The Mercurial Nature and Abiding Power of Race:
A Transnational Family Story

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There are many ways to expose the mercurial nature of racial classification. Scholars of U.S. history might note, for example, that the category of “mulatto” first appeared in the federal census of 1850 and then disappeared in 1930, or they might discover that immigrants who had not thought of themselves as “black” at home in the Caribbean found themselves classified as such upon passage to the United States. Such episodes serve to unmask the instability of racial systems, yet simply marshaling evidence to prove taxonomies fickle tells only a partial story. In an effort to tell a fuller story about the workings of “race”—by which I mean principally the endeavors of racial categorization and stratification—I focus here on historical actors who crossed geographical boundaries and lived their lives within different racial systems. A vision that accounts for the experiences of sojourners and migrants illuminates the ways in which racial classification shifts across borders and thus deepens arguments about racial construction and malleability.¹

At the same time, however, the principal argument of this essay moves in a

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different direction. We tend to think of the fluid and the mutable as less powerful than the rigid and the immutable, thereby equating the exposure of unstable racial categories with an assault on the very construct of race itself. In a pioneering essay in which Barbara J. Fields took a historical analysis of the concept of race as her starting point, she contended that ideologies of race are continually created and verified in daily life. More recently, Ann Laura Stoler has challenged the assumption that an understanding of racial instability can serve to undermine racism, and Thomas C. Holt has called attention to scholars’ “general failure to probe beyond the mantra of social constructedness, to ask what that really might mean in shaping lived experience.” Hilary McD. Beckles affirms that “the analysis of ‘real experience’ and the theorising of ‘constructed representation’ constitute part of the same intellectual project.” Drawing together these theoretical strands, I argue that the scrutiny of day-to-day lives demonstrates not only the mutability of race but also, and with equal force, the abiding power of race in local settings. Neither malleability nor instability, then, necessarily diminishes the potency of race to circumscribe people’s daily lives.2

On one level, people who hold authority (courtroom judges, employers, even neighborhood gossips) impose classification on subordinates. They determine who can marry whom and how to label the children, whom to hire for which jobs and whom to deny work, with whom to socialize and whom to ostracize. But the assignment of individuals to lesser categories can be ambiguous or transitory, and part of the abiding power of racial classification lies precisely, I argue, within this mercurial quality. To put it more concretely, that power lies within the ability of legal, economic, and social authorities to assign and reassign racial categories to oppressive ends; as Nell Irvin Painter has written, the purpose of such categorization is “to rank people and keep them in place.” On another level, though, communities, families, and individuals seek to resist such authority by naming and defining themselves, an endeavor that entails the assignment of others to various racial categories. To name and define others is also to establish one’s own superior station, and so these efforts on the part of rulers and subjugated alike work to create, reshape, and reinforce ideologies of race: who is worthy or superior, who is depraved or inferior. Together, these endeavors work continually to determine, destabilize, and ultimately to sustain racial hierarchies. No matter how chimerical we prove “race” to be, that wisdom alone remains inadequate to diminish the might of racism, for the power of race lies within the very fact of malleability.3

The nature of the power that lies within the capricious exercise of racial categorization in everyday life can best be illustrated by exploring the experiences


of particular historical actors in particular geographical settings. The transnational family story to be told here centers on a journey across racial lines and national borders. Such travels, metaphorical and literal, expose both the volatility and the potency of racial classification. The geographical and temporal markers are New England and the British Caribbean in the nineteenth century, although the questions are transportable to other places and times. The protagonist is an Anglo-American working-class woman named Eunice Connolly. Born in 1831 to a struggling Massachusetts family, Eunice married a local carpenter at seventeen, just before her alcoholic father deserted her mother. Marriage offered no respite from labor, and, like other wage-earning women, Eunice would work in a mill, take in washing, clean other people’s houses, and sell hats she fashioned out of palm leaves. In the late 1850s, Eunice’s husband set out to try his luck in the booming Gulf port city of Mobile, Alabama. In 1860, Eunice joined him there, but the couple’s aspirations collided with the Civil War, and, with luck running low, Eunice’s husband joined the Confederate Army. Seven months pregnant, Eunice and her young son boarded a train for the arduous journey back to New England. Through four years of war, she eked out a living in New Hampshire, barely able to support herself and two children; she had little knowledge of her husband’s whereabouts, and wartime Confederate aid did not extend to Northern wives. Soon after Union victory, word arrived that Eunice’s husband had died fighting for the South.4

Years of poverty and despair abated only with her marriage to William Smiley Connolly, the story’s second protagonist. Smiley (as he was called) was born on Grand Cayman Island in 1833, just before the emancipation of slaves in the British West Indies. Of mixed African and European descent, his family settled with other freedpeople on the unclaimed acres of the island’s eastern end. Over the next decades, Connolly men accumulated land and became successful mariners. Smiley built and captained his own schooners, engaging in the turtle, coffee, and cattle trades. He married a Caymanian woman, but at some point that union dissolved. Documents remain silent as to where or how the widow Eunice met the sea captain Smiley, but the couple wed in 1869 just outside of Lowell, Massachusetts, and swiftly sailed for Grand Cayman. For eight years, Eunice made her home there, keeping house and caring for her children, attending church and sailing on the bay, all the while sending reassuring letters back to New England. In 1877, on a voyage to the Bay Islands of Honduras, Eunice, Smiley, and their children were struck by a hurricane and drowned off the Mosquito Coast of Nicaragua.5

The two Atlantic World sites that provide the principal settings for this story could hardly appear more dissimilar. If northern New England stood at the center of much of nineteenth-century history-in-the-making—transatlantic capitalist ex-

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4 The story can be traced in the 500 or so letters in the Lois Wright Richardson Davis Papers, Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University, Durham, N.C. (hereafter, LWRD); some punctuation has been added for readability. The full story will be told in a forthcoming book, to be published by W.W. Norton.

pansion and industrialization, the creation of a powerful nation in the American Civil War—the Cayman Islands occupied a space on the margins of history, peripheral to the British Empire. Measuring about twenty miles long and less than a hundred miles square, Grand Cayman is the largest of three islands (with Little Cayman and Cayman Brac) situated south of Cuba and northwest of Jamaica. The islands remained under the administrative rule of Jamaica in the nineteenth century, and Caymanian men sailed to Kingston to buy and sell goods, even to collect their mail. With soil too poor to nourish a staple crop, Cayman (like Bermuda, the Bahamas, and British Honduras, among others) never supported a plantation economy. At emancipation, the thousand or so slaves who had worked on farms and as domestics constituted a majority of the population. Turtle-fishing and wrecking (the liberation of goods from shipwrecked vessels) continued as the islands’ major industries, and all residents, including former slavemasters who chose to stay, worked the land without benefit of imported indentured labor. There are no records or traces of indigenous people.6

To nineteenth-century visitors, Cayman seemed remarkably secluded. One Scottish missionary, who arrived the same year as Eunice Connolly, described the “sequestered” islands as a “lonely” place of “extreme isolation.” Yet at the same time, Cayman provides a revealing example of the ways in which one small place could be connected to a more expansive geographical arena. Many of the men were mariners who traveled not only to Jamaica and Honduras but also to Cuba, the Florida Keys, New Orleans, Mobile, New York, and Boston. In 1872, this same missionary found his church services filled with women whose husbands, fathers, and sons were “at sea or in foreign countries.” Moreover, because the land was surrounded by coral reefs, frequent shipwrecks brought in both foreign goods and forever-stranded outsiders. From the seventeenth century onward, the islands witnessed an amalgam of cultures, with a flow of European pirates, settlers, and sailors, enslaved and free people of African descent, and its own seafaring population. A woman born in 1899 told how one of her grandfathers was a slave from Africa, while the other was a shipwrecked seaman from Ireland. According to one linguistic analysis, natives spoke a “mixture of an archaic form of English with fragments of Negro dialect, Spanish forms, and expressions common to the Southern United States, as well as a remarkable number of nautical words.” Caymanians, an elderly resident recently agreed, have been “traveling the world from the beginning.”7

6 On the marginal non-sugar colonies (which also included Anguilla, Barbuda, and the Turks and Caicos), see B. W. Higman, Slave Populations of the British Caribbean, 1807–1834 (Baltimore, 1984), 43–44, 64–70; and Michael Craton, Empire, Enslavement and Freedom in the Caribbean (Kingston, 1997), 150. In the 1830s, two-thirds of Cayman’s population were enslaved, almost a quarter were white, a tenth were free people of color, and most holdings of slaves were small; Higman, Slave Populations, 77, 102–03, 159, 584; Classified Statement, Cayman Islands, PRO: T 71/683, fol. 16; Return of Slaves, Grand Cayman, 1823–30, PRO: T 71/243, pp. 130–31A; Dispatch no. 131, October 20, 1858, PRO: CO 137/339, p. 216. On the economy, see George S. S. Hirst, Notes on the History of the Cayman Islands (1910; rpt. edn., Kingston, 1967), 264–76; Neville Williams, A History of the Cayman Islands (1970; rpt. edn., Grand Cayman, 1992), pp. 11–12, 20–21, 35–36, 42–45, 52–53, 56–57; Roger C. Smith, The Maritime Heritage of the Cayman Islands (Gainesville, Fla., 2000).

7 United Presbyterian Missionary Record, June 2, 1873, p. 530; May 1, 1872, p. 149; June 2, 1879, p. 537; June 1, 1872, p. 176; interview with Geneva Range no. 1 (b. 1899), by Heather McLaughlin, August 27, 1990, Memory Bank (hereafter, MB), Cayman Islands National Archive, George Town, Grand Cayman.
Lives that raise questions about the day-to-day workings of racial classification and stratification across national bounds, coupled with a small body of direct evidence, warrant a certain willingness to embrace speculation. The six surviving letters that Eunice wrote from the West Indies include evidence that other communications never arrived in New England, and none of the mail that Eunice received in the Caribbean outlasted the tropical climate. Six much shorter letters survive from Smiley Connolly, including two penned in North America. But both Eunice and Smiley, along with most of their correspondents, kept ideas about race largely to themselves, and other evidence has proven scarce as well. Like hundreds of thousands of working-class women in the nineteenth century, Eunice and her family seldom appear in the historical record beyond the most commonplace documents (a birth or marriage certificate, a census listing, a muster roll). In Cayman, members of the Connolly family can be found in vital records that begin only in the 1880s, as well as in the memories of islanders born in the early twentieth century who have participated in the Memory Bank project of the Cayman Islands National Archive.

In trying to discern the lived experiences of my protagonists, then, some of my analysis necessarily relies more on context and extrapolation than on the evidence of conventional historical documentation. In particular, my own conversations with Connolly and Conolly descendants (the name is spelled both ways) have yielded scattered fragments about Smiley (a few recall hearing that he and an American woman drowned in the terrible hurricane of 1877) but have proven more fruitful concerning Smiley’s father, brothers, and three sons from his first marriage. From childhood, these descendants, most of whom still reside in East End, where Eunice disembarked in 1869, listened to narratives of family, local, and island history, absorbing the ways in which parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents described themselves and others in terms of ancestry or color or local status. Thus do I at times rely openly on their language and reflections in efforts to speculate about the nineteenth-century lives of Eunice and Smiley Connolly, about the ways in which they were classified by others and endeavored to embody categories to their own satisfaction.

Ancestry, color and appearance, class status, gender, and behavior: all of these perceptions and assessments intertwined in the lives to be investigated here. Scholars of race most often contend that ancestry was the principal determinant of racial categorization in the nineteenth-century United States. In this view, the U.S. system was largely a binary one, built on the polar categories of “black” and “white,” with American Indians and Asian immigrants occupying a place outside of that central duality. A system that placed all people of mixed African and European ancestry into the category of “black” worked to deny separate classifications for people of mixed descent. This feature worked also, theoretically, to erase sex across the color line and to preclude any fluidity of racial identification, since intermediate categories were subsumed within a monolithic blackness. Whiteness in nineteenth-
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century North America, then, was not intended to be a description of color but rather an unfragmentable quality that marked a person off from African lineage. In 1860, a Connecticut court maintained that the phrase “persons of color” in its “common, ordinary and popular meaning” included “those who have descended in part” from African ancestors, and that African ancestry and whiteness were mutually exclusive. In turn, scholars have contrasted this binary structure with the non-binary system of the nineteenth-century British Caribbean that recognized categories in between “black” and “white.” With greater fluidity (though with no less prejudice against darkness), class and complexion openly counted in the pursuit of racial stratification in the West Indies, and individuals of known African ancestry could move closer to the category of “white” precisely because color and especially class status were deeply bound up with racial rankings.8 Yet by drawing the distinction between the United States and the Caribbean too sharply, we miss an opportunity to understand the ways in which the largely binary North American system offered a margin of latitude: not only for those who were able to reject an imposed subordinate ranking by means of “passing” but also for authorities (whether courtroom judges or neighborhood gossips) who aimed to enforce oppression by imposing rankings that did not depend on a person’s ancestry. The “one-drop rule” in North America was never legally firm in the nineteenth century, and although it often prevailed informally, the experiences of Eunice and Smiley Connolly in New England make clear that racial classification could be challenged by factors other than genealogy. As in the British Caribbean, class status and personal associations could affect the shadings of one’s racial classification and subsequent treatment in local, daily life.9

Eunice’s journey across racial boundaries was not simply a metaphorical crossing of the color line, rendering her a white woman married to a black man. Rather, the courtship and marriage to Smiley Connolly set in motion circumstances

8 Johnson v. Norwich, 29 Conn. 407 (1860), 408-09. On different racial systems, see the enduring


Eunice Stone lived in Manchester, New Hampshire, in the 1850s, a thriving mill city on the banks of the Merrimack River, where capital and cotton converged with looms and labor to build the nation’s industry in cloth. Exploited and protesting wage workers in antebellum New England likened themselves to southern slaves (“Slave-driverism at the South and Overseerism at the North is one and the same thing”); northern white families like Eunice’s, who found themselves slipping down the slope of industrial capitalism—landless and struggling to find what was inevitably low-wage employment—consequently emphasized their identity as free and white. Slavery was a useful theoretical invocation, but that institution was far distant from upper New England, and native-born Protestants measured themselves most immediately against a different degraded population: foreign-born Irish Catholics. Like other mill cities, Manchester hosted an influx of Irish immigrants during the 1850s (by 1860, one-quarter of the city’s 20,000 residents were Irish), and native-born Americans reacted with hostility, creating a pattern of nativist violence across northeastern cities. Over the past decade, scholars have asserted that certain historical actors of no African ancestry, most notably Irish immigrants, were nonetheless excluded from the category of “white” in the nineteenth-century United States. More recently, historians have questioned this formulation, calling for greater precision in the form of attention to “lived experience” to augment the evidence of image and representation. One scholar has suggested as well that attention to transnational contexts can better situate the workings of whiteness in U.S. history. Eunice’s experiences are instructive in both of these efforts.10


When Eunice registered to work at Manchester’s Amoskeag Mills just before
she joined her husband in Mobile, she became part of an ongoing shift within New
England’s workplaces. During the 1830s, nearly all mill workers had been young,
native-born, white women recruited from farm families, sojourning to river-bank
cities like Lowell and Manchester in order to earn extra money prior to marriage.
As waves of Irish families fleeing the potato famine disembarked in Boston
beginning in the 1840s, the ethnic composition of that work force began to change.
As industrial expansion kept pace, mill agents set out to enlist this new labor. Irish
families were poor and willing to work for lower wages. Irish women and girls
preferred the mills to the degradation of domestic service, just as the men and boys
were satisfied to refuse hard outdoor labor such as canal digging. These same years
also brought new opportunities for middling Yankee women, who began to take
teaching positions or move west with their fathers or husbands. Accordingly, poorer
native-born women like Eunice, who entered the mills in the 1850s and 1860s, were
motivated more by economic necessity than were the earliest “mill girls.” Eunice’s
decision to sign the employee register of the Amoskeag Manufacturing Company in
March 1860, and the consequent boarding out of her young son, reflected her dire
circumstances; she lived apart from her husband (he was down south) and had no
father to lend interim support, nowhere even to take up residence without imposing
on other straitened family members. The first generation of Yankee operatives,
those who worked prior to marriage, defined themselves against women like
Eunice, calling them “low class New England girls” and lumping them together with
Irish immigrants, blaming them all for decreasing wages.11

Across the urban northeast, tensions continued to mount between native-born
and newcomer. The first naturalization law in the United States, enacted in 1790,
extended citizenship to all “free white persons” in the new nation. Beginning with
the Irish influx of the 1840s, the unexamined inclusiveness of that phrasing began
to unsettle white Americans of British descent. While the concept of the “Anglo-
Saxon” gained popularity, Anglo-Americans also began to rank different national-
ities. “Celts,” for example, were white, but they might also be savages. As
pseudo-scientific racism found a popular audience, white Americans came to parse
other white people into various subcategories, only some of which they considered
fit for citizenship. In this scheme, Irish Catholics were eligible (unlike people of
African descent), but native-born Americans hardly welcomed such immigrants as
their equals. Beginning in the 1850s, Anglo-Americans pointed to the Celtic
physique as proof of innate inferiority and immutable difference. Irish people were

al., “Scholarly Controversy: Whiteness and the Historians’ Imagination,” International Labor and
Working-Class History 60 (Fall 2001): 3–92; Peter Kolchin, “Whiteness Studies: The New History of
Race in America,” Journal of American History 89 (June 2002): 154–73, including the call for
transnational visions.

11 Amoskeag Manufacturing Company Employee Register, March 21, 1860, p. 47, Manchester
(July 1849), 156 (“low class”). On Irish labor, see Thomas Dublin, Transforming Women’s Work: New
England Lives in the Industrial Revolution (Ithaca, N.Y., 1994), 77–118; and Women at Work: The
Transformation of Work and Community in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1826–1860 (New York, 1979),
132–64; Caroline F. Ware, The Early New England Cotton Manufacture: A Study in Industrial Beginnings
(Boston, 1931), 228–32; Peter Way, Common Labour: Workers and the Digging of North American
depicted as slothful and sensual, brutish and coarse, dark-skinned, diseased, four-legged, low-browed, and wild.\textsuperscript{12}

Such stereotypes overlapped with racist ideas about Africans and African Americans, with political cartoons apt to depict Irish people as more simian than human. One prominent antebellum New Yorker described Irish men as bearing “prehensile paws” and likened a group of mourning Irish women to “wailing as a score of daylight Banshees.” A Congregational minister in Boston referred to Irish and Negroes (along with Indians and Mexicans) as “savage, barbarous, half-civilized” populations, and another observer described “the black tint of skin” in “Celtic physiognomy.” According to one Manchester newspaper in 1858, the Irish were “the offals of Europe, as little qualified to go to the ballot box as the veriest Hottentot.” In 1850, the census taker for Manchester listed one Elias Haskell living in the almshouse; his place of birth was recorded as Ireland, his color as black. A faint parenthetical jotting in another hand reads, “Error no doubt,” but on the bottom of the page, the clerk who totaled the numbers added the comment, “Irish ‘nigger!’” Certainly the marshal may have recorded the wrong birthplace or color, or maybe Haskell had been born in Ireland of African descent. On the other hand, the enumerator may have considered this poverty-stricken Irishman no better than a black person. If so, then class status, nationality, and religion acted as the determinants of race, with little attention to proof or disproof of African descent.\textsuperscript{13}

Eunice’s family, too, defined themselves against New England’s latest immigrants. “I think Manchester has altered a good deal,” a sister reported of the city’s landscape in a letter to Eunice and their mother. “It seems to me the morals of the place are much corrupted,” she worried, explaining that “the St[reet]’s in the center of the City seem filthy and mostly inhabited by Irish.” In the face of such disturbing changes, she continued, “the American families all seem to have moved to the outskirts of the city.” There were probably “just as many good people here as ever, but the low Irish have increased fast and remain in the old tenements while our people have erected new buildings and taken themselves out from amongst them, leaving rather a rough set.” The sister’s insistence on her own American nationality (“our people”) likely stemmed from the fact that her family too closely resembled the stereotypes of Irish families. For one thing, their father drank and deserted his wife and children. For another, the women of these Irish families, so disdained by the sister, worked in the Amoskeag Mills, if not alongside Eunice in the weaving and dressing rooms, then nearby in the carding and spinning rooms. Living without a husband, working in the mills, boarding out her son, standing on the edge of poverty: in 1860, Eunice was inching steadily toward a social status difficult to


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distinguish from that of Irish immigrant women. The sister’s anxious reiteration of
the family’s “American” character was meant to separate them from the immorality, filth, poverty, overbreeding, and crudeness that she defined as “Irish.”

These kinds of deprecatory images are related to, though cannot be simply equated with, prejudice against people of African descent. Anglo-American racial thinking is illustrated by Thomas C. Holt’s reading of the British writer Thomas Carlyle, who believed black and Irish people alike to be savage and indolent, although the light skin of the Irish, he maintained, made it harder to segregate them. In Holt’s analysis of Carlyle on this point, the two outcast populations were not equal; rather, black people were the “emblem of degradation, of the level to which whites could sink.” Importing this astute formulation to mid-century New England casts light on Eunice’s experiences there. Certainly no one could claim Eunice to be an immigrant from Ireland, and yet she was descending steadily, just as the Irish in Carlyle’s estimate remained white but had declined to a level of civilization equivalent to that of black people.

Such classificatory blurrings were made manifest in lived experience. Eunice’s fall resulted from her status as a married woman with children but without a husband to provide an adequate home for the family. In northeastern cities, the positions of servant, washerwoman, and cook were reserved for Irish girls and women, or alternatively for free black daughters and wives. (As one white woman wrote from Maine, “My colored girl has gone and I am without a servant and doing my own work.”) In this way, the lives of Irish and black women intersected. In one of New York City’s poorest neighborhoods, eight black women and eight Irish women worked together as laundresses, and the girls and women of Manchester’s small black population who worked for wages likewise had little choice but to take jobs as domestic laborers. For their part, unskilled Yankee women like Eunice preferred the mills to domestic service, since the latter paid less for more demeaning labor. But since mills often required their workers to live on the premises, married women in need of money turned their homes into boarding-houses; Eunice had no such option, however, as she lacked a husband to buy land and build a home, or even to pay rent, and hence had no rooms to let. Next down the ladder were domestic jobs that provided room and board, but Eunice now had two children. “If I could go into the Mill this summer, I could get a long,” Eunice reasoned upon her return from the South. “But if my baby lives, I cannot do much in the Mill this summer, and I dont know as any one would want me to do house work with so young a child.” Live-in maids with children of their own would have to send their offspring away, and so working mothers often settled for live-out

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14 Hattie Harvey to Lois Davis and Eunice Stone [her first husband’s name], Manchester, N.H., August 5, 1865, LWRD; Dublin, Women at Work, 148.
15 Thomas C. Holt, The Problem of Freedom: Race, Labor, and Politics in Jamaica and Britain, 1832–1938 (Baltimore, 1992), 280–82, 319; of the 1849 assertion in Punch magazine that the Irish were “the missing link between the gorilla and the Negro,” Holt notes the “striking similarities between Irish and Afro-Jamaican caricatures” (319, 463 n.); and see 318–36. See also Carlyle to Emerson, August 13, 1849, in The Correspondence of Thomas Carlyle and Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1834–1872, 2 vols. (Boston, 1883), 2: 184; and Hilary McD. Beckles, “A ‘Riotous and Unruly Lot’: Irish Indentured Servants and Freemen in the English West Indies, 1644–1713,” in Caribbean Slavery in the Atlantic World, Verene A. Shepherd and Hilary McD. Beckles, eds. (Kingston, 2000), noting that African slaves and Irish servants, both perceived as dangerous and lazy, could be “interchangeable” in the view of planters (p. 230).
domestic labor, positions largely filled by Irish and black women. It was an especially bleak scenario, since day wages were no better, but they did not include shelter and meals, and it was this scenario that came to describe Eunice’s circumstances as a husbandless mother of two children during the Civil War. Of course, the cotton mills stood idle for parts of the war, and Claremont, New Hampshire, where Eunice settled to be near her in-laws upon her return from Mobile, was home to few immigrants or African Americans. Still, even more than in Manchester in 1860, Eunice now slipped to near the lowest possible status a white woman could know: unskilled and without family support, caring for her children in between housecleaning and laundering for hire, vigilantly but barely keeping destitution at arm’s length. All in all, it was a lowly, lonely, and onerous existence. Only prostitution or the poorhouse would have felt more degraded.  

Eunice’s circumstances did not make her either Irish or black in the eyes of other white people; her economic and social degradation did, however, make it harder for her to define herself against either of those categories, and permitted other white people to define themselves against people like her. To families whose husbands provided for their wives and children, to Yankee women who deserted the factories when the immigrants arrived, to mistresses who were able to assign the drudgery of domestic labor to those unlike themselves, Eunice’s poverty and plebeian occupations crowded her into circumstances closely resembling those of Irish immigrant and black women. As one New Hampshire newspaper put it, “Our native-born citizens hate to work by the side of an Irishman,” for that aroused “the same feeling which makes it impossible for a respectable white man to labor by the side of slaves in the South.” The same could be said about native-born white women, for working the same jobs as Irish and black women made it yet harder to claim the privileges of white womanhood.  


THAT IS WHERE EUNICE STOOD just before she began to be courted by the African Caribbean sea captain. To understand the ways in which the malleability and attendant power of racial classification would transform Eunice’s life, it is imperative to account for the experiences of Smiley Connolly and to consider Eunice’s perceptions of her new husband. At home on Grand Cayman Island, Smiley took his place in a three-part hierarchy. The categories in Jamaica’s nineteenth-century population tables were “white,” “brown,” and “black,” and the 1855 Cayman census similarly divided the island’s population into “white,” “coloured,” and “black.” Travelers, too, noticed these distinctions. Just as the British novelist Anthony Trollope, sojourning in the late 1850s, divided the residents of Jamaica into “black,” “colored,” and “white,” so a shipwrecked Scottish missionary on Grand Cayman in the mid-nineteenth century described the inhabitants there as “white, black, and brown.” But this three-part configuration often proved insufficient, and British Caribbean residents and visitors alike employed a wider spectrum of appellations in efforts to make sense of more informal categories in between. An observer in Jamaica during the 1840s named “sambos, mulattoes, quadroons, mestees, and mestiphines.” According to a white Englishwoman in Antigua, also in the 1840s, “there are as many gradations in tint as there are in rank.” Her inventory included “mongrel,” “mulatto,” “mustee,” “fustee,” and “dustee.” Caymanians, too, contributed to this multi-hued taxonomy; a slave-sale record in 1829 described “a Sambo Girl,” one Conolly descendant born in 1903 described her mother as “mustee,” and two Conolly siblings invoked the term “quadroon” to describe their grandmother. According to an anthropologist who studied folk racial categories in Cayman in the mid-twentieth century, Europeans tended to divide the population into a dual system of “black” and “white,” whereas those of African descent laid out a system bracketed by “black” and “white” but containing various grades in between, including “mulatto,” “quadroon,” “musty,” “sambo,” “half sambo,” and “musty-feno.” Blue or grey eyes and brown hair moved one toward whiteness, whereas darker eyes and hair, or curls, shaded a person toward blackness.

Class and race in the nineteenth-century West Indies were, as one scholar has phrased it, “impossibly entangled,” and this description applied to the Cayman Islands as well. Yet Cayman’s social structure differed from that of plantation colonies. Relations among Caymanian classes and colors were less violent during slavery, and so the transition to freedom also proved less explosive. It is equally true that few if any Caymanians had attained the kind of wealth known to plantation societies. One missionary described the islands’ white people as “a plain, hardwood-

ing class of men” dependent on “manual labor for their daily bread”; another observed, “Since abolition, white people have either to do the work in plantation themselves” (meaning farm labor), “or hire others to do it for them, and black men are sailors as well as white.” At the same time, however, Cayman’s closest economic and political ties remained with Jamaica, and Smiley Connolly and his mariner brothers derived their status in part from their dealings in that major sugar colony. There, as elsewhere in the British Caribbean, the colored (or brown or mulatto) classes occupied an ambiguous middle position. In general, wealth and color were correlated, with whites benefiting the most from connections to an Atlantic market economy and blacks surviving as exploited laborers. White people treated colored people better than they treated black people, since it was in their interest as a numerical minority to keep colored people on their side. But whereas a well-to-do, educated, and mostly light-skinned faction among the colored classes allied itself with whites and was permitted entry into white society, for the most part whites did not consider colored people their equals. Tensions between the colored and black classes continued through emancipation, and caste lines persisted despite legal equality.19

In nineteenth-century Jamaica, where Smiley and his brothers sailed their vessels, respectable middling occupations for colored men included shopkeeping, teaching, and the ministry, and Connolly men could be found in each of these sectors. A half-brother was a mariner and a preaching church elder; three brothers were mariners; sons became mariners and shopkeepers, and one became a teacher and an island officer. At the same time, Smiley stood above the middling artisanal trades such as carpentry (he hired carpenters to build his house for him), and, as a mariner, he (and other Connolly men) belonged to the small class of Caymanians who owned land and prospered through participation in the Atlantic economy, thus drawing closer to the colored elite. In Cayman, then, Smiley Connolly was a man of color whose economic standing and partial European ancestry shaded him toward whiteness.20


20 Patrick Bryan, “The Black Middle Class in Nineteenth-Century Jamaica,” in Caribbean Freedom:
In the United States, by contrast, African ancestry carried enough weight in the exercise of racial designation that North Americans who knew of Smiley’s lineage could have called him “black.” Certainly there is evidence that Eunice and her northern compatriots ascribed to a one-drop rule that would have placed Smiley in that personally unfamiliar category. When William G. Allen, a man who described himself as of “one-fourth African blood,” was violently assaulted by white people upon his engagement to a white woman in New York in the 1850s, he observed, “Whatever a man may be, though, in personal appearance, he should be as fair as the fairest Anglo-Saxon, yet, if he have but one drop of the blood of the African flowing in his veins,” no white woman was permitted to marry him. The African-American novelist Frank J. Webb likewise captured this axiom in his 1857 work, The Garies and Their Friends, which portrayed the virulent enforcement of a one-drop rule in antebellum Philadelphia. As one northern character informed the son of a slaveowner and a slave: “if you should settle down here, you’ll have to be either one thing or other—white or coloured.” Should the man choose to live as a white person in the North, he was advised that “it must never be known that you have a drop of African blood in your veins . . . no matter how fair in complexion or how white you may be.”

Yet at the same time, the term “mulatto” was familiar to nineteenth-century North Americans, and Smiley could have fit into that category as well, thereby destabilizing the black-white binary. Historians plotting the racial systems of the United States have situated the lower South, and especially cities such as New Orleans, Charleston, and Mobile, as closest to a tri-racial West Indian system.

Such tidy regional divisions, however, obscure apertures in the dominant binary system, beyond the well-trodden path of passing from black to white. In the face of antebellum legal rulings in the U.S. North that asserted a one-drop formulation...
comes contrary evidence that fractions of African ancestry could be overlooked, or even erased. In 1810, the Massachusetts Supreme Court defined “mulatto” as strictly one-half black and one-half white, ruling that the child of one mulatto parent and one white parent could not be classified as such. Although the judges offered no alternative (say, “white” or “quadroon”), the verdict nonetheless defied a one-drop system. “Who can tell the proportions and trace the mixtures of blood?” wondered a Connecticut lawyer in 1834. “Shall one half, one quarter, one twentieth, or at the least possible taint of negro blood, be sufficient to take from its possessor the citizen character?” As Massachusetts debated legalizing marriage between blacks and whites in the 1830s and 40s, one lawmaker queried, “How far, through how many generations, must African or Indian blood be diluted, before it can attain to respectability?” adding, “The truth is, it is extremely arbitrary.”

A series of court cases in antebellum Ohio affirmed that “all nearer white than black, or of the grade between the mulattoes and the whites” were entitled to the privileges of citizenship. In one suit, the court declared that ancestry (“blood”), rather than color, should be the determining factor in racial designation, yet simultaneously ruled that remote African ancestry could not dilute whiteness. Indeed, according to the justices in an 1852 inheritance case in Maine, the same laws that counted “any proportion of African blood” as nullifying whiteness, could still (however contradictorily) count people with one-eighth or less African ancestry as white—thus paralleling Jamaican law, which granted the privileges of whiteness to anyone removed a certain number of generations from African descent. The U.S. federal census of 1850 had been the first to enumerate “mulattoes,” and census takers in 1870 were instructed to record as “mulatto” (as opposed to “black”) all those possessing “any perceptible trace of African blood.” The word “perceptible” made clear that the marshals were to rely on appearance rather than ancestry. If “African blood” was visible, it counted; otherwise, it disappeared. A system predicated on the duality of black and white, then, did not preclude an intermediate category. Nor was it possible for such a system to be based solely on genealogy. Rather, a black-white binary based on a one-drop definition of blackness coexisted with a middle category defined as much by visibility as by ancestry.

23 Medway v. Natick, 7 Mass. 88 (1810); Crandall v. Connecticut, 10 Conn. 339 (1834), 349; Liberator, March 10, 1843.

24 Parker Jeffries v. John Ankeny, 11 Ohio 372 (1842), 375; Williams v. School District, Ohio Unreported Cases 1, 578 (1831); see also Polly Gray v. Ohio, 4 Ohio 353 (1829), 353–54; Edwill Thacker v. John Hawk, 11 Ohio 376 (1842); Bailey v. Fiske, 34 Maine 77 (1852); Carroll D. Wright, History and Growth of the United States Census (Washington, D.C., 1900), 147, 157. The Massachusetts state census of 1865 required a choice among white, black, mulatto, and Indian, with a presumably similar definition of “mulatto”; Oliver Warner, Abstract of the Census of Massachusetts, 1865 (Boston, 1867), 235.

Sources disagree about the exact degree that conferred white privilege; see Long, History of Jamaica, 2: 261, 231, 321, 332; Bryan Edwards, The History, Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies, 2 vols. (London, 1794), 2: 17; Matthew Gregory Lewis, Journal of a West India Proprietor, Kept during a Residence in the Island of Jamaica (London, 1834), 106; R. R. Madden, A Twelvemonth’s Residence in the West Indies, during the Transition from Slavery to Apprenticeship, 2 vols. (Philadelphia, 1835), 1: 89; Matthew Gregory Lewis, Journal of a Residence among the Negroes in the West Indies (London, 1845), 55; Phillippo, Jamaica, 144. Southern state laws through the early twentieth century also varied as to the number of “generations removed” necessary to confer white privilege; see Charles S. Mangum, Jr., The Legal Status of the Negro (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1940), 4–17. This could render individuals legally white but socially black; see Berlin, Slaves without Masters, 97–99, 365–66; Williamson, New People, 13–14, 65, 97–98.
Not just in law but in daily life, too, North Americans created discourses about complexion, recognizing a range of skin colors beyond black and white. For one thing, North Americans who stepped ashore on Caribbean islands in the nineteenth century were adept at rejecting a two-category system that consisted of white people and undifferentiated people of African descent. Within their own communities, African Americans often spoke in terms beyond a black-white binary, and the antislavery activist and missionary Henry Highland Garnet likewise noted the “various hues of complexion” in his Jamaica congregation in the 1850s. But white people, too, could employ a wider vocabulary. A white New England woman traveling in the West Indies during the 1860s wrote of the “mixing of black, white and yellow,” describing one servant as “mahogany.” A white Philadelphian on St. Thomas in the 1860s wrote of “a great concourse of people” extending “from white to ebony,” and a white northerner who sailed to the Spanish and British West Indies in the 1870s described women who were “blackest ebony, orange tawney, or café-au-lait.”

The spectrum of complexions was no narrower in North America, and it is possible as well to find similar enumerations of color at home. Abolitionists in New York offered examples of enslaved people who were shockingly white in appearance, describing “ruddy” or (echoing a common West Indian term) “clear” complexions. A lecturer before the Boston Society of Natural History in 1860 told of “a colored pic-nic party . . . of all hues, from the darkest black to a color approaching white.” When the District of Columbia abolished slavery in 1862, masters filled out forms that required an identifying description of each former bondperson, and the notations there ranged from dark black, dark brown, and chestnut, to copper-colored and bright yellow, to pale yellow and “nearly white.” When African-American men from Massachusetts volunteered to fight in the Civil War, the enlistment rolls included a column for “complexion” that carried notations of black, mulatto, colored, and dark, with occasional invocations of ebony, brown, medium, coffee, yellow, and light. Moreover, it was not only African-American soldiers whose color was evaluated and recorded, but the same officers filled in the column marked “complexion” for every man. The two most common terms for white recruits were “dark” and “light,” invoked about equally, but other white men were sandy, florid, ruddy, muddy, medium, sallow, pale, swarthy, fair, and fresh. The term “dark” (and, less often, “light”) notably was employed for black and white soldiers alike, and there were instances in which a volunteer for the black Fifty-fourth Massachusetts was described as “dark,” followed immediately by a volunteer for a white regiment, also described as “dark.”

25 Henry Highland Garnet quoted in John McKerrow, History of the Foreign Missions of the Secession and United Presbyterian Church (Edinburgh, 1867), 341; Mary Gardiner Davis Journal, 1861-1863, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, pp. 28, 228; George Truman, Journal of Rachel Wilson Moore, Kept during a Tour to the West Indies and South America, in 1863–64 (Philadelphia, 1867), 214; W. P. Talboys, West India Pickles: Diary of a Cruise through the West Indies in the Yacht Josephine (New York, 1876), 45.

26 “White Slavery in the United States,” Anti-Slavery Tracts, no. 2 (New York, 1855), 6, 7; J. L. Baker, Slavery (Philadelphia, 1860), 9; Emancipation Papers Resulting from the Act of April 16, 1862, M433, Records of the United States District Court for the District of Columbia Relating to Slaves, Record Group 21, NA; Descriptive Lists of Recruits for Massachusetts Volunteers, 1863–64, Middlesex County and Suffolk County, 477X, MSA.
The attention to complexion in these kinds of inventories parallels the slave registration returns of the British Caribbean. Far from uniform, and rarely dependent on any precise knowledge of individual lineage, these returns recorded an array of colors, including black, brown, red, copper, yellow, light, and clear (sometimes modified by “dark,” “very,” “rather,” or simply “-ish”), accompanied by terms such as Negro, mulatto, quadroon, sambo, mustee, mestizo, and griffe. True, the U.S. federal census at mid-century narrowed all individuals to white, black, and mulatto, but so, too, did British Caribbean censuses in the nineteenth century. The Jamaican census of 1844 pressed residents into the categories of white, brown, and black, just as Cayman’s 1855 tables permitted only white, colored, and black. Scholars have most often contrasted the limited categories of the U.S. federal census with the continuum of colors found in Caribbean slave returns, but such a comparison is mismatched. A census offers a legal count, and both U.S. and British West Indian censuses during parts of the nineteenth century restricted individuals to three categories. Caribbean slave returns, with their more complicated scale of colors, are more properly compared to similar kinds of descriptive lists generated in the United States (of former slaves or Civil War soldiers, for example) that were intended, like the Caribbean slave returns, to identify particular individuals.27

By comparing descriptive lists from both regions, the finer gradations of U.S. color perceptions and discourses come to light. Indeed, when Eunice and her New England family exchanged information about their own coloring, they invoked vocabulary that mirrored the common West Indian descriptions of “fair” and “dark.” One sister described her own son as “fair and white”; the sister’s daughter, according to Eunice, had “eyes like two black coals,” “hair like the ravens wing,” and “skin neither too dark or too fair”; and Eunice’s daughter from her first marriage had “very white fair skin.” As for Eunice herself, a lone photograph (only as reliable as any image captured on film) portrays her as a dark-haired, perhaps olive-skinned woman. (See Figure 1.) Maybe Eunice made a point of describing her newborn daughter’s “very white fair skin” because she thought of herself, by contrast, as dark. Discussion of newborns’ coloring might have been innocent news, but it might also point to the anxieties of white women who toiled in the same realm as Irish factory operatives and Irish and black domestics.28

When Smiley Connolly arrived in New England in the 1860s, then, he might have been described as “black,” “mulatto,” or some variation thereof, but it is also likely that in certain venues he passed for white. The column asking for “color of groom and bride” on the couple’s Massachusetts marriage license remained blank, the same as for the vast majority of those on the roster, indicating that the clerk assumed both parties to be white, and that no corrections were offered. Perhaps the Irish last name helped, too. Whether Eunice believed the sea captain to be a white

27 Higman, Slave Populations, 154–56, and for an extensive list of slaves’ colors in St. Lucia and Berbice, see 527, 529. Holt, Problem of Freedom, 215; Missionary Record, November 1, 1855, p. 190 (censuses). As one scholar writes of Trinidad’s slave registration records, “the detailed colour scale does not seem to have been employed in everyday life, but chiefly when it was necessary to describe someone with particular accuracy”; Carl Campbell, “Trinidad’s Free Coloureds in Comparative Perspectives,” in Shepherd and Beckles, Caribbean Slavery, 601.

28 Ellen Merrill to Lois Davis, Manchester, N.H., January 30, 1857; Eunice Stone to Lois Davis, Mobile, Ala., March 3, 1861; Eunice Stone to Charles Henry Richardson and Lois Davis, Claremont, N.H., December 7, 1862, all in LWRD. The photograph is also in LWRD; see Figure 1.
FIGURE 1: This photograph is labeled “Eunice Stone? ca. 1863,” employing the surname of her first husband. No image exists of William Smiley Connolly. Courtesy of the Lois Wright Richardson Davis Papers, Duke University Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Durham, North Carolina.
man when she first encountered him remains unknown, but as she stated unequivocally when commenting on the happy marriage of a sister some years later, "I would not change Husbands with her, if hers has got a white skin. I know mine has not." And that is precisely the point. Smiley may have passed on his wedding day, thereby illuminating the ways in which mutable perceptions can diminish the power of racial classification to circumscribe a person's life. Yet within the confines of the neighborhood, it was well understood that Eunice had (to put it in U.S. terms) married across the color line. Recalling a local gossip who disapproved, Eunice wrote, "I can't quite get over some of her slurs," and to her mother Eunice explained that she could not have given up Smiley "even though public opinion was against him and against me on his account." Some members of Eunice's family shared in that opinion. Though ardent supporters of the Union during the Civil War, the family (like most white Northerners) did not oppose slavery on moral grounds, nor did they champion racial equality. Eunice's brother Henry, who had returned to New England a celebrated Union veteran, offered the harshest condemnation. As Eunice confessed to her mother just before she sailed for Grand Cayman, "I wanted to tell Brother Henry how much I had always loved him and how his treatment had pained me." It is not difficult to imagine Henry wondering angrily why he had fought to free the "darkies" (his word), only to find one marrying his sister.29

Other family members, though, were more accommodating. "I have the kindest regard for your husband," another sibling told Eunice, "hope he will think of me as a sister for as such I esteem him." That kind of affection might reflect nothing more than garden-variety racism, in which a friend is set apart from all other, unknown, people of color. As one immigrant to nineteenth-century Lowell from the Caribbean island of Nevis put it, "After all the obstacles had been overcome—the obstacles of race and color, paramount objectives in the eyes of prejudice—I became very popular amongst my neighbors." Eunice's family may also have kept their fondness for Smiley confined to a private sphere. The antislavery activist Charlotte Forten noted of her Salem, Massachusetts, schoolmates in the 1850s: "I have met girls in the schoolroom—they have been thoroughly kind and cordial to me—perhaps the next day met them in the street—they feared to recognize me." Or the family's accommodation might have stemmed in part from Smiley's complexion. The division between "black" and "mulatto" codified in the U.S. (and Massachusetts) censuses also operated informally, with lighter-skinned people of African descent suffering comparatively less racial discrimination. In Boston in the 1860s and 1870s, those of mixed descent were more likely to be literate, skilled, and better off than their darker neighbors. In Smiley's case, class status likely mattered, too. Because the majority of African Americans in northern cities were poor, Eunice's family may have perceived him, with his impressive schooners and trade goods, less as a man of color than as a well-to-do foreigner with a British accent. Indeed, foreigners did not always readily divide into established racial categories, thereby

working to destabilize the binary in another way. In the slave South, for example, a claim of Spanish or Portuguese nationality could erase counter-claims of blackness. For Smiley in New England, British nationality may have accomplished the same end.30

Mulatto, white, rich, British, foreign: just as in the Caribbean, malleable perceptions of Smiley Connolly’s status and complexion could move him away from blackness. But that mutability worked just as often to oppress as to liberate, and that, again, is the point. If one day white people welcomed Smiley as a British captain conducting important business in the port, another day they scorned him as a lowly black man scandalizing the neighborhood. Within the most local terrain, Smiley suffered the slurs of neighbors and the wrath of in-laws. That treatment in the neighborhood, and even in the very home of the woman he was to marry, made palpable to him, and in turn to Eunice, the often-unyielding power of racial classification, no matter how fluid or mutable those classifications might be. Surely there were days in post–Civil War Massachusetts when Captain Connolly was startled that a man such as he should be treated so poorly, for that treatment contrasted sharply with the ways in which he had always categorized and ranked himself. In order to maintain that ranking, Smiley and his new bride had little choice but to depart North America, and in fact they set sail just one week after the wedding.

When Smiley returned to the Cayman Islands with Eunice, he again embodied the more familiar status of a West Indian colored man. Most especially within East End, Grand Cayman’s darker and poorer side, the Connolly family enjoyed considerable standing. Educated and literate, they were “better” than others; they were “the important people,” descendants recall. According to a great-granddaughter of one of Smiley’s brothers, the Connollys “always had a big say over here,” and the couple’s nineteenth-century letters bear out such memories. Upon his return with Eunice, Smiley began to build “a large House in American style,” as he wrote to New England, much fancier than the common wattle-and-daub cottages, and with “an American Carpenter to do the work.” (Descendants still recall that “big house” with its “big veranda,” since destroyed in a hurricane.) As one East Ender recently explained, “it didn’t matter what colour you were” if you were a sea captain, since discrimination took the form “more like a little class prejudice than colour prejudice.” In Eunice’s new West Indian home, components of class—connections to the maritime economy, the hiring of others to perform manual labor—formed key elements in the assignment of racial categories. And by bringing home a white wife (whose lowly origins likely never needed to be known), Smiley edged still closer to whiteness himself.31


31 Author’s telephone conversation with James T. Conolly, Brooklyn, N.Y., November 11, 1996
An illuminating shard of evidence emerges from Eunice’s descriptions of her domestic life on Grand Cayman, where she was entitled to household help. “I have always had a woman do my washing and ironing and washing out my house,” she wrote to her mother. Eunice explained that her servant did “all that and my other work too,” describing her as “a good respectable trusty girl,” before adding, “I think much of her although she is a black girl.” Those words expose Eunice’s own racism, expressed freely to her New England relatives, but they also reveal Smiley’s place in a non-binary hierarchy of color that Eunice would have learned from her West Indian neighbors. If Eunice did not think of Smiley as white in New England, neither did she think of him as black in the West Indies. Although both her husband and her servant were of African descent, her servant was “black,” while her husband, the ship captain, belonged to the more elite category of “colored.” None of Smiley’s letters offers a hint of his own ideas, but certainly he agreed with his wife’s assessment of their servant as trustworthy despite her blackness. A white New Yorker in Jamaica in 1850 observed that, whereas relations between “the whites and the colored people” were growing ever more cordial, “a very different state of feeling exists between the negroes or Africans, and the browns.” This traveler elaborated, “The latter shun all connection by marriage with the former, and can experience no more unpardonable insult, than to be classified with them in any way.” A Scotsman in Jamaica likewise found that many of the colored population would “scarcely stoop to shake hands with the blacks, whom they regard with disdain.” The “browns,” this man noted, “deem their half Saxon descent and partial whiteness reasonable grounds for treating haughtily their Ethiopian fellow-subjects.” Or in the words of another observer, “the antagonism between the brown and the black is greater than that of either against the white.”

Smiley Connolly’s respective classifications in New England and Grand Cayman set in relief the mutability of racial denomination and gradation across national borders, as well as the differences between the two systems.Speculating about Smiley, William Warren Conolly, a great-grandson of Smiley’s half-brother, put it this way: “If he wasn’t white, he could pass for white.” That phrasing proves illuminating, coming from a man who grew up in East End, traveled the world in the American Merchant Marine, lived in New York City, and returned to Cayman, for it combines the workings of different racial systems. The rumination that Smiley’s complexion permitted him to “pass for white” applied to his status in North America. As for Smiley’s status in the West Indies, the phrasing implies that Smiley might have been accepted as white, despite the fact that one of his parents was...


32 Eunice Connolly to Lois Davis, East End, Grand Cayman, August 25, 1870 (part of May 16 letter), LWRD; John Bigelow, Jamaica in 1850: or, The Effects of Sixteen Years of Freedom on a Slave Colony (New York, 1851), 25–27; David King, The State and Prospects of Jamaica (London, 1850), 59–60, 65; Madden, Twelvemonth’s Residence, 1: 145. See also Trollope, West Indies, 74, 81, 97; Mrs. Carmichael, Domestic Manners and Social Condition of the White, Coloured, and Negro Population of the West Indies (London, 1833), 70; Edward Bean Underhill, The West Indies: Their Social and Religious Condition (London, 1862), 192, 225.
known to be of African descent. (In this light, Smiley may not have believed himself to be deceiving the marriage clerk at all.)

The descendant's formulation indicates less an emphasis on lineage than on class and color, and perceptions of other descendants shed further light. Family members recall Smiley's much younger brother Laban as a "white man" and one son from Smiley's first marriage as a "big white man." Memories of Smiley's son Cornelius (he died in 1932, a prominent mariner and East End shopkeeper) range from "darkish brown" to "quadroon" to "very white." As for Smiley himself, a descendant born in 1903 thought he was one of five "brown-skin" children. Vagaries of time and memory must be taken into account, but it is also important to understand that such descriptions could rest on class status, so that a man might be understood (or remembered) as light or white precisely because he was a successful sea captain. If Eunice's family back in New England strived to claim and prove respectability, Smiley's family in East End did the same. If Eunice's labor alongside Irish and black women made it difficult for her family to distinguish themselves from those they hoped to keep beneath them, then the upward mobility of Smiley and his brothers allowed the Connolly family to realize those same kinds of distinctions.

Moreover, in all of these perceptions, "brown" and "white" could be as closely allied for West Indians as were "mulatto" and "black" for North Americans. Smiley Connolly's experiences in New England and the British Caribbean illuminate an important difference: in Massachusetts, if Smiley did not formally belong to the category of white, he might still pass for the color white. In Cayman, by contrast, he may not have been the color white, but that was understood to be so ambiguous a designation that he could still belong to the category of white. The more significant distinction between the two systems, then, lay not in a binary versus a ternary configuration but in the placement of the middle category. Whereas in the United States, "mulatto" lay closer to "black," in the British West Indies, those labeled "colored" could be counted as closer to "white." Indeed, missionary census takers on Grand Cayman in 1855 had formulated one category for "black" inhabitants and another, separate category for "white and coloured" inhabitants. No doubt unable to sort islanders' descriptions of themselves (and their neighbors) with any uniformity, the missionaries plainly noted that it was "impracticable to distinguish between the white and coloured population." (See Figure 2.) As another missionary discovered, black people in Cayman were buried in segregated cemetery plots, while white and colored residents shared a final resting place. Such an arrangement stemmed as much or more from class as from complexion, evident in the observed divisions set down by a *New York Times* correspondent that beneath the planter aristocracy in the British West Indies stood "the middle class, composed alike of white and coloured mechanics, and the lower orders, which are the black laborers." If within the U.S. system, generations of one family could openly shift between

34 Interview with Elderly Residents of East End no. 1, by Anita Ebanks, 1982, MB, CINA, p. 15; author's conversation with Dorothy McLean Welcome (b. 1917, a Conolly on her mother's side), East End, Grand Cayman, July 15, 1999; Theoline Conolly McCoy conversation, July 13, 1999; author's conversation with Lou Connolly Coleman, East End, Grand Cayman, August 27, 2000; Aurellia Conolly interview, p. 4.
On the preceding table of statistics, we have to make the following explanatory remarks:—

1. It was found impracticable to distinguish between the white and coloured population; and they are, therefore, set down in one column—their total number being 1097. The greater proportion of these, however, are persons of colour, but, of course, of various shades of complexion.

2. To account for the comparatively small number of “blacks,” it is worthy of notice, that a considerable emigration has, during the last fourteen years, taken place—

black and mulatto, then in the British West Indies, generations could shift between colored and white. In New England, Smiley Connolly’s ancestry ultimately—that is, in a particular local neighborhood and within his new wife’s family—placed him closer to blackness. In East End, Grand Cayman, his status and color ultimately placed him closer to whiteness. There, he was a respected mariner who lived in a big house, employed a black servant, and brought home a white wife.35

But was Eunice Connolly a white wife? Here we arrive at the part of the story in which Eunice’s life intersects most starkly with the mercurial nature and abiding power of racial classification. Just as Smiley Connolly’s racial designation proved mutable, so, too, did Eunice live with ambiguities of categorization following her marriage to a man of African descent. Just as Smiley experienced tensions between the ways in which others sought to label him and the ways in which he thought of himself, so, too, did Eunice resist the racialized judgments of others and seek to claim a racial status of her own. That resistance would succeed only with departure, not just from the neighborhood but from the United States altogether.

Again, much as ancestry was most often the legal and social determinant of whiteness in the nineteenth-century United States, a certain porousness nonetheless prevailed in daily life. Ideologies about class and gender came into play, since poverty could intervene to cloud the supposed or ideal immaculacy of white womanhood. A woman’s behavior mattered, too. In New England, as Eunice’s sinking class standing pushed her to the margins of white womanhood, that precarious status became more fragile still upon marriage to a man of color. In the words of Rainier Spencer, “What was it about blackness that allowed it to be mixed with whiteness and yet stay black? And conversely, what was it about whiteness that caused it to be corrupted irrevocably by one drop of black blood?” Such asymmetry, where it operated, rested on the ideological equation of whiteness and purity, but the notion of “purity” did not rest solely on ancestry. The idea of pure (“Anglo-Saxon”) bloodlines could shade over into another, gendered meaning of purity: the idea of sexual chastity for white women, determined by those who held power to define and to sanction, whether as magistrates or as rumormongers. In tandem came the idea of blackness (or, more literally, African ancestry) as a product that tarnished purity, not only of “blood” but also of morals.36

In one sense, Eunice’s poverty and her marriage across the U.S. color line went hand in hand: white women who married black men in the nineteenth-century North tended to be poor, indeed, often Irish. Mid-nineteenth-century visitors to one of New York City’s poorest enclaves were offended by intimacy between Irish women and black men, whose liaisons and marriages can also be documented in census returns. During the New York City draft riots of 1863, an Irishman himself led a mob targeting “a nigger living here with two white women” (perhaps his wife and light-skinned daughter), threatening to “burn him” and “hang him on the lamppost.” In mid-century Philadelphia, Irish rioters likewise attacked a tavern whose black proprietor had married an Irish woman. When northern Democrats coined the pejorative term “miscegenation” in 1864 (from the Latin miscere, “to mix” and genus, “race”), they caricatured such liaisons by claiming that “the white Irishwoman loves the black man,” despite the fact that the Irish were “a more brutal race and lower in civilization than the negro.” (See Figure 3.) If Eunice’s Anglo lineage did not match this stereotype, her economic circumstances placed her close enough. The outcast white woman Mag Smith (perhaps she was Irish?) who married

WHAT MISCEGENATION IS!

AND

WHAT WE ARE TO EXPECT
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The Mercurial Nature and Abiding Power of Race

a black man in Harriet Wilson’s 1859 autobiographical novel, Our Nig: or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black, earned her living the same way Eunice did: as a washerwoman.37

Although marriage between blacks and whites had been legal in Massachusetts since 1843, a white woman of the upper or middle classes would have much to lose by union with a man of color. As a working-class woman, Eunice had less to lose, but her decision nonetheless tarnished (in the eyes of her brother and some white neighbors) both her “blood” and her chastity. Cheryl I. Harris has written astutely about whiteness as a form of property, yet that property was not always inalienable. Recall the slurs that Eunice suffered and the “public opinion” that stood “against” her. To many New Englanders, it mattered little that Eunice had married a man who could lift her out of poverty, since he was also a man of African descent. Other northern white women who crossed the color line suffered similar social consequences. In 1795, a New Englander sneered that white women who married black men were “without exception, of the lowest class in society, both for education and morals.” In 1833, Lydia Maria Child (actually writing in defense of mixed marriage) remarked, “Under existing circumstances, none but those whose condition in life is too low to be much affected by public opinion, will form such alliances.” A legal commentator cited by a Connecticut court in 1834, put it this way, speaking of the “African race”: “Marriages are forbidden between them and whites . . . and when not absolutely contrary to law, they are revolting, and regarded as an offence against public decorum.” William Allen, the man whom white New Yorkers assaulted in the 1850s, observed that a white woman who wed a black man would be “rendering herself an almost total outcast.” The character of Mag Smith in Wilson’s autobiographical novel was a working-class white woman in New England who (like Eunice) improved her economic status by marrying a man of color, but she “descended another step down the ladder of infamy” in the process. “She was now expelled from companionship with white people,” Wilson wrote, “this last step—her union with a black—was the climax of repulsion.” It was less that a woman like Eunice (working-class and about to marry a black man) forfeited the designation of “white”; rather, the perceived purity required to partake of the privileges of white womanhood did not rest exclusively on ancestry. In standards of behavior and personal association, transgressing white women like Eunice surrendered respectability (already, for Eunice, compromised by poverty), thereby suffering expulsion from a local community, as well as from part of her family.38


Slippage of this sort held fewer consequences for men. When the white abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison proclaimed at the 1859 New England Colored Citizens’ Convention in Boston that “nothing had gratified him so much as the reputation which he had gained of being a black man,” he meant to imply the racial equality of black and white people. Although his detractors equated such rhetoric with dreaded “amalgamation,” Garrison and his male allies could weather such accusations without judgments about personal purity. If white men identified themselves with black people, their enemies might pronounce them disruptive, even dangerous, but those were qualities quite different from the powerlessness of utter degradation. When Massachusetts legislators debated repealing the ban against marriages between blacks and whites, the opposition called such unions unnatural, immoral, and disgusting, warning of the dilution of white purity by animalistic people of African descent. Very occasionally, these opponents mentioned white men and black women, but mostly they reserved their warnings for “the blue-eyed daughters of the Anglo-Saxon lineage” and “the dark African” man, taking up such refrains as, “Every parent would rather follow his daughter to the grave, than to see her married to a black man.” If Eunice’s own mother accepted the marriage to Smiley with reservations, other New Englanders rejected Eunice entirely, for her actions had, in those minds, revoked whatever vestiges of the privileges of white womanhood Eunice had retained as a poor, laboring, husbandless, and at times homeless mother of two young children. Indeed, before the marriage to Smiley, Eunice earned her living not only the same way as Mag Smith did (as a washerwoman) but also the same way as Mag Smith’s free black daughter: as a domestic servant and sewer of palm-leaf hats. (See Figure 4.) Upon marriage to Smiley Connolly, Eunice saw her status in the neighborhood decline to as lowly as any she had known before, maybe worse.39

in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans (1833; rpt. edn., Amherst, Mass., 1996), 187; Crandall v. Connecticut, 10 Conn. 339 (1834), 346; Allen, American Prejudice, 7; Wilson, Our Nig, 13, 15. Wilson resided in Massachusetts and New Hampshire, including Hillsborough County and Goffstown, N.H., where some of Eunice’s relatives lived around the same time; Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “Introduction,” Our Nig, xiv–xvii.

FIGURE 4: Like other working-class women, Eunice Connolly braided palm-leaf hats in addition to undertaking domestic labor. Unlike the well-dressed women in this idealized image, however, Eunice performed the work by herself. “The Idyll of the Palm Leaf Hat,” Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper, July 15, 1871, E171.L63. Courtesy of the Collection of the New-York Historical Society.
When Eunice Connolly accompanied her new husband to the West Indies, and moved into the freedpeople’s settlement of East End on Grand Cayman Island, she experienced something quite different. If Eunice’s beloved brother never spoke to her again, if New England neighbors slandered her, then as Eunice herself articulated from Cayman in a pointed reference to the hostilities of Massachusetts, Smiley was “in his own home now and feels at liberty to act all the love he feels for me without fear of disturbing anyone.” Smiley’s letters, too, reveal a certain ease and defiance, as when he imparted that Eunice “look[s] more beautiful to me every day” or mentioned that she was “teasing me for a kiss.” Certainly Eunice and Smiley crafted letters for a family ambivalent and anxious about the marriage and departure, and certainly post-emancipation Cayman was no racial utopia. Yet the relief Eunice felt there resulted from Smiley’s high local status, as well as from the fact that marriages across shades of color were common and the majority of the population openly claimed mixed European and African descent.

Eunice’s life in the British Caribbean would be profoundly affected not only by this widespread mixture but also by the West Indian correspondence between the categories of “colored” and “white.” When asked if Eunice would have been the only white person in the freedpeople’s settlement of East End in the 1870s, one descendant mentioned two other families who were “considered white” even though they had “some colored blood,” asserting that Eunice would therefore not have stood out. These speculations are supported by nineteenth-century evidence. Writing about the colored majority in the West Indies in 1860, the African-American visitor J. Dennis Harris observed of whites that “the easiest way for them is to allow themselves to be peacefully absorbed by the colored race in these regions.” The impression that white people could be “absorbed” by those of African descent indicates a level of racial interchangeability between “white” and “colored” that lent new meaning to Eunice’s racial status in the islands. Recall that, although no one in Cayman disputed Smiley’s African ancestry, he could still be classified as white, and that census takers in Cayman in 1855 had found it overly burdensome to

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mark off “coloured” from “white.” In Caribbean ideology, whiteness and African ancestry were not mutually exclusive, and virtually no one (no matter how light-skinned) was thought to be without African ancestry. Could these Caribbean ideas have served to shift Eunice toward the category of “colored” upon her passage across the water?41

When asked if nineteenth-century Caymanians might have thought of Eunice as a colored woman, descendants gave these answers: “I don’t think that would have worried them in East End,” one mused. There was “quite a lot of mix-up” at that time, and Eunice would have “fit in.” Or in the words of another, “Well I guess in that time they would. I don’t think it would make any difference.” These responses, and others like them, nearly skipped over the question, in an effort to establish that no one would have minded that Eunice was a colored woman. Indeed, the question itself did not carry the weight it would have carried in the United States, precisely because of the proximity of “colored” and “white” in the West Indian racial system, especially when paired with high class standing. In one possible scenario, Smiley enhanced his own status by bringing home a white wife; alternatively, some East Enders may simply have assumed that Smiley had brought home a colored bride. Nor is it out of the question that Smiley had assumed that Eunice, with her dark hair and possibly none-too-fair skin, was a colored woman when he first encountered her in North America (a meeting that remains entirely obscured in the sources). In the West Indies, Eunice lived in a freedpeople’s settlement, she was the wife of a man of color and of means, and she employed a black servant to keep house. Any or all of those circumstances could have marked her as a colored woman.42

Nor should perceptions of complexion be overlooked. Werner Sollors concludes that “the presumed superiority of the white race” meant that “what was really at stake was the whitening of blacks, and hardly the reverse.” Yet white fears of black passing could be matched by the dread of a white person being mistaken for black. Years of living under the tropical sun would have altered any New Englander’s skin, and white travelers to sunny climes were known to despair about such transformations. “I am so horribly tanned!” shrieked a Massachusetts native on her trip to the Gulf South in the 1830s. Decades after a German immigrant was sold into slavery, it was discovered that, “during the twenty-five years of her servitude, she had been exposed to the sun’s rays in the hot climate of Louisiana, with head and neck unsheltered.” (From the other side, the mixed-descent narrator of Wilson’s Our Nig was forced to labor outdoors without a hat in order to distinguish her complexion from that of the household’s white daughter.) The Caribbean was particularly troublesome, with its low, strong rays. “It ought to be inculcated on the mind of the newly arrived European,” wrote a white doctor living in Jamaica in the nineteenth


century, “that he should avoid exposure to the sun.” No doubt Eunice did. In New England, Eunice’s face and hands would have tanned from planting vegetables, gathering firewood, and walking from one workplace to the next. In Cayman, she likely, and ironically, paled under the tropical sun, given her ability to stay indoors (or at least under the shade trees) while someone else washed her clothes and gathered her fuel. In Eunice’s new home, the combination of class privilege and relative lightness of complexion marked her either as a white woman or a colored woman.43

All of this raises the question of whether historians can accurately speak of a white person “passing.” The very circumstances of racial passing depend on the distinctive U.S. construction (codified unevenly in nineteenth and twentieth-century state laws) that someone with any African ancestry, no matter how many generations removed, must be defined as “black.” Were such an inflexible and dualistic system to function perfectly, no person of African descent could ever shift into the category of white. Yet the same rigid binary would make it effortless for a person without any African ancestry to shift into the category of black. As Gunnar Myrdal phrased it, “To cross the caste line from the white side would be a comparatively easy matter, since in America a Negro is not necessarily supposed to have any Negro features at all.” Or in the words of scholars St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, “any white person—including the lightest blond can, if he wishes, pass for colored.”44

Evidence of passage from the classification of white to that of black can be found in the nineteenth-century U.S. South, where marriage across the color line was illegal. In Tennessee during the 1860s, a white woman was warned away from living with her black husband, and she appealed to the Freedmen’s Bureau, hoping to prove that she was “in reality a colored woman.” On the border of Virginia and Tennessee in 1873, a black man obtained a license to marry a white woman by “falsely representing to the clerk that she was a colored woman.” Both parties were subsequently arrested and thrown in jail. Although these narratives allow for the possibility that the woman had been passing for white at the outset, in each case legal authorities and neighbors understood a white woman to be assuming identification as a black woman. A variation on this scenario is captured in Frank Webb’s novel The Garies and Their Friends, when a minister (in the North), called

43 Sollors, Neither Black nor White, 119; Melissa Russell Diary, November 1, 1835, SPR11, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery; William Craft, Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom: The Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery (1860; rpt. edn., Baton Rouge, La., 1999), 5, told in greater detail in George W. Cable, Strange True Stories of Louisiana (New York, 1893), 145–91; Wilson, Our Nig, 39; John Williamson, Medical and Miscellaneous Observations Relative to the West India Islands, 2 vols. (Edinburgh, 1817), 1: 42. A German anthropologist wrote of white skin: “it is very easy for that to degenerate into brown, but very much more difficult for dark to become white”; see Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, On the Natural Varieties of Mankind (1775; rpt. edn., New York, 1969), 269.

44 Gunnar Myrdal, An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy (New York, 1944), 683; St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City (New York, 1945), 164. For state laws, see Mangum, Legal Status, 1–17. The U.S. Supreme Court decision that established the doctrine of “separate but equal” also furthered the one-drop rule; Homer Plessy, who had challenged segregation on a Louisiana railroad, described himself as seven-eighths white and one-eighth black; Plessy v. Ferguson, 163 U.S. 537 (1896). Concerning the twentieth century, see Wald, Crossing the Line, 15–17, 53–81, 152–81. For an arresting literary representation, see Langston Hughes, “Who’s Passing for Who?” in Laughing to Keep from Crying (New York, 1952), 1–7.
upon to join a black woman and a white man in matrimony, inquired whether the man was truly white. Mr. Garie could at that moment have chosen to represent himself as a black man. Although he did not do so, at his death he was buried in the graveyard of the colored Episcopal church. Another variation appears in accounts of white people who literally infused themselves with drops of blood from a person of known African descent. Millie Markham, born about 1855, told the story of her mother, a planter's daughter in Virginia, who fell in love with the family's coachman and drank a cup of whiskey mixed with his blood in order to swear that she had “Negro blood in her,” so as to marry him. The federal census subsequently listed both husband and wife as “mulatto.” A white North Carolinian likewise spoke of a neighborhood white woman who, before the Civil War, “had her free-negro lover bled, and drank some of his blood, so that she might swear she had negro blood in her, and thus marry him without penalty.”45

Such shifts from whiteness to blackness cannot, however, be filed casually under the rubric of “passing,” since that very concept has historically implied an escape from oppression into a world of greater privilege. Rather, those who moved from the designation of “white” to that of “black,” even if voluntarily, opened themselves to more acute subjugation in a racist world (or neighborhood). And yet, in the case of Eunice Connolly, the ultimate outcome was quite different. True, by marrying a man of color, Eunice sacrificed the privileges of white womanhood in her native land, and most particularly in her own neighborhood. Like Mag Smith in Wilson's autobiographical novel, Eunice had “descended another step down the ladder of infamy” in New England. But by marrying Smiley Connolly, Eunice also married up. She moved from being a servant in New England to having a servant of her own in the Caribbean. Transplanting the marriage from the United States to the West Indies was the key to this advancement.46

Ideologies of gender again prove central. In New England during the Civil War, Eunice had been, in her words, “jogging around the world so without a home,” had so wanted her Confederate husband to be “spared to come home and provide for his little family” in order to “have a place to call home.” Then, an ocean away from her mother and siblings, East End came to be Eunice’s “little ‘Island Home,’ ” “a Happy home,” she wrote, complete with “an indulgent loving Husband.” In one letter back to New England, Eunice wrote, “I never go any where, only when Mr. Connolly and I go out to take a walk, and in the evening we go and sit on the beach. I have no desire to go away from my home to take comfort. I find it there.” That Eunice underlined the words “my home” (as well as the earlier words “call home”) signifies the highlighting of an impressive status to her relatives. The ability to


46 Wilson, Our Nig, 13.
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remain at home all day offered not only shelter from the Caribbean sun, it also served as a symbol of white, middle-class domesticity that Eunice had never achieved as a laborer in North America. Staying at home—in fact, having a home at all—rather than cleaning other people’s houses, became a badge of Eunice’s newfound white womanhood, concurrent with a blurring toward the West Indian category of “colored.”

After a lifetime of tenement living and unrelenting toil, Eunice could now take comfort in domesticity, and it is remarkable how closely the narration of her relationship with Smiley adhered to a model of middle-class Victorian marriage. “I am determined he shall not do more for me that way than I do for him, so far as I know how to do, to make him happy,” she expounded from Grand Cayman. “So while there is a mutual desire and each one takes pleasure in making the life of the other pleasant and happy, there is nothing to fear.” Nothing to fear because Smiley so well met Victorian expectations of a husband thoroughly attentive to his wife’s contentment. As for running the household, Eunice added: “Mr. Connolly allows me to do as I think best about every such thing. I always go to him, but he always says You know what suits you and any thing you do suits me.” (Whereas Eunice had never referred to her first husband by surname, she now routinely referred to “Mr. Connolly,” a class affectation to which her sisters back in New England did not feel entitled when naming their own husbands.) Had Eunice married a well-to-do North American white man, she would have aspired to a home with a parlor, a library, a nursery—a home, too, that embodied Christian civilization and salvation. Yet married to a man of color in the West Indies, even without so many elegant accoutrements, Eunice became “a constant church goer,” with her husband and children nearly as devout. Eunice married across the color line, but she married up; that upward mobility depended on departure from North America, and so Eunice followed her new husband to the West Indies to attain what would have been impossible with him in New England. Just as those who passed from black to white often lost loved ones in the process, so did Eunice suffer loss: most palpably, her brother’s love, more literally, her whole family, when she set up a new life so far away.

Almost certainly, Eunice never came to think of herself as a colored woman. More likely, in fact, just the opposite: she married Smiley Connolly in part to remove herself from the poverty and degraded status that had edged her away from white womanhood in New England. Smiley’s status in his native land had always been greater than Eunice’s in hers, and the stature and skills that Smiley possessed in Cayman changed Eunice’s life from everything that had come before: life as the daughter of an alcoholic father who deserted his family, as the wife of a white man unable to find work in the depressed mill towns of the North and who failed on the


southern frontier, as a mother forced to work in the mills and board out her child, as a widow forced to labor as a domestic servant. In the West Indies, Eunice became a respectable wife who enjoyed the leisure of a companionate marriage. She became a mother who sent her children to school and who left home only to attend church or stroll on the sand in the evenings. She became a lady who directed a dark-skinned maid. “As for me I jog along in a quiet easy way,” Eunice boasted to her mother. “I have enough to eat & drink, & wear,” she wrote, noting that in three months she had never twice donned the same dress for Sunday services. So remarkable was all of this that Eunice repeated it in another letter. “I have aplenty to eat, drink & wear,” she reminded her family and herself, “and do not have to sit up nights sewing by lamp light making and trimming dresses to get it better.” In a freedpeople’s settlement in the British West Indies, Eunice experienced what it meant to attain white womanhood as she had imagined that ideal in nineteenth-century New England.

And so, in marrying Smiley Connolly, Eunice defied her New England neighbors and family. “My darling mother,” Eunice wrote one day in 1870, “It is over four months since he took me or rather”—and here she corrected her narration to reflect her own agency—“since I sent from you to be with him.” Maybe, as one nineteenth-century American traveler wrote, Eunice’s prejudices began to “melt away” in a place “where people of colored blood have attained to such social consideration as to make themselves respected.” In the end, however, Eunice only transferred herself from one racialized system to another. Sandra Gunning, writing about the African-American traveler Nancy Prince, notes that “what is subversive in one context might not necessarily carry the same disruptive effectiveness in another.” Radical choices in New England turned out to be not at all radical in the West Indies. Eunice stoically relinquished the privileges of white womanhood in her native land but emphatically embraced those same privileges in the West Indies, now by virtue of membership in a well-off colored family. Crossing both racial and geographical boundaries, Eunice landed, finally, at the upper end of a stratified society. When Eunice settled in East End, she contentedly took her place among the local community’s elite, even if that community comprised the poorest and darkest on an island of little wealth.

If Eunice’s West Indian neighbors thought of her as a colored woman, that designation lay closer to whiteness than to blackness, evident in the journey from laboring New England widow to leisured West Indian wife—evident, even, in Eunice’s increasingly pale skin despite life under the Caribbean sun. The character of Clarence Garie, in Frank Webb’s 1857 novel set in the U.S. North, agonized that he could not “be white and coloured at the same time; the two don’t mingle, and I must consequently be one or the other.” Unlike Clarence Garie, Eunice could be

49 Eunice Connolly to Lois Davis, East End, Grand Cayman, August 25, 1870 (part of May 16 letter), March 7, 1870, December 13, 1871, LWRD. On white people intentionally shifting toward blackness, see Susan Gubar, Racechanges: White Skin, Black Face in American Culture (New York, 1997).

50 Eunice Connolly to Lois Davis, East End, Grand Cayman, March 7, 1870, LWRD; Benjamin S. Hunt, Remarks on Hayti as a Place of Settlement for Afric-Americans; and on the Mulatto as a Race for the Tropics (Philadelphia, 1860), 28; Sandra Gunning, “Nancy Prince and the Politics of Mobility, Home and Diasporic (Mis)Identification,” American Quarterly 53 (March 2001): 38; and see Hilary McD. Beckles, “White Women and Freedom,” in Centering Woman, on the complicity of white women in West Indian racist systems.
both white and colored at the same time. With certainty in her own mind, and the minds of sympathetic New Englanders, she was a white woman, safely marked off from African ancestry in the past. To unsympathetic New England relatives and neighbors, Eunice had surrendered the status of white womanhood, not only in her economic circumstances but also in her “low” and “revolting” behavior. To her West Indian family and neighbors, Eunice was either colored—that expansive and often subdivided Caribbean category in between African and European—or maybe she was a white woman with “colored blood.” Eunice and Smiley had two daughters of their own (never described in the letters); to New Englanders who knew the father, those children would have been labeled as “black” or “mulatto”; to Eunice’s Caymanian neighbors, those children could have been “white.” Or maybe it was just that Eunice’s own colored blood (everyone in the islands had some, after all) had shown up in the children.51

IN EUNICE CONNOLLY’S DESCENT into poverty and in her later elevation to ladyhood, in her journey with William Smiley Connolly across racial lines and national borders, in the face of imposed rankings and in her quest to rank herself and others, we can see the ways in which the mercurial nature of racial classification could by turns oppress and endow power. “American people don’t know color,” William Warren Conolly told me emphatically. Looking over a copy of Eunice and Smiley’s marriage license that I had brought to Grand Cayman from the Massachusetts State Archives, the great-grandson of Smiley Connolly’s half-brother pointed to the column that asked for “color of groom and bride,” saying, “They put color there, but American people don’t know color.” Making sense of racial categorization is an elusive historical endeavor, doubly so when historical actors and their ancestors crossed racial boundaries and lived their lives across geographical borders, from Africa and Europe to North America and the Caribbean. Transnational journeys expose the malleability of racial classification and thus add an important dimension to our understanding of the constructed nature of race. Yet no matter how fickle we prove racial classification to be, knowledge of that malleability alone cannot subdue its power to circumscribe lives, to categorize, distinguish, and separate people, to subjugate some and elevate others. Transnational journeys illuminate, with equal certainty, the potency of racial malleability in local, daily lives. In the end, we may ask, if scholars have proven race so mutable, why does its might remain so great? Perhaps it is because the abiding power of race lies precisely within that mercurial nature.52

51 Webb, Garies and Their Friends, 323.