(Re)Writing the Lives of Mixed Race Women: Racial and Sexual Identity in Mixed Race Women's Memoir

Tru Leverette

If I tell you I don't lie, can you believe me?

As a child, I didn't always live with my mother. When I was very young, between the ages of three and six, she entrusted me to the care of a lesbian friend, a woman who blurred my understanding of who and whose daughter I was. One shard of memory that I have from this time is watching the front door block my mother's presence, depriving me of access to her as the woman I lived with closed it. In my memory I am standing small and confused between these two white women, the one in front of me barred from my view inch by slow inch as the one behind me usurped her place. As I tried in my young way to understand the role of these women in my life, I was left embodying the in-between, my mind confused with the question, "Who am I?"

I realize now that my question could have been more specific: "Who am I in relation to my mother?" To paraphrase Ngozi Onwurah, who like me is also the daughter of a white mother and a black father, "Children are created in the image of their parents; yet to a world that sees only in black and white, I am only my father. Yet I am more my mother…it was she who created the curves and contours of my life…." Onwurah's comments describe succinctly my own attitude toward my mother and my own desire to acknowledge her, a desire that is not uncommon to mixed race individuals. Still, in my instance, I was struggling to understand not only who I was in relation to my mother but also who my mother was—that is, I was forced to decipher which of these two women held the seed of my origin. Perhaps strangely, perhaps not, my question's answer took on racial overtones; the question of how I could acknowledge and affirm that part of myself that is my mother became synonymous with recognizing her whiteness and its place in my mixed race parentage.

At least, this is how I remember my history. Of course, memory and history both are and are not the same thing, meaning that history is what we say it is, while at the same time what we say it is may not correspond with what actually happened. Again, though, this is what I remember, and I don't lie. Yet what's to be done with a memoir written by someone who admits she lies, someone who acknowledges the trouble she has teasing memories from the mind's cobwebs? When the author is a woman of mixed race, her memoir fits neatly into what Paul Spickard has called the recent "boom in biracial biography," and it fits securely into a tradition in which mixed race is shrouded by secrets and lies.[1] Catherine E. McKinley's *The Book of Sarahs: A Family in Parts* (2002) is a book about the search for family, but it is also a book about lying and keeping secrets. Similarly, Rebecca Walker's *Black, White, and Jewish: Autobiography of a Shifting Self* (2001) details the author's search for belonging in her family(ies) and highlights questions and understandings of truth. Autobiography and memoir, as Spickard has noted, have become popular venues for discussions of

mixed race. The genre is confessional and based in a reputation of truth-telling, yet it is inherently deceptive through the necessity of selectivity—through the choices of what is told and what isn't; indeed, it may be considered deceptive even through the processes by which some things are remembered and some aren't. Autobiography, then, may seem both solidifying and destabilizing, allowing one to locate an identity, even to create one through language, while at the same time troubling assumptions of this identity's existence; for if an identity exists ontologically, why would it need creation and articulation through language?

This question is central to an analysis of the above-mentioned texts, both of which articulate the authors' struggles to find family, belonging, and, ultimately, themselves as mixed race, bisexual women. As in other texts that discuss mixed race identities, these contain utopian longings for idealized societies, communities, and families.[2] Additionally, they likewise deal with the longings for absent fathers; unlike a number of other texts within mixed race discourse, however, these two also prioritize longings for absent mothers, complicating the authors' search for identity, recognition, and belonging. In fact, the longing for absent mothers in addition to absent fathers may manifest itself in the authors' bisexuality. Often in portrayals of mixed race women, desire for a missing father is displaced onto heterosexual desire; the authors under analysis here may project their desire for missing mothers and fathers through bisexuality. Additionally, the autobiographical nature of these texts results in their attempt to articulate "true" identities that resist the historically dominant narratives of mixed race identity.

One might read contemporary autobiographies of black/white mixed race as revisions of the traditional narratives of the "tragic mulatto" and the "outcast," narratives with a particular history of shaping thought regarding mixed race women. Such narratives occupy a seemingly contradictory position, situated as they are within the history of the one-drop rule while they simultaneously often allow mixed race women access to blackness only through heterosexuality, which complicates the lives of homosexual and bisexual women, reinforces patriarchy, and assumes a sexual homogeneity in black communities. Individual lives are shaped by these dominant and contradictory social narratives and then, through autobiography, may be shaped again into new and alternative narratives that can resist and/or reinscribe the dominant narrative. Many people may be unfamiliar with the name of the tragic mulatto stereotype, but they know the many narratives of the historically idealized "American family" as well as the narratives that alter this idealized type through adoption, miscegenation, divorce, mental illness, homosexuality, etc. Revisions of the dominant narratives of mixed race women problematize the master narrative of the idealized family, the racially "pure" individual, and the enforcement of normative heterosexual patriarchy; concurrently, however, the dominant narrative problematizes individual lives that don't conform to its outline.

Although both Catherine E. McKinley and Rebecca Walker have written autobiographies, neither author is entirely the narrator of her own life story. As Walker writes, "In the race-obsessed United States, my color defines me, tells a story I have not written" (302). Their texts are implicated by a master narrative of tragedy, conflict, and mandated heterosexuality for mixed race women that has been provided by the dominant culture. As I will discuss, heterosexuality allows mixed race women access to their womanhood; specifically, heterosexuality with black men allows mixed race women access to black womanhood. Without this relationship to black men, mixed race women do not occupy a socially recognized space in terms of race or gender. Although McKinley and Walker attempt to challenge the dominant narrative through their autobiographies, their lives, having been informed and problematized by this dominant narrative, in some ways reinscribe the very narrative they are attempting to challenge. In each case, the author is both in control and lacking control of her life story and, in some respects, her own life and identity.

These contemporary autobiographies of mixed race women's identity, then, attempt to rewrite the narrative of lives that seem in many ways to reinscribe stereotypes of tragedy and conflict regarding options for race, gender, and sexual identity. The narrators hope to arrive at an imagined utopia by finding ways to incorporate their individual histories into their present articulations of themselves; in turn, they hope to profess these forged identities as a way to carry them into a utopian future.

Gene Combs and Jill Freedman remind us that since "the stories of individual lives can influence the constitution of whole cultures" (16), the study of contemporary autobiographies of mixed race is essential to understanding and shaping imaginings of race, race mixture, gender, and sexuality in the twenty-first century. In the case of these authors, both McKinley and Walker are storytellers, performers with language; they are both, admittedly, liars. They use autobiography as a means to fashion themselves, as a way to forge identity. Because those of mixed race have faced the assumption of outcast status, mixed race autobiographers delineate a space for themselves through writing; their books become the land of their belonging, the site in which they can decide and profess who they are. Additionally, both texts are striking examples of the interworkings of belonging and desire. As both authors seek parental connection, affirmation, and belonging, they enact narratives of sexuality as a displacement for their true longings; their racial identities, moreover, become tied to these sexual narratives, impacting their attempts to rewrite their own lives.

A Hole in Memory

A narrative titled the autobiography of a "shifting self" is necessarily destabilized; in the case of Walker's text, the destabilization is aided by her realization of the elusive nature of memory and her questioning both of how memory works and if memory can be trusted. Her narrative begins: "I don't

remember things," including who she is and why she is here. "There are thousands of large and small omissions…sometimes I feel oddly off balance, like the whole world has figured out how to cope, how to master life on the grid, but me. Without a memory…that can remind me at all times of who I definitively am, I feel amorphous, missing the unbroken black outline around my body" (1). Walker writes of feeling most comfortable in liminal spaces of motion because here she does not "have to define this body . . . to belong to one camp, school, or race, one fixed set of qualifiers, adjectives based on someone else's experience. I do not have to remember who I, or anyone else, thinks I am. I am transitional space, form-shifting space" (4). From the beginning of her text, then, Walker admits to instability and a lack of clarity about who she is within a race and color conscious society.

The daughter of famed African-American writer Alice Walker and Jewish-American civil rights lawyer Mel Leventhal, Walker writes of her parents' understanding that their marriage was revolutionary, that she was a "Movement Child." Yet her parents' divorce ends their utopic narrative of bridging differences and creating a rainbow society. The positive narrative of harmony and revolution is displaced by the dominant narrative it had hoped to challenge: blackness and whiteness are conflicting and oppositional worlds that cannot be unified. In other words, "in the 'real' world blood strikes back" (288). Left with this narrative of conflict, Walker returns to the question that medical personnel had issued at her birth: "'Correct?' a faceless questioner wants to know. Is this union, this marriage, and especially this offspring, correct?" (12). When her parents' narrative of harmony is eroded by the polarized society in which they live, what does that mean for her existence? For Walker, it means a return to the dominant trope of conflict and warring blood within the mixed race body.

From the beginning of her narrative, Walker both rejects and takes up the narrative of the tragic mulatto. Despite her assertion that "I am not tragic" (24), she still questions whether she is "possible" and "correct." Despite her allowance that "maybe I'm being melodramatic" (13) and a suggestion that she might see her life story outside the scope of conflict and tragedy, her narrative reverberates with melodrama and instability: "Letting go and holding on, letting go and holding on, this is the only constant. Not the people I love, not the person I become in their arms, under their gaze" (165). This relinquishing of the past creates a narrator who has no graspable or stable history, an outcast without a home, the proverbial tragic mulatto: "Each configuration is already breeding its own dialectical response, its own disintegration" (166). She cannot maintain her own narrative without reference to the dominant paradigms of mixed race; they continually inform how she interacts with the world and how she interprets her own life experiences: "I am still the little girl who is too dark or too light, too rich or too poor to be trusted. Memory works like this: I am always standing outside the gate, wanting to be let in. I am always terrified that this is where I will have to live: forever wanting, never fulfilled, always outside" (186).

Admittedly, this is how Walker's memory works, seeking out the scenarios and sensations of non-belonging, of an outcast. Thus, whether the sum of her experiences favored such characterization or not, Walker has reinscribed the narrative of mixed race tragedy. This tragedy, indeed, stems from her mixed heritage since her memories of destabilization begin in reference to the world's reactions to her parents and the sense of displacement she maintains after their divorce, which results from their inability to sustain their utopian narrative in the face of social opposition. Walker's memories, too, are shaped by dominant narratives, perhaps restricting accessible memories to those conforming to dominant assumptions regarding mixed race individuals and families. Thus, her narrative relates a series of denials—personal, familial, romantic—although some are more implied and/or imagined than experienced. As a whole, the collection reads as if every experience of rejection or abandonment has been stored up to create her memory of non-belonging, of being outside. Her repetition of "this is how memory works" comes to read like a definitive, authoritative answer to questions she really hasn't answered at all—questions that ask whether displacement is the only interpretation of her life after her parents' divorce, questions that ask whether she has really been left without a home or place of belonging. Indeed, outside of the dominant narrative, some might read Walker's childhood story as exciting and desirable, might dwell on the fact that she essentially had two homes: one with her father and his new family in upper middle class suburbs and one with her bohemian and artistic mother. Walker, then, begs the question of whether she has read her own life in the only way possible, of whether she has written the narrative of her life or whether her life has been overwritten by the dominant narrative.

Internalizing and accepting the dominant narrative, Walker admits: "I wear a mask of belonging because this is what I am supposed to do, because belonging is my birthright. But behind the mask lurks a far more mutilating truth: I am not fit, there is something wrong with me, I am not correct" (186). Walker continually problematizes this birthright through the recollection of memories of non-belonging. However, she is not as self-reflexive about the impact of the dominant narrative on her understanding of "how memory works," suggesting that she has played into a culturally and historically scripted role for mixed race women.

Somewhat similarly, Catherine McKinley agrees that memory is untrustworthy: "I started to have my doubts…about my own memory. I was the one who lived outside the laws of truth-telling and reality…my mother did not lie. I tried to pick apart the past to quiet the nagging feeling that there was some hole in both of our memories" (44). Both authors note that we can't trust memory although our identities are shaped by it; they acknowledge as well that we construct ourselves, in part, through the fragments of history recorded in memory. Both McKinley and Walker, then, struggle with "how memory works." McKinley's attempts to define what she terms a comfortable identity rely on

"forgetting parts of [her]self" (71). She writes of "myth-making" and "shape-shifting," strategies necessary to determining an identity for herself. As in other discussions of racial mixture, McKinley's text explores the compromises, the performances, the lies that are enacted in various contexts as she attempts to negotiate her own identity.

Her autobiography details her childhood as the adopted mixed race daughter of a progressive white family and her subsequent search for her biological mother and father. For a number of reasons, including her adopted and mixed race status, McKinley experiences a sense of non-belonging within her adoptive family, explaining that she needed her mother to "step in and make [her and her brother's] worlds a little closer":

> I was feeling more and more like they were homogenizing as McKinleys, and I was an appendage to their lives. I was fixed on my outsidership and how I didn't belong…I was begging all of them to see that the McKinleys were a white *and* Black family…(82)

McKinley, though, is much more self-reflexive about her self-pity than Walker is:

> I imagined that no matter how difficult it might have been to walk between these two worlds, it would have been easier than the confusion and denial of growing up adopted and part of neither community. I started to feel sorry for myself—and I began to feel resentment toward everyone around me. (94)

She is clear about the difficulties she faced growing up as a trans-racially adopted mixed girl. Her search, then, is for her biological parents in addition to a site of belonging for herself as a mixed woman. Indeed, it is the fulfillment of this search that she believes will provide her sense of identity. Thus, like Walker, McKinley feels the absence of her parents, although for different reasons. This absence impacts her sense of herself, for without a known history, she does not know who she is within the present. McKinley describes her search for her biological parents as

> an act of self and an act of mourning. I had been born into loss. People were lost to me. My personal and racial history, my link to communities of people who so much defined my experience in the world, were blotted out. No matter who stepped in, no matter what they gave to me, there was still always this fact of someone missing, this fact that there had been no language for, no structure, no recognition of that immense grief. (263)

After finding her birth mother, Estie, McKinley's identity is further complicated through the fact of Estie's own lies, which make McKinley's attempts to define herself through her ancestral history even more difficult. For McKinley, the dominant narrative of conflict and confusion paired with race mixture is additionally troubled by the fact that Estie had three daughters, all of whom she named Sarah. Thus, McKinley's access to her own history is destabilized by the fact that she cannot be sure of which Sarah she is, which of Estie's stories refer to her specifically, which are lies and which are truths. With this destabilization, McKinley shifts the ground upon which readers approach autobiography and toys with our ability to know the identity of the narrator. Names and language become an eraser of difference to such an extent that the narrator's identity is threatened as the outline around who she is seeps into other entities, leaving McKinley to assert, as does Walker, "my story…was not my story" (228). Thus, McKinley too is faced with identifying herself despite the destabilization caused by narratives that are not her own.

Lost (and Found?) in Sex

The dominant narrative suggests in part that women may find a place for themselves and gain a sense of belonging through their sexuality. For mixed race women, this place becomes a racialized place, one in which their choice of a romantic partner is made synonymous with their choice of a race. Both McKinley and Walker attempt to immerse and ultimately find themselves through their sexuality; as McKinley writes, "I lost myself and my loneliness in sex" (175). Walker is even more explicit about her attempt to use sexuality in resistance to her outcast status and to cultivate spaces of belonging and acceptance. Although she seeks relationships to maintain a sense of place, the source of this longing lies in her sense of not belonging or being embraced within her family(ies) of origin; neither her mother, who is preoccupied by work, nor her father, similarly preoccupied with work as well as with the establishment of a new family, embraces Walker in the ways she seeks. It is this desire for belonging that drives her to seek recognition elsewhere, through her sexuality. Her desire to belong and gain recognition leads her to acts that replicate the cultural expectations of women as passive objects and men as active, transcendent subjects. Walker's sense of her sexual self is implicated by social standards that attempt to found a generalized definition of beauty, a definition that, ultimately, cannot be reflected by Walker's body. She writes:

> I have never been at home in my body. Not in its color, not in its size or shape. Not in its strange, unique conglomeration of organic forms and wavy lines. In the mirror, I am always too pale, too pasty, not honey-colored, not the glamourous-sounding café au lait. My breasts are always too small, my thighs too fat, my gait unelegant, my neck too long. There is an awkwardness to

> my body, a lack of grace, as if the racial mix, the two sides coming together in my body, have yet to reconcile. (253)

Walker makes explicit her belief that what she considers her lack of self-esteem regarding her physical body is the result of her mixed race heritage. Thus, not only does her mixed race status affect her sense of belonging in a familial and communal sense, it also affects her sense of herself as a woman who does not measure up to social expectations of beauty. Nevertheless, it is through her physical and sexual self that Walker attempts to gain a sense of belonging and recognition, a problematic endeavor. As Naomi Zack writes, "The aesthetic purity of white bodies, the rhythm and elemental sexuality of black bodies, the exotic eroticism of mixed-race bodies and their fancied debilities—all of these fantastic illusions are a cornucopia of physical choices for a person of mixed race. And if one is a woman, there are additional fetishes and mysteries of gender to add to the array" (163). Indeed, the sexualization of mixed race women has claimed that they can combine the beauty standards of white womanhood with the assumed hypersexuality of black women; the dominant narrative, then, has historically seen mixed race women as sexually available to and desired by white men. For mixed race women to escape this assumed licentiousness and its concomitant dangers, the post-slavery narrative suggests that they can choose to marry a black man, thus accepting their blackness. For women who attempt to pass and who marry white men, the choice is equivalent to death—hence the tragedy of the tragic mulatto stereotype.[3]

Although Walker writes that she had "always wanted a story to go with this body" (74), she has known the story all along. Unable to live within the utopian narrative her parents first attempted to provide, she relies on dominant narratives of blackness, whiteness, and mixture. Through conforming to the expectations and requirements of others, through fitting herself into the narratives that others have of her, Walker attempts to gain acceptance and a story to fit her body. Her sexuality, then, becomes the sanctioned means by which she can form bonds and find belonging. As France Winddance Twine has argued, racial identity becomes of paramount importance once mixed race girls reach the dating age. According to her 1996 study, their black/white mixed race identity is either confirmed or denied by who is willing to accept them as romantic partners. Conversely, their choice of romantic partners is often taken as a sign of their racial affiliation. Characteristically, then, Walker expresses concern over dating, wondering whether a boy will "still like me if I tell him, straight out, the simple truth" of her racial heritage (175). As she admits, she is unsure where she belongs; she is, however, sure that her situation is complex, a fact which denies the possibility of any "simple" truth. Walker, moreover, confirms the validity of Twine's argument when she writes: "even though I don't let on that his attention matters, it does. Until we start going out, I feel I am off the radar screen for the boys at camp, not even an option because I am not Jewish enough, not pretty

enough, not rich enough." (182) Her sense of belonging is allowed, then, through the sexual attention and recognition of boys and men: "I am happy to be lying in his arms where it is warm and I feel for one second like I belong" (215). Thus, although the other's gaze confines, it also confirms. Recognition confirms life, and it can also confirm an identity that is desired.

As Frantz Fanon wrote in a discussion of the man of color and the white woman,[4] the latter's desire for the former confirms his desirability and masculinity, even his humanity. Similarly for Walker, male desire works to confirm her sense of self, to create for her a sense of stability and belonging. She continues:

> Even after Luca falls asleep and I am lying in his arms, I hold on to that feeling, not wanting to let it go. I am the chosen one, I think. I am in Luca's bed, in his arms, I am inside, not out; I am the one being stayed with, not the one being left. I am not just alone, out in the world, fending for myself. (215)

Of course, Walker's sense of belonging is complicated not only by her mixed race status but also by her family history. After her parents' divorce, she was shuttled back and forth across the country, alternately living with her mother for one year and her father for the next. And it is clear that Walker's reality as a mixed race individual greatly impacted her sense of living between two worlds. Her initial assumption that she might find a sense of belonging most strongly through romantic/sexual relationships with men is important for feminist analysis. We must question the patriarchal underpinnings of a system that allows a woman a "home" only through heterosexual desire. Additionally, it is important to investigate whether Walker's black/white mixed race identity could only be confirmed by her recognition by a white man, as Twine suggests.

Often a mixed race woman's access to womanhood is allowed only through her adoption of heterosexuality and her relationships with black men. There exists, then, a conflation of heterosexuality with womanhood and blackness with heterosexuality. The former conflation, of course, is not particularly surprising since traditional gender definitions are consolidated through normative heterosexuality. The latter conflation, too, may relate to, if not rest upon, assumptions within black communities that homosexuality is something beyond their borders, only affecting whites. Thus it may be that Walker and McKinley's bisexuality is theoretically linked to their biraciality. If womanhood is tied to heterosexuality and for mixed race women concomitantly tied to blackness, then Walker and McKinley's options, according to the dominant narrative, are problematized from the beginning. Typically, "Love for one's race translates into love and support for the men of the race first, whereas love for women, of the race or not, sexually or otherwise, becomes suspect, something taken or stolen that rightfully belongs to the men of the race, indirectly aiding the

(white) oppressors" (Allman 284). They can solidify their womanhood and their blackness through heterosexual relationships with black men or they can struggle with their attempts to reconcile that which society has deemed oppositional: blackness and whiteness, masculinity and femininity.

Walker's sense of her own identity and belonging is directly affected by affirmations of her sexual self by men. Her relationships not only allow her security; they also allow her access to both blackness and womanhood. Surprisingly, and in challenge to the dominant narrative that would seem to allow mixed women access to womanhood through relationships with black men, Walker depicts herself as very womanly when she begins a relationship with white Andrew, to whom she tells the details of her menstruation. She becomes pregnant during her relationship with black Michael. Clearly, her womanhood is linked to reproduction in these relationships, and the race of her male partner affects her own access to race. With Andrew, her mixture, indeed her blackness, becomes the target of his friends' scorn. With Michael, though, her blackness is confirmed. With neither black nor white men, though, is she allowed access to a white identity.

As Allman writes, "Mixed women, already arguably more marginal to identifiable racial groups, might feel more pressure to submissiveness to males and to compulsory heterosexuality in order to demonstrate affiliation and identification with a particular racial group" (287). Lesbian and bisexual mixed race women, however, "face the pressures toward conformity to conflicting racialized gender roles, toward choosing one race. We are identified as 'confused,' and, in a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy, our gender nonconformity and incorrect sexuality are identified as evidence of our racial confusion" (287). This gender and sexual "confusion," then, is seen as indicative of the confused racial identities, exemplifying the master narrative of disorientation and conflict for those of mixed race. Also, because homosexuality is still seen in many minority communities as a "white" issue, it troubles mixed race women's claims to blackness and allows them some measure of access to whiteness. In some senses, then, a biracial identity may seem fitting for mixed race lesbians and bisexuals. And it is only with women, it seems, that both Walker and McKinley can seek and can claim their mixture.

"Trans-Bi Girls"

McKinley, for example, describes her high school friendship with Penda, "who was her own spin on Diana Ross, with pretty, dark brown skin, long, pressed hair, a face set with big wide eyes, and skinny, expressive, flailing arms" (64). She writes that Penda would "practice her kissing, pressing me up against the wall in my bedroom fueling my impossible, shame-filled crush on her" (66). Attempting to imitate Penda's "Black-girl-ness" (66), McKinley feels her not-quite-Black-ness: "it was not so much a problem of learning the words and syntax of a Black vernacular…as the sound and posture" (66), which she never fully

masters. Initially disappointed by her mixture, by not feeling black enough, McKinley later meets other "mulattas" and begins to allow herself to "love our skin—the flatted browns, and darker browns, and ivories and yellows. I was beginning to enjoy the oddities of how we were configured…Whiteness showed in these women, and I still felt some discomfort, but at heart I liked the sense of disrupted expectations" (67).

Eventually finding herself within a community of other "'trans-bi' girls—the name we began to use for ourselves, playing on the language of the queer community and on our contested racial and family identities" (68), McKinley is able to gain some sense of belonging—though this is still problematized by her longing for her birth parents—and some acceptance of her mixture. Her relationship with another mixed woman allows her to explore the "deep eroticism of yellow," their status as "yellow Black girls," and their history as "mulattas" (70). They are self-reflexive about the dominant narrative of their racial heritage, using it to both highlight and challenge the history of oppression that created women such as themselves. At the same time, though, they are able to celebrate their mixture through and with each other. And, as McKinley acknowledges, their relationship allows her "to feel the beauty of my own body settling into my consciousness for the first time" (70). It allows her "to be a Black woman full of contradictions" (71), a mixed woman. Additionally, their relationship is one in which she can express her anger toward, love of, and longing for "the people she…left behind," namely her parents, both adoptive and biological. Their relationship, then, allows her to experience and express—and perhaps even displace, as is the case with Walker—her desire for her parents and a place of belonging with them. In fact, a connection between parental longing and the conventions of romance—which I will delineate more fully through analysis of Walker's text—is present in McKinley's text as well. She writes of her relationship with her biological mother as a "courtship" (194) and later as a "short-lived, bittersweet affair" (222), adding to the complicated connections of identity and sexuality, history and maternity, and continuing the longstanding association of miscegenation with incest.[5]

Even moreso than McKinley's, Walker's early friendships with girls are charged by sexual situations and discussions and homoerotic overtones: "I watch Lena's tongue slip in and around some boy's mouth, and chart her hands rubbing the hardness bulging against her crotch" (138). "Lena and I were as close as two girls could be, and then things get in between us, things like language and fashion and color. I feel every inch of our separation, miss her every time I choose to go with my black friends instead of her. I wonder what she is doing when I wake up alone in my house on Saturday mornings, wanting to call her, wanting to be close the way we had been…" (141). Walker highlights the often divisive manifestations of race and language, describing the loss of her white childhood friend in a way reminiscent of her descriptions of longings for her mother, longings that reference the difficulty of bridging the gaps—in race,

language, and thinking—that divide groups of people. As Walker writes, "It is more than growing apart, what happens between me and Lena, it is not knowing how to grow together, not knowing how to bring her into the world that is slowly claiming me, marking me, not knowing how to teach her how to walk and talk so that she can fit into my world, not knowing how to let her be her and fit in without doing an goddamn thing" (142).

Although Walker writes that the world of blackness is claiming her, impinging on her closeness with Lena, she also feels the inaccessibility of blackness, the way her whiteness infringes on her claims to it and the way this distances her from her mother, with whom she wants connection, "to have something run between us that cannot be denied. I want a marker that links us tangibly and forever as mother and daughter. That links me tangibly and forever with blackness" (310). Walker's desire for maternal closeness and connection is something she cannot verbalize to her mother; she writes, "I can't say, Maybe I have anger at you that I am directing at you. I can't say, I hate all this moving and losing and trying to find home and saying goodbye" (229). Instead, Walker remains silent and dutiful, but her desires and her anger are manifested elsewhere. In an earlier scene, Walker describes a fight between Lena and her:

> We fight because we are so close we can't breathe, because there is no other way to release all the pent-up emotions that course between us. We want to touch, obviously, we want some physical acting out of the powerful feelings the other can arouse in us, and so we kick and scratch and bite. Before Papa comes in and separates us, I have a mouthful of Lena's light brown hair between my lips, can feel the strands coarse against my tongue. I feel relief there on the couch with my fingernails gouging into her skin. I can smell her, the milky blend of Silkience shampoo and patchouli oil, taste her. She is finally close enough. (146)

The homoerotic overtones of this passage are clear, allowing Walker to comment upon the as yet unrealized desire she felt for this girl when they were young. Walker's imagery—fingernails digging into skin, hair against tongue, milky blend—could be used for a sexual encounter, and the lack of breath, the expression of pent-up emotions, the desire to touch and act out arousal make this fight an expression of sexual desire. Tellingly, the next section of the book is titled "STOP," and it begins with Walker's mother taking her hand and leading her into her study, the room of her mother's most sincere expression, to show her an old photograph of a distant female relative, a slave. Pondering the photograph, Walker thinks of her white grandmother, wondering if either "could have fully claimed or embraced" her (149).

The juxtaposition of Walker's homoerotic encounter with Lena and her feelings of ancestral displacement suggest a strong link between Walker's

budding bisexuality and her search for maternal connection. This sense of maternal longing is made even more pronounced by the next section of the book, detailing Walker with another girl: "Lisa and me lying in the back room of her house at three A.M., in our underwear." This room, Walker writes, is used "when Lisa or her sister bring friends to do stuff they can't do out in the open…" (151). Walker and Lisa talk about sex and boys, but they "don't ever talk about fathers" (152), who are absent from the lives of both. Walker's description of this scene with Lisa, like that with Lena, is charged with homoerotic tension as the two lie close together for warmth to discuss their socially preferred intimacies with boys. In this midst of this scenario, Walker vaguely wants her mother "to find out that where I am may not be very safe" and to make her return home, to tell Walker that she "shouldn't be so far away while she is so young" (156).

Throughout the text, Walker juxtaposes scenes such as these, homoerotic episodes with girls and suggestions that she longs for and feels neglected by her parents, especially her mother. Her descriptions of sexual encounters with boys, too, are linked with longings for parental closeness, especially longings for her father. In fact, after Walker writes of her parents' divorce and her father's return "to the life that was expected of him," she introduces Michael, the boy with whom she shares her first sexual encounter. His introduction, however, comes in the midst of Walker's discussion of her friend Colleen, Asha (Colleen's younger sister), and their mother. Walker details intimate moments among women, bathroom hair rituals where Walker envies Asha and wants "to be on the floor like that…between Colleen's legs, in the warm there, knowing my place, knowing what to do" (124). Walker's first sexual experience is framed by this scene about Colleen fixing Asha's hair. Book-ended in this way, Walker's experience with Michael reads like a stand-in for the experience she desires more: to fit in as Asha does with Colleen and their mother. And this desire to feel the security she attributes to Asha is a reflection of her longing for parental closeness and a secure sense of belonging within her own family. Thus, these ultimate desires are transferred into homoerotic longings that are then displaced onto heterosexual encounters.

Immediately following her first sexual experience with Michael is a fight between Walker and Lena, which is broken up by Papa, Lena's father. Leading Walker into his study, Papa leaves her to calm down to the strains of Pink Floyd: "Daddy's flown across the ocean, leaving just a memory" (132). These conflations of Walker's absent father, her homoerotic episodes, and her heterosexual experiences suggest, if not confusion, then the expression of Walker's true and multiple desires through socially acceptable means. Not allowed by the dominant narrative to act on her feelings for Lena, Walker fights with the girl, a socially sanctioned, sexually charged experience between females. Similarly, she engages in sexual experiences with boys in order to act on her desires in socially accepted ways. Walker's primary desires to feel secure in a family of origin are implicated by the dominant narrative as well; because this

narrative mandates conflict and displacement for the mixed race individual, Walker cannot satisfy her longings for familial security within her own family. Instead, she seeks acceptance and belonging through her sexuality.

Later in life, when Walker is an adult and has accepted her sexual attraction to women, she is able to embrace her bisexuality. This bisexuality, in turn, becomes a parallel to her biraciality, allowing her to forge communities beyond the bounds of color in ways that encourage her to claim her history and move beyond it. Through a conversation with her lover, Walker is able to articulate

> an instant affinity with beings who suffer…Do I identify with the legacy of slavery and discrimination in this country? Yes. Do I identify with the legacy of anti-Jewish sentiment and exclusion? Yes. Do I identify with the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War Two? Yes. Do I identify with the struggle against brutality and genocide waged against the Native Americans in this country? Yes. Do I feel I have to choose one of these allegiances in order to know who I am or in order to pay proper respect to my ancestors? No. (305)

These thoughts lead Walker to ask the pressing question of what we become "when we put down the scripts written by history and memory, when each person before us can be seen free of the cultural or personal narrative we've inherited or devised" (305). Although she acknowledges the power of this possibility, of moving beyond history and memory, her text is filled with the tension of this unrealized potential. As I have been trying to demonstrate, Walker has not been able to escape either history or memory, and necessarily the means through which she attempts to recreate herself—autobiography—is bound by these dual constraints.

Interestingly, Walker's acknowledgement of the re-creation that an escape from history might allow is directly followed by the section "So I Changed My Name." Yet Walker does not use this change to escape from history; rather, she uses it to link herself more fully with her maternal ancestry. She shifts her father's surname to her middle name and takes her mother's last name as her own: Rebecca Leventhal Walker. Her adoption of her mother's name, additionally, parallels a wedding tradition in which the bride takes her husband's name; Walker, then, may be seen desiring a symbolic marriage to her mother. As she writes: "I want to be closer to my mother, to have something run between us that cannot be denied" (311). Of course, I am not suggesting that Walker desires a sexual relationship with her mother, only that her name change is in keeping with her desire for parental, specifically maternal, connection, a desire that often becomes displaced onto sexual or sexualized relationships. It is fitting, then, that her attempt to connect with her mother would make use of the typical customs of

romance, a fact that even the presiding judge notices when he asks why she would be giving up her father's name when she is neither marrying nor divorcing.

True Stories of Secrets and Lies

Both McKinley and Walker deal with these issues of romance and sexuality, of longing for place and parents; they struggle with dominant narratives that attempt to truncate the options of mixed race women to hypodescent and heterosexuality. Both authors realize the toll such narratives took but McKinley, more than Walker, recognizes how her seemingly endless search for her parents impacted who she already was. As she writes, "I had disrupted who I was…I had stopped everything else to have them. I had been on my way to being a woman…and somehow, believing I was enlarging that, I had cut off from myself" (264). McKinley, then, can ultimately acknowledge the self that preceded the search. She recognizes that the disruption of her biological family, in the words of her father, was a tragedy that never should have happened, but she does not ultimately see herself as the tragedy. And when she relinquishes her claim on the confusion of her past, when she no longer depends on it to define who she is, she feels "remarkably free" (205), free perhaps from narratives that would dictate who she is, free to attempt self-definition through her autobiography.

These authors, though, in their efforts to fashion their own life stories beyond the context of the dominant narrative still find themselves subject to it. Their admitted lying becomes a means by which they initially try to redefine their own lives and identities; later, their autobiographies demonstrate their efforts to rewrite their histories, to tell their own stories. Yet these endeavors, too, are challenged by historically dominant stories and the fact of the authors' own secrets and lies. Implicated as they are by the paradoxes of history and memory, by deception and truth-telling, these autobiographies nevertheless represent mixed race women's attempts to write their own lives, a self-defining act that may challenge dominant narratives of mixture and womanhood, even as the act itself is problematized by these very narratives. What we are left with are stories—stories filled with secrets and lies but also with the truth of what these mixed race women see as their own lives. Perhaps, then, the history of what happened is less revealing and ultimately less defining than the memory itself, shaped though it is by the larger social stories. The obvious paradox that follows is that there can be no true story without the lies. So if I tell you I don't lie, you needn't believe me.

End Notes

1. Consider, for example, the era of slavery when the sexual exploitation of black slave women by their white masters was hidden and overlooked and the realities of passing which have allowed those with hidden blackness and secret black ancestry to slip into the trappings of whiteness.
2. See, for example, *Oreo* by Fran Ross, *Caucasia* by Danzy Senna, and *Resurrecting Mingus* by Jenoyne Adams.

3. The narrative for mixed race men is similar. They may take on the characteristics of a stereotypical and hypersexual "black brute" or they may become the educated and dedicated race leaders of the Talented Tenth.
4. See *Black Skin, White Masks*
5. Although historically there has been a clear conflation of race mixture and incest, the latter typically deals with siblings or fathers and daughters rather than mothers and daughters.

Works Cited

Adams, Jenoyne. *Resurrecting Mingus*. New York: The Free Press, 2001.
Allman, Karen Maeda. "(Un)Natural Boundaries: Mixed Race, Gender, and Sexuality. in *The Multiracial Experience: Racial Borders as the New Frontier*. ed. Maria P.P. Root. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1996. 277-290.
Combs, Gene, and Jill Freedman. *Narrative Therapy: The Social Construction of Preferred Realities*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1996.
Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. New York: Grove Press, 1967.
McKinley, Catherine E. *The Book of Sarahs: A Family in Parts*. Washington: Counterpoint, 2002.
Ross, Fran. *Oreo*. 1974. Boston: Northeastern UP, 2000.
Senna, Danzy. *Caucasia*. New York: Riverhead Books, 1998.
Spickard, Paul. "The Subject is Mixed Race: The Boom in Biracial Biography." in *Rethinking "Mixed Race"*. ed David Parker and Miri Song. Sterling: Pluto Press, 2001.76-98.
The Body Beautiful. Dir. Ngozi Onwurah. Perf. . Company, 1991.
Twine, France Winddance. "Brown Skinned White Girls: Class, Culture and the Construction of White Identity in Suburban Communities." *Gender, Place and Culture* 3 (1996): 205-224.
Walker, Rebecca. *Black, White, and Jewish: Autobiography of a Shifting Self*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2001.
Zack, Naomi. Race and Mixed Race. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1993.