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Philip A. Tapley
Louisiana College

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**"DROPPED UPON A STRANGE PLANET": RACIAL
IDENTITY CRISES IN *MADAME DELPHINE* AND
*PUDD'NHEAD WILSON***

Philip A. Tapley

Louisiana College

"Cable is a great man," Mark Twain wrote to his wife in 1885, and if the battle Cable is waging in behalf of the black race continues, "his greatness will be recognized."¹ Cable was becoming known as one of the South's most important writers when he and Twain first met in 1881.² Though their friendship later cooled, Cable's influence upon Twain's mind and work can be seen quite strikingly in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*.

Cable's "deep Southern background" probably fascinated Twain, Arthur G. Pettit believes, "because Cable's ideological disloyalty to the South paralleled [Twain's] own." In 1883, the U.S. Supreme Court supported, in a now famous civil rights case, status quo segregation in the South. Cable's response was an essay, "Freedman's Case in Equity," which made him anathema in the South, where newspapers angrily demanded that he leave since he was "a traitor to his homeland."³ In fact, Cable ultimately abandoned his native New Orleans and became a New Englander because of his heretical views on race.

Pettit shows further that Northern response to Twain and Cable's public appearances was warm and generous as the two authors presented the most popular "anti-Southern" lectures given on the nineteenth-century stage." Twain suggests in one of his notebooks that he and Cable "had several conversations on...a deep subject," which, Pettit argues, must have been about "miscegenation" and "the possible overthrow of white supremacy in the South."⁴

It took Twain ten years, Arlin Turner explains,—from Twain's first major fictional protest against slavery in *Huckleberry Finn* in 1884 to the publication of *The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson* in 1894—for the novelist to face "the implications of miscegenation and the psychological effects of racial doctrines on both races." In *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, Twain treated "the dominant Southern issue of his time with more force and realism" than anywhere in his writings. In Roxy, the beautiful slave who has one-sixteenth black blood, Twain created "his most fully realized female character and through her...he acknowledged sex to be an element in human relations." Though her portrait is

inconsistent, Turner concludes, Twain "achieved in Roxy a level of tragic characterization not present elsewhere in his works."⁵

Twain thus lifts his tragic heroine above the popular literary stereotype of the "tragic mulatto." Like Cable's Madame Delphine and her daughter, Roxy is tragic because she does not in any way look like a mulatto and is moreover a "sympathetic" woman with "the finest qualities that could be given...by the master race" but with "none of its social advantages."⁶ It is also to Cable's credit that he had deepened the characterization of a popular nineteenth-century stereotype, the "tragic mulatto," with his delicate portraits of strongly maternal quadroons, especially Delphine and 'Tite Poulette.

In *Life on the Mississippi* (1882), Twain states bluntly that only two Southern writers are worth reading: Cable and Joel Chandler Harris.⁷ In 1882, after Twain had visited New Orleans and read publicly for the first time with Cable, Twain wrote Cable that he (Twain) had read *Madame Delphine* in one sitting and that the "charm," the "pain," and the "deep music" of the story were "still pulsing" through him.⁸

Twain may even have borrowed some details from *Madame Delphine* for the plot of *Pudd'nhead Wilson*. For example, Cable has the quadroon Delphine renounce her daughter, Olive, so that the girl can marry a white man and enter white society, while Twain has Roxy renounce her son so that he too can pass as white.⁹

In *Pudd'nhead Wilson* Twain joins Cable in condemning the cruel, hypocritical Southern obsession with the purity of aristocratic white bloodlines, many of which were already "tainted" by illicit black offspring. Both writers dramatize the tragic identity crises of victims of racial marginality. In his pioneer work, *The Marginal Man*, Everett Stonequist maintains that marginality "denotes a subtle, perhaps indefinable, sense of estrangement and malaise, an inner isolation."¹⁰ The victim may control or cover up the maladjustment, but some conflicts "are severe enough to demoralize the individual, throwing him into continual restlessness, and initiating a process of disorganization" which may end in a tragic or even a criminal manner.¹¹

Moreover, William Bedford Clark writes, the antebellum South allowed little opportunity for fulfillment of the slave as a person; the slave had "to take on the pseudo-identity of stereotypical masks assigned him by white racism," and often had neither a real family nor "any psychological security even of the surname."¹² Since the slaves' own black culture was not allowed to survive in America, Stonequist notes, blacks were usually forced to become more like whites, thus

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causing many blacks to have a distaste for any form of "Negro-ness."¹³ Such is the case with Twain's *Roxana* and to a subtler degree of *Madame Delphine*.

Twain's first fiction treating miscegenation was a story outline about a mulatto, who, like *Roxana*, is one-sixteenth black. The man searches for his family after the Civil War, is involved in a love affair with a white girl (who in reality is his sister), and recalls that his mother received a scar to protect him from his white father's brutality. Twain's sketch, Pettit concludes, exposes the white man's "fear, doubt, hypocrisy, and guilt about mixing with blacks." The "implications" of Twain's fragmentary story become startlingly clear only "in the light of *The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson*," Mark Twain's "last American novel and his last published outcry against the American South."¹⁴

Twain's choice of a literary model for *Pudd'nhead Wilson* was a good one since Cable's novel, Clark feels, is an "aesthetically successful handling of the complex relationships"¹⁵ of the races in Southern society. The surface plot of *Madame Delphine* involves the love of Delphine Carraze's lovely teen-age daughter, Olive, for a newly established banker and former pirate and smuggler. Olive is the illegitimate daughter of a deceased wealthy American, who left most of his fortune to his mistress and his child. These women own their humble home and live very privately since in antebellum New Orleans they must hold themselves aloof from both blacks and whites.

At one point in the novel, Delphine discusses her daughter's future with Père Jerome, a Catholic priest. Since Delphine has ruled out the cloister for her daughter, the priest notes sadly that Olive "has no more place than if she had dropped upon a strange planet."¹⁶ Allowed to be neither black nor white, the *gens de couleur libre* of Cable's antebellum New Orleans lived in a lonely limbo of social, economic, and psychological ambivalence that kept them close to despair.

Père Jerome becomes a spokesman for one of Cable's dominant ideas, drawn from what Clark has called "the Old Testament notion of collective societal guilt"¹⁷—that we all share in the community of sinners:

...The Infinite One alone can know how much of our sin is chargeable to us, and how much to our brothers or our fathers. We all participate in one another's sins. There is a community of responsibility attaching to every misdeed. No human since Adam—nay, nor Adam himself—ever sinned entirely to himself. And so I never am called upon to contemplate a crime or a criminal but I feel my

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conscience pointing at me as one of the accessories (Cable 198-99).

Later in a special sermon at St. Louis Cathedral, Père Jerome judges the city itself for the sin which has produced the quadroons and forced them to live in isolation and often deprivation as well as despair. The aristocratic white rulers of the city, "strewers of thorns and briars" (Cable 204), made it necessary for the *gens de couleur libre*, the products "of seventy-five years of elimination of the black pigment and the cultivation of hyperion excellence and nymphean grace and beauty" (Cable 193), to have *f.m.c.* or *f.w.c.* (free man of color or free woman of color) "tacked in small letters after their names." Such persons were not "free," then, but condemned by the title to be mistresses to "luxurious bachelors" and to receive "the loathing of honest women"; to own property "by sufferance, not by law"; to pay taxes for public education which their children could not receive; to be excluded from all respectable occupations of the gentfolk.¹⁸ "Ichabod" or "outcast" thus seems stamped on the faces of Cable's heroines (Cable 193).

When Olive was a small child, her father died; she was sent away to be educated by paternal aunts. At age seventeen she has now returned to live with her mother. A handsome, wealthy pirate turned banker is in love with Olive, and Delphine wants Olive to marry the gentleman, Ursin Lemaitre Vignevielle. As Delphine seeks counsel from Père Jerome, they discuss the law, the infamous *Code Noir*, which prevents Olive's marriage and also denies the rights of all blacks in early Louisiana. Delphine asks Père Jerome,

"But...from which race do they want to keep my daughter separate? She is seven parts white! The law did not stop her from being that: and now, when she wants to be a white man's good and honest wife, shall that law stop her?...I will tell you what that law is made for. It is made to—punish—my—child—for—not—choosing—her—father! Père Jerome—my God, what a law!" (Cable 233)

Madame Delphine's intense emphasis of each word she utters suggests her great anger against the "law," including the white "establishment" of the city, represented by two members of the aristocracy, Jean Thompson and Dr. Varrillat. These powerful men and their families unite to protect Ursin from the authorities seeking to arrest him for piracy. When Thompson and Varrilat learn of Ursin's intended marriage to Olive, they declare that they will have Ursin *arrested* rather than

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allow his marriage to this *f.w.c.* The larger legal system that Delphine condemns so eloquently thus could be bent to protect a white pirate from prosecution and also to "protect" him from a marriage to a mulatto.

The opulent grounds fronting the Thompson and Varrillat mansions are the scene for Delphine's confrontation with the white powers of New Orleans, represented by the two aristocrats and their wives. Madame Thompson approaches "with the serenity of a reconnoitering general" (Cable 239). Thomas Hubert has suggested that Cable's military imagery is heightened by the description of "palisades" of "rough cypress" on one side of the Thompson garden. Since a "palisade" is also a fence "forming a defensive barrier," the symbolic value of the palisade is that the precious purity of white blood must be protected from contamination "by the palisades of customs and law."¹⁹

Madame Delphine then swears to everyone present that Olive is not her child but was left with her as an orphaned infant. Delphine offers false evidence to prove that Olive is pure white. Since Delphine's story is believed more thoroughly than she had hoped, she and Olive are immediately separated when the girl is brought to stay at the Thompsons'.

The story ends with Olive's marriage and Delphine's agonized confession to Père Jerome that she has perjured herself to allow her daughter to pass as white. Then, having no further reason to live now that her daughter is lost to her, she dies quietly in the confessional. The quadroon's bitter defeat includes not only an offense against her own strongly held sense of ethics but also against the laws of the day. In *Madame Delphine*, Anna William Shannon asserts, "Cable shows the psychic toll inflicted on woman held responsible and assuming the responsibility for her own victimization. Cable's depiction of the mechanism of guilt in...*Madame Delphine* is truly remarkable."²⁰

Thirteen years passed between Twain's initial reading of Cable's novel and the publication of *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, which Maxwell Geismar has called one of "the first of [Twain's] dark parables."²¹

Pudd'nhead Wilson is set in Dawson's Landing, Missouri, on the Mississippi River, in the 1830s. A son, Tom, is born to wealthy landowner Percy Driscoll on the same day that his near-white slave Roxy gives birth to a boy, who, like young Tom Driscoll, is fair skinned, blonde haired, and blue eyed. Roxy's son, who is named Valet de Chambre (soon shortened to Chambers), was fathered by Colonel Cecil Burleigh Essex. Essex, along with Percy and York Driscoll and Pembroke Howard, traces his lineage to the F.F.V.—First Families of

Virginia—and shares their code: to keep their ancient lineage free of taint and dishonor.

Roxy is “imposing,” “statuesque,” and very fair skinned. “Her face was shapely, intelligent, and comely—even beautiful.” Like Madame Delphine, Roxy appeared to be Caucasian; but the whites of Dawson’s Landing had already decided that she was “a negro... , a slave and salable as such.” The same is true for her handsome child, who “was also a slave, and by a fiction of law and custom a negro.”²²

Soon after the story opens, Roxy witnesses just how easily a slave can be sold “down the river,” the worst of all possible fates for her child or for her. “The thought crazed her with horror. If she dozed,...the next moment she was on her feet and flying to her child’s cradle to see if it was still there.” Next she would pull the child to her bosom “and pour out her love upon it in a frenzy of kisses, moaning, crying, and saying ‘Dey shan’t, oh dey shan’t!—yo po’ mammy will kill you fust!’” (Twain 13). These passages reveal both Roxy’s desperation and her forcefulness. To Henry Nash Smith, “There is a haughty grandeur in her character that shines through the degraded speech and manners of a slave, and confers on her an intimation of tragic dignity.”²³ But even more impressive is Roxy’s questioning of a God that was good to the real Tom Driscoll but not to her own child. Stonequist has said that the isolation of marginality often leads to strong reflective powers,²⁴ and Roxy has a quick, active mind.

First resolving to kill herself and her child, Roxy then decides to switch the two infants in their cradles so that Tom Driscoll becomes Valet de Chambre and vice versa. Having once heard a preacher tell a story about an English queen who had switched babies in such a manner to save her own child, Roxy rationalizes: “Tain’t no sin—white folks has done it!....Dey’s done it,—yes, en dey was de biggest quality in de whole bilin’, too—*Kings!*” (Twain 15). Henry Nash Smith asserts that Roxy “justifies the action to herself by a process of reasoning both humble (for she takes for granted the inferiority of the Negro...) and arrogant, because she compares herself with royalty.”²⁵

When Percy Driscoll dies, his brother, Judge York Driscoll, adopts Tom (the real Chambers), believing him to be Percy’s son. The real Tom becomes Chambers’ valet, footman, and whipping-boy. The boy reared in luxury becomes ill-tempered, cowardly, and arrogant, while the boy reared in rags and contempt grows strong, resourceful, but yet humble—a bitter, ironic example of Twain’s growing belief in the influence of social and psychological conditioning. At first, Roxy is confident that her obsequiousness to her real son is only mockery, but as

Twain points out, Roxy becomes "the dupe of her own deceptions," and her child becomes "her accepted and recognized master" (19).

When Percy Driscoll dies, Roxy is freed and takes a job as a cleaning woman on a riverboat. Upon retiring to Dawson's Landing, she expects her old master, Tom Driscoll, to help her out by giving her money occasionally. When he contemptuously refuses, she reveals the truth about his parentage—that she is his mother. Perceiving that she is not lying to him and thus has the power to destroy him, he falls upon his knees in supplication, a slave begging of a slave. Roxy, "the heir of two centuries of unatoned insult and outrage, looked down on him and seemed to drink in deep draughts of satisfaction" (Twain 39). Now the almost-white black slave is symbolically dominant over her white master.

Because she still loves her son, she gives him permission to sell her into slavery again to help pay his gambling debts. But Tom sells her into harsh servitude in Arkansas although she has given him permission to sell her only to an upstate Missouri farmer where her life will not be hard. Having escaped from her second enslavement, which has broken her physically, Roxy blackmails Tom. Her former affection for him is dead.

Tom is thunderstruck, at least for a while, by the truth of his parentage. As Stonequist has shown, the discovery of marginality may cause the breakdown of one's "usual habits and attitudes."²⁶ Twain notes that Tom begins to wander

...in lonely places, thinking, thinking, thinking—trying to get his bearings....The "nigger" in him went shrinking and skulking here and there and yonder, fancying it saw suspicion and maybe detection in all faces, tones, and gestures....He presently came to have a hunted sense and a hunted look, and he fled away to the hill-tops and the solitudes. He said to himself that the curse of Ham was upon him (44-45).

However, Tom's feeling of alienation is relatively shortlived; soon he resumes his former ways, forgetting that he had earlier cried out, "Why were niggers *and* whites made? What crime did the first nigger commit that the curse of birth was decreed for him? And why is this awful difference made between whites and blacks?" At one point Tom even wishes he could die (Twain 44). Pettit believes that Tom's protest "gives the lie to white distaste for blacks and reveals the philistinism of

a society that privately tolerates miscegenation, then publicly punishes its victims."²⁷

Stonequist's observations that a person's discovery of his own racial marginality often alters his attitudes and habits and may lead him to tragedy or criminality²⁸ are strikingly valid for Tom Driscoll, who, prior to his discovery of being black, was a deceiver, thief, and gambler: but *after* his discovery of his blackness, he is capable, Pettit notes, of selling his own mother down the river and of stabbing to death his foster-father.²⁹ Roxy and Madame Delphine break the law only to help persons they love, but Tom becomes an immoral monster who thinks himself above all laws.

Even though both Tom and Roxy have experienced crises of identity, both continue to embrace many of the customs, beliefs, and attitudes of the white master-race, including contempt of Negroes; at one point, for example, Tom calls Roxy's fingerprints "nigger paw-marks" (Twain 103). Roxy praises Tom's father's lineage from "ole Virginny stock, Fust Families.... You ain't got no 'casion," she tells Tom, "to be shame' o' yo' father" (Twain 43). Later after she returns from Arkansas, Roxy tells Tom, "measureless contempt written in her face," that he is worthless because "of de nigger in you... Thirty-one parts of you is white, en on'y one part nigger, en dat po' little one part is yo' *soul*" (70). Finally, when Roxy learns of Tom's refusal to fight a duel to avenge his honor, she shows her unshakable identification with the white code as she calls Tom a "Judas" and a "hound." But she is totally honest about her share of the blame and admits "—en I's responsible...." Then she spits upon Tom, who is incapable of feeling either guilt or responsibility (Twain 90).

Pudd'nhead Wilson is a far grimmer statement than *Madame Delphine* about the tragedy of racial hypocrisy, miscegenation, and the resulting racial identity crises. Though both novels deal sensitively and powerfully with the stereotype of the sacrificing mulatto mother and the pathos—and even agony—of racial identity crises, Twain's novel does not end quasi-happily (as does Cable's, with Olive's marriage to a loving and wealthy white man). At the conclusion of *Pudd'nhead Wilson* at least five lives are savagely crushed by the inexorable racial code. Percy Driscoll is murdered; his sister, Tom's foster-aunt, is permanently enervated by her loss. Roxy's "heart was broken...; the spirit in her eye was quenched, her martial bearing departed with it, and the voice of her laughter ceased in the land..." (114). The real Tom Driscoll, finally freed from slavery and restored to wealth when the truth is revealed in a dramatic courtroom scene, remains a shuffling Negro

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who can find no secure place in either white or black society. He surely feels that he "has been dropped upon a strange planet"! The false Tom is not hanged for murder since, as the real Valet de Chambre, he is a black and thus has no humanity. He is sold down the river to help pay the false Tom Driscoll's gambling debts, a fate that is "more disturbing than gratifying," Pettit maintains, "for it leaves us with the suspicion that the worst offender is not the mulatto avenger but the white South."³⁰ The "white South" certainly includes the Varrillats, Thompsons, Driscolls, and Howards—all those most greatly responsible for making, enforcing, and even bending the laws to suit their own selfish purposes. To Geismar, these are "the noble aristocratic heroes of the gentlemanly code who are responsible for all the social misery, suffering, and hatred."³¹

Roxy's impassioned admission of guilt in the courtroom—"De Lord have mercy on me, po' misable sinner dat I is!"—resembles Madame Delphine's confession of guilt to Père Jerome (Twain 113). Perhaps Roxy's plea for forgiveness could be that of the global community of sinners referred to by Père Jerome in his sermon—those guilty of *any* racism that separates or alienates one human being from another. John B. Boles states bluntly that "any labor or social system that define[s] persons as property and deprive[s] them of basic autonomy over their lives [is] irredeemably evil."³² And these tragic novels, *Madame Delphine* and *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, stand as somber reminders of "the community of responsibility attaching to every misdeed" (Cable 198).

NOTES

¹Cited in Justin Kaplan, *Mr. Clemens and Mark Twain* (New York, 1966), p. 265.

²Arlin Turner, *George W. Cable* (Baton Rouge, 1966), p. 112.

³*Mark Twain and the South* (Lexington, Ky., 1974), p. 131.

⁴Pettit, pp. 131-132.

⁵Arlin Turner, "Mark Twain and the South: An Affair of Love and Anger," *SoR*, 4 (1968), 508. According to Maxwell Geismar, *Mark Twain: An American Prophet*, abridged ed. (New York, 1973), p. 134, Roxie's development "is not always consistent and sometimes quite erratic, and her character is often manipulated for the purpose of...plot-line." Even a very sympathetic reader of the novel will have to agree somewhat with Geismar's critical

assessment. Other characters, too, Geismar argues, are “never fully realized as people” but “are social and literary types whom Clemens is manipulating for the sake of the moral.” In the “literary surrealism” of *Pudd'nhead Wilson* the “meaning of the artist’s message is more important to [Clemens] than the depiction of human character for the sake of human character.”

Henry Nash Smith, *Mark Twain: the Development of a Writer* (New York, 1972), pp. 171-176, also notes some of Twain’s inconsistencies in tone and character development, but Smith’s analysis of Roxie leads him to praise her,—justifiably, I believe, as “the only fully developed character in the novelistic sense, in the book. She has a different order of fictional reality from the figures of fable with which she is surrounded”; thus “[s]he resembles a portrait in full color set in a black-and-white background” (p. 179).

Moreover, though the “central scenes in *Pudd'nhead Wilson* are “lurid, sentimental, melodramatic, [and] highly uneven,” they are, as Geismar argues, “rough gold in a literary sense” since Twain has “anticipated many of the racial insights of Richard Wright.” In addition, the very specifically described trial scene that concludes the novel marks the way for the “literary form” of *An American Tragedy* and *Native Son* (p. 139).

⁶Pettit, p. 141.

⁷Mark Twain, *Life on the Mississippi* (New York, 1965), p. 267.

⁸Cited in Pettit, p. 131.

⁹Pettit, p. 208.

¹⁰(New York, 1937, 1961), p. 132.

¹¹Stonequist, p. 158.

¹²“The Serpent of Lust in the Southern Garden: The Theme of Miscegenation in Cable, Twain, Faulkner, and Warren,” Diss. Louisiana State Univ., 1973, p. 64.

¹³Stonequist, p. 137.

¹⁴Pettit, pp. 142-43.

¹⁵Clark, p. 62. Shirley Ann Grau in her introduction to *Old Creole Days* (New York, 1961), praises several aspects of Cable’s writing—especially his description of the decaying Creole society and his “rather sparse style” (pp. x-xi), which heighten his realism. However, she finds his plots clumsy (“Gothic”) and “highly romantic, highly improbable.” An example is the love

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between Olive and Ursin, which develops instantly during a brief encounter on a ship where she is a passenger and he is an invading pirate. Ursin shakes his pirate-image by emerging in New Orleans as a banker (p. xiii).

Another fault that Grau finds in Cable's stories is "his formidable dialect passages..., an almost literal transcription of Creole speech." *Madame Delphine* is, however, rather free of this "fault" and succeeds by giving "the feel and the texture of speech without actually reproducing it [often] phonetically" (p. xiii).

Though one must grant Cable's faults as a writer, one must also agree with Cable himself, who considered *Madame Delphine* one of his best stories, Arlin Turner asserts, in part because Cable "thought it superior in execution but in part also because he believed it faced squarely the tragedy of mixed blood" [Introduction, *Creoles and Cajuns, Stories of Old Louisiana* (Garden City, 1959), p. 121].

¹⁶Cable, *Madame Delphine*, in *Creoles and Cajuns*, edited by Arlin Turner, p. 209. Subsequent references to and quotations from *Delphine* are taken from this edition [see footnote 15] and are cited in the text with the name Cable and page number.

¹⁷Clark, p. 63.

¹⁸Cable, "The Dance in Place Congo," in *Creoles and Cajuns*, ed. Turner, p. 407.

¹⁹Thomas Hubert, "The Gardens of *Old Creole Days*," unpublished lecture, Conference of Louisiana Colleges and Universities, 3 March 1979, McNeese State University, Lake Charles, Louisiana.

²⁰Anna William Shannon, "Women on the Color Line: Subversion of Female Stereotypes in the Fiction of Cable, King, and Chopin," Diss. Univ. of Nebraska, 1979, p. 149.

²¹Geismar, p. 126.

²²Samuel Clemens [Mark Twain], *The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson and Those Extraordinary Twins*, Norton Critical Ed., ed. Sidney Burger (New York, 1981), pp. 8-9. Subsequent references to and quotations from *Pudd'nhead Wilson* are taken from this edition and are cited in the text with the name Twain and page number.

²³Smith, p. 178.

²⁴Stonequist, p. 155.

²⁵Smith, p. 178.

²⁶Stonequist, p. 122.

²⁷Pettit, p. 147.

²⁸Stonequist, pp. 122-158.

²⁹Pettit, p. 146.

³⁰Pettit, p. 147.

³¹Geismar, pp. 128-129.

³²*Black Southerners, 1619-1869* (Lexington, Ky., 1984), p. 104.