Racial Funambulism, Retribution, and the Erection of an-Other Order: Seminal Black Nationalist Discourse in Iceberg Slim’s *Trick Baby*

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The mid-1960s to the early part of the 1970s saw the rise of artistic and political efforts associated with the Black Power Movement in the United States. During this period, increasingly provocative imagery and rhetoric were broadcast in a bid to expose the racial exclusivity of tropes and narratives associated with American democracy (such as the American Dream), advance black self-determination, and foster a Black Nationalist consciousness. And while it is both inexpedient and impossible to homogenize the diverse and, at times, contradictory strains of what came to be designated Black Nationalist discourse of the period,¹ it could be distinguished from the discourse of the Civil Rights Movement by its messages and rhetoric of non-conformist militancy and retribution against – what was codified to be – systemic white supremacist structures and governmental policies. Advocates and opponents of Black Nationalist arts and ideology are similarly familiar with the messages and images disseminated by newspapers such as the Nation of Islam’s *Muhammad Speaks* and the Black Panther Party’s *The Black Panther*, the poetic and philosophical works of Black Arts Movement proponents such as Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, and Haki Madhubuti, and the fiction of writers such as John Oliver Killens. However, little scholarly attention has been paid to the widely popular but highly controversial writings of the onetime pimp turned street-philosopher Iceberg Slim (Robert Beck).² While Slim’s work has been cited as a prominent influence of contemporary “gangsta” rap music and culture,³ there has been insufficient scrutiny of his relevance to Black Nationalist discourse of the period. In particular, *Trick Baby* presents a notable instance of Slim’s negotiation of critical issues regarding strategic black essentialism⁴ and performativity, while also featuring a radical employment of the theme of retribution.

Originally published with Holloway House in 1967, Iceberg Slim’s *Trick Baby* and the autobiographical *Pimp* constitute Slim’s earliest published work. These seminal texts thus reflect the incipient endeavors of Slimian counter-discourse to establish and substantiate a social reality
aesthetically alternate, and ideologically antagonistic, to the dominant order upon which Slim’s ensuing publications build. Indeed, the issues that are raised in both titles serve not only to map the ethical, ideological, and aesthetic coordinates of the Slimian narrative universe, but also to raise and explore thematic concerns that persist throughout subsequent works. Specifically, these fundamental topoi relate to prevalent themes from Black Nationalist discourse and include: a preoccupation with exposing the hegemonic disenfranchisement and demonization of African-American peoples, explicit attacks against what is framed to be white supremacist structures and attitudes, and the celebration of certain normatively criminalized occupations as avenues toward black social mobility. Set in Chicago’s underclass and underworld milieus of the 1940s-1960s, Trick Baby presents a curious case of reverse racial passing in which a putatively white male character ascribed with mainstream “Hollywood” traits of masculine beauty identifies with and embraces the black criminal underclass. The protagonist is revealed to be a product of miscegenation and his various exploits throughout the text, mostly involving a kind of racial “tightrope-walking” or funambulism, enable him to operate as an agent of retribution against the white American bourgeoisie and elites of the ruling order. Drawing from the theoretical foundations of critical race theory (including passing discourse) as well as Lacanian and post-Lacanian psychoanalysis, the present study seeks to achieve two related goals: (1) to examine and structurally delineate the ways in which Slim’s transgressive mediation of racial hybridity/funambulism and performativity operates to establish an aesthetic, ethical, and ideological register that aggressively contests – what is staged as – the dominant white order; and (2) to explore the implications of Slim’s appropriation of Black Nationalist ideas and tropes.

Performativity, as a key component of the emergence of Black Nationalist consciousness, involved a kind of strategic black essentialism. In “How the Conjure Man Gets Busy,” Rolland Murray notes that “black nationalists construed performative modes of cultural identity as the locus of their politics … From the movement’s inception Black Power advocates stressed that the new nationalism necessarily depended upon affirming African American identity as the primary grounds for countering white American nationalism” (299-300). Referencing the pronouncements of prominent black rights activist of the period James T. Stuart, Murray describes the key difference between Poststructuralist and Black Power perspectives regarding the function of performativity:
Poststructuralist models such as Jacques Derrida’s notion of citationality and Judith Butler’s concept of performative parody imply that human identity is as mutable as discourse itself, but Black Power ideology insists that nationalist language steer blacks toward identities that are more true to the black subject’s originary essence. (307)

This identificatory essentialism took various forms. From the Pan-Africanist embrace of African names, symbols, and clothing, to the formulation of quasi-scientific theories promoting the biological superiority of peoples of African descent in texts such as Malachi Andrews’ *Psychoblackology* (Murray 300). While adhering to the fundamental practice of privileging blackness over whiteness, the ways in which the protagonist of *Trick Baby* is portrayed to negotiate the “color line” represents a radical departure from these above-cited and recognizable permutations of strategic essentialism.

That the protagonist of the novella is described to be intelligent, beautiful, and white is critical to Slim’s counter-discursive handling of strategic black essentialism in *Trick Baby*. Revealing an exploitative reflexivity towards the white supremacist dogma of the “one-drop-rule” of racial designation, this Byronic hero is featured to be borne of a “light-skinned mulatta” into an underclass black community. Contemptuous of whiteness and yet dreaded and repudiated by his black peers because of his outward appearance, the protagonist is eventually accepted into the powerful underworld coterie of black “hustlers.” Accordingly, his quest for social and racial acceptance forms the basis of the narrative’s drama; and the issues that emerge in *Trick Baby* are largely appendant to his mediation of racial and criminal identifications within and against the (hyperbolically) delineated cross-section of American society in Slim’s text. Because the issues raised in relation to the protagonist’s endeavors to consolidate an identity are also connected to the mutability of the ways in which (racial) identity is catalogued, it is necessary to consider some of the critical tenets of the extensive discourse of passing.

As a transgression of juridical and socio-cultural boundaries, the phenomenon of racial passing is historically associated with one of the means by which slaves escaped situations of bondage and subordination during the American Antebellum. Based upon Manichean difference,
conventional or “common-sense” notions of passing generally interpret the passing body as appropriating a fraudulent identity that conflicts with a putatively essential or authentic self. Insofar as the act of passing is interpreted as an index of a covetous desire to access material and social franchise enjoyed by the “counterfeit” (privileged) identity, such notions reductively situate the passing body in a position of de-privilege. In *Dislocating the Color Line*, Samira Kawash observes:

The one who passes is, in … common understanding, really, indisputably black; but the deceptive appearance of the body permits such a one access to the exclusive opportunities of whiteness. Common sense dictates that passing plays only with appearance and that the true identities underlying the deceptive appearances remain untouched. This has been the accepted understanding of passing, both on the part of social scientists who attempted to study the phenomenon and literary critics who sought to understand the significance of literary representations of passing. (125-126)

In psychoanalytic terms, Kawash’s insights into the identity politics of the “color-line” can be understood in terms of the referential intersection between ideology and the Symbolic order. To begin with, the “common-sense” or “common understanding” to which Kawash refers is of course none other than the apprehension of social reality as mediated by the Symbolic order (or “big Other”). Hence, social Symbolic “reality” – which, in this case pertains to the mainstream American context of the period – provides the criteria through which racial identity is assigned in terms of varying degrees of “blackness” and “whiteness.” This polarization is effected through the systemic deployment of phantasmatic narrativization which ascribes certain features/characteristics to each racial designation for the purpose of differentiation and comparison. The taxonomical narratives thus instituted are also elevated as “objective” or “universal” criteria in the same capacity “Science,” “Mathematics,” or “History” are established as “objective”/”universal” modes of phenomenological and ontological apportionment. Because the phantasmatic narratives which buttress Symbolical specifications of race also operate as the (usually dissimulated) support of presiding ideological formulations, this discourse is also informed by a moral, societal, and political hegemony that privileges individuals who are deemed “white.” In consequence, those failing to qualify as “white” within this system are also
politically and materially de-privileged, as well as being morally demonized or otherwise denounced: the passing figure, because s/he cannot be definitively codified by this Symbolic framework, indexes that site where Symbolical operations fail – that “hole” or aporia in the web of its signification. Subsequently, this non-identity is imputed with a Symbolic unity that the passing body either exceeds or fails to fully assume – that of blackness or whiteness.

The racial non-identity of the protagonist in *Trick Baby* is epitomized in the opening “Preface” of the novella in which Slim first meets the protagonist. The “Preface” of *Trick Baby* attempts to establish a sense of documentary verity by furnishing a fraternal affiliation between its narrator (here featured as the “character” Iceberg Slim) and the narrative voice that relates to the rest of the tale (purportedly belonging to the protagonist): Slim is “nervously pacing cell A-4 in Chicago’s House of Correction” when a prison guard pushes in “a tall white con [who] could have been Errol Flynn’s twin” (*Trick Baby* 9). Apart from his alleged beauty, the stranger (who now emerges as the protagonist) presents a forlorn and demure demeanor; an affectation that seems to transfix Slim:

He didn’t speak. He nodded. I nodded back. He stood for a moment sweeping his sky-blue eyes over the crummy cell. He sighed and jumped to the top bunk. (*Trick Baby* 9)

So that until the beautiful stranger speaks, we encounter (along with Slim the narrator) through our understanding of and conditioning to the unspoken codes of *de facto* societal apartheid, a sense of uncertainty and fascination at the palpable peculiarity of this scene. Needless to say, what is curious or “inappropriate” here is the pairing and juxtaposition of the notorious black pimp with the winsome Byronic – manifestly white – figure. Significantly, however, while this sense of cultural and social impropriety is assuaged as the protagonist articulates his “identity,” our fascination with him is in fact augmented. In an attempt to induce the stranger into exposing himself (since at this point, Slim believes that he is a “fink” masquerading as a convict), Slim alludes that, like all the other whites he had encountered, the protagonist was somehow associated with the police. This provocation elicits a response not wholly anticipated:
I said, “I’m Iceberg. You look slightly familiar. It worries me, because the only white studs I know are rollers [police officers] and bastard undercover rats. Who are you buddy?”

He turned quickly on his side and looked down at me with a hurt look on his handsome face.

He laughed like a nut and said, “Relax, Iceberg. I’m not white. I’m a Nigger hustler. My friends call me White Folks. My enemies call me Trick Baby …” (Trick Baby 9)

In his reply, the protagonist, whose “legitimate” name is Johnny O’Brien (the appellation least frequently assumed by him in Trick Baby), affiliates himself both with the black underclass and with a criminal aesthetic. All five short sentences expressed to countervail Slim’s insinuation disavow (the protagonist’s own) whiteness in an iteration of a black identity that is credible and attractive qua the underground vernacular. As such, the protagonist simulates an alignment between his gaze and Slim’s – who is already visibly black, a pimp, and derives his “moniker” (street-name) from being as “cool as an iceberg.”

Also in this opening exchange between Slim and the protagonist, are established two symmetrically related thematic/denotative oppositions that persist throughout, and structure, the rest of the narrative. The first consists of a quasi-deconstructive reversal of the black/white opposition whereupon blackness acquires the dignity of privileged signifier. This reversal is primarily contingent upon the successful administration of the second opposition; namely, that the material or specular appearance of the protagonist is set up as diametrically antithetical to his verbally articulated (self)-representation. The symmetry in these two structures lies in the way in which the visibly desirable “white” protagonist identifies, through his voiced avowal, with the black counter-Symbolic agenda governing Slim’s narrative universe. Indeed, it is highly consequential that the protagonist is openly welcomed by the white supremacist elite of the ruling order, yet repudiates their corrupt embrace and strives instead to win approval of, and inclusion in, the black underworld. So that despite being a “six-four blond white [man who is a] … dead ringer for Errol Flynn” (Trick Baby 36), the protagonist cleaves to the titular blackness conferred upon him by the Slimian counter-discourse through constant declarations of his blackness coupled with exaggeratedly performative displays of behavior associated with that
register. The explicit installation in the narrative of an hermeneutic antagonism between specular and verbal modes of subject(ive) representation, thus operates as a powerfully subversive instrument for overturning and inverting those binarisms that underpin—what is textually represented as—the white supremacist ontology of dominant discourse. Subsequently, in *Trick Baby*, Kawash’s above-cited “common sense” logic of passing is also radically upset: unlike the traditional passing narrative which sees the passing body assuming white subjectivity and privilege, the passing figure in *Trick Baby* takes pains to aver an “authentic” or convincing black identity at the outset of his provocative (mis)conduct on both sides of the color-line.

As discussed above, “common sense” representations of racial identity *vis à vis* the dominant Symbolic order ultimately rely upon the polarization of blackness and whiteness in order to support a particular social and ideological hegemony. This was characteristically so within the spatio-temporal setting in which the narrative is framed (Chicago circa 1940s-1960s), where the divisive and debasing force of the color-line was keenly experienced by those enframed by the signifier of blackness. Elaine Ginsberg, in “The Politics of Passing,” maintains that post-Antebellum/Abolition situations of racist divisions in American society were not abrogated, but, rather, reformulated to be less visibly overt and in most cases actually exacerbated (7). Indeed, explicating the socio-economic and historical conditions that gave rise at once to the criminal underclass and Black Nationalist movements of the period, Matthew Hughey notes:

> After slavery, reconstruction, and Jim Crow, few opportunities existed for legitimate black male social mobility. The combined social forces of poverty, unemployment, family disruption, and isolation from mainstream [white] civic participation still defined the context for many residents in poor, inner-city neighborhoods. These forces effectively disallowed, or at least greatly constrained, social mobility and worked to create … a ‘code of the street.’ (36)

What Hughey refers to as the “code of the street” is dramatized by the criminalized identities that people all of Slim’s fiction as well as the literature and poetry of other black “rogue” or pulp-fiction authors of the period. In *Trick Baby*, however, while it becomes plainly apparent that the antagonizing and polarizing dimension of the color-line is preserved, the ideological and social
hegemony directing dominant Symbolic codes of racial representation is reversed. This reversal is discernibly operative from the outset: with Slim’s opening remark to the protagonist that all whites are “rollers and bastard undercover rats,” the “us versus them” parameter allows only for orientations of being that may be catalogued as such. This inversion of white into black xenophobia aggressively assaults the paternalistic structures of power in America that install, along with normative “truths,” standards of irreconcilable racial separateness validated by phantasmatic narratives that insidiously de-privilege or demonize non-white identity. Indeed instances that reveal an angry cognizance towards the inequalities issuing from dominant mainstream policies and unspoken social codes are salient throughout the text. For example, in Chapter Eleven of *Trick Baby*, in seemingly unconnected musings about the impending Second World War, the protagonist’s mentor and “partner-in-crime” Blue Howard maintains:

“White Folks, America has to go to war. There’s going to be a white man’s world war to retain white wealth and power.

“You’ll be eighteen years old your next birthday. America, the model of democracy and equality has two armies. A black one and a white one… Folks, there isn’t anything more precious than your life. I’m your friend. If I let them, they’re going to draft you into their nigger army. (*Trick Baby* 158)

Here, mirroring a prevailing attitude harbored by Black Nationalists of the era, the familiar pretexts associated with America’s involvement in the Second World War – concerning the “liberation” of the “Free World” – are displaced by Blue’s racially polemicized counter-narrative. Moreover, the black Blue (as one of the patriarchs of the Slimian cosmos) conveys a benignly paternal concern for the protagonist that seemingly contrasts with the treacherous hypocrisy of the “white man’s world.” In other words, Blue positions himself here as the protagonist’s champion against the racial injustices of the ruling order that would no doubt see through to the latter’s “hidden” blackness. Apart from engaging our sympathies and/or fascination, perhaps the most significant outcome of these inversions is that they produce an ironic mirroring of the normalized-sanitized “white world.” In applying the Hegelian dialectic of the “topsy-turvy world” (*die verkehrte Welt*) to explain the caricatured reversals in Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*, Slavoj Žižek observes that:
In Žižek’s reading of Swift’s text, the reversals featured in its “topsy-turvy world” (where humans serve horses and tiny Lilliputians are endlessly occupied in nugatory disputes) mirror our own conceits and inanities. Through creating a fantasy-world which mocks our own, Swift’s text estranges us from our mirror-image: we might at first laugh at the petty belligerence of the Lilliputians and the haughty pretentiousness of the horses, but suddenly we are caught up in the recognition that the invertedness of the topsy-turvy world is always already the invertedness of our own world. Likewise, the racial/racist inversion in Trick Baby operates to highlight the dissimulated or generally unquestioned structures of racial hegemony extant in the presiding social order. However, unlike Swift’s highly parodic codification of his social disapprobation, the Slimian universe is delineated in starkly politicized terms; withholding no overt rebuke of dominant white culture/ideology. And this universe is a universe that is set up as a “real” (actual) – and “the Real” – realm rather than simply a figurative construction. In other words, this dialectical reversal of the status quo in Trick Baby works not only to estrange us from the dominant (white) discourse but it also canvasses our participation in the “alternate” reality it creates.

What is at stake here, and, mutatis mutandis, in all of Slim’s published fiction, is the substantiation of an ethical and aesthetic register that not only opposes dominant ideological structures, but at least within the Slimian narrative genus, supplants the discursive site of the normative in favor of a Black Nationalist agenda. In Trick Baby, what guarantees the efficacy of this project of strategic essentialism, is that it involves more than a reflexive opprobrium of the Master narratives of the period; Slimian phantasmatic counter-narratives prescribe not simply an opposite ontology to dominant ideology, but an alternative aesthetic that is not always explicitly based on race. For example, again via Blue’s macro-social reflections, we discover another doxastic “universal” subversively inscribed in this social-ideological register; this time pronouncing a social divide between those who are duped (“suckers”) and those in control (“grifters”) of the intersubjective economy. Upon his entry/acceptance into the black
underground, the protagonist is relocated to Blue’s mansion where the latter imparts to his latest disciple the *unwritten* codes of “the con.” At the end of the first day of schooling, the protagonist is happy and excited at the prospect of applying his newfound knowledge. Blue, however, inculcates upon him the “con code” – the statute of socially discriminating between “suckers” and “grifters” – as well as a grave warning about the consequences of its violation:

He said, “I forgot something important that you must remember until you are six feet under. Folks, there are only two kinds of people in the whole wide world, grifters and suckers.

“You’re going to be a grifter, I’m certain of that. The secrets of the con are priceless. Every grifter is surrounded by … charming, likeable suckers… But Folks, a grifter true to the con code never likes a sucker enough or lets the sucker come close enough to get the secrets of con… Folks, you know I think a great deal of you. But if you ever violate the con code, I’ll hate your guts. I swear it! (*Trick Baby* 126)

Subsequently, although the machinery of racial discrimination is reversed in *Trick Baby*, and predictably it is generally the case that whites are often the “suckers” who are swindled by the schemes hatched by Blue and the protagonist, *skin color is not always indexical of this differentiation*. More specifically, those (visibly) black characters who succumb to, subscribe to, or enforce the regulative policies of the (black and white) mainstream are condemned in accordance with the counter-discursive *modus vivendi* set up in the narrative. This is evidenced, for example, in Blue’s contempt towards conservative bourgeois and religious blacks. When the protagonist and Blue are fleeing gangsters they have swindled, they chance upon Blue’s “boyhood chum … from the same town in Mississippi,” the “Reverend Josephus” – a street drunk whose conversion to religious fanaticism irritates Blue more than his erstwhile dipsomania. The idiotic Reverend provides them with sanctuary, but rather than being grateful, Blue is disgruntled at having to receive asylum from someone like Josephus. Blue laments:

“Goddamnit! I taught myself to read and write, and speak fair English. I had a horror of winding up like the ignorant niggers I grew up with. (*Trick Baby* 59)
According to this figuration, “ignorant niggers” (including religious, middle-class, or otherwise “domesticated” African-Americans) are “suckers: lesser beings because they are duped by the white/dominant Symbolic order, and/or exist to maintain its status quo. However, what is perhaps most notable (and controversial) in the Slimian ideological edifice as it is borne out in the narrative, is the specific form of its punitive condemnation of those characters characterized a “racial traitors.” This is exemplified in the particular status conferred upon African-American police detective Dot Murray. More reviled than “ignorant niggers,” black agents of the Law are identified as occupying the lowest or most despised caste in the Slimian social/ethical/aesthetic register. In our first encounter with the minatory character, he is already “standing in the gloom” ([Trick Baby] 12). Within the following pages, as he attempts unsuccessfully to coerce Blue and the protagonist, Dot is alternately described as a predatory animal (“crafty,” “hyena,” “mad dog,” and his jagged teeth made his mouth look like the open jaws of a famished shark”), a “manic-depressive,” a pejoratively framed queer identity with a “fruity, soprano voice,” and he is also associated with capitalistic avarice and corruption (with a grin “as wide as a corporation”) ([Trick Baby] 12-18). Further, as Dot “slithered over the leather seat” to face the two hustlers, it is recorded that:

> His spotted hands were splayed out on the table top. Puddles of dirty yellow had started to wash out the brown pigment. It was hard to believe they had once been dark brown.

([Trick Baby] 13-14)

What is equivocal here is not the textual condemnation of Dot for his membership in the invidious ruling order, but rather that his grotesque contemptibility of character is associated through juxtaposition with the increasing “[p]uddles of dirty yellow [that] had started to wash out the brown pigment.” There is in fact no patent explanation given in the text for the salient representation of Dot’s physical affliction. Instead, the tangible appearance of receding or “corrupted” blackness is prescriptively re-presented alongside Dot’s evident lack of racial “knowledge” that constitutes the social currency required by Blue and performed by the protagonist. Thus is conveyed the impression of whiteness as a disease that not only erodes one’s ethical/psychical constitution, but literally seeps through the skin; defiling the visceral and corporeal. Certainly, this depiction of Dot’s whiteness as affliction echoes one of the key tropes
used by Black Nationalist writers such as Baraka and Larry Neal. In “The Logic of Retribution” Nita Kumar observes of post-1965 Baraka’s writing that: “The white world is repeatedly described as evil, sick, and dying, and the creation of a positive black consciousness is crucially linked to the declaration of white culture as evil and insane” (272). Moreover, Kumar notes of Baraka’s ideological position that: “The enemy is not only the white person, who is easily identifiable, but the whiteness hidden in shades of blackness, where it can be more difficult to detect” (273). Notwithstanding, the narrative “punishment” meted out to race traitors in Slim’s narrative is not the only retributive element coincident with the views of Black Nationalists; fundamental to the characterization of the reverse-passing protagonist is his role in effecting the demise of the white supremacists featured.

As noted above, retributive violence against whites was a prevalent trope of Black Nationalist rhetoric. Many proponents of the Black Arts Movement conceived some form of retribution against whites to be a precondition to black liberation and self-determination. Indeed, in his famous essay “The Black Arts Movement,” in which he calls for a radicalization, reordering, and destruction of “the Western aesthetic” and the “cultural values … in western history” (29), Larry Neal asserts:

The motive behind the Black aesthetic is the destruction of the white thing, the destruction of white ideas, and white ways of looking at the world. The new aesthetic is mostly predicated on an Ethics which asks the question: whose vision of the world is finally more meaningful, ours or the white oppressors? (30)

Featuring even more seditious messages and imagery, the post-1965 writings of Baraka often conjured explicit images of physical violence against whites. In discussing the connection between Black Nationalist performativity and the rhetoric of violent retribution against whites, Murray examines Baraka’s incendiary poem “Black People.” In Baraka’s poem – which was used by opponents to implicate Baraka in the 1967 Newark riot – African-Americans were enjoined to “make our own world” by looting white stores, “smashing at jellywhite faces,” and killing “the white man” (qtd. in Murray 307). More than in any of Slim’s other novellas, *Trick Baby* dramatizes a projected retribution against the hegemony of race and social class in the
American 1940s-1960s. Beyond renouncing his own whiteness, or striving to secure the favor of underground black fellowship of hustlers and pimps, the protagonist literally incarnates an agency of retribution against the white bourgeoisie and upper-class. This is evident before we even enter the narrative/frame in the histrionic back-cover synopsis from the original Holloway House publication:

Author Robert Beck, better known by his ghetto pseudonym, “Iceberg Slim,” tells the story of a blue-eyed light-haired, white-skinned Negro called “White Folks,” the most incredible con man the ghetto ever spawned! Beck knew him well, knew where he was coming from. Folks was tormented by the hateful name “Trick Baby,” but he chose to stay in the black ghetto of southside Chicago because that’s where he could turn the tables and exact his revenge [against whites]! The petty triumphs of the white world weren’t for him, but through the con game … he could overcome his deballing shame[.] … Beck tells his story in the gut level language of the con artist, with the bitterness and despair of the trick baby! (Trick Baby: back cover)

Functioning as the opposite measure of the same ideological Machine, the hidden or “spectral” blackness of the protagonist is exploited as an instrument of retribution against – what is set up as – the edifice of white supremacy. In an aggressive assault against the very same rhetoric of racial anxiety propagated to sustain white supremacist culture from the Antebellum onwards (namely, the “one-drop-rule”), the narrative features the seduction and impregnation of “the Goddess” (also referred to as “Camille Costain”) by the racially “impure” protagonist. As hyperbolically stereotypical of white feminine “perfection” as the protagonist’s “Errol Flynn” appearance is of white masculine “perfection,” the Goddess is depicted as a wealthy beautiful racist whose father, Bradford Wherry, is, predictably, a South African ex-slave-trader (Trick Baby 242). As Wherry himself conveys to his daughter during a dinner with the protagonist to celebrate their pregnancy:

“You typify the inviolate flower of white womanhood that by training and breeding would rather be dead than have sexual congress with a nigger… (Trick Baby 251)
Needless to say, Wherry goes on to disclose to the couple that the forces of white supremacy exert significant control over key branches of local and federal governments. Wherry also discusses the government’s secret agenda of further subjugating black communities through various covert means (Trick Baby 248-252). When the Goddess briefly excuses herself, the protagonist, now no longer able to contain himself, spits in Wherry’s face and storms out, dragging the Goddess away before she is able to return to witness the aftermath of her father’s maltreatment. Therefore, by the time the protagonist discloses to the Goddess his hitherto hidden “stain” of blackness, not only is the Goddess’s true racist aspect exposed, but a fictional revenge is exacted against the edifice of white supremacy:

I said, “I wish I hadn’t met your father. I’m sorry I found out how you got racial poisoning,” … The lovely rose-tinted face stripped itself barren of color, beauty and its fictitious youth. The twisted, stark-white face of a stranger, a popeyed thing gritted its fangs and hurled itself toward me in the half-darkness. It stared into my eyes evilly and silently.

Then it chanted in a throaty whisper, “Mr. O’Brien, don’t you ever, ever, ever let any, any, any insult to Bradford Wherry reach my ears. I could kill you. You miserable coon-loving tramp, white trash… My advice to you is to see a psychiatrist and get treatment [for] … your stupid mania for coons.” …

I said slowly, “Mrs. Costain … I don’t have to go to a headshrinker to find out why I love Niggers. I got the sanest reason there ever was. Mrs. Costain, a Nigger has been fucking you in your ineffably white, Anglo-Saxon pussy for months now.

“You’ve licked the coon like a lollipop. And you’ve loved every minute of it, haven’t you, Mrs. Costain? … you have a bona-fide bastard nigger baby in your sacrosanct guts…” (Trick Baby 255-256, emphases in original)

In exploiting the very paranoid core of the white racist’s world, blackness itself assumes a menacing, because spectral, omnipotence. When the protagonist, as the paradigmatic (if clichéd) embodiment of white masculine perfection, is always already “contaminated” by blackness, the “one-drop-rule” of racial designation that has buoyed justifications of white racism since Antebellum slavery generations becomes radically inverted to threaten and even evacuate the
ontological possibility of “white purity.” Accordingly, directly in juxtaposition to Wherry’s above-cited celebration of his daughter’s status as the “inviolable flower of white womanhood,” the protagonist’s insemination of the Goddess strikes a second blow against the kernel of racist anxiety; defiling the Thing (the fantasy of female and white “purity”) that sustains identity for the white supremacist.

At the same time, blackness, whilst it inheres as the privileged signifier in *Trick Baby*, is performatively substantiated through conduct and avowal more than appearance. In other words, the frame of reference through which identity is designated shifts from the traditional emphasis upon the visual to a privileging of non-visual (and particularly verbal) modes of representation. While skin color does not license Josephus’ admittance into the select coterie, and Dot’s embodiment of all the ills textually associated with the white world literally diffuses his pigmentation, it is the protagonist’s performative (especially non-visual) identification with blackness that is privileged over his physical appearance. Moreover, as Slim’s counter-narratives renovate the terms of racial representation, they operate also to overset the meaningfulness of other analogous hegemonic social groupings. As the material incarnation of the ruling order – in the form of the police and Wherry’s earlier-cited revelations of the government’s investment in white supremacy – is attributed with all that is recreant and treacherous, normatively criminalized occupations are conferred with an ethical “dignity” and “negative glamour.” Indeed, the pimp and hustler, who are customarily construed as morally corrupt and are juridically outlawed, become instead heroic figures within the text. Again, however, the counter-Symbolic presented is not an elementary inversion of the prevalent order, but rather one operating via disparate ethical and ideological principles. Hence, not all members of the underworld are vested with worthiness or dignity. This is exemplified in characterizations of the buffoonish hustler “Lester Gray,” who meets his demise as a result of his undiscerning greed and lust (*Trick Baby* 172); similarly, depraved drug-dealer “Butcher Knife Brown” is rendered a villainous murderer (*Trick Baby* 179-180).

Through exploiting hackneyed tropes of white beauty and radicalizing common conceptions of racial funambulism, the Slimian universe in *Trick Baby* textually establishes an aesthetic-ethical-ideological ground by which the ruling (white) order is opposed. The beautiful and seemingly
white protagonist, an “Errol Flynn” duplicate in every physical respect, does not only reject the elitist embrace of the ruling classes and their grand conspiracies of white supremacy, but his struggle for identity is dramatized as a bid for recognition within the underground milieu of black pimps and hustlers. As demonstrated above, this subversive mediation of racial politics and performativities in Trick Baby accomplishes significantly more than a neat reversal of the racial hierarchy. Specifically, Slim’s text emerges as an attempt to posit a radically alternate system of Value beyond issues of racial differentiation through its privileging of ordinarily criminalized identities such as hustlers and pimps. While Slim’s work certainly incorporates key themes and tropes of Black Nationalist discourse, the unique and provocative quality of Slim’s negotiation of these themes in Trick Baby necessitates further scholarly engagement with his work.
Notes

1 For example, regarding the counter-hegemonic aspect of *The Black Panther*, Matthew Hughey points out that “… *TBP* was full of contradictions: some issues included a decidedly socialist/communist slant that also praised black capitalism, while others held misogynistic overtones that were balanced by a praise of the women’s liberation movement. Once decoded, these dialectics provide examples of the BPP [Black Panther Party] as an organization that was struggling against, and relying upon, hegemonic forces. Together, they illuminate a complex and contradictory set of black masculine representations.” (44).

2 According to Peter Muckley in “Iceberg Slim is the best selling African-American writer of all time” (18). This claim, made in 1995, refers only to the sales of the modestly tendered Holloway house publications before the popular revival and global dissemination of Slim’s work via the slick re-publications with British distributors Payback Press during the 1990s. So whilst it is difficult to ascertain if Slim continues to be the best-selling black American author of all time, the point is that, considering how little critical engagement his work has received, Slim’s importance as a black artist from the period continues to be underrepresented by the scholarly attention he has received. Muckley, one of the few scholars who have examined Slim, further explores this issue in *Iceberg Slim: The Life as Art* (2003).

3 For an account of his profound influence upon Rap artists and culture, see for example: http://www.popsubculture.com/pop/bio_project/iceberg_slim.html

4 The use of this phrase in this essay draws from both Gayatri Spivak’s original usage in *The Post-Colonial critic* (1990) as well as Erneto Laclau’s theoretical development of the term in *Emancipation(s)* (1996).

5 There are many extant historical and literary instances of passing as employed by escaping or escaped slaves from the period. “Slave narratives” (fictional and otherwise) such as Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) and William Craft’s *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom* (1860), as well as “handbills” and newspaper advertisements from the nineteenth-century that sought to capture escaped slaves, feature some of the earliest accounts of passing (Ginsberg 1-18; Kawash 124-131).

6 The use of Slim as the narrator of the Preface and the protagonist as narrator of the rest of the story is an important and strategic differentiation; although the narrative “voice” and “gaze” of the main body of the text are supposedly those of the protagonist, these are of course mediated by the perspective of Slim the “author.” Slim thus relays how their brief encounter leads to such a close friendship that “[w]ithin a couple of days, White Folks and I were like brothers” (TB 10). For the purposes of this essay, suffice it to say that what this does is effect a sense of authenticity for the subsequently described events (in that it justifies, and thus dissimulates, Slim’s own mediation of the narrative gaze so that we suspend our disbelief – it really is a “beautiful” and “intelligent” white man identified with blackness who is telling his story). Such a narrative strategy also indicates the unique status of the (white) protagonist as a signifier of Slinian blackness within the narrative.

7 Although degrees of de facto societal/racial apartheid can be indeed be discerned in most Western cultural contexts, I am here referring specifically to the U.S. context of Slim’s textual milieu (1940s-1960s in Chicago).

8 See the thirteenth chapter of *Pimp* (pp. 182-189) in which Slim obtains the “Iceberg” moniker because of his lack of reaction to a dangerous situation; a function of his proclivity to being tranquilized by strong hits of heroin and cocaine. In this sense, Slim himself is performatively (and illegitimately) simulating or performing what his appellation reputedly signifies. Further, in this scene, the protagonist is more “cool” than the “Iceberg” and causes the notable anxiety and arousal of the latter.

9 A incisive contrast might be drawn against the example of the opening to Nella Larsen’s paradigmatic passing tale *Passing*, whereby both protagonists Clare Kendry and Irene Redfield are passing as “privileged” whites when we first encounter them.

10 See for example Ellis Cashmore’s *The Black Culture Industry* (pp.4-6) which addresses the less overt procedures deployed by the ostensibly objective media of policing the color-line such as the artificial darkening of O.J. Simpson’s skin color on the infamous issue of *Time* magazine which serves to reinforce the criminalization of blackness.

11 It is certainly no mistake that Blue’s moniker is itself a signifier of superlative blackness. As he explains to the protagonist, “… ‘Blue’ for me because I’m so black.” (TB 93).

12 Indeed, there are constant avowals throughout his publications that Slim’s fiction simply “tells it like it is.” This assertion is further corroborated by famous fans and critics in the contemporary editions published by Payback Press. For example, in the 1996 Payback Press edition of *Pimp* and the latest Payback edition of *Trick Baby* (2009), “gangsta” rapper Ice-T avows that “Iceberg Slim always kept it real.” Similarly, black feminine poet Sapphire avers the verity of Slim’s account of black pimps and prostitutes in the introduction to the 1998 edition of *Pimp*. 
This is comparable with the opposite ideological trajectory whereby structures of racism are elided with “trans-ideological” narratives. For example, the logic behind the white supremacist rhetoric which abjures its culpability in fostering racist attitudes by claiming a greater preoccupation with other features of social culture such as granting corporate tax cuts and creating a smaller government.

For an account of Baraka’s complicated and ambivalent relationship to the 1967 and 1968 Newark riots, white leftists, the police, and the politics of Newark’s struggle to acquire a black mayor, see Gerry Watts’ 2001 publication Amiri Baraka: The Politics and Art of a Black Intellectual pp. 308-309.

This is Slim’s own phrase. See The Naked Soul of Iceberg Slim (153).


