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1.

Over the past ten years, Nella Larsen’s 1929 novel *Passing* has become an important reference within contemporary debates over the status of racial difference, especially those debates carried out by critics whose work interrogates the thresholds of biology and culture. For many of these readers, the novel contains strong suggestions that Larsen herself viewed “race” as an ontologically bankrupt term. Samira Kawash, for instance, regards passing narratives such as Larsen’s as part of the project of “dislocating the color line,” insofar as the forms of social encounter these narratives enact — in which genotypically “black” characters are able to move freely through otherwise restrictive social spaces by virtue of their phenotypically “white” characteristics — “makes impossible and irrelevant appeals to authenticity as a signal of ethnicity” (149). “Difference,” Kawash explains, “refers not to some reality . . . but to positionality,” a fact that *Passing* should underscore. Working along a similar vein of thought, Robyn Wiegman points out that *Passing* enacts a “visible negation of ‘blackness’” and thus unsettles the “visible epistemology of black skin” to which traditional paradigms of American racism have been anchored. Larsen’s literary project, then, takes up an overt political agenda for such readers, since as Wiegman goes on to explain, “[t]o interrupt this equation [“between the idea of ‘race’ and the ‘black’ body”] is crucial to the political articulation of antiracist cultural critique” (21-2). At the very least, *Passing* raises persis-
tent questions concerning the efficacy of racial difference inasmuch as the narrative consistently returns to question the premises that ground our knowledge of such difference. When Larsen’s protagonist, Irene Redfield, is asked to explain “the trick” of distinguishing an “authentic” caucasian from an individual who merely passes as one — when, in short, she is asked to locate and give a name to that thing that makes all the difference between two phenotypically similar individuals — she can offer little more than the dubious reply: “There are ways. But they’re not definite or tangible” (Larsen 206). Pushed further, she adds, “Just — just something. A thing that couldn’t be registered.”

It is, of course, a statement that tends to mystify matters of racial difference, and yet such mystification is what Passing cannot avoid, what Larsen seems forced to engage in a novel that removes “race” from the level of the phenotypical, the corporeal, the visible. Irene’s comment might in this sense seem to offer us a glimpse at Larsen’s true hand in Passing: doesn’t “a thing that couldn’t be registered,” the ambiguous “something” that purports to substantiate racial difference, indicate that as soon as we begin to speak of racial ontology, we are already knee-deep in pure fantasy, pure projection — that, in short, the differences between whites and blacks are the differences they themselves inscribe and maintain? For her part, Kawash follows up on these possibilities when she suggests that Irene’s remark figures “race” as more “nothing” than “something,” more a cultural phantasm (like the mysterious “drop of black blood” that ostensibly condenses the world of difference between blacks and whites) than a substantive component of biological reality (155).

Such readings of Passing as a narrative project that disturbs essentialist formulations of racial difference, and hence challenges the racist economies these formulations authorize, draw upon a nuanced association between the pleasures of parody and the political effects of performance. In this sense, Judith Butler’s reading of Passing deserves special attention, since it was Butler’s earlier Gender Trouble that first articulated, in ways that resonated widely among Anglophone cultural critics, the subversive properties of parodic performance. Butler contends that parodic performances are inherently disruptive of the norms they mimic and, more particularly, that the disruptions at issue here disperse themselves through the vehicle of laughter. “The loss of the sense of ‘the normal,’” Butler explains, “can be its own occasion for laughter, especially when ‘the normal,’ ‘the original’ is revealed to be a copy, and an inevitably failed one, an ideal that no one can embody. In this sense, laughter emerges in the realization that all along the original was derived” (138-9). For Butler, parody and the laughter it incites tend to undermine the matrix of prescribed norms we typically experience as reality itself, inflicting a form of category crisis that is all the more powerful because grounded in our sensation of unregulated pleasure.

This model of parodic subversion asserts itself throughout Butler’s later reading of Passing, especially insofar as this reading finds the tension of Larsen’s narrative at precisely that point where an understanding of “race” as a biologically sustained and impermeable boundary gives way to the performative process of passing, the effect of which is to submit every absolute racial demarcation to the prospect of its own contingency and flux. In her reading of Larsen, Butler explains that “the uncertain border between black and white” —
the very uncertain, Du Boisian “color line” upon which Irene fails to lay hold as she gropes for this “thing that couldn’t be registered” — is precisely what racist essentialism must specify in order to maintain its fantasies of racial purity and hierarchy. For this reason, Butler suggests that passing’s implicit challenge to naturalistic categories of difference — more specifically, its displacement of such naturalistic categories with performative simulacra of these categories — presents a profound threat to racial essentialism and hence racism itself; for the latter, as Butler explains, it is “the spectre of a racial ambiguity that must be conquered,” that must be refused and effaced in order for the white-supremacist mind to retain its own epistemological footing (Bodies 172). Thus, the risky pleasures to which passing yields access become strictly subordinate to the pleasures inherent to the form of passing itself, a form in which we witness the collapse of “original” into “copy,” of “white” into “black.” In Larsen’s novel, Butler would suggest, racial ontology itself becomes a kind of joke, since Passing inspires laughter at the expense of those who cling to such an ontology, discrediting those particular criteria of corporeal difference to which larger notions of racial differentiation are often attached.

To a certain extent, Butler’s premise makes enough sense. When Irene Redfield, passing into the racially segregated Drayton tearoom, finds herself the object of an anonymous, apparently caucasian gaze — when she succumbs to the fear that a nearby caucasian onlooker has discerned her legally marginalized racial status — her growing sense of dread is tempered by her sense of the ridiculousness of the situation. “Absurd!” she muses. “White people were so stupid about such things for all that they usually asserted that they were able to tell; and by the most ridiculous means, finger-nails, palms of hands, shapes of ears, teeth, and other equally silly rot” (150). The prospect of discovery is deadly serious for Irene, and yet the whole sequence underlines the “absurd,” laughable possibility that, precisely through its myopic fixation upon corporeal details that actually mean nothing whatsoever, the anonymous caucasian gaze has effectively mistaken Irene for what she is. Thus, Larsen tells us, “Irene laughed softly, but her eyes flashed” (150). That the truth may sometimes arise from a misrecognition would be funny in itself, if not for Irene’s fear of being discovered and hence ejected from the Drayton tearoom, but the overriding joke and its implicit punch line become clear once the anonymous observer steps forward to introduce herself as Irene’s long-lost childhood friend and fellow “Negro,” Clare Kendry.

This early moment of revelation typifies Larsen’s narrative technique in Passing, which often appears at pains to emphasize a dissonance between the “surface” layer of intersubjective encounter and its underlying substratum of “authentic” subjective experience. In this first passing encounter of Passing, it is the passer herself (Irene) who has succumbed to the “absurd” set of racial/corporeal equations that usually lead “white people” to dupe themselves, and that have now led Irene herself to mistake Clare Kandry for a caucasian. It is also, however, a critical moment for any approach to Larsen that seeks out Passing’s attitude toward racial substance, for after the renewal of acquaintances that takes place during this sequence, Irene find herself confronted with a vexed ontological question: in what sense, she now wonders, is Clare actually a
“Negro,” especially when all of her visible, corporeal qualities — her “ivory” skin and “golden hair,” for instance — seem to bespeak “whiteness,” so much so that Irene had never doubted Clare’s caucasian status even throughout a close visual scrutiny of her? Finding herself at a loss to explain precisely how or why the phenotypically “caucasian” Clare actually qualifies as “black,” Irene finally decides that the elusive moment of racial essence resides within the depths of Clare’s gaze: “Ah! Surely! They were Negro eyes! mysterious and concealing,” Irene concludes, but even here, the eyes of the Negro are not configured within the anatomical geometries Irene considers little more than “silly rot” but are instead mystified, sublimated as that place from which racial difference, Clare’s secret inheritance from “her grandmother and later her mother and father,” the “thing that couldn’t be registered” in mere corporeal terms, somehow emanates (161).

It is also, therefore, a moment that places definite limits upon the subversive effects of parodic imitation, since it is the very seamlessness of Clare’s passing performance, the mimetic flawlessness of her simulation of a white woman, that prompts Irene not to abandon “race” as a legitimate differential term but rather to re-locate it on a mysterious plane beyond that of the merely corporeal. Inasmuch as it locates a kernel of raw, unmediated racial alterity within the sanctum of Clare’s gaze, the sequence in the Drayton anticipates another mise-en-scène of performance and misrecognition, one that similarly pokes quiet fun at what Wiegman calls the “visible epistemology of black skin,” though this time, the butt of the joke appears in the form of Clare’s husband, the openly racist John Bellew. Larsen presents Bellew as the dupe, the racist fool who fails to realize that his own wife is among the very “black scrymy devils” he impugns through his frequent diatribes. When asked to explain his apparently affectionate pet name for his wife (usually, we discover, Bellew greets Clare as “Nig”), he offers Clare and Irene what he clearly considers a clever witticism. “When we were first married,” he explains, “she was white as — as — well as white as a lily. But I declare she’s gettin’ darker and darker. I tell her if she don’t look out, she’ll wake up one of these days and find she’s turned into a nigger” (171). At this, of course, Bellew “roar[s] with laughter,” and his laughter is reciprocated by the women surrounding him. But though it might appear to affirm Bellew’s bad joke, the laughter of Clare and Irene actually stems from a surreptitious comedic source, since both passing women are laughing at Bellew rather than with him, are laughing at the racist’s ridiculous blindness and truly laughable assumptions rather than alongside those assumptions. Availing themselves of that outlet Freud describes in jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious, Clare and Irene laugh as a way of striking a blow at an adversary they are otherwise powerless to assail; Irene, Larsen tells us, “had a leaping desire to shout at the man beside her, ‘And you’re sitting here surrounded by three black devils, drinking tea’” (172), but instead of denouncing Bellew openly, Irene savors the hidden comedy through her unconcealed laughter.

So in a definite sense, Irene’s laughter during this sequence also qualifies as a form of Butlerian, parodic laughter: part of the comedy to which her laughter responds lies in the fact that the ostensibly “caucasian” women surrounding Bellew are in fact “copies,” the very “black scrymy devils” from which he imag-
ines himself safely distanced. But even if Irene’s laughter finds its source in the very forms of parody and imitation Butler describes in Gender Trouble, this laughter fails to deliver the liberating, denaturalizing effects Butler forecasts — quite the opposite, in fact. Larsen’s description of Irene’s laughter draws it out, stretches it to conspicuous dimensions, so that while the laughter indicates a certain furtive pleasure with Bellew’s catastrophic mistake, the pleasure itself now appears as if situated along a Möbius strip, now verging upon its reversal into anguish: “Irene, who had been sitting with lips tightly compressed, cried out, ‘That’s good!’ and gave way to gales of laughter. She laughed and laughed and laughed. Tears ran down her cheeks. Her sides ached. Her throat hurt. She laughed on and on and on, long after the others had subsided” (171). It is while in the midst of this vertigo of laughter, Larsen tells us, that Irene, suddenly glancing into the eyes of Clare, “encountered her peculiar eyes fixed on her with an expression so dark and deep and unfathomable that she had for a short moment the sensation of gazing into the eyes of some creature utterly strange and apart” (172). Momentarily, Irene sees Clare as a “creature,” a monster of some kind, and in this sense, Irene sees Clare as Bellew sees all African Americans: even if not precisely as “black sc Sammy devils,” certainly as “unfathomable” and “utterly strange and apart.” As in the earlier sequence in the Drayton, the gaze of Clare contains something “dark and deep,” something as “unfathomable” as race itself, the “thing that couldn’t be registered” otherwise.

So even if readers such as Kawash, Wiegman, and Butler are fundamentally correct when they suggest that Passing turns a suspicious eye toward traditional notions of racial difference, and even if they are correct when they insist that the novel works to undermine those connections between corporeality and “race” that have most usually been taken for granted in American culture, why then do such moments from Passing seem to invest racial difference with a phantasmatic power that perseveres despite the ontological deficiencies of “race”? The first contention I want to make here is that Passing’s paradoxical fixation with racial difference (ontologically bankrupt on the one hand yet irreducibly charged on the other) should remind us of what Jaques Lacan aims at in his deliberations over another category of difference — sexual difference — and especially in his insistence that sexual difference is real. By referring to sexual difference as real, Lacan does not mean that sexual difference pertains to some level of immutable, biologically fixed “reality” that stands apart from our discursive or epistemological renditions of sex but rather that sexual difference belongs to what he terms the order of the real, precisely as that which cannot be enclosed in either the symbolic register (which is to say, in language itself) or what Lacan refers to as the imaginary (the visual world of corporeal images by means of which the subject may liken or differentiate herself from others). “Real,” for Lacan, is what perturbs both the imaginary and the symbolic, what exceeds the conceptual limits of either domain, and in Passing, racial difference — like sexual difference as described by Lacan — appears as “the essential object which isn’t an object any longer, but this something faced with which all words cease and all categories fail, the object of anxiety par excellence” (Seminar II 164). Passing, in other words, denies racial difference both its symbolic and its imaginary support: in this novel, there is no phrase that can answer the
question, "What is racial difference?" (we have seen, for instance, how a version of this question leaves Irene Redfield with nothing meaningful to say), and neither does there seem to be any corporeal quality or set of qualities that can reliably distinguish members of putatively distinct racial groups (all such efforts at the corporeal specification of race, as Irene rightly muses, are little more than "silly rot"). But the symbolic and imaginary bankruptcy of "race" as the term functions or dysfunctions in Passing should not lead us to conclude that Larsen dismisses the term as a mere social illusion — a mere "nothing" that twentieth-century subjects continue wrongly to invest as "something." Instead, Larsen's treatments of racial difference aim at its impossibly charged status, the sense in which racial difference, beyond the fact of its imaginary or symbolic deficiencies, is replete with its own real symptomatology. Another way to put this is to say that regardless of Larsen's purpose the effect of her narrative is to reverse the sort of historicist premise that informs so many approaches to her novel today: the point about Passing is not simply that racial difference is an historically contingent notion, that certain twentieth-century American subjects created or inscribed racial difference for the purposes of post-reconstruction racism. The point, rather, is something like the opposite, that racial difference is in a way what created or inscribed the twentieth-century American subject.

2.

This is to suggest that the sort of antiracist cultural critique for which Wiegman calls (and which she also enacts in sophisticated and illuminating ways), the fundamental aim of which is to interrupt the axis "between the idea of 'race' and the 'black' body," falls somewhat short of the challenge Larsen poses in Passing. For if the racist economies Larsen unveils persist even in the apparent absence of such a connection, this would imply that the cultural force of "race" is conceptually resistant to any critical tactic that focuses strictly upon the dubiousness of its corporeal transfigurations.

What exactly is meant by "race" as the word is used and contested in Passing? Responding to his wife's self-assured remark ("What would it matter if . . . I were one or two percent coloured?"), Bellew exclaims, "Oh, no, Nig. [. . .] Nothing like that with me. I know you're no nigger, so it's all right. You can get as black as you please as far as I'm concerned, since I know you're no nigger" (171). It is an intriguing formulation. Bellew's statement would imply that "nigger" is something that is irreducible to a set of positive physical characteristics, though these very characteristics are at the same time what demarcate whites from blacks. (Again: "I declare she's gettin' darker and darker. I tell her if she don't look out, she'll wake up one of these days and find she's turned into a nigger.") That is, one "can get as black as [one] please[s]," as far as Bellew is concerned, without actually qualifying as "black"; blackness thus designates a kind of uncanny surplus, what is "in the subject more than the subject itself," to borrow the Lacanian phrase; and in Passing, racial substance most often resides here, a kernel of alterity that exceeds the literal characteristics that designate alterity itself. If one may embody all of the physical qualities associ-
ated with blackness without actually being black, this means that “black” is that which bypasses the level of imaginary identification (the level of specularizable difference by means of which one may liken or differentiate oneself), penetrating to the level of the real, the supposed inner stratum of the subject in his or her raw authenticity. So when Bellew explains that Clare may become as darkly colored as she pleases without actually becoming “coloured,” the corollary of this logic is that one may appear as “lily” white as whites themselves without actually being white. The matrix of corporeal qualities (skin, nose, hair, and so on) that ostensibly separates whites from blacks functions strictly as pretext here: what matters for the white-supremacist mentality that Bellew incarnates and Passing exposes is the phantasmatic moment of difference that, since it can never be confined to a finite set of terms, can never be dispelled.

Such a prospect of an immaterial and yet substantial kernel of racial alterity allows us to see how passing, far from undermining the apparently rigid system of partitions that appears on the surface level of racist fantasy (in which the divisions that separate whites from blacks are presented as absolute and impermeable), actually provides the necessary exception that grounds the white-supremacist logic. If, as Bellew believes, African Americans are not only the bearers of a particular class of physical characteristics but also the embodiment and source of a deep social malignancy (as he informs the passing women in his home, “I read in the papers about them. Always robbing and killing people” [172]), what, may we imagine, would be Bellew’s response to an African American who did not rob and kill? To Bellew’s paranoid vision of “all blacks” as those who rob and kill, we may of course add a list of traditional stereotypes: all blacks are lazy, all blacks are unintelligent, all blacks are possessed of an excessive sexual drive for which their unhappy social predicament may be blamed, and so on. The point here is that such lists are, like the physical characteristics Clare may display without “really” being black, pure pretext; the logical formulae, “Because they steal,” “Because they are lazy,” and “Because they cannot control their urges” all serve to obscure the fundamental logic: “Because they are black — because there is a universal something in them that overrides its own particular expression in theft, violence, or indigence.” If we are to imagine Bellew — or someone like Bellew — faced with a black subject who does not exhibit any of these supposedly constant, particular qualities, we can also easily imagine how he would explain such a phenomenon without relinquishing his understanding of what blackness entails. His refrain would go something like this: “Do you see how clever they are? Here we have one who carefully refrains from criminal activity, who manages to keep his sexual urges in check, who has learned to sound intelligent. . . . In short, here we have a black who has learned to pass as white!”

It is this paradox of an exception to the universal law, the exception that rather than undermining actually grounds the law as universally effective, that Lacan articulated in his themes of sexual difference contained in the twentieth seminar, Encore. If, as Lacan suggests, all subjects are subject to the universal condition of castration, this maxim nevertheless provides space for “at least one” subject that is not castrated (what Lacan calls the Name-of-the-Father, the master signifier against which all other signifiers appear as lacking
or “castrated”), so that the universal rule requires some particular instance that escapes its function. Intrinsic to the white-supremacist logic according to which “all blacks” are x, according to which all black subjects fall under the dominion of some universal rule or set of rules, is the proviso that “some blacks” may not exhibit x traits; in order to maintain its epistemological footing in the face of clear evidence that many blacks are not the embodiment of x, the white-supremacist mindset we are describing must have recourse to a conceptual frame within which “some blacks” may appear to escape the universal rule concerning “all blacks” that defines white supremacy itself. The key point here is that passing in no way constitutes a threat to racist-essentialist thinking, not even insofar as it allegedly “deconstructs” the rigidly binarist logic of white/black; on the contrary, it is only through reference to the possibility of passing itself that racists can maintain their essentialist convictions in the face of black subjects who do not fit their paradigm of what “all blacks” must be.

Of definite interest here, moreover, is the way in which this sleight of hand by means of which the prospect of racial essence is preserved, even once bereft of its imaginary or symbolic support, is played out within much of the criticism Larsen’s novel has generated over the past few decades. According to readers such as Cheryl Wall and Mary Mabel Youman, Passing presents a pair of women, Irene and Clare, who have paid for their upper-middle class existence by severing what Irene at one point refers to as “the bonds of race.” 1920s upper-middle-class affluence is thus diametrically opposed not only to solidarity with other African Americans (Irene’s orchestration of tea parties for various racial uplift organizations does in fact seem hypocritically distanced from actual political involvement) but also more troublingly to the self-acceptance of “blackness” itself. Even Deborah McDowell, whose pathbreaking work with the queer dimensions of Larsen’s narrative distinguishes itself from the more racially focused readings of other scholars, argues that Larsen “parodies the manners and morals of the black middle class” with her “descriptions of the endless tea and cocktail parties, and charity balls [that] capture the sterility and banality of the bourgeoisie” (xxv). The manners and morals at issue here are codified as “white” manners and morals, so that Irene’s comfortable lifestyle may be treated as the index of her alienation — or, as McDowell puts it, of the problem of “racial identity and loyalty” raised by Irene’s genteel existence (xxvii). A sequence from Larsen’s 1928 novel Quicksand provides another case study for this tendency in Larsen scholarship. When the (also) mulatta, (also) bourgeois Helga Crane attends a Harlem cabaret in which, Larsen tells us, “the essence of life seemed bodily motion” (59), her involvement and fascination with the scene is somehow tinged with a sense of displacement, so that “when suddenly the music died, [Helga] dragged herself back to the present with a conscious effort; and a shameful certainty that not only had she been in the jungle, but that she had enjoyed it, began to taunt her.” For Cheryl Wall, the severe sense of disjointedness to which Helga succumbs during this sequence comes about as a result of her close encounter with the ethnic Thing she strives to repress throughout the rest of the novel. For such readers, the repression of one’s own racial identity becomes the dominant leitmotif of Larsen’s work, as in Youman’s explanation that “Passing, in my opinion, is a novel which shows that
Blacks can and do lose the spiritual values of Blackness though they remain in the Black world” (235)

What deserves attention in such readings of Larsen, which formulate a sort of repressive hypothesis concerning upper-middle-class, African-American subjects who appear detached from the set of desires that are even today often taken as somehow fundamental to the “authentic” African-American subjective experience, is the supposition these readings necessarily entail: strictly by virtue of their racial status — albeit a racial status that is comprised neither by “black” physical characteristics (since these are a priori “invisible” in passing novels) nor allegedly “black” proclivities (since it is the absence of such proclivities that is itself remarked upon as conspicuous) — African-American subjects are by definition “out of joint” within the staid milieu of the bourgeoisie. This supposition carries with it an implicit injunction: in order to “be black” (that is, in order to show solidarity with other African Americans, in order to attain the ideal of self-realization, in order to be “comfortable with who I am,” and so on), African-American subjects must not only make certain choices (for instance, they must choose the cabaret over the tea-party), they must also go the further step of actually enjoying the “correct” choice. It is not enough simply to go through one’s social ritual in a mechanical, dutiful fashion, since one may attend the cabaret without really embracing it; rather, one must take the additional step of actually, “really” preferring this cultural ritual over that one. If one cannot make this psychic turn — if, in spite of going through all of the outward motions that should signal one’s willingness to embrace some sense of ethnic belonging, one is nevertheless unable to close one’s sense of distance — this failure points to the fact that one is “still passing”; the inability to enjoy the ritual wholeheartedly is indicative of a fundamental betrayal.³

It should come as no surprise that this formula for racial essentialism, one that draws explicitly upon wider suppositions about the modes of pleasure and preference proper to racially distinct individuals, extends beyond Larsen’s work to infiltrate many levels of contemporary culture. Perhaps the most striking recent instance of the demand that African Americans organize their desires in particular ways appears as the central trope of George Tillman’s 1997 film Soul Food, where ethnic cuisine is used as the fundamental test of the subject’s self-acceptance. The particular pairing of words that makes up this film’s title is of course related to the Lacanian motif of sublimation, whereby a random, arbitrary object (“food”) is elevated to the status of the formless, ineffable Thing that is the subject as such (“soul”). That is, the degree to which one loves oneself and one’s family as African American is precisely commensurate, in Tillman’s film, with one’s desire for “soul food”; only by renouncing other culinary styles, or at least subordinating one’s taste for these styles, can the subject prove his or her solidarity and self-acceptance. Another version of this problematic is well-known to African-American literary scholars who choose to specialize in, for example, Victorian or Chaucerian Studies as opposed to (again for instance) the nineteenth-century slave narrative or postcolonial theory. Often such scholars may be regarded as unusual exceptions to the universal rule that all black scholars are postcolonial theorists of the slave narrative, so that the very existence of such individuals seems to betray a form of deep “identity
struggle” on their behalf: does not the very fact that here is an African-American intellectual who does not show any interest in such areas of inquiry point to the fact that this individual has already been interpellated into the white-supremacist mindset that privileges George Eliot over Harriet Jacobs? Does not the fact that this individual has failed not only to choose Jacobs over Eliot but to do so freely, to prefer wholeheartedly Jacobs to Eliot, indicate the sad truth that this individual is really “passing” — not only to other academics but, more tragically, to him- or herself?

3.

So — to return to our earlier concern — while Butler’s tendency is to invest pleasure, and especially the sort of spontaneous pleasure she associates with parodic laughter, as a form of unregulated affect that provides our surest resistance against the normative prescriptions of race, gender, and so on, I would point out that in many cases, the very “authentic” pleasure of the subject who would resist his or her normative, paradigmatic role is already the projection par excellence of this role, already well within the horizon of the normative paradigm to which this subject is already submitted. On the view I offer, we cannot extract the subject in his or her authenticity through reference to this subject’s apparently genuine experience of pleasure because even at this innermost level of the subject’s self-experience, the subject’s psychic interiority is already co-opted and reduced by external socio-symbolic forces. This, moreover, is what Lacan aims at with his insistence that “Desire is desire of the Other” (Seminar XI 235): the same internal, private desire to which we might appeal in order to extract the subject from his or her suffocating, publicly induced, socio-symbolic role is in fact already the extenuation of this role, such that the opposition of surface and depth that seems to inform so much of the criticism Passing generates finally becomes impossible to maintain.

This is to say that the public level of socio-symbolic exchange and encounter intrudes upon the psychic interiority of the subject of Passing, and to such an extent that this intrusion provides the fundamental scheme for the novel’s narrative process. Toward the end of Passing, the collapse of boundaries between private desire and public happenstance follows a pattern of wish-fulfillment, wherein Irene’s internal drives are realized through the activities of others, actuated in the public space — but apparently without her explicit consent. After arriving at the conclusion that Clare has been carrying on an affair with Irene’s husband, Brian, Irene suddenly realizes “how easily she could put Clare out of her life! She had only to tell John Bellew — No. Not that!” If Bellew were to stumble upon the fact that Clare is in fact a passing “Negro,” Irene concludes, “[i]t would be enough to rid her forever of Clare Kendry” (225). Irene, however, immediately abandons this plan, unable to muster the resolve necessary to inform Bellew of Clare’s secret identity — but sure enough, “[a]s if in answer to her wish,” Larsen tells us, the very next scene of Passing brings Irene face to face with John Bellew, whom she meets in a chance encounter on the streets of downtown Manhattan. During this second meet-
ing with Bellew, Irene is literally “linked,” arm in arm, with her friend Felise Freeland, an African American whose skin is too dark to allow her to pass, and so Irene does not have to say a word in order for Bellew to conclude that his wife, as well as Irene Redfield, consorts with “Negroes” and hence (according to the string of associations that apparently structures Bellew’s logic) may well be black herself.

Since her earlier hopes are now reached through an unplanned encounter, and further, since they are realized not by Irene herself but chiefly by virtue of the paranoid associations of Bellew (who apparently believes that mere contact with African Americans indicates one’s identification with African Americans), Irene is spared having to confront the fact that she herself has been psychically complicit in this disclosure of Clare’s secret; she is able, in other words, to disavow her own previous desire for such a meeting with Bellew, since she herself did nothing to orchestrate this meeting. The denouement of Passage, moreover, follows a similar trajectory of disavowal and wish-fulfillment. After realizing that Bellew’s discovery of Clare’s identity will probably cause him simply to divorce his wife (as in the contemporaneous case of “Kip” Rhinelander, who was granted a divorce in New York State after the revelation of his wife’s African-American status) and hence free the latter to pursue a relationship with Brian, Irene now concludes she would be happiest if Clare would simply die. Once again, Irene immediately represses this traumatic wish (“Oh, it was vile!” she thinks, “To think, yes, to wish that!” [228]), and once again, the disavowal of the wish immediately precedes the wish’s chance realization; in the closing pages of the novel, Clare falls from a sixth-story window, apparently in response to her husband’s denunciation of her as “a nigger, a damned dirty nigger!” (238).4

All of this is not simply intended as a digression into the question of Irene’s level of responsibility for Clare’s social and literal downfall, for the questions of accountability at play in both of these mysterious sequences finally intersect with the problems of identity and agency intrinsic to passing itself. Who, after all, passes in Passage? When Clare or Irene passes, she never does so by means of a direct proclamation of whiteness; rather, it is the network of communally held, socially circulated assumptions, assumptions grounded in a model of caucasian normativity, that does the passing for both women, that generates the fiction that each woman then only inhabits — into which she simply passes. Is passing equivalent to lying? If so, it is the sort of lie from which the subject retains a definite distance, a “lie” that initiates and sustains itself quite apart from the passing subject’s overt efforts at deception. In this sense, passing is of a piece with the sort of lie at issue in Freud’s famous joke concerning the two Jews — First Jew: “I’m going to Cracow.” Second Jew: “Liar! Why do you tell me you’re going to Cracow so that I’ll think you’re going to Lvov? You, in fact, are going to Cracow!” (Jokes 115; see also Lacan, Écrits 173).

The lesson Lacan extrapolates from Freud’s joke is that while many animals can deceive, human beings are the animals that can lie by telling the truth, who can formulate “lies” strictly in light of the Other’s unwillingness to see the truth even and perhaps especially when it is hidden in plain sight. Larsen’s acute
understanding of the logic behind Freud's joke imbues every page of *Passing*, where passing mainly occurs at the level of the Other's myopic failure to see blackness except as an aberration of norms. It is in the spirit of this joke, moreover, that Larsen invites us to laugh alongside Irene and Clare as the latter asks her husband, "My goodness, Jack! What difference would it make if, after all these years, you were to find out that I was one or two percent coloured?"

To speak of this dynamic as a form of subversive performance obscures the sense in which passing only acquires its performative status against the backdrop of primarily repressive presuppositions and prerogatives; the day-to-day activities of a subject only become a form of passing once enclosed within a conceptual space that overdetermines these activities as inherently transgressive. This is why Irene, who later admits to occasional passing "for the sake of convenience" (227) and whom we witness in the act of passing on at least two occasions, nevertheless distances herself from the act itself. "Tell me, honestly," Clare asks, "haven't you ever thought of 'passing'?” Irene responds, "No. Why should I?” (160). Irene’s response does not, as we might initially think, twist the truth so very far indeed, since one need not premeditate or even think of one's own passing in order actually to pass; passing, rather, occurs by its own volition, is already underway prior to the passing subject’s apprehension. "It's funny about 'passing,'” Irene later comments. "We disapprove of it and at the same time condone it. It excites our contempt and yet we rather admire it. We shy away from it with an odd kind of revulsion, but we protect it” (186). Like racial difference itself, passing extends from a point beyond the words the subject speaks, prior to the images he or she embodies, emerges from a place past the reaches of these considerations, where contempt, revulsion, and fascination merge into one another. “A thing that couldn’t be registered,” indeed.

Notes

1. See Lacan, *Seminar XX* 78-80: "through the phallic function ... man as a whole acquires his inscription, with the proviso that this function is limited due to the existence of an $x$ by means of which the function $\Phi x$ [Lacan’s matheme for castration] is negated" (79).

2. Other readers who follow the trajectory I describe here, by means of which Irene and/or Clare are viewed as subjects who actively efface some extant dimension of racial/ethnic "identity" through the cultural alignments they assume, include Davis, whose critical biography of Larsen explains that Irene's attraction for Clare should be read as an "aesthetic attraction to whiteness" that we should understand as a "logical extension of her bourgeoisie lifestyle and ideology" (306), and Sullivan, who contends that "Irene ‘passes’ not by adopting a white identity as Clare does, but by adopting white values, including white standards of beauty” (374). Last, I might mention that by interrogating the formal logic these readings seem to embrace, I do not mean to deny the possibility that Irene is indeed invested in some form of racial distancing throughout *Passing*. Rather, what I am trying to underline here is simply that signifiers of affluence and blackness need not exist in an antithetical relationship.
3. The implicit injunction at issue here is thus a version of what Lacan refers to as the superegoic demand. As Lacan stressed over and over again, superego and law are not equivalent, since while the law insists that the subject must curtail his or her enjoyment (and thus tacitly incites transgression), the superego issues the very opposite commandment: “Enjoy!” Superego, Lacan explains, emerges out of the blind spots of the law, the places at which “the law is entirely reduced to something, which cannot even be expressed, like the You must, which is speech deprived of all its meaning” (Seminar I 102). In the conceptual framework of Larsen's novels, we can see how the superegotistical injunction to enjoy can be infinitely more oppressive than mere prohibition. How, after all, can the subject obey such a demand? Often, he or she simply cannot; for Helga Crane, who cannot unproblematically enjoy herself at the cabaret, the failure to respond correctly to stimuli that “should” (according to readers such as Wall and Youman) provide pleasure and satisfaction produces a very particular, poisonous form of guilt, the guilt of a subject whose very failure to enjoy must indicate a deeper loathing of the values that supposedly comprise his or her core being as subject. On the superegotistical injunction to enjoy, see Lacan, Écrits 256. For more detailed analyses of the split between law and superego, see Žižek, Metastases 54–85 and Plague 113-7.

4. Almost all Larsen scholars have focused upon this final sequence in an attempt to solve the plot-level mystery it seems to present. Irene herself, after all, is standing closest to Clare when the latter falls, and so the narrative raises the possibility that Irene, and not Bellew or Clare herself, is the actual agent behind this catastrophe. Indeed, Irene herself appears on the verge of such a conclusion in the novel's final moments; apparently suffering from a form of amnesia as she tries to sort through the events immediately prior to Clare's death, Irene nevertheless recalls “the image of her hand on Irene's arm” (239), a memory that costs her the realization that she herself may have pushed Clare from the open window. But since the novel simply does not supply its reader with the factual information required to reach this conclusion, it is helpful here to refer, once again, to Lacan's distinction between reality and the real. According to Lacan, even when a husband who suffers from the delusion that his wife is unfaithful discovers that his wife has indeed been carrying on a series of affairs, the reality of his wife's indiscretions in no way changes the fact that the husband is a paranoid delusional. In such an instance, Lacan tells us, “reality” renders itself as a projection or symptom of the real, the real as condensed in the husband's paranoid delusions of his cheating wife (which, we can well imagine, would persist even if his wife were utterly faithful). For this reason, Lacan stipulates in his eleventh seminar that “the unconscious is outside”; the unconscious, in other words, does not end at the periphery of internal, purely psychic associations and fixations. Rather, it is bound up with the material reality of the world that surrounds us, infiltrating the sphere of social relations itself. Mutatis mutandis, our final assessments of Irene's role during this scene should not depend upon whether or not she herself actually pushes Clare from the sixth-story window, for the fact is that, whoever initiated Clare's fall, Irene herself is responsible for having desired this fall; the entire sequence, like the earlier sequence during which Bellew accidentally discovers his wife's African-
American status, should be read as the public rendition of Irene’s private desires, and hence as an illustration of reality’s symptomatic relation to the real.

Works Cited


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