[T]he problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line.
—W.E.B. Du Bois

One evening an actor asked me to write a play for an all-black cast. But what exactly is a black? First of all, what’s his color?
—Jean Genet

What one’s imagination makes of other people is dictated, of course, by the laws of one’s own personality and it is one of the ironies of black-white relations that, by means of what the white man imagines the black man to be, the black man is enabled to know who the white man is.
—James Baldwin

Black slavery enriched the country’s creative possibilities. For in that construction of blackness and enslavement could be found not only the not-free but also, with the dramatic polarity created by skin color, the projection of the not-me. The result was a playground for the imagination. What rose up out of collective needs to allay internal fears and to rationalize external exploitation was an American Africanism—a fabricated brew of darkness, otherness, alarm, and desire that is uniquely American. (There also exists, of course, a European Africanism with a counterpart in colonial literature.)
—Toni Morrison

To his white European patients, [Frantz] Fanon is ineluctably black—“the Negro doctor.” To his black Algerian patients, Fanon is white: a French-educated, upper-middle-class professional who cannot speak the language.
—Diana Fuss

ADVENTURES IN THE SKIN TRADE

[How difficult it sometimes is to know where the black begins and the white ends.
—Booker T. Washington

[N]ot only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man. Some critics will take it on themselves to remind us that this proposition has a converse. I say that this is false. The black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man.
—Frantz Fanon

Can human beings (and the cultures they create) be defined as either black or white? Or are most human beings (and the cultures they create) both black and white? These are the questions that seem to be posed by fascinating artifacts about race which survive from ancient times in the form of Janiform vases depicting the heads of Europeans and Africans. Dating back to 510 B.C., the two faces on one such Italian urn embody a study in racial contrast which is constructed by juxtaposing, feature by feature, a white and a black woman (Fig. 1.1). Seen in profile, hair, nose, lips, chin, jewelry (or its absence), and neck suggest that racial difference—not merely skin deep—dictates physiognomy, perhaps even psychology. Antithetical, the abutting heads seem to set the women at odds, for each looks out from her own perspective in a direction that dooms her never to see the other. Hardly a melting pot, the vessel portrays the races as distinct, separate, unamalgamated. Yet the burden of the ornamented pail shared by the two heads signifies a commonality eerily echoed by the two handles that come into view when the artifact is presented in either frontal position (Figs. 1.2 and 1.3). The white face now hides the black, the black the white. Somewhat like two sides of one coin, the dual faces constitute one head, one being, whose mysteriously doubled features speak to the complementarity of Western and African images of womanly beauty, of domestic supportiveness, or even of the biological capacity of the female to contain life as well as life-giving fluids. In this context, the salient, silent form of the urn communicates a teasing truth about racial comingling, fusing, intermixing.

As in Keats’s famous “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” the vase from ancient Tar-
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Figure 1.1 Janiform Vase (510 B.C.), Museo di Villa Giulia, Rome. Courtesy of Archeologica per L'Etruria Meridionale.

Figure 1.2 White Face of Janiform Vase

Figure 1.3 Black Face of Janiform Vase

quinia—or what we see as contemporary viewers looking at the vase—could be said to tell us all we know and all we need to know, in this case about the contradictory disposition of racial representation in Western art. On the one hand, European and American artists have stressed the rigid boundaries separating race from race, while, on the other, they have documented racial interconnectedness and mutuality. Similarly, the two epigraphs for this chapter juxtapose the view (of Frantz Fanon) that race constitutes a rigid bifurcation with the belief (of Booker T. Washington) that race needs to be understood as a graduated spectrum. Imagining race—a category that has promulgated stories about civilization and nation, about family and identity—spawns an absorption with purity and pollution, integrity and hybridity, unity and plurality, sameness and difference. Throughout modern times, artists in virtually all media have mediated on racial relationships using multifaceted figures composed of ethnic comparisons, contrasts, and metamorphoses.

Though certainly conceptualizations of race have not remained static since the creation of the Janiform pail in ancient times, reading the vase now demonstrates how configurations of corporeal traits contributed to a black/white divide that paradoxically provoked in people on each side of it various transgressive maneuvers, much as has the arranging of the world into male and female. Indeed, to Simone de Beauvoir, a thinker as obsessed with the inequality consigned to the Other as Fanon and Washington were, the urn might suggest “deep similarities between the situation of woman and that of the Negro,” though it also implicitly challenges the all-too-common assumption that “woman” is white, “Negro” male (xxiii). Just as numerous sexual narratives were used to justify or explain the subjection of women, by the end of the nineteenth century stories about civilization and nation, about family and identity generated by racial imaginings exploited ideas about purity and pollution, integrity and hybridity, unity and plurality, sameness and difference that contributed to the subordination of whole populations. By the twentieth century, when images of transvestism, androgyny, hermaphroditism, and transsexuality multiplied to negotiate the gender gap, what I am calling racechange had become a crucial trope of high and low, elite and popular culture, one that allowed artists from widely divergent ideological backgrounds to meditate on racial privilege and privation as well as on the disequilibrium of race as a category.

Racechange: The term is meant to suggest the traversing of race boundaries, racial imitation or impersonation, cross-racial mimicry or mutability, white posing as black or black passing as white, pan-racial mutuality. Over the past several decades, Americans have been repeatedly informed by psychologists and sociologists that the classification of peoples into Asians, blacks, Hispanics, and whites has no basis in science or biology, but such “folk taxonomies” persist, indicating how many individuals have not really been able to internalize such a proposition. Racechange provides artists in diverse media a way of thinking about racial parameters. Just as the Tarquinian urn can be said to stress the rigid borders separating the races as well as the easy commerce between them, representations of racechange test the boundaries between racially defined identities, functioning para-
doxically to reinforce and to challenge the Manichean meanings Western societies give to color. To begin with its most ambivalent and thus benign twentieth-century manifestation, racechange may be best viewed outside the American context that will elsewhere take precedence in this chapter and this book, specifically through a glance at the work of two Continental visual artists. For the experimental photographs and photomontages of Man Ray and Hannah Höch exemplify the instability and centrality of racechanging iconography in the modern period, and they do so by continuing to meditate on the relationship “between the situation of woman and that of the Negro.”

During the first half of the twentieth century, Man Ray returned to the Janiform design to depict the juxtaposition of black and white faces because this aesthetic form could sustain doubleness, based, as it was, on the idea of the two-faced god Janus, a deity who stood at (and for) portals. A modernist riff on the Tarquinian urn, Man Ray’s *Noire et blanche* (Black and white) series of images (1926)—with its juxtaposition of Anglo and African, light and dark forms of beauty—simultaneously postulates and traverses a gulf between African and European races and cultures. In the most distinctive of the photographs with this title, the illuminated, pale skin of Man Ray’s model (Kiki de Montparnasse) can be read as an either/or statement about race since it contrasts with the dark, obdurate stone of the black head she holds with her hand (Fig. 1.4). Whereas the living face has all the marks of European urbanity—the flapper’s tight cap of lacquered hair as well as her penciled brows and lashes, powdered lids, lipstick bow-mouth, and hint of an earring—the sculpted mask displays its African difference: With its symmetrically designed hair or helmet, its almost nonexistent mouth, and its half-opened, half-closed eyes, this artifact appears markedly less realistic, more stylized than the photograph Ray takes of it. An *objet*, the dark talis hints that, as Fanon speculates, black subjectivity has no ontological reality for whites. Thus, Kiki possesses the fetish—her hand exhibits it—because the picture counterpoints *Noire* with *blanche*, savage with civilized, black with white, the sad of *negritude* during the twenties with the art of photography which enabled modernist artists to appropriate or assimilate the crafts of alien and presumably primitive cultures.

But of course this photograph (as well as the others Man Ray produced on this theme) also emphasizes the *et* of his title, the both/and of race, suggesting the interchangeability or fungibility of model and mask. Light and dark heads alike cast shadows on the surface upon which they rest. Given Kiki’s closed eyelids, both are blind, the objects rather than the subjects of the gaze. If anything, the stone face contains more agency than the person since its verticality appears to decapitate her. Though Kiki presumably has the superior consciousness of humanity, she is horizontal, as if asleep or dead, while the upright mask appears paradoxically more alert. In addition, Kiki’s make-up, hairdo, and modeling mean she is just as constructed as the African icon, just as “framed” by Man Ray’s “shot.” Indeed, consenting to her erotic objectification, she endorses a colonization as complete as that of the exotic object. Nor, given his pseudonym, could this photographer be unself-conscious about man’s (voyeuristic) rays. Or so Kiki’s prone face—“made up” like a Japanese mask—suggests, since it looks like a rare shelved artifact.

From this perspective, the hand of Kiki represents less an act of ownership than an indication of bonding or camaraderie, a touching connection that links two fetishized objects of otherness, the beauty of blackness and of white femininity killed into art.

The negative version of *Noire et blanche*—switching lights and darks—graphically emphasizes the photographer’s accord with Booker T. Washington’s point that it is sometimes “difficult . . . to know where the black begins and the white ends” (267): Here the now illuminated mask is foregrounded, as if it might be slipped over Kiki’s face (Fig. 1.5). As in several other “solarizations” Man Ray produced, the effect is spectral, even apocalyptic. The inanimate object gains animation while the presence of the living model is reduced to a ghostly absence. Hannah Höch, a friend of Man Ray’s and a theorist of cultural hybridity, extended his experimental variations on the Janus form which reinforce even as they challenge normative racial polarization. In *Enführung* (Abduction, 1925), Höch cut out a photograph of a roughly carved African animal statue on which several figures sit, placed it on a larger base, and substituted a New Womanly face for one of the primitive heads; eclipsing the original Other, an image of the self—the modern profile—stands out with startling whiteness, positioned backward on the sculpted body of an African female (Fig. 1.6). Paradoxically, then, the native travelers are facing forward, while the amazed modernist looks backward (as indeed Höch does) to a primitive past.
she seeks to excavate even as she criticizes how her contemporaries—artists and anthropologists—have reconstructed it. Despite modernist quests for an Ur-mythology grounded in the physicality of ancient, exotic cultures, Höch's New Woman remains a self divided, cut off from the body, a talking head.

Many of Höch’s other collages in her Ethnographic Museum series mix so-called primitive sculptures of dark materials given traditionally African shapes with photographed white body parts. Framed within their frames by sculptural bases, pedestals, or platforms, Höch’s discordant montages display “the arbitrariness of all canons of beauty, both familiar and exotic,” as Maud Lavin puts it (166). According to Lavin, Höch’s “humanistic linking of the subjecthood of Western and tribal peoples through montaging body parts” enabled her to consider the uncanny relationship between women commercialized as commodity fetishes, exhibited as mannequins, and primitives commercialized as ethnographic fetishes, exhibited as freaks (167–68). *Denkmall II: Eitelkeit* (Monument II: Vanity, 1926) features the legs of a naked, posturing white woman attached to what looks like an ancient black, androgynous fetish (Fig. 1.7); *Mutter* (1930) creates a number of facial plains in a cubist portrait that reveals the interplay of multicultural forms that seem to muffle or suppress subjectivity; *Fremde Schönheit I* (Strange Beauty, 1929) presents a seductively posed nude topped by a wrinkled (looming but possibly shrunken) head whose eyes look magnified through the oversized spectacles that underscore the viewer’s own act of voyeurism. In all these works the juxta-

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**Figure 1.5** Man Ray, *Noire et blanche* (1926), negative version. Copyright © Man Ray Trust—ADAGP/ARS, 1997.

**Figure 1.6** (Above) Hannah Höch, *Entführung* (Abduction, 1925), collage, 19.5 × 20 cm. Copyright © 1997 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn; courtesy of Kupferstichkabinett Staatliche Museum Preussische Kulturbesitz, Berlin.

**Figure 1.7** Hannah Höch, *Denkmall II: Eitelkeit* (Monument II: Vanity, 1926), collage, 25.8 × 16.7 cm. Copyright © 1997 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn; courtesy of Rossner-Hoch, Backnang, Germany.
positions between human and other-worldly body parts, symbolic and realistic corporeal configurations, combine to create sometimes funny, sometimes grotesque aliens. Using biracial imagery to mediate on the mind-body problem, Höch sought to confront the difficulty of knowing “where the black begins and the white ends,” even as she studied the appropriation of the primitive that marks the ways in which race is codified when the African blatantly lacks “ontological resistance” or interiority.

If ambivalence distinguishes the Janiform design as well as its namesake, the Roman god of portals, Janus, whose doorways stand as entrances or exits, contradiction resides in the character of the racechanger, a shape-shifter who took center stage in the modern cultural arena. “I want to be your African girl,” croons the blond-haired heroine of Ernest Hemingway’s Garden of Eden (begun in the 1940s), explaining to her white lover the tanning process she has utilized to darken her skin. The experimental photographs of Man Ray and Hannah Höch may seem far removed from Hemingway’s cross-racial impersonator or from Vachel Lindsay exploiting purportedly black rhythms to recite his popular poem “The Congo” (1914) or from the reincarnation of the dead, white Patrick Swayze in the living, black body of Whoopie Goldberg in the movie Ghost (1990); however, the shifty iconography of racechange has enabled artists working in diverse media and with quite different purposes to traverse racial boundaries and question racial presuppositions. The “trick” of racial metamorphosis participates in the illicit, the liminal, the transgressive, the out, the comic, or the camp. Not simply mimetic, racechange is an extravagant aesthetic construction that functions self-reflexively to comment on representation in general, racial representation in particular. To the extent that racechange engages issues of representation, it illuminates the power issues at stake in the representation of race.

In the chapters to come, the permutations of racechange provide a means to measure altering societal attitudes toward race and representation. Of course racial crossover and ventriloquism have long been recognized in music, especially in the history of popular music. One thinks immediately of what Andrew Ross calls “miscegenated” musical productions generated by the interaction of white performers and African-American traditions—Benny Goodman’s swing, Elvis Presley’s rock n’ roll, or Vanilla Ice’s rap—as well as those created by black artists (say, Charley Pride and Living Color) whose productions “don’t sound” black to an astute listener like Marlon T. Riggs, who is led to ask, “What is the marker of blackness in our pop culture?” (Ross, 68; Riggs, 104). Julie Dash’s movie Illusions (1983) emphasizes the cross-racial dynamics at work in the music industry by presenting a behind-the-scenes view of a black singer’s voice dubbed onto footage of a white, lip-synching actress. But what about the other, earlier aesthetic forms racechange often took? More specifically, how did the legacy of slavery and discrimination in the history of the United States shape the patterns racechange acquired among Man Ray’s and Hannah Höch’s American contemporaries?

The pages that follow spotlight white actors sporting burnt cork in pioneering twentieth-century films; black artists investigating the origins of color in literature and the visual arts; white poets exploiting black vernacular to speak as if from an African-American subjectivity, as well as white patrons representing themselves through the language of the Harlem Renaissance writers they supported; white journalists blackening their faces in political pranks; and novelists, essayists, and painters envisioning sexually deviant whites as queerly colored or imagining parents of one race giving birth to babies who look like they belong to another. These are the phenomena I will use to identify the centrality of racechange in twentieth-century literature and art. As in the Tarquinian vase, the Man Ray photographs, and the Hannah Höch photomontages, racechanging imagery deploys sexual iconography to create a host of provocative connections and tensions between conceptions of race and those of gender. In any case, however, such figures are hardly the ones that first come to mind when the subject of racial impersonation is addressed.

On the one hand, the most notorious and arguably the most influential instance of racechange—one that still remains taboo because of its overt racism—appeared on the nineteenth-century minstrel stage, where white actors ridiculed African Americans. On the other hand, the most morally acceptable representation of racechange—indeed, the only one that has received extensive attention from literary scholars—surfaced in so-called “passing” novels, in which African-American characters masqueraded as white so as to assimilate into mainstream culture. I begin with such black figures transforming themselves into whites because, as the writers to be discussed in this chapter demonstrate, this type of racechange functions as the crucial subtext of a supremacist society. Even before the passing novels of the Harlem Renaissance, black-to-white racechange played a decisive role in American culture. That we sympathize with light-skinned blacks passing as white to gain their rights and responsibilities and that we revile white people masquerading as black to mock African-American culture: This asymmetry clearly speaks to the devaluation of blackness, the overprivileging of whiteness in European and American culture.

Yet regardless of whether race engages in the charade and with what motive, twentieth-century performances of racechange depend on the two factors this introduction seeks to establish: first, the ways in which a culture that systematically devalues blackness and establishes whiteness as the norm effectively endorses, even enforces, black-to-white racechange; second, that historically such racial metamorphoses nevertheless (and paradoxically) constituted a crucial tactic used by civil libertarian activists and artists as a means of disentangling the category of race from skin color. In a society that teaches “If you’re white, you’re right” but “if you’re black, get back,” adventures in the skin trade often involve politically progressive blacks and whites trading places: blacks to gain the privileges of whites, whites to dramatize the privations of blacks, and both to unmask the arbitrariness of the system that accords those privileges. What, then, of the modernist ambiguities Man Ray and Hannah Höch achieved in photomontages which recapture the teasing equivocations of the Janiform urn? What, too, of the label of prejudice that has firmly (and rightly) attached itself in contemporary times to minstrelsy?

Although racism necessarily influences American thinking about racechange, just as it has contaminated the reputation of racechange, we will see the ways in which even—and perhaps especially—in the context of racism, racial imperson-
Alienated from their native religions, their families, their own interests and bodies, Blake’s “Little Black Boy” and Churchill’s Joshua exhibit the psychological damage Fanon diagnosed in his classic book Black Skin, White Masks (1952), specifically his view that the colonized man of color thinks about himself, “There is no help for it: I am a white man. For unconsciously I distrust what is black in me, that is, the whole of my being” (191). A crisis of “corporate reconfiguration” is inflicted on people of color, who are subjected to the “mirror” of an idealized whiteness that makes blackness horrific (Silverman, 27, 29).

“And be like him, and he will then love me”; “What white men want is what I want to be”; Heaven for the black boy or man means obtaining the love of his white peer which is in turn predicated on the eradication of difference, the appearance of resemblance. Within the context of slavery, of course, such a resemblance could become a crucial means of survival. William and Ellen Craft’s Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom (1860) describes the only possible solution to the horror of slavery as an escape route made possible by Ellen Craft’s looking “almost white” (2). Disguised as an invalid gentleman, Ellen could be accompanied by her dark-skinned husband when she played the role of master to his slave. In case either her illiteracy or her smooth countenance might betray her, Ellen Craft bound up her right hand in a sling and wore a handkerchief over her cheeks. Although free Negroes existed in the South, William Craft explains, “every coloured person’s complexion is prima facie evidence of his being a slave; and the lowest villain in the country, should he be a white man, has the legal power to arrest, and question, in the most inquisitorial and insulting manner, any coloured person, male or female” (36).

As if William Craft understood the allure of Ellen’s race- and sexchange, he reproduced a picture of her as the frontispiece of his escape narrative, explaining that he managed to obtain his mother’s freedom in part by selling the engraving of his disguised wife (Fig. 1.8). With her top hat, cravat, spectacles, and short hair, Ellen in the portrait does not wear the pelisse that she used to hide the smoothness of her face, and, therefore, as Ellen Weinauer has pointed out, the engraving displays not really Craft’s “wife in the disguise in which she escapes” (Running, 12) but, instead, an enigmatic, indeterminate figure—quasi-performer, quasi-performed—contesting the stability of gendered and racial categories of identity (50, 52). And certainly the allure of this creature is sustained as long as the (truly feminine) Ellen Craft plays the role of the (fictionally masculine) master, for she seems attractively emboldened, even spiritually strengthened, though she weeps and swoons when she dons feminine garb and declines back into the position of the childish, invalid wife (79). Even when only impersonated, whiteness (like maleness) confers power as well as privilege, whereas blackness (like femaleness) conveys subordination as well as dependency. Paradoxically, then, in the condition of slavery Ellen Craft gained the status of becoming her husband’s “master,” while his joyous arrival at a state of “freedom” inaugurated her feminized confinement.

In the clarity with which it presented whiteness as a symbol of personal autonomy, Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom establishes black-to-white racechange as a bid for freedom, one that would be made again by Homer Plessy at the
end of the nineteenth century when he challenged Louisiana's segregated railroad car law by using his light complexion to gain access to the whites-only car and then announcing himself a Negro. Plessy's contention against Jim Crow seating—that his being only one-eighth Negro and able to pass entitled him to ride in seats reserved for whites—was rejected by the Supreme Court. Although the Court's landmark decision in favor of "a separate-but-equal doctrine" in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) legalized segregation, Plessy had used impersonation to undercut the notion that skin color could simply be conflated with racial identity. Because a figure like Plessy was able to pass for white, he could choose to be black; nevertheless, it is still the case that because he was not able to decide to be white, Plessy could only pretend to be white. In other words, culture or social context shapes racial identity without completely replacing biological definitions of race.

Walter White, a prominent spokesperson for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) during the 1930s and 1940s, anticipated this point in his autobiography, *A Man Called White* (1948), which begins with the following two, incongruent sentences: "I am a Negro. My skin is white, my eyes are blue, my hair is blond" (3). For White, "There is magic in a white skin; there is tragedy, loneliness, exile, in a black skin" (3). Yet, imbued with the conviction that he can only pretend to be white, the paradoxically named White chooses to be black, tracing his claimed cultural identity back to an incident in his thirteenth year when he and his father were saved from attack during the 1906 race riot in Atlanta because of their light complexions. At the very moment, they fully comprehended the depth of their alienation from white society; for the same reason that they were assured safety—that is, their skin color—father and son could only stand and watch "a lame Negro bootblack" clubbed to death on the street (9). When it later looked like the mob was making for his family's house and his father handed him a gun, White explains, he knew that

I was a Negro, a human being with an invisible pigmentation which marked me a person to be hunted, hanged, abused, discriminated against, kept in poverty and ignorance, in order that those whose skin was white would have readily at hand a proof of their superiority, a proof patent and inclusive, accessible to the moron and the idiot as well as to the wise man and the genius. No matter how low a white man fell, he could always hold fast to the smug conviction that he was superior to two-thirds of the world's population, for those two-thirds were not white. (11)

The fact that Walter White felt the need to explain why he did not take advantage of his light complexion and renounce his allegiance to the Negro community marks the power of the condition the contemporary novelist Charles Johnson has called "epidermalized Being" (*Oxherding Tale*, 52).

Whereas Walter White chose to be black and refused to pretend to be white, both Ellen Craft and Homer Plessy utilized a mode of masquerading that resembles the tactics of central characters in turn-of-the-century and twentieth-century passing novels whose costumes of disguise demonstrate the fluidity of racial categories no longer connected to skin color. The slave mother of Mark Twain's *The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894), for instance, saves her light-skinned infant from being sold down the river by placing him in the elegant baby clothes and cradle of her master's son, while divesting the legitimate heir of his necklace and putting him in her own child's unpainted pine cradle. Similarly, Jessie Redmon Fauset's *Plum Bun* (1928) features a fair-skinned heroine who simply changes her name and her neighborhood so as to pass herself off as white because whites "had power and the badge of that power was whiteness" (73). After Fauset's central character determines to get "acquainted with life in her own way without restrictions or restraint," she understands herself to be "young, she was temporarily independent, she was intelligent, she was white" (88).

Although such passing novels did contain subversive readings of whiteness, at least in part their authors used racechange to analyze the dynamics of racial envy and more specifically black women's adoption of white-defined standards of beauty. From Zora Neale Hurston's Mrs. Turner (in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937)), who believes "We oughta lighten up de race" (135), to Toni Morrison's Pecola Breedlove (in *The Bluest Eye* (1970)), who drinks milk out of a Shirley Temple cup so as magically to gain storybook blue eyes, a female longing for racechange reflects the self-hatred bred by a racist society. In a photograph entitled *Mirror, Mirror* (1986–87), the contemporary artist Carrie Mae Weems comments on such socially induced self-loathing by presenting a black woman asking
her mirror “who’s the finest of them all?” and being told, “Snow White, you black bitch, and don’t you forget it!” (Fig. 1.9). To be sure, because the wicked queen in the mirror looks more directly at the viewer than at the African-American girl, the evil stepmother may reflect the values of (the white) viewer more than those of the girl; and because the African-American girl looks aside, clutching the mirror as if in the next minute to shatter it, the Snow White tale may not be able to effect its damaging ends. Yet the debilitating split image of “Snow White” and “the black bitch” illuminates and is in turn illuminated by a comment of Lorraine O’Grady’s that uncannily serves to contrast Weems’s photograph to the ancient urn from Tarquinia:

The female body in the West is not a unitary sign. Rather, like a coin, it has an obverse and a reverse: on the one side, it is white; on the other, not-white or, prototypically, black. The two bodies cannot be separated, nor can one body be understood in isolation from the other in the West’s metaphoric construction of “woman.” White is what woman is; not-white (and the stereotypes not-white gathers in) is what she had better not be. (14)

Claude McKay’s short story “Near-White” (1932) dramatizes the ways in which the breach between “Snow White” and the “black bitch” depends less on biology, more on ideology; less on visible signs of skin pigmentation, more on Manichean and transcendent ideas of whiteness versus blackness. Light-complexioned Angie Dove goes in search of romance and adventure in downtown Manhattan, much to the chagrin of her family in Harlem. Passing as white comes easily because “no tangible thing separated her from the respectable white audience down below, her features being whiter and more regular than many persons’ who moved boldly and freely in the privileged circles of the Great Majority” (76). Since she displays no visible trace of “the stigmata of Africa” (86), she meets and eventually falls in love with a young man convinced that she is “the nicest, whitest little girl in the world” (99). Herself persuaded that “Prejudice is not stronger than love” (98), Angie determines to tell him the truth about her racial identity but is stopped after asking him to speculate about how he would feel if he found out he had been unwittingly involved with a quadroon or octoroon girl: “Me! I’d sooner love a toad!” (102).

This Jazz-age Cinderella—dancing nightly with a beau from whom she must escape at the close of the evening so as to keep her origins a secret—discovers that her kisses will never transform the Prince who (if he knew the truth) would consider her as repulsive as a toad. An anti-fairy tale, “Near-White” elaborates upon the passionate maxim of its heroine’s mother: Speaking as one of the “light-colored ones,” she asserts, “We hate [whites] more because we are not black” (95–97). What “near-whites” understand is the fictiveness of an oppression system that generates the greatest hatred against “light-colored ones,” a hatred based on fears about category confusion: Whites are “never sure about us, they can’t place us” (96). “So close and yet so far” from whites, “near-whites” prove that the color bar, though invisible, is nevertheless insurmountable. McKay strikes the point home by inundating the tale with references to Manhattan’s melting pot society. The story begins with a song sensation launched by some “Yank or Yid” (72); continues with references to fashionable Spanish cabarets, German beer gardens, Arabian cafés run by Armenians, dance halls called the Pyramid; and concludes with Prince Charming assuring his doubtful date, “I’d love you if you were even Chinese!” (about which she muses, “Chinese! That was the lowest thing he could imagine”) (101). Yanks, Yids, Spaniards, Arabians, Armenians, Egyptians, and “even” Chinese have apparently managed to become “white,” while whiter-than-white Angie remains as far away as “near-white.”

The threat implicitly posed by Angie Dove on the marriage market is clearly related to her gender, since an unwitting husband could stand convicted of miscegenation, deemed a crime in many states until the 1957 decision in *Loving v. Virginia*. To be sure, the racial ambiguity of the “near-white” can be disturbing in male as well as female characters, or so William Faulkner’s *Light in August* (1932) in-
ticates. For the entire white community finds the “parchmentcolored” (304) Joe Christmas particularly dangerous since he cannot be categorized: “He never acted like either a nigger or a white man. That was it. That was what the folks so mad” (386). However, women’s role in reproduction caused female racial ambiguity to appear more sinister to those anxious about preserving the purity of a white patrilineage. Despite its liberal intentions, Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein’s *Show Boat* (originally produced on Broadway in 1927, made into a film in 1936, and revived in 1946 and 1994) inadvertently instructed audiences on the degradation a racechange from white to black entails for a sexually active (potentially reproductive) woman. The revelation that the light-skinned singer Julie is a “Negro” effectively makes her dispensable in the plot. First, after she and her white boyfriend Steve evade the charge of miscegenation by his cutting her hand and sucking her blood to prove he has more than “one drop” of “Negro blood” himself, the pair leave the showboat (on which they had been performing). Second, when she surfaces in the next act, Julie—abandoned by Steve and doomed to alcoholism—sacrifices a nightclub engagement so as to procure a job for the musical’s white heroine and then disappears not only from respectable society but from any of the other characters’ concern, an unnoticed casualty in the white community’s happily-ever-after. As soon as her color is established, in other words, the beautiful and noble Julie suffers a series of catastrophes that ensure not only her demotion in the plot but the white heroine’s promotion to center stage.

Given the entanglement of narratives like *Plum Bun, “Near-White,”* and *Show Boat* with normative (white-defined) definitions of female attractiveness, it seems appropriate that the most extravagant racechange narrative to emerge from the Harlem Renaissance begins with a black man enthralled by a white woman. The hero of George Schuyler’s freewheeling satire *Black No More* (1931) falls in love with a racist white woman whom he manages to marry only by turning himself white. And given the ways in which passing narratives conflate whiteness with life, blackness with life-in-death, it seems fitting that *Black No More* views the demise of blackness as the only viable solution for African Americans. As its title indicates, this tongue-in-cheek fantasy about a scientific method of triggering a “racial metamorphosis” (14) takes supremacist ideology to its logical conclusion by asking its readers to understand that freedom in America is predicated not only on whiteness but on the eradication of blacks. In a 1949 essay entitled “Has Science Conquered the Color Line?,” Schuyler’s distinguished contemporary Walter White outlined a similar point:

> Suppose the skin of every Negro in America was suddenly to turn white. What would happen to all the notions about Negroes, the idols on which are built race prejudice and race hatred? Would not Negroes then be judged individually on their ability, energy, honesty, cleanliness as are whites? (37)

According to Schuyler, too, the only way for African Americans to achieve individuality, to avoid being viewed as racially representative, is through a color conversion. Schuyler further suggests that a hegemonic racechange script shapes American aesthetic values and political doctrines. Convincing blacks to believe in the superiority of the culture and characteristics of whites, this scenario effectively functions as a form of genocide, threatening to annihilate all African Americans.

To dramatize this idea, Schuyler centers attention on one black do-gooder, a Dr. Junius Crookman, whose studies of vitiligo—a disorder in skin pigmentation—lead him to perfect a method “of artificially inducing and stimulating this nervous disease at will” so as to “solve the American race problem” (27). Only three solutions remain available to African Americans facing that problem—“To either get out, get white or get along” (27)—but most cannot or will not get out and many only barely get along. Determining therefore to get blacks white, Dr. Crookman places the thousands of interested customers he instantly attracts into “a cross between a dentist’s chair and an electric chair” (34) so as to give them “the open sesame of a pork-colored skin” (35), even though it cannot yet be genetically transferred to their offspring. A “Race Man,” the good doctor is convinced that “if there were no Negroes, there could be no Negro problem” (54).

Huge electric signs represent the commercialization of racechange in this economically astute novel:

> A black face was depicted at the lower end of the arrow while at the top shone a white face to which the arrow was pointed. First would appear the outlines of the arrow; then, BLACK NO MORE would flash on and off. Following that the black face would appear at the bottom and beginning at the lower end the long arrow with its lettering would appear progressively until its tip was reached, when the white face at the top would blaze forth. After that the sign would flash off and on and the process would be repeated. (43–44)

Because of the success of Dr. Crookman’s business, hair-straightening parlors and whitening chemical concerns go bankrupt, but so do the various leaders of the black intellectual establishment—Santop Licorice of the once-flourishing Back-To-African Society (Marcus Garvey) and Dr. Shakespeare Agamemnon Beard, founder of the National Social Equality League (W.E.B. Du Bois)—since the citizens who once supported them are quickly disappearing. Ironically, then, the supposedly libertarian black intelligentsia, what Du Bois called the “talented tenth,” oppose the Black-No-More entrepreneurs’ plan for “chromatic emancipation” (87) as fervently as do the Klannish Knights of Nordica, whose members dread unwitting racial intermarriage and miscegenation.

When once-black Max Disher turned white Matthew Fisher joins the Knights of Nordica and marries its founder’s daughter, he gains leadership through blackmailing for capitalists: Poor white workers are kept so busy worrying about “Negro blood” (130) and “white nigger” (128) labor competition that they forget to organize. Convinced that even a fiction about the “presence of the Negro as an under class” can continue to keep white workers underpaid and yet nonunionized, Matthew preaches racial supremacy, although “practically all the Negroes [left] are white” (158). But his success feels fragile because of his dread at his wife’s producing a dark son, a fear that evaporates when a series of political maneuvers expose the racially mixed descent of the Democratic party and of the Knights of Nordica’s leaders, who admit, “We’re all niggers now” (193). Not only does
Matthew’s racist wife believe her own ancestry may have caused the color of her baby, she also begins to use artifical methods to make herself look darker because in Schuyler’s brave new world racism takes an odd twist. When it is discovered that “the new Caucasians were from two to three shades lighter than the old Caucasians” (218) (in other words, that “the blacks were whiter than the whites” (219)), prejudice against exceedingly pale people erupts and the marketing of face powders named “L’Afrique” as well as the wearing of “Egyptienne Stain,” “Zulu Tan,” or just plain charcoal (222) come into vogue.

As in the case of Matthew’s wife, the Democratic antagonists of Dr. Crookman’s Black-No-More enterprise discover how dangerous it is to be white no more when it is revealed that their own families derive from mixed racial inheritances. After two luckless Democrats try to escape Washington incognito by wearing blackface, they land amid “the most truly Fundamentalist of all the Christian sects in the United States” (203), whose preacher has asked for a sign from God consisting of “a nigger for his congregation to lynch” (208). The townfolk therefore greet the two black-faced strangers with joy: “Niggers! Praise God! The Sign! Lynch ‘em!” (213). Saved after they manage to reveal their pale skins, the doomed duo are next exposed as “darned Demmyncratic candidates [who] is niggers” (215) and so their adventure ends with them stripped, their ears and genitals cut off, their bodies ignited on a pyre, their flesh roasted, and then their skeletons ransacked for souvenirs.

Schuyler’s mendacious indictment of Americans’ virulent racism found disturbing confirmation in the fate of the daughter he and his white wife enthusiastically raised as an exemplary of “hybrid vigor” who would break down racial barriers. Some thirty years after the publication of \textit{Black No More} and the birth of Philipa Schuyler, the talented, biracial pianist passed as the white Felipa Monterro not only to gain acceptance in the segregated world of classical music but also because, as she herself put it, “I will be accepted as a person not as a strange curiosity” and because being called “a Negro” would bring a “taint” and thus “30 more miserable years” (Talalay, 224). If the contemporary reviewer and memoirist Anatole Boyroud passed in order to “be a writer, not a black writer,” his racial imposture also hints that whiteness remains “the default position” for individuality, whereas blackness continues to be attached to the concept of race, of a race type, and thus to racial prejudice (Gates, “White,” 66, 75).

“It don’t matter if you’re black or white,” Michael Jackson has sung to popular acclaim at the end of the twentieth century; however, his own reaction to vitiligo adds proof to the continued timeliness of \textit{Black No More’s} satire. Instead of darkening white blotches, as most patients do, Jackson whitened and westernized all of his features. Writing in the early fifties, Frantz Fanon described actual scientific schemes strikingly similar to those employed by Michael Jackson and by Schuyler’s fictive Dr. Crookman:

For several years certain laboratories have been trying to produce a serum for “denegritification”: with all the earnestness in the world, laboratories have sterilized their test tubes, checked their scales, and embarked on researches that might make it possible for the miserable Negro to whiten himself and thus to throw off the burden of that corporeal malediction. (111)

Set in the colonized locales Fanon studied, Julia Blackburn’s novel \textit{The Book of Colour} (1995) includes a reminiscence about a father who took on the work of “denegritification” every night when he washed his son’s face “with a mixture of peroxide and the juice of a lemon” because the boy had “been out in the sun, that is why your skin is too dark” (8–9). Recently, when a black woman, married to an Italian, had a white woman’s egg implanted in her womb so their offspring would be “spared the misery of racism,” the science of “denegritification” horrified the legal theorist Patricia J. Williams, causing her to imagine black women serving as surrogate mothers and making more efficient the production of racially profitable white babies. As if bringing home the renewed relevance of Schuyler’s narrative, Williams views this scenario as “nothing less than the transformation of the social difficulty of being black into an actual birth defect, an undesirable trait that technology can help eliminate” (Rooster’s Egg, 241).

Back in the nineteenth century, illustrations of countless European and American soap commercials sold cleanliness as godliness by portraying blacks (often toddlers) attempting a racechange by trying to wipe away the dirt and grime of blackness, as did many pictures in children’s books (Fig. 1.10). The critic Anne McClintock has argued about Victorian Pears’ Soap ads that the purification of the physical body becomes a metaphor for the rejuvenation of the body politic. In the first frame of the bathing scene displayed on one such advertisement, the magic of soap promises to “regenerate the Family of Man by washing from the skin the very stigma of racial and class degeneration”; however, the second frame—in which the bathed child’s body has undergone a lightening but his face has not—demonstrates that while the boy as an agent of historical progress cannot completely induct his “lesser brother” into the civilities of the European Enlightenment: “In the Victorian mirror,” McClintock explains, “the black child witnesses his predetermined destiny of imperial metamorphosis but remains a passive racial hybrid, part black, part white, brought to the brink of civilization” (213) but never fully inducted or assimilated into it.

At the beginning of the twentieth century in middle America, Madame C. J. Walker (née Breedlove) established her multi-million-dollar fortune by selling lightening creams that could be used on the body as well as the face and straightening solutions for the hair. Elsewhere, Fanon calls such “denegritification” methods a kind of “lactification” whereby whitening the race saves it from “falling back into the pit of niggerhood” (47), a process not unrelated to Pecola Breedlove’s great thirst for milk in \textit{The Bluest Eye}. The brilliant photograph of Whooopi Goldberg taken by Annie Leibovitz shows the actress immersed in a tub of milk and thereby jokes about the grotesque imperatives/impossibilities of “lactification” (Fig. 1.11). Again, and in a manner as risible as Schuyler’s narrative, the connection is made between racechange and death, for whiteness will only prevail when Whoopi’s entire body—her legs, arms, face, and especially her nose and mouth—will be submerged beneath its surface. Is she grinning or grimacing, waving or drowning in her milk bath?

No wonder that Langston Hughes produced a brief but pointed satire of narratives in which characters seek to pass themselves off as white so as to gain social
Figure 1.10  Pears' Soap Advertisement of the Victorian Period. Courtesy of Unilever.

Figure 1.11  Annie Leibovitz, Whoopi Goldberg. Copyright © 1986 Annie Leibovitz/Contact Press Images.
acceptance and status. In “Limitations of Life” (1938), a parody of the very successful passing novel *Imitation of Life* (1933) by Fannie Hurst as well as its popular movie renditions, Hughes criticizes those conventions simply by transposing them. According to Hughes, the conventional passer of, say, Hurst’s novel—a white wannabe—reinforces the devaluation of blackness articulated by characters from Blake’s “Little Black Boy” to Churchill’s Joshua. What would happen if white people felt so ugly and worthless, so dependent on blacks for approval and financial success that they either dedicated themselves to serving blacks or attempted to transform themselves into blacks? What if the overvaluation of whiteness that causes blacks to pass as white were replaced by a privileging of blackness that motivated whites to try to turn black?13

In Hurst’s popular tear-jerker, a large black woman named Delilah works as a domestic for a white woman and together they successfully market the pancakes Delilah makes; but in the process this twentieth-century mammy loses the affection of her very light-complexioned daughter who—somewhat like McKay’s Angie Dove—seeks to pass as white and therefore will not recognize her mother until “too late”: that is, Delilah’s (ornate) funeral.14 *The Bluest Eye* underlines the connection between Hurst’s portrait of the passer and a racially marked ideal of (white) beauty when one of Morrison’s characters confuses the name of the novel’s heroine, Peola, with the movie protagonist, Peola, the “mulatto girl [who] hates her mother ‘cause she is black and ugly but then cries at the funeral” (67). Attempting to uncover the absurd racial assumptions of this maternal melodrama, Langston Hughes simply reverses racial markers. For Hughes, an imitation of whites leads to an imitation life for blacks that can only be understood as a limitation. He counters that limitation by switching the tables and producing a spoof that takes off on the image of a white Aunt Jemima on the box of pancake flour in Mammy Weaver’s kitchen.

Wealthy Mammy Weaver (carrying a Metropolitan Opera program and speaking “perfect English with Oxford accent”) is greeted in her elegant Harlem residence by blond Audette Aube (Claudette Colbert played the passer in one of the movies), who falls all over herself in grateful servitude: “Mammy Weavers, ah been wavin’ up for you-all. Ah thought you might like some nice hot pancakes before you-all went to bed” (656). Although Mammy, who has just come from the Momo Club (where she dined on lobster à la Newburg), declines, she lets Audette rub her feet and sympathizes with the plight of her fair daughter who has been “lyin’ out in de backyard in de sun all day long tannin’ herself, ever day, tryin’ so hard to be colored.” When Audette is asked what she wants in exchange for all of her services—as nurse, cook, housekeeper, mother surrogate—this ideal domestic refuses a day off or a nice home of her own. Instead, all she wants “is a grand funeral when I die.” What makes Delilah so very loveable in Hurst’s *Imitation of Life*—a selflessness bordering on masochism in her service to whites—appears ludicrous when the races are switched around.15 What makes Delilah’s daughter a prototypical tragic mulatto—the contradiction between her “lowly” origins (the black mother) and her “high” aspirations (the white world)—seems equally absurd when played out through a character who seeks to pass as black.

Whereas Hughes’s sketch uses humor, Adrienne Kennedy’s experimental one-act play *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (1964) exploits surrealism to uncover the murderous logic of Western culture’s racechange imperative. Its central character, Negro-Sarah, is haunted by ghostly white avatars of herself like the Duchess of Hapsburg and Queen Victoria Regina, surrogates who wish to be told “of a royal world where everything and everyone is white and there are no unfortunate black ones” because they “know” that “black is evil and has been from the beginning” (5). Wearing identical alabaster masks, both begin the play with “frizzy hair, unmistakably Negro kinky hair” (6), and both suffer the humiliation of alopecia. Negro-Sarah’s original wish “not to be” and her ultimate fate as a suicide find their analogue in the baldness of her alter egos, for the falling out of wild kinky hair symbolizes the infantilization of black people (bald like babies), the castration of black people (shorn like Samson of power), the violation of black people (the rape of their locks), the disease of black people (suffering hair loss due to illness), and the premature decrepitude of black people (aging before their time).

*If You’re Black, Get Back*

While some black characters seek to become white so as to gain privileges (“If you’re white, you’re right”), other white characters are turned black so they will understand and sympathize with the plight of those who are told “if you’re black, get back.” Just as Hughes’s Audette Aube exhibits the psychological masochism of the prototypical black mammy, just as Schuyler’s fable concluded with white politicians suffering the fate (of lynching) more usually accorded blacks, a number of reform-minded writers attempted to educate whites about what Fanon called the “corporate maladministration” of color by presenting narratives of white-to-black racechanges that place racists in black people’s shoes and thereby teach them that race matters most unfairly. Although the switch seems like a reversal—whites turning black instead of blacks turning white—it sometimes attests to the very same values, of whiteness and rightness, blackness and backness. An early and late example of this type of racechange—a story in Charles W. Chesnutt’s *The Conjure Woman* (1899) and an episode in the musical comedy *Finian’s Rainbow* (1947)—can stand here for liberal efforts to promote a kind of racial negative capability that would attenuate the virulence and violence of white supremacists. Yet, as in Schuyler’s novel, blackness can remain anathema in this tradition, especially when it is inflicted as a punishment fitting the crimes of inhumane whites. Only when the boundaries separating black and white are perceived as demonstrably permeable does racial mutability lead to the undermining of race itself as a category.

Chesnutt’s “Mars Jeems’s Nightmare” is a tale told in dialect by the ex-slave Julius about a plantation owner whose cruelty leads one slave to consult “Aun’ Penny, de free-nigger cunjah ‘oman” (76), who pounds up roots to be stirred into the master’s okra soup. The next morning Master Jeems goes away on business, after describing to his overseer Master Johnson how his “niggers is gittin’ mon-st’us triflin’ en lazy en keerless” and advising his second-in-command “ter make
a reco'd dat 'll show w'at kinder oberscach you is" (79). Naturally, Johnson takes this as a hint to overwork and underfeed the slaves. Predictably too, when a brash new slave is bought and brought to the house, Johnson responds to his backtalk and inaptitude by chaining, starving, beating, and finally selling him down river. Aunt Peggy is horrified to learn ‘bout dis noo nigger bein’ sol ‘erway’ (87) and manages to get a conjured sweet potato to him just in time. The very next day, a transformed, repentant Master Jeems appears. Having suffered the “nightmare” of being the “noo nigger,” he awakens a “noo man” (98), firing Johnson and making work bearable, play possible for his lucky slaves.

Though it may be difficult to determine how the spelling of “noo” marks a different pronunciation of the word “new,” clearly it is meant to stand for a visible mark of the difference vernacular makes. The frame tale—written in standard English—clarifies the elderly ex-slave-narrator’s moral. At the beginning of Chesnutt’s story, the white couple who find Julius’s grandson careless, lazy, and untrustworthy fire the boy; after hearing about Master Jeems’s nightmare, the wife decides to give the grandson another chance. Imagining the horror of Jeems’s change from free master to abused slave makes it possible to think about the human subjectivity of blacks not only for the wife in the frame tale but also by extension for Chesnutt’s white readers as well. Exactly this boon born of racechange occurs in Finian’s Rainbow, where the racism of Senator Billboard Rawkins—played in the 1968 movie by Keenan Wynn—is punished when he is turned black and forced to experience the humiliations daily suffered by African Americans (Fig. 1.12).

Initially the bigoted master of an anachronistic Southern plantation, white Senator Rawkins had himself enforced a grotesque racechange upon his servants, one that turned proud African Americans into fawning darkies. When college-educated Howard took a job with the Senator, for example, the dark-skinned young man was taught how to act like a servile “boy.” A white staff member set himself up as a role model—a kind of imitation Negro—for the new domestic by giving “a quick course in Southern-julep-serving, based on the minstrel tradition of Dixie shuffle and exaggerated accent”: “Yousah julep, suh, Mr. Rawkins, suh, all frosted and minty—yawk, yawk!” Since a white man models black masculinity for an African American, racechange here, as elsewhere, questions authenticity, sincerity, and integrity, implying there is no single or stable racial identity. A black person is instructed to imitate a white countereffecting blacks who are mimicking . . . (A comparably vertiginous moment occurs in Douglas Sirk’s version of Imitation of Life (1959) when a white actress pretending to be a light-skinned mulatto copies whites simulating blacks.) In a fitting plot reversal, then, Finian’s Rainbow manufactures a whimsical wish (magically implemented by a leprechaun) that triggers an epidermal metamorphosis, forcing the Senator to experience the vulnerability, injustice, and fear inflicted on blacks until he eventually manages to find happiness by joining a nomadic barbershop quartet. After the rapacious, mendacious Senator is subjected to the insults of discriminatory attitudes he had himself touted, he becomes a “better person,” one who comprehends the injustice and arbitrariness of white supremacy.

As in Chesnutt’s “Mars Jeems’s Nightmare” and Finian’s Rainbow, a racechanging script operates pedagogically to raise white consciousness about American racism in Melvin Van Peebles’s movie Watermelon Man (1970). Here a white insurance salesman insensitive to racial injustice is played by (a heavily made-up) Godfrey Cambridge, who wakes up one night to the shocking realization that he has undergone a racial metamorphosis that proves to be longer and more disorienting than the “nightmare” he initially takes it to be. After various attempts at lightening his complexion fail—including milk baths that produce frames anticipating Annie Leibovitz’s photo of Whoopi Goldberg (Fig. 1.13)—Cambridge suffers the indignities some African Americans commonly experience in everyday existence. Instead of his daily run for the bus being taken as a ritual sporting event, it immediately elicits the assumption of his criminality from neighbors and law enforcement officials alike. Because of his skin color, the Job-like Cambridge loses his children, his wife, his house, his job. At the end of the film, rage against unjust persecution drives him to a mysterious room—a health club? a martial arts studio? a storeroom for janitors?—where he is last seen with a group of chanting black men brandishing mops and brooms in a quasi-African war ritual.

Precisely the advancing of racial consciousness that prompted Van Peebles’s satire motivated the racechanges of two white journalists inspired by the civil rights movement. When in 1959 John Howard Griffin—and, later, following his example, Grace Halsell—traveled through the South as an African American, he was attempting to understand the nature of racial prejudice in this country: “How else except by becoming a Negro could a white man hope to learn the truth?” (7).
In *Black Like Me* (1961), one of the first and most commercially successful instances of so-called “new” journalism, Griffin recounted his use of a treatment developed for victims of vitiligo and of a skin stain to effect a transformation that seemed to “imprison” him in the dark “flesh of an utter stranger, an unsympathetic one with whom I felt no kinship” (15), a process presumably more effective than the burnt cork that hardly disguises white James Whitmore in the 1964 movie version of *Black Like Me* (Fig. 1.14). At times experiencing the invisibility of black citizens (too unimportant to be noticed), at times the hypervisibility of black citizens (too out of place to go unnoticed), Griffin became horrified, on the one hand, by the fact that “the Negro is part of the black mass, the white is always the individual” (48) and, on the other, by the racist “hate stare” (52), a look of passionate but eerily “unreasonable contempt” (87).

After Griffin returned to his white identity so as to publicize his findings, he was hung in effigy by anonymous members of his community: “a dummy, half black, half white, with [his] name on it and a yellow streak painted down its back, was hanging from the wire” (149). Later named a “lynching” (150), this ritual sacrifice implies that befriending African Americans subjects the white liberal to their fate. Of course the death and disappearance of a number of white civil rights activists in the sixties—most famously Michael Schwerner—drove home this point. Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) makes a similar claim about white abolitionists during Civil War times: The egalitarian Edward Bodwin is termed a “bleached nigger” and his face is “shoe-blackened” by his proslavery enemies (260). About his own “experiment” in blackness, Griffin believed that according to most people “because I was a Negro for six weeks, I remained partly Negro or perhaps essentially Negro” (156). This perception helps explain both the strength and the weakness of *Black Like Me*’s journalistic experiment. For Griffin grounds his social critique on his evolving distrust of his own white privileges and of the depravity of vicious white stereotyping of African Americans; but the extraordinary popularity of a book that became a staple in junior high and high school classrooms depended upon Griffin’s assumption that he could speak for black people and the persistence of white readers in assuming black people incapable of elaborating upon their own experiences (Wald, 154).

Grace Halsell—a White House staff writer during the Johnson administration—describes in *Soul Sister* (1969) a meeting she arranged with Griffin before her own journey, first to Harlem and later through Mississippi, as a black woman. At the time, in the spring of 1968, Griffin had undergone surgery because “certain bones were disappearing” which the doctors replaced with steel (21). Jokingly categorized as “a work of art” by his surgeon, Griffin did not attribute the disintegration of his bones to the doses of trimethyl psoralen or the exposure to ultraviolet rays he used for his racechange. Nor does Grace Halsell, who follows this same procedure to darken her skin. Yet after his death, a number of obituaries implied that Griffin had been slowly killed by the process he had undertaken to “pass over”