

# **“Black No More”?: Walter White, Hydroquinone, and the “Negro Problem”**

**Eric Porter**

In an August 1949 *Look* magazine article—“Has Science Conquered the Color Line?”—NAACP Executive Secretary Walter White pondered the social implications of monobenzyl ether of hydroquinone, an antioxidant used in rubber and plastics manufacturing that had recently been found to remove melanin from human skin.<sup>1</sup> Government investigators had publicly identified this effect in 1940, after investigating complaints by black and Mexican workers at a Texas tannery who developed pale patches of skin on their hands, arms and torsos because of the presence of hydroquinone in their protective gloves.<sup>2</sup> Hydroquinone would eventually be used medicinally to treat severe forms of vitiligo (a disease involving the progressive loss of melanin which makes one’s skin appear mottled) by removing the remaining melanin from patients’ skin, thus evening out their skin tone. It has also been used as a fading compound to treat different kinds of localized hyper-pigmentations and is still found in often-dangerous skin lightening cosmetic products sold to people with dark complexions across the globe.<sup>3</sup>

In 1949, however, the ultimate medical, cosmetic, and social impacts of hydroquinone were still unknown. White wrote his article after traveling to Chicago to meet with scientists engaged in research on the substance.<sup>4</sup> Afterwards, he took it upon himself to speculate on its future in ways that echoed George Schuyler’s 1931 prototypical black science fiction novel *Black No More*,

in which Dr. Junius Crookman, a fictional Harlem physician, devises a way to induce vitiligo “at will” and “solve the American race problem” by turning dark skins pale.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately for White, his speculations, which might be described as a bad piece of journalism that degenerated into an involuntary piece of science fiction, rendered him a lightning rod for criticism. For the civil rights leader seemed to suggest that hydroquinone provided a solution to the problems of segregation, racism, and colonialism in the post-World War II world by enabling non-white peoples to bleach their skins.

White’s article baffled his contemporaries. Not only did he seem to be advocating an absurd, demeaning, and physically damaging political strategy; some were also struck by the irony that the comments about hydroquinone came from the blond-haired, blue-eyed Executive Secretary of the NAACP. Early in his tenure with the organization, White had been sent to the South to gather information for the organization’s anti-lynching crusade and did so, risking his life in the process, by passing as a white traveling salesman. His career as a “race man” and his leadership of the NAACP since 1931 both affirmed as well as called into question definitions of racial identity, which in turn prompted questions about his role at the organization’s helm.<sup>6</sup>

White was at something of a personal and professional crossroads even before the publication of the article. He took a leave of absence from the NAACP effective on June 1, 1949. He had suffered a heart attack in 1947 and since then had struggled with poor health. His doctors had suggested that he cut back his activities to prolong his life. White originally asked to take his leave in late 1948, but the NAACP asked him to delay it. Subsequently, he asked to resign on the basis of his heart condition, but the NAACP board would not accept that request either. Eventually, the organization allowed him to take a one-year leave of absence, with a decision on his return as leader to be deferred to the following year. (He was eventually reinstated as Secretary after some debate.) During his leave of absence White pursued with greater enthusiasm his alternative career as a public speaker and opinion maker, agent of postwar U.S. diplomacy, and black/white intermediary. At this moment, when powerful corporate, state, and civic interests were increasingly invested in resolving, at least on the surface, some of the profound discrepancies between the ostensibly egalitarian ideals of the United States and its systems of racial exclusion, they looked to relatively “safe” black public intellectuals for guidance. A few years earlier White had begun writing a syndicated newspaper column for the white press, with the New York *Herald-Tribune* as his primary outlet. Shortly after his leave began, White traveled the globe as a participant in an NBC-sponsored *Round the World Town Meeting of the Air*, a series of radio broadcasts championing the United States’ leadership in the postwar world.<sup>7</sup>

Rumors abounded, however, that the underlying reason for White’s leave from the NAACP was not his health but his recent announcement that he was divorcing his African American wife, Gladys, and had become engaged to Poppy Cannon, a prominent white socialite and South African Jew by birth, with whom

he had recently reignited a romance begun during the 1930s. His marriage to Cannon, one month after his leave began, raised questions for his family, NAACP board members, and the broader African American public about whether he had outlived his usefulness as a “race leader.” For some, “Has Science Conquered the Color Line?” confirmed such suspicions.<sup>8</sup>

White’s motivations for publishing this piece remain something of a mystery and, as such, invite speculation. It would be easy to assume that White’s experiences and privilege as a black person who could pass for white fueled a view that entrenched racial hierarchies could be dismantled so easily and superficially. His biographer Kenneth Janken rejects the “tempting” conclusion that “Has Science Conquered the Color Line?” was a “public admission of what he had always privately believed . . . that he wanted to be white,” by noting White’s repeated, “extra efforts to accentuate his solidarity and identification with the African American people.” He suggests instead that White’s piece is a rather inconsequential piece of journalism that is best understood as a “mischievous” attempt to “bollix up a raft of his tormentors on both sides of the color line” and establish a “maverick” reputation for himself to further his alternative career as a paid consultant and opinion maker. Indeed, White and Cannon soon took over the syndication of his column, and correspondence indicates that White was trying to get it placed in *Look* publisher Gardner Cowles’ stable of newspapers. Thus, “Has Science Conquered the Color Line?” may have well been a provocative first step toward convincing Cowles of White’s legitimacy as an expert on race unafraid to take on controversy.<sup>9</sup>

What I will argue, however, is that, whatever White’s professional motivations, the ideas embedded in “Has Science Conquered the Color Line?” and especially in a somewhat longer, unpublished version of the piece, the resonances of these ideas with other bits of White’s public commentary, and responses to the *Look* article by black leaders and lay people alike—all give insight into some of the political and moral dilemmas revolving around race, science, and civil and human rights during the immediate postwar period. Moreover, they illustrate how a scientific, political, and moral imperative to abandon racial thinking had entered African American political and popular discourse by the end of the 1940s. This imperative emanated from decades of research seeking to debunk race as a biological category, and it was given new immediacy by both the horrors of Nazi racial science put into practice and a post-Hiroshima and Nagasaki faith in science, technology, and rational thought as vehicles by which to overcome the problems of the world (the racist and genocidal applications of the bombing notwithstanding). The notion that race was irrational and irrelevant was increasingly prominent, albeit in complicated ways, through the 1940s within a broader, transnational context of academic writing, journalistic reportage, and the rhetoric of statecraft. But it had a particular and no less complicated resonance among African Americans during the immediate post-World War II era.

White's article and the controversies it elicited demonstrate how dilemmas around race and rights, conditioned by scientific research on race, were, in fact, significant components of black racial formations at mid-century. The imperative to move beyond race affected other political and personal choices—for example, national versus international affiliation, the primacy of race or class in social analysis, integrationist versus nationalist civil rights agendas, race consciousness versus color blindness in personal deportment and interpersonal relations—facing African Americans. And it caused people to ponder the usefulness of the sense of black virtue that constituted their own understanding of what it meant to be human.

This essay moves next to an assessment of “Has Science Conquered the Color Line?” and issues that arose as White, a middle-class “race man” capable of passing as white, tried to debunk the idea that race had a biological basis while maintaining a link to his racial community. The investigation continues by examining the controversy surrounding White's piece, which demonstrates how political leaders and lay people alike addressed the limitations and value in racial affiliation and racial transcendence. In the process, it explores some of the conceptual and political questions about race, science, and rights that emerged as black leaders like White contemplated the Faustian bargain of linking domestic civil rights struggles to U.S. foreign policy goals and a concomitant ethos of color blindness. The conclusion revisits the idea that engagements with scientific accounts of race were significant to African American racial formations at mid-century, and it ponders the implications of these engagements in light of scholarly claims about the importance of black political cultures and racial discourses during this period.

### **Black No More?**

An extant, unpublished draft of “Has Science Conquered the Color Line?” provides the fullest insight into White's perspective on the social implications of hydroquinone. As White himself tried to point out later, it provides a more nuanced and less advocative take on its subject than the article published in *Look*. White began the draft by quoting atomic scientist Leo Szilard, who called hydroquinone “a more explosive discovery than the atom bomb.” Drawing from existing research, which demonstrated hydroquinone's ability to lighten human skin, White readily admitted that questions remained regarding side effects, the dangers associated with depigmentation, and the success and permanence of the treatment. But even as he failed to present any information indicating that this, or any other known substance, could be used to darken one's skin, White optimistically predicted that within two to ten years a substance would be available that might enable a human being “to adjust his pigmentation according to his needs or desires which, in a world made up of two-thirds non-white and one-third white peoples, may shatter the color line and the dangerous racism it has



**Figure 1:** Walter White, in a 1942 portrait by Gordon Parks. Courtesy Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection, [LC-USF34-013344-C]

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created around the world as explosively and basically as Dr. Szilard believes it will.”<sup>10</sup>

White next set out to “present some of the racial, social, economic, and political consequences which could develop when and if there is available a means of racial transformation at reasonable cost.” White pointed to the impact on the cosmetics industry, possibly on the “multi-million dollar annual business of white people making themselves dark,” and certainly, given hydroquinone’s properties, on the market for skin bleaching creams in the black community. He also addressed the question of whether other physical markers would still define racial identities should people change their skin color. Hair would not be a

factor, he suggested, because a hair straightener “of very real permanence” had recently been discovered. Plastic surgery would take care of facial features.<sup>11</sup>

White used this discussion of physiognomy to call into question the notion of embodied racial differences. “There is,” White argued, “ample biological reason for the circumstance that there is far less difference in the features of Americans of various races than most of us imagine.” Plastic surgery might not be necessary in the end, for America’s fixation on “pigmentation” had obscured the fact that people of different “races” share facial features. He invited his readers to observe black people and white people in public places and to note that many of them had features purportedly belonging to members of the other group. Echoing Crèvecoeur’s *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782)—albeit in a more inclusive way—White suggested that society was moving “towards the creation of an American pattern of racial figures,” stemming from the variety of “racial strains” in the United States, a long history of miscegenation and a centuries-long practice of “passing” by light-skinned blacks.<sup>12</sup>

White next speculated about the broader social implications of chameleonic processes. One immediate question was whether black people would use hydroquinone. “Contrary to the beliefs of a number of fair-minded, prejudice-free white Americans who know about monobenzyl hydroquinone,” White wrote, “it is exceedingly doubtful if many of the fourteen-million identifiable Negroes in the United States would avail themselves of the opportunity to depigment their skins.” For, even if race were a biological fiction, tangible modes of affiliation also defined black identities. Not only might people be loath to give up relationships with friends and family, but a sense of cultural community and a collective struggle for full citizenship also drew them together as a group. White quoted an unnamed “Negro editor,” identified in the published version of the piece as John H. Sengstacke of the *Chicago Defender*: “Negroes are proud of their heritage and do not want to lose it by merging with the white world. They want first-class citizenship—not second-class—as Negroes. They are proud of the progress they have made against terrific odds toward attainment of that status.”<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, White continued, the “destruction of the myth of white moral, military, and other superiority by World War II and the growing revolt against colonialism which is sweeping Asia and Africa can and may create a situation in certain areas of the world where it can be dangerous to have a white skin.” So White reaffirmed his claim that “one of the major developments from the discovery of monobenzyl hydroquinone may be scientific research to add instead of remove melanin from the skin.”<sup>14</sup>

White concluded by suggesting that once hydroquinone was “perfected and marketed,” it could “affect more profoundly racial relations in the United States and throughout the world than any other scientific discovery to date.” Quoting sociologist Louis Wirth, White averred that “the progress of civilization has been an enlargement of human freedom—or human choice,” and he surmised that hydroquinone presented “a new avenue for enlarging the range of human

free choice.” The logic of the piece suggested that such freedoms would come from a chemically-induced destabilization of racial categories and the meanings and valuations embedded in them. The discovery might well usher in a new era, “where less importance will be placed upon skin color as a determinant of human ability and acceptance than has ever been true before.” And at this moment of growing militancy by colored people throughout the globe, he suggested that this scientific solution might be the only avenue for peace. “It remains to be seen whether the ability to decrease or increase the amount of pigmentation in the human body will be used to create a world in which white and non-white peoples can live together in mutual respect or whether the dark world’s resentment against exploitation and social disadvantage will burst into violent revolt against white racism.”<sup>15</sup>

White’s comments in the article draft clearly speak to a faith in the power of science—encompassing in this case both applied technology and rational, objective inquiry—to disrupt racial hierarchies. Such views permeated public discourse in the United States and elsewhere during the 1940s, and they can be found in White’s autobiography, *A Man Called White*, published a year before the *Look* article. There, White recognized the “magic in a white skin” and the “tragedy, loneliness, exile, in a black skin.” “All race prejudice,” he argued, with the exception of “that which is deliberately uttered in base attempts to gain political or economic advantage . . . is founded on one of the most absurd fallacies in all thought—the belief that there is a basic difference between a Negro and a white man.” He noted recent work in biology, which had concluded, as one scientist put it, that “the saying ‘We are all brothers under the skin’ . . . has a basis in scientific fact.” He also pondered the impact on American race relations “if the skin of every Negro in America were suddenly to turn white.” Would not the result, he asked, be that they would they would then be subject to the same “individual judgment in matters of abilities, energies, honesty, cleanliness, as are whites?”<sup>16</sup>

In both his autobiography and the article draft, White suggested a way out of the regime of what Paul Gilroy, following Frantz Fanon, calls “epidermalization” by pointing to a new configuration of the human outside an economy of racial difference: one that was rooted in the biological sameness of the human body under the skin.<sup>17</sup> White drew upon growing scientific evidence to support the notion of human equality. Biologists, geneticists, and social scientists (most famously anthropologist Franz Boas) had been challenging the biologicistic foundations of white supremacy for decades and had sought cultural or environmental explanations for differences in human behavior or technological development. Such avenues of inquiry took on added urgency in the 1930s and 1940s, as non-black researchers developed affinities for African American political struggles, black researchers established their authority in the scientific and social scientific debates, and all gained knowledge about and often denounced Nazi racial theory put into practice.<sup>18</sup>

Such ideas were taken up by liberal opinion makers and antiracist activists alike, and they entered the public discourse more generally through the popularity and influence of titles such as Ruth Benedict's *Patterns of Culture* (1934) and *Race: Science and Politics* (1940), Benedict and Gene Weltfish's *The Races of Mankind* (1943), M.F. Ashley Montagu's *Man's Most Dangerous Myth: The Fallacy of Race* (1942), and, of course, Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma* (1944). Myrdal's book drew heavily upon the existing work of and commissioned new studies by various scholars, including African American members of the "Howard circle" like E. Franklin Frazier and Ralph Bunche, thus bringing their work to a wider public. As Carey McWilliams summarized the situation in 1951:

Encouraged by new scientific findings, the spokesmen for equality became increasingly insistent that the old barriers should be removed, and at the same time the defense of these barriers began to assume a ludicrous quality, shrill, falsetto, croaking. The more support these new scientific findings provided for the American creed of equality, the more interest they aroused—with the result that the myths formerly used to rationalize prejudiced attitudes have lost their power to coerce people's thinking about race relations.<sup>19</sup>

### **Black Virtue in the Public Sphere**

Yet this scientific definition of human equality raised distinctive and pressing questions for African Americans at this historical moment, which was characterized, as White put it, by "the destruction of the myth of white moral . . . superiority." There was indeed a strong hope that research proving a biological basis of human equality would undermine restrictive definitions of the human and instead grant a full spectrum of rights and moral treatment to people of color. But when White mentioned the anticipated resistance to using hydroquinone on the basis of group pride and a political demand for citizenship "as Negroes," he referenced the complex historical process by which black people had redefined race from a biological category into a cultural, ethnic, and political one that served multiple purposes.

Scholars have increasingly pointed to the 1940s as a critical moment in black political and social formations. Nikhil Pal Singh, for example, describes as coming to fruition during the 1940s, "the emergence of black people as a distinct people and a public—and the concomitant development of race as a political space."<sup>20</sup> The development of this national, collective sense of self-awareness and semi-autonomous political space—what he calls a "black public sphere"—was indeed a complicated process; it was a product of state recognition and protection (albeit minimal) of black interests, local and national black culture industries, and a series of black social movements that were increas-



ingly urban, national, and at times transnational in their orientation. And it was anything but uniform in its composition, its self-conception, or its relationship to the notion of “race”:

To speak of an emergent black public sphere or black nationality at the inception of the long civil rights era is not to endorse a separatist politics of black nationalism, nor does it infer a singular or corporate racial identity; in fact, it may do the opposite. The modernity of the black public/nation may actually result from the very heterogeneity (in terms of region, occupation, class, and gender) increasingly arrayed and negotiated under the sign ‘Negro,’ or ‘black,’ as well as from a growing awareness of the lack of biological foundations for racial differentiation, and a widening of the means and scope of intraracial and interracial communication.<sup>21</sup>

In other words, complex modes of affiliation and paths toward collective empowerment were in a sense moved forward by the partial unmooring of race from biology. But this freedom from the confines of race that enabled action and self-awareness necessarily brought with it questions about the basis of future affiliation.

White’s piece referenced the way that the process of redefining race as something other than biology involved a rejection of racially-determined systems of morality that denied African Americans their humanity and, by extension, full citizenship. Often suggested instead was an alternative moral framework, which located human worth not as a gift of skin color but as a product of a collective struggle for citizenship by minority subjects. Thus was black virtue made coterminous with human virtue. Of course, a significant feature of black thought, politics, and cultural production since the popularization of Boasian anthropology and other investigations challenging the scientific validity of race has been the tensions that have emerged when such studies have, by extension, called into question the basis of black virtue and redemptive constructions of black humanity. One can see this, for example, in the often-discussed work of W.E.B. Du Bois, who sought in various ways, beginning in the 1910s, to reconcile the freedoms promised by the scientific delegitimization of race with a retention of race as both a category of social analysis and as a collective sign of positive moral significance.<sup>22</sup> As black people in the late 1930s and 1940s sought to incorporate the insights of scientific challenges to the idea of race, while maintaining and sometimes creating a sense of duty, honor, or ethical behavior that were also “arrayed and negotiated under the sign ‘Negro’ or ‘black,’” they often found themselves facing a difficult philosophical conundrum. For the converse of the end of race was the question of whether social realities—and, by extension, good works on the part of human beings with dark complexions—required a kind of pragmatic retention of the concept.

White himself seemed to be struggling with his own personal ethical-racial dilemma during this period, which was inflected with class and gender issues, as well as questions about the social status of black people in the United States and elsewhere. This is evident in his interrogation of his own racial identity in *A Man Called White*. For despite his rejection of race and his will to assimilation, he retains a black identity that is simultaneously beholden to the “one drop” rule and socially determined through good deeds. At the beginning of his autobiography, he presents himself as “the paradox of the color line.” “I am a Negro. My skin is white, my eyes are blue, my hair is blond. The traits of my race are nowhere visible upon me.” Yet, he continues, “I am not white. There is nothing within my mind and heart which tempts me to think I am.”<sup>23</sup>

White poses the question of why he should remain a “Negro” when he could pass. His commitment to blackness, we soon find out, was solidified in his youth when his family barely escaped with their lives during the 1906 Atlanta race riot. There and then he realized that biology, “invisible” as it was in his case, had defined him in the eyes of others as less than human. But White took solace that he was among the virtuous people, that his “mind and spirit were part of the races that had not fully awakened”; he was not a member of that group who were “made sick and murderous by pride” and “whose story is in the history of the world, a record of bloodshed, rapine, and pillage.” Thus White retains an investment in juxtaposing his white skin and his black “mind and spirit,” the latter of which is most attuned to what he describes at the end of his book as an essential “human kindness, decency, love . . . the only real thing in the world.”<sup>24</sup>

Science might indicate that there were no differences between races, yet the story of how White was, in a sense, embodied as black by the Atlanta lynch mob because of history, ancestry, and the application of the one-drop rule, demonstrates how race continued to influence his consciousness. Moreover, his embrace of a virtuous black “mind and spirit” and his commitment to the “race” speak of an understanding of race at least as determinative to his thinking as the empiricist rejection of difference that contemporary biology provided. White was, in effect, responding simultaneously to the moral imperatives to denounce race, to claim his own humanity, and to define an identity from which to commit to serving “the race.”

### **Losing Face**

There is some indication in the autobiography that, as a cold warrior and a light-skinned black man, White saw his role as a race leader as somewhat precarious given the developing color consciousness fueling civil rights struggles in the United States and anti-colonialist struggles abroad. He seemed to be worried that an increasingly militant, mass constituency might not recognize his blackness or adhere to the social authority or cautious political strategies put forth by elite leaders. Noting that “the end of the war brought many signs that

the patience of the Negro was wearing thin,” White celebrated this when expressed in acceptable political activism but was critical of it when articulated in the “less commendable and often quite embarrassing . . . belligerence and surliness of Negroes towards whites.” White described instances where he himself was “the victim of such ill-will until I escaped from the situation or was forced to let it be known that I was not white.”<sup>25</sup>

This question of whether White could adequately serve “the race” also emerged as a significant issue in the controversy that followed publication of the article. Many in the African American community were already upset about his divorce from his African American wife, Gladys, and his marriage to Poppy Cannon. Carl Murphy, an NAACP board member and publisher of the Baltimore *Afro-American*, for example, conducted a campaign in August of 1949 to oust White from his NAACP position during his leave. While Murphy said he had no problem personally with the marriage, he claimed that it had already created a situation in which White no longer had the support of the black community, according to a poll of “hundreds” of people in the Baltimore area.<sup>26</sup>

Publication of the *Look* article added fuel to debates about White’s leadership. Members of the NAACP’s leadership were not at all happy with White’s article and generally viewed it as an embarrassment. Although some NAACP officials defended White’s marriage—it was, after all, consistent with both the group’s history of interracial leadership and membership as well as with their vision of equality—other officials thought that the combined effect of the marriage and the article undermined his legitimacy as a leader. At the organization’s meeting in October of 1949, the New York branch moved to oust White as Executive Secretary, a motion that was tabled by the NAACP board of directors.<sup>27</sup> Meanwhile, the New York *Amsterdam News*, Baltimore *Afro-American*, and Chicago *Defender* reported that the article had raised questions among the African American public about White’s capacity to head the organization.<sup>28</sup>

When analyzing these responses to White, it must be noted that while his original draft suggested that the solution to the race problem lay in the destabilization of racial categories stemming from increases *or* decreases in dermal pigmentation, the *Look* piece gave the impression that the leader of the NAACP was actually promoting the idea of mass skin bleaching as a viable means of letting black people “live like other Americans and be judged on their own merits.” For starters, *Look* chose to run, between the title and the author’s name and photograph, the teaser, “A revolutionary chemical compound has been discovered that turns black skin light. When it is perfected, Negroes who use it could pass as white.” The magazine added for emphasis two photographs of an attractive, bathing suit-clad young African American woman, the second of which was overexposed to lighten the model’s skin tone. The caption raised the question of whether “life [would] look brighter to her in the ‘white man’s world’ if she changes the color of her skin.”

Moreover, the draft had two long paragraphs detailing the reasons why black people might not want to bleach their skins, but the *Look* piece’s argu-

ment against whitening was reduced to a short paragraph revolving around the Sengstacke quote regarding “first class citizenship . . . as Negroes.” And even this quote was bracketed by two fairly strong statements in praise of what might be achieved through the use of hydroquinone as a skin lightener. The article noted, “For [African Americans], monobenzyll will provide a way to get the fair treatment they’ve always wanted.” As a rejoinder to Sengstacke, it quoted Lena Horne, who was not mentioned in the original: “This would be the greatest thing for world peace and race relations that has ever happened.”<sup>29</sup> There was no mention that one might want to *darken* one’s skin in the context of “the destruction of the myth of white moral, military, and other superiority by World War II and the growing revolt against colonialism.” Taken together, these changes in the *Look* version suggested that “a range of human free choice” would be achieved by embracing whiteness rather than by destabilizing racial categories.

Beyond helping us to understand how out of favor White had fallen with segments of the African American public and his colleagues at the NAACP, reactions to the article, to White’s marriage, and to the combined effect of both give insight into the multiple systems of identification through which “race leaders” and lay people thought of themselves and one another in racial terms and some of the contradictions inherent in these acts. They also illuminate the moral economy conditioning the choices members of the African American public made about the viability of race at this moment, including the judgments they made about others’ choices.

Journalist and novelist George Schuyler used the controversy over White’s marriage as an opportunity (as with *Black No More*) to critique what he viewed as the flawed logic of political affiliation based on biology and family status. In a draft of his regular column that the Pittsburgh *Courier* ultimately refused to print, Schuyler ridiculed the New York NAACP Branch’s attempt to oust White and blasted the biologicistic logic of “race chauvinism” in the black community. White’s standing as a race leader, according to Schuyler, was precarious but remained intact because of the “one drop theory” of racial identification. However, his marriage to Cannon appeared to dilute his racial status. Schuyler satirically proposed a system of racial classification, which would appeal to “Ku Kluxers, the professional Anglo-Saxons, African Nationalists, [and] the Negrophiles” alike: “In the past it has always been somewhat difficult to determine who were the real leaders but we need worry no more. An anthropologist’s color tape and an adding machine are all that will be needed, aside from a family tree. Couples would have their chromatic place and keep it, with the jet blacks leading the list and the Pinkies at the bottom. In that case Mr. White and a whole lot of others would definitely have to go.”<sup>30</sup>

Other objections to White’s marriage across the “color line” clearly did speak to what Kevin Gaines identifies as a nationalist and often masculinist “racial conservation” that frequently guided black uplift strategies early in the twentieth century and resonated in black politics during subsequent decades. Such projects rejected the assumptions of white supremacist racial science but

were still problematic in their reliance on biological racial categories and their crafting of racial community and leadership in patrilineal and patriarchal terms.<sup>31</sup> To the extent that Murphy’s poll accurately portrayed the sentiments of blacks in Baltimore, it suggested that by marrying outside of the race, White was seen as turning his back on the racial body politic imagined as a family and calling into question his own moral authority.

Yet other responses to the combined effect of White’s marriage and article were rooted in emergent definitions of race that moved beyond biology and the family. White’s article and marriage raised questions about various modes of group identification and a collective sense of black virtue that were instrumental to the vision of a plural yet egalitarian society that fueled civil rights struggles during the 1940s and beyond, and that worked in uneasy symbiosis with an integrationist ethos. At this moment that witnessed the increasing visibility and self-consciousness of the black public sphere, leaders such as White enabled and gave self-awareness to their constituents, but this public simultaneously demanded from these leaders appropriate modes of communication and service to the black nation. It thus seems clear that White’s marriage and his article provided means for a referendum for other pre-existing concerns about his leadership at both a practical and a symbolic level. It is also clear that the public outcry over both episodes (White’s marriage and article) linked dissatisfaction with White to broader concerns about the viability and moral status of race and racial affiliation.

Various black leaders pointedly rejected the assimilationist challenge raised by White’s article. Black nationalist James Lawson, president of the United African Nationalist Movement, dismissed the article as an example of White’s poor moral behavior: namely, a racial self-contempt that Lawson thought was also expressed through his marriage to Cannon. Edith Alexander, a local Baltimore leader, did not think black people would avail themselves of the treatment, but she did express some anxiety that they could benefit from a stronger sense of group awareness. “I don’t feel that colored persons would give up the pride in their own race in order to make social gains through a synthetic process. It’s time that we get proud of being colored.” And S. Vincent Owen, Executive Secretary of the St. Paul Urban League, used the moment to affirm a sense of black virtue necessary for political action. He suggested, “most colored persons would rather see our democracy actually get a chance to work for all—regardless of color or class. Certainly, they would rather have a first-class citizenship as colored persons than to hope to be accepted in a white world by changing the color of the skin.”<sup>32</sup>

Members of the black left, on the other hand, saw in the *Look* article controversy an opportunity to comment on the NAACP’s retreat from the moral imperative to struggle for human rights across the globe. Alphaeus Hunton Jr. of the Council of African Affairs, which was currently moving further to the left and losing support of mainstream civil rights leaders, ridiculed White’s proposal and said “a chemical change of skin pigmentation as a solution to the

problems of race relations is about on a par with the atomic bomb formula for gaining world peace.”<sup>33</sup> In the wake of the Holocaust and the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, such comments were a powerful condemnation of modern technologies and their genocidal applications, as well as an implicit critique of the failures of the science of human sameness to address adequately capital’s role in the creation of racial hierarchies.<sup>34</sup>

Communist William Patterson, Executive Secretary of the Civil Rights Congress and author of the exposé *We Charge Genocide*, which he and Paul Robeson submitted as a petition to the United Nations in 1951, made explicit connections between White’s article and the moral failings of the mainstream civil rights movement because of its retreat from internationalist, anti-colonialist politics. White’s proposal “would be laughable,” he argued, “were it not such a grievous insult” to “colored people” in the United States and across the globe.

Mr. White’s ‘solution’ would disarm the colored people in the United States and the scores of millions of colonial people now rising against oppression. He bids them suffer in silence the vileness of government-inspired terror and oppression, to await the coming of an insulting and degrading ‘chemical Messiah.’ Mr. White’s ‘solution’ is not an unexpected one. Under his guidance the top leaders of the NAACP have failed ever to seriously challenge the government’s mailed-fist [sic] treatment of colored peoples.<sup>35</sup>

### **(Color)blinded By Science**

Hunton’s and Patterson’s critiques point toward the complex geo-political stakes of this imperative to move beyond racial thinking. They suggest that White’s scientifically supported challenge to legacies of racism should be understood in light of the variety of universalisms being implemented to support domestic and global politics during the 1940s. World War II, of course, had helped bring about a crisis in white supremacy. Even as the race war against Japan raged in the Pacific, the struggle against Hitler’s racist regime (and knowledge of the Holocaust at the end of the war) made the existence of white supremacy in the United States all the more contradictory. This was not lost on African American activists, who argued that a successful struggle against fascism abroad must be accompanied by a dismantling of racism at home. As Singh observes, the *Pittsburgh Courier*’s “double victory” campaign (which linked victory overseas to ending prejudice at home) “starkly confirmed [that] the moral status of American nationhood and the status of black nationality within America was now inextricably intertwined. The profound irresolution regarding the meaning and substance of universal citizenship, posed again and again throughout U.S. history, could no longer be sustained or upheld.”<sup>36</sup>

Yet the moral scene surrounding civil and human rights struggles was also deeply conditioned and constrained by the linkages that emerged among U.S. foreign policy, the fate of the colonized world, black activism, and ideas about citizenship during World War II and the early Cold War. As Singh points out, a series of competing universalisms mediated these relationships, ranging from the nationalist, imperialist, “civilizing” mission put forth in Henry Luce’s “American Century” to W.E.B. Du Bois’s calls for “Human Rights for all Minorities” that linked the fate of African Americans with that of colonized subjects across the globe. Of course, the fate of visions like Du Bois’s was eventually to be displaced by Cold War needs. And the moral imperative of global human rights was conveniently overlooked when evaluating the fate of American allies’ colonies or was subsumed by a “functionalist argument” concerned with the elimination of racism in the United States and elsewhere primarily as a means of countering Soviet propaganda and of improving the United States’ reputation and influence in the decolonizing world. Thus developed a “color-blind universalism,” predicated on the assumption that the United States was the moral center of the world, that race and racism were eroding in the United States and in the colonized world, and that U.S. foreign policy was anything but racist. Moreover, as Gerald Horne argues, the discrediting of anti-racist, anti-colonial movements as “‘red’ slowed down the movement against colonialism and—perhaps not coincidentally—gave ‘white supremacy’ a new lease on life.”<sup>37</sup>

Walter White’s and the NAACP’s role in this political and conceptual shift at the end of the 1940s, as the range of acceptable black protest diminished, are well documented. During the war and in the immediate postwar period, White and the NAACP analyzed racism as a historical and global phenomenon and optimistically linked African American freedom to the successful liberation of the colonized world. Such efforts can be seen in White’s participation in the United Nations founding conference and his subsequent lobbying efforts with United Nations and United States government officials. Yet, as Janken argues, White increasingly recognized that emerging Cold War aims would supersede the struggle for global human rights—the latter made clear when the United States blocked the United Nations’ consideration for Du Bois’s and the NAACP’s human rights petition, *An Appeal to the World*, at the end of 1947 in large part because of the Soviet Union’s support for it. With growing pressure from the Truman administration, and in exchange for concessions on domestic civil rights issues, White separated domestic and international rights issues and put his organization’s support behind anti-communism. Although he continued to advocate ratification of the 1948 United Nations’ resolution on human rights, White distanced himself from the *Appeal*. He also helped purge the black left (including Du Bois) from the NAACP, attacked critics of U.S. racism abroad, and supported President Harry S. Truman’s Point Four foreign policy initiative, which attempted to stem socialism in the “Third World” through economic development programs and shared technical knowledge. Not only did this initiative

pave the way for private investments by U.S. corporations in the soon-to-be former colonies, but it also left oversight with European powers in countries that were still under colonial rule.<sup>38</sup>

As mentioned earlier, White in part used his “leave of absence” to devote more time to international statesmanship. In July of 1949, he announced to NAACP branch presidents that, during the leave of absence, “I shall continue my efforts through newspaper columns, articles, books and a limited number of speaking engagements to do what I can to carry the Association’s message to the United States and the world.”<sup>39</sup> In December of that year, he optimistically observed “that there is almost a revolution taking place in the United States as the people themselves wake-up to the enormous damage to our prestige by the continuation of discrimination here at home.” In other words, America needed to change its practices at home in order to compete with the Soviet Union in carving out spheres of influence in the newly and soon-to-be independent colonies in Asia, Africa and the Caribbean. The end of 1949 saw White lobbying for economic and military aid for Nehru’s new government as a means of pre-empting Soviet influence in India.<sup>40</sup>

As White and other actors put competing universalisms into play in the geo-political sphere, the intellectual and political scene was profoundly conditioned by scientific research debunking perceived wisdom about race. Although such an underpinning was deployed in fairly radical antiracist and anti-imperialist writings such as Du Bois’s 1945 *Color and Democracy*, the political and moral demand for a fully realized universal citizenship rooted in science was articulated most visibly in the U.S. public sphere by Gunnar Myrdal’s 1944 study *An American Dilemma*, the culmination of seven years of research sponsored by the Carnegie Corporation. As Myrdal put it: “The American Negro problem is a problem in the heart of the American. . . . Though our study includes economic, social, and political race relations, at bottom our problem is the moral dilemma of the American.”<sup>41</sup>

Within the moral stance inherent in Myrdal’s conceptualization of race and national belonging we gain further insight into the limitations of the logic proposed by White in his article. Myrdal’s moral imperative based on the scientific proof of human sameness played a critical role in changing conceptions of race and struggles to secure rights throughout the decade and into the 1950s. The NAACP’s Legal Defense Fund and its allies cited it in briefs for a series of landmark desegregation cases culminating in 1954 in *Brown v. Board of Education* (Chief Justice Earl Warren also referred to it in his opinion on the *Brown* decision itself). This call to action based on common biology was also found in UNESCO’s 1950 and 1951 statements on race, which were the result of a UN Economic and Social Council resolution that called upon UNESCO “to consider the desirability of initiating and recommending the general adoption of a programme of disseminating scientific facts designed to remove what is generally known as racial prejudice.” Myrdal was on the committee that helped draft



the first of these statements under the direction of physical anthropologist M.F. Ashley Montagu, from whose own work he had drawn in *An American Dilemma*. The UNESCO group even went so far in their 1950 statement to argue that there was a biological basis for “the ethic of universal brotherhood,” although this was qualified in the 1951 statement after objections from physical anthropologists and geneticists who said there was no scientific basis for such a claim.<sup>42</sup>

But, as various scholars have argued, Myrdal’s understanding of what race actually was, if not something with roots in biological fact, helped shape an ultimately limited response to the causes of and solutions to racial inequalities in the United States and elsewhere. Myrdal and his collaborators drew heavily on science debunking race but did so in a way that rejected historical materialist understandings of racism in the contemporary world. As Penny Von Eschen notes, “In the retreat from explanations grounded in political economy, . . . Racism was portrayed as a ‘disease,’ and as a psychological or spiritual problem, or as a characteristic of backward peoples which could be eradicated by ‘modernization’ or, in more psychological language, ‘maturity.’”<sup>43</sup>

Myrdal’s emphasis on modernization also located within the United States, and its stated commitment to extend universal rights, a “teleological certainty” that it would overcome its racial history. The implications of such a proposal in the domestic sphere was a stated imperative toward a national homogeneity against which both racist exclusions and black color consciousness were deemed contrary to national ideals. Moreover, by explaining persistent racial hierarchies as products of a “vicious circle” of racial discrimination and black social pathology, Myrdal’s study was predicated on the legitimacy of the U.S. nation state—and, by extension, the broader fabric of white society—as the arbiters of racial justice, as well as on the goal of assimilation for blacks into American society (and by extension, Western “civilization”) as the most legitimate solution to black demands for equality.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, Lee Baker has documented how Myrdal was directly and indirectly assisted by those scholars who had been influenced by Boas’s theories of racial equality but who played down the cultural relativist and historicist aspects of the anthropologist’s intellectual legacy, directing their attention not to validating difference but to determining how “the Negro” might best assimilate into American society. As Baker astutely notes, “Myrdal’s theme appealed to the American public because he fashioned the Negro problem into a moral dilemma for Whites and a formidable [moral] task for Blacks, to assimilate and work themselves out of poverty.”<sup>45</sup>

Myrdal’s deployment of science against race also linked the struggle for civil rights in the domestic sphere to the struggle for human rights in a global context. But again it did so in a way that emphasized the primacy of the “American Creed” and narrowed the field of vision with which race and racism might be perceived. As Singh provocatively suggests, by arguing that the United States’ successes in the revamping of the global order would be predicated on the suc-

cessful inclusion of African Americans in the U.S. body politic, Myrdal vindicated the goals of black activists and intellectuals during the 1940s. However, he also helped establish the more narrow political and discursive terrain upon which leaders like White would operate. For Myrdal's study implicitly positioned the United States as heir apparent to the "civilizing mission" of the European imperial powers while presenting the promise of black inclusion within its borders as the moral justification for the expansion of the "U.S. global mission."<sup>46</sup>

When taken in this political and intellectual context, then, the different versions of "Has Science Conquered the Color Line?" are indeed complicated texts, reflecting White's complex position as a public intellectual negotiating competing ontological and political imperatives vis-à-vis race. They critique the larger refusal to fully acknowledge black people as rights-bearing members of the human species, while speaking of White's understanding of the links between racism at home and in the colonized world. Yet, the articles also reflect the ideological turn of the mainstream civil rights movement in the late 1940s, which involved a new understanding of race based on a rejection of historicism and political economy, a faith in "modernization," and an ultimately nationalist and scientifically legitimated will toward assimilation.

Moreover, White's embrace of science as a means of "enlarging the range of human free choice" expressed a color-blind ethos that was homologous to that which underwrote the Cold War aims of the United States in the immediate post-war period. White's argument, especially in the *Look* version but also in its earlier incarnation, assumed that science's underwriting of "human freedom" would do so along the lines of the imperial political and cultural systems and racial statecraft of the United States. When White ominously wondered in the draft whether hydroquinone would help create a peaceful world characterized by "mutual respect" or whether it would "burst into violent revolt," his statement spoke of the sphere of Soviet influence in the newly decolonized world but also of fears of an un-American, irrational, and thus un-manageable, population of colored people across the globe. Therefore, even as he thought to expand definitions of the human, he gave validation to what was ultimately an exclusionary brand of universalism that affirmed U.S. moral superiority and not only located a standard for human valuation and a basis for extension of rights in the United States but assumed that these could be delimited by the U.S. nation-state and its political, military, and economic interests.

### **"I Only Want to Be Free"**

The final few months of 1949 saw White attempting to save face. In September, he held a press conference, in which he announced that his marriage to Cannon was a private matter that had no bearing on his capacity for leadership. He characterized the *Look* article as a matter of factual reporting with a bit of speculation and insisted he was not advocating that people change the color of

their skin.<sup>47</sup> He repeated this defense in a September 24, 1949 article in the Chicago *Defender*, in which he wrapped himself in the cloak of factual reporting and said he never advocated that people bleach their skins. He invoked Schuyler’s *Black No More*, stating that like this “widely praised and enjoyed” novel, his article “ridiculed the idiotic theory of judging a man on the basis of his color.” Misinterpretation, White argued, came as a result of the article being abridged, and he took this opportunity to emphasize that the most beneficial transformations to human skin might involve darkening it. He then referenced and offered quotes from the “avalanche” of letters from readers from across the globe that asked where hydroquinone could be purchased. Although their motivations for wanting the substance were varied, White used these inquiries to suggest that opinions of the “people” might well have been different from those of their leaders. In a parting shot, he admonished his critics for acting irrationally by buying into the myth of race:

Those who are the victims of distorted thinking about race ought to be the very last to succumb to the deliberately created falsehoods of the racists. . . . Above all else, they need ability to recognize the situation when a writer points out how scientifically unsound, dangerous, and idiotic are most of the contemporary notions about ‘race.’ To do otherwise is to demonstrate that the victims of racism have swallowed the lies and myths which their oppressors have created to make the world believe that they are inferior.<sup>48</sup>

Although the logic of White’s multi-pronged defense was contradictory at best,<sup>49</sup> he had a point about the letters, which were sent to *Look*, to the NAACP, and to him directly. Ranging from the curious to the insightful to the truly bizarre, these letters were written by African Americans and white Americans, as well as by people from South Africa, Japan, Latin America, the Caribbean, and Europe. And within them, we find a critical dialogue on the causes and impact of racism, an assessment of the ontological basis of race, and a response to the demand that people give up their investment in race.

Some correspondents were interested in White’s article for aesthetic or health reasons. A number had little interest in hydroquinone but were instead curious to know where they could purchase the “permanent” hair straightener. One Phoenix beautician, who had himself been developing a hair product, proposed going into business with White to bring his own product to African Americans preparing to pass.<sup>50</sup> Several readers were interested in obtaining hydroquinone as a cure for their own skin ailments. One came from a man who was suffering from white blemishes that did not tan, which he blamed on his addiction to “tea” (marijuana); he had recently been on a “tea spree,” he told White.<sup>51</sup> The most bizarre response may have come from a German émigré “leather chemist” in

the Dominican Republic who had observed how tannery workers in the Haitian city of Port-au-Prince had suffered a depigmentation of the skin similar to that of the Texas plant workers. He had kept the industrial accident a secret for a decade, but now proposed that he and White start a business together to distribute his own bleaching product in the United States and Canada.<sup>52</sup>

But some black readers who contemplated White's "scientific" rejection of race and chemical solution to the race problem responded in ways that show how his article caused them to ponder competing visions of racial pride and universalism and to question the bases of their identities. They thus give us additional insight into the everyday moral scene regarding race in black America at mid-century. A Colorado man used the occasion of the article to praise White's personal and political commitment to blackness. He lauded White's record of achievement "in dealing with this hellish 'race' situation in the United States" and congratulated him for not passing and for not marrying a white woman earlier. This reader also went on to chastise his people for upholding a racially determined definition of human worth. As to race, "there's one and only one, THE HUMAN RACE." Unfortunately, he continued, "Our so-called Negro is naturally polyglot, and these United States of ours have made him a poly-racist. He talks about the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man . . . glibly about racial unity, but deep down thinks 'many races' and longs for 'black supremacy.'"53

Perhaps the most interesting response came from a New York woman in a letter to the *Amsterdam News*. She found herself challenged by White's article in ways that were unexpected to her. She made it clear that she was "not ashamed of being colored"; in her brown skin she "often [felt] superior when sitting near some white person whose complexion (to me) is not half as attractive." She also expressed her love for Negro men and said: "I never had or will have any doubts that they are less than equal to any other men." Yet she still believed that she and other black people faced a daunting threat to their psyches because of a legacy of racism. "On certain days of mental depression it seizes one like stark pain, . . . and the pain nearly chokes you to death." And while she appreciated what black leaders had accomplished in recent years, she thought it would be "generations . . . before the colored man will be free." Therefore, perhaps hydroquinone was the answer, even "if it meant sacrificing our complexions" and admitting that a long struggle for rights and social equality was for naught. As she concluded:

I truthfully don't give a darn about being white skinned. I only want to be free. If I am treated one way or another I'll know it is sincerely my own short comings, not due to prejudice because I am dark. A lot of people won't commit themselves this way and I don't blame them because it's a shame that a human race could be so degraded as to force some of its members to want to go against nature's intentions. All of us

are aware, however, if this chemical can work, it could end the Negro problem.<sup>54</sup>

White’s article opened a space for this woman to demonstrate her investment in race as a political identity, communal feeling, embodied aesthetic, and determinant of virtue. In some ways race had worked well for her as a human being in the 1940s, and in some ways it had not. The pleasures of identity and her sense of virtue forged in a political context were counterbalanced by racism’s continuing impact on her psyche. She had no desire for whiteness, but she did long for full status as a human being, whether that was achieved through securing full cultural and political citizenship for black people or by the less appealing choice of going “against nature” and eliminating black identities.

In the end, White’s article and its controversies provide a rich opportunity for making still valuable inquiries into the complexities of black racial formations at a crucial historical moment. The racial ambivalence of the writer of the *Amsterdam News* letter, like White’s ambivalence, demonstrates how scientific challenges to race at mid-century played a role in the complicated, and often contradictory, processes by which black identities were constructed, theorized, and lived, by posing a series of dilemmas revolving around race, science, and rights. More specifically, White’s folly and responses to it illustrate how these identities were often created in light of a series of morally-charged choices revolving around the existence or non-existence of race.

Scholars today frequently examine the middle of the twentieth century as a moment that witnessed what Howard Winant calls “a worldwide *crisis of racial formation*” with an eye towards what it can tell us about the present.<sup>55</sup> This moment has been viewed as the source of a critical cosmopolitanism or healthy anti-racism that avoids the essentialist shortcomings of black racial formations of the civil rights and, particularly, post-civil rights eras, or, from a somewhat different perspective, it is seen as undermining a global hegemonic racial project that masks itself in the common-sense belief that race is no longer relevant.<sup>56</sup>

Rather than understanding the early post-World War II moment simply as a time of racial certainty, the White episode suggests a complicated terrain upon which black people were thinking about and living race. These years witnessed an important stage in an ongoing dialectic of racial avowal and disavowal. This had long been a fundamental component of black political cultures historically forged in the context of global racial oppressions based on racial particularity and racelessness alike. But the weight of the growing scientific research debunking race, a broader climate of technoscientific certainty, and the racial aspects of World War II, the Cold War, the Holocaust, Hiroshima, and anticolonial and antiracist struggles worldwide conditioned the dialectic at this moment and gave it a particular resonance.

Clearly, African Americans’ relationships with science—as rational objective discourse, and as applied technology—were vexed at mid-century, as they

had been before and would be later. After all, knowledge production in the modern era has been undergirded by what David Theo Goldberg terms “racial knowledge,” a legacy that both drew authority from “established scientific fields of the day, especially anthropology, natural history and biology” and “has been historically integral to the emergence of these authoritative scientific fields.” Scientific (i.e., racial) knowledge has helped create the restrictive definitions of “the human” (or “infrahumanity,” in Paul Gilroy’s words) and exclusionary systems of morality that have supported modernity’s history of racial and racist exclusion and its concomitant regimes of slavery, colonialism, and apartheid.<sup>57</sup> Indeed, suspicions of various (mis)applications of science on black bodies has figured prominently in African American folklore going back to the nineteenth century, as Patricia Turner, Spencie Love, and others have documented.<sup>58</sup>

Such ambivalence about science continued to resonate in African American letters and popular discourse at mid-century. A suspicion of medical experimentation runs through Ralph Ellison’s 1952 novel *Invisible Man*, for example. Black people were reminded of the oppressive applications of applied technologies and “rational,” “objective” science by the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. While some African Americans supported these acts and the quick end to the war they supposedly facilitated, they confirmed to many the racism and barbarism of the supposedly more “civilized” U.S. nation.<sup>59</sup> Also contributing to the black community’s suspicions about science during this period were the controversies engendered first by the armed forces’ decision to exclude African Americans as blood donors during World War II and their subsequent decision, after black protests, to segregate the blood supply.<sup>60</sup>

Yet, as present-day Afrofuturist critics remind us, science and technology have also provided a vehicle for challenging the illogical, irrational, and mythical aspects of race and racism. They have presented the raw materials for staking out new and sometimes oppositional definitions of the human, conceptualizing redemptive constructions of racialized bodies, and formulating alternative systems of knowledge. And, at times, as at mid-century, they have presented a challenge to black subjects to think hard about the bases of their identities and their place in the social order.<sup>61</sup>

Ultimately, as a result of the popularization of scientific research challenging the biological foundations of race, the World War II and immediate postwar period witnessed many black people rethinking what it meant to be black and, at the same time, pondering what it meant to be human in both race-oriented and species-oriented ways. They pondered the relevance of race in the face of timely moral imperatives to abandon the concept in favor of the potential freedoms that scientific “proof” of the insubstantiality of racial categories might offer. Scientific awareness of the fictiveness of race presented new possibilities for reconstituting the human and political subject. Yet to go down this path also meant potentially calling into question political and social formations situated in racial experience and potentially letting go of a powerful analytic for under-

standing the way the world operated. And some began to recognize, however incomplete their analysis, that this moral impetus to let go of race was coming to light at a political moment, as Goldberg reminds us, when “racial historicism [a racial rule based on assumptions of historical development] could claim victory in the name of racelessness, sewing the assumptions of (now historicized) racial advancement silently into the seams of post-war and postcolonial reconstruction.”<sup>62</sup> It is crucial to keep these dilemmas in mind and add them to analyses of the motivations for the deployment of race and colorblindness in intellectual production, political activism, and the ways black people engaged the world on an everyday level. We can then think not so much in teleological terms about how race has become irrelevant or inevitable, but to contemplate the various possibilities and pitfalls accompanying acts of racial identification, whether we seek to determine which choices around race continue to hold value in the present or are interested in how racialized subjects lived and thought about their lives at mid-century.

### Notes

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1. Walter White, “Has Science Conquered the Color Line?,” *Look*, August 30, 1949, 94-95. Reprinted in *Negro Digest* (December 1949), 37-40.
2. Louis Schwartz, Edward A. Oliver, Leon H. Warren, “Occupational Leukoderma,” *US Public Health Report* 55: 25 (June 21, 1940).
3. For a survey of the development of hydroquinone as a treatment for vitiligo see David B. Mosher, John A. Parrish and Thomas B. Fitzpatrick, “Monobenzylether of Hydroquinone: A Retrospective Study of Treatment of 18 Vitiligo Patients and a Review of the Literature,” *British Journal of Dermatology* 97: 669 (1977), 669-679. Hydroquinone is often found in levels of 1.5% to 2% in cosmetic and over-the-counter medicinal products sold in the United States and Europe. However, it is found in levels up to 4% in other countries. See *International Programme on Chemical Safety, Guide No. 1001: Hydroquinone*, available at <http://www.inchem.org/documents/hsg/hsg/hsg101.htm>.
4. Walter White, to John Johnson, *Ebony* magazine, December 5, 1949, Box 2, Folder 107 (Johnson Publishers), Walter Francis White and Poppy Cannon White Correspondence, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library (Hereafter referred to as White Correspondence).
5. George Schuyler, *Black No More: Being an Account of the Strange and Wonderful Workings of Science in the Land of the Free, A.D. 1933-1940* (New York: The Macaulay Company, 1931).
6. Schuyler, in *Black No More*, based the character Walter Williams on White and described him as “a tall, heavy-set white man with pale blue eyes,” whose commitment to racial uplift was based on the fact that his “great-grandfather, it seemed, had been a mulatto.” Schuyler, *Black No More*, 94. When White lobbied the film industry earlier in the 1940s in an effort to do away with offensive representations of black Americans, actress Hattie McDaniel, fearful of the effect on established black actors playing stereotypical roles, suggested that White lacked the authority to represent African Americans because of his diluted blood quantum. Kenneth Robert

Janken, *White: The Biography of Walter White, Mr. NAACP* (New York: The New Press, 2003), 271.

7. Janken, *White*, 325-355.

8. *Ibid.*, 94, 325-347; Madeline White to Walter White, May 10, 1949, Box 5, folder 225 (Madeline White—Walter's sister), White Correspondence; Alice White to Walter White, June 7, 1949, Box 2, Folder 72 (Alice Glen White), White Correspondence; Henry Lee Moon, publicity release, May 10, 1949, NAACP papers, volume 17, reel 23, frame 896; Alfred Baker Lewis to Carl Murphy, Baltimore *Afro-American*, August 30, 1949, NAACP papers, volume 17, reel 23, frame 922.

9. Janken, *White*, 341-348; Walter White to Gardner Cowles, Cowles Publishing, November 9, 1949 and Walter White to Gardner Cowles, Cowles Publishing, November 28, 1949, Box 4, Folder 125 (*Look Magazine*), White Correspondence. For other brief treatments of this article see Sander L. Gilman, *Making the Body Beautiful: A Cultural History of Aesthetic Surgery* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999); Susan Gubar, *Racechanges: White Skin, Black Face in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

10. Undated manuscript, White correspondence, Box 4, Folder 26 (*Look Magazine*, draft of article by W.W. . . . Responses to article, A-Z), 1-4.

11. *Ibid.*, 4-6.

12. *Ibid.*, 6-7. White cited a statistic that 35,000 “white” Negroes annually disappear into the white world.” Alluding to recent research White suggested that 20 percent of whites had some black ancestry.

13. *Ibid.*, 7-8.

14. *Ibid.*, 8.

15. *Ibid.*, 8-9.

16. Walter White, *A Man Called White: The Autobiography of Walter White* (New York: The Viking Press, 1948), 3, 363-365. White's quote of “brothers under the skin” speaks to Carey McWilliams' volume of the same title but in this case is taken from Fairfield Osborn's *Our Plundered Earth* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1948).

17. According to Paul Gilroy, Fanon, in *Black Skin, White Masks*, identified “a historically specific system for making bodies meaningful by endowing them with qualities of ‘color.’ It suggests a perceptual regime in which the racialized body is bounded and protected by its enclosing skin.” Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 46.

18. Elazar Barkan, *The Retreat of Scientific Racism: Changing Concepts of Race in Britain and the United States Between the World Wars* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Carl Degler, *In Search of Human Nature: The Decline and Revival of Darwinism in American Social Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Jonathan Scott Holloway, *Confronting the Veil: Abram Harris, Jr., E. Franklin Frazier, and Ralph Bunche, 1919-1941* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002); William H. Tucker, *The Science and Politics of Racial Research* (Champaign, IL: The University of Illinois Press, 1994).

19. Carey McWilliams, *Brothers Under the Skin*, Revised Edition (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1951), 13.

20. Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black Is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 214.

21. *Ibid.*, 50.

22. See, for example, W.E.B. Du Bois, “Races,” *Crisis*, August 1911, 157-158; W.E.B. Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn; An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept*. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1940). Both are discussed in Anthony Appiah, “The Uncompleted Argument: Du Bois and the Illusion of Race,” *Critical Inquiry*, 12: 1 (Autumn 1985), 21-37.

23. White, *A Man Called White*, 3.

24. *Ibid.*, 3-4, 11-12, 365. Kevin Gaines perceptively notes that White's autobiographical description of his racial identity formation during the Atlanta race riot speaks of his concern with this identity four decades later. See *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 48-51.

25. White, *A Man Called White*, 344.

26. Carl Murphy to Palmer Weber, August 31, 1949, NAACP papers, volume 17, reel 23, frame 925-26. See also SK Bryson to NAACP, October 15, 1949, NAACP papers, volume 17, reel 24, frame 120.

27. William Hastie to Carl Murphy, October 3, 1949, NAACP papers, volume 17, reel 24, frames 128-129; Alfred Baker Lewis to Carl Murphy, *Afro-American*, August 30, 1949, NAACP papers, volume 17, reel 23, frame 922; NAACP Press Release, October 13, 1949, NAACP papers, volume 17, reel 23, frame 994; Walter White to John Johnson, *Ebony*, November 9, 1949, Box 2, Folder 107 (Johnson Publishers), White Correspondence; Walter White to Jean Gilchrist, *Look* magazine, December 12, 1949, Box 4, Folder 125 (*Look Magazine*), White Correspondence.



28. S.W. Garlington, "Walter White 'Loses Face' With Wanna-Be-White Story," *New York Amsterdam News*, August 27, 1949, 2; "Leaders Ridicule White's Solution of Race Problem Through Bleach," *Baltimore Afro-American*, August 27, 1949, 12.

29. It is unclear whether Horne ever made this statement. See Janken, *White*, 342.

30. George Schuyler to Walter White, with attached draft of "Views and Reviews," May 9, 1950, NAACP papers, volume 17, reel 22, frame 58-61.

31. Gaines, *Uplifting the Race*, 120-127. See also Paul Gilroy, "It's a Family Affair," in Gina Dent, ed., *Black Popular Culture* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992), 303-316.

32. "Leaders Ridicule White's Solution of Race Problem Through Bleach," *Baltimore Afro-American*, August 27, 1949, 12.

33. *Ibid.*; Penny Von Eschen, *Race Against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937-1957* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 115-116; Brenda Gayle Plummer, *Rising Wind: Black Americans and U.S. Foreign Affairs, 1935-1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 126. It should be noted that in the immediate aftermath of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, White and other NAACP board members were initially critical of the United States' decision to use this weapon. White was particularly incensed by Churchill's desire to keep the bomb in "Anglo-Saxon" hands. Paul Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age* (New York: Pantheon, 1986), 198.

34. Carey McWilliams also criticized analyses that concluded that science proved that racial differences are largely irrelevant but that failed to take into account the way race was largely an invention used to control the labor force. In his words: "Racial myths can be deflated in a manner that creates the illusion that discrimination is simply based on an unfortunate misunderstanding about race; clear up this misunderstanding and all will be well. Unfortunately the evidence indicates that a real look at racial differences does not necessarily correct biased views." *Brothers Under the Skin*, 2nd Ed., 314.

35. "Leaders Ridicule White's Solution of Race Problem Through Bleach," *Baltimore Afro-American*, August 27, 1949, 12. One reporter defending White against his critics argued that much of the opposition to the article and the marriage was part of a broader campaign by members of the left, including Patterson, to discredit him in the black press. See CC DeJoice, Jr, draft of *Louisiana Weekly* article, dated September 10, 1949, Box 4, Folder 121 (General Correspondence, Li-Lz), White Correspondence.

36. Nikhil Pal Singh, "Culture/Wars: Recoding Empire in an Age of Democracy," *American Quarterly*, 50: 3 (September 1998), 474.

37. Singh, "Culture/Wars," 478-484, 502-503; Plummer, *Rising Wind*, 127-128, 146, 176-177; Gerald Horne, "Race from Power: U.S. Foreign Policy and the General Crisis of 'White Supremacy'" *Diplomatic History* 23: 3 (Summer 1999): 454. For an overview of the Cold War's impact on civil rights struggles and vice versa, see Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

38. Janken, *White*, 261-263; Kenneth R. Janken, "From Colonial Liberation to Cold War Liberalism: Walter White, the NAACP, and Foreign Affairs, 1941-1955," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 21: 6 (November 1998), 1074-1095; Carol Anderson, "From Hope to Disillusion: African Americans, the United Nations, and the Struggle for Human Rights, 1944-1947," *Diplomatic History* 20: 4 (Fall 1996), 531-563; Manning Marable, *Race, Reform and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction in Black America, 1945-1990*, Revised Second Edition (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1991), 22; Von Eschen, *Race Against Empire*, 109-110; Plummer, *A Rising Wind*, 140, 180-188, 200.

39. White to NAACP branch presidents, NAACP papers, July 11, 1949, NAACP papers, volume 17, reel 23, frame 919.

40. Walter White to George Cornish, *New York Herald Tribune*, December 12, 1949, Box 1, Folder 40 (Co-Cz, General Correspondence), White Correspondence; Methodist Information, Press Release, December 12, 1949, Box 4, folder 138 (Methodist Student Movement), White Correspondence.

41. Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1944), xliii.

42. Also participating in the drafting or revising of the first UNESCO statement were E. Franklin Frazier and Otto Klineberg, from whose work Myrdal had also drawn. Lee D. Baker, *From Savage to Negro: Anthropology and the Construction of Race, 1896-1954* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 182, 209; Degler, *In Search of Human Nature*, 204; UNESCO, *Race and Science* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), 493-495. UNESCO followed up the statement with a series of pamphlets published during the 1950s and 1960s through the series "The Race Question in Modern Science." The pamphlets and the full texts of the 1950 and 1951 UNESCO statements on race may be found in *Race and Science*.

43. Von Eschen, *Race Against Empire*, 155. See also Singh, "Culture/Wars," 487.

44. Singh, *Black is a Country*, 38-39, 142-146.

45. Baker, *From Savage to Negro*, 177-182, 194.

46. Singh, *Black Is a Country*, 135-136, 148-150.

47. Henry Lee Moon to Walter White, September 20, 1949, NAACP papers, vol. 17 reel 23, frame 931. NAACP publicist Moon gave White explicit instructions to respond to questions along these lines. In addition, in keeping with the NAACP's social vision, he told White to avoid giving any sense of apologizing for the marriage. As to the *Look* piece, White was also warned not to "belabor" the point about being misrepresented by the editing process. He had, after all, approved the final draft.

48. Walter White, "You Got Me Wrong," *Chicago Defender*, 24 September 1949, 1-2. As *Negro Digest* made plans to reprint the article in December, White unsuccessfully tried to persuade the magazine to run the entire article rather than the previously published version. Walter White to John Johnson, *Ebony*, November 9, 1949; Ben Burns, *Ebony*, to Walter White, November 14, 1949; Secretary of Walter White to Ben Burns, *Ebony*, December 5, 1949. All contained in Box 2, Folder 107 (Johnson Publishers), White Correspondence. White also wrote to *Look*, defending himself against what he termed "the fantastic and inaccurate interpretation of my article" and attempting, again unsuccessfully, to get the entirety of the article published in a future issue. Walter White to Editor, *Look Magazine*, September 27, 1949; Walter White to Editor, *Look Magazine*, October 11, 1949; Walter White to Harold Clemenko, *Look Magazine*, October 11, 1949; Walter White to Gardner Cowles, Cowles Publishing, November 9, 1949; Walter White to Gardner Cowles, Cowles Publishing, November 28, 1949; All contained in Box 4, Folder 125 (*Look Magazine*), White Correspondence. White appears to have been interested in maintaining some legitimacy in the eyes of *Look* publisher Gardner Cowles, in whose newspapers, as noted earlier, he was trying to get a regular column placed.

49. Janken points out the contradictions in White's defense. See Janken, *White*, 343-345.

50. Emmet Y. Clark, Los Angeles, CA, to Walter White, October 3, 1949; David J. Frazier, Long Beach, CA to Walter White, undated; H.A. Tuthill, managing director, Chemical Research Institute, Miami, Ohio, to Walter White, October 17, 1949; John K. Webber, Phoenix, AZ to Walter White, October 18, 1949. All contained in Box 4, Folder 126 (*Look Magazine*), White Correspondence. Wendell Suel, Dayton, Ohio, to Walter White, September 29, 1949, Box 5, folder 173 (Readers' letters, K-Z), White Correspondence.

51. Ruth Costello, Jamaica, Long Island, to Walter White, undated, Box 4, Folder 126 (*Look Magazine*), White Correspondence; Mrs. Theda Essex to Walter White, September 1, 1949; Box 5, Folder 172 (Reader's letters A-J), White Correspondence. Anonymous letter to Walter White, August 15, 1949, Box 5, folder 173 (Readers' letters, K-Z), White Correspondence.

52. Willy C. Günther, Dominican Republic, to Walter White, October 31, 1949, Box 4, Folder 126 (*Look Magazine*), White Correspondence.

53. James Atkins, Denver, CO, to Walter White, October 3, 1949, Box 1, Folder 7 (General correspondence, Amer.Fo—Az), White Correspondence.

54. Clarissa Anderson, "Woman Reader Satisfied with her Brown Skin, Talks of New Formula," *Amsterdam News*, September 24, 1949, 18.

55. Howard Winant, *The World is a Ghetto: Race and Democracy Since World War II* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 135.

56. See, for example, the following, which differ significantly in their prescriptions for the present: Gilroy, *Against Race*; David Hollinger, *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1995); Singh, "Culture/Wars"; Winant, *The World is a Ghetto*.

57. David Theo Goldberg, *Racist Culture: Philosophy and the Politics of Meaning* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1993), 149; Gilroy, *Against Race*, 44-45.

58. Patricia Turner, *I Heard It Through the Grapevine: Rumor in African-American Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Spencie Love, *One Blood: The Death and Resurrection of Charles R. Drew* (Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

59. Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light*, 198-199.

60. Love, *One Blood*, 16-17.

61. For an introduction to the critical work of Afrofuturists, see the special issue on Afrofuturism in *Social Text*, Vol. 20:2, (Summer, 2002).

62. David Theo Goldberg, *The Racial State* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, Inc., 2002), 210.