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*“We Were Too White to Be Black and
Too Black to Be White”*

AS A YOUNG GIRL COMING of age in Fifth Ward in the 1930s and 1940s, Mary Rose Berry had a circle of friends that included people who identified as Negro and “French.” Berry lived near Frenchtown, and even attended school at Our Mother of Mercy after converting to Catholicism as a child in around 1939. Her day-to-day life included people with roots in southwestern Louisiana. But one aspect of her relationship with her friends in Frenchtown troubled her. Racially ambiguous Creoles of color could access spaces that excluded brown-skinned Mary Rose. Her lighter-skinned friends transgressed the racial boundaries enforced by legal segregation by “passing” for white temporarily. This was especially noticeable when she and her classmates used public transportation to travel downtown. Berry laughed and talked with her Creole friends while waiting for the bus in Fifth Ward. Once on board, however, the lighter Creoles headed for seats at the front, while she had to sit in the colored section in the rear. “They’d sit up there with the white people,” Berry recalled, noting that her friends pretended not to know her once they sat in the white section. “And by the time I’d pay my little money and go back, they’d turn their head to keep from speaking. . . . I mean they really did that a lot.”¹ Berry felt resentful toward Creoles of color who “wanted to pass for white” outside of Frenchtown.

As racially ambiguous people, Berry’s Creole friends employed different racial practices in different spaces. Creoles of color were legally black, and many families sent their children to segregated schools in Fifth Ward. On city buses and in other public spaces, though, some Creoles of color engaged in “discontinuous passing.” They temporarily slipped into spaces designated for white people in order to access privileges associated with white racial status.² Yet they returned home to Frenchtown and asserted a Creole

subjectivity that rejected racial binaries. Their public activities point to numerous layers of racial identification and racial practice that occurred at the local level. These identifications were a product of multiple heritages and experiences: a racial subjectivity brought from rural southwestern Louisiana, their ongoing community-building efforts in Frenchtown, their legal position as Negroes in Jim Crow society—and their light skin, which gave them racial ambiguity within the black/white binary.

Skin color influenced the countless understandings of race and status that circulated within a diversifying migration city between World Wars I and II. Black Houstonians noted that differences in skin color produced hierarchical notions of status and beauty within local communities. For ethnic Mexicans and Creoles of color, a lighter complexion could allow one to avoid the stigma associated with dark skin in a city that employed a black/white binary. This was especially significant to people of Mexican descent in the 1930s as some government agencies attempted to recategorize them as “colored.” Racial ambiguity allowed some Creoles of color to move betwixt and between black and white worlds, escaping the indignity of sitting in the back of the bus, or securing the higher wages of jobs denied to “black” workers. Others used passing to reject the racial dichotomies enforced by Jim Crow laws. Both Creoles and ethnic Mexicans learned that successful navigation of the black/white binary required careful and crafty manipulation of the logics of racial recognition and representation.

The influx of multihued groups who spoke an array of languages complicated one of the central features of a Jim Crow society—namely, the production of racial hierarchy through access to space. The wide range of physical characteristics and the variety of languages seen and heard across Houston by 1930 made a person’s race increasingly difficult to ascertain. As scholar Ian Haney-López has shown, “The construction of race thus occurs in part by the definition of certain features as White other features as Black, some as Yellow, and so on.”³ But the features of racially ambiguous people often did not match their legal racial assignment. Black Texans, Creoles of color, and ethnic Mexicans had a variety of different complexions that reflected the hybridity of their ancestries. Their physical characteristics could hinder or enable their ability to access spaces designated for white people, regardless of whether they legally had the right to enter those spaces. Furthermore, the variety of languages migrants brought to Houston meant that people with legal claims to whiteness, like ethnic Mexicans and Italians, did not always speak English like the Anglo majority. A multiethnic public operated within

the white/black public face of Jim Crow, and the diverse groups who appeared in segregated spaces made whiteness and blackness increasingly unstable visual and sonic categories.

The issue of passing and the stain of colorism figured prominently in conversations among diverse Houstonians who worried that these practices could potentially distort efforts to build group solidarity in a new place. During the 1930s, people of Mexican descent from Mexico and Texas forged community and asserted a Mexican ethnic identity through labor organizing, and through the creation of social clubs. New Negroes continued pushing for racial solidarity among all people of African descent worldwide. Activists from these communities argued that racial passing and skin-color hierarchies threatened these community-building efforts. If access to space symbolized power in a Jim Crow society, then a person with light skin who passed attained higher status than other members of his or her racial or ethnic group. Racially ambiguous Houstonians could, then, affirm or disavow racial membership (temporarily or permanently) by choosing to inhabit a particular space. Conversations on passing often centered on women, suggesting, perhaps, that women who passed would fail to pass down identity to the children they raised, leading to a loss of culture in the next generation. Skin color, therefore, influenced a person's access to segregated public spaces, but it also figured in intraracial/intraethnic discourse on hierarchy and group membership. The controversies surrounding skin color and passing highlight the complexities of racial subjectivity and racial hierarchy in an interwar migration city.

SKIN COLOR AND CASTE

Within black communities, discussions of skin color were a common part of racial discourse. Black Americans used words like *yellow* and *red* to describe some of the assorted hues found among people of African descent. In the folklore of Texas, perhaps no other woman is as popular as the one remembered as the Yellow Rose. Popularized nationwide by country-and-western singers like Michael Martin Murphy, the song is part of a romanticized origin story for the Lone Star State. According to legend, Mexican general Antonio López de Santa Anna was so enraptured by the beauty of a woman named Emily, the so-called Yellow Rose, that he failed to notice the opposing army's descent upon his camp. Sam Houston's troops won the battle, Emily escaped, and "Tejas" became the Republic of Texas.

But fewer people know the racial story embedded within the song. Some researchers maintain that Emily West was a free woman of color. The word *yellow* has been used to describe light-skinned people of African descent since the earliest days of North American slavery in Virginia, and African Americans continued using the term well after the Civil War. (A black cowboy in West Texas named Lightnin' Washington would sing a spirited song for Alan Lomax called "My Pretty Little Yellow Gal" a century later.)⁴ Emily was likely the product of sex across the color line, like so many of the slaves and free people of color described as "yellow." She was born in New York but moved to Mexican Texas, perhaps in hopes of finding less social restraint in an emerging frontier society.⁵ Once in Texas, she worked for a white man named Colonel James Morgan on his plantation in New Washington (later renamed Morgan's Point) as an indentured servant. When Mexican troops entered the area, General Santa Anna—whose own wife lived in Mexico City—chose Emily as his new mistress. Some scholars argue that a black man penned the original words to "The Yellow Rose of Texas" to express his affection for Emily:

There's a yellow rose in Texas
That I am a going to see
No other darky knows her
No one only me
She cried [*sic*] so when I left her
It like to broke my heart
And if I ever find her
We nevermore will part.⁶

Lighter skin was one of the primary markers of mixed racial ancestry. When interviewers from the Federal Writers' Project talked with a former Texas slave named Lucy Lewis during the Great Depression, they learned that her husband, Cinto, called her "Red Heifer." As Cinto Lewis recalled, "[H]er pap's name was Juan and he was a Mexican," which gave Lucy a distinct complexion.⁷ In Frenchtown, many Creoles of color had just as much European as African ancestry, if not more, and black Texans noted the light complexions of the Louisianians. "Some of them was so light," remarked Barbara Berry about her Creole classmates.⁸

Skin color could also be a divisive issue among the diverse-looking Americans counted as black. People with light and dark complexions noted instances of ostracism by other members of their race. Donaville Broussard,

a former slave from Louisiana who lived in eastern Texas, argued that his darker-skinned stepfather disliked him because of his light skin. Broussard had a white father and a white maternal grandfather, and because of his racial heritage, he and his stepfather “couldn’t get along.” Likewise, Christia Adair claimed that “[t]here was a time when Negro children who were of a mulatto color or very fair, were not looked upon and loved like children of darker skin.” Her mother, who had a white father, endured teasing and public ridicule from other African Americans. “They pulled her hair and made fun of her and used vulgar language to her,” said Adair.⁹

The sexual exploitation of women of African descent further influenced the ways that former slave societies in the Americas depicted light-skinned people, especially women. Music and films from the era often portray light-skinned women of African descent as duplicitous, hypersexual man stealers with loose morals. The stereotype is rooted in the “Jezebel” myth, which circulated before the Civil War. “Jezebel” was an enslaved black woman who was “governed almost entirely by her libido.” The “fancy trade” further tied notions of black promiscuity to a particular phenotype. In the slave market, especially in New Orleans, fancy girls were light-skinned slaves sold to affluent white men.¹⁰ The stereotypical link between women’s skin color and sexual availability could be found across the Americas. In Brazil, for instance, a popular phrase asserts that a Brazilian man should have “a white woman to marry, a mulata to fornicate, a black woman to cook.”¹¹ The Jezebel stereotype still informed portrayals of women of color in the twentieth century. In the 1929 film *St. Louis Blues*, a light-skinned woman seduces Bessie Smith’s paramour. When discussing the temptress, one character says there was “no telling what a yellow woman will do,” implying a lack of morality in women with that skin tone. Later in the film, Bessie Smith calls her romantic rival a “little red slut.” *Cabin in the Sky*, released in 1943, uses similar tropes to distinguish between two black women. Church-going Petunia Jackson, portrayed by Ethel Waters, is the exact opposite of Lena Horne’s sensual Georgia Brown, who tries to seduce Petunia’s husband. The visual contrast between the chocolate-skinned Waters and the lighter Horne visually coded these sexualized racial stereotypes for the audience.¹²

The most widespread tension surrounding skin in communities of people of African descent, however, involved accusations of skin-color hierarchy that placed lighter-skinned black people at the apex of society. Barbara Berry remembered that skin color dictated privilege in her Fifth Ward community, where Creoles of color increasingly entered black institutions in the interwar

era: "For school plays and church plays, they always got the cute, light-skinned girl with the curly hair. It always has been like that."¹³ Even without the presence of white people, Texans with varying amounts of African and European ancestry acknowledged the privileged status of whiteness when they associated lighter skin with rank or beauty. African Americans even had specific language that highlighted the link between status, economic standing, and skin color. When a black person called someone "yellow wasted," they described, "mulattos or light-skinned African Americans who failed to use their skin color to their advantage to gain social and economic success."¹⁴ Music and films of the interwar era often used skin color to signal attractiveness or desire. "Black women evil," sang bluesman Texas Alexander. "Gonna get me a yellow woman, see what she will do." In some areas, the word *black* carried a negative connotation. "Black was an insult," said Berry. "Black meant the same as a nigger." To insult one another, she recalled, she and friends would taunt one another by saying, "You old black so-and-so" as children. "We used to call each other black when we'd get mad. . . . 'You old black dog.'"¹⁵

Statements from contemporary black women, however, indicated that not all believed that dark skin was less attractive than skin that appeared closer to white. Sixth Ward native Naomi Polk praised her family's dark skin, which she credited to being "African to the bone" on her mother's side. In her handwritten memoirs, she voiced delight at her "beautiful deep chocolate brown skin." Blues singer and Houston native Sippie Wallace asserted, "I'm so glad I'm brown-skin . . . chocolate to the bone."¹⁶ These Houstonians showed pride in their dark skin even as popular films and newspapers of the time tended to focus on lighter women as symbols of black female beauty.

Celebrations of dark skin could be lost, though, in a society where corporations sold skin lighteners, products designed to whiten dark skin. Altering skin color and hair texture was lucrative business in the 1920s and 1930s, so companies profited handsomely from products that marketed light skin as the standard of beauty. The *Informer* was full of advertisements for skin lighteners. The company that manufactured the skin-lightening tonic Ko-Verra promised to make "the darkest skin look light tan, while those with tan skin look like dark white people." One advertisement quoted salon owner Mrs. Elnora Gresham, who claimed, "Since I have been using Ko-Verra many of the white ladies who come to my beauty shop say they would hardly know I am a Colored lady."¹⁷

New Negro activists and writers decried skin-color consciousness as a pockmark on black society. At a time when "race pride" became synonymous

with activism, divisions over skin color perplexed race leaders of the era. Locally and nationally, activists urged black people to abandon the skin-color hierarchy. Writer Zora Neale Hurston criticized the tendency to promote people with lighter skin, calling it black America's "dirty little secret." Hurston's novels from the 1930s frequently highlighted ways that skin color informed status and desire. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the light-skinned protagonist, Janie Starks, is often seen as an object of desire and derision because of her skin color, as is John Pearson of Hurston's 1934 novel, *Jonah's Gourd Vine*.¹⁸ Meanwhile, Cyril V. Briggs, founder of the African Blood Brotherhood, proclaimed that black people should "[k]ill the caste idea. Stop dividing the race into light and dark."¹⁹ Skin color could be divisive among people of African descent at a time when scholars, writers, and activists pushed for solidarity in order to fight Jim Crow.

Debates over skin color among people of African descent illuminate racial practices that developed within intraracial spaces. Black Americans noted the range of shades and hues that could be found within the broad category of Negro, and they often used racialized language to describe this physical diversity. Some alleged that variations in skin color produced different levels of stigma and privilege within black communities. These hierarchies were rooted in the existence of a Jim Crow society that placed white over black by constantly defaming blackness and privileging whiteness, and they informed relations between people who were legally members of the same race.

Conversations about skin color in the interwar era were not limited to black communities. People of Mexican descent had varying amounts of European, Indian, and/or African ancestry, which produced differences in skin color, and physical appearance could affect their ability to access the privileges of white status. Ethnic Mexicans with darker skin could be marked as nonwhite—and, therefore, subject to segregation—more easily than their lighter peers. A. D. Salazar, a business owner in Magnolia Park, discovered this while driving through Texas. During a stop for food in the town of Gonzalez in the late 1920s, an Anglo woman served Salazar, but not his dark-skinned companion. "We don't serve Mexicans. We'll serve you but not him," she told him. Salazar countered that both he and his friend were Mexican, but the darker man received service only when Salazar asked, "Listen, do you take Mexican money?"²⁰ Whatever legal claims to whiteness ethnic Mexicans possessed, segregation was often a matter of local practice—and sometimes depended upon the shade of one's skin—rather than official classification.

Texas Mexicans recognized that people with light skin could avoid some of the discrimination their darker peers faced. As historian Neil Foley notes, "Some light-skinned middle-class Mexican Americans had always been able to gain admittance to, if not outright acceptance in, Anglo society."²¹ Born to a Tejano family that had migrated to Houston, Carmen Cortés knew that her white skin and light hair color helped her land a job at the Solo-Serve store. "They couldn't tell that I was a Mexican until I said my name," she said of Anglo business owners she encountered.²² Cortés's features perhaps helped her land a job at city hall. A coalition of business owners and activists worked to find an ethnic Mexican woman who could successfully apply for a clerical position downtown. A group of Mexican American activists, including members of the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), held a series of meetings regarding the lack of Mexican American women working at city hall, and they decided to find a candidate who could be hired. On September 1, 1941, Cortés became the first ethnic Mexican woman to work in city hall.²³ The woman with light brown hair and eyes was less prone to attracting negative attention from those Anglo Houstonians who may have harbored anti-Mexican sentiment, so Cortés's physical appearance likely aided her selection.

Organizations founded by ethnic Mexicans in the late 1920s and early 1930s tackled the topic of skin color over the next decade as they negotiated Mexicans' place in the racial hierarchy. One of the city's first organizations for women of Mexican descent, El Club Femenino Chapultepec, grew from the Young Women's Christian Association. The YWCA was a segregated organization; black and white women attended meetings at two different branches. When they began joining in the late 1920s, Mexican American women entered the white branch. Eva Perez, an employee at the chamber of commerce, talked to the YWCA about creating a club for Latinas after seeing that no social organizations for ethnic Mexican women existed in city. The Anglo women initially balked at the idea of letting ethnic Mexicans use the facilities, and they cited religion as the primary reason for their hesitation. They wondered if Catholics fit into the organization's structure, although, as one ethnic Mexican woman asserted, "Catholics are the original Christians." A group of northern-born administrators took the issue to the board, however, and allowed the Catholics to join. The ethnic Mexican women created a subgroup within the white branch that they called El Club Femenino Chapultepec in the early 1930s.²⁴ (See figure 6.)

The women of El Club Femenino Chapultepec always insisted that they never meant to cause any trouble when they gathered to write a letter about



FIGURE 6. El Club Femenino Chapultepec at Sam Houston Park. Melesio Gómez Family Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

their status as ethnic Mexican people living in Houston, but in 1936 they created a scandal that rocked the regional offices of the YWCA and revealed the tenuous place of people of Mexican descent in Houston. During one of their weekly meetings at the YWCA, they decided to air their grievances about life in Houston. Estela Gómez, the secretary, took notes. Over the next six months, the women continued to meet and talk, and these conversations resulted in a letter that listed their concerns. “We wrote the letter down so we ourselves knew what we had to face in our community and what we had to do to improve the situation,” Gómez said. “We wanted to do something for ourselves and our families.” The result was a ten-point manifesto that became known as the “Letter from Chapultepec.” The letter discussed ethnic slurs and cultural issues like negative portrayals of Mexican people in popular films.

The tenth point of the manifesto related directly to ethnic Mexicans and the question of color. People of Mexican descent, they wrote, “are called ‘brown people,’ ‘greasers,’ et cetera and of course want to be called white.”²⁵

Chapultepec's final issue spoke to how skin color could complicate ethnic Mexicans' place in Houston. The law categorized them as white, but the people coming into the city from Mexico and other parts of Texas often had multiracial ancestry that was reflected in the wide array of skin colors found in ethnic Mexican communities. The term *brown people* marked them as a nonwhite group, which could hurt their claims to whiteness in a place that considered anyone with African roots "colored."

Chapultepec was not the only ethnic Mexican organization to stress whiteness in the 1930s; the League of United Latin American Citizens, founded in Corpus Christi, Texas, in 1929, also made racial categorization part of its political project. LULAC is often deemed an "assimilationist" organization by modern scholars, and its members tended to assert a white racial identity. The designation *Latin American* in its name further allowed them to link themselves to whiteness, since *Mexican* was a racial designation in places like South Texas.²⁶ In an article from 1932, Tomás A. Garza described Anglo Americans and Latin Americans as "two GREAT PEOPLE, both descended from the White Race."²⁷ Likewise, in an article titled "Are Texas-Mexicans Americans," another LULAC writer asserted that "the Latin-Americans (Mexicans) who first braved and tamed the Texas wilderness" were "the first white race to inhabit this vast empire of ours."²⁸ By using a historical argument, LULAC members demonstrated that they considered themselves as a white ethnic group.

Ethnic Mexican organizations in the 1930s frequently mentioned Indian ancestry, which they did not see as a detriment to their ability to claim racial whiteness. LULAC members often discussed their Indian heritage with pride. Frequent contributor Rodolfo A. de la Garza wrote an article for *LULAC News* in 1932 in which he asserted that people of Mexican descent shared "the blood of cultured Aztecs and fierce Apaches, the reddest blood in the world." At the same time, he told fellow Mexican Americans that "in your veins races the hot blood of adventurous Castilian noblemen, the whitest blood in the world." A month later, de la Garza wrote another article, called "Our School Children," which argued that Mexican American children should not be segregated into separate schools in the Rio Grande Valley because of Indian ancestry. "Regardless of the amount of Indian blood in our children," he wrote, "the law has proclaimed them white!"²⁹ For de la Garza, indigenous heritage did not damage claims to legal whiteness.

Being marked as nonwhite could translate into being defined as "colored," especially in places that relied on a white/black dichotomy for racial

classification. Federal and local agencies attempted to group ethnic Mexicans into the same category as African Americans during the Depression. In 1936, the U.S. Census Bureau instructed employers to categorize ethnic Mexicans as “colored” on birth and death records. LULAC lobbied the federal government, which eventually reversed the decision. When one LULAC member detailed how the organization found out about these attempts to mark ethnic Mexicans as nonwhite, he joked that they had found “‘the nigger in the woodpile.’”³⁰ One year later, a white tax collector in Wharton County revealed that he’d been instructed by the White Man Union—a local political organization—to count Mexican Americans as colored. The White Man Union also forbade Mexican Americans to vote or participate in nominating candidates for county offices. LULAC investigated the situation and argued that it was illegal to use “Mexican” to distinguish a race of people. “It is generally conceded that the word ‘race’ on poll tax receipts is put there to distinguish the black (or colored) and white races,” wrote a LULAC member in the *LULAC News*. The writer also noted that the governor of Texas, James Allred, when he was the state attorney general, had “rendered a decision to the effect that all persons of Mexican or Spanish extraction are recognized by law as belonging to the white race.”³¹ “Mexican,” they argued, was not a racial category, but rather a group that could exist within the spectrum of whiteness.

White status signified more than the psychological benefit of racial superiority in a caste society. Whiteness meant access to more political and material benefits. White Texans could vote. White Texans were not lynched or executed in electric chairs at the same rate as black Texans. White children attended better-funded schools than black children, since Negro schools received between 5 and 17 percent of the total funds earmarked for school improvements in the city. White students enjoyed swimming pools, Bunsen burners, and typewriters not available in black schools.³² When ethnic Mexicans in Houston and eastern Texas asserted that they were white, then, these declarations were efforts to avoid the same stigma that black Americans faced. They observed that black people occupied the bottom rung of society, and they were not eager to join them. People of Mexican descent living in eastern Texas, therefore, had to negotiate racial blackness.

LULAC constantly stressed that “colored” and “Mexican” constituted two different racial groups, and they worked to ensure that the law did not conflate the two. “[T]o be associated with blacks or any other dark race was considered ‘an insult,’” writes political scientist Benjamin Márquez.³³

Assertions of whiteness constituted both a political strategy to avoid legal segregation and a desire to distinguish themselves from a group that was legally restricted from accessing the same rights as white people. To avoid segregation, Mexican Americans had to prove that they were white and not colored; therefore, racial categorization as “white” was a fundamental part of their activism. LULAC activists argued that, as Americans of Mexican descent, they were still racially white.

In Houston, then, claims to whiteness rested on proximity to blackness, which made skin color a delicate topic. Brown-skinned ethnic Mexicans faced difficulties entering white spaces, since Anglos associated dark skin with “colored” status. This range of skin colors present in both ethnic Mexican and black communities often complicated race and hierarchy in Jim Crow Houston.

PASSING AND GROUP SOLIDARITY

Houstonians living in black and ethnic Mexican communities of the interwar era discussed a public phenomenon associated with race and space—the act of passing. When people “passed,” they allowed others to believe they were members of another racial or ethnic group in order to avoid discrimination. Passing could occur on different levels. For people of African descent, passing allowed them to circumvent the black/white color line when they entered the racialized spaces created by segregation laws. For ethnic Mexicans, passing enabled them to evade local practices that marked people of Mexican descent as inferior to Anglos. As Houston diversified, a person’s ability to pass could be based on visual and sonic markers of race and ethnicity.

Since the legal establishment of Jim Crow at the turn of the century, racially ambiguous Houstonians had economic incentive for crossing the color line. For example, after a 1908 city council ordinance Jim Crow-ed the vice district called the Reservation, economic concerns likely encouraged a prostitute named Thelma Denton to break segregation laws. Denton ran a house of prostitution populated with white and black women, and she ignored the 1908 law that forced sex workers of different races to operate in separate houses. The justice of the peace and an army of constables raided the Reservation in 1909, arrested Denton and twenty-five other black women, and charged them with vagrancy because they refused to move into segregated residences. The twenty-six women sued for their right to integrate and

lost. Using census data from 1910, one historian has remarked that the Reservation had been thoroughly segregated after the raid. Yet when census taker E. G. Norton met Denton at her residence that year, he noted that she was white, as were the other occupants of the house. Only a year before, though, she had been listed as “colored” in a city directory. Apparently Denton found a way to earn more money. Rather than submit to Jim Crow and earn less money, Denton passed for white.³⁴

Racial passing in black society was largely an urban phenomenon in the Jim Crow era, and linked to narratives of migration from rural to urban areas. Rural locales had fewer social spaces where races met, and people tended to know one another’s family histories. But when racially ambiguous people migrated from areas where their family had lived for generations, they had the opportunity to create new narratives for themselves.³⁵ Houstonians in the interwar era noted the presence of racially ambiguous people who could access “white only” spaces. Writers for the *Informer* drew attention to the phenomenon when the newspaper began circulating after World War I. Cimbee issued a typically tongue-in-cheek commentary on passing that also incriminated beauty-business entrepreneurs who profited from the sale of skin lighteners. In 1924 Cimbee claimed to have burned his face while using Madame Nobia Franklin’s skin bleach. A French ocean liner had come through the ship channel, and since only white people were allowed to visit, Cimbee used Franklin’s cream to become white enough to see the spectacle.³⁶

Creoles of color from rural southwestern Louisiana noted the existence of racially exclusive urban spaces, but some could choose whether or not to reveal their African ancestry when they ventured outside of Frenchtown. Inez Prejean learned to negotiate seating on public transportation in Houston as a young woman. The Prejean family identified as a mixture of races; however, Jim Crow laws in Houston divided the city’s institutions and public spaces along a black/white binary. After moving to the Bayou City in 1927, Inez’s mother told her children to always sit in the rear, since they were black by law. One day Prejean boarded a streetcar and made her way to an empty seat in the rear, as her mother had instructed her to do. Seeing the fair-skinned, dark-haired young woman in the “colored” section, the white conductor instructed Prejean to move forward. When he realized that the passenger spoke French-accented English, he explained that white people sat in the front. The Prejean family lived in Frenchtown in Fifth Ward, where she attended a “colored” school in the neighborhood; however, Inez realized that she could navigate the city’s segregated interracial spaces outside of Fifth

Ward most easily as a white woman. From that day forward, she sat in the front section with white people. Reflecting on Prejean's tenuous place in Jim Crow Houston, an African American teacher in Fifth Ward told her she was "too black to be white and too white to be black" in a city that segregated residents along that very racial dichotomy.³⁷

Racially ambiguous Houstonians could also exploit the fact that whiteness had become more difficult to determine using visual cues. The multiethnic reality that existed within Houston's black/white binary allowed some people to more easily transgress the racial line created by Jim Crow. By law, the category of "white" did not include just Anglos, but also ethnic Mexicans and European immigrant groups like Jews and Italians. Since all of these diverse groups had legal claims to whiteness, it was increasingly difficult to determine what "white" looked like. An olive-toned Italian who attended a white public school could be darker than a black student who enrolled at a segregated school for colored children. That visual instability gave racially ambiguous people an opportunity to pass for a member of another group. Creoles of color like Prejean possibly had an easier time entering white spaces in Houston because of the presence of groups who were legally white, but darker than Anglos. After all, if an Italian American, a light-skinned black Texan, a Creole of color, and an ethnic Mexican boarded a bus in Fifth Ward, could a bus driver distinguish between who should sit in the front and who should occupy the rear, based solely on visual cues? The Anglos charged with making these decisions in public spaces tried to avoid falsely accusing a white person of being black. In the 1930s, one person told an interviewer that Anglo southerners "are pretty careful before they call a person a Negro." The same individual also acknowledged that the people who enforced Jim Crow laws especially gave people from other nations the benefit of the doubt. "I look somewhat like a foreigner," he said, "so I can get by without a great deal of trouble."³⁸ The growth of migrant populations who had legal access to white space made it easier for racially ambiguous people of African descent to transgress the color line.

Some black Americans used ethnic Mexicans' legal claims to whiteness to their benefit. Langston Hughes, who emerged as a top figure in the Harlem Renaissance literati in the 1920s, knew that Mexicans' white legal status, and his own light skin, could allow him to shirk segregation in Texas in the early twentieth century. Hughes was raised in Kansas, but his father left the family and moved to Mexico to escape racism. As a child, young Langston took the train from the Midwest to Mexico City to visit his father, and the route took

him through Texas. During one of his first trips with his mother and grandmother, in around 1906, the black family could not purchase hot food from the dining car when they were hungry because of racial restrictions. When returning home from a summer in Mexico City as a teenager, however, Hughes found a way to access white accommodations. Hughes recalled, “[T]he only way I could purchase sleeping car space after I crossed the border into Texas was by pretending to be Mexican.” The young man ignored the Jim Crow signs and asked for a berth by speaking Spanish. He “also ate in the diner all the way across Texas by pretending not to speak English.”³⁹

In the cases of Inez Prejean and Langston Hughes, their ability to pass was based on sonic, as well as physical, characteristics. Anglo Americans marked race through sound as well as skin color. Some observers claimed, for example, that they could discern distinctive qualities associated with sonic blackness in the timbre of classically trained Marian Anderson’s voice when she performed opera.⁴⁰ Race was not just visual in Jim Crow America; it was sonic. Racial ambiguity, then, could arise from the way a person spoke. Prejean’s French-accented English may not have seemed “Negro” to Houston bus drivers who had little experience with Creoles of color from southwestern Louisiana. When Hughes passed for ethnic Mexican, he played on the fact that some Spanish speakers could enter spaces legally reserved for white people in parts of Texas. For example, El Club Chapultepec organized within the white YWCA, and ethnic Mexican children attended white schools. Although administrators separated them from Anglo students, they were not barred from entering those schools. Hughes’s ability to pass for Mexican did not entirely rest on his light skin and wavy hair, but also depended upon his success at speaking Spanish (or at least pretending to not know English).

While light-skinned black Americans may have used ethnic Mexicans’ legal white status for their own benefit, some ethnic Mexicans passed as members of other ethnic groups. Migrants from rural Texas and immigrants from Mexico realized that a hierarchy existed between the groups recognized as white, and that some non-Anglo white people may have faced less discrimination in the 1930s. The authors of the 1936 “Letter from Chapultepec” voiced concerns that anti-Mexican prejudice made some disavow Mexican roots and pass for a different ethnicity: “Mexicans in [a] desire to get ahead have at times denied their nationality by calling themselves French, Italian, and Spanish,” they wrote in the letter. Some felt that they would receive better treatment if Anglo Houstonians believed they belonged to a European ethnic group. Mexican-born Catalina Gómez Sandoval recalled that her

light-skinned brother, Paul, had an easier time in school than she did. The Sandoval family claimed Scottish and Spanish ancestry; her paternal grandmother was a redhead, her mother had reddish-blond hair, and the rest of the family was “very white.” Their classmates thought Paul was Jewish, so he faced less taunting at his multiethnic school. (His darker sister told everyone she was an Aztec princess who knew the location of Montezuma’s treasure).⁴¹ Jews and Italians certainly faced forms of discrimination, but in the 1920s, when anti-Mexican backlash intensified and politicians pushed for deportation, Sandoval thought her brother’s Jewish appearance gave him advantages at the white school.

In order to avoid the stigma associated with Mexican heritage, some ethnic Mexicans preferred to socialize exclusively with Anglos and avoid Spanish-speaking Houstonians. Estela Gómez thought a fellow student resisted forming relationships with other people of Mexican descent because of the stigma of Mexican ancestry in Texas. In the late 1920s, the only other Mexican American girl at Sam Houston High besides Gómez socialized only with Anglo students and dated only Anglo boys. “She just separated herself from any contact with any Spanish-speaking person,” Gómez recalled.⁴² Spanish-speaking youth faced exclusion from other students within white public schools, so her classmate perhaps felt that she could best avoid discrimination by distancing herself culturally and socially from a recent immigrant like Gómez.

As the accounts from ethnic Mexican migrants and the articles from the *Informers* indicate, Mexican Americans and African Americans often focused on women when discussing the phenomenon of passing. People from both groups discussed women who passed on Main Street in downtown Houston to gain access to certain businesses, for example. Janie Gonzales alleged that only certain ethnic Mexicans could find employment on Main: “One Mexican girl [worked] on Main Street. One. And she was married to an Anglo. And she didn’t want to be a Mexican.” A 1929 edition of the “Passing Parade,” a weekly gossip column in the *Informers*, warned, “If certain Houston women, of light or fair complexion, don’t stop ‘high-hatting’ members of their race and stop trying to pass on Main, the Parader is going to talk out in public! Selah!”⁴³ The comments from black and ethnic Mexican Houstonians emphasize the exclusive nature of the Main Street shopping district. For black readers of the *Informers*, gendered comments about passing intersect with the publishers’ activist goals. Stores were sites of conflict between black female shoppers and white employees in the Jim Crow era. C. F. Richardson had lobbied for a black

department store throughout the 1920s and asked readers to patronize black stores so black women would not face insult; his peers fought segregation and degradation through autonomy in their own communities and institutions. New Negroes demanded respect as black people, but African Americans who passed seemed to disrupt that activist project. Racially ambiguous women could avoid public degradation and gain access to white space by allowing people to believe they were white, but that act of individual advancement did not contribute to community activism that would aid all women of African descent who traversed the city's segregated spaces.

New Negroes and ethnic Mexicans frequently linked women's decision to pass with an abandonment of their race and community. For descendants of enslaved southerners, this tendency may be linked to the history of sexual exploitation of women of African descent by white men, and the subsequent creation of multihued families led by those black women. Anglo-American laws in places like colonial Virginia established that a child's race followed its mother in the 1600s. Generations of black women raised their mixed-race children in black communities, took them to black churches, and enrolled them in black schools. If a light-skinned woman left that black community for white circles, the children she bore also lost the communal ties that led a spectrum of light and dark people in the United States to identify as Negroes. Women of African descent who could potentially bear and rear children that did not identify as black became the focus of fictional narratives about passing. The central question of Oscar Micheaux's *Veiled Aristocrats* is whether Rena Walden will continue living as a white woman in South Carolina or marry her black boyfriend and return to the black race. Likewise, the 1930s version of *Showboat, Imitation of Life* from 1934, and *Pinky* from 1949 also focus on light-skinned women who pass for white against the wishes of darker family members, and in each film, racially ambiguous women of color engage in relationships with white men. *Pinky* further depicts the main character's decision to pass for white as a disgrace to her race. Aunt Dicey, played by Academy Award nominee Ethel Waters, tells Pinky that she has denied herself "like Peter denied the good Lord Jesus."⁴⁴

New Negro activists of the interwar era discussed passing as evidence of a lack of racial solidarity. *Informer* contributors characterized passing as one way that black people "are continually pulling apart and working untiringly, insidiously and incessantly against each other." According to one article, three to four hundred thousand "light-colored Negroes" passed for white in every section of the United States. The newspaper also acknowledged the

local version of that story, which may have alluded to Frenchtown: “Then, aside from this large number who are really ‘passing for white’ and getting by with it, a large colony who seem to think that they are white—who will not speak to members of their own race in public places and who paint and powder their faces to such extremes that they look like Mardi Gras celebrators or Hallowe’en prankers.”⁴⁵ The allegation that some light-skinned people did not acknowledge African Americans in public may have resonated with people in Fifth Ward. Indeed, some Creoles’ ability to transgress racial borders caused problems with the black friends they made. The act of passing weakened community ties for Mary Rose Berry and her lighter neighbors. After watching her classmates sit at the front of the bus in the white section, Berry did not feel friendly: “When we’d get off the bus downtown, then they’d want to start talking with me. And I would just keep walking.”⁴⁶

Anger over passing also stemmed from New Negroes’ project to uplift black heritage. Being a descendant of slaves gave most black people in the United States a collective racial subjectivity, which was central to African American political strategy since the antebellum abolitionist movement. But people who passed for white complicated those notions of solidarity and group struggle. African Americans of the interwar era responded to white supremacy by stressing their pride in black heritage in Africa and the United States. They emphasized the accomplishments of former slaves in the most dire conditions. Black Houston leaders veered toward cultural, economic, and political autonomy and stressed Negro pride. Two of the most prominent *Informer* writers, editor Clifton F. Richardson and Simeon B. Williams, discussed black achievement in music and culture. Articles spotlighted black self-government across the world, from the elected government officials in the African nation of Liberia to the Mississippi town of Mound Bayou, a place “founded by a Negro, developed by Negroes and governed by Negroes.”⁴⁷ New Negroes’ interest in a broader, multilingual, transnational black world epitomized the worldview that had been shaped by the experiences of migration and urban community building in communities made up of diverse people of African descent. Even the names of popular music venues in interwar Houston, like the Ethiopian Café and Club Ebony, emphasized an international, diasporic sense of black pride. Activists stressed unity between the diverse people living in their neighborhoods. The leisure activities and cultural celebrations and social/political groups formed by migrants were efforts to build community; therefore, New Negroes considered conflict over skin color and passing to be disruptive to those projects.

The political and poetic assertions of New Negroes—from Clifton Richardson and Langston Hughes to Cuban-born poet Nicolas Guillen—emphasized group struggle and solidarity despite differences in skin color, language, or national origin. An awareness of the African diaspora permeated the racial rhetoric of New Negroes in these diversifying urban spaces. As different groups of people with African ancestry made contact with rural migrants from the South in U.S. cities, some members made attempts to include one another in their racial appeals. When Langston Hughes wrote poems like “Brothers,” he emphasized kinship across national boundaries.

Hughes and other writers of the era stressed the mutual struggles faced by people of African descent.⁴⁸ Similarly, Spanish-speaking New Yorkers from the Caribbean made ties with black southern migrants based on ancestry and the similar forms of discrimination they faced as African-descended people. One Cuban publication referred to New York transplant Nicolas Guillen as “El Mulato Guillen,” a description that referred to his mixed racial background. Guillen stressed that mixed heritage in the poem “La canción del bongó,” which alluded to a “*mulata de africano y espanol*.” These references indicated his racial hybridity as a person with Spanish and African ancestry, yet Guillen formed a close association with black Americans, who he felt shared a diasporic connection.⁴⁹ At the same time, curator Arthur Schomburg, an Afro–Puerto Rican who moved to Harlem, collected items for the New York Public Library that pertained to people of African descent from around the world. Over the course of the 1930s, he served on the education committee of the Ethiopian World Federation, received visitors from Haiti, spoke at the eighth anniversary banquet of the Yoruba Lit and Debating Club in Harlem, and took a trip to Cuba earlier that decade to procure materials pertaining to black history on the island nation. Other members of his community, which had previously served as headquarters of Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association, considered the race problem—or race pride—to be an issue that didn’t end at the U.S. border. In 1936, an African Methodist Episcopal church in Harlem hosted a Sunday-afternoon discussion of “the Africans and the Latin American and South American Negroes and their contribution to civilization.” By referring to people living on other continents as “Negroes,” the New Yorkers defined racial blackness in transnational terms. They hailed from different parts of the world, but African ancestry linked them racially.

The African nation of Ethiopia, which had successfully trounced Italy’s colonialist ambitions in the Second Italo-Abyssinian War of 1935–36, figured

prominently in New Negroes' construction of a transnational blackness. The Universal Ethiopian Students Association met at New York's Abyssinian Baptist Church to discuss the topic "African vs the Imperialist Powers" in October 1935, just one month after the conflict between Ethiopia and Italy erupted in warfare; and two years later, Harlemites held a fund-raiser for Ethiopian war refugees.⁵⁰ In an era when people of African descent worked to convey pride in African-descended people, then, racial passing seemed to confirm the privileged, superior status of whiteness. When the *Informer* remarked about the "large colony who seem to think that they are white," the comment suggests that these particular Houstonians were threatening the diasporic sense of group cohesion that New Negroes stressed.

But the act of passing exposes the multiple racial subjectivities that could exist among the diverse people legally categorized as "black." Indeed, some people with African ancestry disagreed with New Negroes' construction of racial blackness. Louis Fremont Baldwin, a mixed-race Californian and self-proclaimed "Exponent of Yogi Philosophy," created a stir by wondering in 1932 whether "there exists to any substantial number among the so-called Negroes, an actual Negro." When his peers, including a Jewish rabbi, accused Baldwin of "denying his race," he responded, "I deny being a Negro myself." Baldwin believed that sexual and cultural mixing with other groups, including Europeans, had eliminated the black race and created new groups in its place. According to Baldwin, "miscegenation and the adoption of customs and habits, dress, language, religion and all else alien to him as a Negro, has completely de-Negroized him."⁵¹ Blackness was not an essentialized idea for Baldwin; he chose to stress hybridity rather than believing that anyone with any amount of African ancestry was a Negro. His assertions point to the different definitions of racial blackness that circulated in the United States.

From the perspective of racially ambiguous people with African ancestry who did not identify as Negro, passing could be transgressive—a way to circumvent the "one-drop rule." Some people with African ancestry argued that passing, as well as the popularity of skin lighteners, did not indicate a desire to be white, but rather signified their desire for better economic opportunity. Segregation forced them to choose when in public spaces, so they chose white because of the associated privileges. The Reverend W. P. Stanley, a black man, argued that the act of passing and the use of cosmetic products to lighten skin and straighten hair should even be applauded because they pointed to black economic aspirations. Stanley noted that "these practices of bleaching one's skin, straightening one's hair and 'passing for white' are praiseworthy efforts

to improve one's appearance and to secure pecuniary benefits for one's family."⁵² For Stanley, passing was largely an economic attempt to gain the material benefits that the white power structure withheld through the enforcement of racial categories.

Some racially ambiguous people did not regard passing as a rejection of black roots or of racial solidarity, but instead saw it as a defiance against a system that shored up white supremacy by denying mixed racial subjectivities. Creoles' ambivalence toward passing demonstrates their distinct racial subjectivity. What some African Americans perceived as a denial of black ancestry was, for others, a rejection of a black/white racial binary and an assertion of their racial hybridity. As historian Grace Elizabeth Hale argues, passing was "the ultimate resistance to the racial polarities whites set at the center of modern American life."⁵³ By ignoring the "one-drop rule," racially ambiguous people with African ancestry defied Jim Crow and exposed the socially constructed nature of race. The Creoles of color who migrated from Louisiana identified as a combination of races; however, Jim Crow laws did not acknowledge hybrid racial identities. Since they did not consider themselves members of the black race, they did not consider the act of occupying white space as a denial of racial membership.

These conflicting opinions over passing highlight the fact that "Negro" did not have one static definition, even in an era when Jim Crow laws determined racial status. The migration of diverse people of African descent into urban spaces meant that people who had different definitions of blackness made contact. New Negroes posited a transnational definition of blackness that included everyone with African ancestry. But while activists like C. F. Richardson saw passing as evidence of a lack of racial solidarity, racially ambiguous people may have viewed the act as transgressive. Creoles of color considered themselves a separate group; for them, blackness was not just a matter of African ancestry. Their distinct racial subjectivities informed the way people from different places defined themselves.

Creoles of color who passed did not necessarily do so on a full-time basis. The Creoles who lived in Frenchtown, for example, ultimately did not choose to live their entire lives as white people. Passing was not always a permanent condition, then. A Creole worker might allow her employer to think she was white; but at the end of the day, she returned to Frenchtown because of kinship and social ties. The fact that some members of the same family varied in skin color undoubtedly influenced some people's decision to live near a black community and send their children to black schools rather than trying to

mix permanently into white society. The Prejean family, for example, contained some members who were frequently mistaken for white and others who had darker complexions. When a brown-skinned cousin accompanied the Prejean children downtown, people assumed that she was the black maid. "They would ask her if she was babysitting," Inez Prejean said. If some of the Prejeans had decided to continuously pass for white, their decision would have affected familial relations with their darker kin.⁵⁴ Discontinuous passing likely appealed to racially ambiguous people who did not want to permanently lose ties to their families and communities. Living in Frenchtown allowed for the maintenance of kinship networks; Frenchtown provided a place where Creoles of color could speak French, practice Catholicism, and live near people with a similar racial subjectivity.

By contrast, continuous passing, the act of permanently identifying as white, resulted in a form of social death.⁵⁵ Louisiana Creoles of color had worked to create their own communities; they tended to marry one another, and they maintained cultural and social practices that fostered their group subjectivity. Permanently passing for white would require them to sever ties with Creole communities and culture. Instead, Creoles of color built institutions in the community of Frenchtown to preserve what they had brought from Louisiana. The people who "looked white" but lived in Frenchtown chose ties with other Creoles of color over passing on a permanent basis. Likewise, the ethnic Mexicans who chose to live in Segundo Barrio or Magnolia Park, even when they could "pass" as Italians, made a similar decision.

Since they lived near black Houstonians, and often sent their children to black public schools, Creoles of color who engaged in discontinuous passing in public spaces risked public exposure by African Americans who knew them. Cimbee acknowledged that risk in a typically part-humorous, part-scathing take on people of African descent who crossed the color line. To people who passed on public streets, Cimbee warned that others might expose them as nonwhite: "[Y]u is runnin' er grate big ris' 'cauze awl de black fokes ain't lak me, whut ef dey meets yu w'en yu is passin' fer w'ite an' try ter play lack yu doan see 'em, dey'll walk rite up an make yu no 'em, an dat mought be er' li'l 'barrassin'."⁵⁶ Racially ambiguous people who lived near black Houstonians may have had less success with discontinuous passing because black Texans recognized them from places like Fifth Ward. Although Cimbee only joked about exposing racially ambiguous people as black, this situation did occur in some real situations. Victorien Prejean won a job reserved for a white man at the ship channel at the onset of World War II;

however, black workers spotted him one day on the job and alerted management that he was nonwhite. His supervisor promptly fired him.⁵⁷ It is also possible that Prejean did not lie about his race, but rather that his supervisor assumed he was white when they met. A person's ability to "pass" involved physical appearance and language, but also behavior and deportment in segregated public space. Anglo Texans expected black men to conduct themselves in a deferential way by stepping aside on sidewalks or removing their hats in the presence of white people. So, when a racially ambiguous person made eye contact with a white person or strode boldly through downtown, he may not have been suspected as a Negro. As a Creole of color, Victorien Prejean may not have carried himself in the way that white Texans expected from black men.

Their spatial practices illustrate Creoles' different levels of racial identification. Prejean lived in Frenchtown with other people who shared his racial subjectivity as a Creole of color. Yet this community of Louisianians sat near an older black neighborhood, so the spaces he occupied shaped his racial experience in Houston. Living in close proximity to black people in Fifth Ward marked Prejean as nonwhite even more so than his African ancestry. Although his skin, hair, and demeanor possibly convinced a white employer that Prejean was not African American, the black men who recognized him considered him a Negro because they likely saw him in Fifth Ward. People from both sides of the Sabine River met at work, made contact in local institutions, and sometimes lived next door to one another. In 1930, Yancy Strawder, a twenty-six-year-old black Texan who moved to Houston from San Jacinto County to work for the Southern Pacific Railroad, bought a home on Josephine Street next door to Clay and Eva Chevalier, who came from a plantation-owning Creole of color family in St. Landry Parish, Louisiana.⁵⁸ At work, men like Strawder worked with Creoles who had been recruited by the railroad. And in the public schools Crawford Elementary and Wheatley High, Creole and black Texan children took classes together. Creoles often operated within black spaces; therefore, black Houstonians saw them daily, and they often formed friendships. Mary Rose Berry's observations on city buses show that she had ties to the Creoles of color she met at school. Those spatial relationships help explain why black Houstonians often considered passing as an act of betrayal.

At the same time, some ethnic Mexicans portrayed Houstonians who passed for another ethnicity, or who associated only with Anglos, as traitors who disowned their Mexican heritage and shunned other people of Mexican

descent. Janie (Gonzales) Tijerina felt that some Mexicans would come to the country and then turn their backs on other ethnic Mexicans. She had helped some immigrants get apartments and a foothold in their new country, but she felt that “once they [get] a little money, and have a home, intermarriage with Anglo people, things like that, they forget about the things that you did for them, you know.”⁵⁹ Immigrants’ denial of Mexican ancestry in favor of better treatment in an Anglo world seemed to suggest that Mexican heritage was worth hiding.

For Tijerina and the women of Chapultepec, ethnic Mexicans who passed for a member of another group, or associated only with Anglos, threatened their community-building efforts. They founded organizations that pushed to end discrimination, created new neighborhoods that had not existed in 1900, and established churches that included members from both sides of the Rio Grande. These acts distinguished them from other migrant groups who claimed racial whiteness in the city. At one point in Houston history, people of German descent outnumbered ethnic Mexicans. But by 1940, Germans did not maintain German-specific institutions that marked particular parts of the city as “German space.” In other words, Germans did not maintain distinctive neighborhoods for the preservation of language, culture, or religion. But ethnic Mexicans did. In the process of building neighborhoods, churches, and social/political organizations, they established ethnic Mexicans as an identifiable group in Houston.

Like Creoles of color, then, ethnic Mexicans enacted multiple layers of group identification. But while the Louisianians asserted that they were a separate race, people of Mexican descent emphasized racial and ethnic memberships. They consistently asserted that they were racially white, but they simultaneously advanced a Mexican ethnic affiliation. Ethnic Mexicans created a sense of community based on Mexican ancestry and shared experience in a new place. The anger that some felt about passing shows that they had developed a group subjectivity that would inform their appeals for equality.

Their labor-organizing work at the ship channel in the 1930s offers one example of how ethnic Mexicans in Houston fostered group solidarity. When they accepted jobs at the docks—the place responsible for the city’s postwar economic ascendance and subsequent population boom—ethnic Mexicans entered a historically contested space. The Great Depression exacerbated tension between workers from different backgrounds. Black men won the majority of the longshoring jobs, which angered white workers. A committee organized in 1936 reported that white longshoremen obtained only 30 percent of the

work in Houston and 15 percent in Galveston. One white man complained that he had to make do with membership in a Banana and Green Fruit Handler's Local rather than longshoring. Fruit handling paid less than longshoring work, and white men bristled at the thought that they "had to carry bananas on their backs to make a living" while black men earned higher wages.⁶⁰ In 1939, the Houston City Council issued a resolution that encouraged ship owners and stevedores to give half of the work in the port to white men.⁶¹ Violence intensified the dangerous atmosphere of the docks in the 1930s. Workers toiled under the guard of machine guns that had been mounted on the docks to keep order during a 1931 strike.⁶² Two years later, a union leader named Ralph Landgrebe whipped a black man, and when word of the attack reached the superintendent of one of the lines employing the man, the superintendent shot Landgrebe, leaving the union leader with a permanent limp.⁶³ Longshoremen witnessed virtual warfare at the ship channel in that decade because of strikes and racial tension.

The increasing presence of ethnic Mexican workers further complicated the already volatile balance of race, space, and labor at the Houston ship channel and other Texas port cities like Galveston, Texas City, and Port Arthur. As early as 1915, longshoremen in Texas City complained of competition from Mexican workers, arguing that they were not "American citizens, nor fit subject to become such."⁶⁴ Racialized notions about bodies and labor could also have affected ethnic Mexicans' ability to gain a foothold as longshoremen. Some Anglos doubted that men of Mexican descent had the physical prowess to perform the job. For example, one Anglo writer argued in the 1930s that ethnic Mexicans were better suited for cotton picking because that job "requires nimble fingers rather than physical strength, in which he cannot compete with the white man or the Negro."⁶⁵ Longshoring was physically demanding work. It required men to lift extremely heavy loads under the blazing hot Houston sun. In a society where some people assumed that people of Mexican descent were physically smaller than Anglos or African Americans, stereotypes about bodies and physical prowess could dictate the type of labor a person could obtain.

Fear of ethnic Mexican dockworkers acting as scabs during a Depression-era strike, however, eventually convinced some Anglo men to incorporate them into their local. Labor competition at the docks in Houston and Galveston drove a wedge between black and Anglo men, but led to awkward attempts to include the growing number of ethnic Mexican workers. Some Anglos, like fruit handler Tom Hency, decided to unionize with men of

Mexican descent. Hency belonged to the ILA's Banana and Green Fruit Handler's Local, organized in 1934. He asserted that "the Mexican was a whole lot more decent man than the Negro."⁶⁶ Part of his animosity toward African American workers stemmed from black men's numerical dominance in longshoring. Thinking his Anglo/Mexican coalition could compete with black men, Hency considered his local his last chance to salvage a job for himself during the Great Depression: "If we let this union fall through our jobs will go to the Negroes."⁶⁷

The Houston ILA also began to incorporate ethnic Mexicans in 1934 by establishing a branch for them. The resulting Local 1581 consisted of ethnic Mexican compress men, warehouse men, and cotton-yard workers—all jobs that paid less than deep-sea and coastwise longshoring jobs, which usually went to black men.⁶⁸ The local was not part of the "mainstream" ILA that was numerically dominated by black longshoremen. The ILA mandated that when a local received a job too large to be filled by its membership, the local had to turn the extra work to other union men; however, black and Anglo men in Houston locals often chose to hire nonunion labor rather than give the work to ethnic Mexican workers.⁶⁹ In local practice at the ship channel, their legal status did not give ethnic Mexican men advantages over the black men, who enjoyed a statistical majority.

Black workers may have been reluctant to accept ethnic Mexican workers as longshoremen because they feared labor competition. When he visited the city in 1930, scholar Lorenzo Greene spoke with black Houstonians who told him that the ethnic Mexicans claimed the jobs that once went to African Americans. He asserted that the "the only labor which Negroes have a real hold on here is loading and unloading ships."⁷⁰ Longshoring was one of few occupations that still provided steady employment to black men during the Great Depression, which may have decreased African Americans' incentive to organize with Mexican American men at the ship channel. Labor competition also drove some black Houstonians to support the forced deportation of ethnic Mexican people from the United States. In 1929, the *Informer* carried a headline that read "Deport Mexicans in Large Numbers Says Labor Agent." The full story focused on Houstonian C. W. Rice, president of the Texas Negro Business and Laboring Men's Association and editor of the *Negro Labor News*, and his efforts to secure work for black laborers on farms and in industries where Mexican deportation had left some jobs available.⁷¹ In total, about two thousand ethnic Mexicans experienced deportation from Houston during the Great Depression.⁷²

The persistent denial of work at the docks soon caused ethnic Mexican laborers in Local 1581 to organize as a group. In 1939, members drafted a letter to the district convention asking them for assistance in this matter. The writers referred to themselves as “Latin Americans,” a choice that one historian has called an effort to “emphasize their whiteness” and citizenship status while dissociating themselves from the Mexican immigrants portrayed so negatively during the era. These efforts, though, failed to produce any labor equity for Mexican Americans at the ship channel. Mexican workers lacked the numbers or the history of union activism that kept African American longshoremen secure. Anglo men were more concerned with maintaining their own supremacy than ensuring fairness for ethnic Mexicans.⁷³ Regardless of national origin, ethnic Mexicans showed solidarity when denied access to work by Anglos and African Americans. The efforts of Local 1581 illustrate how ethnic Mexicans established group solidarity in the 1930s. The organization stressed their racial whiteness, but also affirmed their shared Latin American heritage. Furthermore, their shared status in a discriminatory climate influenced them to band together to fight against the bias they experienced. Their subjectivity was shaped by ancestry, the color line, and local racial practices.

The women of El Club Femenino Chapultepec articulated a similar construction of racial and ethnic subjectivity. They viewed their Mexican heritage as a marker of ethnicity, but they still saw themselves as white when it came to the color line. When Estela Gómez first moved to the city, she knew no English and felt like an outcast in the Anglo-majority schools she attended. Her isolation led her to seek ways to build community with other Latinas, which is why she joined Chapultepec. “The community in Houston was small,” said Gómez. The YWCA offered specialty clubs, and a group of Anglo women in the business department tried to recruit Mexican American members. They declined, however. “We did not join them because we wanted our own,” Gómez stressed, “because we don’t even know each other.” The women could have organized with Anglo women, but they chose to meet by themselves in order to build community among themselves. They also decided to conduct official business in Spanish, which excluded English-speaking women in the YWCA. At the time, the ethnic Mexican population of Houston was scattered across town, and the first members of the club represented at least several different neighborhoods and two nations. Members lived in Magnolia Park, Segundo Barrio, Fifth Ward, and the Washington Avenue area of Sixth Ward. About half of the members of

Chapultepec had been born in Texas, and the other half had come from Mexico with their parents.⁷⁴ The club gave them a forum and a way to forge bonds based on Mexican ancestry and their experiences in Houston.

Ethnic Mexican groups also built community in the 1930s using cultural production. While New Negroes made racial solidarity and diaspora a key aspect of their art, ethnic Mexican organizations like El Club Femenino Chapultepec used cultural performances like dances and pageants to stress the importance of Mexican culture and forge community among Spanish-speaking people who lived in communities spread across the city and who hailed from different nations. For them, white did not mean Anglo; there was room within the spectrum of racial whiteness for Mexican culture. Chapultepec emphasized Mexican heritage instead of anglicization. The name the group chose for themselves and the functions they supported reflected their desire to be linked to Mexico. "They wanted something typically Mexican," recalled Carmen Cortés. *Chapultepec*, a Nahuatl word, refers to a hill outside of Mexico City and the site of a battle in 1847 during the Mexican-American War. "We decided on 'Chapultepec' because we were Mexican American and we wanted to keep our culture, not lose it," asserted Estela Gómez.⁷⁵ In addition to political appeals, the women organized cultural festivals, like hosting suppers and parties with Mexican food and celebrating events associated with Mexican history. With the YWCA's backing, they sponsored parties on Mexican holidays.⁷⁶ Chapultepec was the first organization in Houston to host Cinco de Mayo and 16 de Septiembre celebrations in 1932. They made friends with other women in the YWCA, and they even invited Anglo members to their banquets. Mexican cultural events and the use of Spanish allowed ethnic Mexican women to carve out a portion of the YWCA for themselves.

Chapultepec's Cinco de Mayo and 16 de Septiembre celebrations in 1932 were performances of citizenship that reflect some gradual change in Anglo depictions of Mexican culture. Held in City Auditorium, these holiday celebrations displayed Mexican heritage in a way that Anglos could see and consume.⁷⁷ Anglo journalists covered both events in local newspapers, and their comments showed a marked difference from depictions of Mexican cultural practice than had appeared a decade earlier. While the *Post* wrote disparaging accounts of Mexican Catholics in 1922, Anglo coverage of the festivities a decade later focused on positive aspects of Mexican culture. One journalist wrote a historical description of the meaning behind Cinco de Mayo, explaining the significance to an audience with little to no knowledge of Mexican

holidays: “In Houston’s ‘Little Mexico’ dark eyes flashed and men walked proudly Thursday as they recalled the battle of Puebla.”⁷⁸ The article noted a physical characteristic that Anglos mistakenly assumed all ethnic Mexicans shared—dark eyes—but by covering the event, the journalist showed more acceptance of Mexican culture in Houston. The spatial movement of the celebration out of Mexican-owned venues in Segundo Barrio signaled the event’s movement into Anglo consciousness. Chapultepec’s celebrations of Mexican heritage also showed Anglos that Mexican Americans would not abandon the Mexican cultural practices they brought with them to Houston.

The women of Chapultepec sought to establish a place for Mexican culture within the broadening spectrum of racial whiteness. Historian Matthew Frye Jacobson argues that between passage of the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act and World War II, Italian, Greek, and Jewish Americans succeeded in claiming white racial identity. According to Jacobson, the “culture-based notion of ‘ethnicity’” replaced the older idea that they represented racially distinctive groups. As more people in the United States came to view Italians, Greeks, and Jews as white, these groups defined their differences by culture, and therefore ethnicity, rather than biology. By asserting racial whiteness, while holding on to a Mexican ethnic identity constituted through cultural practice, El Club Femenino Chapultepec attempted to follow a similar path. They argued that they were ethnically Mexican but racially white.⁷⁹

Chapultepec’s insistence upon speaking Spanish at meetings and celebrating Mexican holidays distinguished them from LULAC, whose members argued that they should exclusively speak English and celebrate U.S. holidays instead of Mexican ones.⁸⁰ In a 1932 article in the *LULAC News* called “The Glory of American Citizenship,” a writer argued, “American citizens of the United States should cease to observe the holidays of Mexico and join heartily in observing the holidays of the United States.”⁸¹ Filiberto Tijerina, who changed his name to Felix after moving from Mexico to Houston and marrying Janie Gonzales of Sandyfork, served as president of Houston’s LULAC, and he later led the national organization after World War II. Tijerina insisted that his children speak English and did not allow them to speak Spanish in their home. At the restaurant he and Janie operated on Main Street, the Tijerinas catered to an Anglo clientele in the area known for its “white only” businesses. His restaurant was not exclusively a community-building space for ethnic Mexicans, but instead served as part of a larger effort to introduce Anglos to Mexican food as a way of smoothing relations between the groups.⁸²

Tijerina used positive depictions of Mexican culture to appeal to Anglos who had used cultural difference as the basis for discrimination in the 1920s. Mildly seasoned dishes would introduce Anglos to Mexican food, while being served by Mexican people in a clean facility could improve their image in Anglo minds.⁸³ (At the time, few local Anglos had eaten Mexican food. The culinary staples found in Segundo Barrio households would have baffled most Houston natives. A newspaper article from the 1930s, for example, described tortillas as “cornmeal flapjacks” to an audience that had little familiarity with the food.⁸⁴) Improving relationships with Anglos was a goal of an organization that Tijerina joined in 1933, a men’s organization called Club Cultural Recreativo México Bello. Organized in 1924, México Bello was “strictly a recreational club” launched by local business owners like A. D. Salazar and men who worked for the Southern Pacific Railroad. Members chose “Patria-Raza-Idioma” (homeland, race, language) as their motto, and declared that their intent was to “*hacer un México chiquito en el extranjero*” (create a little Mexico abroad). The *Houston Chronicle* reported in May 1933 that “the primary purpose [was] the promotion of a better understanding between Mexicans and Americans.”⁸⁵ Because Houstonians and people across the Southwest watched the growth of the ethnic Mexican population with apprehension, activists like Tijerina worked to show native-born white people that ethnic Mexicans could be contributing citizens to the United States. For Tijerina, Anglo acceptance was powerful. After all, Anglo cultural domination was an intrinsic part of the version of white supremacy found in the western South. Since 1836 the language and legal traditions brought west by Anglo Americans had largely dominated the political structure of Jim Crow Texas.

Chapultepec, on the other hand, represented another mode of acculturating to Houston—one that resisted conforming to Anglo standards. By remaining separate, Estela Gómez and other members of El Club Femenino Chapultepec could organize around issues that specifically pertained to the ethnic Mexican population in Houston. Their interests in local affairs transformed Chapultepec from a social club into a political club, which brought suspicion from the federal government. After writing their manifesto in 1936, the women of Chapultepec initially received the support of the Anglo leaders in the YWCA. Their sponsor, Olive Lewis, felt proud of their work and even signed the letter herself. When the letter found its way to the regional office of the YWCA in Macon, Georgia, however, some white administrators felt the letter was inappropriate for a social club. Estela Gómez recalled that

administrators said they “shouldn’t be complaining about anything of that sort” because “our business was just recreation and activities for recreation.”⁸⁶ More problems arose when the African American branch of the YWCA discovered the letter and used it for their own purposes. “They heard about our [i.e., ethnic Mexicans’] problems and they said, ‘We have some problems, too,’” said Estela Gómez of members of the black branch that contacted her. “You did a great thing writing all of those things down.” The African American women asked club officers Cortés and Gómez if they could publish the letter in their organization’s magazine, the *Occasional Papers* (“a quarterly publication for Negro [YWCA] branches”), and they agreed.⁸⁷

The Anglo leaders of the national YWCA bristled at the attention. The ethnic Mexican women’s stance against segregationist practices showed that they would not blend into the mainstream. Olive Lewis lost her job after the YWCA learned of the letter. Gómez’s worst fears were confirmed in late 1937, when federal agents began shadowing her. Two men from the FBI visited her at her family’s restaurant on Washington Avenue. “They asked a lot of questions,” Gómez recalled. “‘Do you believe in God?’ ‘What schools did you go to?’ ‘Who are your friends?’ ‘What organizations do you belong to?’ I was kind of scared.” She realized that the FBI had questioned her neighbors when someone asked her if she was a Communist. “We were just wondering,” the neighbor reported, “because somebody wanted to know. They came in and asked me.” Gómez saw FBI agents parked across the street from the restaurant from 1937 until 1941. The men always treated her respectfully, but they asked “scary questions.” Since she would not obtain U.S. citizenship until 1945, their interrogation may have been especially frightening for an immigrant woman unsure of her status in the United States.⁸⁸

The work of Estela Gómez and El Club Femenino Chapultepec in the 1930s and early 1940s further illustrates how notions of race in the interwar era were influenced by the legal color line, a plethora of cultural and spatial experiences, and understanding of ancestral heritage. People of Mexican descent joined the same branch of the YWCA as Anglo women in Houston because they were white according to the black/white color line, but their experiences with local discrimination in Houston led them to use that organization as a platform to fight against those slights. Chapultepec also acknowledged ethnic differences between themselves and Anglos when they decided to meet together as a group without Anglo women, speak Spanish at meetings, and host Mexican-themed festivities. Gómez was part of a cohort that strove to connect Houston’s diverse ethnic Mexican population through

cultural celebrations that linked them to a shared Mexican heritage, while they simultaneously pushed to be legally counted as white. For them, racial whiteness was broad enough to include ethnic Mexicans.

The conversations surrounding passing, skin color, and group solidarity further reveal the multitude of racial constructions that circulated in a migration city during the interwar era. Both ethnic Mexicans and New Negroes fostered solidarity based on transnational notions of group membership. For ethnic Mexicans, this entailed building community among people of Mexican descent who hailed from either side of the Rio Grande. When light-skinned ethnic Mexicans dissolved ties to other Spanish-speaking people, though, some viewed the act as a betrayal that threatened those community-building efforts. “Passing” was, therefore, a central concern for the people working actively to build an ethnic Mexican presence in Houston. For New Negroes, the push for solidarity necessitated counting all people of African descent—irrespective of language, hue, national origin, or how much European ancestry one claimed—as members of the black race who should unite to defeat Jim Crow, colonialism, and versions of white supremacy that existed across the globe. Yet people with African ancestry who passed for white constructed racial blackness in different terms. Some saw the act as a way to advance themselves economically or to temporarily attain additional privileges of whiteness. Others considered passing a rejection of the black/white binary that did not acknowledge their mixed racial subjectivity. These contrasting views highlight the myriad notions of subjectivity, the multitude of ethnic and racial heritages, and the evolving racial practices that informed a person’s place in a city where diverse groups made contact.

