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"This Damned Business of Colour:" Passing in African American Novels and Memoirs

by

Irina C. Negrea

A Dissertation

Presented to the Graduate and Research Committee

of Lehigh University

in Candidacy for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

English

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Date

Dissertation Director

4-26-05
Accepted Date

Committee Members:

Dawn Keetley

Seth Moglen

Elizabeth Fifer

William Scott

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

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ABSTRACT

The topic of this dissertation is an analysis of racial passing, as depicted in the novels The House Behind the Cedars by Charles Chesnutt, The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man, by James Weldon Johnson, and Passing by Nella Larsen, as well as in the memoirs The Sweeter the Juice by Shirlee Taylor Haizlip, Notes of a White Black Woman by Judy Scales-Trent, and Life on the Color Line by Gregory Williams.

Starting from the premise that passing is a complex phenomenon that reinforces and subverts the racial system simultaneously, this dissertation focuses on the subversive side of passing that comes to light especially when the passer is found out—a side that becomes obvious in the reactions it provokes in white racists: horror, fear, disgust, and insecurity.

One other new element that this dissertation brings into the field is a classification of passing that can be used as a tool for the analysis of similar literary works. The majority of passers fall into one of two categories: identificatory and performative. Identificatory passing is predicated on the passer's identification with the white ideology. It is permanent, and the passer breaks all ties with his/her African American ancestry. At the other end of the spectrum is performative passing, based on the view of race as performance—a matter of props, makeup, and/or behavior. The passer crosses the color line and "acts" white, but in most cases, s/he does not break his/her ties with his/her African American roots and community. Rather, the

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performative passer tries to acknowledge both his/her racial identities, refusing to be boxed in one narrow racial category. These types of passing do not exist in a "pure" state; there are characters who start as performers of race and end up identifying with whiteness, for example, but the two basic types exist, in one combination or another, in all the stories of passing ever written. These two different types of passing engender different types of subversion of the racial system, and they are discussed as well in this dissertation.

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INTRODUCTION

"I'm sick of the whole race business if you ask me. No, I don't think being colored in America is a beautiful thing. I think it's nothing short of a curse." (53)

Angela Murray's words, in Jessie Fauset's Plum Bun, echo the thoughts and attitudes of many characters in passing novels—especially those in The House Behind the Cedars by Charles Chesnutt, The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man by James Weldon Johnson, and Passing by Nella Larsen. How are John and Rena Walden, the ex-colored man, and Clare Kendry expected to cope with life in a system that had discriminated against African Americans constantly? More importantly, how can they keep their dignity intact and forge a life that is meaningful to them, a life that would give them a greater degree of individual freedom than the lack of freedom and the discrimination the "black" racial category entails? It seems that John, Rena, Clare, and the ex-colored man have found the answers to these questions in racial passing.

As a complex phenomenon, necessarily surrounded by secrecy, passing cannot be analyzed alone, but rather along with a host of issues and concepts that are equally daunting and complicated. This dissertation is an exploration of passing and of the main issues it involves; it also establishes a typology of passing, along with a discussion of race and the racial status quo in three passing novels that appeared at the beginning of the 20th century and three autobiographical works published at the end of the 20th century—a discussion that adds to the critical narrative on passing novels.

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The exploration of passing in its complexity requires certain concepts to be explicated, so this introduction facilitates the analysis by providing a theoretical framework. Since passing between races is predicated upon prior racial classification, my argument focuses first on a discussion of race as a fictitious and highly unstable—category. It is so unstable, in fact, that the mere lack of certain physical features (coded as "black") enables an individual to cross the color line to the white side in order to pass. The lack of so-called "black" features helps the passer become invisible to white eyes. Invisibility accompanies racial classification and can be used as a strategy by African Americans or as a discriminatory tool by whites, added to other uses of the black body by existing power structures. The discussion of these concepts makes up the first two sections of the introduction.

The third section, reveals the potential of passing to challenge and, in certain situations, subvert the racial status quo in America—the racist system that gave birth to passing in the first place. It is also necessary to acknowledge that passing is a sword that cuts both ways, in that it challenges *and* it reinforces racial categories. The passer makes a clear choice when s/he crosses the color line to *become* white, so one may say that a category is chosen and that the entire system is maintained by this very choice. This is only partly true, however, and this dissertation is also focused on how passing can challenge this system, especially when the passer is outed. The novels I have chosen represent, in my opinion, the most sophisticated treatments of passing in American literature. Chesnutt, Johnson, and Larsen have all focused their attention on passing figures and the space they carves for themselves: in each case,

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the fact that the main characters are racially mobile is what makes them truly threatening to a system based on stable and confining racial categories. The characters cultivate their racial ambiguity in order to pass; they exploit it as a means to escape the confinement of racism that threatens to suffocate them and to annihilate their complex identity. The three contemporary works that I discuss in the final chapter—Shirlee Taylor Haizlip's The Sweeter the Juice, Judy Scales-Trent's Notes of a White Black Woman, and Gregory Williams' Life on the Color Line—are autobiographical narratives written from different perspectives: those left behind by the passer, that of a biracial individual producing visible white anxiety, and that of a former passer who finds out he is black and that he needs to change his life accordingly. All the works discussed explore the situation of biracial individuals who belong—literally—on the color line and whom the system nonetheless tries to contain at all costs.

Ultimately, I argue that the very existence of people who cannot be contained within either binarized racial category is threatening to what is already a precarious system. The works that I discuss explore this threat, since they all depict characters of mixed ancestry; this fact inevitably renders identity problematic because the characters have to learn how to think outside the binary system into which they have been born. While the characters' sense of identity is not necessarily resolved by the end of the work, the writers are clearly critical of a system that has created such problems in the first place. Above all, Chesnutt, Johnson, and Larsen concentrate on the struggles engendered by the ability of their characters to switch races if they wish

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to, and on the possibility of a certain degree of individual freedom that such mobility entails. Racially, these characters are neither black nor white, but somewhere in between, and that in-betweenness creates ambiguity and possibilities of freedom from assimilation into one race or the other. To the extent that these characters reject fixed categories and preordained identities, they reject containment and a visibility that echoes the auction block. To use Dawn Keetley's words, "it is not simply 'passing *as* white' that is the source of a certain freedom...; rather, it is the sense of just 'passing,' of being between and mobile" (16). Finally, writing the story of passing is in itself a subversive act that challenges white beliefs in racial purity and in so-called "stable" signs of blackness. The writers consciously set out to make their white readership interrogate the whole racial system.

Section One: Race and (In)visibility

"I knew then who I was. I was a Negro, a human being with an invisible pigmentation which marked me a person to be hunted, hanged, abused, discriminated against, kept in poverty and ignorance, in order that those whose skin was white would have readily at hand a proof of their own superiority." (A Man Called White 11)

Walter White's words define race as a way of marking a certain group as inferior, as a target for abuse and discrimination on the basis of skin pigmentation, which is not always visible. The mark assigns inferiority to those who bear it, and White's analysis could be regarded as one of the definitions of race, added to the

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various ones that have circulated throughout history. Werner Sollors assumes that the concept itself may have developed out of biblical generational tables and evolved to its present meaning(s) (111). According to George Fredrickson, the initial usage of the word "race" was associated with animal husbandry, and later with aristocratic lineages. The first "modern" use of the word dates from 1611. A Spanish dictionary defined one of its meanings as a "pejorative one, as referring to a lineage that included Jewish or Moorish ancestors. Whenever and wherever it was used, however, the term implied that "races" had stable and presumably unchangeable characteristics" (53). It is a usage that has been preserved throughout history, even though it has been proven unstable again and again.

F. James Davis discusses how race became known in the South as closely connected with the "one-drop rule" (5). Since one distinction that was important was black/white, and since whites believed that race and its "unchangeable characteristics" were transmissible by blood, the conclusion was that "a black is any person with any known African black ancestry" (Davis 5). An important auxiliary of race as a tool of exploitation, the one-drop rule had multiple uses: it was used to protect slavery, to maintain the Jim Crow system, to facilitate the sexual exploitation of black women by white men, and to keep alive the myth of pure whiteness (Davis 174).

Anthony Appiah enriches the definition of race by asserting that "the concept of race that has done so much damage in our era is ... a biological fiction [that] pretends to be an objective term of classification" (37), while Cathy Boeckman sees

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race as "a performance or a disguise rather than a natural category," a definition that will prove crucial in the discussion of passing (2). With these definitions, we approach the realm of what race really represents rather than how it is seen by white supremacy. Sollors adds to his definition the idea that even though race is not always easily detected physically, it can also be a matter of conviction, especially for biracial individuals. In the case of blond-haired, blue-eyed Walter White, who was easily able to pass for white, race is indeed, a matter of conviction, as the epigraph suggests (147).

To the definition of race as a "biological fiction," I would like to add another dimension: the strenuous attempts of the American judicial system, from the 17th century on, to define and construct race in order to keep boundaries in place and to make biracial individuals visible as black. Teresa Zackodnik's article, "Fixing the Color Line," proves to be crucial in understanding how efforts to contain biracial individuals were taken to absurd extremes by the American judicial system, all with the aim of making race visible and keeping the racial system operational. Especially during the 19th century, American judicial definitions of race were varied and contradictory in their desperate efforts to contain all African Americans and biracial individuals into one category. Thus, apart from the physical aspect, race acquired a social one—it became "a matter of reputation, personal conduct, and association," because the "stable" physical signs of race had been destabilized by the existence of biracial individuals (Zackodnik 421).

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Racial ambiguity challenges the black/white binary that white supremacy is founded on, exposing its instability and refuting the myth of pure whiteness. This possibility of subversion on the part of the mixed blood African Americans who are able to pass has been explored by critics at length. Elaine Ginsberg speaks about the white anxiety at the destruction of the binaries black/white and free/slave (6). Samira Kawash discusses the failure of the binary black/white to provide a coherent identity to people with mixed blood (63). Juda Bennett and Martha Cutter point out that passing not only destroys binaries, but is also liberating from the enclosure of race (15, 75). Finally, Werner Sollors discusses how "the mulatto" is an upsetting and subversive character, since he questions the very existence of "pure" whiteness and proves its instability, its inability to stand as a fixed, immutable category, or as the "original" category, against which blacks (and all "others") are defined as deviant (234).

Drawing upon these components, then, my study is grounded in the notion of race as a fictitious and highly unstable category, created by a dominant society, in order to objectify the Other's body and render it visible—a text to be read and mastered by whites. Race is a tool of economic and sexual exploitation, systematically used by whites to justify their superiority and their rights to discriminate against African Americans. Self-appointed protectors of racial purity, white supremacists patrol the borders of racial categories and realize that it is in their interest to keep them intact and rigid at any cost. However, the instability of race has

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enormous possibilities for biracial individuals who are able to pass, because it renders them racially mobile and invisible—the main requirements when it comes to passing.

As Ginsberg claims, "passing is about specularity: the visible and the invisible, the seen and the unseen" (2). Visibility is crucial in establishing race, in assigning race to an individual. White supremacists have used this concept to impose the racial system on African Americans, and they need it to maintain its status quo. They also need it to maintain the myth of white purity, so all blacks have to be made visible, i.e. known. Louisa Picquet's narrative (1861), for example, contains a discussion about the auction block: "Q.—Did you ever get up on the stand? A.—Why, of course; we all have to get up to be seen" (Keetley 8). Picquet's words speak about how visibility is necessary to maintain the racial system and whiteness, and how important it is for white supremacy to read race "correctly" and make no mistakes.

The African body on display gave whites the opportunity to use the so-called "stable" (and visible) signs of blackness to create fictitious difference and to anchor race in the physical whenever possible. Sander Gilman discuses how in the 19th century, the physical appearance of the Hottentot became the epitome of difference between the European and the African (231). In 1810, Saartjie Baartman, also named "the Hottentot Venus," was publicly exhibited in the nude throughout Europe, so that the viewers noticed her genitalia and buttocks and located and read on her body the difference between the African and the European—a physical difference that was made to signify complex cultural differences. Her exhibition, reminiscent of the auction block on which everybody had to get up "to be seen," constituted the whites'

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efforts to turn her body into a text and give it the meaning they preferred. The physical differences—located in the genitalia and buttocks—along with her nickname, accounted in the European imagination for a "primitive sexual appetite," something Europeans rejected as barbaric and "uncivilized" but secretly desired (232). Interestingly enough, Baartman's genitalia are still on display at the Musée de l'homme in Paris. Reduced to sexual organs, the African body is still the repository of white fears (and desires) and an "object of voyeuristic scrutiny," in Robyn Wiegman's words (59).

The creation of fictitious difference is crucial in the use of visible signs of blackness to maintain the racial system. Robyn Wiegman discusses how visibility is hierarchical, political, and subjective, claiming that the system "is itself contingent on certain visual relations, where only those particularities associated with the Other are, quite literally, seen" (6). In Baartman's case, the viewers (or the voyeurs) focused only on her genital and back area. These body parts accounted for the racial and cultural difference between black and white, and—somehow—for the superiority of European civilization. When trying to "read" a black body, only certain features are seen, while others are ignored because they are not considered relevant in ascertaining race. To this end, certain "stable" signs of blackness[i] are sought every time the race of an individual is under question. The desire to be able to make the distinction is so great on the part of the whites, that these features were used in American courts of law to determine whether an individual is black or white, or, in other cases, a slave or a free person:

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> Complexion indicates his social condition with almost as infallible certainty as it does his race, his color is to be regarded, in the absence of all other evidence, as prima facie proof of slavery. (*Bennett v. the State*, 1 Swan 411 [1852])

Visibility is absolutely crucial, then, not only in establishing race, but ultimately in determining the social status of an individual, and, during slavery, it represented the vital difference between bondage and freedom. The absence of these "stable" signs of blackness is crucial for passing: when the body is not racially marked, it can become racially mobile and able to escape the narrow confines of the system. Sollors discusses how the fingernail "as a racial sign" is associated with other markers (hair, skin, eyes) that "transform the body into a text" and classify it racially (151). The African American body becomes a text to be read and deciphered by whites to their own ends. In The Clansman, for example, Thomas Dixon describes Silas Lynch's eyes: "his dark yellowish eyes beneath his heavy brows glowed with the brightness of the African jungle" (Boeckmann 62). While it is unclear how glowing eyes could represent a sure sign of an African ancestry (in a court of law, for example), Lynch's eyes serve to mark him racially, despite his other Caucasian features; they are created to serve as a warning to unsuspecting whites. They also serve as markers of a fictitious difference; they create it where it did not exist in the first place, in order to keep the system viable.

As long as the African ancestry is rendered visible, racial categories can be maintained, and with them, the myth of white purity and superiority. However, when the African body becomes illegible in terms of racial markings, the opportunity arises

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for bypassing racial laws and for racial mobility. As Juda Bennett claims, the passing figure is "defined by its invisibility" among whites (15). Consequently, anything that can challenge the black/white binary represents a source of anxiety among white supremacists. Miscegenation undermines the binary, since it makes the African heritage less visible—some of the very elements that the racial system was based on (Ginsberg 6). Biracial individuals who exhibit no racial markers (such as Chesnutt's John Walden or Johnson's ex-colored man) often become the focus of deep anxiety when they are "found out:" "Such people were rather literally on the color line, as they could be considered white or black depending on what side of a state line they found themselves" (Boeckmann 33). Presenting an "illegible body" [ii] to white eyes is essential in being able to cross the color line and pass, and even then, this "specter of invisible blackness" was so anxiety-producing, that the mere association with African Americans was enough to classify an individual as black (Davis 56).

Section Two: The Black Body and Whiteness

"There is not a father among you ... who would not rather see his son in a casket than wedded to this mulatto woman. ... There is not a mother in this land who would not see her daughter with her white hands crossed above her shroud than locked in the embrace of a mulatto man." (Isac Mills—attorney for Leonard Rhinelander, Love on Trial 198-9)

The Rhinelander case became the scandal of the year 1925, fed by the media frenzy that exploded around young white millionaire Leonard Rhinelander. Leonard

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sued for the annulment of his marriage to Alice Jones because he claimed she was "colored" and had kept that information from him, i.e., that she was passing for white at the time of the marriage. The jury found in favor of Alice, after compelling evidence that suggested that Leonard's father—powerful and rich Philip Rhinelander—forced his son to get out of what was considered a horrible mésalliance among the white New York elite. This trial brought under discussion yet again one issue that has persistently been associated with race and the visual: the various uses of the black body by racist whites. Alice Jones Rhinelander's defense attorney tried to prove that Alice was visibly "colored" and that anybody—including her husband—could tell that just by looking at her. The defense strategy worked, but Alice was subjected to the ultimate humiliation: she had to disrobe in front of the jury and the judge, baring her breasts, legs, and back. The jury and the judge had to be able to place Alice racially by looking at her exposed body, reading it, and presumably locating all those signifiers of blackness that made her visibly "colored." Alice won the trial at the expense of her dignity. Her body was used as evidence in court, and the gesture echoes the auction block and the exhibition of Saartjie Baartman at fairs around Europe. Earl Lewis and Heidi Ardizzone contextualize the use of Alice's body as evidence:

> It reverberates through a violent racial history and flickers with the remembrance of a multitude of atrocious vignettes: Sojourner Truth baring her breasts to prove to a hostile audience at the Akron, Ohio, Women's Rights Convention that she was a woman. And then there were the Dahomey female warriors brought to the 1893 Chicago World's Fair to represent, with their "masculine" role and their bare

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> breasts, the lowest level of human cultural and racial evolution: the savage African matriarchy. (157)[iii]

The use of visibility by white supremacy helps anchor race in the physical and thus to keep racial categories intact. Even though Alice Rhinelander never claimed she was black (she only claimed she had "colored" blood), she was already black in the eyes of public opinion and in the eyes of the jury, as her body was considered an exhibit in the trial.

Other uses of the black body have been persistently registered by American courts of law. Abby Guy sued for her freedom and that of her children in 1857, and they all had to present themselves to the jury for inspection: the judge informed the jury that "they...should treat their...inspection of the plaintiff's persons as evidence" (Catterall in Zackodnik 420). As in the case of Alice Rhinelander, the inspection would determine the outcome of the trial (which Abby won), but at what price? The defendant, a Mr. Daniel, claimed that Abby was his daughter's inheritance from her grandfather—yet another use of the black body objectified, as gift or inheritance (Zackodnik 421). Finally, Abby won her appeal because her physical appearance did not conform to the idea of blackness in the jury's mind: "No one, who is familiar with the peculiar formation of the Negro foot, can doubt, that an inspection of that member would ordinarily afford some indication of the race" (Catterall in Zackodnik 422). Thus, in using the black body as evidence in a court of law, the so-called stable signs of blackness are invoked to keep the color line firmly traced between races.

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This particular use of the body usually originates in white anxiety, as I will argue in the case of the novels I analyze. It goes beyond the racist objectification of the body in question, and it addresses a particularly white fear: what if the myth of white purity is just a myth? What happens when the Other lacks all the "distinctive" signs that allow whites to classify? John Walden, the ex-colored man, Rena Walden, Clare Kendry, Margaret Murray, Judy Scales-Trent, and Gregory Williams, all lack these signs, and, although legally they would be classified as black, most of the time they represent a source of anxiety and discomfort for whites because their physical appearance destabilizes white expectations about race. [iv]

"White supremacy," "whiteness," and all the other terms that I have used so far to signify the existing power structures, need to be explicated. A specification about white ideology is needed as well. I consider white ideology (or "whiteness") to be the basis of the racial/racist systems in the U.S. and elsewhere. According to Frances Ansley, white supremacy is

> a political, economic, and cultural system in which whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and unconscious ideas of white superiority and entitlement are widespread, and relations of white dominance and non-white subordination are daily reenacted across a broad array of institutions and social settings. (74)

In her definition, Ansley describes the state of affairs in American society at the time Chesnutt, Johnson, and Larsen wrote their novels of passing, a society where power is unequivocally in white hands. Similarly, Valerie Babb defines whiteness as "a system of privileges accorded to those with white skin" (9). She locates the

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beginning of whiteness in America with the arrival of the settlers, and adds that "once conceived, [it] maintained itself hegemonically," mainly through the exclusion of those who are not white—a fact which reveals, paradoxically, that whiteness needs nonwhiteness "to give it form and expression" (41-3). Once the concept of whiteness is clarified, it is easy to see how visibility and "reading" race are both crucial in establishing difference between the "white" and "black" racial categories, since "white" needs difference in order to survive.

Often whiteness is not named and exists, as Schlossberg claims, "outside the volatile world of 'racial tensions' that it caused in the first place" (5). It is not *marked* as whiteness; there are no stable signs of whiteness, and the white body is not transformed into a text to be read and deciphered, unless its racial heritage is under question. It is in the interest of white ideology to represent whiteness as "the absence of the racial sign" because it can maintain the myth of white purity (Wald 13-14).

The same myth is perpetuated by establishing white as the "original" race, against which all other races are defined as deviant. As Sterling L. Bland claims, "whiteness has the privilege of not being classified at all, since whiteness is considered a point of reference or of origin, used to define and classify 'the others'" (141). [v] The issue of whiteness as absence of classification and, at the same time, constituting one side of the racial binary, is crucial in understanding passing.

One other view of whiteness is that of Cheryl Harris, who sees it as property, protected by law as an asset that is very valuable (1713). If whiteness is defined this way, then passing can also be considered theft, from the point of view of white

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ideology, and this view adds to the potential of passing to challenge and break written and unwritten laws. As property, whiteness was inheritable (hence, the need to keep the purity of race by maintaining sexual control over white women), and it ultimately represented a shield from slavery, "the quintessential property for personhood" (1720, 1730). The color line became, during slavery, a literal protection from commodification, since one's position on one side or the other would determine his/her social status as free or enslaved (1721).

Integral to race and racial classification, the color line is another white invention that helped maintain the racial status quo in America. It is the ultimate attempt to keep the racial binary black/white completely separate and the white race "pure." In fact, as Samira Kawash concludes, the color line "persists as the organizing principle of racial space," as the main means of keeping a boundary between whites and blacks, ensuring the property value of whiteness (12). Race, therefore, could be envisioned as having a spatial organization, structured mainly around the color line, an organization that becomes visible in the case of racial segregation. In Larsen's novel, for example, the roof of Chicago's Drake Hotel is a white space that would normally be off-limits to both main characters Clare and Irene, because of the color line. Even though whites would want to make it look natural and stable, the color line is challenged and crossed by the passer.

Passers are able to reside on either side of the color line. Usually biracial, the very existence of these individuals posed a challenge to the racial system based on a strictly enforced binary. As Sollors says, they are "ideal questioners of the status

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quo" and they "led to the emergence of the popular literary theme of crossing lines" (245). The color line is closely connected with biracial individuals, since, as Boeckmann claims, they "were said to be 'on' the color line, as if they existed in a space between races" (14). Boeckmann's observation will prove to be crucial to the analysis of the passer's moments of in-betweenness—a position that truly destabilizes the racial system so painstakingly maintained by white ideology. Being "on" the color line means being neither/nor; the double negative refers to the binary black/white. Also, being a biracial individual poses a direct "corporeal challenge" to the entire social system based on the color line (Zackodnik 421).

The "abominable mixture and spurious issue," as one Virginia statute declares biracials, represent, in the eyes and minds of whites, the failure of the color line to keep whiteness pure (Zackodnik 426). Moreover, when so many American courts of law were going to great pains to fix the color line, individuals of mixed ancestry posed a threatening dilemma: they did not have any racial markings—therefore they could not be rigidly classified, and they showed how fragile and unstable whiteness was, lowering its value as property. The only way to keep the color line intact was the appeal to morality, according to Zackodnik: "As the illegitimate offspring resulting from immoral and unsanctioned relationships, the mulatto was relegated to the periphery of the 'normative'" (430). Labeling biracial individuals as illegitimate and immoral, the dominant culture relegated them not only to the periphery of society, but also to the black race. It created difference and focused it on a mythical, deviant, African sexuality. In other words, the supposedly insatiable sexual appetite

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of the black woman enticed the white man who fell victim to it. The offspring of such a relationship would automatically be assigned the race and the social status of the mother in order to protect the father's race. Consequently, any suggestion that mixed race individuals would pose a legitimate challenge to the racial system was silenced by labeling them as "bastards" (Zackodnik 432). John and Rena Walden and the ex-colored man are all illegitimate offspring of illicit affairs between a white man and a woman of color—a stigma that affects them all their lives.

One of the literary figures of the 19th century American literature wrestles not only with the stigma of illegitimacy, but most importantly, with "a drop" of black blood in his/her veins which bars him/her from white privilege. The black and white authors of the age have created the figure of the tragic mulatto/a—a figure that turned into a stereotype, doomed to a tragic destiny by his/her black blood and/or illegitimacy. As Sollors argues:

> conceived for white readers, these characters invite empathy because they are so much like whites and so little like black; the internal conflict they experience is explainable as a result of racial forces; therefore, no wonder white writers were far more eager to develop them. (225)

The tragic mulatto (especially developed by writers such as Thomas Dixon, Thomas Nelson Page, and Albion W. Tourgée) is a character designed to appease the fear that whites felt at the thought of biracial individuals crossing the color line undetected. It is destined to show the white reader that "mulattoes," like blacks, will always stay visible and "in their place," on the black side of the color line, since any attempt to cross it seems to fail and to have tragic consequences. Illegitimacy is often added to

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the "black drop," in order to push the character to the limits of the norm and make his/her tragic ending even more justified.

Even with the accusation of illegitimacy over his/her head, the biracial individual still proved the fact that the color line was far from being natural and immutable. Having been crossed by whites numerous times, the permeability of the color line has to work both ways, and passing proves that it does. The figure of the biracial individual, "stranded in cultural ambiguity," represents a tremendous threat to an already precarious system (Spillers 165). [vi] As Teresa Hubel and Neil Brooks claim, "it is precisely in this state of in-betweenness, specifically, in its propensity for fluctuation, that the potential for the subversion of established racial categories and the undermining of racist assumption lies" (i).

The ability of the biracial individual to fluctuate between racial categories, to be racially mobile at will, is the source of anxiety on the part of white supremacists. According to Simone Vauthier,

> The white Negro raises fears of indifferentiation as he calls into question the whiteness of the white man. The white Negro represents a *cas limite*, the smallest difference that marks the point where the Other turns into the Same, and when the either/or disjunction is no longer operative. (Sollors 236)

The biracial individual obliterates the false difference that enables the whites to value whiteness as property. Once the color line is crossed, the value decreases. Consequently, miscegenation was regarded as "the beginning of the end" for the white race, and as a plot on the part of the "colored" races to invade America. White

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anxiety gave way to fantastic scenarios that were given serious attention, fed public racism, and perpetrated hate crimes.

In his massive work on races and racism, An American Dilemma, Gunnar Myrdal, acting as an outside observer, elaborates on what he calls "the white man's theory of color caste": "The concern for 'race purity' is basic in the whole issue; the primary and essential command is to prevent amalgamation; the whites are determined to utilize every means to this end" (58). The white obsession with the boundaries between racial classifications comes, then, from white anxiety over miscegenation, also fueled by hundreds of self-declared "scientific" treatises that go to great lengths to demonstrate how Africans and/or African Americans are inferior to Caucasians. [vii] Even Chesnutt refers to such works in The House Behind the Cedars, letting the readers form their own opinion about the characters who read them.

Very prevalent were the scenarios that described a "dark," silent, and constant invasion of the white race by blacks and/or biracial individuals: "There is another way of taking a country than by force of arms. The continual, quiet introduction of these races may achieve what they could never have accomplished by arms alone" (Smith 412). These are the words of Watson F. Quimby, M.D., and part of his diatribe against miscegenation, Mongrelism, published in 1876. The picture Quimby paints is meant to horrify his white readership. The image of dark (and maybe "dark-blooded," but not dark-skinned), quiet, and threatening invaders turns out to be even more unsettling than armed invasion. "Mongrelism," or miscegenation, is what truly threatens the nation. His words reflect a trend present in several publications of the

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times. In 1902, William Benjamin Smith published his work, entitled The Color Line: A Brief in Behalf of the Unborn, in which he speculates on what he thinks was the most ardent desire of African Americans:

> But some will say that we are fighting "bogies," that no one in the North, much less in the South, desires such amalgamation. Do not believe it! The intense, supreme yearning of large bodies of Negroes is for social recognition among the Whites—more especially for intermarriage with their haughty, old-time despisers. (John David Smith 124).

Apart from the unsettling image of "large bodies of Negroes" (suggestive perhaps also of the stereotype of the "black buck," i.e., the brutal black man[viii]), Smith introduces the notion that the way in which African Americans plan to achieve social recognition is by intermarriage, as a form of revenge on the entire white race.

Fear of miscegenation is intensified by the image of the white woman whose virtue is besieged by the "black buck." In 1907, Senator Ben Tillman of South Carolina claimed:

> The white women of the South are in a state of siege; the greatest care is exercised that they shall at all times where it is possible not be left alone or unprotected. ... Some lurking demon who has watched for the opportunity seizes her; she is choked or beaten into insensibility and ravished, her body prostituted, her purity destroyed, her chastity taken from her...(Chace and Collier 181)

To maintain control of the color line and of the racial system in general, white men need to have complete control of white women—the means of producing white offspring who would inherit whiteness (and *only* whiteness) as a property to be valued and preserved in a "pure" state. Speeches like Tillman's are incendiary; they push a

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lynch mob to control through terror, which was another widely employed means of containing black men.

Miscegenation is therefore seen as a disaster that would take the nation on the road to destruction: "the negro will exterminate the last remaining whites of the black belt, ... by miscegenation," P.R. Barringer claims in his The American Negro: His Past and Future, published in 1900 (Smith 456). The idea that the mixing of races would have disastrous consequences for whites is at the forefront of numerous works published around the time when Chesnutt, Johnson, and Larsen were writing their novels about mixed race characters. The "much-dreaded contamination of blood" is deemed worse than a natural disaster by W. B. Smith: "No other conceivable disaster that might befall the South could, for an instant, compare with such miscegenation within her borders" (J. D. Smith 63).

Finally, white anxiety caused by miscegenation and passing is clearly manifested in the use of legal power to prevent and discourage intermarriage (Sollors, Interracialism 143). Starting in 1691, antimiscegenation laws were passed and enforced throughout America, the ultimate appeal in favor of these laws being "Would you like your daughter to marry one?" (Drake and Cayton 130).[ix] During the Rhinelander trial, Leonard's defense attorney used a smear campaign against Alice, portraying her as the "colored" vamp that lured an innocent white man with her licentiousness, while at the same time she hid from him the fact that she was not white. He banked on the fact that no white parent would agree to a marriage between their white offspring and a "colored" man or woman. Consequently, even if Alice

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won, after all the appeals in 1927, both New York and New Jersey debated antimiscegenation bills, obviously under the influence of the media frenzy that surrounded the trials and fueled by the fear that it could happen to any other "unsuspecting" white man or woman (Lewis and Ardizone 243). Since fear of miscegenation was widespread, passing was even more anxiety-producing, when individuals who were legally black crossed the color line and "polluted" white blood.

To conclude, it is clear that the existing power structures went to great lengths in order to keep the color line rigidly drawn and racial categories separate. The concept of pure whiteness (seen as property) is also crucial to the smooth functioning of the entire system, so the efforts of white supremacists were directed at establishing immutable and visible signs of blackness that could be used to keep African Americans contained by their racial category and to stop miscegenation, which was seen as a sure way to "ruin" the entire nation.

Section Three: Passing

"I've got a lot of friends, and we've got a lot of makeup. So next time you're hugging up with some really super groovy white guy or even a really great super keen white chick, don't be too sure...they might be black." (Eddie Murphy, "White Like Me"—Saturday Night Live)

Eddie Murphy's words, meant to create doubt about the color line and the purity of whiteness, introduce another important idea that has always been anxiety-producing to racist whites: that race is a matter of performance, of props, of makeup

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and acting. For what else is passing if not—partly—a performance of whiteness? There are many definitions of passing, and the differences among them shed some light on the complexity of the phenomenon. There are those definitions that discuss the relation between passing and whiteness, such as Ginsberg's, that claims that passing is the "creation of a 'white' identity" (1). Similarly, Williamson defines passing as a phenomenon produced by "invisible blackness" which entails "winning acceptance as white in the white world" (100).

Passing is also defined as a tactic to obtain the civil rights that African Americans were barred from: Cutter defines it as a strategy "to be a person" (75). If one takes into account only the uses of the black body and the numerous ways of objectifying it, it is not hard to see why a passer would want to be treated as a human being, not as property, as Stetson claims: " 'Passing' is, after all, passing oneself off as a human person with all the rights and privileges thereof" (Sollors 248).

One other way to define passing is to see it as a transgression. Ginsberg completes her definition with the claim that passing is also "a transgression not only of legal boundaries ... but of cultural boundaries as well," meaning that the passer not only breaks the law when sh/e decides to pass, but also crosses into a sometimes foreign cultural territory. Wald gives a more comprehensive definition of the phenomenon:

> to pass is to transgress the social boundary of race, to "cross" or thwart the "line" of racial distinction that has been a basis of racial oppression and exploitation. It is also ... to capitalize on the binarism of the dominant racial discourse to negotiate the multifarious needs, fantasies, and aspirations that are mediated and expressed through the

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> racial sign. Passing entails, then, not racial transcendence, but rather struggles for control over racial representation in a context of the radical unreliability of embodied appearances. (6)

Wald's definition of passing adds layers of meaning to the concept of passing and complicates it. Not only do passers cross the color line, but they also use the binary black/white to suit their needs in a world where the visual has become increasingly unreliable. In other words, if one does not "look" black, one must be white—or so the binary system works, since it does not accept anything in between. Passers capitalize on that because it helps them cross the color line. Even if passing does not overturn racist social arrangements, it grants the passers more individual freedom, and in some cases, the opportunity—covertly— to claim and explore *both* their races.

McLendon and Sollors have yet other definitions of passing that deserve attention. According to McLendon,

> passing may be regarded as any form of pretense or disguise that results in the loss or surrender of, or a failure to satisfy a desire for, identity, whether racial, cultural, social, or sexual. (96)

One of the consequences of passing is, as McLendon argues, a loss of identity, and she seems to be right when she analyzes Clare Kendry in Nella Larsen's Passing. But it is not a loss of identity that consumes Clare; it is her desperate attempts to cope with a *mixed* identity in a world based on mutually exclusive binaries. Sollors defines passing as a "social invention that makes one part of a person's ancestry real,

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essential, and defining, and other parts accidental, mask-like, and insignificant" (249). According to this definition, all passers discard their black ancestry and do not look back. Why, then, is Larsen's Clare Kendry so attracted to Harlem, to the company of black people, if her African part is accidental, mask-like, and insignificant? It is also interesting that Sollors regards the African part as "mask-like," when passing novels have provided numerous cases of passing characters who perform *whiteness* and wear it as a mask. Both Sollors' and McLendon's definitions also allude to passing as betrayal—an interpretation that I will argue against.

Finally, two more definitions of passing should be taken into account. Bennett explains the probable origin of the word itself, as coming from the slave passes signed by the white master so that the slave could travel without being captured as a runaway. In this context, Bennett argues, "the 'pass' is a slip of paper that allows for free movement, but white skin itself is a 'pass' that allowed for some light-skinned slaves to escape their masters" (36). Bennet introduces an important concept that is closely connected to passing: that of movement, of racial mobility that granted freedom during slavery times and other rights and privileges later. Adding to the notion of mobility, Keetley suggests:

> It is not simply "passing as white" that is the source of a certain freedom from slavery; rather, it is the sense of just "passing," of being between and mobile. This kind of passing, the kind that refuses to be categorized, not only wins freedom for one individual who can pass as white but also questions the very foundations of the system itself and thus potentially frees all who are enslaved. (16)

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One other important concept is mentioned: that of in-betweenness, which entails an identity far more complex than the one initially assigned to the passer. In-betweenness, along with racial mobility, represents the principal opportunities to challenge the racial system and its confining categories. Biracialism as hybridity has enormous possibilities for freedom from the binary system, possibilities that are discussed by the three authors of the memoirs analyzed in Chapter V.

How is passing connected with all the concepts that have been discussed so far—(in)visibility, the color line, white anxiety, and miscegenation? To be able to pass, an individual has to lack racial markers (or be invisible as "black") in the white eyes. Passing is realized by becoming racially mobile and crossing the color line arbitrarily drawn between the white and black races—and passing is a result of miscegenation. Since they disprove the myth of pure whiteness and the validity of the color line, both passing and miscegenation produce white anxiety, so much so that in 1924 the Virginia Act to Preserve Racial Integrity was passed, in an effort to "stem the tide of pseudo Caucasians who are storming the Anglo-Saxon ramparts." The act made it a felony "to make a willfully false statement as to color" (Sollors 254). Since passing was made illegal, and the words used in the Act belong to the discourse of warfare ("Anglo-Saxon ramparts," "storm"), to cross the color line represented the defiance of all the rules that white supremacy imposed on blacks, even though it does not always appear to be so.

The contradictory complexity of passing is revealed when—at a closer look—one notices that it can be used to reinforce racial categories as much as subvert them,

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so much so that in some cases it is not clear where the reinforcement stops and the subversion begins. This complexity originates in the fact that whiteness is simultaneously perceived as the absence of classification (which is desirable for the passer) *and* one side of the very racial binary the passer is trying to escape. At first glance, the passer seems to take the opportunity to profit from the fact that s/he lacks racial markers in order to join the white side of the color line and thus the system that oppressed him/her in the first place. This is the source of the belief—shared by many critics—that passing is a betrayal of the African American race, and that it represents self-denial and complicity in one's own oppression (Harris 1711-2). One other assumption hastily made in this belief is that initially the passer truly identifies (or should identify) *only* with his/her African American ancestry.

Berzon considers passing a rejection of black culture and "the most extreme form of denial" (6), while Davis shows that there was a strong attitude against passing in the black community itself:

> Those who pass are acknowledging the one-drop rule but escaping its effects, not openly challenging it....Whites defined the black population of the Unites States by establishing the one-drop rule, and apparently the whites' original reasons for doing that are now irrelevant for most blacks. The whites forced all shades of mulattoes into the black community, where they were accepted, loved, married, and cherished as soul brothers and sisters. (138)

Often, the price for openly challenging the rules—including the one-drop rule—would have been lynching, so the best way to manipulate the system was *from within,* without overturning it and attracting the wrath of the existing power structures.

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Passing is a way to do just that to one's advantage. It seems that Davis argues that African-Americans who oppose passing are unconsciously supporting the one-drop rule.

I will argue that passing is not a betrayal at all, but a covert way to acknowledge one's complex identity and a refusal to submit to imposed racial classifications that would relegate the passer to a narrow, confining category and a subordinate position. This particular type of passer rejects race as a fixed and imposed category, but she does not turn her back to the African American part of her heritage. Even in the case of the other type of passing that I define, there are moments when the passer's cultural heritage is important. Although it is true that some of the characters even think of themselves sometimes as "race" traitors, ultimately the works analyzed lead us to see passing and racial mobility more often than not as tactics to avoid the rigidity of the racist system, and very rarely as betrayal.

The subversiveness of passing is revealed when and if the passer is found out or reveals him/herself not to be "entirely" white. However, when the act is made public (always at the expense of the passer) we see white anxiety surface in the attempt to make the passers racially visible again and put them "in their place." In the works that I discuss, the reaction of the white characters when the passing figure is "found out"—horror and shock—attests to the subversiveness of the act.

It is from this point of view that passing—and especially racial mobility—seems to put the passer in a strange position of both power and vulnerability—power

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because the passing character has usurped the boundaries set by the white establishment, and vulnerability because passing is effective only as long as the passer's racial makeup is unknown. In order to be able to contain the threat, the white establishment needs to make race visible, or to expose the passer, but in doing so, it creates even more anxiety and doubt in whites, and unwillingly shakes racial categories from their "fixed" places. Biracial individuals subvert the binary black/white through their very existence; when they choose to pass, they do so even more on being outed. Passing itself does not always assume a black/white binary, but it complicates the dichotomy, since the passer sometimes is believed to be of other races and ethnicities than white European, according to Ginsberg (11). In Larsen's novel, Irene Redfield is thought to be Italian, Spanish, Mexican, or Gypsy, but never black, when she chooses to pass.

Consequently, even though at times passing seems to reinforce racial categorization, it also challenges white assumptions about categories that were initially thought immutable, boundaries that were thought impermeable, as well as identities that were thought "pure" (Ginsberg 4). In order to account for his/her identity, the passer cannot occupy any of the categories and/or identities provided by the system. S/he cannot be white because s/he has black blood, but s/he cannot be black either because s/he has white blood. It is a conundrum in which many passing characters find themselves in the works discussed—trying to cope with formulating and/or finding a comfortable identity in a world that thrives on binaries. Kawash discusses the "failure of blackness or whiteness to provide the grounds for a stable,

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coherent identity" (63). What is more important, passing subverts all the limits that were imposed by the system to the social mobility and opportunity for African Americans. A passer's access to these is equal to that of whites.

Apart from initially shaking the foundations of fixed and immutable identities, passing challenges the racial system in other ways. If we regard whiteness as property, passing is about appropriating something that does not belong to the passer, and consequently it can be experienced as "a source of radical pleasure or intense danger" (Schlossberg 3). Most of the passing characters in the novels I discuss have their moments in which they feel they are playing a joke on the (often) racist whites that surround them. They contemplate outing themselves just to horrify whites at the idea that they had a black individual in their midst and were oblivious to it. Passing is also about claiming a space one is not entitled to—a space one is not allowed to occupy. In The Practice of Everyday Life, Michel de Certeau defines the difference between tactics and strategies: strategies are used by the power structures in order to impose the Foucauldian grid of discipline, meant to control and contain the powerless, while tactics are employed by the powerless in order to avoid the grid (xiv-xix). To translate his theory in terms of race, the whole racist social arrangement can be read as a strategy deployed by whites to keep African Americans and biracial individuals under control, while passing is a tactic that biracial individuals use in order to evade the disciplinary grid. In other words, to employ tactics means to work within the system, to "manipulate" the space that strategies produce and impose, *without* necessarily overturning the system (29-30). This position allows passers a much

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greater degree of individual freedom than submission to the system. As Kawash mentions, there is "spatial politics" in the color line, not only in the sense that, unlike blacks, whites had unfettered access to the physical public space, but also in a conceptual sense, since the color line organizes the racial space (1, 12). Passing is a tactic that allows the passer to manipulate physical and racial space to suit his/her own purposes. Larsen's Irene Redfield does just that when she goes to the restaurant on the roof of Chicago's Drayton hotel—a space off-limits for those classified as African Americans.

Discussing social spaces in American Studies, anthropologist Renato Rosaldo mentions the social border as a very important and politically charged space. The border is inhabited by "hybrid figures"—figures that already challenge the status quo by resisting the dominant culture through their positioning on the border and by their being hybrid; these figures claim the border:

> Claiming the border amounts to a declaration of interdisciplinary—and narrative—freedom: the border, porous and open, emerges as a zone capable of nourishing a rich grid of "crisscrossed," multiple identities, a celebration of ambiguity .... (Weber 532)[x]

Rosaldo's definition pinpoints one very important feature of the passer: the possibility of being racially mobile and in between identities. In fact, racial hybridity is what truly frees the biracial individual from any classifications. In the memoirs I analyze in Chapter V, the three authors—Shirlee Taylor Haizlip, Judy Scales-Trent, and Gregory Howard Williams—reach the end of their spiritual journeys and position themselves on the color line precisely in order to elude any attempt at racial

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classification. They offer this position as an alternative to passing that does not involve the trauma of leaving family and community behind. This position is possible today, but it was not available to the fictional heroes of Chesnutt, Johnson, and Larsen, who had to make a choice in terms of race and to find other, covert ways of exploring their own liminality.

Passing is also seen as a means of achieving freedom. The Crafts' narrative and the way they gained their freedom by Ellen's passing is one case in point. After slavery, it was important to achieve freedom from the constraints of the "black" racial category as well, and this is what passing becomes. It is "an attempt to escape the racialized body," in McLendon's words (28-9), to free it from the enclosures of race within which it is kept by whiteness. Indeed, passing challenges race in these terms as well, since it represents a desire, on the part of the passers, "to control the terms of their racial definition" (Wald 6). Despite the humiliation she had to go through during the trial, Alice Jones Rhinelander never admitted that she was "black." Her only admission concerning her racial identity was that she had "some colored blood" (Lewis and Ardizzone 63). Nothing convinced her to elaborate on the nature of her race, even though the media felt free to speculate on it, labeling her as black from the beginning. Even so, by the end of the trial, it was evident that "she understood race as a descriptor but not necessarily a mark of identification. Perhaps that is why the racial category on her death certificate is blank" (ibid. 257). It is still unclear whether Alice passed or not, but her view of race is common to passers: she refuses to be classified and pigeonholed into one category. Some passers want to embrace both

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their races: the ex-colored man's desire to collect old black songs and transcribe them into classical forms is emblematic of his desire to acknowledge his double heritage and to find a comfortable and coherent identity in a world based on mutually exclusive binaries. Even though she regards passing differently than the ex-colored man, Clare Kendry does not feel whole if she cannot acknowledge both her races as well.

One of the original ideas that this dissertation intends to bring to the field is a discussion of the types of passing that appear in late 19th-century American fiction. There are some classifications of passing in the critical narrative on the phenomenon. In Black Metropolis, Drake and Cayton attempt to offer a classification of passing based on stages: there is the "initial stage" of passing unintentionally or for convenience, out of which develops passing for fun for the adventurous individuals. The third stage of passing involves economic necessity, especially to be able to obtain employment, and finally, the fourth stage involves "passing in order to associate socially with the white people" (162-3). The authors also add: "for a Negro to pass socially means sociological death and rebirth," meaning that passing socially implies leaving behind family, friends, and community, and acquiring new ones in the white world (163). However, finer distinctions can be made, especially in the case of social passing, distinctions that will help explicate the complexity of this phenomenon.

In his work, Neither Black Nor White Yet Both, Sollors also creates a classification of passing, which is predicated as well on the reasons why people decide to pass: opportunism, love, political reasons, "an occasional thrill, love of

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deception, preparation for political acts of subversion or revenge and investigation of white criminal misconduct" (251). Sollors covers many more reasons for passing than Drake and Cayton, and he also discusses passing in terms of the length of time the passer spends on the other side of the color line: "it may be permanent, at least by intention, for the duration of an individual's life; or it may be temporary or sporadic (though full-time) for a shorter or longer period of a person's life" (251).

The typology of passing that I offer in this work delves deeper into the issue and will hopefully point out how complex this phenomenon really is. It also offers a tool of analysis to those interested in passing fiction and in literary works focused on race because it allows for a more sophisticated and complex reading of the works. I did not choose length of time or even reason for passing as criteria for this classification, but rather degree of identification with white ideology (for various reasons) and/or degree of regarding race as performance. The types of passing that I detected I called identificatory and performative.

One cautionary word is necessary when working with classifications, since the word itself implies that the border between the types is (or should be) impermeable. Insisting on having "pure" types of passing would defeat the purpose of this work, since passing would not have been possible had the color line itself not been permeable *both* ways. I insist on racial mobility as the main phenomenon that allows passing, so keeping the borders fluid between passing types is also crucial. Since my alternative to racial classification would be a racial continuum, passing types can also be stretched and located on a continuum, especially since the discussion of the novels

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will show how there are "performative moments" in the experiences of an identificatory passer, and vice versa.

Identificatory passing involves a social and psychological identification with white ideology, usually originating in a Eurocentric education. In the case of identificatory passing, the passer adopts the identity of a white individual, along with its accompanying ideology, as in John Walden's story or that of the ex-colored man. The identificatory passer crosses the color line with a clear intention not to come back to the black side. In many cases, the intellectual background of the passer is white, so s/he cannot help but aspire to live in the white world and share its ideology. John Walden grows up reading all of his white father's books, written mostly by European authors, and no work by an African American writer. There are also cases when the passer thinks s/he is white until a traumatic childhood event proves otherwise, as is the case of the ex-colored man or Gregory Williams, as described in his memoir. Identificatory passing is usually permanent and has mainly economic, social, and psychological reasons. A "white" intellectual background helps the passer identify with whiteness more easily. To pass in such a way, one has to cut all one's ties with one's own past (family, community, and sometimes culture), which is the case of Chesnutt's hero in The House Behind the Cedars, or that of Margaret Murray's family in Haizlip's The Sweeter the Juice. The passer leaves physical and cultural blackness behind, usually displacing it on those who stay "black."

The novels discussed thus enable us to ask what kinds of subversion are possible in identificatory passing. There are moments in the lives of these characters

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when they know they are defying the system and they savor the power that comes with this defiance, so one other question that needs to be answered is, to what extent is such individual consciousness a subversion of the racial system, especially when the passer seems to end up assimilated into the mainstream? Or is the passer's invisibility actually a potential source of even greater white anxiety, thus making identificatory passing more challenging of the power structures than it appears?

The other type of passing is performative. Performative passing is based on a view of race as performance—a matter of props, makeup, and/or behavior. The passer crosses the color line and "acts" white. Irene Redfield performs whiteness occasionally in Larsen's novel. There are cases in which the passer does use physical props to enhance his/her credibility, and this is what Ellen Craft does when she performs race and gender in order to escape slavery. In other cases, the passer simply bets on his/her lack of racial markers and racial ambiguity to cross the color line, like Clare Kendry, for example, or Tony Williams in Life on the Color Line. Performative passing can be temporary (usually for economic reasons or for obtaining one's freedom), but it can also be permanent. In this case, the passer tries to find a means of reclaiming his/her double identity as both black and white, and he/she keeps ties with both communities, but is defined by neither on its own. In other words, like Alice Jones-Rhinelander, the passer rejects exclusive and rigid racial categories altogether. Having a connection with both races seems to make this type of passer thrive. Even though this type of passer renounces his/her physical blackness, displacing it on whomever s/he leaves behind, cultural/spiritual blackness is too much

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a part of the passer's intellectual makeup to be forsaken. This is the story of Clare Kendry, in Larsen's Passing, who did not feel happy in the white world and needed to reconnect with Harlem and its people. However, she dies as soon as the white half of her identity is obliterated (her husband calls her a "dirty nigger"). In this situation, the characters are happy as long as their identity is not fixed and their mobility undisturbed because they have the ability to live in both worlds. To pass successfully, physical blackness has to be left behind. In most cases, it is displaced on a family member or a friend who is needed as a term of comparison. Without their blackness, the passer's whiteness would not exist. Chesnutt's hero, John Walden, leaves his mother and sister to bear his physical blackness after he decides to break away from his family and community.

Section 4: Writing the Story of Passing

"The object of my writings would be not so much the elevation of the colored people as the elevation of the whites. ... The subtle almost indefinable feeling of repulsion toward the Negro, which is common to most [white] Americans—cannot be stormed and taken by assault; the garrison will not capitulate, so their position must be mined, and we will find ourselves in their midst before they think it." (Chesnutt in Ames 149)

If the fictional racial "outing" of the passer creates scenes of anxiety, the very act of writing a passing novel can also be considered subversive of the system, since the racial identity of the main characters seems to shift before the reader's eyes. These novels and memoirs were meant to make a white readership question the

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viability of the entire American racial system, based on the myth of white purity and the presumably impermeable color line. Reading these stories caused many white readers to feel, if not anxious, at least uncomfortable and doubtful about how tenable the race system is in America. For those who are used to thinking in fixed racial binaries, it is unsettling to see that those binaries are unable to account for certain identities and that it is easy for some to cross the color line. Since the cause of such discomfort is the passing story itself, one cannot ignore its capacity to cause doubts and discomfort in its white readers.

According to Rosaldo, in border analysis, culture is recognized as "political contestation: the battle over narrative power, the fight over who gets to (re)tell the story, and from which position" (Weber 532). Getting to retell the story is a major victory for all the writers discussed. They all write against stereotypes that have been used to label, classify, and reduce an entire culture to a simplistic image meant to make whites feel superior: the tragic "mulatto," the brutal black man, the oversexualized black woman, the lazy "coon," and many others. They also write as biracial individuals. By having the courage and determination to write the story of passing, these writers accrue narrative power, and what they do with it is to unsettle whites with their stories. The simple act of writing about mixed race characters who do not seem troubled about the drop of black blood in their veins—such as John Walden or Clare Kendry—is an act of defiance of the racial system. By showing how easy it is for their characters to pass and how far they are from the tragic mulatto stereotype, the novelists prove the instability of the color line, the inadequacy of the

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racial binary to account for an "in between" identity. The ease with which their characters become invisible in the white society, the way in which they have no qualms about socializing with whites, and finally the way in which the writers "out" the passer to the reader only before outing him/her to the other characters are all meant to "mine" the positions of the white readers, as Chesnutt claims in his journal. In addition to journal entry excerpts and letters written by the novelists, in which they discuss writing about race and passing, I have used book reviews that appeared when the novels were published. Their content is self-explanatory, as it exudes an urge to place the writers racially (since they were all biracial, they were all classified as African American by whites[xi]) and to protest when the content of the novel seems too anxiety-producing. The other three works that are analyzed are autobiographical, so they contain first-hand accounts and discussions of the issues I focus on.

Charles Chesnutt's The House Behind the Cedars explores and complicates the notion of identity for its mixed blood characters and represents both identificatory and performative passing. The main characters, John and Rena Walden, are the illegitimate children of a rich white man and a free "octoroon" woman. Both lack physical racial markers, so both of them are racially mobile. John Walden illustrates identificatory passing: while he is aware of his mixed blood heritage, he persists in his conviction that he is white, and with that conviction, he leaves his past, family, and community behind to cross two boundaries: the state line from South to North Carolina and the more elusive but ever-present color line. As my analysis of the novel will show, while John is an identificatory passer, Chesnutt nevertheless

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manages to make him a challenge to the system. Not only does he write John's story and thus disclose him to the (white) reader, but he makes John disappear at one point in the novel—and this fact, as Charles Duncan argues, renders Walden invisible, and as such, uncontainable (183). He disappears from the novel to "start life over again," as he tells Rena. This disappearing act can only prove unsettling to the white reader, since John cannot be rendered visible (as "black") any longer—not even to the reader—and, therefore, his identity cannot be fixed.

Rena Walden does even more to unsettle race and create white anxiety. First, Chesnutt describes her as caged by racial categories. With her brother's help, Rena learns to perform "whiteness"—she is sent to school and taught to be a "lady," and she attracts the attention of white George Tryon who falls in love with her. Rena illustrates performative passing, since she keeps in touch with her mother. Her insistence on telling Tryon about her mixed ancestry reveals her own struggle for self-identity—for finding a way to assume an identity that is not entirely black, not entirely white, but somewhere in between (neither and both). Her subversiveness is revealed by Tryon's reaction when he finds out her racial identity: astonishment, anger, and horror. She certainly unsettles other whites in the novel, and after she decides not to pass any longer, she is constantly subjected to scrutiny from whites, who repeatedly ask her to "declare" her racial identity. John and Rena's lack of visible racial markers is used by Chesnutt, then, to cultivate a racial ambiguity that is deeply unsettling for the 19th-century white reader, since the identity of both these

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characters represents the space in between—the space that the binary black/white does not, and cannot, account for.

In Chapter III, I discuss James Weldon Johnson's narrator, the ex-colored man. He unsettles the white reader, since his anonymity is carefully preserved, along with that of his children. What can be more horrifying to a white racist than to read that this nameless, faceless man lives among the whites and has fathered children that are equally invisible, devaluing whiteness as property and weakening the system as a consequence? Johnson's subversive intentions are revealed not only in the very act of writing the story of the ex-colored man, but in the act of passing off the novel as an autobiography, published anonymously in 1912. The negative reviews the novel received in the South are telling in this respect: The Nashville Tennessean wrote: "[the book is] an insult to Southern womanhood. ...[The passing theme is not believable because] once a negro, always a negro." [xii] The reviewers were so scared that they felt the need to reassure themselves (and the rest of their white readership) that this book is not "real," and that this story could not have happened in reality. The ex-colored man is another good example of identificatory passing. He is convinced he is white until—in a classroom episode that resembles DuBois' own "fall into race"—he is told he is black. Even so, the reader is never told the "exact" racial makeup of the ex-colored man—a fact that prompts the questions: To what degree does Johnson cultivate racial ambiguity to keep his readers unsettled? How does he use the ex-colored man's invisibility to show the tenuous nature of whiteness?

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In Nella Larsen's Passing, Clare Bellew is a performative passer. As Martha Cutter argues, if passing in general can prove to be liberating because it gives one the opportunity to flee the enclosure of race and class, in Clare's case passing is definitely a strategy to "avoid the enclosures of a unitary identity" (75). Indeed, Clare attempts to take hold of both her identities, and she thrives on it.

It is interesting that Larsen tries to make Clare a puzzle for all those around her—especially Irene. Countless times, Irene turns Clare's body into a text, trying to "read" her as black and to render her visible, but she never manages to do that, so Clare is actually removed from the novel by Larsen "before she can become enclosed with one meaning" (McLendon 97). In what must be a truly unsettling act for the white reader, Larsen does the same to the novel itself—leaving it with an open ending and no certain meanings. So even if Clare dies at the end, the very act of writing her story proves to be subversive, for if Clare was passing, then who knows who else is, and, especially, how many people are doing the same? Two of the questions that this chapter is going to answer are: How does motherhood complicate passing? and How does this issue relate to the need for a self-defined identity that the urban black woman was in search of at the beginning of the last century?

The final chapter explores passing and race from different perspectives than the three novels. The writers are all contemporary and their works relate real life experiences. These memoirs complicate the analytical model based on a typology of passing: while in the novels, most of the characters were either performative or identificatory passers, in these works, the types get mixed, since there are characters

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who start as performative passers but identify with whiteness so much that they end up as identificatory. Shirlee Taylor Haizlip's The Sweeter the Juice is a memoir of the author's search for a part of her family that has crossed the color line and never looked back on those they abandoned. The work covers passing from an unusual perspective—that of those left behind by the passer. The author's mother, Margaret Morris, is literally abandoned by her entire family after the death of her mother and left on the black side of the color line, while her father, brother, and sister pass for white. Haizlip delves into the trauma of the one left behind and the way it affects even the next generation.

Judy Scales-Trent's work, Notes of a White Black Woman, represents a collection of notes, diary entries and autobiographical anecdotes written from the perspective of an individual standing on the color line—a veritable borderland dweller who chooses to live in a politically charged space and who describes the effect she has on white people—denial, amazement, shock, and fear—because she does not conform to their racial/racist expectations.

In Gregory Howard Williams' Life on the Color Line: The True Story of a White Boy Who Discovered He Was Black, the author discusses the particular position of a biracial individual who passes without his knowledge and, after he is told the truth about his racial makeup, has to "learn" to "be black." It is the chronicle of a very difficult life, spent on both sides of the color line.

The three memoirs have several common points. They all discuss permanent passing and they bring a new perspective by exploring what that action means for the

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family members left behind by the passer. The memoirs also point out the relentless racism that African Americans have to face daily, and to some extent the authors reach similar conclusions in the end—that racism is the main cause of passing, and that the passers cannot (and should not) be judged for the choice they made, no matter how much pain they caused to the ones they left behind. One other issue that connects the three works is their discussion of biracialism as an in-betweenness with real possibilities for freedom from the binary system. At the end of their works, Shirlee Taylor Haizlip, Judy Scales-Trent, and Gregory Howard Williams situate themselves on the color line, in a move that is meant to avoid racial classification. They offer this position as a possible alternative to passing—a position that is possible today, but was not available to the fictional heroes of the novels analyzed.

So, in conclusion, what does this new, different classification add to the critical understanding of passing novels? First, it points out in how many ways passing can challenge rigid racial categories. The racial mobility that enables passing is a means to free oneself from any enclosure or containment that whiteness devised and that being classified as "black" entails. Passing is a tactic used to infiltrate slowly white society and to work within the system in order to achieve more individual freedom. Secondly, this classification shows that passing is not a betrayal of one's "true" race. To believe that means to subscribe to the rigid racial classification that whites devised in order to keep African Americans visible and contained. It means to agree with the one-drop rule that declared all biracial individuals black in order to

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keep them caged into one category that cannot describe the complexity of their identity.

In trying to reason how she, as a black woman, came to terms with her relatives who have chosen to pass for white, Adrian Piper explains:

> Your sense of injustice may be compounded by the daily humiliation you experience as the result of identifying with those African-Americans who, for demanding their rights, are punished and degraded as a sign of warning to others. In these cases, the decision to pass may be more than a rejection of a black identity. It may be the rejection of a black identification that brings too much pain to be tolerated. (13)

Piper still finds it very difficult to forgive those relatives of hers who are passing—most of all it is difficult for her not to consider them traitors, but she is obviously attempting to see passing as a rejection of pain, humiliation, and discrimination that come with being classified as African American. Finally, one other claim that I maintain is that passing does not mean only an exchange of one classification with another because whiteness is *not* only a classification. It is true that in certain cases, passing can reinforce the racial system, and perhaps that is where its very complexity resides. However, since too many critics choose to explore this side of passing, this dissertation will focus particularly on possibility of passing to challenge the existing social structures, acknowledging that to be white means also *not* to be classified, not to be constrained legally, economically, and politically, not to be racially marked. So when passers reject classification, they reject containment in a white-created restrictive racial group that makes no sense and is unstable. The issue of racial

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mobility, also connected to the concept of passing, holds tremendous possibilities for freedom from the racist classificatory system—a fact that does not escape the attention of the writers. The types of subversion that the passers represent, in the moments when they are mobile and in between classifications, by being invisible when the system wants them visibly contained, by making whites anxious and uncomfortable, and finally by claiming spaces to which they are not entitled, are meant to "raise some commotion," to use Chesnutt's words. [xiii] The writers want to force their white readership to examine carefully the social structures and racial arrangements which they have inhabited all their lives and left unquestioned, to realize that appearances are (almost always) deceiving, and to interrogate their assumptions about the binarized racial order. Even though the passer does not overturn the existing power structures, the fact that passing itself is possible, that the passer is able to cross borders that were thought impermeable, that s/he is able to work within the system to achieve a greater degree of individual freedom, points out that the racialist system on which American society is based is deeply flawed and highly unstable.

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[i] William Benjamin Smith, in The Color Line (1905), lists some features as "essential" in establishing the difference between blacks and whites:

> 1. The abnormal length of the arm, which in the erect position sometimes reaches the knee-pan...
>
> 3. Weight of brain, as indicating cranial capacity, 35 ounces (highest gorilla 20, average European 45).

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4. Full black eye, with black iris and yellowish sclerotic coat, a very marked feature.

8. Exceedingly thick cranium, enabling the Negro to butt with the head and resist blows which would inevitably break any ordinary European's skull.

9. Correspondingly weak lower limbs, terminating in a broad flat foot with low instep, divergent and somewhat prehensile great toe, and heel projecting backwards ("lark heel").

11. Short black hair, eccentrically elliptical or almost flat in section, and distinctly wooly, not merely frizzly...(John David Smith 100-02).

[ii] For a discussion of how the American justice system dealt with such "illegible bodies," see Zackodnik, "Fixing the Color Line" (424).

[iii] For anthropological studies that contained detailed descriptions and assessments of African American physical features, see Sander Gilman, Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985.

[iv] I did not, by any means, exhaust the discussion of all the uses of the black body, nor do I intend to do so. I restricted myself to those that are useful to my analysis. For further reading, see Cheryl Harris, "Whiteness as Property," which highlights yet another use of the black body: that of currency in paying debts.

[v] For further opinions on whiteness as origin, see also Harlow S. Orton, "The History and Development of Races: Annual Address Before the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Feb 23, 1869":

> What we call the Caucasian race, is no type; it is the original, the primeval race, the most perfect form of physical beauty, symmetry and proportion—the crowning work of the

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creation, and the worthy cabinet of the Divinity that stirs within it. (John David Smith 342)

[vi] In "Notes on an Alternative Model—Neither/Nor," Spillers adds her own definition of the term "mulatto:"

> An accretion of signs that embody the "unspeakable," of the Everything that the dominant culture would forget, the mulatto/a, as term, designates a disguise, covers up, in the century of Emancipation and beyond, the social and political reality of the dreaded African presence. (166)

[vii] Among such works are: Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, On the Natural Varieties of Mankind (1776), Thomas Jefferson, Notes on Virginia (1781-1782), Robert B. Bean, "Some Racial Peculiarities of the Negro Brain," in American Journal of Anatomy (1906), Robert W. Shufeldt, America's Greatest Problem: the Negro (1915).

[viii] For a discussion of how this stereotype works, especially in film, see Tom Bogle, Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks

[ix] St Claire Drake and Horace Clayton discuss documented cases of police harassment of interracial couples:

> Between 1938 and 1944, in Chicago, there was ample evidence to indicate that individual policemen sometimes considered it their civic duty to break up mixed couples appearing in public. ... In one case, a policeman forced the white girl into a squad car, lectured her for "going out with a nigger," and called her a Communist. In another case, the Negro man was threatened with arrest on the charge of contributing to the delinquency of a minor although the girl was 22. These seem to be acts of individual policemen, undertaken on their own initiative, but they reflect two widespread beliefs about Negro-

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white couples: (1) the parties are probably Communists, or (2) the white woman is either a prostitute or an innocent victim of a rapacious Negro. (132).

[x] For more about Rosaldo's border theory, see his Culture and the Remaking of Social Analysis. Boston: Beacon Press, 1989.

[xi] I do not intend to discuss the writers' own definitions of their racial identity. I think it is not inaccurate to say that no matter how they would describe themselves racially, the white society would simply box them into the black race.

[xii] in Price and Oliver 19.

[xiii] In Gartner 164.

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CHAPTER II

"Gone Over on the Other Side:" Charles Chesnutt's The House Behind the Cedars

> "You are black," he said, "and you are not free. You cannot travel without your papers; you cannot secure accommodations at an inn; you could not vote, if you were of age; you cannot be out after nine o'clock without a permit. If a white man struck you, you could not return the blow, and you could not testify against him in a court of justice. You are black, my lad, and you are not free" (169).

Judge Straight's words, addressed to John Walden in Charles Chesnutt's The House Behind the Cedars, sum up the odds that John tries to defy in his attempt to become socially and racially mobile. The same odds were stacked against any person who was defined as "black," legally or otherwise, and that is especially true of the time period in which Chesnutt's novel is set—"a few years after the Civil War" (1). According to historian George Frederickson, "antiblack racism" was at its peak in the years following the war—a fact that makes the judge's words even more poignant (81).

Not only does John have to fight all the circumstances the judge outlines, but also a whole racial system that is designed to lock people into permanent, immutable categories, with no room in between for people of mixed blood, such as himself and his sister, Rena. Classified as black, John is contemplating a lifetime of servitude and discrimination, added to the stigma of his illegitimacy. In his discussion with John, Judge Straight also alludes to the Dred Scott Supreme Court decision, which reduced

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the status of African Americans to non-citizens and deprived them of any legal rights. The impossibility of returning "the blow" from a white man refers to the fact that if he were to strike a white man back, he would be lynched. Therefore, he needs to find a covert way to achieve what he wants. Despite his protests that he, in fact, is not black but white (because he looks white), the judge introduces John to another racist concept that keeps the system in place: the one-drop rule: "One drop of black blood makes the whole man black" (170).

For all intents and purposes, John Walden is black, despite his lack of physical "visible" marks of blackness and, as such, he is barred from all the rights and privileges of the whites, including that of becoming a lawyer. In an interview with Pauline C. Bouvé, Chesnutt himself deplored the injustice of the one-drop rule:

> "You see," he continued, a bitter smile playing about his lips, "the words of the negro song, 'All Coons Look Alike to Me' express the sentiment of the whole people of that section. The educated man or woman, no matter what his character and ability may be, who has one-sixteenth, or one-thirty-second, or one sixty-fourth part of African blood is counted a negro and is debarred from the privileges of a white man or woman." (McElrath 101)

Chesnutt's words point out how racially, "white" is a category that constructs itself by exclusion. He does not deplore the fact that people of mixed blood are not considered white; rather, he is critical of the entire race system in the U.S.—a system based on making visible and containing all the people of mixed blood and African Americans alike.

The House Behind the Cedars makes specific claims about the two specific types of passing that it portrays: identificatory and performative. Identificatory

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passing involves a social and psychological identification with white ideology. In the case of identificatory passing, the passer embraces the identity of a white man/woman, along with its accompanying ideology—the way John Walden does in the novel. The identificatory passer crosses the color line with a clear intention not to come back to the black side. He leaves both his physical and spiritual blackness behind, usually (dis)placing it on some family member who remains "black." In John's case, his mother and sister stay in the house behind the cedars and bear John's blackness as well as theirs. Identificatory passing is usually permanent and has economic, social, and psychological reasons, but to really identify with whiteness, the passer has to have a "white" intellectual background. Most of the times, the intellectual background of the passer is indeed Eurocentric. To pass in such a way, the passer has to cut all his ties with his own past (family, community, and sometimes culture), which is the case of Chesnutt's hero in The House Behind the Cedars.

The other type of passing the novel depicts is performative. It is based on the view of race as performance—a matter of props, makeup, and/or behavior. The passer crosses the color line and "acts" white. Performative passing can be temporary (usually for economic reasons or for obtaining one's freedom), but it can also be permanent. In this case, the passer tries to find a means of reclaiming his/her double identity as both black and white, and he/she keeps ties with both communities, but is defined by neither on its own. For the performative passer, it is crucial to keep his/her spiritual blackness intact, while leaving his/her physical blackness behind. John and Rena's mother, Molly Walden, is the family member that will stay behind and remain

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"black." Rena Walden illustrates this type of passing in Chesnutt's novel, and it seems that the choice he makes is not arbitrary: Chesnutt genders racial passing by making John the more "calculated" and "cold" passer and Rena—much more sympathetic to the reader—the passer who cannot adapt to passing and who cannot find her place on either side of the color line. The author's ambivalent views on passing and his critical attitude toward the system that made passing a necessity are also present in the depiction of these two types of passing, which are not discussed by Chesnutt's critics.

Early criticism on Chesnutt is sparse and focuses more on his own racial makeup and its significance than on his works. As Joseph McElrath Jr. remarks in his collection of critical essays, Chesnutt was considered, along with Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois, an exceptional "black" author, whose infusion of white blood put him above the intellectual limitations of African Americans.[i]

In the recent years, however, Joseph McElrath Jr.'s collection of critical essays on Chesnutt is valuable in understanding the complexity of this author. It contains contemporary book reviews, interviews, journals, and a section of important critical essays on Chesnutt's major works. McElrath also offers a review of the critical literature about Chesnutt. He argues that there are two tendencies that prevail in the writing on this author: one that uses an "autobiographical approach," which implies the reading and understanding of the works in terms of Chesnutt's life and personality, and one that is overly critical of Chesnutt because of his "racist" and condescending treatment of his black characters. The main proponents of the latter are

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Sally Ann Ferguson and Michael Flusche (20). Flusche goes as far as arguing that Chesnutt considered "white" as the norm and the ideal, and that he cast himself as the tragic mulatto. I will argue against the views of Ferguson and Flusche in showing that Rena is not a "failed future American," as Ferguson calls her. I do agree with McElrath's counterargument that Chesnutt mocks blacks, light-skinned, and white people *alike* throughout his work, as in "The Wife of His Youth," "The Conjure Woman," and "The Passing of Grandison" (21).

Critical responses to The House Behind the Cedars are quite varied and numerous. However, most of the readings ignore crucial elements of the plot and characters that would allow for a more in-depth and complex analysis. While a discussion of passing and of the color line is a constant in these analyses, none of the critics mentioned go as far as pointing out that the differences between John's and Rena's attitudes toward passing make way for a classification of passing—a classification that will help in the analysis of the phenomenon, and will shed light on the sophistication of Chesnutt's work. My analysis of The House Behind the Cedars belongs in the former category discussed by McElrath, the one that reads the novel through the lens provided by the personality and identity struggles that the author himself experiences as a biracial individual in a binary-minded America.

Reflecting his own racial makeup, Chesnutt chose to focus on biracial characters in his fiction. According to Charles Duncan,

> As a light-skinned, gray-eyed black man whose grandfather was white, Chesnutt understandably lacked a fixed or definite position from which to view racial interaction, and

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> this ambiguity about his own racial makeup clearly affected his writings. (11)

Chesnutt's lack of a "fixed position" is transposed into his writings, especially in The House Behind the Cedars, where characters have the freedom of racial mobility—a fact that makes them both powerful against, and vulnerable to, the American racial system. Rather than discuss Chesnutt's lack of a fixed position, Sylvia Lyons Render discusses his vision as "one whose racial antecedents placed him on the color line rather than on either side of it" (Duncan 11). Chesnutt's personal racial identity—neither black, nor white, yet both—made it easier for him to explore his biracial characters, a fact which he acknowledges himself: "[s]ubstantially all of my writings ... have dealt with the problems of people of mixed blood" (Andrews 137).

In The House Behind the Cedars, John is an identificatory passer because he initially models himself after his father—intellectually by reading his books, and racially, by convincing himself that he is white, despite the beatings he receives from the white boys in town. John's reasoning is built on his lack of physical "visible" marks of blackness:

> His playmates may call him black; the mirror proved that God, the father of all, had made him white; and God, he had been taught, made no mistakes—having made him white, He must have meant him to be white. (161)

It is a strange mixture of self confidence, religious devotion, and empirical evidence that John uses to build the conviction that he is white, since he has seen how blacks are treated and wants to escape that treatment. As Sterling L. Bland claims, "whiteness has the privilege of not being classified at all, since whiteness is

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considered a point of reference or of origin, used to define and classify 'the others'" (141). John sees whiteness as absence of classification inasmuch as it helps him evade being classified as black. The other side of whiteness—one that John ignores—is that is also one side of the binary that he's desperately trying to escape. Until his discussion with Judge Straight, John is steeled in his conviction that is is white, and only after the judge's legal proof of his blackness does he acknowledge it, but he still tries to find a way to avoid being absorbed by the system. He uses his racial ambiguity and he manages to be successful in passing for white.

However, an identificatory passer does not merely pretend to be white, just as John does not merely perform whiteness. Since childhood, he has identified with "white" values and ideologies, partly from his father's books, partly from his mother Molly's unwavering adoration of her white lover and admiration for all things white, and partly from witnessing race relations in his hometown. Judging from the way he remembers Patesville—in terms of the injustice committed against blacks—John has always been aware of prejudice and discrimination against African Americans. Thus, the factors that make John an identificatory passer are multiple and varied. Given his background, it is easy for him to believe he is white. Even after the judge proves him wrong, he cannot shake his conviction about his racial makeup. This conviction makes him the perfect candidate for identificatory passing, since no words can undo the years he spent acquiring a "white" background.

John's intention is to pass permanently, and his reasons are multiple, apart from his personal identification with whiteness: awareness of how African Americans

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are treated, unwillingness to be treated in the same way, and access to different social and economic opportunities, as opposed to a life of constant servitude and subordination in Patesville and to classification in a category that was considered inferior. The narrator discusses John's rationale for passing:

> With him, the problem that oppressed his sister had been a matter of ... self-conviction. Once persuaded that he had certain rights, or ought to have them, by virtue of the laws of nature, in defiance of the customs of mankind, he has promptly sought to enjoy them with no troublesome qualms of conscience whatever. (78)

The narrator himself explains the difference between an identificatory and a performative passer. It lies in the distinction he makes between how John and Rena conceive of passing. Both are aware of how unfair "the customs of mankind" are, subjecting them to white surveillance and making them visible as black, thus curtailing their freedom. Both are equally aware of the fact that—as humans, or "by the laws of nature"—they should have the same rights as all humans. Even so, Rena experiences those "troublesome qualms of conscience," while John has convinced himself a long time ago that his whiteness (or his identification with it) has helped him evade any remorse that a performative passer experiences. His emotional self-defense works to protect him from the trauma that is usually associated with a passer who decides to break away from family and community. What is more, his manipulative nature—which, without a doubt, has helped him achieve his status—makes Rena believe that *not* telling her fiancé Tryon about her race is a noble sacrifice, made to protect not only herself, but also her brother and nephew.

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"Qualms of conscience" or not, John and Rena Walden apparently refuse to be caged by racist categories, to be exposed to a visibility reminiscent of the auction block, and with that, to be barred from the most fundamental human rights. They both choose to use their racial ambiguity as a tactic to work within the system at finding a life that would give them a greater degree of personal freedom, along with material and social privileges they would not have access to as "black.". In The Practice of Everyday Life, Michel de Certeau devises a model of analysis that is useful in examining passing. He discusses the difference between tactics and strategies. The latter are employed by the existing power structures in order to impose a disciplinary grid whose aim is containment and control. On the other hand, tactics are used by the powerless in order to be able to live within such a system (xiv-xix). In terms of race, the binary racial system represents the strategy deployed to keep African Americans and biracial individuals contained and controlled, while passing turns out to be a tactic that biracial individuals use in order to evade the disciplinary grid *without* overturning it. In other words, to employ tactics means to work within the system, to "manipulate space," the space that strategies produce and impose (29). Creating a space is a tactic of survival; deCerteau argues: "The space of a tactic is the space of the other. Thus it must play on and with a terrain imposed on it and organized by the law of a foreign power. It is a maneuver 'within the enemy's field of vision'...and within enemy territory" (37). Both John and Rena manage to find a way to "manipulate space" and to evade the place to which they were relegated by the grid of the racial system. However, their similarities stop here. While John

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can be described as an identificatory passer, Rena remains a performative passer the whole time she spends "on the other side." She also thinks that love can be a strong enough weapon to defeat the "customs of mankind," as opposed to John. The fact that both of them are able to pass allows them to question and challenge the racial status quo, whether intentionally or not.

Telling a passing story is in itself an act that challenges the power structures in America. In order to be effective, passing has to be surrounded by secrecy at all times. However, when a passer is "outed," the act is bound to produce anxiety in whites. In a passing novel, the white reader sees how unstable racial identity really is, and how the Other can turn into the Same often enough to show how unstable the system is. Reading about "blacks" crossing the color line causes many readers to feel anxious, uncomfortable, and doubtful about how tenable the race system was in America. For those used to thinking in racial binaries, it is unsettling to see how those binaries fail to account for the space between "black" and "white," the space that both John and Rena occupy at certain moments in the novel. Therefore, it is safe to say that perhaps the most subversive act of all is Chesnutt's writing a passing story because he shows how easy it is for biracial individuals to cross the color line at will. Moreover, even though Rena is contained by the end of the novel, John's disappearing act makes him a threat to the system once more, since his disappearance into white society throws into question the myth of pure whiteness.

The way in which Chesnutt tells the story of John and Rena Walden is worthy of consideration. The novel begins with the "trite reflection[s]"of a man who comes

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out of the Patesville Hotel and starts walking through the town (1). The narrator describes this man as "tall, dark, with straight, black, lustrous hair, and very clean-cut, high-bred features" (2). The only other piece of information about his identity is given by the hotel clerk—his name (John Warwick), along with the assumption that he must be "one of the South Ca'lina bigbugs," obviously a man of wealth (2). For the remainder of the first chapter, Chesnutt carefully withholds information from the reader as to who Warwick really is, but he generously describes the town through his eyes. Patesville, as seen by Warwick, is a clue for the reader, because John racializes the places he sees: the clock tower that used to signal curfew for all blacks; the town hall steps where a black man was shot by a white man (who afterwards served one year in prison and was released); the place ironically named Liberty Point, where slave auctions used to be held. Chesnutt's racialization of the town serves multiple purposes, of which one is to give the reader a clue about Warwick's racial identity. Why would a rich white man walk through his native town and remember the places where injustice, discrimination, and murder have been committed against African Americans? Is he merely a white man with very liberal views? Or is he a racist who tries to remember what Chesnutt himself ironically calls "the good old days?" (7)

De Certeau's notions of "space" vs. "place" are useful in bringing to light the implications of Chesnutt's writing. According to de Certeau, *place* represents a location that is controlled by the dominant culture, with rules that have to be respected by all the users. In contrast, *space* is chaotic and unregulated. The rules created by the power structures do not apply. It is temporary, and created within

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places by members of subordinate cultures, in order to cope with the rules set by the dominant culture. Consequently, Patesville is—to use de Certeau's words—"enemy territory" for John, and a *place* that is racially organized. He is able to see this organization because he is part of "the other," of those who were punished for transgressing the laws of the dominant system. *Place* and *strategy* go hand in hand, imposed by the dominant culture, while *tactics* and *spaces* are temporarily developed by the powerless in order to survive and cope with the system. It is a way of fighting the system from within. A passer has the power to turn a *place* into a *space*, merely by being present where blacks are not allowed. The clue is within the reader's grasp all along: Patesville represents the *place* in which John has developed his *tactics* of beating the system. Because his racial identity is known in Patesville, John cannot transform this *place* into a *space*—not even for a short time, so he has to deploy his tactics elsewhere.

William Andrews finds yet another purpose for this particular way of describing the town. He connects it to Warwick's musings from the beginning of the chapter—musings that deliberately set a misleading atmosphere. The reader is told that even though time destroys everything, in Patesville it seems that it "lingers lovingly after youth has departed" (1). Chesnutt seems to establish an atmosphere and a mood that are typical for Southern romances of the period, but he quickly deconstructs that when he describes how Warwick sees the town. Indeed, nothing has changed in Patesville—especially not old racist attitudes (Andrews 158). The setting is not exploited merely to add local color, but to make a point, and to show what odds

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are stacked against African Americans even after slavery has officially ended. By placing a passer in a clearly racialized *place* that is established by, and belongs to, the dominant culture, Chesnutt is making the reader aware of the difficulties, as well as the subversive possibilities inherent in passing.

Even though Warwick experiences the town by remembering injustice, racism, and murder, by the end of the chapter, the reader is still kept in the dark about his racial makeup: Chesnutt seems reluctant to clarify it. Andrews sees this as a strategy devised in order to win the reader's sympathy before John and Rena's racial identity is disclosed (159). The racial ambiguity cultivated by Chesnutt in his characters is indeed destined to win the reader's sympathy, but also to make the reader question the validity of the one-drop rule and the black-white binary, although this will come into play only when Rena's racial identity is beyond any doubt. The very first clue in this respect is their mother's speech. Molly Walden speaks like the other African American characters in the novel, a fact that is discussed by the narrator with irony: "The corruption of the white people's speech was one element—only one—of the negro's unconscious revenge for his own debasement" (9). Thus, Molly's speech, along with the information that she is John's mother, should clue the reader in as to John's race. Even so, Chesnutt does not state it explicitly, so the ambiguity still exists, increased by references to a shameful secret in their past, which could be either their illegitimacy or their race. It is only in Chapter XVIII that Chesnutt tells the story of the affair between Molly Walden—"a free colored woman"—and a wealthy white man (155). So the reader learns that apart from illegitimacy, the secret that

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both brother and sister try to keep has to do with the fact that—according to the one-drop rule—they are legally black, and as such, subject to prejudice and discrimination.

The chapter "Under the Old Regime" contains the solution to the puzzle that Chesnutt has so carefully constructed for his reader in the previous chapters. It also discusses John's intellectual background, limited to the books that his father brought to the house behind the cedars: Fielding, Walter Scott, and many other European writers have built John's intellectual makeup and his outlook on the world. Had his father not been white, his learning would have been limited to what the black school taught him—something he quickly outgrows: "The blood of his white fathers, the heirs of the ages, cried out for its own, and after the manner of that blood set about getting the object of its desire" (163). With this background, John seems to be convinced that he is white, when—in a scene reminiscent of DuBois' "fall into race"—he is told by white boys in the street that he is black. What is more, John is beaten into race: "When he had been beaten five or six times, he ceased to argue the point, though to himself he never admitted the change" (160). His own conviction that he is white is unwavering, not only because of his intellectual background, but also because his mother tries to erase any sign of blackness in her children (including "the wave" in Rena's hair).

Armed with his opinion and determination, John pays a visit to old Judge Straight, who seems to be the only white character endowed with a more liberal outlook on race and race relations. The judge thinks at first that John is white, but

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then he realizes that before him stands Molly Walden's son—not only illegitimate, but also legally black—who is asking for advice on how to become a lawyer. What follows is a brutally honest statement, in which the judge sums up what John has to overcome in order to achieve his dream—prejudice, discrimination, and injustice—because he is on the "wrong" side of the color line. John's counterargument is that he is white and he looks white, so he should not be barred from any rights and privileges that white people enjoy: "I am white, and not black" (170). However, at the judge's insistence, John has to acknowledge the existence of the one-drop rule, no matter how unjust and illogical it is, since it makes him "black as ink," in Straight's words (170).

The mental step that John has to take, from acknowledging the one-drop rule to stating his intention to pass, is rendered by Chesnutt solely through the dialogue between the two characters, although usually the narrator offers comments on the characters' thoughts and reactions. John's reply, "It is not right," referring to the one-drop rule, is followed by "I had thought...that I might pass for white. There are white people darker than me" (170). The narrator shares no comments about this exchange, although this is the defining moment of John's life. He recognizes the injustice and lack of logic of an arbitrary rule that boxes him into a rigid, limiting racial category, out of which there is no escape; he rebels against it; and finally he makes a decision to use his lack of "visible" marks of blackness as a *tactic* to become racially (and socially) mobile.

There are two moments in John's story when he can be considered subversive, and this is one of them. His awareness of the possibility of moving between fixed

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identities, to be *in passing*, along with his decision to claim a space that—according to the laws of his state—is not "rightfully" his, make him threatening to the existing power structures. For a few moments, John is hovering between two identities, and his in-betweenness holds a considerable potential for freedom from classification. Had he stayed in this *space* in between (or on the border), he would have been a bigger threat to the system than he is when passing. However, he chooses another fixed identity—albeit one that he assumes illegally because it offers him material and social privileges. John turns into a spy in the "enemy territory," and he uses the knowledge he gleans about white society in order to infiltrate himself deeper in their midst. He is helped by a white man in the accomplishment of his plans, even though Chesnutt infuses some irony in the old judge's rationale. When John announces his intention to pass, the judge's first reaction is to reject his plan and scold him. However, he watches John closely and "he saw his old friend in the lad's face, and again he looked in vain for any sign of Negro blood" (171). Only after he sees John's resemblance to his white father and also his racial ambiguity, the judge agrees to help him not only with legal advice, but also by letting him read his law books. It is interesting that John's "whiteness" has compelled Straight to help him, and nothing else. Could it be the influence of the pamphlet the judge was reading when John came to see him? It is a pro-slavery pamphlet that discusses "the hopeless intellectual inferiority of the Negro and the physical and moral degeneration of mulattoes, who combined the worst qualities of their two ancestral races..." (163).

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The judge is described as a very fair person with liberal views, so his decision to help John could be read as his going against the argument of the pamphlet in order to prove it wrong. Even though the first reading seems to be more in tune with Chesnutt's sophisticated sense of irony, the reader should not discount either of them. Ultimately, the most important outcome of the meeting between John and Judge Straight is that John gets help and advice on how to bypass the law. The fact that he "need not be black" in South Carolina—as opposed to North Carolina, where he was born—bespeaks the unexpected unevenness of the racial system that goes to great lengths to maintain whiteness "pure."

The tenuous nature of the racial system is part of American history. From the seventeenth century on, the American judicial system has made strenuous attempts to define and construct race in order to keep boundaries in place and to make biracial individuals visible as black. Teresa Zackodnik discusses some of these attempts, arguing that one of the reasons why the definitions and conceptions of race were so different and varied especially in the South was that biracial people posed a "corporeal challenge" to the system of racial classification, a challenge that a system based on a binary had enormous difficulties containing (422). What is clear from all the constructs and definitions of race is that the main intention of the judicial system was to "police and enforce the limits of whiteness" (423). Luckily for John Walden, South Carolina laws seem to be more flexible when it comes to the one-drop rule, and he is not necessarily legally black there. But, as the judge tells him, it would be impossible for him to pass in Patesville, not only because he would break the law, but

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because he is known as Molly Walden's son. John gets his first lesson in passing from the judge—through his advice and through yet another subterfuge. While John is passing as his office boy, he actually reads the judge's law books in order to prepare to become a lawyer. After two years of social passing, John turns eighteen and decides to leave Patesville and his former life behind, crossing two borders: the state border to South Carolina and the color line. Asked about him, his mother would only say that "he's gone over on the other side," which is an indication that she knows he is passing (174).

The events of John's life after he leaves Patesville are gleaned by the reader from what he tells his mother and Rena on the night of his first visit home after ten years: during the Civil War, he worked as a manager of an estate where he ended up marrying the daughter of the owner and inheriting all his wealth. He has also become a lawyer, so it seems that John Warwick has achieved everything that John Walden dreamed of in the house behind the cedars. The reader is pressed to question his marriage to a rich white woman: was it interest in her inheritance and/or race that prompted it? Was it love? Was it both? As John Warwick, John has accomplished much more than Walden could have, had he remained in Patesville. On the other hand, in Clarence, South Carolina, any questions about his race (if there were any) would have been dropped when he married a white heiress and took over a slave-owning plantation. When John explains this to Rena and Molly, neither one of them seems to be troubled in the least about their brother and son owning slaves even for a short time, until slavery was abolished. The fact that Chesnutt himself is silent on this

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matter seems to point to the argument that Ferguson makes, that John's marriage had purely economic purposes, as far as he is concerned (202). However, John emphatically states that he loved his late wife "very dearly," and was loved by her as well, so the marriage was love based, but it also provided John with what he needed: wealth and respectability to solidify his position (23).

John Walden is a fascinating figure, partly because even Chesnutt seems to be ambivalent about him, and that is what makes the construction of this character very sophisticated, unlike any other passing figure portrayed before. John is a mix of contradictions, most of which he himself does not seem to acknowledge. To begin with, John may be read as a "traitor" to his race, but only if the reader does not fully understand his background. By going into a lengthy description of the books Walden used to read as a child, Chesnutt shows the reader that John did not have a choice but to model himself after his white father. He is also brought up by Molly who is convinced of the superiority of the white race, and he had no other African Americans in his life. He grew up in Molly's closed, intensely snobbish, and racist light-skinned world. It seems that Chesnutt portrayed John Walden as a product of his environment even more than Rena, but he still can't help his ambivalence toward his own character:

> The sight of [Molly's kitchen] moved [John's] heart, and he felt for a moment a sort of blind anger against the fate which made it necessary that he should visit the home of his childhood, if at all, like a thief in the night. But he realized, after a moment, that the thought was pure sentiment, and that one who had gained so much ought not to complain if he must give up a little. (30)

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John's anger is directed at the system that makes passing necessary in the first place. That, along with a host of other emotions that he cannot repress—such as being moved at the sight of the kitchen where he grew up—seem to put John into a more favorable light with the reader and with the narrator as well. However, he discards his anger as "pure sentiment"—unnecessary on his way to success—and he weights his past and his family ("a little") against his wealth and social position ("so much"), considering the former a sacrifice well made. Chesnutt's ambivalence is thus reflected in John's portrayal, which does little to endear him to the reader at this point.

Equally damning is the fact that, at first glance, John seems to accept racial classifications as long as the system defines him as white. It is true that he has moments when he rebels against the system: when he is beaten into race by the white boys, and when he is angry that he has to hide in order to come visit his mother. The very fact that he returns to Patesville speaks in his favor, however. While Andrews argues that the reason for his return is to get Rena as a free governess for his son (150), the narrator is clear on the reason for John's return:

> He had yielded to a sentimental weakness in deciding upon this trip to Patesville. ... an overmastering impulse had compelled him to seek the mother who had given him birth and the old town. (28)

No matter how white-identified he might be, John is still thinking about the past and about the ones he left behind. With these arguments in his favor, Chesnutt still weighs facts against him: his complete identification with whiteness; the fact that he

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stayed away from his mother and sister for ten years; and his thoughts that whatever he sacrificed for his status and wealth was worthwhile.

Chesnutt describes John as a product of a system as cold and calculating as he appears to be. Without these character traits, he would not have succeeded, and Rena's story proves that, for she is the opposite of her brother in this respect. In a way, Chesnutt blames the system for creating John, since he has no choice but to pass in order to become a lawyer and fulfill his childhood dream. His position is one to be envied and coveted by others, and herein lies John's power and also his vulnerability. He is aware that keeping the secret of his origin is paramount, in order to keep his status, but at the same time, he feels lonely because of his situation—a secretly biracial man in a sea of white people—so Rena's presence in his life is welcome, as one who shares the same blood and is in the same situation. He stands to lose everything that he has achieved so far if he is exposed as a passer, and there are two such moments in his life: first, when Rena wants to tell Tryon that she is passing (but John convinces her not to), and second, when Tryon discovers Rena's true identity and her racial makeup and writes him a letter.

Given John Walden's character traits and the narrator's ambivalence toward him, the question remains: In what way(s) does he question or challenge the racial system? From the very beginning of the novel, the reader realizes that John is sharply aware of the gap the color line imposes between whites and African Americans. His first walk through Patesville is his way of questioning the racial status quo. It is true that he may only remember the differences between blacks and whites in order to

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remind himself what he had escaped years earlier when he decided to pass, but the reader sees him angry enough at the system to realize that John has been questioning it since his youth. The incident with the white boys who beat him up is also revealing. John is made aware of the existence of rigid racial categories and of the necessity to "stay in his place" as a young black man. He is not allowed to cross the color line. The fact that he decides—despite what he is told—to actually use his racial ambiguity and to become racially mobile makes him a threat to a system whose very existence depends on keeping African Americans "in their place." The moment he decides to pass for white is probably his most subversive act, because it finds him between racial classifications. John's racial invisibility is the best weapon that he uses against the system. It renders him racially mobile and the efforts to contain him are useless since he can't be *seen* as a black man. Unlike his social mobility—which can be visualized as a vertical axis—his racial mobility represents a movement from one side to another on a horizontal continuum. This movement is not allowed by the racial system, but John is determined to infiltrate himself into the other camp, and his *tactic* is passing. He cannot be contained by the racial category "black."

Even though once he is passing for white, John seems to accept the racial system as long as he is on the white side of the color line, there is one more act that he performs which is meant to cause anxiety in the white readership: his disappearance. After Tryon breaks his engagement to Rena because he finds out she was passing, John tries to convince her one more time to move away and start life under another (white) identity: "'Listen, Rena,' he said, with a sudden impulse, 'we'll go to the

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North or West—I'll go with you—far away from the South and the Southern people, and start life all over again'" (183). Tryon and Dr. Green's discovery that he and Rena were passing does not deter John from making plans. He cannot rely on a Tryon's word that his secret will be kept and his racial identity will remain undisclosed, so he sees the necessity to go away to another *place* where he can carve a *space* for himself and, possibly, his sister—a space where he can once more make himself invisible to the dominant culture. The advantage of a tactic, as de Certeau suggests, is that it is "determined by the absence of a proper locus" (37). John is free to pick a location that he deems safe and to develop his tactic in order to actualize a *space* for himself. It is another moment when he is mobile and between identities—another moment of questioning and challenging a system that is trying to keep him chained. He plans to recreate himself and acquire a new identity that would render him invisible once more. According to Duncan, John's disappearing act may very well be his (and Chesnutt's) most subversive move in the novel:

> John's disappearance becomes an act of double passing, both textual and social. He fades out of the scope of the novel's plot while, more subversively, he disappears into (*not* out of) the culture at large: like Johnson's ex-colored man and Ellison's Invisible Man, John Walden, (cloaked in whatever new identity he contrives for himself "elsewhere") has, by two-thirds of the way through *The House Behind the Cedars*, gone thoroughly underground. (15)

John's absence from the novel renders him invisible not only to the reader, but also to the system he is fighting. Nobody knows where he has gone, and the plans he announces to Rena are vague enough to cloak him completely. One of the last references to John in the novel is made by Molly—"My son's gone"—and his

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disappearance is bound to be unsettling, since John is not visible any longer to the white reader (187). John is meant to create questions and doubts in the minds of Chesnutt's readers because, just like him, there could be others who are passing, ultimately proving that the color line is permeable after all from the black side to the white side as well, and that the myth of pure whiteness is just that—a myth that does not reflect reality. The character has presumably taken a place that—by social custom and law—did not belong to him. Even more incendiary is the fact that he actually married a white woman and fathered a child, thus increasing the number of individuals whose very existence interrogates the myth of pure whiteness. It is true that John's tactics are deployed for individual gains, but the presence of his son is much more than an "insurance" (as his marriage to a rich white woman might have been). John's son is another mixed blood individual born on the white side of the color line, and he is also meant to make the reader question the efficacy of the existing power structures in containing biracial individuals.

Chesnutt's attitude toward his character may be seen as ambivalent at first glance, but it may also be read as a genuine effort to render his character as realistically as possible. One important aspect of John Walden's portrayal is how different he is from the tragic mulatto stereotype—the hero of the passing fiction written before Chesnutt. Andrews argues:

> John Walden enters the white world unburdened by the ponderous psychological baggage which virtually all the mixed-blood figures in late nineteenth-century American fiction consume their energies wrestling with....He is established, in fact, as the antitype of the mulatto character

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> popularized by most white and black authors of Chesnutt's day. (164)

Far from being burdened or doomed by his "one drop," John "climbs the steps of the American Dream," as Andrews further argues, displaying qualities that Chesnutt himself saw as conducive to success: "native intelligence, industrious disposition, wise training, and considerable patience" (165).

The narrator of The House Behind the Cedars takes the time to explain his own attitude toward the two main characters in the chapter entitled "A Loyal Friend." He discusses critically how, in post-war America, "the taint of black blood was the unpardonable sin," a sin more dangerous than any other crime, especially when kept secret (127). As much as he identifies with the dominant culture, John does not see his "black blood" as a sin. The opening lines of the novel attest to that, since the description of Patesville through John's eyes tells the reader that privately, John acknowledges his blackness. Aware that some of his readers might see passing as deceiving and as lying, Chesnutt challenges those readers and finds moral and political grounds for his characters' actions. By birth, they are Americans, so they should have the same rights as all Americans, but they are barred from those rights—and from fully developing to the best of their abilities—by being born on the "wrong" side of the color line. Chesnutt does not disapprove of passing because he sees it as a *tactic*—to obtain their rights. He also sees it as an effect of how the racial system functions, as he notes in his journal:

> it was only natural for colored people to pass if they could as long as it had advantages for them. The only way to stop

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> it was to give colored workmen and artists a chance to succeed without having to pass. (Gartner 163-4)

Passing is not lying or betraying, Chesnutt argues. On the contrary, "to undertake what they tried to do required great courage" (128). In his criticism of the system, Chesnutt lashes out at the "blessed institutions of a free slave-holding republic," implying that by discriminating against African Americans, the system itself has caused a phenomenon like passing to take root, and that the passers are nothing short of courageous to take such risks (128).

If John has enough resources to move away and recreate himself, the situation is different for Rena Walden, and passing comes to have a different significance in her life. Even though they are brother and sister, John and Rena are fundamentally different. If Chesnutt refuses to make a tragic mulatto out of John, he does not seem to find any difficulty doing so with Rena. But to label her only as a tragic "mulatta" or a melodramatic heroine means to miss some sophisticated aspects of this character. Even though obviously sharing some traits with romantic heroines (or perhaps exactly because of that), Rena Walden manages to catch the eye of the reader and engage his/her sympathy more easily than her brother.

The reader sees Rena for the first time through John's (slightly incestuous) gaze. Walking through Patesville, he sees Rena, and is attracted by her beauty. Without realizing she is his sister, he follows her through the town. He also believes she is white. This time, Chesnutt makes Rena pass for white in John's eyes, who is passing for white in the reader's eyes. It is quite an intriguing puzzle and a maze of

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appearances that the author has built for his readers, perhaps to make them more apprehensive when it comes to appearances and the way they are deconstructed.

However, even though he seems to enjoy misleading his readers, Chesnutt is carefully undermining Rena's whiteness in John's eyes: passing through a residential part of the town, he notices that people completely ignore the woman he is following. As long as she keeps on her side of the color line and respects the rules of the *place* she moves in, Rena is invisible to the people in the white section of the town. She becomes visible and known in the black section of the town—another *place* created by the dominant culture through segregation. In the tenements, she helps out an old black woman and a child, and she is seemingly on her way to what John now believes must be a charitable mission or a search to hire a servant in the black part of the town. Finally, after a startled look at John, she enters the house behind the cedars, thus confirming his later suspicion that the mysterious and beautiful woman is his sister, Rena.

After John has finally revealed his identity to Molly, Rena reacquaints herself with her long-lost brother, and the reader gains access to her through the narrator's comments. At first sight, Rena's attitude toward racial classification is—to a certain extent—similar to John's. She perceives the injustice of being boxed in and living with prejudice and discrimination from whites, and the arrival of John from "the other side" makes her experience these feelings poignantly: "As Rena listened, the narrow walls that hemmed her in seemed to draw closer and closer, as though they must crush her" (23). She feels—almost physically—the pressure of having to fit in a category

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that does not account for her identity, of being the object of "glance[s] of pity and contempt" because of her race and illegitimate status (19). Her brother's story sounds to her like "an escape from captivity," and the world of wealth and status that he talks about seems to be far off and to shut her out (19).

Unlike John, who is portrayed as active, Rena appears more passive, at least in the first half of the novel. The feeling of being closed in, of the walls crumbling on her, is one of the few that Chesnutt lets her have at this point in The House Behind the Cedars. The reasons why he portrayed Rena this way seem to be multiple. If John is not tailored according to the tragic mulatto stereotype, then Rena is a character that conforms to that literary figure to a certain extent, probably because Chesnutt does not want to push the limits of literary representation to the degree of alienating all his readers. According to Duncan, "Rena's death serves to appease the sensibilities of late-nineteenth-century readers uneasy about the morality of passing" (15-16). It is also true that—at that time—it would have been difficult to give Rena—as a woman—the role that has been assigned to John, simply because readers of melodramas did not expect female characters in active roles. One other reason why Chesnutt portrayed Rena as passive is that he wanted to prove how innocent people are caught in, and crushed by, a relentless binary racial classification that is totally inadequate. She dies in the end not necessarily because she has to atone for the sins of her father, but because she is the tool that Chesnutt uses to criticize and condemn the system. Ferguson argues:

> One is led to question those critics who claim that racism alone brings on Rena's "tragedy," when considering that

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> Chesnutt's intrusive narrator makes frequent references to the Walden children's having to atone for their parents' adulterous miscegenation, but then puts the entire atonement on Rena. (203)

What Ferguson does not seem to take into account is that miscegenation was illegal at the time the novel was written; had the racial system not been trying to contain people of mixed blood in order to preserve white purity, then Rena's life would not have ended the way it did. Racism is definitely the primary cause of Rena's death; the references to children atoning for their father's mistakes are all made in counterpoint to numerous critical remarks against the system that makes passing a necessity and a tactic of escape from its confines, so they are all subordinated to Chesnutt's criticism of white supremacy and racism.

Apart from the feeling of being closed in, there is another reason for Rena to pass: access to John's world and to a marriage that would bring her wealth and protection (as opposed to life in a town where "she must forever be–a nobody"), along with John's desire to share his experience (and loneliness) with somebody who is of the same kin (26). He is willing to teach her the same tactics he used to infiltrate white society. He manipulates Molly into letting Rena go with him by flashing in front of her opportunities that he knows Rena would not have while in Patesville. Molly's guilt at keeping her daughter away from her own ideal of happiness wins her over, and Rena is free to join her brother on the other side of the color line.

Unlike John, however, Rena becomes a performative passer. Performative passing is based on the view of race as performance—a matter of props, makeup, and/or behavior. Rena approaches passing in a different way from John because she

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does not have the same intellectual background and convictions as her brother. Molly tells John that Rena does not "take to books" the way he did, probably because—as a woman—Rena was never expected to be an intellectual (18). While John was convinced he was white, Rena does not seem to think so. She actually grew up with Frank—the son of her father's former slave—and she is still friends with him. She has a place in the community, and she intends to keep her ties with it, even after she leaves with her brother: " 'You don't think, Frank,' asked Rena severely, 'that I would leave my mother and my home and all my friends, and *never* come back again?' " (39). Molly knows that if Rena is to be successful in her venture, then she has to stay away, but she does not have the heart to tell her. Instead, she relies on John to break the news to her when it is necessary. Even though Rena intends to keep contact with her mother and her friends, she realizes as well that she has to do so covertly. She needs to keep spiritual ties with the people she leaves behind because it is the only way in which she can survive the emotional strain of passing. Her departure itself was unannounced, and she stays in her cabin for the duration of the trip to her brother's estate.

Rena's journey represents much more than a physical move from Patesville to Clarence, South Carolina. It is a journey that takes her up on the social scale and over the color line, from one side of the racial continuum to the other. The time in her cabin is the time she spends between racial classifications, when her racial mobility is manifested, and when she defies what Chesnutt calls "the customs of mankind"—the white supremacist system that kept her bound. Ironically—since she spends all her

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time locked in one room—this is the time when she is truly free, when her in-betweenness gives her that freedom from any and all classifications, even though she does not perceive it as such. It is also an emotional time, when she tries to cope with her separation from her mother and her community—all familiar surroundings—and she prepares to take up a role she has never played before—that of a white woman. Unlike John—who does not seem to give in to regrets and emotional farewells—Rena feels uprooted, and that takes a toll on her emotionally. The maid on the ship sees that she has been crying:

> "Po'chile," murmured the sympathetic colored woman. "I reckon some er her folk is dead, er her sweetheart's gone back on her, er e'se she's had some kin'er bad luck er'nuther. W'ite folks has deir troubles jes'ez well ez black folks, an'sometimes feels'em mo,' 'cause dey ain't ez use'ter'em." (41)

Indeed, for all intents and purposes, Rena's folk are dead, and she suffers from homesickness already. The maid thinks she is white, since a black woman would not be allowed to travel in a cabin, and because Rena, like John, lacks physical "visible" marks of blackness. The cabin on the ship, then, is a *place*, and as such, it is subject to the rules and *strategies* imposed by the dominant culture. Because she normally would not have been allowed in there, Rena's presence reactualizes the cabin as a *space*, where the rules of the dominant system and her relation to them are temporarily suspended, and her *tactics* of resistance and infiltration are developed. It is interesting to note that even at home, in her *space*, Rena feels constricted, so she feels the same in the one she creates in the cabin. The fact that Rena does not seem to

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feel completely at home in any of her *spaces* seems to foreshadow the tragic ending of the novel.

Thus, while Rena Walden enters the ship's cabin in Patesville, Rowena Warwick emerges from it at Wilmington, and is sent to a boarding school where she will learn all the skills she needs to be a white woman. The difference between John and his sister is clear by now: his whiteness is a matter of self-conviction and identification with Euro-American culture, while Rena has to be taught everything. She has to perform whiteness, since she still identifies with everything she left behind in Patesville. Her tactic against the system is the same as her brother's, however: it mainly consists of her use of the lack of racial markings which make her invisible to whites. Before she settles in his home, John sends her to school in order to acquire culture (such as was considered necessary for a woman of her status) and especially manners. Rena needs to learn how to "act white," since being "white" is only an act for her. The year spent in the finishing school improves "her mind and manners," and readies her to play Rowena Warwick, the sister of rich and white John Warwick. The fact that on her first public appearance she catches the eye of George Tryon who proclaims her the Queen of Love and Beauty makes her brother comment: "Well, Rena, you have arrived. ... You are winning the first fruits of your opportunity" (57-8). John's choice of words is interesting: he refers to Rena's goals in spatial terms. To be a white woman, then, (or to *appear* white) is to "arrive" at a certain locus (*space*?) that would grant Rena everything she wanted. Literally, Rena receives recognition as to her status as a rich white woman in a very public *place*, which is

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definitely functioning under rules imposed by the dominant culture. However, John indicates to her that by passing, there is the possibility of creating one's own *space* that does not follow—and does not overturn—the rules of the larger *place*, and also the possibility of getting everything one wants.

As a performative passer, Rena has managed to play her role so well that not only is she taken for a white woman, but she is proclaimed the ideal white woman—her title of Queen of Love and Beauty is received at a tournament where, in keeping with the chivalrous and romantic traditions of the South, men compete against each other imitating the fictional tournaments in Walter Scott's Ivanhoe. Chesnutt plays with the names of Scott's characters. The female part of the love triangle in Ivanhoe includes Rowena—a blonde beauty of noble blood—and Rebecca—the dark heroine, who is Jewish, untitled, and who sacrifices her love for Ivanhoe so that he could marry Rowena. Ironically, Rena bears the name of the white woman who gets the hero in the end, even though, as one character in The House Behind the Cedars says, "she should have been named Rebecca instead of Rowena" because of her physical appearance (137). Unbeknownst to her, Rena has a rival in blonde Blanche Leary—a favorite of Tryon's mother. Chesnutt's play on names and similar incidents point to his ironic deconstruction of Scott's romance.

George Tryon's attraction to Rena quickly turns into love: "His heart had thrilled at first sight of this tall girl, with the ivory complexion, the rippling brown hair, and the inscrutable eyes" (70). He goes as far as to propose to her after a very short courtship, when he makes sure that his feelings for her are reciprocated.

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However, even though Rena has fallen in love with George, she does not feel free enough to set a wedding date because she is aware of playing a role:

> It had not been difficult for Rena to conform her speech, her manner, and in a measure her moods to those of the people around her; but when this readjustment went beyond mere externals and concerned the vital issues of life, the secret that oppressed her took on a more serious aspect, with tragic possibilities. (74)

If she finds it easy to play the role of a white woman in daily and mundane activities, this does not mean that Rena identifies herself with a white woman or that she believes she is white. Her "modes of thought" have been changed to conform to the whites around her only "in a measure," but never totally. For Rena, marriage represents too serious an issue even to contemplate playing a role when she enters it, and she wonders if George would love her at all if he knew who she really was. Even though the books she had read seemed to assert that "love was a conqueror, that neither life nor death, nor creed nor caste, could stay its triumphant course," she is much too realistic and possesses too much wisdom to believe blindly in that creed (74). Her experience of being "a nobody" in Patesville has taught her to doubt white men. She scrutinizes herself in the mirror, as if convinced that her secret has visibly marked her, but, in the narrator's words, "there was no mark upon her brow to brand her as less pure, less innocent, less desirable, less worthy to be loved" (76). On the contrary, Chesnutt is clear in pointing out from the very beginning that neither John, nor Rena, possesses any physical race markers. In discussing Chesnutt's strategy to "pass" both his main characters for white in the beginning, Cathy Boeckmann argues:

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> Thus the novel uses the physiognomy of race to render the one-drop rule virtually meaningless. The two mulatto protagonists are incapable of being read as anything but white and superior; moreover, they are read as signs of racial perfection. (157)

After the reader guesses the truth about John and Rena's racial makeup, some of the other characters in the novel however, are still left in the dark—none more so than Tryon, who is convinced that Rena's purity of character comes from her whiteness (Boeckmann 158).

Tryon's idealization of Rowena Warwick gives Rena pause and makes her decide to tell him about her passing. When she discusses her decision with her brother however, he manipulates her into believing that by telling her secret, she would jeopardize John's and his son's situation as well: "Would you involve all of us in difficulties merely to secure your own peace of mind? Doesn't such a course seem the least bit selfish?" (82). Rena is convinced now that she must sacrifice her own peace of mind for the greater good, but that does not stop her from trying to come to terms with her own identity, since she has grown up in a binary racial system that left no room for people like her. When sounded by John, George seems not to care about Rena's apparent origin from a lower social class than his. The misunderstanding increases when Rena, still unsure about his love, points at her nephew's nurse ("a good looking yellow girl") and asks him whether he would still love her if she were the nurse (86). Tryon thinks Rena is concerned about the social gap between them, so he unequivocally replies in the affirmative, but the narrator is careful to note that their

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minds "did not meet" in this circumstance, even though Rena decided to marry him, seemingly pleased by his answer (86).

Even though she decides to marry Tryon, Rena remains a performative passer. Unlike John, she is often homesick and yearns for her familiar surroundings, after the shock of leaving her past, her mother, and her community behind. The narrator dwells on the oppressiveness of her secret, compounded with her homesickness. Rena actually keeps in touch with her mother and receives letters from her from time to time. Compared to John's absence and silence of ten years, the difference between brother and sister is obvious. Despite the time spent in finishing school, Rena retains her old beliefs—her spiritual blackness. That is why she trusts the dreams she has about her mother's illness, proved true later by Molly's letter. John's over-rationalizing mind would have never let him pay attention, let alone believe, in such dreams. Ferguson argues that because of her "superstitious ignorance," Rena cannot keep her status. She is portrayed as a "postbellum naïf" and her fault is that she tries to stay "psychologically black" while she passes (201). It is true that Rena stays "psychologically black" while she passes, if that means keeping in touch with her mother, and through her, with the community she had left. That is the main characteristic that makes her a performative passer, after all, as opposed to John. However, Chesnutt does not find this a fault with Rena (as Ferguson implies), nor does he dismiss these dreams as ignorant superstitions. In The House Behind the Cedars and The Conjure Woman, Chesnutt considers premonitions and dreams as intrinsic parts of African American folk culture, which cannot be so easily dismissed.

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The fact that Rena's dreams proved to be true is an argument against Chesnutt's so-called disdain of superstitions, and in favor of Rena's maintaining the ties that keep her close to her African American roots.

As a performative passer, Rena has a certain subversive power, but also a tremendous vulnerability. In fact her power is contingent on her vulnerability, for while Rena's power consists in her looks, in her ability to unsettle whites and create racial anxiety, it is—paradoxically—manifested primarily when Tryon finds out she is passing. While relating Rena and Tryon's courtship, the narrator does not discuss George's racial views. Moreover, given his apparent disregard of social class, the reader is led to believe that George must have liberal views when it comes to race as well. However, Chesnutt is slowly deconstructing that assumption by the time George makes an unannounced trip to Patesville. Waiting for Dr. Green—his mother's cousin—he happens to read an article that discusses the inferiority of black blood and the impossibility of miscegenation. The article ends by calling every Southerner to "maintain the supremacy and purity of his all-pervading, all-conquering race" (106). Tryon regards the article as a "well-considered argument," and this is the moment when Chesnutt begins to disclose George's opinions on race. When the doctor mentions Molly's daughter, without giving her name, but praising her beauty and deploring the fact that she is black, George's reaction is perplexing but unmistakable: "To mention a Negro woman in the same room where he was thinking of Rena seemed little short of profanation" (113). But Tryon's racism and Rena's power to shock come fully into light when he finally realizes that the "Negro" beauty

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the doctor was discussing is none other than his own Queen of Love and Beauty, Rowena Warwick. Since passing is a phenomenon necessarily shrouded in secrecy, its power to subvert racial binaries is fully realized only when the passer is found out, exposed, and—ironically—at his/her most vulnerable. Rena's power to question absolute racial categories is revealed by Tryon's reaction when he recognizes her:

> When Rena's eyes fell upon the young man in the buggy, she saw a face as pale as death, with starting eyes, in which love, which had once reigned there, had now given place to astonishment and horror. (140)

Apart from his pun on "pale as death," Chesnutt carefully describes Tryon's emotional turmoil and his wavering between anger, disgust, and horror at the realization that he had been about to commit "the unpardonable sin against his race of marrying her" (143). Tryon was prepared to overlook any other possible impediment to his marriage to Rena: illegitimacy, poverty, low social class, but race is something he is not prepared to overlook. His nightmare—of beautiful Rena turning into a "hideous black hag"—speaks of how deep his anxiety runs (147). However, all the anxiety he experiences cannot extinguish the love he still feels for Rena, so he even tries to convince himself that maybe she is wrong about her origins, and she is actually a white child adopted by a black family. While he tries to come to terms with his love for her, Tryon sees Rena dancing with Jeff Wain—a "burly grinning mulatto"—and that moment racializes her forever in his mind (221). "Who but a Negro could have recovered so soon from what seemed a terrible bereavement?"—Tryon asks himself (223). Even though he writes John that he still thinks of him as a white man, he racializes Rena, and because there are no visible racial marks on her,

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he locates them in her character: "Each fault of hers, every wayward impulse of his children, every defect of mind, morals, temper, or health, would have been ascribed to the dark ancestral strain" (224). Fueling his anxiety about blacks seems to work for Tryon, as he tries to convince himself that a marriage with Rena would never have been a viable option. As Boeckmann argues, when the visual failed to classify an individual as black, the essence of race was located in character (4). At the center of Tryon's anxiety is, of course, Rena—living proof that the color line has been crossed before by a white man, and "an example of how permeable the boundary between races [is]" (Boeckman 32). Through her visibility, Rena has unknowingly threatened the very existence of the color line, since she has the possibility to dwell on either side of it.

However, when George reacts to her with horror, Rena feels that she has lost everything that mattered to her. What hurts her the most is the realization that George's love is contingent on her whiteness. She refuses to try passing again because she feels entirely too vulnerable to do so, and the image that repeatedly plays in her mind is Tryon's expression when he finds out who she is: "He looked at me as though I were not even a human being" (180). At the end of her last discussion with John, she makes the decision to "stay with [her] own people" (181).

After the shock of her broken engagement wears off, Rena's decision to teach at a black school brings her to Tryon's neighborhood, although neither of them is aware of that initially. According to Andrews, Rena's fate from this point of the novel is similar to that of other heroines of passing novels and conforms to the

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conventions of the tragic mulatta fiction (167). However, there is something to be said about the way Rena makes white people uncomfortable, even though she does this unintentionally. On her way to Sampson County where her school is, she and Wain have to explain to several inquiring whites that she is black. As soon as she offers the explanation, nobody questions it, since—as Chesnutt bitterly comments—"no white person of sound mind would ever claim to be a Negro" (229). Rena's presence makes white people uncomfortable: she unsettles their expectations about race and because they cannot read her. She is constantly subjected to scrutiny from whites because her appearance represents a source of constant concern and insecurity to the whites who meet her. She is repeatedly asked to "declare" her racial identity, even by Tryon's mother who pays her a visit to the schoolhouse because she is "interested in the colored people" (239). Whites need the reassurance of fixed racial categories that reinforce their superiority, especially when it comes to Rena, because they want her visible as "black." It is interesting to note that, were she passing, Rena would not have caused any anxiety in whites because her "blackness" would have been invisible; it is her refusal to do so in this instance that causes unease.

Discussing Rena's vulnerability as a young African American woman, Boeckmann argues that the scene where she is pursued by Tryon and Wain

> is a metaphor for the twin vulnerabilities of her position. When she rejects both her suitors and sets into the uncharted swamp, she succumbs both to the powerlessness of her gender position and the liminality of her racial identity. (166)

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It is true that, as an African American woman, Rena is especially vulnerable to both men who are pursuing her. She knows that if Wain catches her, she will be raped, and she does not want Tryon's attentions any longer. According to M. Giulia Fabi, "The once-Queen of Love and Beauty will turn into a fugitive slave pursued by obtrusive suitors turned slave catchers" (79). At this point in her life, Rena has managed to heal her wounds and to become an independent professional woman, so the prospect of neither of her two followers is desirable to her. A wife abuser who is looking for another mother for his children and a free servant, Wain is definitely not the one for Rena. What he offers her is just another kind of slavery. Tryon, on the other hand, who has finally realized that he loves her despite her race, is ready again to marry her. However, Rena cannot overlook his reaction when he found out that she was passing, nor can she help but think that it is still only her "whiteness" that keeps George in love with her. She realizes that a life with Tryon would submit her to constant scrutiny, if not from him, then from others around him, and she does not want to pass again either. Indeed, what Tryon offers her is also a form of slavery, which she refuses.

Rena's acceptance of either man means also accepting one or another rigid racial classification—white if she accepts Tryon, and black if she accepts Wain. It is quite possible that Rena felt the need of being in between, of having both her black and her white blood accounted for, which would not have been possible had she made a choice between the two men. Running into the unknown territory of the swamp is an expression of her attempts to cope with her complex identity, which is still an

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unknown territory to her, a *space* beyond the *places* of the white and black parts of the town. Thus, her tragic end begs the question: Why do Rena's "in-between" moments end up by being so fatally confining? Rena's death is Chesnutt's answer to the binary racial system: it makes it impossible for biracial individuals to exist between classifications. A position that will be available to biracial individuals at a later time, in-betweenness situates itself in the politically charged space between races and offers its dweller total freedom from classification. This would mean that the border dweller is not under the control of the racial system, so the existing power structures cannot let that happen. In Chesnutt's times, biracial individuals like Rena had to accept classification as "black" or they had to pass for white. Since for Rena passing was a traumatic experience, she tries to stay outside classifications, but she cannot survive there. Chesnutt is highly critical of the racist system in America, to the extent of showing how innocent people fall victim to it because of its relentless attempts to contain and control a part of society. There is no end in sight—Chesnutt seems to contend—unless segregation and racial prejudice are abolished.

Chesnutt's critical stance against racism is prevalent throughout the novel. From his subtle technique of hiding the characters' race and gaining the reader's sympathy, to the way in which he slowly deconstructs their whiteness before our eyes, Chesnutt tries to educate his white readers against the dangers of believing that passing is an endeavor that is always doomed to failure, and that all biracial people fit the stereotype of the tragic mulatto, so prevalent in the works of his contemporary Southern white writers Thomas Dixon and Thomas Nelson Page. He is also trying to

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show them what happens when innocents are trapped in a system that is relentlessly trying to contain them. In Chesnutt's own words,

> The object of my writings would be not so much the elevation of the colored people as the elevation of the whites. ... Not a fierce indiscriminate onset, not an appeal to force, for this is something that force can but slightly affect, but a moral revolution which must be brought about in a different manner. The subtle almost indefinable feeling of repulsion toward the Negro, which is common to most Americans—cannot be stormed and taken by assault; the garrison will not capitulate, so their position must be mined, and we will find ourselves in their midst before they think it. (Ames 149)

It seems surprising that Chesnutt sets himself the task of elevating the whites, but the irony in his words announces his intentions to the reader. The word choice in his journal entry is nothing short of incendiary, since he uses a war vocabulary—"storm," "assault," "garrison," "revolution"—to describe the walls that white supremacy has built in order to protect whites, and the actions needed to tear them down. Chesnutt recommends stealth and secrecy—and what better way to infiltrate an enemy camp than telling the story of passing, of people who have secretly crossed the color line, "mined" the positions of the whites, and lived among them, undetected? If his own characters are subversive—each in their own way—telling the story of passing must be the most subversive act of all because not only does he achieve his goal of educating his readers, but he also manages to render them "ideologically uncomfortable," sabotaging positions that had seemed ideologically safe (Duncan 12).

The critical attitude directed against the racial system pervades The House Behind the Cedars. Chesnutt's irony in discussing all the pseudo-scientific racist

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tracts that go to great lengths to prove the inferiority of African Americans and the necessity of maintaining a binary racial system intact cannot escape his readers. As Boeckmann argues, "Chesnutt places the physical assessments of his mixed-race characters in direct and ironic juxtaposition with the pronouncements of scientific racism" (158). By portraying John and Rena as intelligent, articulate, and capable of holding their own in the wealthy white world, Chesnutt contradicts all the tenets of scientific racism and intends to render his white readers uncomfortable and insecure about whiteness. Moreover, in creating a character like John, so different from the typical tragic mulatto, Chesnutt thwarts the expectations of his white readership, while "the novel's final silence concerning John's whereabouts sends an inflammatory message to that very audience" (Duncan 15-16). Chesnutt's play on racial (in)visibility is also meant to be inflammatory. In discussing that, George Handley argues:

> Chesnutt ... expose[s] the personality and limitations of white culture's gaze, which often masked itself in the guise of realism... This attack is launched by means of loosening the white reader's cognitive grip on the racial signifiers apparent on the black body and thereby transforming the terms on which racial difference is identified and imputed moral meaning. (77)

Once more, Chesnutt's intention is to "mine" the ideological positions of his contemporary white readers by forcing them to wonder about the validity of "visible" marks of blackness.

To note the effects that The House Behind the Cedars has on its readers, it is enough to read a few of the reviews the novel received at the time of publication.

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However, even previous works by Chesnutt have an unsettling effect on the readers. In 1898, Bookman printed a review for "The Wife of His Youth:"

> Perhaps the most tragic situation in fiction ...is that in which a mulatto finds himself with all the qualities of the white race in a position where he must suffer from the disadvantages of the coloured race. Mr. Chesnutt has for several years treated this subject...and has proved himself not only the most cultivated but also the most philosophical story writer his race has as yet produced; for, strange to relate, he is himself a coloured man of very light complexion. (McElrath 29)

The review is about a story that discusses interracial individuals of light complexion, and as such, it is revealing in terms of reader reaction. The racial bias of the anonymous reviewer is obvious in the first sentence. What, exactly, are "all the qualities of the white race"? Does only the white race posses them? Applying the comment to John and Rena, how can one tell which of their qualities are "white" and which are "black"? Moreover, the reviewer seems to be very anxious to place Chesnutt racially and to insinuate that it's "strange" that Chesnutt is black, but he has a "very light complexion," so probably all his qualities ("cultivated," "philosophical") come from his white blood.

The Book Buyer's Guide of 1900 remarks that Chesnutt's English is "gratifyingly smooth enough," this being the most pertinent fact to report about The House Behind the Cedars, in this reviewer's opinion. It is a racist comment that not only refers to the use of dialect in the novel—undoubtedly not difficult for Southern readers, since they once *owned* the people who spoke it—but to Chesnutt himself, as

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if the reviewer doubts his mastery of literary English because he is African American.[ii]

One other anonymous reviewer is also anxious to put Chesnutt "in his place," to define him as black in a show of condescension:

> He is one of the three most distinguished products of his race... [apart from Booker T. Washington and W. B. DuBois]. Mr. Howells commended the author and his work as promising a future for the colored race. (McElrath 68)

By the time Chesnutt published The House Behind the Cedars, there were far more than three "distinguished products of his race" in American culture and letters, and the future was already promising for African American intellectuals without the endorsement of Howells, which is reminiscent of the signatures of various white people that Phyllis Wheatley had to collect in order to be able to publish her poems.

The New York Times Saturday Review of Books and Art published a review of The House Behind the Cedars that chooses to focus on Rena's fate as an "unfortunate heroine" (McElrath 70). To concentrate on John's fate or his disappearance seemingly would prove to be too anxiety producing. The reviewer's claim that "the romance Mr. Charles W. Chesnutt has written is a singularly distressing one" can apply very well to the distress some white readers felt at the thought that there are people who are able to cross the color line and be racially invisible. The next claim that "Mr. Chesnutt has no liking for the man who is neither black nor white" (referring to Jeff Wain) is very important, since it actually expresses the dislike of the reviewer him/herself, but definitely not Chesnutt's. In The House Behind the Cedars, the author expresses his admiration for the courage that both John

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and Rena display in to crossing the color line. To add to that, Chesnutt himself was "neither black nor white," even though he identified himself as an African American. The reviewer's claim betrays only his/her own anxiety at the possibility of passing and it is his/her intention to put the reader at ease about miscegenation. Both Sylvia Lyons Render and Donald Petesch remark that the novel came under attack by Southern reviewers, who resented the subject matter and the way the plot is resolved (137, 143). Ken Johnson mentions one particularly negative review written by Katharine Glover for the Atlanta Journal (22 Dec. 1900). Glover finds the subject matter "revolting," and adds that "[Chesnutt] dwells on a subject of unpleasant interest" (116). These reviews take "the pulse" of the reading public—in this case, the white reading public—and give us today a view of what the reaction to the novel was at the time the novel was published.

The reviewer of The Nation states bluntly:

> A great many person of kind and generous sentiment believe that a white man breaking his engagement to marry a woman who has left him to discover by accident that she has a strain of negro blood, is morally and rationally justified and without dishonor. Such an opinion...may be rooted in natural antipathies and a belief that, ...for the good of society, such an engagement is better broken than kept. (182)

Not only does the reviewer think that an interracial marriage is not desirable, but he also naturalizes the racial hatred that white racists (the persons "of kind and generous sentiment") feel for blacks—a "natural" anitpathy. An interracial marriage is not desirable for the "good" of white society because it would devalue whiteness as

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property and it would ultimately destroy not only the myth of pure whiteness, but also the entire racist social arrangement that made white the superior race.

While himself of mixed ancestry, Chesnutt focused his attention on characters that challenged the American racial system and questioned its functionality and validity. White Southern writers who focused on biracial characters (Page, Dixon) have typically represented them as "a dangerous element among the freedmen, [as a] despoiler of white womanhood, the corruptor of white gentlemen, and the usurper of political power," according to Penelope Bullock (142). In one of his journal entries, Chesnutt reveals his opinion on the tragic mulatto stereotype as well:

> Judge Tourgée's cultivated white Negroes are always bewailing their fate and cursing the drop of black blood which "taints"—I hate the word, it implies corruption—their otherwise pure race. (Ames 153)

Chesnutt changed this image by portraying dignified and intelligent characters who are, indeed, dangerous to whites, since they can use their lack of "visible" marks of blackness as a tactic to escape white scrutiny without upsetting the system and attracting the attention of the power structures. They claim places to which they are not entitled and they suspend the rules and strategies established by the dominant culture by actualizing spaces where they can use their silent tactics and create a better life for themselves. But perhaps more than his characters' invisibility, racial mobility, and infiltration into white society, Chesnutt's telling of their story is unsettling to white readers, to the extent of making them question the validity of "pure" whiteness and of a binary racial system that is implacable, unforgiving, and bent on containing African Americans and people of mixed ancestry into one narrow racial category.

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The House Behind the Cedars does its share in "elevating" whites, educating them about the identity struggles of racially mixed individuals because even if John is at home in the white world, Rena cannot seem to find her place on either side of the color line. Telling the story of passing forces the reader to ask anxious and uncomfortable questions: If John's passing was so successful, how many "real" cases of passing are going on, and why is there no apparent way to contain the passers without making them visible as black? What if the racial classification system is unprepared to deal with people who do not seem to fit into the racial binary? Is whiteness really pure? If Chesnutt's readers asked themselves these questions, then the novel has fulfilled one of its author's aims: to "mine" the positions of the whites that seemed so stable and so unapproachable before, or, in Chesnutt's words, "I hope the book may raise some commotion" (Gartner 164).

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[i] During the 30's, interest in Chesnutt rose briefly, and focused mainly on him as a representative of early African American literature. He received acknowledgment during the 40's and 50's in surveys and histories of American literature, and 1952 saw the publication of Helen Chesnutt' s biography of her father, Charles Waddell Chesnutt—Pioneer of the Color Line. In the 60's and the 70's, critical interest in his life and works increased, and a number of studies appeared that addressed his life, his short fiction, and his non-fiction works. Critical analyses of The House Behind the Cedars are now numerous, and one of the first books entirely dedicated to Chesnutt is Sylvia Lyons Render's Charles W. Chesnutt, published in 1980. Rather than an in-depth study, it surveys the author's life and works, sharing short analyses of his themes, characters, settings, and style. The House Behind the Cedars is discussed in terms of these elements, but no special mention is made of types of passing and of how Chesnutt differentiates between

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his two characters from this point of view. Rena Walden is seen as "an admirable rather than a heroic figure," who "overshadows all of Chesnutt's other female characters" (78).

The same year saw the publication of William L. Andrews' The Literary Career of Charles W. Chesnutt, a comprehensive and in-depth study that offers a thorough analysis of The House Behind the Cedars. However, Andrews makes some points that are arguable, one of them being that John Walden comes back to Patesville with the intention of taking his sister with him as a governess for his son. I argue that John's reasons for re-crossing the color line are multiple and much more complex than his need to find adequate care for his motherless child—readily available to him as a rich "white" man in Wilmington.

One other point of contention is that Andrews reads certain plot elements as Chesnutt's concern to gain the (white) reader's sympathy. It is true that having his characters pass for white in the eyes of the reader and freeing Rena from the responsibility of telling Tryon about her origin bespeak a certain amount of concern and a willingness to make some concessions so that the book is successful with a white reading public, but I will argue that Andrews ignores Chesnutt's intention to write and educate the whites about how easily the color line can be crossed by biracial individuals.

Andrews also discusses John's character, and while I agree with most of the claims he makes, I will argue that John is not "raised 'black,'" as Andrews states, but that his intellectual background is "white," and his mother's idolatry of his dead white father, along with her undying respect for all things "white" are very important elements in the formation of his character and his choice to pass. These elements ultimately turn him into an identificatory passer, so they are crucial in my analysis.

Finally, Andrews' arguments that with Rena's story, The House Behind the Cedars "retreats into the sentimental byways of the novel of seduction" (166) and that Rena embodies the "lifeless ideality of a martyr to love and duty" are superficial and do not reflect Rena's complexity as a character (168). I will argue that even if Rena's story partly conforms to the stereotype of the tragic mulatta, to read it only as such means to ignore Chesnutt's critical stance against the racist system that forces biracial individuals to pass in order to find a better life.

Like Andrews, Charles Duncan ignores other readings of Rena's story except that of the tragic mulatta plot. However, in his work, The Absent Man: The Narrative Craft of Charles W. Chesnutt, he

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offers an excellent analysis of John Walden as a surprisingly subversive character—one who performs "an act of double passing, both textual and social" (15). He is refering, of course, to John's disappearing act from the second half of the novel, an act whose significance is crucial in my analysis. Duncan's work, however, is focused more on narrative strategies in Chesnutt's short fiction than on his novels, and as such, he does not discuss at length the significance of passing in The House Behind the Cedars.

Raymond Hedin sees the novel as a cautionary tale about the consequences of crossing into "white" territory—a reading that I will argue against in my analysis, since it only "explains" Rena's end, but not that of John. The power of the novel to challenge white racism is undermined, according to Eric Sundquist, by what he sees as Chesnutt's ambivalence toward passing. I will argue that Chesnutt finds passing totally justifiable, and that his ambivalence is directed at John, not at passing, for various complex reasons.

[ii] in McElrath 67.

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CHAPTER III

"They Wouldn't Know You from White:" The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man

> "My boy, you are by blood, by appearance, by education, and by tastes a white man. Now, why do you want to throw your life away amidst the poverty and ignorance, in the hopeless struggle, of the black people of the Unites States? ... This idea you have of making a Negro out of yourself is nothing more than a sentiment; and you do not realize the fearful import of what you intend to do. What kind of a Negro would you make now, especially in the South? ... I can imagine no more dissatisfied human being than an educated, cultured, and refined colored man in the United States." (834)

Similar to Judge Strait's advice to John Walden in Chesnutt's The House Behind the Cedars, the speech that the "millionaire friend" addresses to the ex-colored man in James Weldon Johnson's work refers to the experience of living as a black man in the United States during the first decade of the 20th century. Far away from the poverty, the ignorance, and the "hopeless struggle" that being a black man involve, the white "friend" is truly amazed at the idea that someone as "educated, cultured, and refined" as the ex-colored man would want to leave the wonderful experience of idly traveling through the world to return to discrimination, abuse, and lynching. However, and not surprisingly, the speech fails to convince the ex-colored man that a life spent in the vague position of valet/entertainer to a man who says he considers him his racial equal (even though he calls him "boy") is more acceptable than going back to the United States. Even though (part of) his blood, his appearance, his education, and his

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tastes make him a white man, as his companion argues, the ex-colored man feels the need to return to America, for reasons that are not quite clear to himself: a desire to help "his people," a selfish desire to become famous, or even—and most plausibly—the desire to reconcile himself with his ambiguous double identity.

The ex-colored man is surely one of the most fascinating figures in passing literature; two of the contributing factors to this fascination are his anonymity and the fact that the novel itself was published anonymously in 1912, *passing* for an actual autobiography. As Samira Kawash argues, "the text itself passes back and forth between the poles of truth and fiction, autobiography and novel," playing continuously with identities and perceptions and shifting them before the reader's eyes (60). Johnson himself discussed his desire to publish the novel anonymously:

> Most of the reviewers...accepted it as a human document. This was a tribute to the writing, for I had done the book with the intention of its being so taken. ... But I did get a certain pleasure out of anonymity, that no acknowledged book could have given me. ...I had a rarer experience, of being introduced to and talking with one man who tacitly admitted to those present that he was the author of the book. (238-9)

Johnson's mention of the pleasure anonymity gave him and his subtle irony in describing his experience of meeting somebody who pretended to be the author of his own novel seem to represent a more emotionally censored version of what his main character says about passing: "Many a night when I returned to my room after an enjoyable evening, I laughed heartily over what struck me as the capital joke I was playing" (855). In both cases, the emotion experienced seems to be the pleasure in knowing that somehow one has thwarted the reader's expectations of what an

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autobiography is supposed to be, while the other has distorted the image of how a black man is supposed to look and even act. In both cases, the notion of purity—purity of genre and purity of race—is shown to be tenuous at best. The Autobigraphy was reprinted in 1927 as a novel and Johnson was identified as its author, although by that time both his identity and the fictional nature of the work were known facts, especially in Harlem Renaissance circles.

As in Chesnutt's case, there are few significant critical works on Johnson until the 1970s, when Eugene Levy published James Weldon Johnson: Black Leader, Black Voice. It is a detailed biographical work that also contains some critical remarks on The Autobiography. However, since the focus is on Johnson's life, in his summary analysis of the novel, Levy equates its narrator with Johnson—a fact which sets Levy apart in the field of criticism on The Autobiography. To say that Johnson reveals "inadvertently" his own "sensitivity toward color," or, more bluntly put, racism, by having his hero "struck" by the beauty of light-skinned female students at Atlanta University is to miss much of the irony and sophistication of Johnson's writing (140).

Robert Fleming's James Weldon Johnson (1987) represents a comprehensive work, focused not only on Johnson's life and career, but also on his work. It is interesting that Fleming presents Johnson as a multifaceted personality—two of his chapters are entitled "Historian and Political Activist" and "Editor and Critic." By showing Johnson's multiple identities, Fleming is urging the reader to make the association with the multifaceted hero of The Autobiography. In the section

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dedicated to the novel, Fleming makes numerous valid arguments, perhaps with one exception: he argues that "the narrator views himself in romantic terms, as a tragic hero whose flaw is the black blood he inherited from his beloved mother" (33). While I agree that sometimes (especially when recounting his childhood), the narrator slips into a subtle (but nevertheless detectable) irony that indicates he *had* seen himself in rather romantic terms when he had been of that particular age, there is no indication that he holds the same view as an adult, not that he thinks himself "cursed" by his black blood throughout his life, with one notable exception: when he witnesses his white lover's reaction to his racial identity. I will argue that the ex-colored man is in no way a tragic mulatto, nor does he see himself as one.

One other important and comprehensive study of Johnson's work is Kenneth M. Price and Lawrence J. Oliver's Critical Essays on James Weldon Johnson. Published in 1997, the collection contains a series of articles on all aspects of Johnson's work, from contemporary reviews to critical analyses of his novel, his poetry, and his articles. The section on The Autobiography is well represented by critics such as Houston Baker, Robert B. Stepto, Joseph K. Skerret, and Valerie Smith. All these readings belong to a vocal camp of criticism that strongly argues that passing should be seen as a betrayal of one's race. One argument that Baker makes and that I will argue against, is that the narrator of The Autobiography "is forced to take the lesser course: he joins the vast white American fraternity that considers money-making the acme of human virtue" (37). Baker definitely considers the ex-colored man to be a race traitor. He also reads the ending of the novel literally,

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as the ex-colored man selling out his "race" and becoming white in order merely to make money. No mention of his children or of their safety is made in his argument, and that needs to be taken into account when discussing the reasons for the choices he makes in the end.

In the same vein, Stepto discusses what he sees as a succession of "devastating act[s] of assault upon a considerable portion of his heritage," starting with his boyhood prank of digging up the bottles in his mother's yard, continuing with his attempts to render old black songs in "classical" form, and ending with the most important "assault" of all, his crossing of the color line (48). Stepto argues that every transgression or "assault" on the protagonist's heritage was followed by a punishment—spanking in the case of the bottles and the lynching in the case of the songs. If this is true, then it seems really inexplicable that the most important transgression of all—that of passing and "betraying" his race—is not punished at all. This notion of race betrayal begs the question: what is the "true" identity of a biracial individual?—since, as Kawash argues, "the assumption that passing for white conceals or obscures a true black identity has generally been the basis for reading passing novels" (62). But what is this "true" black identity that the critics regard as the better alternative to passing? Is it to accept the categorization imposed by whites? Is it to accept a fixed identity that would actually perpetuate the racial/racist system? In the case of the ex-colored man, the reading of passing as a betrayal of a "true" black identity is very problematic. The hero does not have a "true" black identity to be obscured by his passing. He is brought up as a white boy, and he finds out

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relatively late in his childhood that he is legally black, at a time when the only action he can take is to try to learn what "black" is from books.

In her analysis of the novel's ending, Smith reaches the conclusion that "the narrator denies his race, a choice that, by extension, becomes linked inextricably to his artistic failure" and to race betrayal (100). Both Pisiak and Goellnicht agree with Smith when they discuss passing in the novel. Pisiak sees his passing as a "consequence of his own silence and passivity" (109), while Goellnicht sees his choices as leading to "perverse blindness, voluntary invisibility, and self-enslavement" (24-5). It is interesting that most critics warn against the unreliability of the narrator, yet they all interpret his actions literally. I will argue against these claims, proving that the ex-colored man tries—sometimes even subconsciously—to reconcile his double racial identity, and that his intention of creating a musical hybrid, for example, is nothing more than an attempt at finding who he really is.

Discussing the ex-colored man as an identificatory passer will support the counterclaims I am making. Identificatory passing involves a social and psychological identification with white ideology; the passer embraces the identity of a white man/woman, along with its accompanying ideology. In some cases, the hero is born into or educated in the spirit of white ideology, so the choice was not his/hers from the beginning, as is the case for Johnson's narrator. At the same time—and here is where the argument and the concepts become more complicated—passing is not a denial of one's "true" race, especially since the hero is biracial. There is no one "true" race to betray; nor is there any passivity involved in his struggle to escape

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classifications. At first glance, it seems that the two claims—the narrator being an identificatory passer and not a "race" traitor—contradict each other. The difficulty arises from the fact that whiteness is simultaneously one of the sides of the constraining binary that the narrator is trying to escape, *and* it represents freedom from classification and from labeling. Just as passing as a tactic has been known to challenge and to reinforce racial categories at the same time, the complexity of whiteness renders the analysis difficult. The protagonist seems to be caught in a double bind: even though he tries to escape classification, he nevertheless appears to choose to be classified after all (as white), when he crosses the color line. However, the very same complexity of whiteness allows us (and the protagonist!) to regard it as *absence* of classification and as granting a freedom he would not have if he were on the black side of the color line. As Sterling L. Bland claims, "whiteness has the privilege of not being classified at all, since whiteness is considered a point of reference or of origin, used to define and classify 'the others'" (141).

So one way to resist classification is not to advertise his racial makeup and let people "read" him in the way they want (the underlying meaning being, of course, that they will think he is white, since he "looks" white). Moreover, it turns out that being on the black side of the color line would not give the narrator the freedom to try to reconcile his two racial identities; in fact, being on the black side of the color line would not grant him *any* freedom at all, so he chooses the side that allows him to express his mixed racial heritage in other ways than openly declaring it. According to de Certeau's model, *place* is a location under the control of the dominant culture, with

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a firmly set grid of rules for all its users. In contrast, *space* is unregulated. Rules do not apply. Space is temporary, and created within *places* by members of subordinate cultures, in order to cope with the strategies that dominant culture has in place. Actualizing a *space* is a *tactic* of survival within the existing power structures that offers the subaltern more freedom: "The space of a tactic is the space of the other. Thus it must play on and with a terrain imposed on it and organized by the law of a foreign power. It is a maneuver 'within the enemy's field of vision'...and within enemy territory" (37). For the ex-colored man, passing is a way to cope with life under an oppressive power structure that gives him more freedom from classification and allows him to express (and explore) his racial heritage through writing: "I know that in writing these pages I am divulging the great secret of my life [and]...I am playing with fire..." says the narrator in the beginning of his account (777). The existing power structures are not overturned by this action, but they are weakened, since publishing the account of passing is tantamount to "playing with fire." The account and the very existence of the ex-colored man are a challenge to the racist system and to the myth of white purity—a fact that becomes obvious when examining the reviews that The Autobiography received.

From the fictional act of anonymously writing one's own story of passing to the actual writing and publishing of The Autobiography by Johnson, there is an unmistakable sense of progression in the way of dealing with the racial/racist system in America: the fictional narrator's anonymity still allows him to work *within* the system, but Johnson's act of publishing his novel under his name represents an open

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challenge to racist social arrangements, since the novel is meant to make white readership interrogate their own assumption about the racial binary, the permeability of the color line, and the myth of pure whiteness.

Most of the critics of The Autobiography discuss passing only as a cowardly act. In my view, as suggested in my reading of The House Behind the Cedars, passing is a tactic for beating the enemy at its own game and a way to cope with the relentless attempts at containment on the part of the system. In The Autobiography, passing is a way to achieve anonymity, freedom, and invisibility from the white gaze that always threatens to objectify, classify, and contain. As was the case with John Walden, the ex-colored man *is* dangerous being invisible and anonymous—infiltrating white society while married to a white woman. He represents, like John Walden, white supremacist nightmares come true.

The ex-colored man is an identificatory passer. To be an identificatory passer means to identify with white ideology, and Johnson's narrator seems to be the perfect candidate to exemplify this type of passing. Like John Walden, he is the illegitimate son of a wealthy white Southerner and a black maid. He grows up in another "house behind the cedars" where his father "settled" his "colored" mistress and visits her periodically. The narrator's hazy childhood recollections give Johnson the opportunity to use his fine irony when describing the ex-colored man's father. The hero remembers his white father in terms of objects (so now it is the non-white character who actually has a chance to objectify a white man):

> I remember that his shoes or boots were always shiny, and that he wore a gold chain and a great gold watch... My

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> admiration was almost equally divided between the watch and chain and the shoes. (779)

However, the child is treated like a servant, since his duty is to bring his father's slippers and put his shoes away, and his father gives him a coin every time he performs his duty. The reader's opinion is reinforced by the parting gift that the father gives to his son: a ten-dollar gold piece in which he has drilled a hole so the child can hang it around his neck. It is one of what Stepto calls the "bondage images" in the book: the narrator states that he still has the coin, although he still wishes that it hadn't been drilled (49). The significance of the drilled coin has been an object of contention among critics, but most agree that it is the ex-colored man's first lesson in materialism. [i] However, this view ignores the fact that *his mother* is the one who taught him to save the coins his father gave him for his dutiful services. It is perhaps more accurate to say that lessons in materialism and interest in money have been cultivated in the child by both parents, although the father is the one who gives him the flawed coin. The significance of the flawed coin resembles that of his racial inheritance: the father gave him his white blood as his inheritance; however, the ex-colored man has to learn that he is not entirely white, that his whiteness is "flawed," since his mother is black. Just as he cannot use the imperfect coin, he cannot use his whiteness either, as property inherited from his father, because it is not perfect, or "pure;" it does not conform to the requirements of white purity.

When it comes to the discussion of his racial markers or their absence, the famous mirror scene has been extensively analyzed by critics as well, but what really

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matters for the purpose of this analysis is the absence of black racial markers which later will enable him to pass:

> I noticed the ivory whiteness of my skin, the beauty of my mouth, the size and liquid darkness of my eyes, and how the long, black lashes that fringed them produced an effect that was strangely fascinating even to me. I noticed the softness and glossiness of my dark hair that fell in waves over my temples, making my forehead appear whiter than it really was. (784)

The preponderance of adjectives expressing whiteness and darkness is obvious, and—narcissism aside—the hero seems to perceive himself as a mix of contrasts. This moment of "specular identification" comes after he is told he is "colored" at school (Kawash 65). Valerie Smith sees the scene as the hero's inability to accept his racial identity, since he seems to present himself "as he wishes to be seen" (95-6). It is true that the reader has no way of knowing whether the boy's perception is accurate—that is, if he "looks" white, but how else could he have passed for so many years had he had any markers of blackness? What the reader witnesses here is another argument in favor of the narrator being ideologically white already: the fact that his first reaction was to go to the mirror and search for marks of blackness tells the reader that the ex-colored man was taught to *see* race in "white" terms and in visual terms, that is, to read the black body as a text, looking for telltale marks that would give away the body's racial identity. In this case, he is willing to objectify himself, to turn his body into a text, to look at himself with "white" eyes in order to find the marks of race.

His intellectual background also accounts for the ex-colored man's "whiteness:" he reads Bunyan, Parley, Grimm, Walter Scott, and his heroes are King

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David and Robert the Bruce, at least before he finds out he is not white. Like Chesnutt's John Walden, the ex-colored man grows up with a Eurocentric intellectual background that he thinks of diversifying only after he is told that he is not white. There are other factors that may have contributed to his confusion. His mother's racial identity is slowly revealed by the narrator, but becomes plain only after the mirror episode, when he actually looks at his mother and reads her as black:

> I had thought of her in a childish way only as the most beautiful woman on earth; now I looked at her searching for defects. I could see that her skin was almost brown, that her hair was not so soft as mine, and that she did differ in some way from the other ladies who came to the house...(784)

Even though this scene seems quite different from the mirror scene, the intentions of the viewer in the scene are the same: to identify marks of blackness, and—as a reaction to being classified as black—to (dis)place his physical blackness onto his mother. Even though he is not passing at the moment, but grappling with the effects of the news he has just received, the narrator makes an unconscious choice for whiteness as lack of characterization and as original (and superior) term of comparison. He clearly compares himself to his mother and finds her lacking: "her hair was not so soft as mine." The ex-colored man subjects his mother to the same scrutiny as he did himself in the mirror. He uses his learned perception of physical blackness and reads her as a text; his "white"-trained eyes find her different from himself and from the white women who were his mother's customers. In other words, the white world has taught him the meaning of racial difference in visual terms.

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The moment he learns that he is "colored" is reminiscent of DuBois's fall into race and of John Walden's experience. All three boys learn about their race in school from a white teacher or classmate. In the case of the ex-colored man, the school principal comes into the classroom one day and asks the white students to stand up. When he obeys, the ex-colored man is told to remain seated. The hero learns that he is different in a traumatic episode that shatters his world. The separation between races is done neatly, in front of his confused eyes, and he somehow thinks that there have to be some defects that made him different, so when he does not find any on his own face, he looks for them on his mother. Why is this episode so traumatic for him? Fleming argues that even before his racial identity is revealed to him, the ex-colored man is able to notice the effects of racial discrimination in his school (24). It is interesting that his own "white" frame of thinking makes him give one of the black boys in school a racist nickname: "Shiny." He also notices that even though Shiny is the best student, "he was in some way looked down upon" (782). The other black students are also discriminated against, taunted with racist rhymes and slurs, and attacked by the white students. The hero actually participates in one of these attacks, along with the white children. Even though his mother scolds him for using the word "nigger" and admonishes him to stop bothering the black children at school, it seems that she never discusses his racial identity, leaving him in the dark as to who he is. She also owns the books that form his intellectual background, and there is also the narrator's early childhood memory of his mother scrubbing him "until [his] skin ached" when she was giving him a bath (778). While Fleming argues that these

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actions of his mother's are proof of the fact the "she accepts the white world's value system, and thus helps to create the confused marginal being that her son becomes," he also states that the ex-colored man seems to resent his mother for the "tainted" blood in his veins, discussing the lie that the hero concocts about his mother dying (32). One alternative reading to Fleming's is that his mother's actions can be regarded as overprotective. She knows what it means to be a black individual in a racist society, since she is barred from marrying the (white) man she loves, so she is trying to shield her son from the taint of racism. Accepting the white world's value system does not mean that she necessarily agrees with it. There is no indication in Johnson's text that the narrator resents his mother for his blackness. The lie he tells his teacher could be just a lie, or even if he resents his mother, it is more likely that he does so out of jealousy; seeing his mother's joyous reaction when his father pays them a visit would be enough to make a young boy resentful.

All these elements make the ex-colored man an identificatory passer. The main difference between him and John Walden is that Walden had to learn how to be white, while the ex-colored man has to learn how to be black, or what it means to be black. The narrator finds out about his physical blackness and realizes that he has to accept it. He also realizes that he needs to acquire spiritual and cultural blackness in order to fully acknowledge his African American heritage, but his Eurocentric frame of mind makes it difficult to learn how to be black. Thus, the ex-colored man turns to books in order to try to understand blackness. Johnson ironically emphasizes that the first book he reads to get "a perspective of the life [he] was entering" is Uncle Tom's

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Cabin (793). The disclosure of his "colored" racial identity has a traumatic effect on the hero:

> I did indeed pass into another world. From that time I looked on through other eyes, my thoughts were colored, my words dictated, my actions limited by one dominating, all-pervading idea which constantly increased in force and weight until I finally realized in it a great, tangible fact.
>
> And this is the dwarfing, warping, distorting influence which operates upon each and every colored man in the United States. He is forced to take his outlook on all things, not from the viewpoint of a citizen, or a man, or even a human being but from the viewpoint of a *colored* man. (785)

As other critics point out, the ex-colored man's views on race coincide with DuBois's double consciousness: racial categories imposed on African Americans force them to view the world in a different way, or through another set of eyes. Having learned the "white" outlook on the world, the hero discovers that he has to learn the "colored" one as well, and that he is forced to adopt it. He has to learn about the "freemasonry" of the black race, which compels black people to hide their true thoughts and emotions and to adopt the mask that the dominant culture wants them to wear (785). Wearing a mask has become a survival tactic for African Americans also, a way to manipulate space within the system. The changes that the hero goes through show the reader that he is learning to do both. Johnson, like Chesnutt, blames the racist system for the development of this necessary tactic.

After he finds out that he is not white, the ex-colored man rebels against racial classification. It is interesting that before he found out about his racial makeup, the protagonist did not think about race and racial classification, since whiteness also

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means the absence of classification. In fact, it never occurs to him to define himself racially until *after* he finds out that he is part black. Although he says he is not able to distinguish any difference between his white classmates and himself, the narrator notices that some of them "had evidently received instructions at home" not to play with him any longer, and thus they create that difference. When it comes to his black classmates, however, the narrator clearly states that he "had a very strong aversion to being classed with them" (785-6). His aversion can be arguably read in different ways, but as a (future) passer, his aversion is not directed at the classmates, but at "being classed," at being forced into a category that is too narrow to contain him. At first sight, it seems that he desires to be white and that in doing so, the ex-colored man helps to reinforce the racial system. But if he wanted to be white, why would he try to learn what it means to be black? What the protagonist wants at this point in his life is not to *be* white, but *not to be* contained by any category that would fail to account for his complex identity. It is the system that does not give him any other choice apart from the binary. One important image that gives the reader a glimpse into how it feels to be categorized is the one of the mule that the hero comes across in Atlanta, sunk in the mud and drowning. The choice of animal cannot be arbitrary, since the offensive term "mulatto" itself comes from "mule." If the reader were to pinpoint a moment of the ex-colored man's rebellion against racial classification, it is when he decides to isolate himself from both races, although he still stays friends with Red and he and Shiny are more than acquaintances, albeit not close friends. Staying in touch with both boys also represents the first attempt he makes to reconcile his dual

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racial identity somehow, even though he admits that his closer connection remains with the white race, since this is how he was brought up.

What is the ex-colored man's attitude toward passing? With the exception of the beginning and the end of his account, the narrator does not discuss passing directly in the novel, but it is clear that he is passing on more than one occasion, and this is how he is able to overhear a discussion on race while traveling to Atlanta. The narrator confesses that life with "the millionaire" had accustomed him to luxury, so he travels in a Pullman and he shares the smoking compartment with some white men who–inevitably—start arguing about "the race question." In de Certeau's terms, the compartment itself is a *place*, since it belongs to the whites and it has white rules that have to be obeyed. However, by simply taking a seat that he is not legally allowed to take, the ex-colored man creates his own *space* where his *tactics* of beating the system have temporarily suspended the *strategies* that the racist system uses in order to control and contain people like him—the strategies that work to keep people like him out of there and in his own (white-created) *place*. It is ironic that passing—his tactic—enables him to observe these strategies at work in the discussion on race that he overhears. The argument our hero witnesses is related with the dispassionate care of an observer, but at the end, he confesses that the racist arguments that one of the men brought into the discussion "fell upon [him] like a chill" (842).

The Pullman episode is in direct contrast to his first youthful adventure in Atlanta: after his money is stolen, he finds himself forced to accept a ride to Jacksonville in a Pullman porter's closet. The experience is one he cannot forget:

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> I spent twelve hours doubled up in the porter's basket for soiled linen, not being able to straighten up...The air was hot and suffocating and the smell of damp towels and used linen was sickening. At each lurch of the car...I was bumped and bruised against the narrow walls of my narrow compartment. (802)

Using the metaphor of a porter's closet, the narrator describes how any "colored" person feels in America: forced to fit into a narrow and bruising compartment that necessarily has to contain all his/her movements, intentions, emotions, and aspirations. In de Certeau's terms, as opposed to Rena Walden's ship cabin, which is a *place* that she transforms into a *space*, the porter's closet is obviously a *place* that cannot be transformed. The ex-colored man is feeling exactly the way he is supposed to feel as a "colored" man in a *place*—that he is forced into it; that he has to stay in it and he cannot leave it without enduring severe consequences. The narrator opposes the two scenes—the Pullman (passing) argument scene and the Pullman (not passing) porter closet trip, in order to emphasize that passing is to be preferred over the suffocating feeling that forced racial classification gives him. It is clear that in between these two scenes, the hero has weighed the pros and cons of passing and has found passing to be desirable. He develops it as a tactic that will give him a greater measure of individual freedom without overturning the existing power relations. The juxtaposition also indicates to those who embrace the "race traitor" theory that at this point the white side of the color line simply offers more freedom to the narrator to explore—paradoxically—his racial makeup by writing his own story of racial quest and passing. A man classified as black but declaring himself "half white" would find himself lynched in no time, whereas a white man who is (covertly) exploring

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possibilities to reconcile his two racial identities has the freedom to do so. As the lynching he later witnesses proves, the black side of the color line does not offer the protagonist the possibility to embrace his biracial identity—covertly or not—while the white side allows him to find ways to work within the system.

This is partially why the hero struggles to "reconcile the knowledge of being black with the feeling of being black which he does not possess" (Kawash 64). Even though the tone of the narrator does not betray any of these internal struggles, there are certain exterior manifestations of his identity quest, of which the most important one is what he wants to do with African American music:

> I sat amazed. I had been turning classic music into ragtime, a comparatively easy task; and this man had taken ragtime and made it classic. The thought came across me like a flash—It can be done, why can't I do it? From that moment my mind was made up. I clearly saw the way of carrying out the ambition I had formed when a boy. (833)

The narrator is not clear on what exactly that boyhood ambition was: to become a famous musician or to become "a great colored man, to reflect credit on the race and gain fame," or maybe both (795). What is clear in his intention however, is that he desperately wants to reconcile his two racial identities, black and white, and he tries to do so by combining ragtime with what he calls "classical" music. His intention is not at all one of "assault" on his inheritance; it is a result of being forced into a narrow category out of which he wants to escape somehow. At this point in the story, he wants to be *both* black and white, but on his own terms. According to Boeckmann,

> The narrator realizes that the themes of black music—its racial soul—are not linked in any fundamental way to the musical body that contains them. In effect, the narrator has

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> discovered a way to free the character from the body it is assumed to inhabit. (198-99)

So the ex-colored man has realized that *his* soul is not fundamentally linked to a *black body*, in the way in which white dominant culture would want him to believe. He has found a way to reconcile what at the outset seemed to be "two warring ideals in one ... body," as DuBois puts it (615). In essence, the ex-colored man seems to have found a way out of the conundrum of double consciousness.

Unfortunately, the lesson that actually there is no way out of this conundrum and that it is impossible to reconcile his whiteness with his blackness in a racist regime comes in the form of a brutal lynching that he witnesses. Since at the time he had made the decision to express his hybridity though music the ex-colored man was willing to embrace his identity as a black man, his reaction to the lynching is strong and immediate:

> A great wave of shame and humiliation swept over me. Shame that I belonged to a race that could be so dealt with; and shame for my country, that it, the great example of democracy to the world, should be the only civilized, if not the only state on earth, where a human being would be burned alive. (851)

It is now that he decides to choose the side that frees him from labeling of any kind and from violence; in doing so, he (as a legally black man) rejects the classification that was imposed on him by the dominant culture; instead, he takes up a space that is forbidden, putting himself in the same danger as the man who was just lynched because he did not stay "in his place." As Boeckmann argues, "It is not surprising, then, that the narrator renounces his musical ambitions (and his race) when he is

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forced to reconnect blackness to the black body" (199). The narrator receives yet another confirmation of what it means to be a black man in America: not only is it a narrowing experience—this forced classification and placement on a Procrustean bed—but it is also fraught with danger for those who do not conform to the rigid and unfair rules that the system has in place. The lynching he witnesses forces him to see the futility of his endeavor—as a "black" man—to find an identity through artistic expression that would encompass both his bloodlines because he will never be regarded or accepted as such by whites. He realizes that he has to make a choice—not to accept classification passively into the "black" category. Therefore, his choice is made:

> I finally made up my mind that I would neither disclaim the black race nor claim the white race; but that I would change my name, raise a mustache, and let the world take me for what it would; that it was not necessary for me to go about with a label of inferiority pasted across my forehead. (852)

The narrator clearly states that he does *not* disclaim the black race and that he will not claim the white race either. However, he knows from the mirror scene that he lacks black racial markers, so he realizes that white people would not question his presence among them. Whiteness appears here as a solution to his dilemma, since it is regarded as absence of classification. In deploying his tactics to work around the strategies imposed by the system, the narrator is not passive, as some critics argue; on the contrary, he takes active steps to change his identity, by changing his name and trying to alter his physical appearance. He also refuses to accept the "label of inferiority" that being black in America entails. The ex-colored man's decision to

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pass permanently is thus made only after he witnesses the lynching. It is the system that forces him to make a choice in terms of race, and despite all his previous attempts, he makes the choice that is safest for him. He has seen what happens to black men who do not stay "in their place," i.e. the place they are designated at birth by virtue of their blood, so even though he realizes that his choice will—in a way—maintain the classification he has fought against, he does so in order to survive. It is true that most black people—including those of mixed race—are not lynched, but it is also true that most do not find themselves in the narrator's situation—trying to escape classification and to find a way out of the bind of double consciousness.

Part of his quest is dedicated to finding his own identity, sorely tested by a system that deals only in binaries. The ex-colored man is not, *can*not, be a person who fits in the binaries that the white dominant culture imposes; he needs to be in between, and he tries to do just that and to reconcile his two races. Seen from this perspective, some critics argue that passing itself is a solution to this identity struggle. Samira Kawash claims that because the passing narrative in general refers to "the *failure* of blackness or whiteness to provide the grounds for a stable, coherent identity," in The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man, passing is seen "not as a deviation from the 'truth' of the social identity of the race but as the only way in which a subject can take up a position of identity in terms of race" (63, 70). As argued before, for the ex-colored man, there is no "true" social identity that would encompass the complexity of his racial identity. As a black subject, he is automatically classified as a subaltern, and that would erase his white identity. Being

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brought up white, this erasure is practically impossible for the narrator. Passing still remains one way in which he can try to establish a coherent identity because it allows him to "be" white, but also to covertly acknowledge his black side by writing his story anonymously. Thus, since life in a binary system would force him to make a choice, and since he does not want to accept the classification imposed by the dominant culture, the ex-colored man's only choice remains either black or white. That is why he chooses to pass, and herein lies the complexity of passing: that it allows him to cross the color line and break racial laws, but it also reinforces the color line because the passer chooses to "be" white, as whiteness is also one part of the racial binary.

Neil Brooks belongs to the same critical camp as Kawash. He does not see passing as a betrayal, but as a

> physical manifestation of a psychological quest to understand oneself in a society where to be black was often not to have one consistent self, but to have a double self—as described by DuBois and others—or to have a multiplicity of selves as does Johnson's narrator. (2)

Having multiple "selves" is another way to work within the system. Passing can be seen as a quest for one's identity in a world where people are forced into the narrow category of "black," and also in a world where a lot of blacks had to develop multiple selves in order to cope with injustice. Being black in America does not only mean possessing a double consciousness, but also sometimes having to pass *socially* (not *racially*) in order to survive. The ex-colored man tells the story of the minstrel actor who was a regular of the "Club" and who always recited Shakespeare when he was

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asked to entertain—a man who made people laugh at blacks and who wanted to be a tragedian. The narrator actually concludes that "after all he did play a part in a tragedy," since he was forever doomed to play in minstrel shows because nobody wanted to see a black tragedian on stage (819). Similarly, after the disastrous attempt to understand himself by reconciling his two races, the ex-colored man is forced to find a way out of the box where he is forced by the system, so he does that by choosing to pass.

His failure as a musician does not come from rejecting his black heritage, as Smith argues, but from the impossibility of being *both* black and white—something the system does not allow him to be if he "remains" black. Witnessing the lynching makes him understand that he cannot be both *and* stay on the black side of the color line. This seems to be origin of the sense of failure that pervades the ending of the novel:

> My love for my children makes me glad that I am what I am and keeps me from desiring to be otherwise; and yet, when I sometimes open a little box in which I still keep my fast yellowing manuscripts, the only tangible remnants of a vanished dream, a dead ambition, a sacrificed talent, I cannot repress the thought that, after all, I have chosen the lesser part, that I have sold my birthright for a mess of pottage. (861)

The critics who see his passing as a "betrayal" of his race have also argued that the narrator of this story is highly unreliable, but at the same time, they all choose to believe that the emotions he expresses at the end are genuine. What they seem to overlook is the fact that a race traitor would *not* choose to keep his manuscripts and go over them again and again (the use of "sometimes" and of the present tense

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indicate this is a habitual, repeated action). A race traitor would *not* have the thoughts that the ex-colored man has in the end, but he would stay in the white world, enjoying the position he had achieved, never looking back, never having regrets. In the case of Johnson's hero, no matter how white-identified he is—and his background accounts for that—he still looks back and feels unhappy because he did not manage to find his full identity by reconciling his two races in his music. He is forced to keep one identity secret because it is unsafe, and that is what gives him the feeling of failure in the end. Without his full identity, he cannot be the musician he wants to be, so his artistic failure is actually connected to the impossibility of the ex-colored man living openly as a biracial person, since, as such, he would have been a threat to the system. The failure to live openly as a biracial person accounts for the failure to produce bi-cultural music as well—which was his chosen way of acknowledging his hybridity. Going over his manuscripts—"the only tarnished remnants of a vanished dream"—points out to the reader that Johnson's hero cannot (and will not) abandon his black heritage, but it also alludes to the narrator's ambivalence and doubts about the road he has chosen (861). However, the manuscripts themselves are "tarnished" by the memory of the lynching he had witnessed—the pivotal event in his life that made him realize the futility of his dream: living as an openly biracial man in America was dangerous, if not impossible; creating as an openly biracial artist in America was equally so.

Even so, the ex-colored man represents a substantial threat to the racial system. In Chesnutt's The House Behind the Cedars, John Walden performs the most

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subversive act of his life when he disappears entirely from the novel. His invisibility and anonymity are the weapons he uses in his private war against the system. In a similar fashion, the ex-colored man deploys a set of tactics to escape the relentless racism that life as a black man would make him experience. Living in a country where open aggression against the powerful would bring him death (as is confirmed by the lynching he witnesses), one way to work within the system and eschew its rules is to infiltrate the enemy lines and to pretend he is one of them. His best weapon is his lack of racial markers which he notices in the mirror scene. Like John and Rena Walden, the ex-colored man uses his racial ambiguity to foster the belief that he is white, and therefore—paradoxically—above classifications. He becomes invisible to the whites who cannot see him as black any longer, and thus cannot contain him.

From the moment he realizes that he "looks" white, the ex-colored man realizes as well that he can break the rules that kept him chained. Breaking the racial rules itself constitutes an act of rebellion, as Maurice O'Sullivan argues: "he is a rebel violating the most sacred taboos of his time..." (62). To this act he adds his anonymity and the measures he takes to keep secret other names in his story: "I shall not mention the name of the town, because there are people still living there who could be connected with this narrative" (778). His actions bespeak an effort to stay under the cover of that anonymity that gives him safety, the satisfaction that he has bypassed the rules, and a greater degree of personal freedom than living as a black

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man would entail. Even though he does not agree with passing and with the subversiveness it entails, Goellnicht admits that the ex-colored man's

> continued passing, with its insistence on the importance of mimicry and his refusal to name himself, becomes an even more threatening position to white society because that society cannot identify and safely control him. He remains an unknown and thus a continually potential subversive force. (28)

Apart from invisibility and anonymity, the ex-colored man uses other ways to thwart dominant structures. In the beginning of his narrative, he discusses his desire to play a prank on society:

> I know that I am playing with fire, and I feel the thrill which accompanies that most fascinating pastime; and, back of it all, I think I find a sort of savage and diabolical desire to gather up all the little tragedies of my life and turn them into a practical joke on society. (778)

The use of qualifiers such as "savage" and "diabolical" indicate without a doubt that not only does he know exactly what he is doing—tricking the system from within—but that he feels immense pleasure doing it. As Giulia Fabi remarks, the joke he is playing "turns into a continued threat to the group identity of the whites among whom he prospers undetected" (99). But perhaps the group identity and the purity of the white race are threatened most by his children, whose anonymity he guards religiously:

> I no longer have the same fear for myself of my secret's being found out, for since my wife's death I have gradually dropped out of social life; but there is nothing I would not suffer to keep the brand from being placed upon them. (860)

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He marries a white woman and he fathers children who are not white, but are anonymously integrated into white society, free to procreate and to further tarnish the "purity" of white blood. The ex-colored man's children are thus the embodiment of white anxiety and—like John Walden's son—help refute the myth of white purity. Their anonymity represents a real threat to the system and to the white readers of Johnson's novel.

But perhaps the most anxiety-producing act for whites that James Weldon Johnson enacts is writing the story itself—a sophisticated, ironic treatment of racial passing that seems more incendiary because it was initially published as an autobiography—a fact which prompted its readers to believe it was a true story. As Goellnicht argues,

> Passing, like parody, threatens to dismantle the entire structure of apartheid, "the law of genre" and of genetics; but, paradoxically, it can do so effectively only by revealing itself and thus proving the absurdity of the boundaries imposed by the dominant culture. (28)

The real subversiveness of passing is revealed either when the passer is found out (as Rena is in Chesnutt's House Behind the Cedars), or when the story of passing is written and published. The reaction of the white reading public and the effect the novel had on them can be inferred from the reviews the book received. Johnson himself notes in an editorial that the reviews that appeared especially in Southern newspapers were negative, claiming the implausibility of the plot. [ii] The Nashville Tennessean accused the novel of being "an insult to southern womanhood" and the passing theme implausible, since "once a negro, always a negro."[iii] The "insult to

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southern womanhood" refers to Johnson's portrayal of the narrator's wife—a white woman who marries a "black" man and has children with him. The novelist's idea is incendiary for white Southern men who fought for the myth of the pure white blood as well as for the control of its means of production—white women. The passing theme is regarded as implausible because of the deep-seated white belief in the inferiority of African Americans. As Boeckmann argues, the belief was that when the physical characteristics failed to account for an individual's racial identity, the essence of race was located in his character (4). The much-used phrase "once a negro, always a negro" implies that there are character flaws inherent to African Americans—flaws that will inevitably come to light and ultimately "out" any passer.

The New York Times reviewer seems to have had some problems accepting the book as it was published, asserting that "Nevertheless, it is necessary to consider the possibility that it may be merely the product of some whimsical imagination." [iv] Why is it "necessary" to consider that the book might be fictional? The novel was published anonymously as a "true" autobiography, and at that time, nobody had any reasons to doubt its authenticity, except perhaps in an attack of anxiety that denies even the possibility of an anonymous passer into white society. The same review discusses how the narrator "witnessed the burning alive of a brutal negro" (19). Since the novel offers no indication of why the black man was lynched, the reviewer's inference that he was "brutal" suggests an attempt to find a justification for the lynching itself.

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In the same vein, a purportedly "scientific" volume published in 1915—three years *after* The Autobiography—written by Maurice Evans and entitled Black and White in the Southern States, concludes, after the "scrupulous " study of a "body of data," that maybe about a dozen people passed racially in the North, while in the South "I have never heard of such a thing nor do I believe it ever happens" (185). This comes after Chesnutt's House Behind the Cedars, after the Crafts' narrative, after The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man, and after the publication of other novels or narratives—some fictional, and some true—that discuss racial passing. Acknowledging the possibility of passing creates doubts regarding the purity of white blood and the efficacy of the racial system itself to detect, control, and contain African Americans. Evans's "scientific" argument is meant to appease white racial anxiety and to reassure the white readership that passing is not possible. However, his account runs counter numerous newspaper announcements—dating back to slavery times—that advertised runaway slaves. Made by the white slave owners, they openly acknowledged the possibility that the escaped slaves may be passing for white.[v] Evans's book is also contradicted by the content of many state laws passed in order to fix race, to make it immutable, to define it in order to secure whiteness and to stop passing. [vi] Denial (and the attempt to regard black men as "brutal" inferiors) seems to be the response that white readership offers to the story of passing.

Johnson's novel is revolutionary not only because it discusses an issue that was more or less taboo in white society, but also because it is subversive of the autobiographical genre itself. Discussing genre in general, Derrida notes:

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> As soon as the word "genre" is sounded...a limit is drawn. And when a limit is established, norms and interdictions are not far behind. ... Thus, as soon as genre announces itself, one must respect a norm, one must not cross a line of demarcation, one must not risk impurity, anomaly or monstrosity. (203-04)

Derrida's discussion of the purity of genre is applicable to race. Substituting the word "race" for the word "genre" in Derrida's analysis would lead us to the essence of the racist system that the ex-colored man wants to avoid at all cost: "as soon as the word ["race"] is sounded, a limit is drawn. And when a limit is established, norms and interdictions are not far behind...one must not cross a line of demarcation, one must not risk impurity..." According to the racial system, the ex-colored man is an anomaly, an impurity, even a monstrosity that has to be removed and/or contained, which is something he fights. In a similar way, Johnson wants to avoid genre purity, so he passes his text off as an autobiography and he also parodies the slave narrative, which, according to Goellnicht, "appealed to the great desire in liberal Northern whites to 'know' the Negro race and its 'problems' by presenting the life of one individual...as representative of the lives of the mass of black Americans" (24). However, Goellnicht argues that the hero enslaves himself to whiteness, which is not an accurate reading; if we are to read the novel as a slavery tale, it is the account of how the ex-colored man escapes the slavery of categorization and containment through writing his story.

The fact that the novel itself passed for an autobiography at publication; that it was published anonymously; that the narrator himself is unreliable, and that Johnson's sophisticated irony makes the text itself ambiguous at times—all these

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elements are destined to convince the reader that appearances can be very deceiving. Although not for quite as long as Chesnutt, Johnson also makes his narrator pass before the reader's eyes: there is no indication of the hero's racial makeup for a good part of the story, even though the preface warns the reader that the book is a "race-drama" and that it is about the black race. It also warns the unsuspecting reader that racism pressured African Americans to pass: "These pages also reveal the unsuspected fact that prejudice against the Negro is exerting a pressure which ...is actually and constantly forcing an unascertainable number of fair-complexioned colored people over into the white race" (778). Not only does the preface make it clear that the main cause of passing is the racist system, but also that this phenomenon occurs constantly. While this may sound as a warning to the white readership, it also resonates with a later passage in the novel, in which the ex-colored man talks about the "capital joke" he is playing on unsuspecting whites by passing.

There are numerous interpretations of the preface, but critics generally seem to be divided in two camps: those who believe that the preface was written by Johnson himself, and those who regard the preface as being written by the publishers. In the former critical camp, Goellnicht argues that Johnson *passes* as the white publishers and gives the reader a "quasi-anthropological or ethnographic discourse, complete with an assumed view from the position of the white reader" (19). The idea of Johnson writing the preface seems plausible, since it goes with the general unreliability of the book, of the narrator, and of appearances in general. It also fits in with the underlying irony that pervades the whole novel; the reader is promised "a

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view of the inner life of the Negro in America," but it is far from what s/he finds this book to be (778).

Belonging to the latter critical camp, Robert Stepto argues that the preface was written by the publishers and functions on multiple levels: first, as an authentication device (such as those that preface slave narratives) that verifies the authorship and, second, as a tool to classify racially the ex-colored man: "The "Preface" puts the Ex-Colored Man in his place by acknowledging his mobility in two worlds, but authenticating the clarity of his vision in only one" (45-6). However, if we admit the plausibility of Johnson's himself having written the preface, his irony becomes even more sophisticated. The possibility that Johnson himself passes for white when he writes the preface adds to the levels upon levels of deceiving and shifting appearances, meant to weaken the readers' confidence in everything that appears stable, including—or especially—the racial binary system that they inhabited.

Considering Johnson's whole body of work, the novel is only part of the war he had waged all his life against racism, injustice, and the system that blindly insists on containing everybody not considered white. In The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man, Johnson's criticism of racism is not so direct as, for example, Chesnutt's in The House Behind the Cedars. While Chesnutt discusses and criticizes the system openly throughout his novel and especially in the chapter "A Loyal Friend," Johnson's critical attitude towards racism is an undercurrent that flows throughout the book, sometimes camouflaged by irony, in a more sophisticated treatment than Chesnutt's. Even so, Johnson also regards passing as a result of

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racism, and portrays the ex-colored man as the product of a system that has no use for its biracial members, and so tries to contain them and box them into narrow categories.

In his autobiography, entitled Along This Way, Johnson discusses the narrowness of the black American experience: "Here was a deepening, but narrowing experience; an experience so narrowing that the inner problem of a Negro in America becomes that of not allowing [it] to choke or suffocate him" (78). The extraordinary description and its use of words that express being forced into a *place* that is too small and too controlling is reminiscent of the Pullman closet experience of the ex-colored man. They both speak against a system that is bent to either control and contain or to choke the life out of its biracial subjects.

The way out of this narrowing experience is, in Johnson's opinion, writing—especially creative writing: "The use of prose as a creative medium was new to me; and its latitude, its flexibility, its comprehensiveness, the variety of approaches it afforded...gave me a feeling of exhilaration, exhilaration similar to that which goes with freedom of motion" (238). It is clear that writing, and especially writing the story of passing, was not only a way to criticize the system, by discussing "unspeakable things unspoken," but also Johnson's way of achieving a freedom that was hard to attain by a black man living in America. In the words of "the millionaire friend," "I can imagine no more dissatisfied human being than an educated, cultured, and refined colored man in the United States" (834). Perhaps this issue of freedom found in writing is one that the critics of the ex-colored man should have taken into

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account, especially when they label him a "race traitor." Even though his musical career was ended abruptly, Johnson's character seems to find the same liberating effect in *writing* his story: he is still anonymous and anonymity allows him to do something that he could never have done publicly: acknowledge his "black side," the part of his identity that he had to keep hidden in white society. His last words—"I cannot repress the thought that, after all, I have chosen the lesser part, that I have sold my birthright for a mess of pottage"—should be read as yet another expression of doubt whether he has made the right choice and of regret that he could not be more openly defiant of a system that forced him into this situation (861). Even so, the reader is preemptively warned that these doubts are balanced by the narrator's love for his children: "My love for my children makes me glad that I am what I am and keeps me from desiring otherwise" (861). In fact, the reader should have learned by now that in this novel, all appearances are deceiving and that nothing is what it seems to be. Identity quests are usually fraught with self-doubt and sometimes regrets, and the ex-colored man's is no exception. All his adult life, the narrator has searched for the freedom to express his biracial identity; he wanted to be white *and* black and to work at enriching his bicultural heritage. Unfortunately, circumstances ruled out music as his means of artistic expression, but writing remained available to him, along with the possibility of remaining anonymous. Through writing, the ex-colored man is whole again and able to attain the artistic achievement that eluded him before; thus, telling his story has truly set him free.

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[i] See Goellnicht (23); Baker (Kenneth and Oliver 33); Stepto (ibid 49).

[ii] in Price and Oliver 7.

[iii] ibid.

[iv] ibid. 19.

[v] From the New Orleans Picayune: "Two Hundred Dollars Reward—Ran away from the subscriber 18 November a white negro man , about 35 years old, height about five feet eight or ten inches, blue eyes, has a yellow wooly head, very fair skin..." From the Savannah Republican (1855): "Ran away from the subscriber, my negro man Albert, who is 27 years old, very white so much so that he would not be suspected of being a negro. Has blue eyes and very light hair..." For more, see Charles L. Blockson. Black Genealogy. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1977.

[vi] For a discussion on how American courts tried to fix race and to forcefully classify biracial individuals as black, see Teresa Zackodnik. "Fixing the Color Line: The Mulatto, Southern Courts, and racial Identity." American Quarterly. 53:3 (2001): 420-451.

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CHAPTER IV

"They Always Come Back:" Nella Larsen's Passing

> After taking up her own glass [Clare] informed them: "No, I have no boys and I don't think I'll ever have any. I'm afraid. I nearly died of terror the whole nine months before Margery was born for fear she might be dark. Thank goodness, she turned out all right. But I'll never risk it again. Never! The strain is simply too—too hellish."
> "No," [Gertrude] went on. "No more for me either. Not even a girl. It's awful the way it skips generations and then it pops out. ... But of course, nobody wants a dark child." (168)

When compared to Chesnutt's and Johnson's works, Nella Larsen's novel, Passing, adds new dimensions to the issue of passing. If Chesnutt makes an attempt to address some singularly feminine issues in connection with race and passing in The House Behind the Cedars, his focus is not entirely on Rena. Larsen's work, however, introduces two heroines who are constantly kept in the spotlight, in sharp focus, and with them, a host of problems and issues that women of color had to confront and resolve—especially in the Harlem Renaissance years. In the excerpt above, two characters in Passing, Clare and Gertrude, mention an aspect of black motherhood that was not discussed often: the fears of a passing woman that her child is going to turn out dark, thus "outing" her to the rest of the world.

One other issue that this excerpt raises is the one of control over the African American female body itself, which historically represents the site where important tensions and struggles took place and/or met. Sexualized, owned, raped, brutalized,

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and used as a means of breeding and producing more property, the African American female body has historically been the one that gave its own racial (and social) status to its children—and therefore was used by white men as a means to keep the binary racial system in place and to keep black men under control. Domination of the white female body ensured white purity and transfer of whiteness as property, while domination of the black female body ensured the survival of the system and control over African Americans. One way of controlling the black female body by white men was sex, while another was the displacement of a seemingly insatiable and "savage" sexuality onto the black woman. Oversexualization of the black female body by whites had as consequences very restricted possibilities of expression on the part of black women and also constrictive possibilities of artistic representation. Consequently, as Anne Stavney argues,

> the urban black woman of the early part of the century had not yet located a geographical a subjective space which was secure yet not suffocating, respectable but not decreed, more self-defined than other-defined. (557)

In other words, at the beginning of the 20th century, black women were in dire need of a space that was not created and/or judged by either white or black men—a space in which motherhood, as discussed by Clare and Gertrude, is only *a part* of what defines their identity, and not a burden or a requirement of femininity. Clare Kendry in Passing is one such woman in search of a subjective space, since she realizes that motherhood is only a part of her identity, as it should be. One other part of her identity is her being biracial.

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In the passage quoted, Clare and Gertrude make obvious some aspects of motherhood that represented a harsh reality for those women who decided to pass: the fear of having dark children who might betray their racial identity. As Thadious Davis remarks, childbearing in the case of the passing woman is heavily problematized by race and by the possibility that the offspring will have racial markers, therefore "outing" the passer (316). The strain that Clare had to live under for nine months before she gave birth to her daughter is too much to bear for another pregnancy, so she decides not to have children again. Similarly, Gertrude (whose white husband knows she is passing) makes skin color the deciding factor of motherhood. But what is really remarkable in the whole discussion is what Gertrude says at the end of the conversation: "But, of course, nobody wants a dark child" (168). It is the assumption that even mothers who do not pass would not want a dark-skinned child that seems extraordinary, especially coming from an African American woman. Gertrude speaks of "it" skipping a generation and "it" coming back—the "it" being of course, skin color, seen here as a physical mark of blackness. The assertion also reflects an issue that affected the author's life: the fact that Larsen was the dark child that nobody in her immediate family wanted and/or recognized, according to Davis.[i]

Nela Larsen is considered to be one of the most mysterious writers of the Harlem Renaissance, a woman who guarded her private life and her past with an obsessive care. After the sudden success that came with the publication of her two novels at the end of the 1920s, Larsen severed all her friendships and relationships in Harlem and disappeared, leaving behind—according to Davis—rumors about her

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passing for white (xiv). She exercised a tight control over what elements of her biography were disclosed to the public, and she described herself as a "mulatto, the daughter of a Danish lady and a Negro from the Virgin Islands" (Davis 22). After extensive research, Davis made some important revelations in her biography of Larsen: since Larsen was not acknowledged in the 1910 census, Davis makes the assumption that Larsen's entire family passes for white (her black father had presumably changed his name from Walker to Larsen and passed for Danish), but since Nella was the dark child who could not pass, she was denied acknowledgment by the family and kept as a secret (36). The family's denial went as far as 1964, when after Larsen's death, her sister still asserted that she did not know she had a black sister (xviii). Having one's existence denied by her own family was undoubtedly traumatic for Larsen, and it seems to be a trauma that followed her for the rest of her life, influencing her writerly vision. So when Gertrude says that "nobody wants a dark child," she voices the feelings of Larsen's parents, who seem to have considered her a shameful secret, perhaps even displacing all their blackness onto her, since she was the darkest one in the family.

In Passing, racializing motherhood exposes some of its more entrapping aspects that were not discussed in the fiction of the time. Motherhood is seen as far from being the blessed state that is supposed to fulfill a woman. For Clare and Gertrude, and partly for Irene (even though she refuses to admit it), motherhood turns out to be a curse and a different form of slavery and entrapment. The issue is complicated even more when passing enters the equation and the horror of having a

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dark child means the horror of being exposed as a passer. To the entrapping aspects of motherhood, Larsen adds the identity struggle that urban black women undergo, and associates the two issues with passing in a novel that is probably the most sophisticated treatment of the phenomenon yet. As Martha Cutter argues, Passing is what Barthes would call a "writerly text"—a text where the reader is considered a producer of meaning, and a text that refuses to be consumed or reduced to only one meaning, just like its protagonist, Clare Kendry (75).

Contemporary reviewers and those who wrote in the years after Larsen's disappearance tended to discuss her work in terms of the tragic mulatta theme. [ii] In the 60s, 70s, and 80s, Larsen's work was analyzed in the larger context of the Harlem Renaissance. [iii] A feminist dialogue on Larsen's novels was started in the 1980s and continues today. Its main participants are Mary Helen Washington, Hortense Thornton, Claudia Tate, Cheryl Wall, and Deborah McDowell. But by far the most comprehensive work on Nella Larsen's life and writing, the result of painstaking detective work and extensive research, is Thadious Davis's Nella Larsen: Novelist of the Harlem Renaissance (1994). Davis sheds light on the events of Larsen's life that were obscured by her unwillingness to share her past with anybody and by the passage of time, events that might help to a certain extent in the analysis of Larsen's work.

When it comes to discussing Passing, critics seem to be divided into camps, according to the issue they consider most important in the novel: there are those who discuss it as a story about race and the tragic mulatta, with all the social implications

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that result from it, [iv] and those who consider the novel's complexity as a representation of black female sexuality and/or lesbian desire. [v] I agree with Judith Butler when she argues that these two views are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and that a more complex and sophisticated reading of the novel would result if the issues of race and sexuality (along with a host of other concepts) are seen as "inextricably linked" (272). In writing about Larsen's novel, both McLendon and Cutter discuss passing as a liberating strategy from racial, social, and gender enclosures, while Bennett is fascinated with the play of (in)visibility in the black and white worlds; Wald considers the novel as being the most pessimistic in terms of the possibility of a non-problematic identity, since race cannot represent it. Larson considers Clare "freed" by her death, while Wall agrees with Larson in terms of Clare's liberation through death, and sees passing itself as a metaphor for death, loss of identity, and denial of self.

As diverse and ingenious as they all are, none of these critical readings discusses the *types* of passing that Larsen depicts in her novel and how their exploration enriches the reading of Passing. Different types of passing have different causes, different consequences, and—most importantly—they bring to light different modes of subversion, so it is necessary to understand these differences for a better and more accurate analysis of the text. As opposed to identificatory passing (predicated on the passer's identification with the white ideology), performative passing is based on performing race—a matter of behavior, props, and maybe makeup. The passer crosses the color line and "acts" white. There are cases in which the passer uses

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physical props to enhance his/her credibility, and this is what Ellen Craft does when she performs race and gender in order to escape slavery. In other cases, the passer simply uses his/her lack of racial markers and racial ambiguity to cross the color line, like Clare Kendry, for example. Performative passing can be temporary (usually for economic reasons or for obtaining one's freedom), but it can also be permanent. In this case, the passer tries to find a means of reclaiming his/her double identity as both black and white, and s/he keeps ties with both communities, but is defined by neither on its own. In other words, the passer rejects exclusive and rigid racial categories altogether, similar to like Alice Jones-Rhinelander, whose case is mentioned in the novel. [vi] The Rhinelander case became the scandal of the year in 1925, fuelled by the media frenzy created by young white millionaire Leonard Rhinelander's action. Rhinelander sued for the annulment of his marriage to Alice Jones because he claimed she was passing for white at the time he married her and she kept that information from him. After compelling evidence that suggested that Leonard's father—powerful and rich Philip Rhinelander—forced his son to take this step and get out of what had to be considered among the white New York elite a horrible mésalliance, the jury found in favor of Alice. This trial brought under discussion yet again one other issue that has persistently been associated with race and the visual: the various uses of the black body by racist dominant whites. Alice Jones Rhinelander's defense attorney tried to prove that Alice was visibly "colored" and that anybody—including her husband—could tell that just by "reading" her body. The defense strategy worked, but Alice was subjected to the ultimate humiliation: she

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had to disrobe in front of the jury and the judge, baring her breasts, legs, and back. The jury and the judge had to be able to place Alice racially by looking at her exposed body, reading it, and presumably locating all those signifiers that made her visibly "colored." Alice won the trial at the expense of her dignity. Her body was used as evidence in court, and the gesture reminds one of the auction block and of the exhibition of Saartjie Baartman at fairs around Europe. Even though Alice Rhinelander never claimed she was black (she only claimed she had "colored" blood), she was already classified as black in the eyes of the public opinion and in the eyes of the jury, as her body was entered as an exhibit in the trial. Even so, Alice refused to define herself racially and refused to be classified throughout her life.

Apart from the rejection of classification, maintaining ties with both races seems to make performative passers thrive. De Certeaus's model of strategy/tactic and space/place works well with performative passing as it brings to light a new perspective on the phenomenon. In The Practice of Everyday Life, Michel de Certeau discusses the difference between tactics and strategies. While strategies are employed by dominant power structures in order to impose a disciplinary grid whose aim is containment and control, tactics are used by the powerless in order to be able to live within such a system (xiv-xix). In terms of race, the binary racial system represents the strategy deployed to keep African Americans and biracial individuals contained and controlled, while passing can be seen as a tactic that biracial individuals deploy in order to evade the disciplinary grid *without* overturning it. In other words, to employ tactics means to work within the system, to "manipulate" the spaces that strategies

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produce and impose (29). Applied to Clare's situation, her passing can be interpreted as a tactic that she uses to escape the racialist system and its strategy of classifying individuals as superior and inferior according to the color of their skin. Clare needs to find a way to cope with life under this oppressive power structure and passing offers her that solution, as it gives her the security of material and social privilege and—paradoxically—the freedom of racial mobility. Living as a (black) servant in the house of her (white) aunts would never give her the economic, social, and racial freedom to cross the color line back and forth, as she does after she renews her friendship with Irene and reestablishes contact with the African American community.

In this situation, Clare is happy as long as her identity is not fixed and her mobility undisturbed. Claiming one's double identity means staying on the border; it also means being a hybrid figure and a challenge to the racial status quo in America. The very existence of biracial individuals blurs the boundaries between black and white and proves that the racial system is tenuous in trying to keep them separate and "pure." The position of the passer on the color line opens up tremendous possibilities for freedom, as it involves refusal of classification and it points out once more how race is an artificial category, based on falsely created difference.

What does Larsen's novel say about this type of passing? Is there something new that she brings to this genre with her characters? Rena Walden, the performative passer in Chesnutt's House Behind the Cedars, dies in the end because she cannot cope with her problematic double identity in a strictly binary world. In Plum Bun,

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Jessie Fauset's character, Angela Murray, decides to live in an ambiguous racial limbo: not exactly passing for white, but not declaring herself as black either. Clare Kendry is different from both Rena and Angela: she is stronger than Rena and she does not hesitate to pass to satisfy her economic and emotional needs, as she confesses to Irene. Unlike Rena, Clare has no difficulty in embracing her mixed racial identity, thus escaping the enclosures of race; the difficulty lies with the people around her who become frustrated and unsettled when trying—unsuccessfully—to box her into a fixed identity. Clare's situation is different from Angela's: her husband is a rabid racist and does not even suspect that Clare is not "completely" white. Clare's discovery by her husband causes her death: he manages to damage her irreparably by fixing her identity—he calls her a "dirty nigger." Clare cannot live contained by only one identity, so she dies in the end. Larsen's novel brings about not only the most sophisticated treatment of passing of all the novels analyzed so far, but it also develops the idea that performative passing can be used as a tactic to in manage one's "double" identity in a world where people have to fit into one of two rigid categories, without attracting the attention of the power structures and without overturning them, but still challenging them from within by debunking the myth of pure whiteness and the one of an impermeable color line.

When discussing Johnson's The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man, Samira Kawash states that in that novel passing is seen "not as a deviation from the 'truth' of the social identity of the race but as the only way in which a subject can take up a position of identity in terms of race" (63). It is a statement that holds true for

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Clare as well, since she is in search of a subjective space and a coherent identity that will not define her as somebody's wife or mother. Passing gives her that subjectivity and the agency to assume a position in terms of finding an identity.

Writing about passing in general, Juda Bennett argues:

> The passing figure stands as a refutation of the unbridgeable distance between "black" and "white." This figure, often defined by its invisibility, becomes apparent through the traffic between what is often envisioned as two polarized worlds. In the movement across the color line, invisibility becomes the subject, the visible preoccupation of these authors [who write passing novels]... Nomenclature makes invisibility visible. (15)

As a "passing figure," Clare's relationship with (in)visibility is very complex. In crossing the color line, she has to make sure that she becomes invisible as a "colored" person: if she wants to be successful in her endeavor, she has to make sure that nothing marks her as "black," thus rendering her visible to white eyes. Clare's (in)visibility is clearly one of Larsen's preoccupations throughout the book, even if it is witnessed by the reader through Irene's (not always reliable) eyes. When Irene runs into Clare on the roof of Chicago's Drayton Hotel, both of them are passing for white, as they are in a space where blacks are not allowed. They are both invisible to the racializing white gaze, but Irene still tries to read Clare as a black text:

> And the eyes were magnificent! Dark, sometimes absolutely black, always luminous, and set in long black lashes. Arresting eyes, slow and mesmeric, and with, for all their warmth, something withdrawn and secret about them.
>
> Ah! Surely! They were Negro eyes! Mysterious and concealing. And set in that ivory face under that bright hair, there was about them something exotic. (161)

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Once Irene (and with her, the reader) ascertains the fact that Clare is passing—so her "race" is invisible to white eyes—she starts reading Clare in order to try to localize her blackness. The moment is reminiscent of Johnson's ex-colored man's reaction upon finding out that he is black: he tries to "read" his mother and localize her blackness. Similar to Johnson's narrator, who (unlike Irene) was brought up "white," Irene acts through a white ideological framework (that she initially denies as "silly rot") which she uses in order to anchor race in the physical and immediately classify Clare as black for her own peace of mind, thus making her visible (150). The "Ah!" moment that Irene experiences is the expression of relief at finding a feature that can help her classify Clare, because Clare unsettles Irene, and Irene—paradoxically—wants race to be stable and visible.

Clare's invisibility in the white world—as a passer—is only to be desired, since it ensures secrecy and makes discovery impossible. On the other hand, Clare's disappearance from the group of her classmates causes speculation and rumors about her passing, so that later when she meets one of her former school acquaintances, she is completely ignored: "..she cut me dead. My dear 'Rene, I assure you that from the way she looked through me, even I was uncertain whether I was actually there in the flesh or not" (154). Thus, Clare has become invisible in the black world as well, but in a negative way, since the woman despises her for passing and presumably "betraying" the race. Passers have notoriously been considered defectors and traitors of the race, but what race is Clare really betraying, if any, as a biracial person? What

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is her "real" race, and is one racial category able to contain her and account for her identity?

And—more importantly—who is Clare Kendry? She has mixed blood, which makes Clare what some would (offensively) call a "mulatta." According to Spillers, the mulatta is a sign of "the illicit that designates the violent mingling and commingling of bloodlines that a simplified cultural patrimony wishes to deny. But in that very denial, the most dramatic and visible of admissions is evident" (167). Even more than Irene, Clare is the vivid proof of the fact that the color line has been continually crossed by white men for sexual purposes—by the same men who have gone to great lengths to keep the white race "pure." Her father is the result of a "wild oat" that her grandfather sowed in his youth—according to her white aunts—the product of an affair he had with a black woman, which automatically makes Clare herself black, by virtue of the one-drop rule (158).

Even though the events of her life seem to be known, Clare Kendry is also regarded as a mystery by Irene and other people around her. In the very beginning of the novel, Clare's letter is described as "out of place and alien," as "mysterious and slightly furtive," and as "a thin sly thing" (143). These epithets also refer to the way Irene sees Clare: even when she localizes Clare's "blackness" in her eyes, Irene describes them as "mysterious and concealing" (161). The common semantic field of these adjectives refers to the fact that Clare has something to hide, since she is passing. But it is not only the furtiveness of passing that Irene notices in Clare. It is some incomprehensible mystery that she cannot decipher and that unsettles her, as it

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unsettles all the other characters who come into contact with Clare. It is significant that Irene, who has known her since childhood and considers herself "bound" to Clare by ties of race, is the one who finds Clare a mystery: "Clare's ivory face was...masked. Unrevealing. Unaltered and undisturbed by any emotion" (220). However, even though she cannot read her, Irene does not hesitate to describe Clare as "selfish, cold, and hard," "catlike," and malicious and therefore suited for "this business of 'passing'," which Irene thoroughly disapproves of (144-5). Duplicity and a capacity for betrayal are, according to Irene, qualities that help Clare pass.

One of the few remarks that Clare makes about passing refers to the ease with which it can be done by someone like her:

> You'd be surprised, Rene, how much easier that is with white people than with us. Maybe because there are so many more of them, or maybe because they are secure and so don't have to bother. I've never quite decided. (158)

Even if she speaks little about passing, Clare's behavior and especially Irene's reactions to her are suggestive of what Clare thinks about passing and of why she decided to pass. Clare is the perfect example of the performative passer who is not ashamed, embarrassed, or uneasy about what she has done. Both Rena and Angela Murray experience one or all these emotions, and even the ex-colored man seems to regret passing in the end of his account. Clare makes it clear that she is not sorry, but at the same time, she is not happy either in her position. Performative passers need to keep spiritual and cultural ties with the black community that they leave behind. Even though they renounce physical blackness, it is crucial for them to stay in touch with their African American roots. Clare's unhappiness stems from the fact that—

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until she renews her friendship with Irene—she was unable to return to the black side of the color line. For her, passing is a matter of a carefully hidden past and of attitude. For the first time, Larsen brings us a heroine who is a "mulatta," but not a stereotypically tragic one. Clare does not bemoan her "black" blood; she hides it from her husband's rabid racism while trying to reconcile her dual racial identity. She does not have any qualms about what she has done, and given the choice, she would do it again, unlike Rena Walden, for example. It is important to underline the fact that Larsen makes Clare the one who decides to pass, while in Rena's case, the decision was made for her by her brother and her mother.

As the decision maker, Clare makes a conscious choice to perform whiteness. Wall argues that she seems to be the "black female performer" while Irene seems the "black female spectator," at least until the reader realizes that Irene is a performer herself (121). Even so, that does not change Clare's performer status: Irene finds herself suspecting that "Clare was acting, not consciously, perhaps—that is, not too consciously—but, none the less, acting" (182). The reasons why Clare decides to pass are multiple and complicated—not easily explained away by the simple desire to have money, or by what Irene calls "a having way," when she refers to Clare. Her life has been difficult: as a janitor's daughter, Clare was marginalized in the group of her classmates, most of them members of the black middle class. Her father's alcoholism and their abject poverty put another burden on her shoulders, so that she had to work in order to support them both and her father's addiction. After he died, Clare moves in with his two white aunts who used her as a domestic. She describes them as

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belonging to "the generation that had written and read long articles headed: 'Will the Blacks Work?'"—a generation of prejudiced and racist people (159). Clare's life with the two white aunts was the final push toward her decision to pass. The two white women insisted in telling Clare that she belonged to a "cursed" race, and that the touch of the "tar-brush" doomed her (159). Even so, Clare's "blackness" was not public, since the aunts themselves decided to keep secret their brother's indiscretion committed with a black woman, and in doing so, they helped Clare fabricate a "white" past when she met white John Bellew, her future husband.

Clare herself is aware of the role the two aunts have played in her decision:

> They made me what I am today. For, of course, I was determined to get away, to be a person and not a charity or a problem, or even a daughter of the indiscreet Ham. Then, too, I wanted things. I knew I wasn't bad-looking and that I could "pass." ...I used almost to hate all of you. You had all the things I wanted and never had had. (159)

Being forced to live with two racist religious bigots makes Clare feel not only like a charity case, but also as a problem. The line is reminiscent of DuBois's famous question: "How does it feel to be a problem?" and it points out that double consciousness is an issue that black women have to contend with as well (614). However, Clare does not internalize the way her aunts see her, but she realizes that she has very few identity options: she could choose to stay with them as a charity case and continue to work as their servant only to be reminded every day that she was a burden and a problem; she could become a member of a "cursed" race and go live on the "black" side of the town, disregarding her white blood and returning to the abject poverty she left behind at her father's death. Either way, the choice she would make

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entails ignoring a part of herself. That, in her eyes, will make her less than a whole person. In conclusion, Clare chooses to pass because she wants to "be a person." Performative passing allows her to slip back and forth across the color line and thus to acknowledge both her black and white blood, since this is the only way she can do so. When an entire society is trying to put people like her into one narrow category, in an attempt to completely erase one part of her identity, passing becomes for Clare a tactic she uses in order to be treated like a whole human being, since "the aunts' definition of blackness attempts to rob [her] of her humanity," as Sullivan argues (375).

At first sight, it would seem that Clare's choice to pass—i.e., to "be" white—has nothing to do with being a whole person, if passing is regarded as erasing a part of one's identity. While it is necessary to acknowledge the fact that passing *does* reinforce racial categories to a certain degree, it is also necessary to see that—paradoxically—it challenges them at the same time, and its capacity to subvert the power structures is revealed when the passer is outed. Clare's example is one of the most compelling ones in this respect, since without "being" white, she would not have been able to cross the color line back and forth. Her position in white society gives her the ability to achieve covertly an encompassing, complex identity and become racially mobile. Passing gives her access to both her identities and thus allows her to deploy her tactic of escaping the system's rigid and unrelenting rules without overturning them.

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According to Cutter, Clare uses passing as a strategy to "avoid the enclosures of a unitary identity," or in general, the enclosures of class and race in her particular case (75). It is important to note that only performative passing allows the passer this liberation, since she is able to move back and forth across the color line. Clare does not embrace a "white" identity and cut all her ties with the African American race, the way an identificatory passer would do. On the contrary, she crosses the color line every time she can get away from her husband. In this way, she can feel like a whole person and she can acknowledge both her races. Her need to feel like a whole person and to reconnect with her black heritage is so pervasive that she writes to Irene:

> ...For I am lonely, so lonely...cannot help longing to be with you again, as I have never longed for anything before...You can't know how in this pale life of mine I am all the time seeing the bright pictures of that other that I once thought I was glad to be free of. ...It's like an ache, a pain that never ceases. ...(145).

The play of words "pale" and "bright" encompasses the range of Clare's desire to be able to acknowledge both sides of her identity without having to stay boxed in only one of them. Her existence as an exclusively white woman (who left her physical blackness behind) is "pale," and her identity stunted without her (re)connection with the "brightness" cultural blackness would bring in her life. Paradoxically—since she decides to pass in order to be "a person"—she realizes that in order to be a *whole* person she needs to be racially mobile. Thus, passing becomes for Clare what Wald calls a way to "control the terms of [her] racial definition," or, in other words, to escape the only racial definition available to her—"black" (6). While McLendon argues that insecurity and a "loss of place" in the community (therefore a loss of

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identity) are "implicit in the concept of passing," it is important to note that this is not the case with Clare, for whom passing (the only way in which she is allowed into the white race in order to acknowledge her white blood) is a way to realize her full identity as a biracial person and to freely go back and forth across the color line (98).

Apart from the desire to be a person, there is also the desire to overcome the social stigma of poverty that pushes Clare to pass. Irene recalls an incident when Clare kept some money out of her own earnings to buy material for a new dress, causing her father to fly into a rage because he did not have enough money to buy alcohol. As Clare herself confesses, she wanted "things," material things that her black peers had and she did not, not even in the aunts' house. Marriage to Bellew and passing gave her the opportunity to climb socially and materially. Whiteness offers her material and social privileges that would be impossible to attain without passing.

Clare's envy of Irene and her friends extended also to the fact that they had a home and a family to take care of them—something that she did not have with her alcoholic father. It explains Clare's tears of gratitude when she heard that Irene's father was worried about her after her father's death and tried to visit her, since it seems that nobody had ever expressed concern for her. Security represents one other reason why Clare decides to pass, since she passes with the intention of marrying Bellew. Larsen makes it clear that in Clare's case (and in most cases), an African American woman cannot ever hope to marry a white man for economic security; the only positions available to black women in relation to white men are those of domestic and/or mistress. Even though the novel presents two characters who do not

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seem to fall into these roles—Gertrude, whose white husband knows she is passing, and Irene, who seems to enjoy a cordial relationship with white writer Hugh Wentworth—these two cases seem to be the exception rather than the rule in the racial climate of the time, since her own group of classmates—Irene recalls—draws the wrong conclusions when Clare is seen accompanied by a white man and another white couple in a fashionable restaurant, being well dressed and having dinner:

> And then they would all join in asserting that there could be no mistake about its having been Clare, and that such circumstances would mean only one thing. People didn't take their servants to the Shelby for dinner. Certainly not dressed up like that. There would follow insincere regrets, and somebody would say: "Poor girl, I suppose it's true enough, but what can you expect." (153)

Not only is Clare subjected to the scrutiny and judgment of her narrow-minded and prejudiced peers, but also to the condescension and disdain that come from the economic security of a middle-class home that was sure to give them an "honorable" future, as it did Irene. Ironically, Clare is also passing to escape this situation—of having to choose to be either a domestic or a mistress. As McLendon argues,

> ...while it appears that blacks who pass are in effect colluding with hegemony, instead their very belief in the necessity of passing—of attempting to escape the racialized body—is a legacy of slavery. ...this legacy carries special significance for black women, who have had to struggle for control of their own bodies—with white men, with white women, and with black men. (28-9)

From slavery onward, the African American female body has been the terrain of struggle and tension between black and white men, and white men and white women. It was regarded as property by black and white men alike. One way to control black

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men was the forced appropriation of the black female body by white men, a fact which put them at odds with their white wives, whose lack of power over white men caused them to place the blame on black women for their husbands' sexual transgressions. In other words, one legacy of slavery was still black women's lack of control over their bodies—a fact which not only rendered them vulnerable, but also contributed to the lack of a subjective self-defined space that urban African American women seemed to be searching in the first decades of the past century. Thus, in light of African American history and experience, passing becomes for Clare a way to take control not only of her own racial definition, but also of her own body. One may say that when she agreed to pass in order to marry Bellew she relinquished control of her body to a white man, but she does that to the degree that every white woman relinquishes control when entering marriage, and she chooses to do so. She even states that she does not want to have any more children, for fear they may turn out to be dark-skinned, and even that decision is obviously hers to make. McDowell interprets that as a lack of sex in Clare and Jack's marital life, but Jack Bellew is so visibly in love with his wife that it is hard to consider that as credible. Moreover, Larsen gives the reader a surprisingly accurate view of the white racist male mind in the way in which he sexualizes his wife—a fact that implies that sex is present in their marital life.

Even though she has retained control of her own body, Clare is deeply sexualized in the novel, perhaps in the literary tradition of the "mulatta" characters, which Larsen follows—but only to a certain extent. It is interesting to note that Clare

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is sexualized by her husband who clearly adores her and implies that Clare has acquired a certain level of sexual skill since they got married: "When we married, she was as white as—as—well as white as a lily. But I declare she's getting' darker and darker" (171). The darkening of Clare's skin can be read as an expression of Clare's progression from sexual innocence (lily-white) to a sexual skill ("darker and darker") that Larsen associates with the white-created stereotype of the black woman as sexual temptress. It is an association that fits Jack Bellew's portrayal as a racist white man.

As Spillers contends, "noted for her 'beauty,' the 'mulatta' in fiction bears a secret, the taint of evil in the blood," and this is true in the case of Clare, since Irene regards her as a mystery, as "sly" and as "furtive," as her letter seems to be (Spillers 173). Not only is Clare sexualized by her husband, through a heterosexual framework, but also by Irene, through a lesbian framework: Irene does objectify Clare constantly and she turns her into what Wall has called "the exotic Other" (89). The scene on the roof of the Drayton Hotel in Chicago, when Irene sees Clare after many years without recognizing her is telling in this respect. The reader perceives Clare at the same time as, and in the same way that Irene does: first, an aural impression—a woman's "husky" voice; then, the olfactory stimulus—"a sweetly scented woman;" finally, Irene looks at the features—"a caressing smile," with "those dark, almost black, eyes and that wide mouth like a scarlet flower against the ivory of her skin" (148). It is a truly synesthetic perception that involves all the senses and clearly turns Clare into the *object* of the gaze, and this kind of gaze—almost, if not, sexual—is continuously employed by Irene for the rest of the interlude with Clare. She

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fetishizes Clare's mouth, calling it "tempting," and she focuses on her eyes, which she deems "Negro" eyes, exotic and mysterious (161). McDowell's suggestion that Larsen was suggesting lesbian desire between Irene and Clare is completely justified by this scene and by others in the novel (xxiii).

It is also important to note Irene's ambivalence when it comes to Clare. If, at times, she seems to gaze raptly at Clare and lose herself in her beauty ("Dear God! But aren't you lovely, Clare!"), there are also times when Irene seems to be envious of her friend's beauty and her social status and tries to demean her, as she warns her that at the N.W.L. dance she might be confused with "a lady of easy virtue looking for trade" (199). Even though Irene thinks she knows Clare, there are moments when she perceives that there are parts of her friend that are not—nor will they ever be—known by her. Apart from the time she scrutinizes Clare's eyes at the Drayton and finds them mysterious, when she visits her and meets Jack Bellew, Irene has another moment of utter alienation from her childhood friend:

> She turned an oblique look on Clare and 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)

Even though Irene admits that she feels connected to Clare by some unexplained "ties of race," there are numerous instances in the novel that show Irene puzzled, alienated, unsettled, and even scared by Clare's mysterious side. Since Irene herself locates her friend's race in her "mysterious" and "concealing" "Negro eyes," she seems to be at odds with Clare's blackness (161). The ties of race that Irene claims connect her to

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Clare are tenuous at best because of Irene's ambivalence toward blackness. She seems to adopt part of a white framework to look at the world, and thus her feeling of alienation from Clare can be aligned—to a certain extent—with the way in which Bellew sees all African Americans, according to Christopher Hanlon (27). Hanlon's reading is not without merit, since a few pages later, the reader finds out how Irene regards her maid: "Zulena, a small mahogany-coloured *creature*"— the same terms which Bellew would use to describe her (184). Just as both dark-skinned Zulena and Clare are mysterious and undecipherable creatures to Irene, it is not the "white" or the "passing' side of Clare that Irene does not and cannot read; it is her "black" part that is inscrutable. Thus, Irene is the bearer of a "white" gaze that objectifies, sexualizes, and turns Clare into a text to be read, but a text that does not open itself completely to its reader.

Being described as a mystery often throughout the book, Clare is, in Cutter's words, "the element that creates the gap between the signifier and the signified, for she causes one to question if there is any such thing as one meaning, one signification, one "essential" identity" (95). If she creates the gap between the signifier and the signified, Clare also bridges the gap between whiteness and blackness. Her ambiguity comes from her refusal to stay on either side of the color line: she is, at times, black, at times white, and at times, neither and both, but she never stays in one single position for too long—or for long enough to be defined by it. She consciously cultivates and maintains her ambiguity, which leaves the reader unsettled and confused. As Zackodnik argues, Clare renders herself racially

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ambiguous and "tests boundaries that she can at times subvert" (61). One of the most telling scenes in this respect is the meeting of Irene, Clare, Gertrude, and Jack Bellew in Clare and Bellew's hotel suite in Chicago. Unaware that he's surrounded by the people he hates the most—the "black scrimy devils"—Clare's husband rants and raves against black people, but the most surprising fact for Clare's visitors is hearing that he nicknamed his wife "Nig," since, he explains,

> When we married, she was as white as—as—well as white as a lily. But I declare she's getting' darker and darker. I tell her that if she don't look out, she'll wake up one of these days and find she's turned into a nigger. (171)

Bellew's words stand as proof of how effectively Clare has managed to maintain her racial ambiguity. Even though her husband seems to be convinced that she's "purely" white, he still notices that her skin gets darker and the nickname—although affectionate, in his mind—is bound to express some confusion on his part as to Clare's whiteness. His words—"I know you're no nigger, so it's all right"—belie an attempt to convince himself that his wife is "entirely" white (171). Clare's ivory skin—the object of Irene's scrutiny for so many times throughout the book, seems to be holding the key to her ambiguity—it makes her white and it makes her black at will. However, it is much more than the way Clare looks: performative passing is also a matter of attitude, of being able to play a role. Clare's reaction to her husband's words emphasize her flawless performance:

> Clare handed her husband his tea and laid her hand on his arm with an affectionate little gesture. Speaking with confidence as well as with amusement, she said: "My goodness, Jack! What difference would it make?" (171)

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She acts like an affectionate and indulgent wife who has heard her husband's seemingly outlandish ideas so many times before, and has learned to tolerate them.

Had she remained in this role—that of the loving white wife—Clare's challenge of the racist social arrangements would have been a different matter, perhaps less effective for the reader. But the fact that she is able to act this way on the "white" side of the color line and then cross it and become "black" is what makes her dangerous to people like Bellew, whose deep faith in the binary racial system enables him to draw the color line. It is people like him who draw it and try to keep it in place at all cost. Bellew's view of the world is based on his ability to draw this line: there are the "black scrimy devils" who are "bad" people, and then there are the "good" white people. Cutter notes that Clare destroys this binarism by being black and at the same time the (white) wife he clearly adores (86). Clare is the element that skews his whole world and destroys the myth of white purity in which he believes. His own wife proves to him that his view of the world was totally wrong and terribly distorted, and as a consequence, she throws *his* identity into question. His reaction to finding out that Clare is "black" tells the reader how subversive Clare is: first, he is heard roaring in the hallway, and when he finally enters the room, he looks so menacing, that even Clare backs up from his approach: " 'So you're a nigger, a damned dirty nigger!' His voice was a snarl and a moan, a expression of rage and of pain" (238). Bellew reacts like a wounded animal, and Larsen's carefully chosen words point to the mixture of helpless fury and pain that are part of his reaction. Clearly, in her husband's life, Clare is—to use Cutter's term—the "destabilizing"

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element (86). Clare disrupts and destabilizes other characters in the novel, but none more than Irene. It is this destabilization that security-loving Irene loathes and that pushes her to murder Clare.

Irene's world is based on stability and on her tremendous efforts to keep it that way. As she is the central consciousness in the book, the reader is forced to experience the world of the narrative (and Clare) through Irene's eyes, so it is not difficult to see that her main endeavor is to keep her life unchanged:

> Was she never to be free of it, that fear which crouched, always, deep down within her, stealing away the sense of security, the feeling of permanence, from the life which she had so admirably arranged for them all, and desired so ardently to have remain as it was? (187)

The cause of Irene's fear is what she calls Brian's "restlessness," embodied by his aspirations to move and work in South America, where presumably there is less racism because there are more people of color. Dark-skinned as he is, Brian thinks that he—along with his dark-skinned son—would be safer and freer there than in the United States. Irene is scared by this restlessness, which she secretly (or perhaps unconsciously) associates with blackness. Even though her marriage to an African American dark-skinned man seems to place her among the race-proud black bourgeoisie, Irene is highly color-conscious, and one of the ways in which she makes clear distinctions between castes of African Americans is based on the lightness of their skin. The outlook on race can only originate from internalizing some parts of white ideology, and her actions in the novel prove that she has done so. Irene has displaced all her blackness onto Brian, and it is that blackness that makes her afraid

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and threatens to destabilize her life. The fear that she experiences resembles in part the fear that any white racist feels in the face of the unknown, non-white Other, who threatens identity and status quo.

Fear of blackness pushes Irene to fight so that everything in their life remains unchanged. Indeed, status quo seems to be Irene's mission, since she has "arranged" the life she always dreamed of, as a mother and a wife, as a middle-class woman who was fashionably occupied with charities, "uplifting the race," and giving tea parties. From her observation of Clare, the reader finds out that Irene also has clear views of the strict social distinctions of the world she lives in: she is annoyed when Clare spends time in the kitchen with the maid and she also thinks that Clare's smile is "just a shade too provocative for a waiter" (149). Paradoxically, even though she seems outraged and offended by Bellew's racist diatribes, Irene actually seems to share part of his world vision and belief in a society distinctly divided between black and white, where one should not cross the color line—except perhaps at high society tea parties, but never to marry or to live across it. It is the only world that she knows and the world that gives her a sense of order and of identity. Irene does not enjoy being black; on the contrary, that is one thing she would like to change about herself, but since she cannot, she tries to make the best of it: she chooses a dark husband and she displaces all her blackness onto him, so she does not have to bear the burden of race in the family. Irene cannot exist without Brian and without his blackness because her whiteness cannot exist without him. She seems to regard whiteness as an original (and superior) term of comparison. Irene also needs Brian because his blackness (and

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his money) gives her a certain status in the African American bourgeoisie. Marrying him proves to their social milieu that Irene is loyal to the race, even though her loyalty is questionable to the reader.

It is interesting that although she openly despises passing and passers, Irene indulges in passing occasionally, since it is the only way to gain access to the white world which she emulates. Irene's type of passing is challenging to place because she seems to share parts of a Eurocentric belief in the superiority of whiteness. She feels alienated from Clare, whom she regards as an "exotic Other" and she is annoyed by Clare's passing (perhaps envying her whiteness?). She believes herself to be a committed "race woman," partly because she married a dark-skinned African American man, and partly because she is invested in "race uplifting" activities and cross-racial socializing. However, Larsen makes it clear that Irene is involved in "uplifting the race" only because it is socially expected of her, as part of the African American bourgeoisie, and because it is fashionable, but she complains about having to do it: "Thank heaven that [the NWL dance] comes off tomorrow night and doesn't happen again for a year," since "it's a terrible lot of work" (197, 186). The "racial uplift" she does consists in organizing the Negro Welfare League Dance once a year—an event that puts African Americans on display for whites. Asked by Clare about the reason why white people attend this event, Irene answers: "Same reason you're here, to see Negroes. ...to gaze on these great and near great while they gaze on the Negroes" (198). She sells tickets to white people to come and look at blacks. Her interracial tea parties do not fall into the "racial uplift" category, since she invites

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only people from her own social milieu, while her friendship with Hugh Wentworth is nothing but an important social cachet for Irene. She gives him access to the black world by inviting him to the N.W.L. dance and African American parties, and that provides him with material for his novels: "Others [come to the dance] to get material to turn into shekels" (198). In exchange, Wentworth agrees to be paraded to Irene's parties, which makes Irene the envy of her social milieu and puts "a tiny triumphant smile" on her face (198). To "catch" a white novelist of his caliber and have him come to her parties gives her more status in her circle, but does not disrupt her vision of the world where boundaries are firmly in place:

> "That wasn't," Clare asked, "Hugh Wentworth? Not *the* Hugh Wentworth?"
> Irene inclined her head. On her face was a tiny triumphant smile. "Yes, *the* Hugh Wentworth. D'you know him?" (198)

All these elements converge to prove that Irene identifies partly with a "white" ideological framework, which makes her an identificatory passer—somebody who identifies with the position she takes in the white world. However, circumstances and the desire for financial and social security prompt her to marry Brian, who is dark-skinned, so Irene cannot permanently pass for white. What Irene does—paradoxically—is passing for *black* in her day-to-day life: she proclaims a "duty" to her race that she cannot feel, since her actions all speak for the contrary. Irene's "blackness" is a pretense that she carefully cultivates. The fact that she frequently passes for white (and in this case, she becomes a performative passer, like Clare) represents the materialization of her secret desire to be part of white society, with the

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awareness that she is forever barred from it by the existence of her husband and her dark-skinned son. At the same time, without their existence, Irene would simply be another "colored" middle class wife, which is something she does not want. Irene does not like the "black" world in which she has to live, but she tries to make the best of it by "arranging" a life that is closely modeled after the white middle class. Thus, Irene's type of passing is a combination of identificatory and performative, with different causes and different consequences from Clare's. As argued before, when working with classifications, one has to keep fluid the borders between types, lest one falls into the trap of "pure" types. [vii] The passing classification model can be viewed as a continuum, and so Irene's place is somewhere between the two ends—identificatory and performative.

On the day she met Clare, Irene feels faint from the "brutal staring sun" of the sizzling (black) world in which she has to move, so she takes refuge in the (white) world of the Drayton Hotel: "It was, she thought, like being wafted upward on a magic carpet to another world, pleasant, quiet, and strangely remote from the sizzling one she left below" (146-7). It is interesting that even the position of the two worlds seems to point out the hierarchy in Irene's mind: she leaves the black world somewhere below and crossing the color line is an upward movement for her. She looks down on Clare because she passes, and at the same time, she is fascinated with the phenomenon of passing itself.

In this carefully constructed life, Clare enters and wreaks havoc: she is, as Cutter argues, a destabilizing element (86-7). She awakens Irene's curiosity about

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passing: one who has always firmly believed in boundaries (even though she is blurring them when she passes), now Irene wants to "find out about this hazardous business of 'passing,' " which fascinates her and irritates her at the same time, along with Clare's willingness to cross boundaries: her familiar behavior with the maid and the waiter, her repeated visits to Harlem when her husband is away, her letters, and her insistence to be in places where Irene does not want her (157).

Even so, these transgressions of class and race cannot account for Irene's final gesture—that of pushing Clare out the window. The first suspicion that Clare may be dangerous to her and to the life that she has so painstakingly constructed for herself appears in Irene's mind when she suddenly sees Clare as a "creature" that is alien and mysterious, which points out that Irene is disturbed and scared by her childhood friend. The feeling returns: "For an instant a recrudescence of that sensation of fear which she had had while looking into Clare's eyes that afternoon touched her. A slight shiver ran over her" (176). In the very beginning of the novel, the reader is also cautioned by the fact that Clare represents danger, when Irene hesitates to open her letter because she fears it would reveal "an attitude towards danger" (143). For Irene, Clare represents all the emotions and aspirations she has carefully repressed, sacrificed, and displaced for the sake of security and stability: "Security. Was it just a word? If not, then was it only by the sacrifice of other things, happiness, love, or some wild ecstasy that she had never known, that it could be obtained?" (235).

In Irene's eyes, Clare—who seems to enjoy all the "things" Irene has sacrificed for the sake of security—becomes an exotic object and the embodiment of

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"taboo desires for sexual pleasure, worldly experience, independence from men, and escape from the narrow conventions of the marriage plot" (Blackmer 103). Clare's liminality represents a possibility of escaping all the confining categories that would put a black woman "in her place" in a racist and sexist world, but it is a terrifying escape for Irene who believes in boundaries because boundaries define her. So passing is for Irene not only a possibility of escape, but also a possibility for chaos, for formlessness, for lack of boundaries and identity—which scares her more than anything and prompts her to reject this possibility so violently. For Clare, on the other hand, passing is a tactic of survival beyond the boundaries and the stigmas attached to blackness and lesbianism.

Butler explains that in the novel, neither blackness nor homosexuality are visually marked, since both Irene and Clare are light-skinned and married: "it is only the condition of an association that conditions the naming" (269). Also, as Bennett argues, "nomenclature makes invisibility visible" (15). Irene is "recognized" and named as black by John Bellew only after he sees her in the company of a dark-skinned friend, and that is when he realizes that his wife is black as well. Blackness is seen as a "contagion transmissible through proximity," Butler notes (269). In the same vein, homosexuality was regarded in early 20th-century America as a disease that may contaminate "the healthy." Striving to imitate whites and to uphold bourgeois family values, Irene accepts the racist, sexist, and homophobic dominant ideology and sees Clare as a danger to her "happy marriage," which is far from happy. Clare represents the return of the repressed for Irene, since the latter has

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painstakingly avoided everything that she feels uneasy about—her sexuality and partly her allegiance to her own race—by embracing white bourgeois values. This profound destabilization of all Irene holds dear is reason enough for her to murder Clare at the end of the novel, and it is proof enough to the reader that Clare's willingness to cross all boundaries—class, sexual, and racial—disturbs these boundaries and challenges them. As Cutter asserts, Clare does not "play by the rules" and that turns her into a menace for all those who obey the rules (90), or as she herself puts it: "Really, 'Rene. I'm not safe" (210).

Clare is right: her mobility, while it gives her the opportunity to seek (and find) a complete identity, exposes her to a tremendous vulnerability. She dies because of her mobility, and her death gains a symbolic significance that has been discussed by numerous critics: Larson thinks she is freed by her death (87), and Wall concurs with him that Clare finds freedom in death (132), but what is she freed of? Her ability to cross boundaries gave Clare a freedom that no other character enjoys in the book (except perhaps Bellew, since he is a white man). Cutter argues that "Larsen removes Clare from the novel before she can become enclosed with one meaning" (97), but the truth is, Clare dies *because* she is enclosed by one meaning: her husband calls her a "dirty nigger," so Clare is removed by Larsen from the novel *after* that significant occurrence. Judith Butler's reading argues that the exposure of Clare's color leads to her social death (280), but that does not seem to be true, since Clare is at an African American party when she dies; she has found a place in Irene's middle-class community—a place that she is unlikely to lose even after her husband's scene.

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What her death truly symbolizes is the consequence of the forced reduction of her identity to one race that does not—cannot—account for Clare's complexity. Not only does her husband push her permanently on the other side of the color line, but the racial slur he uses reduces her to the same position she was in when she was a despised servant in her white aunts' house—a position she escaped only by passing. Thus it is Jack Bellew's words that bring about Clare's death, even though Irene's hand is what pushes Clare out the window. After tasting the freedom to move at ease across boundaries and through all the *places* in the novel, Clare cannot live contained by a single category, under the punishing grid of the racial system.

DeCerteau's theory that defines the difference between *space* and *place* helps to prove how subversive of the racial status quo Clare really is. According to de Certeau, *place* represents a locus that is controlled by power structures, with rules for all its users. In contrast, *space* is unregulated. Rules do not apply. It is temporary, and created within *places* by members of subordinate cultures, in order to cope with the rules set by the dominant culture. Creating a *space* is a *tactic* of survival; deCerteau argues: "The space of a tactic is the space of the other. Thus it must play on and with a terrain imposed on it and organized by the law of a foreign power. It is a maneuver 'within the enemy's field of vision'...and within enemy territory" (37). One of the most important *places* in the novel—a *place* invaded both by Irene and Clare, is the roof of the Drayton Hotel in Chicago. Since the narrative is seen from Irene's perspective, the reader gets much more information about how Irene sees the Drayton: a magical world that she is not allowed to enter because she is black: "Did

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that woman, could that woman, somehow know that there before her very eyes on the roof of the Drayton sat a Negro?" (150). Even though Irene is passing, she is still very much aware of the rules, so in a way, her uneasiness at being caught and possibly "ejected" from this *place* stops her from completely appropriating it. However, Clare does not seem to have any problems with invading this *place* where she would not be allowed either and actualizing a *space* both for her and Irene. She appropriates this "white" locus and momentarily suspends its rules. The same happens in the Bellews' hotel suite in Chicago. Knowing Jack Bellew's racism, one would realize that he would not even contemplate staying at a hotel that allowed blacks, so Clare appropriates the exclusively white place there as well, and she even goes as far as inviting two other "black" women to share it with her and her husband. Clare is so chameleon-like that even her dress matches her surroundings perfectly: her dress is the same shade as the draperies in the hotel room, so appropriating the place is second nature to her. In the discussion that follows, Irene sees the irony of the situation when Bellew starts speaking against blacks, sitting in a room with three of them. However, it might seem that in this case, the three women obey some of the "white" rules of the place, since they do not react to his racist comments (even though Irene and perhaps Gertrude would want to). Actually, the three women actually use the one weapon they have at their disposal—laughter, and thus they break the rules of the place not only by simply being there, but also by aligning themselves against Bellew. After Bellew explains why he calls his wife Nig, he laughs at what he thinks is the wit of his own joke, while the three women join him. The difference, as Hanlon

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notices, is that the women do not laugh *with* Bellew, but *at* him (26). They ridicule his arrogant confidence in his stupid, blind, and racist assumptions, and at the same time, they suspend the "panoptic practices" of the white place they are sharing with him (de Certeau 36). It is notable that the laughter of the three passing women can be connected to the idea of passing as a joke perpetrated on the ignorant whites, as Johnson's ex-colored man sees it. Larsen's intention is to make the reader question all the assumptions that s/he has about identity and race, about the right to occupy a place and the right to use certain tactics in order to appropriate it, the way Clare does every time she finds herself in a "white" place.

By writing a passing story, Nella Larsen questions all these assumptions herself. The message that Clare's death sends is also incendiary: the fatal weight of the racial/racist binary grid kills innocent victims who, by virtue of their birth, cannot find a space in any of the categories that are offered without suppressing a part of their identity. Like Chesnutt and Johnson before her, Larsen is critical of the racial system in America and of its relentless attempts to contain people who are uncontainable. Also like Chesnutt, Larsen is .critical of the limited identity possibilities that are given to black women, both in society and in artistic representations, and is clearly exploring a subjective space that would allow black women to be represented as sexual beings. The former theme interrogates the white-dominated society. As Wall argues, Larsen's novel masks "the subversive themes that frequently shimmered beneath the surface of her fiction...: the inextricability of the racism and sexism that confront the black woman in her quest for selfhood" (89).

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Larsen writes against a system that made passing possible and desirable in order to find a coherent identity.

With Clare, Larsen goes against the grain of the black uplift ideology, which often insisted on chaste and motherly artistic representations of black women. Stavney notes:

> To clear a gendered space in Harlem for herself and for her female characters meant renegotiating definitions of black womanhood, and, by extension, notions of black woman's work. It also meant proposing ways in which the black woman's body could be brought back into public view neither as the sexually wanton female of white racist imaging nor as the Brown Madonna, the woman-as-African-mother, constructed by black uplift ideology. (556)

Like Jessie Fauset, Larsen was one of the relatively small number of African American women writers who were successful in this time period. Writing in a male-dominated field, she clearly needed to carve a space for herself as a writer and for her female characters. Clare is clearly the product of the renegotiations that Larsen had to make, of the sexualized representation of the black woman and of entrapping aspects of black motherhood. The discussion between Clare and Gertrude about the fear of bearing a dark child when one is passing brings to light a side of motherhood that has never been discussed before, qualified by Clare's words later in the novel: "I think that being a mother is the cruellest thing in the world" (197). With her character, Larsen is trying to explore a black female sense of identity that goes beyond the much-used images of the chaste, asexual, lady-like black woman, the happy and dutiful mother, the tragic mulatta, and also beyond what Wall calls "the exotic Other"

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(89). Clare goes beyond all these representation by her willingness to cross all boundaries, including—or especially—the most dangerous one: the color line.

Hanlon argues that Larsen regarded race as "an ontologically bankrupt term," since her novel (and Clare in particular) destabilizes the white racist assumption that blacks can be made visible by physical racial markers (23). The writer is clearly suggesting to the reader that an interrogation of his/her concepts of racial boundaries is in order after reading this novel, since neither of the racial categories available to Clare can provide her with an identity. Larsen herself interrogates these boundaries, not only in her novel, but also in her life. In a letter addressed to Carl Van Vechten, she relates the story of her passing and entering a diner in a very conservative town in the South: "[we] demanded lunch and got it, plus all the service in the world and an invitation to return" (Davis 424).

Perhaps it is Larsen's habit of subverting the system in her writings and in her life that made white reporters who interviewed her anxious to mention her background first and to make sure they described her appearance: "Nella Larsen...has skin the color of maple syrup. The costume of shading grays makes it seem lighter than it really is." [viii] The reporter clearly localizes Larsen's race in the color of her skin, (perhaps because Larsen's appearance disrupts the interviewer's expectations of race) and objectifies her by association with food. Or perhaps when mentioning maple syrup, the interviewer alludes to the Aunt Jemima brand of syrup, which rose to fame in 1889 and had (dark-skinned) ex-slave Nancy Green's picture on the label. The suggestion is in this case meant to associate Larsen with the mammy stereotype,

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and thus to make her appear harmless to white readers. [ix] The interviewer seems anxious to assert that the writer is even darker than she seems, but the clothes she is wearing make her skin lighter. In other words, not only is the reporter implying that Larsen wants to appear lighter (maybe to emulate whiteness), but also she puts Larsen "in her place" on the "black" side of the color line, in a clear case of white anxiety which she does not want to communicate to her white readers. In discussing the reviews of Passing, Davis also remarks on the overwhelming urge of the reviewer to point out Larsen's racial identity with the intention of reassuring the white readers that this writer is not going to cross the color line, as Clare did. [x]

It is interesting that W.E.B. DuBois predicted, in his review of the novel, that, in spite of being "one of the finest novels of the year," Passing was not going to be very successful because "so many white people in America either know or fear that they have Negro blood" (234). DuBois intuits that the novel about a "black" woman who crosses the color line back and forth without being caught will produce anxiety in white readers. The white reviewer of the New York Times Book Review starts with the assertion: "Nella Larsen is among the better Negro novelists." [xi] It seems to be a compliment, but it is a visibly backhanded one: an obvious attempt—again— to put her "in her place." It is truly an offensive remark addressed to all African American novelists. Other critical observations were directed against the novel itself, one of them being that Clare Kendry "seems a little too beautiful to be true." [xii] It is a comment that implies not only the fact that the reviewer felt racially threatened by the novel, but it also expresses the wish that characters like Clare are entirely fictional,

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that racial passing may be a product of a "Negro" imagination and perhaps an expression of wishful thinking on the novelist's part. Passing is also seen as a "vexatious problem," in the reviewer's words, and it is clear that it represents "a problem" for the white reader, who does not want to know that passing is a phenomenon that happens in reality.

In less than fifty thousand words, Larsen managed to write a novel that transgresses numerous boundaries, centered on a character who thrives only when she crosses boundaries, when she does the unexpected, when she does not conform to what society asks of her. Clare is far from being a helpless tragic "mulatta," bemoaning her fate and the "drop of black blood" that is supposed to doom her. She takes charge of her own identity and does not let others label, contain, or even name her. She forges her own identity, but the necessary secretiveness of passing makes her tremendously vulnerable. Clare's "outing" by her husband and his reaction to her "blackness" demonstrates how subversive—and dangerous—passing really is, and that Larsen's intention of criticizing the racism and sexism of American society is also doubled up with her intention to destabilize—like Clare—the (white) reader's fixed notions of racial purity and identity.

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[i] See Davis, Thadious M. Nella Larsen, Novelist of the Harlem Renaissance: A woman's Life Unveiled. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1994.

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[ii] Sterling Brown in The Negro in American Fiction (1937); Hugh Gloster in Negro Voices in American Fiction (1948); Benjamin E. Mays in The Negro's God as Reflected in Literature (1949); Robert Bone in The Negro Novel in America (1958). See Davis xv.

[iii] Nathan Huggins in Harlem Renaissance (1971) and David Levering Lewis in When Harlem Was in Vogue (1981). See Davis xv.

[iv] Barbara Christian, Amrijit Singh, Mary-Helen Washington, Hazel Carby. See Butler 271.

[v] Cheryl Wall, Claudia Tate, Deborah McDowell. See Butler 272.

[vi] See Earl Lewis and Heidi Ardizzone, Love on Trial: An American Scandal in Black and White. New York: WW. Norton & Co, 2001.

[vii] See Introduction.

[viii] Mary Remals, The World Telegram, April 13 1929.

[ix] See Afro American Almanac: Biographies. Available online: http://web.ask.com/redir?u=http%3A%2F%2Ftm.wc.ask.com%2Fr%3Ft%3Dan%26s%3Da%26sv%3Dza5cb0dc6%26uid%3D298a3644398a36443%26sid%3D398a3644398a36443%26o%3D0%26qid%3D76FE84377949F8449FC56D8A50B1E8D0%26io%3D0%26ask%3Daunt%2Bjemima%26uip%3D98a36443%26en%3Dte%26eo%3D-100%26pt%3DAFRO-AMERICAN%2520ALMANAC%2520-%2520African-American%2520History%2520Resource%26ac%3D24%26qs%3D0%26pg%3D1%26ep%3D1%26te_par%3D106%26te_id%3D%26u%3Dhttp%253a%252f%252fwww.toptags.com%252faama%252fbio%252fwomen%252fngreen.htm&bpg=http%3A%2F%2Fweb.ask.com%2Fweb%3Fq%3Daunt%2Bjemima%26o%3D0%26page%3D1&q=aunt%20jemima&s=a&bu=http%3a%2f%2fwww.toptags.com%2faama%2fbio%2fwomen%2fngreen.htm&qte=0&o=0&abs=...in%201834.%20Her%20given%20name%20was%20Nancy%20Green%2C%20but%20the%20world%20knew%20her%20as%20%22Aunt%20Jemima.%22%20Although%20the%20famous%20Aunt%20Jemima%20recipe%20was%20not%20hers%2C%20s...&tit=AFRO-AMERICAN%20ALMANAC%20-%20African-American%20History%20Resource&bin=&cat=wb&purl=http%3A%2F%2Ftm.wc.ask.com%2Fi%2Fb.html%3Ft%3Dan%26s%3Da%26uid%3D298a3644398a36443%26sid%3D398a3644398a36443%26qid%3D76FE84377949F8449FC56D8A50B1E8D0%26io%3D%26sv%3Dza5cb0dc6%26o%3D0%26ask%3Daunt

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[x] See Davis 329.

[xi] Review of Passing. New York Times Book Review, 28 April 1929. 14.

[xii] Ibid.

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CHAPTER V

The Family's "Heart of Darkness:" Passing in African American Memoirs

> I am a black American with white skin, an African American with both African and European ancestors. Thus, I live a life that is often disjointed, troubling. I also see the world in a different way. There is something about living on the margins of the race that gives me a unique view of the categories "black" and white, that presents a different picture of white Americans and black Americans. For my position does not allow me the luxury of thinking that the notion of race makes any sense...my existence unsettles expectations of "race." (Judy Scales-Trent 7)

The exploration of passing in African American fiction indicates how the phenomenon can threaten existing power structures, especially when one analyzes how the very act of writing the story about passing unsettles white ideology and beliefs. However, a discussion of how passing affects those who practice it in reality, and especially those left behind by the passer, proves to be even more illuminating, since it shows how passing is, in fact, a double-edged sword: it is true that it undermines the racial categories so that white supremacists cannot claim "pure" whiteness as an exclusive property. However, it also enforces racial categories to a certain extent, because the passer chooses to live on the white side of the color line, no matter how s/he terms this choice. The complexity of the phenomenon resides in the fact that whiteness is *both* absence of categorization and yet also a category that is chosen. Apart from the material and social advantages that can be gained by passing, whiteness as absence of categorization is something that attracts the passer. When

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one faces racial discrimination daily because of being born in a system that slots black and biracial individuals automatically into the disadvantaged category, one needs to find a way to either escape this process of categorization or to cope with life within the system. Passing offers one solution, and the passers are usually biracial or multiracial people who choose to experience life as *one* of the races they represent. In this respect, the passer cannot be considered a "race traitor," but somebody who has made a clear choice—in some cases for reasons of safety, and in others because their upbringing prompts them to make that specific choice. The model of analysis that Michel de Certeau offers helps in the discussion of passing as a way to work within the system. In The Practice of Everyday Life, de Certeau discusses the difference between tactics and strategies: strategies are employed by the power structures in order to impose the Foucauldian grid of discipline, while tactics are employed by the powerless in order to avoid the grid (xiv-xix). To translate his theory in terms of race, the whole racial system can be read as a strategy deployed to keep African Americans and biracial individuals under control, while passing is a tactic that biracial individuals sometimes use in order to evade the disciplinary grid. To employ tactics means to work within the system, to "manipulate" the space that strategies produce and impose (29-30). The system is what forces passers to make choices that nevertheless take a tremendous emotional toll on the passer him/herself and on those members of the family with whom the passer has severed contact.

Recent memoirs of people who have been left behind and have family members who passed or are still passing are poignant reminders that, indeed, the

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problem of the 20th century was the problem of the color line—as DuBois declared in 1903—and that race is still a problem in the 21st. These memoirs show once more how the racial system is failing to account for the existence and identity of people such as Shirlee Taylor Haizlip, Judy Scales-Trent, and Gregory Howard Williams, authors who declare their allegiance to the black side of the color line, but who unsettle whites by virtue of their physical appearance, and in some cases, by their passing. Even if the three authors do not pass (with the exception of Williams whose passing happens without his knowledge), they provoke in whites the same emotions as outed passers. If passing proves its subversiveness when it is found out, then these people, who do not pass but are phenotypically white, are as dangerous to the system as the outed passers. Since passing has to be shrouded in secrecy, its power to subvert racial categories is visible only when the passer is made visible as well. In The House Behind the Cedars, Rena Walden's power to question absolute racial categories is revealed by Tryon's reaction when he recognizes her: anger, disgust, horror. Later in the novel, after she decides not to pass any longer, Rena's presence makes white people uncomfortable because they cannot read her and place her racially, so she is constantly subjected to scrutiny from whites because her appearance represents a source of constant concern and insecurity. She is repeatedly asked to "declare" her racial identity. The characters in the memoirs I have selected to discuss in this chapter produce the same emotions in whites, as soon as their racial identity is revealed. Here, however, the cause of anxiety is not somebody who has passed and lived undetected among whites, but people who say they are black but "look" white.

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They threaten white identity itself, as the characters in The Sweeter the Juice, Notes of a White Black Woman, and Life on the Color Line prove.

The three memoirs have several points of intersection. They all discuss passing, especially crossing the color line permanently, and they bring a new perspective by discussing what that action means for family members left behind by the passer. In The Sweeter the Juice, the author's mother is the one left behind by her father and siblings. In Notes of a White Black Woman, the author herself talks about her uncle who crossed the color line and never came back. In Life on the Color Line, the author's white mother takes two of her biracial children away to the white side of the color line and leaves behind her other two. The memoirs discuss at length the racism that African Americans face in their daily lives, and to some extent the authors reach similar conclusions in the end: that racism is the main cause of passing, and that the passers should not be judged for the choice they had made, no matter how traumatic their choice proves to be for those they leave behind. One other issue that connects the three works is their discussion of biracialism as hybridity, as an in-betweenness that creates enormous possibilities for freedom from the binary system. At the end of their physical and spiritual journeys, Shirlee Taylor Haizlip, Judy Scales-Trent, and Gregory Howard Williams situate themselves on the color line, in a move that is meant to elude any attempt at racial classification. They offer this position as a possible alternative to passing, since it does not involve the trauma of leaving family and community behind. This position is possible today, but it was not

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available to the fictional heroes of Chesnutt, Johnson, and Larsen, who had to find other, covert ways of exploring their own liminality.

Shirlee Taylor Haizlip's The Sweeter the Juice is, as she subtitles it, "A Family Memoir in Black and White." Published in 1994, it represents the fruits of long for a branch of Haizlip's family that crossed the color line to pass and left everybody else behind. She undertakes this quest for the sake of her mother, Margaret Morris, whose entire family "had become white," as Haizlip puts it (13). Haizlip herself, along with her mother and her siblings, are phenotypically white, but they identify themselves as black. The author herself sees how destabilizing she is to racial categories, even if she does not pass:

> Genes and chromosomes from Africa, Europe and a pristine America commingled and created me. I have been called Egyptian, Italian, Jewish, French, Iranian, Armenian, Syrian, Spanish, Portuguese and Greek. I have also been called black and Peola and nigger and high yellow and bright. I am an American anomaly. I am an American ideal. I am the American nightmare. I am the Martin Luther King dream. I am the new America. (15)

The author herself is specific in delineating the exact parameters of her racial heritage—no ambiguity here, nor a wish to use it in her favor, unlike the passing figure whose racial ambiguity is a main asset in passing. The names she is called—whether they represent different ethnicities or derogatory racial terms—represent attempts to classify her, deeply rooted in the racial insecurity of the person who does the classifying. She seems to be unable to find a place on either side of the color line, even though she firmly asserts that her place is on the black side, but the "Peola" and the "high yellow" appellations prove that she is not entirely accepted as black either.

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The variety of perspectives she uses to describe herself is also telling: an "anomaly" and a "nightmare" for the race purists who do not want people like her to exist because she is the element that destabilizes the racial system, and an "ideal" or Martin Luther King dream, or the "new America," for those who see the solution to the "race problem" in race-mixing and erasing the color line. Her very existence puts into question the whole racial binary system, since she cannot be classified "objectively."

Haizlip follows the history of her family, starting with the abandoned daughter of an Irish immigrant who married Edward Everett Morris, a former slave, born to a white judge and his female slave. She is concerned with her mother's family because it is the side of the family that is phenotypically white and able to pass. Dire circumstances cause the dissolution of Margaret Morris's family: her mother dies; her father (who is an alcoholic) abandons the family; her older brothers and sisters go out on their own, while Margaret is left behind in the care of her black godmother. Later, when Margaret tries to reunite with her brother and sister, she finds out (from another "white" aunt) that they are passing and that they do not want to acknowledge her because she is "black." Her own father ends up passing as well and while he keeps in contact with Grace, Margaret's "white" sister, he never tried to contact or acknowledge Margaret in any way. The success of passing depends on its secrecy, so the passer has to break the ties with his/her past if s/he is to attain the goal of this endeavor. In order to develop a tactic that will help the passer work within the system, s/he has to become invisible to white eyes. There are cases in which acknowledging one's family meant simply outing oneself as a passer, and Margaret's

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siblings and father obviously fear this. Even though the information on the four passers is scarce, their decision to pass reveals whiteness as a conscious choice *and* as part of a binary, but also as lack of classification, as original term of comparison against which everything else will be found inferior. Margaret's family has (dis)placed its blackness onto her—so while it is true that they are beyond classification (as whites), they cannot exist without her because she represents the other term of comparison.

Nevertheless, being left behind was a devastating experience for Margaret, especially when she was old enough to understand the reason why she was left behind: because she was the darkest of all the siblings, even though she would have been able to pass. The author confesses: "I was even more confused when my mother told me that she was not with her father, or her brothers and sister, because she was too brown'" (32). In fact, the children (including Margaret) attended a whites-only school in Washington, where admission was based on visual inspection, so it was obvious that Margaret was light enough to pass. In a way, her experience echoes that of Nella Larsen, another dark child left behind because the rest of the family decides to cross the color line. Haizlip's memoir adds a new dimension to passing: while the majority of novels explore the experiences and emotions of those who decide to cross the color line, this memoir explores the experiences and emotions of the person(s) left behind by passers. This different perspective complicates the issue of passing and brings to light the fact that, while passing may enable the passer to live a better life materially and (in some cases) spiritually, for those left behind it seems only to

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reinforce racial categories, since they are not acknowledged by their own family any longer. Once the color line is crossed, the passer has to make sure that it is firmly drawn between him/her and the family left behind, so in a way, the passer leaves his/her physical blackness behind as well. It seems to be part of the tactic that the passer deploys in order to escape the strategies that the existing power structures have in place. Identificatory passers leave behind both physical and cultural blackness—the whole African American heritage is abandoned and (dis)placed onto a family or community member left behind, while performative passers leave behind only physical blackness, still keeping ties with family and/or community.

One of Margaret's uncles, Edward, decided to move to Buffalo with his wife in order to start a life on the white side of the color line, in a place where nobody knew them. They were visited only by those in the family who were light-skinned enough to be considered white because nobody in Buffalo knew they were black. Even so, when family visited, Edward and his wife kept their shades drawn and did not invite any of their neighbors or friends to meet their family members. In this case, race is a well-kept secret, and those left behind are made invisible by their families, if they are acknowledged at all. It is yet another kind of invisibility, different from the one the passer looks for: the passer needs to be invisible as a white person—not to stand out among whites. The invisibility the passer inflicts upon the rest of his/her family is tantamount to the denial of their existence and it is likely to have traumatic consequences for the ones left behind, as it had on Margaret. She felt rejected by her

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father and siblings all her life because she could not see them and could not intrude on their new, "white" life.

As to the type of passing Margaret's family practiced, it is clear that they all started as performative passers: they were brought up as "colored," but circumstances made it so that they were able (or forced) to cross the color line in order to take advantage of white privilege. Although they start as performative passers, by the end of the book, some of them (Margaret's immediate family) end up as identificatory passers. One of Margaret's aunts married another light "colored" man and moved to Brazil where they passed, in spite of the fact that racism did not seem to be as strong there as in the United States. When reading one of the letters that the husband wrote home, Haizlip notes that he sounds "like a white man" who makes detached observations of the black world (69). It is an indication that this particular passer has already begun to identify with whiteness, so even though he still keeps some ties with his family (as seen from his letters), he is on his way to becoming an identificatory passer and leaving his black heritage behind.

It is interesting that while fiction seems to keep the types of passing more or less unadulterated, real life proves that there is no such thing as a "pure type," especially when race is the topic. In the novels analyzed, the passing characters seem to fall into one or the other type of passing—performative and identificatory. In Haizlip's memoir, however, Margaret's sister, Grace, "mixes up" the types of passing, going from performative (since she was brought up "black") to identificatory to such a degree, that she herself believes she is white, even though growing up in the same

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family with Margaret (who is still "black"), she *must have known* she was considered "colored." Being brought up in a black family did not give Grace the Eurocentric cultural and intellectual framework of the ex-colored man, for example. Grace cannot culturally identify with whiteness from the beginning, so she and her siblings start out by performing whiteness and relinquishing their physical blackness (which is left behind with Margaret). Eventually, years of performing whiteness lead to the passers' abandonment of their black heritage, which turns them into identificatory passers.

When Margaret tries to contact her siblings by mail, her letters were returned marked unknown addressee, even though she knew she had the right addresses. After three years, her husband, Julian, used his influence as a minister and wrote to the chief of police in Cleveland, asking him for help in reuniting his wife with her family. Contacted, the two brothers and one sister replied that they did not know a Margaret Morris. As Haizlip comments, "Once again, the results...were defined by color. Reclamation was the goal on one side, renunciation on the other" (100). The importance of reclaiming relatives for African Americans dates from slavery times, when families were broken up at the whim of the slave master, and their members sold away to different parts of the country. In such a hostile climate, one important part of African-American culture is to claim, to know, and to acknowledge all members of one's family—the one group that should be all-accepting and defend its members from the racism of the outside world. Margaret's desire to find and be acknowledged by her own siblings is easily explained in these circumstances, as well

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as her deep disappointment at the rejection she had to experience from her siblings who could not acknowledge a "colored" sister without outing themselves. In this particular circumstance, the double nature of passing makes itself obvious. The passing relatives go from performing whiteness to identifying with it. They were brought up "black," so it is clear that in the beginning they were performative passers, but their refusal to acknowledge Margaret—even covertly—bespeaks of their eventual identification with whiteness. One would simply say that in this particular case, Margaret's siblings have reinforced the color line by refusing to communicate with her, but it is necessary to remember that these are people who are still legally black and who crossed the racial divide with ease, becoming invisible in the white world. Their actions are reminiscent of John Walden's disappearing act in Chesnutt's The House Behind the Cedars—an act whose destabilizing attributes have been already discussed in Chapter II. Keeping their race a secret is of utmost importance for Margaret's siblings, since they have broken the (written and unwritten) racial laws and can be punished for that.

Years later, the author takes over her disillusioned mother's quest and traces Grace, her mother's "white" sister, who at first denied ever having a sister and then recanted and allowed Haizlip to pay her a visit. Grace told her the story of her life after the separation, not mentioning anything about the separation itself or about her race. Family pictures were exchanged and stories told, but even then race did not enter the conversation: "Despite all the years of longing and conjecture, despite the fact that race was the central issue, I could not bring myself to broach it yet," the

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author comments (247). Haizlip senses that to approach the issue of race means to break the tenuous connection she has painstakingly established. Grace is—as shown—another example of a performative-turned-identificatory passer. When she finally is reunited with her aunt after so many years apart, Haizlip realizes that Grace "had no conscious memories of her colored years. In fact, she had no colored memories at all" (250). What is more, Grace criticizes her own granddaughter for dating a Hispanic man who is dark "like a black man," asserting her preference that she date a white man: "What's wrong with a good white man?" (257). Since Grace associates "goodness"—whatever that may be in her definition—with whiteness, it is clear that she is convinced of her own whiteness and that she—deliberately or not—insults her sister and niece who are both part of this conversation. Neither one of them is willing to discuss race yet, so they leave the offending remark go unaddressed.

Reconnecting an identificatory passer with her black heritage is not an easy task, but that is what happens to Grace eventually. In the end, the one who integrates the family is Jeff, the author's cousin and Grace's son, who only now finds out that he is part black. He organizes a family get-together, attended by his grandmother, his father (Grace's son-in-law), Margaret, and her daughters—Shirlee (the author) and Jewelle (the author's sister). Once again, everybody is mindful of Grace and does not openly discuss race or the race of those present. However, the very presence of dark African American men (Shirlee's and Jewelle's husbands), the discussion centered around African tribal music and dance, and Jewelle's demonstration of a Liberian

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dance—all indicate that race is the undercurrent flowing in the room and that the color line, drawn in the middle of this family and separating its members for so many years, is about to be erased. Grace's reaction is interesting: "Grace sat quietly, hugging herself with both arms as if holding herself together...[she] smiled and gripped my mother's hand tightly as she watched her past become her present" (264). If in the beginning Grace had the reaction of someone whose world is slowly crumbling and is trying to hold herself (and that world) together, in the end, she hangs on to the person she actually left behind, to the person she once rejected and did not want to acknowledge, but to whom now (that she is alone) she feels connected by the past.

In the end, after detailing what she calls "the geography of despair and flight and fear," Haizlip herself realizes that her relatives who have crossed the color line have, in fact, *become* white:

> I began the search for my mother's family believing that I was looking for black people "passing for white." And they did indeed pass. But what I ultimately found, I realized, were black people who had become white. After all, if you look white, act white, live white, vacation white, go to school white, marry white and die white, are you not "white"? Can race be simply a matter of context? (266)

Haizlip's last question can be the overarching question in the exploration of race, and its answer is "yes" in so many cases, even in her family: that the uncle who moves to Buffalo "becomes" white and that Margaret is taken into the house of a black relative and "becomes" black are only two cases of "contextual" blackness and whiteness. But even if it seems arbitrary, race nevertheless proves strong enough to break up

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families traumatically. Paradoxically, in trying to escape the racial system and seeking whiteness as being beyond classification, the passers have in fact reinforced the color line for the ones they have left behind, because whiteness is also a part of the racial binary that seeks to contain everyone. In the passage above, the author describes an identificatory passer, or rather, as the case is with her family, a performative-turned-identificatory passer—someone who has willfully erased all "colored" memories from their mind and lives on the other side of the color line. Cases like this show how contradictory and how double-edged passing really is: the passers prove that racial categories can be undermined, because they can cross the color line and claim spaces that they are not entitled to by birth, but they can simultaneously enforce them by insisting on their whiteness, as distinct from and against blackness.

Such people could not exist without those they left behind, however, and Haizlip makes an astonishing discovery:

> It has occurred to me that my mother was the scapegoat for her entire family. As the youngest survivor, she was the logical choice. The family divested all its blackness into her. She was their Other, and she fulfilled the role, by marrying the darkest man and living the blackest life. She literally became her family's heart of darkness. (267)

Margaret becomes the Other, against whom her siblings can compare and find themselves superior. They have projected all their blackness onto her—physical and cultural. Even though by attending the same whites-only school, Margaret proves that she is able to pass as well, she is tacitly chosen to bear the "stigma" of blackness for the rest of the siblings (and her father)—to be the only visibly black member of the

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group, while the others have quietly become invisible, both in the black and the white worlds. Margaret is the family's best kept secret and none of them realizes (or cares) how traumatic it is for her to be left behind and abandoned, as if her father and siblings were "sold down the river." In a way, they have sold themselves to the idea of becoming white, not caring who they affect in the process.

Even in this situation, though, one should not call them race traitors, since there was no *one* race to be betrayed. Haizlip herself discusses this issue at the end of her book. Rather, she insists, they have betrayed Margaret as a *family member*, deciding to use their racial ambiguity to cross the color line. Even Haizlip realizes that there is no one race to betray:

> If asked, I would probably now describe myself as a person of mixed race rather than as black, although I know I will never lose my black feelings. And I have more sympathy for those who made the choice to leave the black part of their lives behind. In my eagerness to condemn, I had never looked to closely at the circumstances that provoked such decisions. (267)

She is ready to understand that more often than not, passing happens out of economic necessity or a desire for physical safety—and that passing itself represents not a betrayal, but a means to cope with all the adversities that a person faces if classified as black. The fact that some (such as Haizlip or even Margaret) have stayed on the "colored" side of the color line even though they would have been able to pass should not prompt negative judgment of those who have decided to pass. Rather, one should judge the very system that makes passing possible in the first place. Haizlip makes

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sure that by the end of her memoir, the reader does not condemn those who are passing, even though the book is clearly written for those who stayed behind.

Apart from testimonials and the close description of her own searches for the forgotten branches of her family tree, Haizlip manages to integrate (no pun intended) some anecdotes that give readers a bleak picture of what it meant to grow up black in mid-20th century America. Most of these anecdotes are told in a casual tone, as if the teller thinks the situation she describes is "normal" because it represents a daily occurrence, but the casual tone itself marks for the reader "unspeakable things" finally spoken—the blatant racism that Haizlip's family and black people had to cope with every day. Two incidents stand out: one is that on their annual car trip to Washington, Margaret would pack up a lunch even though they could afford to eat in a restaurant, but they would not be served once they crossed into New Jersey because they were black. The other one is her memory of police harassment because her parents were perceived by the (white) policemen as a biracial couple: they were pulled out of a traffic jam, where cars were almost at a standstill, and fined for *speeding*. In the process, the police also wanted to know whether Margaret was white, which prompted her husband to ask her to sit in the back with the children and pretend she was white in order to avoid similar incidents. It is a situation in which passing would save lives, and even if Margaret refuses to do so, the author discusses how some of her father's friends would wear chauffeur caps while driving their light-skinned wives, especially through the South. So even though Margaret does not pass, her appearance unsettles whites' expectations of race and causes anxiety. She is—

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like her daughter—"an American ideal" and "an American nightmare," an individual whose very existence proves how permeable the color line is and how the racial binary cannot account for her (15).

If some anecdotes relate specific experiences of her own family or herself, others refer to the racial status quo in America in the past century. The author recognizes that especially in the first decade (1904 is the year she discusses), passing was a phenomenon that occurred with such regularity that theaters and concert halls in Washington, D.C., in a (futile) attempt to spot the passers, hired so-called "Negro spotters" whose job was to detect the black people passing for white—or, in other words, to make them visible. The "Negro spotters" were black themselves, and they were considered "race traitors," and with good reason. They tried to bring passers under the spotlight and make them visible as black. In a show of solidarity, African-American newspapers published the names of the spotters, thus making *them* visible to the black community, so that they would be ostracized and punished for their betrayal. These incidents form a bleak picture of black-white relations that spans the whole past century and offers some explanation for passing. If the reader is not convinced by fictional accounts of what it meant to be black in America, a memoir should offer plenty of evidence. The author is also able to pass, and at the end of her journey describes herself as a "person of mixed race" rather than black. Haizlip's journey is both a physical and a spiritual one, consisting of actual searches and detective work; underlying it, there is a spiritual quest for identity that bears fruit in the end. Even though the author "defines" herself in the beginning of the book,

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giving the reader the impression that she has no doubts as to who she is, the ending proves that she has reached a different conclusion regarding her racial identity. She does not define herself as "black" any longer, but rather as an individual of mixed race. Her position is one that gives her the advantage of perspective:

> My color, I said, had allowed me to sit on top of and look over both sides of the high wall that separates the black and white experiences. And yes, that has been an advantage in the revelation of the dark secrets people have in their white souls (238).

Haizlip realizes that being on the color line has given her a unique perspective on racial categories. She is able to see that they are not fixed and that whiteness is not purely white. Moreover, her liminality puts her directly in the politically charged space that is situated between the races, a space that Renato Rosaldo considers important because it is inhabited by hybrid figures who challenge the status quo by resisting the dominant culture through their positioning on the border:

> Claiming the border amounts to a declaration of interdisciplinary—and narrative—freedom: the border, porous and open, emerges as a zone capable of nourishing a rich grid of "crisscrossed," multiple identities, a celebration of ambiguity .... (Weber 532)[i].

The possibility to celebrate one's ambiguity, free from classifications, without the need to manipulate space and to work within the system is one alternative to passing that Haizlip seems to offer, in order to spare other families the pain of leaving and being left behind.

The dark secrets in people's "white" souls that Haizlip's passage mentions refers to the passers who have adopted white ideology to such an extent that they

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identify with it, leaving behind family members who cannot recover from the trauma of being rejected by their own blood. Even if it was Haizlip's mother, Margaret, who was left behind by the rest of her family, the experience has affected the next generation as well, since the author has spent years tracking down the passing side of her mother's family. The perspective of those left behind by the passer adds to the complexity of the issue and shows how passing can cut both ways: it can undermine white authority, especially when it comes to racial categories because in claiming places the passers are not entitled to by birth and developing tactics to survive within the system, they undermine the myth of pure whiteness maintained by existing power structures. At the same time, however, passing can also reinforce racial categories because of the choice the passer makes: in choosing whiteness as absence of classification, they also choose whiteness as part of a binary. Those left behind fall prey to invisibility—they do not exist any longer for the passer because they are the ones that carry the stigma of blackness—physical and spiritual.

Judy Scales-Trent adds yet another perspective on the issue of passing—more specifically the issue of involuntary passing, which is not often discussed. In The Sweeter the Juice, Haizlip mentions being mistaken for white, but her focus is clearly different and she is not interested in exploring that particular avenue. In Notes of a White Black Woman, Scales-Trent does just that. Published in 1995, the book is what the title suggests—a collection of notes, diary entries, short pieces, and anecdotes, all written from the particular perspective of one standing on the color line. Like Haizlip, Trent realizes that a liminal position between classifications is what

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frees her from the system, and gives her the advantage of a clear view of both sides of the color line, which she discusses.

In the introduction, the author decides to define herself for the reader:

> I am a black American with white skin, an African American with both African and European ancestors. Thus, I live a life that is often disjointed, troubling. I also see the world in a different way. There is something about living on the margins of the race that gives me a unique view of the categories "black" and white, that presents a different picture of white Americans and black Americans. For my position does not allow me the luxury of thinking that the notion of race makes any sense...my existence unsettles expectations of "race." (7)

Unlike other authors who are multiracial but prefer to consider themselves only black, Scales-Trent acknowledges her white and black heritage, but she makes sure to let the reader knows that her whiteness is skin-deep. Even so, her duality gives her a different perspective on life and on racial categories. Her very existence undermines the existence of the myth of white purity and leaves people at a loss as to where she fits. She considers herself living on the margins of the race, so it is appropriate to consider her what Rosaldo calls "a borderland dweller"—one whose existence defies immutable blackness and whiteness, and one who is most feared by white purists, living in the politically charged space between the races. Her appearance unsettles whites and their expectations and provokes unexpected reactions. Similar to Rena Walden and Haizlip, even without passing, Scales-Trent causes anxiety and doubt in the whites whom she encounters because she does not "look" black and she does not conform to white expectations of blackness.

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In "Shock and Fear in America," the author discusses how she considers herself an ordinary person, with the same hopes and fears as those of any other average human. However, she is made to feel different and she is given the measure of that difference in the fact that people (usually whites) perceive *her* as an "object of shock and fear" (57). At first impression, she is seen as white, and then something destroys that perception, and even though she still "looks" white. She unsettles white expectations and, by her very presence, causes anxiety and sometimes anger. In Chesnutt's The House Behind the Cedars, Rena Walden's white racist fiancé experiences the same emotions when he finds out that she is black and passing. Even after she does not pass any longer, the whites Rena encounters try to read her in terms of race and express their need to know what her race is.

Scales-Trent shares describes how a checkout clerk in a store who sees her hair (what she calls "true African hair") and is shocked because the hair does not "match" her white complexion, so he advises her to straighten it in order to look white. He takes it for granted that she wants to pass because of all the advantages whiteness offers. She relates how an old white woman in a restaurant asks her where she is from and physically hits her when she tells her that she is of African and European heritage, but does not know what specific European nationality, since slave owners did not share their heritage with their slaves. Scales-Trent's comments on both incidents reveal that she realizes how explosive her presence is:

> While I was just going along leading my quiet, humdrum life, I apparently inspired shock, fear, anger. These people got upset because there was not a good fit between what they saw and heard, and what they expected to see and hear.

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> This disjuncture upset them and they wanted me to do something to make them feel better. (59)

Like Clare Kendry in Larsen's Passing, the author disrupts these people's vision of a world ordered into black and white, clear, pure, and separate. Their reaction is Procrustean: they want *her* to conform and make changes in order to fit *their* vision of the world, unwilling to accept the truth that *their* perspective is skewed and rigid. The same reaction is provoked in white people every time a passer is outed: anxiety, anger, and shock. Chesnutt and Larsen have written on this very reaction in their novels.

According to Scales-Trent, one other reaction of whites is complete denial, compounded by a limitless arrogance that the world *is* the way they see it. In the piece "Definitions," the author tells a white man at a party that she is black. His reaction is unexpected: "He replied, with a smile: 'No, you're not.'" (72). The interesting fact was not that the words were uttered with shock, denial, amazement, or even dismay, but "calmly, with a certainty that the speaker, not I, controlled my identity" (74). The certainty comes, of course, with whiteness and with the deeply imbedded belief that whites are the ones who *make* the definitions—and they *are*, since the racial categories are white-created—and that race is about visibility. Behind the speaker stand centuries of history when whites decided who was black and who joined their privileged ranks, and centuries of legally awarded power to do so. Train conductors on Jim Crow trains had the power to ask people to move from one carriage to another only by deciding who was black and who was white. In a clear association with the Jim Crow era, Scales-Trent tells the reader that nowadays there

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still are clerks who are empowered to do so and decide on one's race without asking. They are still a part of a system that seems ludicrous when it comes to people like the author (since they prove how tenuous it is) but a system that nevertheless can be deadly as she contemplates "the categories, the racial purity laws, the lives that are stomped, mangled, ruined because of those categories and those laws" (74).

It is no wonder, then, that in such circumstances, defining oneself—even racially—is a sign of owning oneself. From this perspective, passing also undermines the intentions of whites to decide an individual's racial identity. But the author sees passing from yet another point of view. In the piece "Lost Great-Uncle Charles," she relates how Charles ran away from home when he was young with the intention to pass and never returned. Scales-Trent sees her uncle as an immigrant to a new country—aptly named "Whiteland"—a political refugee who could not stay in his native land because he "got tired of being persecuted for holding the very dangerous political belief that he was, indeed, a man" (97). Like Chesnutt, Larsen, Johnson, and Haizlip, Scales-Trent does not see passing as a betrayal. Political refugees in other countries are not considered traitors for escaping a regime that threatened their lives. On the contrary, the regime—or, in this case—the racial/racist system is at fault for causing refugees to seek safety and passers to cross the color line: "I think about how mean a country must be to force someone to make such a cruel choice" (98). The author adds a new dimension to passing, a new way to read it and to interpret it, and, like Haizlip, dwells on the ones left behind by the passer. It seems that there is an overwhelming desire to keep track and know all the family one has—and it is

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especially important for the African American family to keep track of all its members because of a troubled and traumatic history. Passing also breaks families, and the racial system is ultimately to blame, as the cause of passing, for the estrangement of blood kin from one another, as the author herself recognizes.

She also discusses the notion of mestiza consciousness, developed by Gloria Anzaldua[ii], a notion helpful to describe her own perspective: the necessity to develop a "tolerance for contradictions" and for ambiguity, to operate in a "pluralistic mode," to stand where "phenomena tend to collide," and where "the possibility of uniting all that is separate occurs" (155). The same position is described—in different words—by Haizlip: a position that escapes classification, that eludes being boxed in a narrow category and treated as such. This is, perhaps is a better alternative to passing, since it does not cause so much trauma to the passer and the ones left behind. It is also a position whose hybridity and liminality opens possibilities for freedom and creates anxiety among whites.

The third author I want to discuss, Gregory Howard Williams, spent his life first as white, then as black, and ends up in the same liminal position as Haizlip and Scales-Trent. He shares his experience in his memoir entitled Life on the Color Line: The True Story of a White Boy Who Discovered He Was Black, published in 1995. "My black grandmother and my white grandmother both died in the 1970s. They lived within two miles of each other, but they never met," Williams writes, effectively describing one strange aspect of a difficult life spent on both sides of the color line (283). The reason why his grandmothers never met was because one was white and

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the other black. Williams' father, "Buster," is the pivotal figure in the young boy's life and a larger-than-life character who dominates the memoir. Himself of mixed race, James Anthony Buster Williams, is portrayed as a very intelligent but easily bored idealistic alcoholic who in turns, makes and breaks the lives of his two sons, Greg (the author) and Mike. After he drops out of Howard University, Anthony returns to his home town of Muncie, Indiana, and has an affair with a young white woman. They decide to get married and to move away from Muncie, so that Tony ("Buster" in Muncie) can pass for white. It is interesting to see how de Certeau's theory works here. Tony's manipulation of space is intelligent, as he works within the system and his tactics pay off: away from Muncie, nobody can tell that he is "colored," so he owns and operates a roadside café in Virginia. Since Tony is brought up "black" by his mother, who still lives in Muncie's black neighborhood, he starts off by performing whiteness. The years spent on the whiter side of the color line, however, turn him into an identificatory passer. He subverts and reinforces racial categories at the same time: he observes them by serving white customers in the front of his café and black customers in the back. However—and this is where he manages to subvert racial laws—in the 1950s in Virginia it was against the law to serve both races under the same roof, but that's exactly what Tony Williams does, creating a space where the two races can actually come together in the deeply segregated South. The café itself—a most unlikely place for racial integration, such as it was—is symbolic of Tony's real position in terms of race: neither black nor white, yet both.

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In this atmosphere, Tony and his wife are bringing up their four children who have no inkling that legally they would be considered black, even though Greg and Mike have some suspicions when they visit their mother's parents in Muncie:

> We were always greeted warmly in Muncie, but hardly a day passed without some abrupt silence when I entered a room filled with relatives. The silence indicated to me that aunts, uncles, and even older cousins shared a secret I must not know. (16)

Williams introduces to the reader yet another perspective on passing: that of the passer who passes unbeknownst to him. The secrecy that surrounds their racial makeup is necessary for their survival in Virginia, but in Muncie it is kept by his mother's white family out of shame.

After one of their visits to Indiana, his mother took Mike and Greg's younger siblings and left because of the physical abuse she had to suffer at her husband's hands. From then on, Tony Williams drinks all his businesses and possessions away and Greg and Mike are literally starving. Finally, when their poverty reaches the extreme, Tony Williams decides to return to Muncie to his mother. This is the moment at which he tells Mike and Greg that they are not white. The boys' reactions are predictable:

> I didn't understand Dad. I knew I wasn't colored, and neither was he. My skin was white. All of us are white, I said to myself. But for the first time, I had to admit that Dad didn't exactly look white. His deeply tanned skin puzzled me as I sat there trying to classify my own father. Goose bumps covered my arms as I realized that whatever he was, I was. Colored! Colored! Colored! (33)

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Greg's reaction to his fall into race is reminiscent of the one the ex-colored man has after he finds out he is black—he looks at his mother with "white" eyes and "sees" her blackness. Greg does the same, using his own white background and literally trying to classify his father, reading him as a text, and then having a physical reaction to the realization that he belongs in the same category with his father. The knowledge terrifies him so much that his instinctive response to it is denial. But he realizes almost immediately that denying his blackness does not mean he can get rid of it, so he automatically displaces it on his father:

> The veil dropped from his face and features. Before my eyes he was transformed from a swarthy Italian to his true self—a high-yellow mulatto. My father was a Negro! We were colored! After ten years in Virginia on the white side of the color line, I knew what that meant. (34)

In a DuBoisian turn of phrase, Williams describes how young Greg "sees" his father's blackness where before there was none, and even if he tries at first to make his father its sole bearer, he realizes eventually that he has to acknowledge his own. Greg's reaction is typical for someone brought up in white ideology—and also someone whose father has become an identificatory passer to such a degree that he feels enraged when he suspects his wife has an affair with a black man. Young Greg thinks he knows what it means to be black, but nothing has prepared him in his life on the white side of the color line for the life that is waiting for him in Muncie, Indiana, this time in the "colored" part of the town.

Greg Williams' life illustrates deCerteau's theory of space and place: while living with his family in Virginia, his father carves a space for them, finding a way to

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manipulate space within the rules imposed by the dominant culture. Going back to Muncie, however, means returning to a place where the existing power structures go unchallenged, or in other words, it means having to accept a place designated for the blacks by the power structures. And so, Greg finds himself in the absurd situation of being white in Virginia and "colored" in Indiana, as his father tells him: "we can still be white, but not in Muncie" (34). The color line runs through the town and divides it deeply, with firm rules against crossing it:

> "This is the Projects, boys," Dad explained. "Colored families live on this side of Madison, and crackers the other. Stay outta there. If the crackers learn you're colored, they'll beat the hell out of you. You gotta be careful here, too. Coloreds don't like half-breeds either." (38)

It seems that Greg and his brother are actually paying the price for their father's crossing of the line, since they can't find their place anywhere: the "colored" children reject them because they "look" white and the whites are suspicious of them because they thwart their expectations of how "coloreds" are "supposed" to look. Even though they are too young to know it, this liminal position is one of power in relation to the dominant structures. Paradoxically, it is a position of power to undermine those structures, but also of tremendous vulnerability because in-betweenness or hybridity is not acceptable as a racial classification. In essence, it is the only position that is unequivocally beyond classifications and it has possibilities of freedom from the system. However, one could not overtly stay in that politically charged space in the first half of the 20th century without incurring the wrath of racists, and the Williams boys find out on their own how that wrath is manifested in daily encounters with

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racial hate and discrimination. When Greg's first school friends, the white Molly and Sally, find out that he is related to one of the black students, they reject him. The school episode, which echoes The Souls of Black Folk, is the first in a series of harsh rejections that the boys have to endure from both races, while doing what their father calls "learning how to be niggers" (58).

In The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man, the narrator explains that his children who ignorant of their racial makeup and of the fact that they are passing, but the reader does not get to see things from the children's perspective. Williams' memoir adds this dimension to passing and acquaints the reader with this particular perspective. While living in Virginia, the boys are convinced that they are white and they never even question their racial makeup. In this case, the boys don't even define themselves as white because it was not necessary and because whiteness is (partly) absence of classification. Changing locations means in this case changing racial makeup and lifestyle—drastic changes that take a toll on both boys in different ways. Mike has the makings of another "Buster," taking after their father with his life and contacts in the underworld of Muncie. Greg realizes that the only way out of the abject poverty of the Muncie projects is education, so he strives to do as well as he can in school, in spite of the discrimination and harassment he has to face almost daily from both the white and the black students. Williams makes another intriguing point: that their father is the one who grooms his sons to turn out so differently in life, since he traces the color line between them:

> Ladies and Gentlemen, tonight I am going to present my two sons in performance. Greg, my white boy, is going to

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> quote Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, and Mike, the nigger and small-time hustler—just like me—will exhibit the same athletic prowess I did during my Golden Gloves days. (154)

Tony Williams is the one who turns his sons into stereotypes and into a freak show. He is the main cause for the breakup of the family (since he physically abused his wife almost every day before she decides to run away) and he is an alcoholic whose rages make him often threaten his sons' lives. Not only does he bring complete disfunctionality into the family, but he also tries, in God-like fashion, to dictate the future of his sons by deciding on their race. He wants Greg to leave Muncie and pass so that he can become a lawyer, but he has no such expectations for Mike, on whom he displaces the blackness of the family. In this instance, Tony, as a former passer, reinforces the racial divide so much that he places it between his two sons: one is supposed to "act white" and continue his education, while the other one is supposed to remain "black" and give up any hope for a better future than poverty in Muncie's slums. It is interesting that Tony considers himself black, according to his own words—since he likens Mike to him (a "small time hustler"), but his act of deciding his children's racial makeup is a fundamentally "white" gesture—the stuff Plessy vs. Ferguson is made of.

After marrying a white girl, Tony decides to move away from Muncie and pass. He is a performative passer and the obvious reasons for passing are economic. It seems that his plan of improving his financial situation starts with getting a white girl pregnant. Being with a white woman makes it easier for him to pass as an Italian and to find various financial opportunities that he brings finally to fruition. There are

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times when the family is living very well in Virginia, but poor business management and his alcoholism are the main causes of the major financial losses that ultimately lead to his and the boys' return to Muncie. One other reason for passing is actually coming from a mischievous desire to con whites into believing that he is white as well. This aspect is reminiscent of the ex-colored man's attitude: Tony confesses he sometimes has a laugh about how easy it is to fool whites. Greg's theory is that Tony has always hated his white side, so his passing can be construed as revenge on whites: "Dad related how, when passing for white in Virginia, he became the first "spook" president of the whites-only Forty-and-eighth American Legion Post" (63). It definitely looks like a "capital joke" that Tony plays on whites and a way of getting his revenge on his rich white father in whose house his mother was a servant, a father who never acknowledged him. As a passer, he also has access to nightmarish images: he passes and infiltrates the festive white crowd gathered to witness the last lynching in Indiana in 1930: "Four thousand white citizens had stormed the jail and applauded as the youths were killed. Dad shared the horror of Indiana's lynching with Muncie's black community. It was as if he had walked into hell and come out with a report on it" (64). Acting as a spy for the black community seems to be the extent of subversiveness that Tony Williams' passing reaches. Even so, he wants Greg to continue his education and pass into the white world to become a lawyer and realize his dream. What Greg wants for himself is—as usual—irrelevant to Tony: "He's gonna be the man I wanted to be" (64).

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The expectations that Tony has for his son are a burden on Greg, especially since he decides he does not want to pass for multiple reasons, one of them being the categorical rejection from the white community as soon as his racial makeup was known: "too much had happened to me in Muncie to be a part of the white world that had rejected me so completely" (157). He is also convinced that passing was one of the causes of his father's downfall and he is perplexed about why Tony would want his son to go down a road that proved to be treacherous and dangerous for him. Throughout the book, Greg seems to be in denial about the fact that Tony Williams does not and cannot love anybody but himself—this being perhaps a trait of the addicted—so even Greg's future is regarded by his father as his personal vindication of both real and perceived injustice. But even though Greg is in denial about his father, he definitely knows his own identity: "No matter what Bobby, Dad, or anyone else said or thought, I knew who I was and who I wanted to be" (157). He hears the story of Walter White, the blond-haired, blue-eyed executive director of the NAACP who chose not to pass, and he makes the same decision. One need not assume that Greg makes this decision in order not to betray the black race; part of his decision is based on the utter rejection he has experienced from whites in Muncie, his white family included. His acknowledgment of his dual identity can be found in his choosing a white woman to marry, even though he decides against passing.

Being brought up as white, Greg has to learn how to be black, like the ex-colored man. However, unlike Johnson' hero, Greg does not have the time to learn it from books. He is brutally uprooted from one situation and lifestyle and plunged into

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another so different that it becomes a matter of survival to adapt to the new life as fast as possible. He has to learn to deal with the daily embarrassment of picking his father up from the bars where he passes out in an alcohol-induced haze and carrying him home through the neighborhood. He also has to deal with the insults and demeaning abuse that his father piles on him every time he is drunk—which is most of the time. He has to cope with the abject poverty in which they have to live when every penny went to feed his father and his grandmother's addiction. This is only the embarrassment Greg incurs at home and is part of being black inasmuch as his family is black and lives in the "colored" part of town, as a result of discrimination and segregation. But what perhaps hurts even more is the discrimination he is subjected to almost daily from white people whom he knows. As a high school student and a member of the high school basketball team, Greg and a few of his black teammates are forced to face an angry white mob among whom he recognizes classmates who have rooted for him at games: "They could see we were four well-known Muncie Central athletes. These same students cheered wildly when we mastered conference rivals. From somewhere in the darkness, I heard, "Get the black bastards" (225). This is one of the lessons he is taught daily—what it means to be black in a town where racial tensions are running high.

But perhaps the most painful lesson he learns is taught by the white side of his family. The two families lived in the same town for years but have never even crossed paths, with the exception of a hurried visit from his white racist grandmother who was scared to drive in the "colored" section of the town and has always been

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openly hostile to the boys because of their race. Greg will also learn later that she did not even bring the boys the letters and money their white mother sends for them. One other incident happens at school: "At lunch I entered the cafeteria and saw Ben Cook, a white cousin. In the joy of a new beginning, I gave him a friendly smile. His eyes widened in panic, and he quickly avoided my gaze" (190). One horror-producing scenario in a white racist family is, of course, the discovery of "colored" branches in the family tree. Judging from the reaction of Greg's cousin, it is clear that the white side of his family did not care to be associated with them in any way. But perhaps the most painful blow comes from their mother whom they do not see for years. Experiencing a deep feeling of abandonment that left its traces on both boys, their mother's departure has broken the family in two, along the color line: Mike and Greg "become" black like their father, and their younger brother and sister "stay" white with their mother. When they finally get to see their mother after ten long years, she does not want to talk or even find out about their lives as "colored;" all she wants to talk about is how she wants them to go and live with her in Washington, and of course, pass for white:

> We could reenter her world if we rejected the one in which we had lived for the past ten years. She knew little about our life in Muncie, nor did she want to know. She expected us to move back into her life without a past, without roots, without feelings for the people who have sheltered and cared for us when our need was greatest. (281)

It is interesting that this is the final step that Chesnutt's hero, John Walden, takes in The House Behind the Cedars. John's move is away from his mother, but the fact remains that he wants to lose himself among whites, which is something Greg cannot,

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and will not, do because he is one of the ones left behind by his mother and he knows how it feels. Since his mother left the family taking away his younger brother and sister (who were passing), their blackness gets displaced onto the children left behind—Mike and Greg. When asked why she did not visit them in so many years, their mother answers that—as a white woman—she was afraid of the neighborhood and of her ex-husband. Since her primary aim was to hide from Tony, her fear becomes stronger than the desire to communicate with the children she has left behind.

Even though the blackness of their passing siblings was metaphorically displaced onto Mike and Greg, their appearance always confuses and frightens white people, especially after they learn that they are "colored." The white reactions betray a deep-seated fear of blackness, of mixed blood, of the possible unreliability of the entire racial system—the very same gamut of emotions that both Haizlip and Scales-Trent discuss and the one whites experience when a passer is outed. Mike and Greg accomplish all this without even having to pass. When the boys are in an accident and their "visibly" black grandmother is in the same car, the state trooper interrogates them:

> On the way to the hospital he asked us if we were runaways. We denied it.
> "Then what are you doing with those colored people?"
> "They're family," I said.
> "Don't lie to me. You better tell me the truth before you really get into trouble.
> You're lying. We can keep you in jail until you tell the truth, and not some bullshit about being kin to those niggers." (142)

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The trooper works himself into an anxious/angry state of mind when he reluctantly realizes he has to let himself believe that the boys are telling the truth. He does not *want* them to be kin to the black people because the visual racial marks cannot be seen on the boys and his expectations of what "colored" people look like are completely unsettled.

Greg has a moment of realization when a white café owner, upon finding out about his racial makeup, wants to exhibit him as a freak to his customers: he remembers watching a KKK rally on TV and listening to a speaker ranting against "the bestial mongrel mulatto, the dreg of human society" (91). In the beginning, Greg does not realize who the KKK leader was talking about, but all of a sudden, he has an epiphany:

> He was talking about me. I was the Klan's worst nightmare. I was what the violence directed at the integration was all about. I was what they hated and wanted to destroy. And that was the biggest puzzle in the world to me because I had absolutely nothing. (91)

Actually, Greg does not realize that he possesses the object of contention and the most valuable property: the white blood that racist whites want to keep "pure" and pass to another generation of racists who would keep the system in place. It is a coveted property because its possession assures the owner a place on the privileged side of the color line—if one wants it. Young Greg does not understand all this and cannot fathom why he is hated so much when he clearly feels so disempowered by his poverty and race.

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The situation gets even more complex when Greg is in high school and starts dating. The cardinal rule is—of course—"black boys do not talk to, flirt with, or date white girls" (165). It is a rule which Greg obeys. However, when he dates a "colored" girl, the reaction of the town is surprising to him:

> I began to notice cars slowing down and drivers gawking at us from the heavily traveled street. Even among our classmates, unfriendly faces followed our every move. I wrestled with the fact Muncie would not permit me to date white girls, and apparently couldn't tolerate seeing me with black girls either. Muncie's white community would only be satisfied with an inconspicuous and unobtrusive eunuch. My very existence made people uncomfortable and shattered too many taboos. (165-66)

White Muncie's reaction to Greg dating a white girl is not surprising. They react to what they consider the "tainting" of the white blood. However, seeing Greg with a black girl, whites react to his white blood and to the possibility of its further mixing with "colored" blood. The community reacts negatively to the general idea that Greg has grown up and has a sex drive. His very existence reminds them of sex across the color line, and no matter whom Greg would choose as his sexual partner, he will also have sex across the color line—a fact that produces anxiety in racist whites because it weakens the system they are trying to maintain.

Even if Greg chooses not to pass, his subversiveness is made obvious by the reactions that he unwillingly causes in whites: they would like to see him contained in a fixed place, but even they do not know what that place is. Williams seems to think it is on the color line, as the title of his book shows, and he is the first to admit that it is not an option that whites are prepared to accept because it would weaken the racist

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system. He realizes however, that it is a politically charged place and a place not very many have been able to occupy, since those like him—phenotypically white—either passed or spent the rest of their lives trying to explain that they were, in fact, "colored." Neither option seems the right one for Greg, who, like Haizlip and Scales-Trent, thinks that hybridity and liminality, when practiced overtly, are the better alternatives, the ones that hold the key to freedom from classification. At the end of his book, with an optimism that is not justified by the way he has been treated by whites almost all his life, Williams expresses hope that maybe his position will help bridge the gap between races, bringing them closer. That would be true perhaps if racism were eradicated, but the way it stands right now, Williams' position serves to weaken the racial/racist system and to free him of classifications. It is true that if asked to classify himself, he will answer that he is black; however, he also makes several references to being in between classifications—a position that some of the passing characters I have analyzed so far are striving for, but are not free to assume.

In the end, however, all three authors agree that the racial system in America is to blame for the choice to pass that inflicts pain on so many because the color line ends up running through the same family and separating its members. Haizlip delves into the pain caused by rejection and shows what it means to be left behind by those who decide to pass and to become "the heart of darkness" of the whole family, or its only black member. Scales-Trent comments on how it feels to unsettle white people and their vision of the world, born out of the deep belief in white superiority and purity. Finally, Williams shares his extraordinary experience as an unaware passer

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who learns what it means to be black five decades after DuBois made his prediction about the 20th century. So even though in these memoirs the types of passing are not so clear cut, the concepts are still used as analytical tools for reading these works and discussing the ways in which the characters unsettle the racial system. The very issue of racial mobility, which is at the heart of the concept of passing, illuminates possibilities for freedom from racist classifications. By being racially mobile and taking advantage of that mobility, by being invisible when the system wants them visible and contained, by causing white anxiety, and finally by claiming spaces to which they are not entitled, these characters that the authors discuss, along with their stories, succeed in pointing out the tenuousness of the entire racial system on which the American society is based.

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[i] For more about Rosaldo's border theory, see his Culture and the Remaking of Social Analysis. Boston: Beacon Press, 1989.

[ii] See Gloria Anzaldua. Borderlands: The New Mestiza. San Franciso: Aunt Lute Books, 1987.

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