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Of Pickaninnies and Nymphets: Race in *Lolita*

Of all the strong opinions Humbert expresses in *Lolita*, two of the briefest and most striking concern his reaction to a guidebook description: “Relics of the cotton era. [...] Bourbon Street (in a town named New Orleans) whose sidewalks, said the tour book, ‘may [I liked the ‘may’] feature entertainment by pickaninnies who will [I liked the ‘will’ even better] tap-dance for pennies’ (what fun)” (156).¹ While the bracketed insertions may signal highbrow Humbert’s ironic distance from the guidebook’s patronizing choice of local color, they also draw the reader’s attention very frankly to the sort of institutionalized racism betokened by those pickaninnies forever tap-dancing in a semi-authoritative representation of New Orleans. The guidebook quotation offers an image of postwar America, which the European Humbert, his own father a “salad of racial genes” (9), is learning to negotiate: does he share the guidebook’s amusement in the tapping pickaninnies, or does he condemn the racism manifest in the “will”? The ambiguity is characteristic of the ways in which Nabokov evokes images of miscegenated blood and racial difference to further distance his authorial presence from Humbert’s poisoned perspective. Scholars such as Douglas Anderson and Susan Mizruchi have considered Nabokov’s treatment of anti-Semitism in *Lolita*, and suggest compelling associations among Humbert’s criminal actions and the travesties of the European Holocaust.² But what this guidebook reference points to is a

1. All quotations from *Lolita* are from Appel’s *The Annotated Lolita*—with appropriate poachings from his invaluable notes.

2. Despite Nabokov’s own appeals to the contrary, some recent scholarship has begun to read his work in light of the cultural and historical circumstances in which it was written, and to which it may be responding. Douglas Anderson’s “Nabokov’s Genocidal and Nuclear Holocausts in *Lolita*” works on terrain similar to this essay in that it attempts to chart the psychic weight of the Holocaust and the development of the atom bomb as it is registered in *Lolita*. See also Susan Mizruchi’s “*Lolita* in History.” While Mizruchi reads Humbert’s desire to “consume incestuously” as a desire to “keep separate and

particularly American legacy of slavery (“Relics of the cotton era”) and ever-present racism, both of which become tangled with Humbert’s febrile meditations on his relationship with Lolita.

Nabokov once remarked that “In home politics I am strongly anti-segregationist” (*Strong Opinions* 98); while *Lolita* is of course not about race per se, postwar American race relations nonetheless shape Humbert’s aesthetic, an awareness of which allows us to better appreciate the author’s own, more generous, aesthetic visible through his construction’s cloying and strident narrative voice.³ Through Nabokov’s generous aesthetic of curiosity and tenderness, *Lolita* still has something new to tell us about the ways contemporaneous racial categories were erected as slyly as Humbert’s twisted yet seductive invention of the nymphet. Nabokov demonstrates how the creation of such aesthetic categories was effected laterally, through homological associations and tacit cultural images, often so subtly that it passed for reality itself, a confusion that for him was always a dangerous one.

Although the “pickaninnies” are obvious examples of a mid-century idiom that seems dubious at best to contemporary readers, the ways Humbert refers to race relations are in general oblique: images of idealized masters and their slaves are bound up both in descriptions of employers and servants and in descriptions of his abusive relationship with Lolita.⁴ What first becomes noticeable for the reader is the casual bigotry of the WASPish middle-class world into which Humbert stumbles when seeking a room in Ramsdale. A trip to Hourglass Lake offers Charlotte Haze occasion to describe an offhand remark made by her friend John Farlow. About Leslie, the black servant of

pure” (635), it will be evident in the pages to follow that I think Humbert’s awareness of American racial difference troubles such claims to purity.

3. I have in mind here something like the terms Kenneth Warren establishes in his study of race in Henry James: “racial concerns shaped James’s aesthetic even when his texts were not specifically ‘about’ race in any substantive way. This reading of James is not meant to be comprehensive but suggestive, an indication of the possibilities that an attention to race may hold for further studies of American literature” (12). As I argue in this essay, Humbert’s and Nabokov’s aesthetics are similarly shaped by racial concerns, if only partially, and I am hardly intrepid enough to pretend a comprehensive reading of *Lolita*.

4. Eric Rothstein writes: “Since ‘Lolita’ exists only as a figment of Humbert’s fantasy life, I will call the character ‘Dolores’ throughout” (22). This seems to me a just rhetorical move. I refer to Dolores when I’m talking about the girl, Lolita when I’m talking about the nymphet, the figment of Humbert’s imagination.

“Miss Opposite”—a character so dubbed by Humbert because she lives opposite the Haze household—Humbert relates:

Charlotte remarked that Jean Farlow, in quest of rare light effects (Jean belonged to the old school of painting), had seen Leslie taking a dip “in the ebony” (as John had quipped) at five o’clock in the morning last Sunday [...] . [Charlotte said] “He is subnormal, you see. And [...] I have a very definite feeling our Louise is in love with that moron.” (82)

Like the guidebook entry Nabokov has Humbert quote verbatim, the effect of John Farlow’s quip is to offer further primary evidence of the various registers of racism present in postwar America.⁵ As we will see, Humbert leverages American racism, whether backhanded or bluntly discriminatory, to advance the feeble argument that his pedophilic indulgence is legitimated by the very context in which it operates—what, Humbert implies, could be more despicable than a culture built on clumsy categorization and institutionalized segregation?

Notorious solipsist that he is, Humbert fits all the people in his life into easily identifiable categories—from Miss Opposite to Miss Lester and Miss Fabian, for him two parts of the same “Lesbian.” The difference with his use of American racial categories is that he is appropriating a cultural phenomenon. Whereas labeling a neighbor only by her geographical position is a relatively innocuous quirk of Humbert’s, the tendency to abstract people into types according to their physical attributes is endemic to the kitschy American aesthetic Humbert claims to shun. Because of the cultural inclination to convert images like pickaninnies into verifiable reality—go to New Orleans and see them tapping—the important distinction between these two sorts of lumping is that racial stereotypes in this cultural moment limit the categorized only to their subservient performative function. Humbert’s aesthetic, however highbrow in its allusiveness and sensual style, is thus nonetheless similar to the postwar *poshlust* aesthetic that produced and consumed the guidebook.⁶ Attention to race in *Lolita* demonstrates, in part, that Humbert’s aesthetic is more kitschy than he admits or knows, and that Nabokov’s

5. Boyd cites this passage as evidence of Nabokov’s disdain for racism (242).

6. Nabokov describes *poshlust* as an approximate synonym for kitsch. As he explained in an interview: “Corny trash, vulgar clichés, Philistinism in all its phases, imitations of imitations, bogus profundities, crude, moronic and dishonest pseudo-literature—these are all obvious examples” (*Strong Opinions* 101). For a fuller working out of kitsch that pays special attention to Nabokov’s theory of *poshlust*, see Matei Calinescu (225–62).

aesthetic, in contrast, allows for the possibility of discreteness rather than easy certainty.⁷

John Farlow's quip yields the first stirrings of the affinities between racial discrimination and Humbert's domination over Lolita that are developed throughout the novel.⁸ Many of these concerns come together at The Enchanted Hunters, the surreal hotel where Humbert and Dolores first engage in sexual relations. While registering at The Enchanted Hunters Humbert himself becomes the object of sly anti-Semitism: the porcine desk clerk evaluates his "features with a polite smile," notes the Jewish-looking name on the telegram reservation, and suavely explains they are all full up. Humbert responds in kind: "'The name,' I said coldly, 'is not Humbert and not Humbug, but Herbert, I mean Humbert, and any room will do'" (118).⁹

7. David Andrews argues that Nabokov "does not believe knowledge can ever be 'complete.' For him, truth exists as an incompletely knowable thing" (53). I see this as related to Nabokov's interest in curiosity and possibility, characteristics antithetical to glib categorization.

8. Like John Farlow, earnest Charlotte stands as representative of the "arty middle class" (36), and she pronounces Leslie simply "subnormal." Again the reader is left unsure whether such a statement is warranted by his mental acuity or his skin color. Note also that in the same scene, Charlotte also longs to replace Louise herself with a servant who would be of purest possible stock: "I would love to get hold of a real trained servant maid like that German girl the Talbots spoke of" (82).

9. Appel explains that the phrase "NEAR CHURCHES"—which appears on The Enchanted Hunters's note-paper—was a "discreet indication that only Gentiles were accepted" (435). Humbert notes that he had "the Tour Book of the Automobile Association" (145), and in his prison cell he still has "an atrociously crippled tour book in three volumes, almost a symbol of my torn and tattered past" (154). The three-volume tour book Humbert has is the American Automobile Association's *Hotel Directory*, which was divided into *Northeastern*, *Western*, and *Southeastern* volumes. The 1940 edition includes listings such as the Dixie Inn in Alexandria Bay, New York, and the Hotel Washington in Newburgh, New York, both of which were "convenient to churches" (69; 79). The Arrowhead Hotel in Inlet, New York, was both "near churches" and boasted "restricted clientele" (75). Thus there seems to have been a range of code words guidebooks employed to indicate that Jewish travelers need not inquire within. Humbert mentions that Dolores demanded the imprimatur of "Huncan Dines" (148) wherever they went. In Duncan Hines's 1948–49 edition of *Vacation Guide*, he prefers the more ambiguous "For quiet, conservative people" (107, 108, 198), but also notes places "with a generally 'well-bred' atmosphere" (114); and others that cater, according to

Although this encounter proves nothing but a minor impediment to Humbert's stratagem, a similar incident is reported within pages of the commencement of Part Two's road trip: "I shudder when recalling that *soi-distant* 'high-class' resort in a Midwestern state, which advertised 'raid-the-icebox' midnight snacks and, intrigued by my accent, wanted to know my dead wife's and dead mother's maiden names" (147). Furtive discrimination is thus a pattern on the road, and Humbert's denunciation is doubly damning as he converts "high-class" into an epithet with his French and his scare quotes, a riposte that suggests that a truly high-class establishment, sans quotation marks, ought to be above such petty discrimination.¹⁰ The inquiring innkeepers share their doubts about Humbert with Charlotte herself, whose suspicions are rankled once he becomes a marriage prospect: "she also asked me had I not in my family a certain strange strain. I countered by inquiring whether she would still want to marry me if my father's maternal grandfather had been, say, a Turk" (74–75).¹¹ The possibility of Humbert's having miscegenated blood haunts much of the novel and affects his descriptions of Dolores's pollution, descriptions which, as we will see, again suggest that the racialized aesthetic informs the novel's larger ethical arc.

Later in the novel Humbert comes to marshal the image of his own miscegenated blood insofar as he figures Lolita herself as polluted by it, but in that moment at The Enchanted Hunters, he is offended enough by the clerk's presumptive discrimination to react indignantly. In fact, once the mistaken name on the telegram is cleared up, another curious detail is offered—Humbert and Dolores's luggage is handled by a "hunchbacked and hoary Negro in a uniform of sorts" (117). This bellhop leads the way to room 342 as Humbert refers to him as "Uncle Tom" (118). Is this an example of the injured Humbert, however "attractively simian" he admits to being (104),

the management, to "refined fine folks, young and old" (115). What such statements "really" mean perhaps Humbert could say.

10. By 1954, the number of Jews on the American travel scene was great enough to warrant Bernard Postal and Lionel Koppman's *A Jewish Tourist's Guide to the U.S.* The point of this volume was not to provide a list of friendly hotels, but rather a comprehensive account of Jewish contributions to American character so that "The traveller who makes all or part of the journey mapped out in this book is sure to stub his toe on American Jewish history wherever he goes" (xii).

11. Humbert himself associates his pedophilia with his being turn'd Turk: "In my self-made seraglio, I was a radiant and robust Turk, deliberately, in the full consciousness of his freedom, postponing the moment of actually enjoying the youngest and frailest of his slaves" (60).

redoubling his efforts to enjoy the categorizing power of the WASPish ethnic elite typified by the Hazes, the Farlows, and the management of The Enchanted Hunters? If so, it would certainly go a long way in explaining why he postures as a supercilious master to the black bellhop's Uncle Tom, an affect that would seem fitting indeed to those tourists who might toss their pennies to pickaninnies. That Humbert has positioned himself as discriminator rather than discriminatee is evident as Uncle Tom is reduced to a synecdochic wanting black hand: "I was tempted to place a five-dollar bill in that sepia palm, but thought the largesse might be misconstrued, so I placed a quarter" (119). Humbert's swelling near-beneficence is predicated upon the bellhop's *only* being Uncle Tom, an imagined type that allows him to savor the powerful position of seeing Uncle Tom's "sepia palm" with a vision as backward-looking and sepia-washed as the guidebook's version of New Orleans.

The "Uncle Tom" label given to the "hunchbacked and hoary Negro" is a significant descriptive detail because it draws the reader's attention back to that oft-quoted moment when "Lolita had been safely solipsized" (60). This pronouncement comes after Humbert has ejaculated in his pajama bottoms after (unknowing?) Dolores fidgets in his lap. The self-congratulatory stance is among the novel's most disturbingly self-deluded: "The child knew nothing. I had done nothing to her. And nothing prevented me from repeating a performance that affected her as little as if she were a photographic image rippling upon a screen and I a humble hunchback abusing myself in the dark" (62). Aside from being one of the many examples of Humbert's desire to enjoy Lolita as a purely aesthetic object, this passage associates Humbert the "humble hunchback" with the "hunchbacked and hoary" Uncle Tom—the point seems to be that for all Humbert's bigoted posturing, Nabokov wants to cast his narrator's crimes in terms of the racist superiority that produces aesthetic categories such as "Uncle Tom." The specific image of Humbert the humble hunchback "abusing himself in the dark" is key to understanding *Lolita's* racial politics, for the veil of darkness Humbert's solipsism brings down on the world is tinged with racial awareness.

The notion of a Lolita projected visually onto a movie screen reminds one of the pickaninnies and Uncle Tom, which are categories reinforced as much by popular films as they are by guidebooks. Thus when Humbert indulges in his lyrical descriptions of the strange and seductive minutiae of postwar America, he turns to film cliché to help him articulate. In the South he encounters: "Ante-bellum homes with iron-trellis balconies and hand-worked stairs, the kind down which movie ladies with sun-kissed shoulders run in

rich Technicolor, holding up the fronts of their flounced skirts with both little hands in that special way, and the devoted Negress shaking her head on the upper landing” (156). Technicolor in real-life American films and in Humbert’s imagined reel of *Lolita* insists on distinctions between blackness and whiteness that will grow murkier as Humbert desperately tries to strengthen his mastery over Dolores.¹² The presence of the maternal, “devoted Negress” is yet another example of worn stock characters Humbert so keenly identifies in the kitschy culture Dolores adores—types the novel suggests are more than a little complicit in perpetuating dangerous aesthetic types.¹³

To understand why Humbert’s engagement with American racism is so often a visual one, let us recall that John Farlow’s remark about Leslie—last name Tomson, not incidentally—occurs in the context of Jean’s being an amateur member of the “old school of painting” (82). After Humbert has raped Dolores for the first time, painting is again an occasion for him to muse about his vision of the world:

Had I been a painter, had the management of The Enchanted Hunters lost its mind one summer day and commissioned me to redecorate their dining room with murals of my own making, this is what I might have thought up, let me list some fragments: [...] There would have been a sultan, his face expressing great agony (belied, as it were, by his molding caress), helping a callypygean slave child to climb a column of onyx. There would have been those luminous globules of gonadal glow that travel up the opalescent sides of juke boxes. There would have been all kinds of camp activities on the part of the intermediate group, Canoeing, Coranting, Combing Curls in the lakeside sun. There would have been poplars, apples, a suburban Sunday. There would have been a fire opal dissolving within a ripple-ringed pool, a last throb, a last dab of color, stinging red, smarting pink, a sigh, a wincing child. (134–35)

It is hardly surprising that Humbert’s aesthetic should reflect his totalitarian view of *Lolita*; when something like Charlotte’s “arty middle class” decor is replaced by something like Humbert’s ideal world, a tormented master must

12. Humbert’s other discussions of film have been much remarked on; see *Lolita* 170–71 for his dismissal of “musicals, underworlders, westerners” (170). Jon Thompson discusses passages such as this in the context of an argument about *Lolita*’s relationship to European travel writing (156).

13. *Lolita*’s third hunchback makes an appearance at the Wace post office, where Humbert runs into a “hunchback sweeping the floor” (223). Early on Humbert refers to himself as “round-backed Herr Humbert coming with his Central-European trunks” (56).

help his slave child surmount a phallic column.¹⁴ Although the allegory here seems straightforward enough, it is nonetheless curious that Humbert should juxtapose such a desperate fantasy of sultans and slaves with the quotidian American world of “camp activities” and “juke boxes,” however gonadal. Of course Humbert appropriates elements of Dolores’s world into his solipsistic dream, but Nabokov behind him has larger quarry in mind. The reference to a “suburban Sunday” evokes that very suburban Sunday when Jean Farlow caught Leslie Tomson skinny-dipping “in the ebony.” A “suburban Sunday,” in other words, characterized by seemingly harmless racist quips and middle-brow aesthetics—two things which, as our discussion of the guidebook and the movies suggests, are connected in Humbert’s mind. If Nabokov is leveling a critique of crass American consumerism, it is not only its slick vulgarity he questions, but its effect of casually turning people into types—whether the tap-dancing “pickaninnies,” the “devoted Negress” headshaker, or the wanting “sepia palm.” Humbert laments that “We are not surrounded in our enlightened era by little slave flowers that can be casually plucked between business and bath as they used to be in the days of the Romans” because “the old link between the adult world and the child world has been completely severed nowadays by new customs and new laws” (124). What troubles Nabokov is the casual plucking still legitimated by the “new customs and new laws” that govern postwar America.

Although custom may codify the sort of bigotry we have already seen present in *Lolita*, the role of the aesthetic—lowbrow, middlebrow, or high—should not be underestimated in its power to organize real life. In the novel’s elegiac closing lines, for example, Humbert returns to the motif of murals in his last paean to Lolita: “I am thinking of aurochs and angels, the secret of durable pigments, prophetic sonnets, the refuge of art. And this is the only immortality you and I may share, my Lolita” (309). In this final aestheticization of Lolita, as an auroch on an ancient cave wall,¹⁵ Humbert succeeds not only in becoming sultan to Lolita’s slave child, but also in replacing with “durable pigments” the pigment he had earlier imagined protecting America writ large from recognizing itself: “Ah, gentle drivers

14. James Phelan discusses this passage at length, but for quite different purposes. He rightly notes that the “suburban Sunday” here also alludes to the scene when Dolores was in Humbert’s lap (120). The final line is an example of how Nabokov witnesses Dolores’s pain even through Humbert’s narrative—the “winning child” is an example of those “icebergs in paradise,” those moments in which Humbert pretends to “human tenderness” toward Lolita (285).

15. See Appel 452.

gliding through summer's black nights, what frolics, what twists of lust, you might see from your impeccable highways if Kumfy Kabins were suddenly drained of their pigments and became as transparent as boxes of glass!" (116–17). This apostrophe to the anonymous drivers sharing the road with Humbert takes place on the approach to The Enchanted Hunters, so what may be exposed is not just Humbert's rape of Dolores, but also the casual discrimination and unthinking bigotry concealed by its walls—predicated as much on "pigment" as on kitschy stereotypes.

Aesthetically speaking, Humbert takes on the language of light and dark to help him describe his treatment of Lolita, a language that becomes racially charged over the course of the novel. If Lolita is figured as a slave, she is a white one. Following the disturbing masturbatory scene mentioned above, Humbert writes: "The hollow of my hand was still ivory-full of Lolita—full of the feel of her pre-adolescently incurved back, that ivory-smooth, sliding sensation of her skin through the thin frock that I had worked up and down while I held her" (67). As is often the case in *Lolita*, the moment when words fail the logomachist Humbert are the most revealing: the repetition of "ivory" intimates that Lolita's appeal lies at least partially in her whiteness. Indeed, throughout his narrative, Humbert's descriptions of Lolita often resort to pale adjectives: she has "pale-gray vacant eyes" (44), "tender pale areolas" (165), "pale-freckled cheeks" (269), and "pale breasts" (273); she is struck by "pale light [that] crossed her top vertebrae" (128), and she moves "through pale shade and sun" (188). In the late scene in which Humbert confronts the married and pregnant Dolores for the last time, he notes her "watered-milk-white arms" (270). What such descriptions tend to suggest is that Lolita's whiteness is significant to Humbert's obsession. He adores her pubescent body as he deplores her adolescent mind, and the moments when she has not been browned by the sun, narrative detail dwells on her paleness.¹⁶ By that final confrontation scene, however, Humbert's vision of Lolita has become at once "pale and polluted": "I insist the world know how much I loved my Lolita, *this* Lolita, pale and polluted, and big with another's child, but still gray-eyed, [...] still mine" (278). Even at this late point in the novel, Humbert has still not recognized Dolores-the-human being, but clings to the paleness of Lolita's youth and declares it his.

Given the awareness of racial difference present in *Lolita*, Dolores is "polluted" not only by her escapades with Quilty and her husband Dick, but by Humbert, "the radiant and robust Turk" (60), who in his "polluted rags and miserable convulsions" is not permitted entrance to what he calls the real

16. See Jenefer Shute 114–15.

Dolores “behind the awful juvenile clichés” (284). Nabokov’s deft patterning and sustained intratextuality would seem to demand that Lolita’s ivory “incurved back” be read as the inverse of Humbert’s own dark hunchback, a pairing that again opens up the associative readings laid out above. Thus when in that final confrontation scene on Hunter Road Humbert gives Dolores an envelope of money (“‘You mean,’ she said, with agonized emphasis, ‘you are giving us *four thousand bucks?*’” [279]), it is a gesture of largesse that Humbert is careful not to misconstrue. After Dolores asks him if the money is contingent on her going to a motel with him, he tells her no and “kept retreating in a mincing dance” (280). Whether or not we are meant to read a telepathic kinship between such generous “tipping” and the previous mention of Uncle Tom and the dancing pickaninnies, it certainly does seem significant that when Dolores speaks about Quilty—Humbert’s parodic double throughout—she hits on the terms Humbert established with his musing about the mural at The Enchanted Hunters: “he was a complete freak in sex matters, and his friends were his slaves” (276). Although Humbert can’t really be said to have “friends,” a more penetrating description of him is hardly possible. Given the association between him and Quilty that Humbert frets over and Nabokov toys with, it is compelling that when Dolores is trying to cast Humbert’s suspicions away from Quilty, she says first that “the gal author is Clare [Quilty]; and second, she is forty, married and has Negro blood” (221). Clever Dolores, who is never quite so dopey as her captor imagines, adds the detail about Quilty’s “Negro blood” to throw up a mental roadblock for Humbert, who as we have seen is willing to indulge in American bigotry if it means he might also indulge his pedophilia. If Dolores can make him believe Clare has Negro blood, then it makes the possibility that “Quilty was an ancient flame” (221) of hers all the more inconceivable for Humbert.

In the final scene in which Dolores is “pale and polluted,” metaphorical associations among slaves and a quintessentially American character as perceived by Humbert are emphasized again when Dick and his friend Bill come in from working outside. Bill’s presence in the novel is not immediately clear; he is quiet and discreet and seems to exist only as extraneous local color. Humbert’s dismissive treatment of Bill’s war wounds is a characteristic but no less egregious example of his heartlessness—Bill, like Dick, is a “veteran of a remote war,” and has lost an arm, a circumstance Humbert finds comical: “Discreet Bill, who evidently took pride in working wonders with one hand, brought in the beer cans he had opened. [...] It was then noticed that one of the few thumbs remaining to Bill was bleeding (not such a wonder-worker after all)” (273). While this is yet another instance of Humbert’s solipsistic

world-view staining everyone he encounters, Nabokov behind him includes specific descriptive detail that links, however obliquely, Bill's brief appearance to the novel's submerged racial politics. When Dick remarks that Bill "lost his right arm in Italy," Humbert thinks: "Lovely mauve almond trees in bloom. A blown-off surrealistic arm hanging up there in the pointillistic mauve. A flowergirl tattoo on the hand" (275). Humbert's aesthetic categorization trumps the human once more: the "pointillistic mauve" would seem just only to Humbert, and his imagined tableau points to his earlier complaint that "We are not surrounded in our enlightened era by little slave flowers that can be casually plucked between business and bath as they used to be in the days of the Romans" (124). The inked flowergirl on the phantom limb obliterated in a remote war is thus another glimmer of the subtle ways Humbert's cocksure categorizations lead to a dehumanization that carries a frequently racialized spin. Whether it is Humbert's jocular dismissal of "the cripple," his appropriation of derogatory epithets, or his identification of American mass culture's discriminatory complicity, Humbert's treatment of Lolita in particular (and all the incidental characters he encounters in general) suggests that part of Nabokov's critique of Humbert's behavior is also a critique of American culture's tendency to reduce humans to knowable types.

This tendency is alluded to very early in the novel, when Humbert recounts the strange coda to his relationship with Valeria, his first wife. The reading of *Lolita* I am offering helps account for bizarre interludes such as this:

A man from Pasadena told me one day that Mrs. Maximovich née Zborovski had died in childbirth around 1945; the couple had somehow got over to California and had been used there, for an excellent salary, in a year-long experiment conducted by a distinguished American ethnologist. The experiment dealt with human and racial reactions to a diet of bananas and dates in a constant position on all fours. My informant, a doctor, swore he had seen with his own eyes obese Valechka and her colonel ...[] diligently crawling about the well-swept floors of a brightly lit set of rooms (fruit in one, water in another, mats in a third and so on) in the company of several other hired quadrupeds, selected from indigent and helpless groups. (30)

The reader may chuckle at unfaithful Valeria's unfortunate fate, and Humbert glosses over it so rapidly that we are soon amidst a densely playful excerpt from *Who's Who in the Limelight*. Yet given the attention to racial categories I have identified, this anecdote seems important indeed. Whether we ought to wonder if Valeria's "melanic root" (26) is alone enough to warrant her inclusion in this perverse study in dehumanization, Humbert's mention of

“human and racial reactions” to a banana and date diet betrays the American ethnologist’s racist premise: do blacks take more naturally to a dehumanizing, monkey-like regimen than whites do?¹⁷ The intrepid ethnologist will find out, and this stands as the most exaggerated moment of American pseudoscience attempting to uphold racist logic.¹⁸ Like Valeria, Dolores dies in childbirth, a connection strengthened by Nabokov when we realize that Humbert’s treatment of Dolores-as-Lolita is much like the American ethnologist’s treatment of Valeria-as-“hired quadruped” because both women are confined to the limited world of their respective captors’ design. Given that the ethnologist’s experiment is meant to unlock “racial reactions,” Nabokov’s association of Dolores with Valeria again reveals that Humbert’s typecasting is racialized.¹⁹

The simian lifestyle to which Valeria is subjected suggests that Nabokov weaves relationships and affinities among Humbert’s charming monstrosity and a particularly American aesthetic that is fascinated by legitimating racial types that in turn nourish discrimination. When Humbert writes the following, then, it is a not racially innocent statement: “I am lanky, big-boned, wooly-chested Humbert Humbert, with thick black eyebrows and a queer accent, and a cesspoolful of rotting monsters behind his slow boyish smile” (44). This self-identification makes eugenic logic seem tenable, so Humbert’s bad teeth become the “rotting monsters” within. Throughout the narrative, in fact, he builds on similar descriptions—borne of the same mentality that fashioned pickaninnies and Uncle Tom—in order to intimate his own moral and racial pollution. As his actions with Lolita grow increasingly unjustifiable, Humbert lays bare the connotations inherent in big bones and wooly chests: his features are “attractively simian” (104), he has “ape eyes” (39), an “ape-ear” (48), and an “ape paw” (258) with “long agate claws” (274).²⁰ Blackened Humbert dwells in a shadowy movie house of his own construction, abusing himself and others in the dark so that once he and Lolita are on the road, he

17. Colorful colleagues of the American ethnologist bookend *Lolita*: Dr. Blanche Schwarzmenn (5) and “the explorer and psychoanalyst” Melanie Weiss (302).

18. Note that Mr. Taxovich, Valeria’s new husband, is, according to the Afterword, one of the “secret points, the subliminal co-ordinates by means of which the book is plotted” (316). For more on another of these secret points, the barber at Kasbeam, see Rorty 160–64.

19. The distinction between Nabokov and Humbert here is that Nabokov makes events happen—e.g., Valeria and Dolores both die in childbirth—whereas Humbert describes, interprets, and otherwise presents these events.

20. For an alternative explanation of Humbert’s self-identification as an ape, see Appel lx–lxi.

declares “She had entered my world, umber and black Humberland” (166). That Nabokov should have Humbert label himself “simian” is especially curious given the germ of the novel as explained in the Afterword, “On a Book Entitled *Lolita*”: “As far as I can recall, the initial shiver of inspiration was somehow prompted by a newspaper story about an ape in the Jardin des Plantes, who, after months of coaxing by a scientist, produced the first drawing ever charcoaled by an animal: this sketch showed the bars of the poor creature’s cage” (311). If the creature in this metaphor is Dolores, then to give Humbert self-ascribed simian features is another way for Nabokov to underscore Humbert’s deluded sense of victimhood: he has been marked by a culture that demands that, as an outcast, he figure himself as an ape. By referring to himself as an ape, in fact, Humbert enacts an aesthetic miscegenation that, despite his disparagement of figures such as Uncle Tom, puts him in a similar category—thus it is fitting that in the end, like any Parisian ape, he “died in legal captivity” (3).²¹

Humbert literalizes his aesthetic miscegenation with his references to vampirism in the book: “the purplish spot on her naked neck where a fairytale vampire had feasted” (139); “a raised purple-pink swelling (the work of some gnat) which I eased of its beautiful transparent poison between my long thumbnails and then sucked till I was gorged on her spicy blood” (156). Such moments seem more than of a piece with the many guilty associations Humbert draws between himself and monsters. Whether the life-draining gore of the bullet-riddled Quilty—who, recall, Dolores jokes has “Negro blood”—or Humbert’s readiness to gorge himself on Lolita’s insect bites, blood flows freely in *Lolita*. The text itself, according to Humbert in the final four paragraphs, has “bits of marrow sticking to it, and blood” (308), and he insists in the last paragraph that “blood still throbs through my writing hand” (309). As Humbert is a simian brute, living, his aestheticized self-descriptions tell us, in something like the American ethnologist’s experiment, he likewise pollutes Lolita with his own miscegenated selfhood, whether literal or not. Although his memoir is officially labeled “the Confession of a White Widowed Male” (3), this is only the clinical term applied by John Ray, Jr. As

21. The artistic ape does still have claims to Dolores’s double, however, for as Humbert further pollutes his vision of Lolita, he offers her a diet similar to Valeria’s, and buys “a bunch of bananas for my monkey” (213). The perverted pet name is present at other moments in the text: earlier he recalls “those delicate-boned, long-toed, monkeyish feet! ... I held, and stroked, and squeezed that little hot paw” (51). Lolita is thus a lighter and smaller version of Humbert’s animalistic self.

we have seen, Humbert retreats to ambiguity when he refers to his father's "salad of racial genes" (9) or when he insists that "In and out of my heart flowed my rainbow blood" (126).

The guilty possibility that Humbert has exchanged polluted, miscegenated blood with Lolita is borne out when he expresses the Kerouacian sense that the end of the American road is actually in Mexico:²²

I now think it was a great mistake to move east again and have her go to that private school in Beardsley, instead of somehow scrambling across the Mexican border while the scrambling was good so as to lie low for a couple of years in subtropical bliss until I could safely marry my little Creole [...] (173–74)

With Lolita the "little Creole" we are returned to New Orleans, home of the guidebook pickaninnies and Technicolor mammies. Humbert figures Lolita as of distinctly American mixed race: Webster's Second defines "Creole" as either "In the United States, a white person descended from the French or Spanish settlers of Louisiana or the Gulf States, and preserving their characteristic speech and culture" or "A negro born in America" or "A person of mixed Creole and negro blood." Thus the pointed reference to Lolita as a "Creole," a term with a racially ambiguous meaning, cannot help but recall—as does, I hope, this essay as a whole—the statement in Nabokov's Afterword arguing that of the three themes that were "utterly taboo as far as most American publishers are concerned," one was "a Negro-White marriage which is a complete and glorious success resulting in lots of children and grandchildren" (314). As we have seen, *Lolita* has more to do with this sort of taboo than it seems on casual reading.

Readers of mid-century American fiction certainly did not need *Lolita* to demonstrate to them that the very theme of trouble-free interracial marriage was a social taboo—those interested in a more straightforward treatment could turn to Chester Himes's *The Primitive*, also published in 1955. It is an under-read novel, but one that deals with a black novelist enmeshed in an affair with a white woman—like Humbert, who has "only words to play with" (32), the introspective Jesse Robinson feels most at home when he begins "to play with words" (128). Also like Humbert, Jesse resorts to murder, and so decidedly does not achieve anything close to "complete and glorious success" with his lover. My brief pairing of *Lolita* with *The Primitive*—a novel more directly about the "Negro problem"—is meant to make visible the notion that

22. Morris Dickstein remarks that "*Lolita* is a send-up of the lyrical novel that, in a sense, parodied *On the Road* even before it appeared" (123).

even a world as aesthetically involute as Humbert Humbert's is not hermetically sealed. In fact, part of *Lolita*'s point may be to recognize that the veils between Nabokov's fictional worlds and real life in postwar America are permeable.

It is true that Nabokov makes the celebrated comment in the Afterword that "a work of fiction exists only insofar as it affords me what I shall bluntly call aesthetic bliss [...] (curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy)" (314–15). But it seems foolhardy to take such a remark to mean that the aesthetic world does not or ought not have a relationship to "real life"—especially since, as the Creole passage above glaringly demonstrates, Nabokov has Humbert too use the word "bliss" to describe his imagined defilement of Dolores.²³ Nabokov often intimates in his fiction that the lurking danger of any aesthetic is its ability to be evoked in order to brush over human beings; thus his four cardinal features of art or "aesthetic bliss" suggest a particular kind of aesthetic that requires an ethical relationship to one's fellow human beings. But as we have seen, Humbert's aesthetic falls far short of Nabokov's requirements. If Humbert longs to "safely marry my little Creole"—who has been in the meantime "safely solipsized" by his aesthetics—then perhaps *Lolita* is not so removed from the "Negro-White marriage," however complicated and obliquely rendered, than an abusive dynamic between a white widowed male and an ivory-skinned American adolescent may indicate. In other words, by paying attention to the secret points of racial awareness in *Lolita*, we see that aesthetic categorization can have damaging effects in the real world.

Humbert thus prefigures one of John Shade's thoughts on "racial prejudice" in *Pale Fire*. According to Kinbote, Shade "said that, as a man of letters, he could not help preferring 'is a Jew' to 'is Jewish' and 'is a Negro' to 'is colored'; but immediately added that this way of alluding to two kinds of bias in one breath was a good example of careless, or demagogic, lumping [...] since it erased the distinction between two historical hells: diabolical persecution and the barbarous traditions of slavery" (*Pale Fire* 217). In his baroque associations and clever aesthetic connections, Humbert certainly erases distinctions through his demagogic appropriation of whatever cultural and social categories might allow him to legitimate his indefensible treatment of Dolores Haze. It is indeed remarkable that after fifty years of very good criticism on *Lolita*, the theme of American race relations has remained so

23. Humbert uses the word repeatedly; for instance: "there is no other bliss on earth comparable to that of fondling a nymphet" (166). See also 18, 169, 257.

submerged. But this is because the novel as a whole operates through imagistic associations and verbal pairings—I have tried to make my analysis faithful to this aesthetic, which is far removed from the sort of kitsch or *poshlust* that Nabokov excoriated as exhibiting “overconcern with class or race” (*Strong Opinions* 101). My point lies rather in how the novel is concerned with racial undertones. Tropes that perpetuate racial categories are not as obvious as tap-dancing pickaninnies, but can rather come in the form of aesthetic affinities, can be inherent in the way one manages descriptions, and can thus stand as part of the very fabric of a culture’s self-understanding.

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