcome Hungarians but not blacks, while Webb mocks female missionary societies for

the character of Mr. Walters, was to challenge Stowe's well-meaning, but narrow and racist stereotype of a black male heroic figure. Abolitionists like Stowe were unable "to ground their case for the black man on a forthright and intellectually convincing argument for the basic identity in the moral and intellectual aptitudes of all races" (Fredrickson 127). Webb's Mr. Walters, a black character written by a black man, makes a convincing argument for the intelligence, ability, potential and moral competency of the black man.

Uncle Tom and Mr. Walters have several things in common. As noted previously, they are both full-blooded black men, they are both physically formidable, and they both experience moments of self-questioning. They both exhibit leadership, strength of character and other heroic traits. Uncle Tom, however, is a slave who owns no property, is mostly uneducated, and derives his moral sense of himself from his Christian faith. Tom is content to bear the trials of this world because he believes it will all be made right in the next world when he dies and joins Christ in heaven. Stowe's white readers embraced Tom as an heroic figure because his Christianity rendered him passive and non-threatening. In his famous essay critical of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, James Baldwin argues that Tom's "triumph is metaphysical, unearthly; since he is black, born without the light, it is only through humility, the incessant mortification of the flesh, that he can

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evangelizing the Patagonians, but not helping fellow black Americans. In addition, there is a simile about shipwrecked sailors that is nearly identical in both texts. And perhaps most striking, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* has a white character called Mrs. Bird, a senator's wife who is sympathetic to fugitive slaves. *The Garies* has a white character also called Mrs. Bird who is wealthy, and takes Charlie Ellis for the summer, treats him wonderfully, and tries to help him gain admittance to a good private school. The Mrs. Birds in both stories have lost children to death. It seems highly likely that Webb wrote his Mrs. Bird with Stowe's Mrs. Bird directly in mind. Perhaps Webb's Mrs. Bird, as a wealthy, sympathetic, northern white woman, was also a tribute to Stowe.

enter into communion with God" and that Tom, Stowe's only full-blooded black man, was thereby robbed of his humanity and divested of his masculinity (Baldwin 535). Baldwin believed that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was "activated by what might be called a theological terror," set up, delineated, and controlled by the white, northern, sympathetic, sentimental Mrs. Stowe and her fellow abolitionists. According to Baldwin, Stowe's Tom, perhaps heroic to white readers, accepted a theology that denied him life and was constrained and made subhuman in the process.

There is no evidence that Baldwin read *The Garies*, but perhaps he would have approved of Mr. Walters, and Webb's attempt to represent a black man as a full human being. Mr. Walters shows many of the same heroic traits as Uncle Tom, but he is different in two critical ways. First, because he is at the opposite end of the social hierarchy from Uncle Tom, Mr. Walters asserts his manhood by participating fully in his world, by leading his people against injustice, by marrying and raising a family. Baldwin believed that oppressed people seek a "new society," one in which inequalities will disappear. What the rejected people desire, Baldwin wrote, is an "elevation of status, acceptance within the present community" (Baldwin 537). Mr. Walters certainly strove to be fully accepted within the American community.

Secondly, Mr. Walters, unlike Uncle Tom, is not motivated by religious beliefs. Although Mr. Walters does not outwardly reject Christianity, his life experience has convinced him that most individuals who call themselves Christian do not live Christian ideals. Mr. Walters, unlike Uncle Tom, is therefore not an overtly religious man. Walters' morality seems to derive rather from a deeply held belief in individual equality, fulfillment and justice. As a free, wealthy, urban man, Mr. Walters has a concrete stake in

trying to change this world for the good, not in waiting for the afterlife. Stowe, a white northern abolitionist woman, created a stereotypical romantic racialist heroic figure in Uncle Tom. In the midst of Stowe's phenomenal success, Frank Webb, an African American man, answered back with a different vision of a black hero and a black man: Mr. Walters, certainly heroic, but also free, proud, wealthy, educated, capable, moral, and very decidedly demanding justice in this world. Baldwin wrote that it is the "power of revelation which is the business of the novelist, this journey toward a more vast reality" (Baldwin 534). Perhaps James Baldwin would have thought that Mr. Walters and Frank Webb, unlike Uncle Tom and Harriet Beecher Stowe, broadened the horizon "toward a more vast reality" for conceptions of antebellum black manhood.

Chapter Summary

With Mr. Walters, Webb challenged and destabilized white racist assumptions that sought to permanently associate and confine "blackness" to the lowest rung of American society. Although Webb's Mr. Walters shares some traits of earlier literary representations of black male heroic figures, Webb's hero is something new in African American literature – an unapologetic full-blooded black man in the person of a free, upper-class gentleman. Webb created this new conception by upending prevailing assumptions about race and class. Instead of showing a black man as enslaved, poor, illiterate, degraded and crude, Mr. Walters is free, wealthy, educated, refined and cultured. Like Madison Washington, the heroic slave rebel, and Uncle Tom, the noble, passive Christian slave, Mr. Walters has heroic traits and performs heroic actions, yet he is imperfect and has moments of self-doubt. At no point in the novel does he behave or

speak ironically, nor does he assume any alternate persona or mask throughout. Through Mr. Walters' description, actions, and words, Webb contemplates the definition of individual black manhood and black identity within antebellum America. The character's actions show an undoubtedly brave and noble man, while his self-reflective dialog shows an individual struggling not against slavery but rather to define his identity as a free black man living in a white-dominated culture. Mr. Walters strives toward race pride, and there are many textual examples where he insists upon it, yet Webb has rendered him human enough to reveal self-doubt. Some critics have dismissed Mr. Walters, and Webb, for this perceived flaw of self-doubt. However, Webb's Mr. Walters represents an accurate portrayal of emerging black consciousness for some African Americans in mid-nineteenth-century America. Webb, through Mr. Walters, is a black man finding his way through the questions and challenges of what it means to be a free black man in antebellum urban America. Walters' black pride is present and emerging, but not yet fully realized. Far from being a reason to dismiss Mr. Walters, and Webb, this character and this novel deserve recognition for honestly seeking answers to complex and difficult questions at an extremely tenuous moment in African American history.

CHAPTER FIVE:

CONCLUSION

Frank Webb's *The Garies and Their Friends* is much more than a sentimental tale. It is in fact a vigorous and incisive examination and interrogation of race and class in antebellum Philadelphia. Webb's recurring use of mistaken identity, his multi-layered explication of an urban riot, and his creation of a new vision of a black male hero demonstrate his paramount objective of challenging white racist assumptions that sought to permanently associate and confine "blackness" and black skin to the lowest rung of American society. Webb demonstrates that skin color does not and should not designate social class, and moreover, shows that social class itself does not indicate the moral character of any individual. Webb used the literary conventions of sentimentality and melodrama, but it was sentimentality and melodrama with pointed sociological and political underpinnings. Webb's novel should be more widely recognized for its important contribution to the understanding of race relations in mid-nineteenth-century urban America and for its place in the history of African American literature.

One question that must be asked is why, if this work makes such a significant contribution, has it been largely ignored? The answer is that *The Garies* has been a book out of step with its time, not once, but twice; first, when it was published in 1857, and then again in 1969 when it was republished. In 1857, Northern abolitionists, the most obvious American target audience for *The Garies*, were happy to welcome a work written by an African American that condemned slavery and slave owners. To be sure, the thinking went, those evil, unchristian slaveholders needed to be exposed and condemned for perpetuating the colossal and cruel sin of slavery. *The Garies*, however, was not about

slaves and slavery, but about respectable northern blacks and the racism they experienced in the North. It was nearly impossible for those same white northerners who despised slavery to turn the lens upon themselves and examine their own racist and unjust treatment of free blacks in their own cities and neighborhoods. While northern abolitionists wanted an end to slavery that did not translate to a belief that blacks were equal to whites. The middle- and upper-class black characters and their lives as portrayed in *The Garies* represented and set goals for the African American community that were, for most northern whites, uncomfortable at best, and dangerous at worst. In short, while sympathetic white Americans in 1857 were ready for emancipation, they were not ready to admit their own racism or to recognize the full humanity and subjectivity of black Americans. When it was published, therefore, the novel seems to have been ignored by American readers.

The Garies was also out of step with the times when it was republished in America 1969. The late 1960s and early 1970s were a time of great social unrest in the United States, particularly for black Americans. The Black Power movement was in full swing, emphasizing racial pride and the creation of black political and cultural institutions to nurture and promote black collective interests and advance black values. The Black Power Movement, together with its artistic branch called the Black Arts Movement, embodied and generated pride in "blackness," black solidarity, and black culture and life. *The Garies and Their Friends* was republished during this period by Arno Press, as part of its series called *The American Negro, His History and Literature*. The scholarly response to *The Garies* upon its second publication was largely negative and seems to suggest that although *The Garies* was written by a black author, and

concerned itself with the lives of black people, it was simply not "black enough." *The Garies* did not fit in with the values of the Black Power Movement because it showed middle-class black characters, speaking standard English, some with light or white skin, seemingly adopting "white" values. *The Garies*, many scholars surmised, was the story of black people capitulating to the values of the dominant white culture, in essence acting "white," and that did not fit the vision of the Black Power Movement. In her essay "Interrogating "Whiteness," Complicating "Blackness": Remapping American Culture," Shelley Fisher Fishkin has noted that before 1990, there was a "tendency on the part of scholars to avoid attending to black middle-class experience" which essentially had "the effect of redlining as subjects worthy of study writers, texts, ideas, and communities that failed to fit the mold" (Fishkin 448). Although Fishkin's analysis concerns black women writers, her conclusions aptly apply to the reception given to *The Garies* when it was republished in 1969. One could say that Webb was first excluded in 1857 because he was black, and excluded in 1969 because he was not black enough. The historical moments in which *The Garies* was published - first in 1857 and then again in 1969 - account for much of its neglect: it was not the novel itself, but rather the expectations of the audience that caused *The Garies* to be ignored.

The Garies was republished for a third time in 1997. Even today, however, scholarly attention remains minimal. There is not yet a full book devoted wholly to Frank Webb and *The Garies and Their Friends*. As of March, 2013, a search of the Modern Language Association International Bibliography returns a total of eleven articles devoted to *The Garies*, four books and six articles that mention *The Garies*, and one PhD dissertation. Clearly, much work remains to be done.

Webb's other few known writings show a man who continued to be deeply concerned about issues of racial equality and suggest his ongoing interest in the links between race and class. His other writings include a biographical sketch of his first wife (1856), two letters to Mary Wager Fisher which mention his second novel, *Paul Sumner* (1870), and two poems, "None Spoke a Single Word to Me," about the feeling of being a social outsider, and the romantic "Waiting" dedicated to his second wife. There were also two articles published in the *New Era* in 1870, one on a planned exhibition in which Webb calls upon "coloured men" to participate in the coming "industrial reunion" and "prove that we are not behind our white compeers in mechanical skill, and that despite the barriers which the slowly declining prejudices of the white labouring classes have interposed in the way of our acquisition of an extended knowledge of industrial pursuits, we have not been let in the rear in the march of progress." The other article entitled "The Mixed Race Question" concerns a bill for school integration in Washington D.C., which Webb writes, will determine, whether the "white and coloured children cannot breathe the air of the same school room, romp in the same playground, compete in the same classes, and be flogged by the same teacher, without the safety of the country being imperiled thereby." Webb writes optimistically, "The day will come when people will smile at the fact that this question could have been discussed with so much acrimony of spirit." A third article, "An Old Foe with a New Face," is an attack on the Democrats who were contemplating changing their name to "Conservatives." Webb also wrote two novellas that were serialized in the *New Era*. "Two Wolves and a Lamb" is a Gothic tale of spiritualism and domination set among expatriates in Paris and Southern France. "Marvyn Hayle" is a story of a deep and reciprocated love between the wealthy Ella and

a proud, but poor, struggling artist. In both these novellas, there is an absence of racially marked characters and an emphasis on the upper- and middle-class status of the characters.

In the course of research for this thesis, this writer had the good fortune to come upon a previously unknown piece of writing by Frank Webb. Webb wrote this editorial, entitled "An Appeal for Peace," when he was forty-three years old and living in Texas. The *Houston Daily Union* published it on January 19, 1871.[58] The introductory paragraph, written by an unnamed editor, introduces Webb as "a colored man, the editor of the *Galveston Republican*," who makes "the following earnest, heartful and beautiful appeal for friendship and harmony to the white men of the country. It is the heaviest rebuke to the prevalent race bitterness we have lately seen." Webb's piece, then, was written in response to local racial strife. Webb wrote:

> I am convinced that the material prosperity of the State mainly depends on the degree of harmony that exists between the laboring classes and the landed interests. They cannot divorce their fortunes. They must sink or swim together. There is room here for us all. Let, then, forbearance and good will replace acrimonious memories, class jealousies and mutual suspicion. Let us shake hands over the grave of by-gone misfortunes. Let us strive to forget the past relations in which we have stood to each other, and agree to respect each other's differences of opinion. Let white men cease to remind us by opposition, contumely and abuse, that they were once masters, and we, in turn, will gladly forget we were once slaves. Writing on our banner the forbearing motto, "Favors on marble, insults on sand," living harmoniously together, disregarding the efforts of little-minded, designing political hucksters to estrange us, looking down upon the abuse of small men as beneath the dignity of anger or notice, we can, by the united efforts of all classes, develop the wonderful material resources of this State and elevate her to a pitch of unparalleled prosperity. That accomplished, we may safely rest from our labors in the happy conviction that we have one flag, one country, one proud title – that of American citizens.

[58] *The Houston Daily Union* (January 19, 1871): Volume: III; Issue: 114; 2.

Webb directs his appeal to both white and black citizens of Texas and makes the case that peace and harmony will lead to prosperity for all. He calls upon all men to "shake hands over the grave of by-gone misfortunes," and for white men to "cease to remind us by opposition, contumely and abuse, that they were once masters" and proposes that blacks "in turn, will gladly forget we were once slaves." Webb is deeply concerned with the relationship between whites and blacks, but just as in *The Garies*, Webb perceives a more complex analysis for social problems than just racial antipathy. As in *The Garies*, he links racial strife with class conflict. He notes that the prosperity of the state depends upon the "degree of harmony that exists between the laboring classes and the landed interests"; he calls for an end to "class jealousies" and declares that by "the united efforts of all classes," all can attain unparalleled prosperity, under "one flag, one country, one proud title – that of American citizens." This editorial, written fourteen years after *The Garies*, demonstrates that the connectedness of race and class in American society was a topic of longstanding interest for Webb. It therefore supports the argument that Webb's overarching goal in *The Garies* was indeed an examination of the intersection of race and class.

Webb was one of the first black novelists to write about the black middle class. He should be recognized for his contribution as forebear in the ongoing conversation among black writers about this class. In particular, Webb can be seen as a forerunner of both the Post-Reconstruction, sentimental Victorian novels by African American women, and of the historical protest novels of Charles Chesnutt. Like *The Garies*, turn-of-the-century Victorian novels written by African American women use stories of idealized domesticity and bourgeois values as a way to reject racist discourse, to affirm the value of

hard work, frugality, and equitable distribution of political justice and to declare allegiance to middle-class values as a way forward to political inclusion and full citizenship for black Americans.[59]

Webb's novel, however, differs from the Victorian novels by American black women in that those novels are heroine-centered, while his novel is male-centered and includes a storyline of protest and vigorous black male heroic agency. In this sense, Webb more closely prefigures the novels of Charles Chesnutt, in particular *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901), which retells and fictionalizes the story of the historical race riot in Wilmington, North Carolina in 1898, in which whites responded violently to a growing, prosperous and increasingly visible black middle class. Although there are significant female characters in Chesnutt's novel, the action and violence of the novel concerns a number of heroic male black figures. Both the Victorian women's novels and Chesnutt's novel are about the efforts, issues and responses of the growing black middle class to establish itself within American society. Webb, therefore, as an early black author writing about the black middle class, should be recognized as a precursor to both the sentimental Victorian novels and the historical novels written by black American authors at the turn of the century.

At end of *The Garies*, Webb describes in extravagant detail the wedding of Emily Garie and Charlie Ellis at Mr. Walters' mansion. He writes of the arrival of the guests:

> carriage after carriage rolled up, and deposited their loads of gay company,

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[59] For an outstanding analysis of turn-of-the-century Victorian novels by African American women, please see Claudia Tate's *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire, The Black Heroine's Text at the Turn of the Century*. Tate examines eleven novels by black women to show how they were influenced by, and influenced, early twentieth-century dialogues about racial justice and sexual equality by novelizing these ambitions within the diverse social attitudes of that era.

> who skipped nimbly over the carpet that was laid down from the door to the curbstone. Through the wide hall and up the stairway, flowers of various kinds mingled their fragrance and loaded the air with their rich perfume; and expressions of delight burst from the lips of the guests as they passed up the brilliantly-lighted stairway and thronged the spacious drawing-rooms.
>
> (Webb 371)

After the wedding ceremony is over, Webb tells the reader "Then came the supper. Oh! Such a supper! – such quantities of nice things as money and skill alone can bring together" (Webb 376). Webb describes "turkeys innocent of a bone, into which you might plunge your knife to the very hilt without coming into contact with a splinter – turkeys from which cunning cooks had extracted every bone leaving the meat alone behind, with the skin not perceptibly broken" and "tiny reed-birds beside [the turkeys], which lay cozily on the golden toast, looking as much as to say, "If you want something to remember for ever, come and give me a bite!" (Webb 376). Webb writes of "stewed terrapin," "oysters of every variety," and "jellies, blancmange, chocolate cream," "not to say a word of towers of candy, bonbons, kisses, champagne, Rhine wine, sparkling Catawba, liquors, and a man in the corner making sherry cobblers." At the end of this heavily-detailed two-page passage, Webb writes, "on the whole, it was an American supper, got up regardless of expense – and whoever has been to such an entertainment knows very well what an American supper is" (Webb 376-377).

With this scene and all its splendid detail, Webb showcases the success, accomplishments and refinement of the African American middle and upper classes. The scene lays down a clear, almost militant challenge to white assumptions about race and class. Webb is clearly saying that African Americans are every bit as capable of middle- and upper-class refinements as whites. Webb invites his white readers into the home of an upper-class African American man and into this celebratory moment in the black

community in order to forcefully demonstrate "the existence of a 'gentleman' with African blood in his veins" – something that Webb knew was not only possible, but was self-evident.

Webb in fact includes a "few whites" (Webb 372) among the guests at the wedding: Mrs. Bird, who helped Charlie Ellis in a time of need; Mr. Balch, the friend and legal advisor of the bride's father; Father Banks, the minister who married the bride's parents many years before; and Mrs. Burrell, a white woman who helped Charlie get his first job. Webb chose these specific white characters because they treated the black characters as equals and were unwavering in their support of the black characters in times of need. That Webb would include white guests at this event symbolic of African American achievement, suggests that Webb believed that while the black community was perfectly capable of "elevating" itself on its own, the support of sympathetic whites would not be unwelcome.

Finally, with the statement that "on the whole, it was an American supper, got up regardless of expense – and whoever has been to such an entertainment knows very well what an American supper is" (Webb 377), Webb makes the point that not only are these African Americans middle and upper class, but they are also thoroughly American. This elaborate supper occurs within the African American community, but Webb wants to emphasize that these African Americans are as American as their white counterparts and therefore deserving of full inclusion and full citizenship.

The Garies and Their Friends was sentimentality, but it was sentimentality with a purpose. This thesis has shown that within Webb's novel lies a complex and incisive

commentary on urban antebellum American society. *The Garies* can rightly be called a subversive novel: Webb challenged the status quo and wanted to make his readers think. He sought to spur his audience towards racial equality and social reform with appeals not to religion, but to reason, morality and justice. Webb wrote from and about a unique historical time and place, which was informed by his own biography as an educated black man living in antebellum Philadelphia. The ending of *The Garies* leaves the question of racial equality unresolved, yet Webb seems guardedly optimistic about the future, and especially about the progress and potential of the middle- and upper-class African American community. As one of the first African American authors to write about the black middle class, Webb raised complex questions that are still being considered by black and white writers today.

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