CHAPTER FIVE

PERFORMING PASSING

Although the logic of the paradigm I have established and followed would prompt the discussion of race next—and for a while I did indeed contemplate writing about how black becomes black and white becomes white—I have decided after all not to continue with a chapter titled “Performing Race.” My abandoning this plan has been necessitated in part by the enormity of the topic and in part by my own resistance to totalizing structures. So, rather than just scratching the surface of the problematics of race performativity, I turn now to a particular aspect of performative subjectivities, passing, where I demonstrate the subversion of the inflections of gender, sexuality, and race alike.

Passing is a term originally used in the context of race, but has been recently extended to cover other forms of boundary crossings. As a general term, it involves various—often multiple—transgressions between such binary oppositions as man/woman, white/black, or heterosexual/homosexual. A dramatic or theatrical replaying of existing social scripts, passing is predominantly performance. Gender and race passing, for example, are performances which uncover the purely imitative and constructed nature of gender and race by ignoring, transforming, or literally re-dressing the “biological”: gender performance overwrites “true” sex, while race performance goes counter to skin color defined by law or lineage. In other words, these are performances where the binaries of feminine/masculine and black/white leave the body marked as their “natural” site and become staged or acted out. In such instances of passing, gender and race are visibly constructed in a catachrestic manner, lacking both a literal referent where ontologies might be located and an “original” which might be copied and cited.

Dislodged from the body, race and gender will be seen as constructed through institutions and discourses; foregrounded as both product and process, passing will reveal itself as series of performance acts of oscillation and transgression between boundaries, categories, and subjectivities. As an instance of transgression, passing often appears as a threat: it threatens the order believed to have been solid; it threatens identity categories thought to have been securely planted in our bodies; threatens positions of domination and hegemony, with all their rights and privileges, which are now “usurped,” as Lynn Friedli puts it (qtd. in Ginsberg 13), by the passer.
As much as I might agree with Juda Bennett in seeing the term passing “inelegant” (36), its original meaning—coming from the slip of paper that, preventing slaves from being taken for fugitives, granted free movement to them (36)—can be transferred to the realm of gender too. As such, by gender passing I will mean that elaborate performance through which the “passing figure” will be allowed free movement as the person produced in this performance. By opposing power relations, the passer will violate the norms of subjection and critique discursive boundaries; by what Gayatri Spivak calls “enabling violation” in the post-colonial context (Spivak Reader 19), the passer will be self-constructed as a subject with agency.

The term gender passing, just like its constituent term gender, exhibits a strong asymmetry: instead of referring equally to passing in either direction, it highlights the marked elements—“gender” as an attribute of woman—as its target configuration. In other words, in the transparent meaning of gender passing womanhood—as the marked element of the man/woman binary—will be the predominant identity inflection targeted. This is so in spite of the fact that asymmetrical power relations would privilege the reverse—as they do in the case of race passing, where the predominant direction of passing is from the disempowered black position to the more powerful white position. In my reading there is a very important reason for this gender asymmetry: while man’s is the obvious, unmarked/unseen, and transparent position, woman’s is palpable, marked/seen, and opaque (to continue the transparency/opacity metaphor). She is the one who “has” gender, whose gender is more obviously “made,” its constructedness visible and legible, therefore the technologies available for its imitative construction in passing are more prevalent.

Moreover, the transgression of the woman who passes as a man is more serious: she will be a usurper of male privilege indeed, a female Prometheus who steals the fire—this time not from Zeus but man in general. The woman transgressor seems to commit a grave crime when she dissociates masculinity—which, as Judith Halberstam explains, is still the property of the white male heterosexual (2)—from the male body.6 In this case, part of woman’s crime, I would add, is that masculinity’s appropriation by the female body makes a most subversive claim unambiguously: that masculinity is as much of a construction as

6 This is an even graver crime than the foregrounding of masculinity on the male body, which happens, as Halberstam claims, when masculinity is performed by a gay man, such as Agent Q in the James Bond film Goldeneye (4), or when it appears in excess and turns into its own parody, in Bond’s own performance (4), or, to take another example, in the case of Walt Whitman constructing himself as the hairy-chested virile man.
Performing passing

femininity. Gender passing from female to male, in other words, will undo the marked/unmarked distinction by foregrounding the constructedness of the “unmarked universal” subject, and will also undo unmarked as dominant and invisible equation (see Lisa Walker 14). Female masculinity is obviously one such instance when masculinity leaves the male body: this is masculinity in women which appears as the ultimate transgression; this is the appropriation not only of gender but also of power, as well as of unmarked transparency. (Masculinity’s wider reassignment to the female body is a rather recent phenomenon only, part of “postmodern cool,” as Susan Bordo points out [Male Body 41]). In spite of the many examples of cross-dressing, female-to-male transsexuals, thirdness, or cross-identifying women (which Halberstam cites throughout Female Masculinity), this female masculinity has not found its entry in literature to the degree a man’s passing for a woman has. I too will discuss the mechanism of gender passing through examples only where womanhood is being performed.

Passing is a most complex phenomenon. Two kinds of passing can be discerned from the perspective of binaries. Both can be shown to exploit the imitative structure of gender and reveal, in Butler’s words, “gender itself to be an imitation” (Psychic 145); both are, moreover, parodies “of the idea of the natural and the original” (Gender Trouble 31), since what they copy are technologies and not “essences.” Of the two kinds, the first refers to the replacement of one pole for the other in the system of binaries; this is the case when a man “passes over” for a woman or a black person for white, for example. This type, which I will call full passing, is always performance, since it stages existing normative identities. The other kind which I call play passing, or, in the case when passing occurs within the sphere of gender, gender play, is the interrogation and subversion of the binary system; as such, these instances can be seen as the performative creations of new ontologies. It is much like mimicry, to adopt the meaning of Homi Bhabha’s concept of colonial mimicry: of wanting to be “almost the same, but not quite” (86). While full passing will aim to deceive (to be altogether “the same”), gender play will want to reveal its own transgression by constantly producing its own slippage. While the first is a deadly serious game, where the stakes are high indeed, in the second playfulness is a key factor.

I will start with full passing. By openly deploying imitative-mimetic processes taken from the “other” in the binary, this performance foregrounds the theatrical basis of gender and race, and gives a high visibility to playful repetition or mime—to be reenacted by a person of the “opposite” gender or race. As a narrative which “assumes that there is a self that masquerades as another kind of self,” as Halberstam puts it, full passing will limit gender or race identification by allowing movement between the binaries of man and woman or black and white only. This binary understanding of passing—when the passer can only step from one category into the “opposite” other—involves the either/or logic of power relations. This is especially obvious in the example of race passing, seen by Elaine...
K. Ginsberg as “an attempt to move from the cultural margin to the center,” into the “dominant race” (8). Concomitantly, there is often a moral element involved: the passer is considered a trespasser, while passing is seen as deception, “an attempt to claim status and privilege falsely” (Ginsberg 8). This element of deception, as well as the claiming of privilege falsely, is present even in instances where the passer masquerades as belonging to the subordinated group: in the case of gender passing, when a man passes as a woman. In these instances, however, as I will show, the male passer assumes only more power (in the legal, sexual, or political arena) by masquerading as woman.

But, as I mentioned above, this is only one kind of passing, from one pole to the other. There exists that other kind too, play passing or mimicry, where the passer refuses the logic of dichotomous thinking and assumes both gender and race to be hybrid categories, occupying a continuum rather than opposite poles. So, together with the insistence of passing as “almost the same, but not quite” comes a multiplication of categories for constructions between the two poles. As Susan Bordo puts it, “some people are trying to reconstruct the categories as well as their bodies” (Male Body 41). This claim is, of course, more acceptable in the case of race, where genetic mixing will allow a plethora of unforeseen gradations between “black” and “white.” But the new “colors” brought about by play passing are not only about genetic mixing: they are also about construction and self-construction along socially more mutable categories. Bordo writes about the younger generation who “truly and honestly don’t think of themselves as one race or another” (41; emphasis in original) and about cultures with greater diversity even among gender categories, among them, India, the Philippines, or Portugal, where “[t]he travestis . . . are male prostitutes who adopt feminine names, clothing, and hairstyles, take female hormones and inject themselves with silicon in order to create breasts, wide hips, and large buttocks; yet they do not identify themselves as women” (40; emphasis in original). It is playful approximation and in-betweenness, as well as the opening of the field for new, transitional categories.

Confounding the logic of binary thinking, gender play will allow for new possibilities of gender configurations to come about by showing that all identities are constructed, acted out, through a series of normative performances (when woman performs femininity, for example). Once femininity leaves the body of the woman, what was purportedly the “essential” site naturalized for its performance, gender ceases to be a binary category: not conforming to the two poles of the binary, gender will be constructed at variable or random points of the continuum, making for multiple and contingent gender categories (depending, for example, on the imbrications of other identity categories such as race, class, sexuality, nationality). Moreover, gender play will contribute to the fundamental destabilization of the categories themselves, creating a “category crisis” defined by Marjorie Garber as “a failure of definitional distinction, a borderline that
becomes permeable, that permits of border crossings from one (apparently distinct) category to another” (16)

Let me give some examples. George Harris’s Spanish masquerade and Eliza Harris’s cross-dressing in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin satisfy all the specifications of full passing: they aim at deception, wanting to fully enact the “other” race and gender, and make some alterations on their bodies. George’s full passing is proclaimed a “dangerous game” (123), one of life and death, where he not only dresses up as a Spanish gentleman but changes his skin and hair color too:

“I am pretty well disguised, I fancy,” said the young man, with a smile. “Little walnut bark has made my yellow skin a genteel brown, and I've dyed my hair black; so you see I don't answer to the advertisement at all.” (123)

Similarly, when, in another deadly serious game, Eliza dresses up as a man before crossing Lake Erie, she adapts “her slender and pretty form the articles of man's attire,” cuts her “black curly hair” (410), and is learning to take long steps in an effort to “try to look saucy” (412). No slippage is allowed in either case; otherwise they would be caught and returned to their owners. Historically, cross-dresser women in the Civil War, of whom there were probably around four hundred, according to Elizabeth Young (184), made every attempt to perform full passing. One of the better-known passers, Loretta Velasquez/Lt. Harry Buford went as far as “combining gender masquerade with heterosexual seduction” (Young 192). But, to take an example of gender play, George Sand sports a masculine look by wearing pants and smoking cigars without wanting to pass fully as a man; hers is a performance that meant to reveal its slippage. The effort to not fully hide but highlight this playful slippage from a linguistic-orthographic perspective is there even in the name George, spelled purposefully differently, in the English way, without an s. If much of passing is about visibility—or “specularity,” as Ginsberg claims (2)—then this kind of gender play is much about making the slippage visible too.

Wholly constructed in processes that challenge biology, gender passing provides a serious argument against gender essentialism. Of course, both full passing and gender play relate to biology in certain ways: the first attempts at some alterations of the body, “biology” (like skin or hair), while the second applies changes on the body, but usually not to the body. But not even do the alterations performed on the body in full passing involve radical sex changes as in the case of transgendered/transsexed bodies, for example. We could say that sex is made irrelevant in both forms of gender passing; it is through gendering institutions and practices only that gender performance is conducted. All gender traits will be produced by gendering institutions, discourses, practices, and performances independent of whether man performs womanhood (in the Mark Twain and
the David Hwang texts), or, in the case of the as yet “unsexed” child’s performance, a woman comes about without regard to biology (in the Nabokov text).

Passing, finally, usually does not occur within one category only, that of gender, for example, but involves other inflections of identity too, like race and sexuality. Since identities are not made up of single inflections but are formed of complex imbrications of such inflections, the passing figure will most often be seen as passing along more than one axis. Therefore, gender passing will involve, more often than not, additional forms of passing, between white/black, straight/gay, genuine/fake, original/copy, subject/object, for example.

I turn now to my three texts informed by gender passing.

Full passing: (cross-)dressing and constructing the body:
Mark Twain, Is He Dead?

Mark Twain’s late comedy *Is He Dead?* was thought to have been lost for over a hundred years. Written in Vienna in 1898, it was published in 2003 only, just in time perhaps to offer another supporting argument for theories on the performative construction of the subject.

The play was inspired by the fate of what was considered the most famous painting of the time, *The Angelus* of Jean-François Millet, the object of an “intense bidding war” between France and America (see Fishkin 159), to sell finally for the amazing price of 550,000 francs. The issue problematized in the play concerns the fact that while artists are unable to sell their paintings during their lives, heirs and art dealers make fortunes on these same paintings after the death of the artists. The Millet in Twain’s play cannot sell a single painting, not even the one recognized as a masterpiece by all, *The Angelus*, and not for the meager sum of 275 or even one hundred francs. Bound by a contract to the villain of the play, the art dealer Bastien André, who wants to ruin the painter, Millet and his pupils decide to stage the master’s death. Giving him three “last months” to enjoy his creative frenzy and to introduce Millet’s heir, his “twin sister” “Widow Daisy Tillou” (played by the cross-dressing Millet of course), they first spread the news of his imminent death, then start selling his paintings. Some of the same buyers appear, now happy to pay 80,000 francs for pieces they refused to buy for a hundred earlier. The art dealer also reappears, insisting that he owns the pictures (the same which he considered invaluable before) by contract. Having to attend his own funeral, Millet/Widow Tillou now must find a way to get rid of the art dealer, who wants to marry the widow in exchange for burning the contract. The painter passing as his own twin sister takes a desperate step and performs a peculiar Swiftian undressing ceremony for André, who thinks he is unnoticed in the room, as she removes her wig, glass-eye, false teeth, and even wooden legs. Having successfully disposed of André, Millet reveals the whole theatrics to his
grieving fiancée, together with the new plan that he will reenter art life under the name of Placide Duval, a “marvelously successful imitator of the late lamented” (128)—and the whole victorious gang rejoices to the simultaneous sound of the Marseillaise, Yankee Doodle, God Save the Queen, and Die Wacht am Rhein.

Three circumstances are relevant from the perspective of my argument: Millet’s passing as a woman, the foregrounding of “her” constructed body, and the plan to reintroduce Millet as his own imitator. Of course, these incidents are not without parallel in Twain’s works. Male cross-dressing appears in several Twain texts, among them Huckleberry Finn and Pudd’nhead Wilson, fitting well into his larger fascination with doubles and duplicities. Throughout his career Twain was intrigued by mistaken identities and the dilemma, described by Susan Gillman, as “whether one can tell people apart, differentiate among them” (5). Clemens, who took the rather revealing pseudonym Twain, was fascinated by masks, twins, double personalities, look-alikes, impersonators, as well as impostures: “the pose of a pose, the fake of a fake” (Gillman 6). He liked to amuse his audience with what he called “double jokes,” those that “aimed at deceiving the listener but at making him pleasurably conscious of his own deception” (Gillman 21). The idea of the constructed body also appears in some other pieces, such as “Aurelia’s Unfortunate Young Man,” Roughing It, and “The Lowest Animal” (see Fishkin 181). Moreover, the man who only wore his famous white suit in his seventies was not only eccentric but transgressive too: “why not adopt some of the women’s styles?” he asked, justifying his “Dress Reform” by linking it to gender roles (qtd. in Gillman 186).

So, to return to my first point, the Widow’s cross-dressing performance is a convincing full passing to the degree that even Millet’s fiancée is deceived. This is so in spite of the fact that it is difficult for him to “endure these awkward clothes” (63) and that he appears smoking a pipe (62). Moreover, since the Widow is unable to present a coherent story of her own life, she must be seen as having a “touched” mind (86), as being “eccentric” and “a little crazed by this great sorrow” (82). Not only does she give a fantastic account of having “slathers” of children (88), “seven in two years” (89), of having not just sons and daughters but a “considerable variety” (91) of children, from a “whole colony” of husbands (89), but—and this is her most severe transgression—she uses very unladylike language, telling André, for example, that he is “a mean, cowardly, contemptible, base-gotten damned scoundrel” (99). All these forms of slippage should give away the mimicry. But not even does Millet’s fiancée see through the performance, although she does find the Widow “queer” (115). But no slippage is noticed, because, as Twain seems to suggest, people will believe what they want to believe. As Millet claims at the end (ironically about France only), “[w]hen France has committed herself to the expression of a belief, she will die a hundred thousand deaths rather than confess she has been in the wrong” (143).
Millet’s passing, however, involves more than gender: he also transgresses object/subject categories, or, in this case categories of agency. Instead of allowing André to act as his agent art dealer, Millet and his friends decide to claim agency in a very particular way, by making himself into his own agent, even if he needs to pass as a dead man for that.

Second, it is the constructed body *par excellence* which is being reenacted during the performance which the Widow puts on in order to scare away the art dealer. This performance seems to be exactly the reverse of Corinna’s disassembling herself in the Swift poem I discussed earlier: in this comedy, the “woman” starts out without her body, as having but one eye, no hair, no teeth, and no legs; all the missing parts will be supplied during her self-construction, during which she assembles herself into a “supremely beautiful” woman (135). Confronted with the prospect of having a wife who has no part that is “genuine” (138) or “solid” (139), André is of course happy to sneak out and not “marry that débris if she was worth a billion” (139). In this performance not only are the boundaries of gender transgressed, but those between “genuine” and “fake” too.

Third, with Millet’s market value sky-rocketing in the art world, the pupils decide to continue tapping the artist’s creative energies and introduce him as a Millet-imitator. They find a name for him too, Placide Duval, who would now supply an unlimited flow of Millet-imitations. Twain deconstructs the original/copy binary by giving primacy to the copy as that which will make the original original (and more valuable). Indeed, the copy is shown to be valued over the original when sold for hundreds of thousands, and the Englishman buys the original of *The Angelus* as a worthless copy. But, as Millet himself (still as the Widow) observes, people “will never know it” (129). Moreover, it is “a fictitious François Millet” (132; emphasis in original) who now passes as his own imitator (“Imitator of myself” [128]); it is fiction that passes as imitation, and the original/copy distinction gets conclusively erased.

**Transgression’s slippage, gender play, or girl performing woman (with a difference): Vladimir Nabokov, Lolita**

Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* (1955) foregrounds an instance of gender passing usually not discussed under the heading of passing: in this case it is a preadolescent, a still boyish girl who turns into a “nymphet” or “girleen” (*Lolita* 19) in order to pass for a woman. This novel, subverting in other ways too the stability of identity (we need only to think of the Humbert-Quilty doubling or characters described as having “a salad of racial genes” [9] or “mixed parentage” [11]), puts in its center the carnal desire of the grown man for “pale pubescent girls” (16), or “girl-children” (16)—whether called Annabel or Dolores. The
object of his desire is the nymphet, the Dolores/Lolita who is not a child any more but not a woman yet either.

The nymphet for Nabokov occupies a stage between girlhood and womanhood, somewhere between nine and fourteen, as he says in the novel (16). For the Nabokov who made his name in lepidoptery by collecting and identifying butterflies, the nymphet corresponds to the “pupa” stage of insects undergoing metamorphosis. In fact, he emphasized this transitional nymphet-stage of the pupa when naming one of his lepidopterological finds “Nabokov’s Wood-Nymph” (see Lolita 339). Expanding this nymphet/pupa metaphor, the author/lepidopterist gives the evocative name “nympholepts” to the “lone voyagers” who have a passion for collecting these nymphets (17).

Dolores the child only plays with the man first, when she still rather innocently sits on his knees or sneaks up to him from the back and plays peek-a-boo. Her transformation is marked by her first applying lipstick and eating a “banal, Eden-red apple” (58). She becomes a nymphet by responding to Humbert’s desire and becoming his creation: “my own creation, another, fanciful Lolita” (62), who starts to see herself as a “starlet” (65). When she “flows” into his arms, he realizes it was him who “willed into being” this “ineffable” life (113), while on her part it was “but an innocent game . . . in imitation of some simulacrum of fake romance” (113). At this stage the twelve year old Lolita is still a pupa: half-child, munching on candy bars and ice cream cones, and half-woman, flirting with the man in a seemingly innocent manner, thinking (seemingly) that they are lovers already. While laughing in a childish manner with a “young golden giggle” (119), she seems to know that their relationship verges on “incest” (119). She becomes a good performer when her performance involves the copying of copies, or the imitation of simulacra of fakeness—as all nymphets do, Nabokov suggests, when, in an effort to pass for a woman, they imitate “the cheapest of cheap cuties” (120). Lolita does not aim at full passing: her performance is play passing, mimicry rather, and the in-betweenness of this “fey child” is emphasized in various ways.

A combination of naïveté and deception, of charm and vulgarity, of blue sulks and rosy mirth, Lolita, when she chose, could be a most exasperating brat. I was not really quite prepared for her fits of disorganized boredom, intense and vehement griping, her sprawling, droopy, dopey-eyed style, and what is called goofing off—a kind of diffused clowning which she thought was tough in a boyish hoodlum way. (148)

Both a girl of “very childish appearance” and one who, “owing perhaps to constant amorous exercise,” radiated “some special languorous glow” (159), she is the ultimate pupa, at home both in children’s libraries and in bed with Humbert on “violent mornings” (160). The “most mythopoetic nymphet in October’s orchard-haze” (186), who in school gives the impression that she is “morbidly
uninterested in sexual matters” (195), yet knows exactly how to tempt Humbert when saying, “Carry me upstairs, please. I feel sort of romantic to-night” (207).

What is very important in the novel is that Lolita’s construction is carried out as much by Humbert as Lolita. In other words, it is the man’s desire which constitutes the nymphet, who responds to this desire by her self-construction. But what Humbert desires is not the “powdered” butterfly of a grown woman (12), but a pupa in metamorphosis, a transgressor from girlhood to womanhood. It is this in-betweenness which turns him on, giving him an “incestuous thrill” (80): seeing the nymphet verging on womanhood, the daughter turned into lover, child into woman, boy into girl even. He will not want to be wholly deceived; he does not demand full passing from Lolita (in fact, once a mature woman, a mother, she does not interest him any more). His obsession is rather with transgression itself: the complete destabilization of categories—metamorphosis, transitionality, in-betweenness, slippage.

**Orientalism as performance:**
David Hwang, *M. Butterfly*

The transgressions between dichotomies are further problematized in David Hwang’s drama *M. Butterfly* (1988), where discourses of gender, sexuality, race, and colonialism intersect, while imitation and reversal are foregrounded as dominant thematics. In his afterword to the play, Hwang labels *M. Butterfly* a “deconstructivist” play (2869). Indeed, in this drama of sex, politics, camaraderie, and spying, several binaries are being subverted, among them, man/woman, East/West, reality/fiction, innocence/experience, gay/straight, truth/deception, and copy/original.

This thematic of imitation is exploited in a twofold manner: on the one hand, the French diplomat, René Gallimard plays out a performance of cultural imitation as he reenacts (or thinks he reenacts) the plot of Puccini’s *Madame Butterfly* (becoming both Pinkerton and Cio-Cio-San, actually), while on the other, an agent of the Chinese intelligence service puts on a masquerade of Oriental womanhood as s/he gives the performance of Gallimard’s ideal of the “Perfect Woman.”

The plot unfolds as the reworking of the popular Western opera (in fact, in several scenes we have a crisscrossing between performances of the Puccini opera and Song’s “real-life” performance). Here, however, the love plot between the American naval officer and the Japanese Cio-Cio-San, or Madame Butterfly, gets subverted into a Frenchman falling in love (and having a long relationship) with the beautiful Chinese diva, Song Liling, who turns out to be not only a spy but also a drag artist, a man. If *Madame Butterfly* was, as Mari Yoshihara puts it, “a white female performance of white male Orientalist fantasy” (976), then *M. Butterfly* is its contemporary reworking, its parodic and subversive Asian re-
performance of passing and Orientalism. So the play can be seen as the reverse staging of the narrative of “an exotic and imperialistic view of the East,” as Hwang himself puts it (2869)—in other words, Orientalism.

Orientalism, defined by Edward Said as an interest in the East which turns into “an all-consuming passion” (132), is present indeed as the hypotext. The East is not only shown as a “career” (which it certainly is for Gallimard), but is itself Orientalized in the sense that here too “[t]he relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony” (133). This relationship of power gets further gendered, exemplifying, as Yoshihara claims, the “gendered dynamics of East-West relations founded upon unequal power relations” (975). Gallimard takes great pleasure in this gendered power relation, getting dizzy from recognizing himself as another Pinkerton, who “caught a butterfly who would writhe on a needle” (2839) and from experiencing for the first time in his life “absolute power” over a woman: “I felt for the first time that rush of power—the absolute power of a man” (2840). “The West thinks of itself as masculine,” Song explains in court; “big guns, big industry, big money—so the East is feminine—weak, delicate, poor . . . but good at art, and full of inscrutable wisdom—the feminine mystique” (2864).

A merging of the passing plot and the Orientalist narrative, the drama foregrounds the performative-imitative nature of Orientalist/feminine submission as a construction of Western fantasy. As Gallimard’s friend Marc says about Song, “she must surrender to you. It is her destiny” (2836). Or as Song explains at the end, “[t]he West believes the East, deep down, wants to be dominated—because a woman can’t think for herself” (2864). Moreover, the wide popularity of the “original” opera presupposes the Western point of view, as Gallimard learns from Song’s explanation and, the hard way, from his own experience. “It’s a very beautiful story,” Gallimard admits; “Well, yes, to a Westerner,” Song adds to the Frenchman’s great surprise (2832). Gallimard also learns that there is no innocent enjoyment of Orientalist narratives: it is not possible to hear, as Helga would want to, Puccini just “as a piece of beautiful music” (2833), for this form of “innocence” only gives green light to hegemony and domination under the guise of a love-story considered supremely beautiful within the Orientalist frame. Having fallen from the position of the innocent imperialist to the position of the helpless but “experienced” colonial victim now gendering himself female, Gallimard will have experienced both perspectives, transgressing in the final scene all gender and cultural boundaries. Thus, in this second marriage of the narrative of Orientalism and the passing plot, he becomes Madame Butterfly and, committing hara-kiri, adopts the Oriental version of dénouement.

There is, however, an additional element here: Orientalism functions as an Althusserian ideology which will interpellate Gallimard: in this process the French diplomat becomes a socially constituted subject. Orientalism is presented as a performance in both the opera and the drama: in fact, both Butterflies are
cultural constructions, catering to the Orientalist fantasies of the men. But as much as Gallimard is constituted by power and ideology, he remains blind to his own Orientalism in the sense that he fails to see how his desire is moved by a particular cultural myth. Of course, Gallimard’s subjugation itself is twofold: not only is he produced (interpellated) by Orientalism, but is also being used by what Althusser might consider another ideological state apparatus, Chinese intelligence. Moreover, the performance of Orientalism is at work in Gallimard’s two self-constructions too: both when he constructs himself as the powerful Western man and when he steps into the garb and role of the suicidal Cio-Cio-San.

Song seems to be similarly constructed by ideology, simultaneously by “true womanhood” and Orientalism. S/he appeals to existing gender conventions, staging and acting out well-known scripts in this performance—applying a complex technology of gender, to use de Lauretis’s term, in constituting his body as female—as if s/he was interpellated by the norms of gender. His is indeed a double masquerade, with mask, costume, and convention interacting in constituting him not only as a woman but also as an Oriental woman desired by the Western man. As the imperialist’s vision of the Oriental Butterfly, Song responds to the man’s desire, sexual as well as political, by letting him take the illusory role of a latter-day Pygmalion. “I am a man who loved a woman created by a man,” he admits at the end (2867).

In Gallimard construction of the Oriental woman as the perfect woman, he makes her sole desire to please the Western man. The hypotext, however, is turned parodic, when it is revealed that it is the intelligence service of communist China who manipulates the French diplomat through Song and especially through the Westerner’s blind belief in Orientalism. In the hypertext, power ultimately resides in the Orient, and the Westerner gets beaten at his own game by becoming the victim of his own cultural myth of domination.

The drama seems to carry the critique of essentialism further than other narratives of gender passing. Here it is not a man who simply prepares the surface of his body or takes women’s clothing simply in order to look like a woman. In Song’s case, deceit affects the functioning of gender. His performed gender is being put to use, so to speak, in bed for years; gender is not just theatrics, but gets tested at the point where, according to the sex/gender distinction, it is not gender but sex (biology, “nature,” “essence”) which should be at work—biology, which gender masquerade is not supposed to have affected. In this aspect, the play seems to enact the Butlerian tenet concerning the always already gendered nature of sex: the site of sexuality will shift from biology to gender and discourse, as Song performs a total, all-inclusive sex/gender passing. However, her seduction is carried out as much by the body as by language. Much like Don Juan, whose “erotic success,” Shoshana Felman claims, “is accomplished by linguistic means alone” (Scandal 14), Song too seduces by producing a language of pleasure and
Performing passing desire, and prolongs, to use Felman’s words again, “within desiring speech, the pleasure-taking performance of the very production of that speech” (15).

Furthermore, in the project of deception, the political motivation reinforces the erotic economy: while tapping Gallimard’s desire to be another Pinkerton, s/he seemingly creates a high-class marketable good of him/herself as a woman, while all the time s/he is the consumer going after the goods Gallimard can sell. This ambivalence of subject-object relations (where in terms of his erotic pursuit, Gallimard is the desiring consumer, while in his political pursuit, the Chinese agent takes the dominative position) leads to the gender reversal of the final scene, where Gallimard dies as just another abandoned Madame Butterfly. Of course, the passer himself is not a free agent but the actual secret agent of the Chinese government, fully obeying his superiors. The staging of womanhood is really directed, so to speak, by them; behind all performance, agency is with the Chinese intelligence, who really act as theater directors in the sense that they both create and manipulate the Westerner’s desire and at the same time move the primary performer Song so that she fully cater to his needs.

The copy/original dichotomy concerns the way in which the primacy of the “original”—whether of gender categories or earlier narratives—is being questioned. While passing is indeed a process informed by imitation, its end-product can by no means be taken as a copy. For passing, as I pointed out earlier, does not imitate the “original” (“essence”) but reenacts the processes whereby that earlier “original” was constructed too. What Song performs is not some female essence but the performance of womanhood itself. She performs heterosexual performativity, thereby supplies a supporting argument to Butler’s claim that “all gender is like drag, or is drag”; that “imitation” is at the heart of the heterosexual project and its gender binarisms, that drag is not a secondary imitation that presupposes a prior and original gender, but that hegemonic heterosexuality is itself a constant and repeated effort to imitate its own idealizations” (*Bodies* 125; emphasis in original).

I think one way Hwang deconstructs the original/copy dichotomy is by having Chinese intelligence use a male rather than a female agent. For if Song’s gender had been just a copy and if an “original” had been more “authentic” or useful, then they should have (and most probably would have) employed a woman, a “true woman,” to seduce the Frenchman and act as his desired Butterfly. Sex is again made irrelevant in gender performance: the “original” genital markers really do not matter—all that counts is that the performance be credible. Of course, “true womanhood” as an “original” gender identity is parodied here: it is the man who knows best how a real woman thinks, feels, looks, or how his needs should be catered to. “[O]nly a man knows how a woman is supposed to act” (2854). Indeed, with this knowledge, s/he will “out-woman” all women, so to speak.
Similar to how drag is described by Butler as disputing “heterosexuality’s claim on naturalness and originality” (Bodies 125), so too, when Song claims that only men know what a true woman is, he disputes the woman’s claim on “feminine” naturalness and originality, while contributes to the parodistic re-idealization of woman. The model of true femininity is, then, a man here, along lines similar to those taken by the Polish performance artist Ktarzyna Kozyra, who was assisted by the Berlin based drag queen Gloria Viagra in best assuming the role of the truly feminine (see front flap, Wróblewska). By allowing a man to know best what a real woman is, Hwang highlights the contingency of gender and lays claim to what Butler calls the “transferability of the attribute” (Undoing 213): indeed, femininity, even in its “truest” form, is incidental and transferable to any other player of the mime.

But why is Gallimard so easily deceived? And, indeed, deceived in bed? This is the question posed in the French court as well:

JUDGE: Did Monsieur Gallimard know you were a man?
SONG: Well, he never saw me completely naked.
JUDGE: But surely, he must’ve . . . how can I put this?
SONG: Put it however you like. I’m not shy. He must’ ve felt around? (2863)

One answer to this question is given by Song himself (dressed in a suit already): “[m]en always believe what they want to hear. So a girl can tell the most obnoxious lies and the guys will believe them every time” (2863). But Gallimard’s vision is further tainted by his blind belief in Orientalism: not only does he too see what he wants to see, his stereotypes are constructed by the myth of Orientalism. So he sees the West’s (sexual) mastery over the East; this is what ultimately blinds him. Gallimard wants to believe the performer who performs the stereotype so dear to his heart. (In addition to these Western clichés of the Orient, the drama exploits other national stereotypes, too: the Frenchman as sexual, as a “ladies’ man” [2825], the French woman as turning a blind eye to her husband’s extramarital affairs, or Scandinavian women as being uninhibited about sexual matters.) Gallimard will have to come to the recognition that neither is the West masculine, nor the East feminine; moreover, not only is it impossible to tell one Butterfly from another, copy from original, useful from fake information, but also heterosexual from homosexual, man from woman.

Hwang’s is a performance text because it reproduces some well-known scripts of gender normativity. And because of this reproduction, gender gets fixed into a single and culturally intelligible configuration: we all understand the theatrics of “Oriental womanhood,” even if the performer is a man. But the question of agency emerges with a special twist here. Who acts as agent in this construction? Is it the Western man, whose sexual desire and desire for power construct the Oriental woman? Or is it the Oriental “woman” “herself,” who will put on the performance so desired by the Westerner? Or Song, who is an actual
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agent of the Chinese government? Or those who who control him? The answer is probably that they all do. For through these various performances power comes to be redistributed in the play. To apply another phrase of Butler’s, they “make over the terms of domination, a making over which is itself a kind of agency” (Bodies 137).

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I would like to conclude this section by reiterating the following claims.

First, gender passing presents new counter-arguments to the essentialist position. Whether woman becomes woman, man becomes man or, indeed, woman becomes man or man becomes woman, gender is shown as a discursive construct constituted by bodies whose biological markers have been made irrelevant. Second, given the constructions of passing in these texts (French male artist to female sibling; nymphet to woman; Chinese man to Chinese woman, Frenchman to Japanese woman), gender’s catachrestic character gets highlighted: it is shown to be a metaphor lacking its referent in “reality.” The “original” biological sex of the gender performer is made totally inconsequential: the “authenticity” of the performance has nothing to do with whether the performer is “originally” a man or a woman. In fact, there are no “original” or “true” genders to be “copied” when performed. It is not something “out there” which is cited, evoked, or imitated when gender is being performed; rather, those processes are iterated whereby gender is constructed again and again in discourse.

Third, the texts show differences in terms of agency and the degree to which they each reproduce existing scripts. The full passer, who follows normative scripts of gender performance can lay little claim to agency other than overriding “original” biological sex; here the “new” gender will be performed simply by way of letting oneself be interpellated by a powerful ideology, some well-know script of womanhood. Yet agency does get to be problematized in texts of gender passing too, especially in gender play. Gender play will not only come about from shifting back and forth between gender constructions (which can happen in full passing too), but from the trying out of positions of in-betweenness and multiplicity, and the revealing of various forms of slippage.
The convergence of categories: race and class passing
(James Weldon Johnson, The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man; Nella Larsen, Passing; Philip Roth, The Human Stain)

After exploring gender passing, I continue in this chapter with discussing the subject who performs race passing. Similar to the gendered and sexualized subject, the racial subject is also produced in discourse. The primary marker of this subject is not simply skin color—in fact, in many cases skin color is not even the determining factor—but the place the person occupies in the hegemonic system. Thus a particular imbrication of the categories of race and class is clearly observable in the instances where race is being performed, including instances where race passing is performed. Therefore, I will explore passing as racial and social performance in James Weldon Johnson’s The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man, Nella Larsen’s Passing, and Philip Roth’s The Human Stain. These are novels where discourses of race and power intersect in plots of multiple transgressions. In two texts of the three, Johnson’s and Larsen’s, race and sexuality emerge as sites where one category can only be constituted and transgressed jointly with the other, and where the racialization of sexuality as well as the sexualization of race occurs.

The discourse of power itself structures the discourse of race. As is well-known, the black or the colored person (or the “Negro” or African or African American in the American context) is always the one occupying the socially inferior position, the oppressed, the Other, the subject subjected to power, or, to use Frantz Fanon’s term, the “colonized personality,” who comes about when “the colonised man and the colonial system form themselves into a structure” (Black Skin 201). As such, the black or African American subjectivity does not pre-exist its historical appearance, slavery, and the subsequent post-colonial situation, but is the product of the historical encounter of the colonizers with the peoples to be enslaved or colonized. Of course, race has not been a social construction only but a legal construction as well: as Gwendolyn Audrey Foster points out, “liberty and citizenship in America, from its inception, depended on being white and free” (26); “[w]hiteness defined citizenship, freedom; blackness connoted slavery, bondage” (30). This also means that when a “black” person (whose skin color is often not black at all) attempts to pass as “white,” his or her passing very strongly involves a breaking out of whatever social condition his or

7 I use the term race in its current meaning, referring, in the American context, to the identity marker of African Americans primarily. Although I am strongly aware of the fact that “race” is a misnomer and should thus be put into quotation marks throughout, but as with several other terms recently shown to be misnomers, some for other reasons (such as “black” and “white” and even “man” and “woman”), I assume a general theoretical agreement on its being a misnomer. With this position, I think it is better to refrain from the overuse of quotation marks, which, I think, puts many unnecessary artificial breaks into the text.
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her colonized and legal construction locked him or her into. Passing is a powerful example of how having an identity is not a matter of being born with an “original” self, but rather of taking it on in the process of performance. As Nealon puts it, “human identities do not exist as ‘originals’; they come into being as they are named” (114).

Race is therefore another catachrestic marker which lacks its referent; another signifier which is not only without a signified but is produced out of its differences from other signifiers. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr., has famously pointed out, “as a meaningful criterion within the biological sciences,” race “has long been recognized to be a fiction” (“Writing ‘Race’” 4). Indeed, it is a misnomer and a metaphor. I would go even further and claim that “race,” a catachresis lacking its signified and structured solely by difference with relation to other signifiers, satisfies the definition of Derridian différance: its meaning derives from always differing and deferring. Lacking in concrete signified anchored in biology, it is always constructed and interpreted with regard to its other constructions. Nowhere is this différance more obvious than in the processes of construction; nowhere is it more clearly stated than in instances where performance wholly leaves the body, that is, in race passing.

Much like gender passing, race passing is also an asymmetrical term. I claimed earlier, in connection with gender passing, a predominance of one passing direction; in the case of gender passing, this was male to female passing, which I explained with the fact that it seemed easier to stage marked (female, feminine) than unmarked categories (male, masculine). The logic of this reasoning would necessitate the predominance of white to black passing, which is, of course, not the case. Although blackface shows, where white masquerades as black (and which would serve as the racial parallel of male to female passing), have always existed, race passing in the United States (and American literature) has consisted predominantly of black passing for white. The reason for this is obvious: blacks have passed, or tried to pass, for white with the hope of leaving behind a position of oppression, slavery, or post-coloniality. As Susan Gubar points out, in “the masquerade of whiteness . . . the passers comprehend exactly the gratuitous privileges” that go with being white (Racechanges 105). These are the cases I am primarily interested in too: where the masquerade is not mere theatrics, race play, but a deadly serious full performance, involving a radical change in social position and resulting in the ultimate destabilization of the category of race. In fact, the most exciting instances are those where passing is not an effort of masquerade to cover up an assumed “real” race, but rather an inherent part of the subject’s performative self-construction into either black or white. In fact, the term passing proves to be a misnomer too, simply reflecting the biological justification (in the form of the one drop of blood rule) of the hegemonic group’s hold to power. However, because I consider the claims that “race is biology” to be a myth in both cases—that is, when visibility makes a
person’s racial identity stable (when skin color makes it “obvious” and allows the person to consider himself/herself of a particular race) and when invisibility destabilizes race and racial awareness (when the person is unsure of the race he/she has)—I will still use the term, thereby emphasizing that race is a catachrestic cultural construct, no matter what seems visible and what doesn’t.

Race passing, especially when white is the color (and class) targeted, de-naturalizes whiteness and consequently deconstructs the white/black binary. Race passing challenges the belief in the essentialism, stability, and permanence of binary categories, while also challenges, as Juda Bennett points out, “the essentialist metaphors of ‘black’ and ‘white’” (37). Conceptualized as a performative process, it makes visible the permeability of boundaries, while introducing the possibility unthinkable in the history of logocentrism: the undoing of binaries and ultimately the displacement of the whole system of binary thinking. With binary oppositions questioned, race becomes relative, meaningful only in the realm of the signifier, when difference structures sameness.

By performing whiteness, the passer makes visible what was formerly invisible, and makes marked categories out of categories that were formerly considered unmarked. The exploration of the performative-discursive processes, in turn, supports the radical theses of “whiteness studies,” which question the invisibility of whiteness and the assumptions behind whiteness as the “natural” cultural “norm.” Whiteness too proves to be not a biological given but a cultural construct, a catachresis lacking a referent. This is so in spite of the fact that whites very often assume whiteness to be “natural,” a color which is not one and a race which is, again, not one, to adopt Luce Irigaray’s well-known phrase made widely current in connection with gender. bell hooks has pointed out, for example, how little white liberals see themselves as white (Black Looks 167); similarly, Hazel Carby noted the degree to which white students take for granted that primarily blacks constitute the “racialized subject” (“Multicultural” 193). Carby calls for admitting that everyone is a racialized subject and that whiteness is also an invented category (which I too demonstrated in my discussion of the performances of Southern white womanhood).

Theoretically, we should be arguing that everyone in this social order has been constructed in our political imagination as a racialized subject. In this sense, it is important to think about the invention of the category of whiteness as well as that of blackness and, consequently, to make visible what is rendered invisible when viewed as the normative state of existence: the (white) point in space from which we tend to identify difference. (“Multicultural” 193)

“[D]o we honestly think that some people lack color,” she continues,

Do white women and men have no color? What does it mean socially, politically, and culturally not to have color? Are those without color not implicated in a society
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structured in dominance by race? Are those without color outside the hierarchy of social relations and not racialized? Are only the so-called colored to be the subjects of a specialized discourse of difference? And, most important, do existing power relations remain intact and unchallenged by this discourse? (194)

I believe that studies in passing intersect with whiteness studies at some very significant points. First, they both emphasize that white is a color just like black or brown or yellow; they both refute that whiteness should claim, as Susan Gubar points out, a “universalized default position” (Critical Condition 24). They both make whiteness visible by tracing its processes of performative construction. Second, they destabilize the normativity of whiteness: they “make strange” whiteness, to use Richard Dyer’s term from his landmark book entitled White; “the racing of whites is to dislodge them/us from the position of power” and allow them to be “represented to themselves as whites” (3–4; emphasis in original). Dyer also notes the intimate alliance of whiteness to heterosexuality, which will be significant in at least two of my case studies (The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man and Passing): race is “always about the reproduction of bodies through heterosexuality” (25). “Race and gender are ineluctably intertwined,” he goes on, “through the primacy of heterosexuality in reproducing the former and defining the latter” (30). Mason Stokes comes to a similar conclusion when calling whiteness and heterosexuality “analogous structures—normative copartners in the coercions of racial and sexual power” (Color 191). Studies in race passing done from the performative perspective will disprivilege both whiteness and heterosexuality, stripping them both of perceptions of normativity and invisibility.

Not only does the passer make whiteness visible (by performing it), but also makes blackness invisible (by hiding it). Here studies in passing and whiteness studies intersect again in that they both discredit whiteness as the master signifier and racial (supremacist) thinking. Once the visible becomes invisible and the invisible visible, race itself gets wholly destabilized. Race ceases to be “fundamentally a regime of looking,” a “practice of visibility,” as Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks defined it (2). This “a regime of visibility that secures our investment in racial identity” (21) indeed evaporates in passing.

With passing, race ceases to be single and pure; instead, hybridity and multiplicity are taken as the general conditions of human identity, where the limits themselves are constructed, therefore movable and permeable. Coming from the mestiza subjectivity of the Chicana who grew up within a Spanish-speaking community embedded into the larger English-speaking society, Gloria Anzaldúa made the famed claim, “I made the choice to be queer” (Borderlands 41), underscoring this understanding of hybridity and multiplicity as vehicles of agency involved in acquiring multiple subjectivities.

Three observations that I made earlier—about the intersection of race and power; race being a purely discursive construction, a catachresis; and whiteness
They Aren’t, Until I Call Them

as being a construction too—figure in race passing, I want to suggest, as presuppositions which performativity responds to. The first such presupposition can be formulated as ‘race is a shameful stigma, which should be kept in secret.’ Passing, therefore, is performed out of social-political motivation; it is the vehicle of upward mobility that allows the subject to leave behind a racialized society. The second presupposition concerns the fact that race as a biological phenomenon is an empty category which can be filled by performing it. If race is what Anthony Appiah suggests, the “biologizing [of] what is culture,” then passing is making it again into the “metonym for culture” (In My Father’s House 45). Passing, in other words, de-biologizes race through cultural performance. Race is always illocutionary, that is, performative, responding to some governing ideology. To quote David Goldberg,

[R]ace is whatever anyone in using that term or its cognates conceives of collective social relations. It is, in this sense, any group designation one ascribes of oneself as such (that is, as race, or under the sign) or which is so ascribed by others. Its meanings, as its forces, are always illocutionary. (81)

The third presupposition at work here refers to whiteness as a construction: a becoming, rather than a being. Only through the refutation of the presupposition underlying hegemonic discourse, that “whiteness is the natural cultural norm; only black is race,” does the possibility of race passing emerge. Indeed, without assuming that whiteness itself is a socially constructed color or race, passing could not even be attempted. The person determined to pass knows that whiteness can be attained by the dramatic performance of whiteness.

Foregrounrding race as catachresis:

James Weldon Johnson, The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man

James Weldon Johnson’s The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man (1912) offers a particular case of race passing, where, as I will show, race is foregrounded as pure construction, a catachresis lacking its referent. Although I agree with Martin Japtok’s demonstration of the novel as partaking both in “a rhetoric of constructionism and in a rhetoric of essentialism” (34), I believe that ultimately anti-essentialism prevails in the form of the protagonist’s inability to anchor his race in either black or white. Indeed, what he must find out is that he does not “have” a “true” or “real” race which he would hide through the mimicry of passing. The “incarnation of DuBoisian double consciousness,” as Henry Louis Gates, Jr., points out (qtd in Japtok 32), the protagonist-narrator hesitates between making himself into white and making himself into black. Rejecting what Kathleen Pfeiffer calls “the ontology of racial categories” (404), he is never really comfortable with either identity; does not consider either his blackness or
his whiteness as “natural” or “essential.” So he will construct himself performatively each time. Although the plot can be read, as W. Lawrence Hogue suggests, as the chronicle of “the dominant society’s myth of the rugged individual’s quest for freedom” (41) as well, I believe that the anonymous protagonist actually beats white society at its own game by taking on an identity reserved for the dominant group. In this passing novel which presents, to use Ginsberg’s words, the “complex imbrications of race and gender” (13), the protagonist, a man of multiple subject positions and sites of identification, moves back and forth between races and sexualities (and genders as a consequence): feminized and racialized (into black) in some relationships, he “passes” in others, by performance, as a white heterosexual male. The protagonist makes himself into these multiple subjects by the performative power of the first person singular: it is indeed the genre of the confession, defined in performative terms by Foucault, which allows his multiple self-constructions (see “Beginnings”). Here the novel offers an example of generic passing as well, where, as several critics have pointed out, Johnson transgresses the boundary between fiction and autobiography (see Donald C. Goellnicht 20; Pfeiffer 403; Samira Kawash 60).

Born in a little town of Georgia after the Civil War, the anonymous narrator lives with his mother in a no name town. Uncertainty permeates his whole life: neither black nor white, neither poor nor rich, neither slave nor aristocrat—in fact, he is all of these. According to one of his earliest memories, his mother tried constantly to scrub his skin in the bathtub, thereby making him symbolically white.

These tubs were the earliest aversion of my life, for regularly on certain evenings I was plunged into one of them, and scrubbed until my skin ached. I can remember to this day the pain caused by the strong, rank soap getting into my eyes. (778)

In another memory, he sees an elegant white man visit their home regularly. The boy must perform various favors for the mother’s white patron, who then rewards him with bright coins, constructing him into the slave mulatto child, who is paid for his “services.” Through the white man’s patronage, mother and son are well-off: she becomes a dressmaker for white women, while he, spectacularly transgressing his own social class, becomes “a perfect little aristocrat” (779). The boy

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8 In order to assume generic passing here, one needs to accept such traditional categories of the epic genre as the novel and the autobiography. Otherwise, I believe it is equally valid to see Johnson’s text as deconstructing the novel/autobiography distinction. Moreover, this deconstruction would support the claim of József Szili concerning the replacement of the category of the epic with the more inclusive category of the catalogue, which he defines as the hypothetical archaic genre relying solely on narrative sequentiality (see A poétikai műnemek).

9 This generic passing is quite like the generic ambivalence between autobiography and fiction in Alain Robbe-Grillet, Le miroir qui revient, as described by Mihály Szegedy-Maszák (see „A regény, amint írja önmagát” 178ff).
goes to a mixed school, where he, attracted to both races, makes two friends: a white boy, “Red Head,” who becomes his protector, and a black boy, “Shiny,” whom he idolizes. These are the first relationships where both his race and gender become malleable and relative. When he is with Red Head, not only does his skin color stick out, but he is objectified and is treated as a girl too; yet when he is next to Shiny, his whiteness and subjecthood are emphasized. With Shiny it is him who is attracted to the feminized other, whose “face was as black as night, but shone as though it was polished; he had sparkling eyes, and when he opened his mouth he displayed glistening white teeth” (782). He recognizes his “dual personality” (785) in what John Sheehy describes as a true Lacanian mirror scene, after he is told in school that he is a “nigger” (783). Checking his features, he sees ivory white skin as well as “liquid” dark eyes and black lashes (784); taking both the subject and the object positions, he is the one who looks (and wants to know) and the one who is looked at, or specularized (and wants to be known).

I was accustomed to hear remarks about my beauty; but, now, for the first time, I became conscious of it, and recognized it. 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 and shaded 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. How long I stood there gazing at my image I do not know. (784)

After this scene he becomes conscious of his racial origin. I agree with Japtok with respect to the ex-colored man’s accepting the “fact” that he is colored; indeed, from this point on, he cannot ignore his race. As Japtok puts it, “[o]nce he knows he is ‘coloured’ according to U.S. racial logic, he cannot be ‘white’ again the same way . . . he accepts that logic, internalizes it, and acquired double-consciousness; he cannot simply be but is always conscious of being, seeing himself through a DuBoisian ‘veil,’ as ‘whites’ might see him” (32; emphasis in original). His has been interpellated by white supremacist ideology, thus has not choice but to accept the essentialist argument.

On the other hand, in the rest of the novel he comes to realize that ambiguity is the only certainty about his racial identity. So he will construct and reconstruct himself several times, sometimes through full passing, at other times through play passing. Knowing now that there is nothing to know, he spends his life shuffling between identities, races, genders, and sexualities, as well as worlds and cities. He becomes a pianist, having found in the black-and-white keyed piano the appropriate instrument which allows him to move between black and white. Moreover, he finds his genre too, ragtime music, the vogue initiated by blacks but picked up by whites. Soon he develops an African American race consciousness. Although here the protagonist seems to embrace a previously unacknowledged racial identity, his narrative cannot be considered a coming out narrative. There is
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no “true” racial self, which he now lets out of his closet; he finds no way to “out” a “true” identity. In other words, his self-construction is performative rather than constative. In fact, it is a performance, which does not reveal an already existing racialized self, but actually brings this self into being. He takes pride in Shiny, the class orator, who allows him “to form wild dreams of bringing glory and honor to the Negro race” (795). Having recognized the “peculiar fascination which the South held over [his] imagination” (797), he decides, after his mother’s death, to go to college in Atlanta. In the South, they again see him as white: again it is the difference between the signifiers which structures his race. So he goes North, where his racialization promptly happens: finding himself displayed for the gaze of men, he is objectified-feminized in the New York pool room.

I could feel that I had gained the attention and respect of everybody in the room, every eye was fixed on me, and the widespread question, “Who is he?” went around. This was gratifying to a certain sense of vanity of which I have never been able to rid myself. . . . (814)

If Paul de Man is right about prosopoeia being “the trope of autobiography, by which one’s name . . . is made intelligible and memorable as a face” (“Autobiography” 76), then the Johnson text is informed by a double prosopoeia: here autobiography confers two faces, one black-female-homosexual and one white-male-heterosexual, upon the narrator. Shuffling as he is between races, genders, and sexualities, he remains consistent when taking on either of these two faces: he either chooses the subject position of the white heterosexual man or the object position of the black homosexual “woman.” Where there is a slippage in this consistency, he crosses inflectional boundaries: first when toying with the identity of a “white” “girl” (when looking at himself in the mirror) and later when contemplating the violation of manhood by a Negro (when watching the lynching scene). In both cases he refuses the mixing of racial and gender categories in the form of [white + female] and [black + male] by distancing himself from these images which, as Kristeva abject, seem to threaten the borders of his self.

As the narrative of multiple—racial, gender, and sexual—passing, the novel presents a protagonist passing within what Valerie Smith calls “the discourse of intersectionality” (35). Indeed, as race, gender, and sexuality emerge out of the permutations of power, the body of the protagonist becomes the discursive site of multiple intersectionality. His passing is at least two-fold: he performs racial and sexual—and, concomitantly, gender—transgression. On the one hand, his self-construction as “Negro” coincides with his feminization in a homosocial (homosexual?) relationship. While in such white fantasy of blackness as T. S. Eliot’s “Sweeney Agonistes,” where, as Rachel Blau DuPlessis has demonstrated, “the appropriation of the primitive force” of the “savage” character allows the white man to achieve a “remasculinizing uplift” (Genders, Races 104),
in Johnson’s novel the black man is stripped of his male power. Indeed, he becomes feminized, appearing either as the beautiful object (the object of attraction of white men) or the kept [wo]man, who enjoys the patronage of older (white) men: “When I grew to manhood I found myself freer with elderly white people than with those near my own age,” he remarks (786). In his relationship with his older patron, where he play passes as a woman, he is again described as a kept woman, feminized and eroticized. On the other hand, his self-construction as white goes together with being masculinized in a heterosexual relationship while attempting full passing. All aspects of his identity are presented as mutable and transgressive, negotiated and renegotiated in various situations.

His objectification is complete when he meets a “clean-cut, slender, but athletic-looking man,” who takes the narrator under his patronage. Required to perform certain “services” for a white man, he will again find himself in the position of a kept (black) woman (much like his mother was), a concubine, a piece of property, possessed by a “relentless tyrant” of a man (825). In this relationship of rigid hierarchy, his race and gender will be relativized. Still, to add to the narrator’s “troubled state of mind” (835) resulting from his growing sense of racial ambiguity, the white patron, when hearing of the ex-colored man’s determination to return to the South, argues for his whiteness. He uses both the essentialist and the constructivist arguments, insisting that he is a white man in terms of both biology and “making”: “My boy, you are by blood, by appearance, by education and by tastes, a white man” (834), adding the constructivist conclusion, “This idea you have of making a Negro out of yourself is nothing more than a sentiment” (834). And, indeed, back in the South, the ex-colored man constitutes himself as white in a scene which might be considered one of the most significant moments of the book from the perspective of his racial consciousness. This is the lynching scene, where, while full passing, he mingles with the whites, the “fierce, determined men” (850), participating in the construction of the black man as a spectacle. “[F]ixed to the spot,” he cannot take his eyes off the burning black man, yet he will not give himself away:

He squirmed, he writhed, strained at his chains, then gave out cries and groans that I shall always hear. The cries and groans were choked off by the fire and smoke; but his eyes bulging from their sockets, rolled from side to side, . . . Some of the crowd yelled and cheered, others seemed appalled at what they had done, and there were those who turned away sickened at the sight. I was fixed to the spot where I stood, powerless to take my eyes from what I did not want to see. (851)

Standing in the white crowd all along, he transgresses the racial position which he holds at this time. This scene of the lynching will only strengthen his determination to abandon “his” race. Unable to bear any longer the “shame at being identified with a people that could with impunity be treated worse than
animals” (853), he comes to the decision that it is not necessary to go about with the “label of inferiority pasted across [his] forehead” (852).

Feeling to have mis-taken the identity he happened to choose, he always feels bad about his choice. At one point this discomfort is amplified into a moral crisis: when at the end he chooses whiteness and feels that he has betrayed “his” race, having sold his “birthright,” like Esau, “for a mess of pottage” (861). But, as Siobhan B. Somerville has so aptly pointed out, his choice here involves not just race but also sexuality: the two elements of his interracial heterosexuality together make up his transgression (124; see also Cheryl Clarke). With his marriage he dons whiteness and heterosexuality at the same time, leaving behind his racial past, as well as his former sexual and gender identities. I see this turn of the plot as illustrating two theses of Mason Stokes: that the marriage-plot emerges as the narrative superstructure when whiteness and heterosexuality meet (19), and that whiteness and heterosexuality actually threaten one another:

Although the forms of heterosexuality—marriage, for example—pretend to create a racial order out of mongrel chaos, the pretense is never entirely persuasive. In some cases, heterosexuality’s “coming to the rescue” not only doesn’t “save” whiteness; it in fact reveals things about heterosexuality—and about whiteness—that their adherents would be shocked to discover. (20)

Indeed, in the case of the anonymous protagonist of the Autobiography, heterosexuality (marriage) will threaten whiteness: not just in the sense that the children will not be necessarily “white,” but also because his having once been an “ex-colored” man—which, as Henry Louis Gates, Jr., points out, “is simply another form of ‘colored’” (Figures 202)—will be revealed. Ultimately his identity as a white father and the widower of a white woman is the result of a successful performance of socially accepted white masculinity. His passing is a complex performance relating to power, and involves race, class, gender, and sexuality at the same time.

The narrative trajectory of the novel follows the expectations of classic passing texts as defined by Valerie Smith: indeed, passing for white will figure as the betrayal of the black race, giving associations of black accommodationism (see 36). Moreover, in this novel, where passing will have multiple reverberations, these associations will be multiplied: whatever he does, it seems he is passing—whether for black/woman/homosexual (in his relationship with his white patron) or for white/man/heterosexual (in his marriage)—for the sake of some race, gender, or class privilege.
Two models of race passing: mask and catachresis:

Nella Larsen, *Passing*

Nella Larsen also presents a complex case of racial, sexual, and class transgression in her 1929 short novel, *Passing*. Employing not one but two passer protagonists who complement each other in many ways—or are, as Ann duCille claims, “body doubles” (104) or “halved selves” (105)—Larsen is able to create a tension between racial subjects constructed by masking strategies and subjects informed by a catachrestic notion of race.

I see a fundamental similarity between *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* and *Passing* in how they problematize biology, or “essence.” As I tried to show, Johnson is rather hesitant in tying race to biology: his ex-colored protagonist will ultimately not have a “true” race which he either masks or uncovers in performance. Indeed, his self-construction as black (which would be considered reverse passing in the case of whites) is no less of a performance than his passing as white; race is pure catachresis in either case. Larsen conceptualizes race through two protagonist: as a one-way performance in the case of Irene and as a two-way performance in the case of Clare. Of the two protagonists, Irene clearly has a racial home, so to speak, to which she can always return. But ultimately no such “racial homecoming,” as Gayle Wald aptly puts it (47), is granted to Clare, should she discard her “ivory mask” (*Passing* 157). This is why I see Larsen’s novel as complying with all five features of the passing novel as defined by Juda Bennett—“chiarusco” style, polemics of racial justice, the topos of an almost atavistic return home, the secrecy and exposure, and the death of the heroine (48)—through the figure of Irene only. When it comes to Clare, Larsen, much like Johnson, destabilizes the racial home base and is not really concerned with racial justice.

Already on the first pages the reader is led to associate “theatrical heroics” (144) with the character of Clare Kendry, who has performed full passing after she has married a white man and kept her “true” identity secret. She is described by Irene Redfield, the central consciousness of the novel, as a passer of no race loyalty, a woman without any “allegiance beyond her own immediate desire” (144), but who now says she has “an ache, a pain that never ceases” (145). The difference between these two women, which Irene tries to enlarge in her free indirect discourse, all but diminishes in the scene where the two women meet in Drayton’s, a restaurant in Chicago which does not “sit a Negro” (150) and stare at each other. They become the objects of each other’s “persistent attention” (149), “outstaring” each other in a staring game provoked, at least for Irene, by the suspicion of her passing. It is this long stare which Barbara Johnson takes as supporting the irresistible sexual magnetism in this “overinvested and underexplained” relationship between the two women (*Feminist Difference* 160). Yet the scene is notable for another reason too: although Irene attaches the
Performing passing

inability “to tell” to “stupid” whites only (150), it turns out that it is impossible even for blacks, and even for black women themselves wearing transgressive masks, to know race, or to know who is attempting full race passing. While Irene assumes that there exists a “true” race which is possible to tell or know, she must realize that biology is not socially readable, therefore, as Clare’s passing to and fro indicates, it does not exist. Especially in Clare’s case is it made obvious that race is not biological but discursive. No biological trait connects her either to the white or the black race. Only by introducing, which she never does, blackness as a “conversational marker,” as Butler puts it (Bodies 171), would her race have been made visible to her husband; and only when she associates with blacks does she “become” black, as if, Butler aptly puts it, “through proximity” (171). In other words, she becomes black by association: through similarities to and differences from other catachrestic signifiers, the racialized subjects of the black community.

For Irene, passing, “this breaking away from all that was familiar and friendly,” is a “hazardous business” (157); in her case, passing is, indeed, the taking on of “false, forged, and mistaken identities,” as Deborah McDowell claims (“Introduction” xxx). For Clare, however, her supposed homecoming to her familiar environment is an adventure. Clare has neither “true” identity, nor false or mistaken identity; she must construct her identity—which is, as Thadious M. Davis has rightly claimed, “racial fluidity” (ix)—each time, whether she makes herself into white or black. Of course, in both cases, passing involves class mobility as well; but while Clare’s class passing is the consequence of her race passing, in Irene’s case her self-construction as middle-class is itself a performance independent of her occasional instances of race passing done for the sake of convenience. For example, every day Irene performs the ritual of taking tea and she even picks up the habit of giving tea-parties; moreover, she takes on white attitudes to her black servants as well, who are of dark color and whose welfare, as Wald points out, “Irene seems wholly unconcerned with” (49). These seem to me perfect examples of Homi Bhabha’s concept of colonial mimicry, where the colonized copy customs of the colonizers and perform them with a difference (86).

A complex ambivalence permeates Irene’s relationship to Clare: not wanting to see her, she finds herself setting up newer and newer engagements with the woman; determined that “she was through with Clare Kendry” (163), she yet bathes in the “seduction of Clare Kendry’s smile” (162), finding her voice “appealing” and “seductive” too (165). As Barbara Johnson’s observes, “Irene’s ‘no’ constantly becomes a yes,” thereby providing another “sign” of their sexual-erotic attraction (Feminist Difference 160). Irene is similarly ambivalent in connection with passing, admitting that blacks “disapprove of it and at the same time condone it” and that it “excites [their] contempt and yet [they] rather admire it” (185–186). In line with this admittance, she faults Clare, but manages to excuse herself. As she says to her friend Felise, “I don’t believe I’ve ever gone
They Aren’t, Until I Call Them

native in my life except for the sake of convenience, restaurants, theatre tickets, and things like that. Never socially I mean” (227).

Two elements gain emphasis when passing is thematized in the novel: the passer becomes the object of the gaze, and the scene, or some aspect of it, is described as “queer.” The latter happens when Clare talks about her aunts who made the Negro girl into white (159), when Clare is shown at the height of her race performance for her husband and is assisted by her two black friends (171, 172), or when Irene starts to be suspicious of another transgression of Clare’s, her sexual violation of Irene’s marriage (216), as well as Brian’s sexual transgression (209). These are indeed queer situations, where the transgressor, concealing his or her racial origins or sexual practices, enters into dangerous games which threaten the status quo. I see these situations labeled as “queer” by the narrator to coincide with catachrestic passing, that is, when there is no “true” identity covered up by a mask, but when all identities are discursively performed. Moreover, I believe “queer” indicates instances of racial and sexual fluidity as well, making, as Davis claims, Clare into a “biracial and bisexual person” into whose personality, moreover, Larsen has scripted a “variety of moves for power and agency,” “a mobility usually endemic to male subjects” (xiv).

Several instances of Clare’s objectification can be cited for where the passer is made into the object of the gaze: “easy on the eyes” (207), she is able to give immense “aesthetic pleasure” to the onlooker (209). Each time Clare appears, her absolute beauty is acknowledged by Irene in what Bennett terms “‘chiascuro’ or ‘Manichean’ style,” depicting the world “primarily in ‘black’ and ‘white,’ with particular attention to skin and eye color” (48). Indeed, her “dark, almost black, eyes” and “the ivory of her white skin” (148) are emphasized when she is first seen on the roof of Drayton’s. Later too it is her “unsheared” “pale gold” hair, her “ivory skin [with] a peculiar soft lustre” and her “magnificent! dark, sometimes absolutely black, always luminous” eyes, “Negro eyes! mysterious and concealing” (160) that catches Irene’s attention. But Clare’s objectification does not stop here: in fact, she becomes a spectacle when she goes to the Negro Welfare League dance as well.

Clare, exquisite, golden, fragrant, flaunting, in a stately gown of shining black taffeta, whose long, full skirt lay in graceful folds about her slim golden feet; her glistening hair drawn smoothly back into a small twist at the nape of her neck; her eyes sparkling like dark jewels. (203)

Irene is drawn to this beautiful exotic object in part out of her own desire and in part, as Butler points out, because her husband is drawn to the woman; as Butler claims, Irene “finds [Clare] beautiful, but at the same time finds Brian finding Clare beautiful as well” (Bodies 186). Clare’s heterosexual transgression—or Irene’s fantasy of it—seems to provoke the fantasy of homosexual transgression for Irene.
I would like to emphasize another issue here too. Clare, it seems, is no more at home, or less transparent, among blacks; she sticks out of the black background, which is supposed to be her native and familiar context, just as she sticks out of any white background (like Drayton’s). Never able to attain the invisibility of the familiar, Clare’s “passing figure,” to use Bennett’s phrase, is always foregrounded, always de-familiarized. Clare emerges as the ultimate passer and performer, the alien trespasser and, let’s say, “tresperformer,” of any environment: she is, indeed, a two-way passer. Although she thought for a while that homecoming was possible, she must realize that for her race is always construct, always catachresis. Clare, who Irene recognizes as “the menace of impermanence” in her marriage (229), is indeed the paragon of malleability: she can change races, sexualities, and subject positions, and as a consequence of her own multiple transgressions, she can destabilize situations and liaisons around herself. A “character with multiple significations,” as Martha J. Cutter remarks (84), Clare’s “plural identity destabilizes others’ sense of identity” (89). In a desperate effort to reclaim the security of her marriage, to “hold fast to the outer shell of her marriage, to keep her life fixed, certain” (Passing 235), Irene contemplates revealing Clare’s secret to her husband, until she is practically saved by the “accident” of Clare falling/jumping/being pushed out of the sixth-storey window—much like the cigarette Irene throws out of the window (238), Clare’s body, “a vital glowing thing,” falls “like a flame of red and gold” (239). Always cutting through the binaries of categories of race, class, and sexuality, the ultimate ambiguity surrounding Clare’s death seems to underpin the ambivalence of her destabilizing transgressions.

The topos of the text as the vehicle of (self-)construction:
Philip Roth, The Human Stain

In Philip Roth’s The Human Stain (2000), the protagonist Coleman Silk, classics professor and former dean of small Athena College, full passes from black to white, more precisely, to the ethnically marked version of white, Jewish. Having, as a man of colored ancestry, performed Jewishness, he simply replaced one stigma for another, it seems; but “he now made sense”: “a heretofore unknown amalgam of the most unalike of America’s historic undesirables” (132). On the faculty of this all-white New England school, he teaches the foundations of Western culture; Silk has, so to speak, “out-whited” whites. As his sister tells the narrator at the end of the novel,

As white a college as there was in New England, and that’s where Coleman made his career. As white a subject as there was in the curriculum, and that’s what Coleman chose to teach. . . . Coleman is more white than the whites. (336)
The fundamental topos of the novel is textuality: the text, the narrative is foregrounded in several ways. First, Silk’s performance is all too discursive. He invents his Jewishness with words, when at age twenty-six he decides to fiction his racial origins, making up an elaborate story about the saloon keeper Jewish father and the whole family. He passes down this fiction to his four children, providing the grounds for their Jewishness too. So, it seems, all races can be performed, the Jewish included; all one needs is a narrative of family origins, which will performatively bring about the Jewish identity. In other words, the identity does not pre-exist the narrative, rather it is the narrative that makes identity.

Second, the reader gets familiarized with Silk’s passing through Nathan Zuckerman’s imagining the events. In his imaginative reconstruction, the narrator does not tell of how it “really” happened, but necessarily only how he imagined it to have happened. In other words, what at first looks like a metalepsis, the crossing between “the world in which one tells [and] the world of which one tells,” to quote Genette again (236), turns out to be intertextuality, the meeting of two textual worlds, the world of narrating and the world of imagining. It is “imagined life,” as Derek Parker Royal puts it (117), that the narrator narrates, constructing “much of the novel as fiction” (122).

Third, the final fall of Silk is brought about by a text of sorts too: an old-fashioned and highly innocent comment. His words get interpreted by Athena purists, this “highly judgmental and self-righteous” academic community, as one critic puts it (Safer 211), as a racial slur, causing his ultimate downfall. He becomes the victim of the “calculating frenzy” and “persecuting spirit,” as Zuckerman quotes Hawthorne (2), much like Clinton became the victim of a comparable frenzy and spirit during the same year, in 1998, Roth suggests. Unable to uncover his secret, Silk must die a death fitting a Greek hero, “in battle” (see Timothy L. Parrish 454), where the deaths of his wife and girlfriend come about as collateral damage to the primal tragedy.

As in several other novels of passing, including the ones I discussed earlier, the passer will be punished for crossing the color line. Like Clare in Passing, Coleman must die a violent death; and like the ex-colored man in The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man, he will lose his wife (and girlfriend) too. But his crime is somewhat different: it is not his race—for he feels no moral obligation to his biological brethren, which is why his brother thinks he is “the traitor to his race” (342)—but his family whom he betrays and for whose betrayal he must die. The “unshakable enmity” (61) which Mark feels for his father—the blind belief “that he was going to have his father around to hate forever” (314)—takes him to becoming an Orthodox Jew. He too will be punished for so thoroughly hating his father by never having the chance to know Coleman’s (and now the whole family’s) secret. So while Coleman takes Mark’s hatred as a punishment, he too punishes the son, also a passer, albeit unknowingly, by
“withholding something so crucial to what a person is, . . . their birthright to know their genealogies” (320). “Payback. There was no end to it,” Zuckerman concludes (71). Roth indeed foregrounds the inevitability of Silk’s fall: like Oedipus, he might think that with his children born (white), he managed to flee his fate, the “universal burden of his ‘human stain,’” as Timothy L. Parrish puts it (454), only to have it return with a full-blown vengeance, killing them all. (On the Silk-Oedipus parallels, see Patrice D. Rankine.)

Several times Nathan Zuckerman presents Silk objectified, the object of his gaze. Not only does Silk, together with his secret, of course, occupy the narrator’s attention, but he is often defined in his corporeality, whether as a Jew or an African American. The first long description comes in the memorable scene of the dance: Zuckerman sees Silk as “the small-nosed Jewish type” verging on the Negroid: “one of those crimped-haired Jews of a light yellowish skin pigmentation who possess something of the ambiguous aura of the pale blacks who are sometimes taken for white” (15–16). Again, race is not possible to tell, even for a most perceptive narrator, who is Jewish himself. Much like in the Larsen novel, race will be read not as skin color but by association here too: as a boy, he gets identified as Jewish because he boxes in the team of Doc, the Jewish trainer. “You look like you look, you’re with me, and so he’s going to think that you’re one of Doc’s boys. He’s going to think that you’re Jewish,” he tells Coleman (99). Only in a brothel in the segregated South is he kicked out for being “just another nigger” (102); in “niggertown” (183), his race is read again by association. After this incident, when filling out the navy enlistment forms, he decides to pass officially. His passing becomes final, however, only when his college girlfriend, Steena Palson—who otherwise never detected his color, not even when they were naked—breaks up with him after meeting his colored mother. He can pass because he feels no race loyalty: “[b]eing a Negro was just never an issue with him,” his sister Ernestine tells Nathan much later (325). Running away as far as possible from “the tyranny of the we and its we-talk” (108), Coleman decides to craft and follow his own personal Emancipation Proclamation and thereby make himself into a free individual.

Far from there being anything wrong with his decision to identify himself as white, it was the most natural thing for someone with his outlook and temperament and skin color to have done. All he’d ever wanted, from earliest childhood on, was to be free: not black, not even white—just on his own and free. (120)

This Emancipation Proclamation is the invented narrative of his family history: it is a piece of discourse whereby he is capable of reinventing himself. When she is visited by her son for the last time in their lives, she is naturally crushed at the thought of never seeing him again, or ever seeing his wife or children. She is disappointed because Coleman shows no race consciousness: “Lost himself to his own people,” she says (324). But for Silk race consciousness is not the issue: it is
the lack of a piece of discourse comparable to the one he makes up which allows his self-construction as a Jew “You think like a prisoner. You do, Coleman Brutus. You’re white as snow and you think like a slave,” the mother tells him (139). What she does not understand is that he gains a different kind of freedom by the invention of his own text and by his self-fashioning as a Jew.

Coleman never reveals to Iris, his wife, that, having come from an African American family, he performed full passing. In fact, Iris’s fuzzy hair seemed like a good cover-up, should their children exhibit Negroid traits. Recognizing this, he “wondered if this entire decision, the most monumental of his life, wasn’t based on the least serious thing imaginable: Iris’s hair, that sinuous thicket of hair that was far more Negroid than Coleman’s” (136). Ultimately, his Jewishness becomes naturalized, by association again, on the campus: it is the academic community whose proxy makes his passing fully credible. And perhaps it is no accident that his secret will be revealed to another Jew, Nathan Zuckerman, whose investigative proxy, providing them with a chance to reveal their racial différence, will put Silk’s Jewishness into a new perspective.

Silk and his son are not the only passers, however. Faunia Farley, abused by her stepfather when she was a child, abused by her Vietnam veteran husband during their marriage and after, and tormented by the memory of the death of her children, lives a life in hiding. As the janitor cleaning in the college and the post office, she has disowned her past as a “rich, privileged kid,” a “blond angelic child” (29), now concealing all her miseries “behind one of those inexpressive bone faces that hide nothing and bespeak an immense loneliness” (1–2). She is a traumatized individual, immobilized to the degree that now her overall response to life is disconnection and removal. As the narrator puts it in the novel, “She had managed to make herself so that she wasn’t even here to be seen. The skill of an animal, whether predator or prey” (211; emphasis in original). Faunia’s class passing, then, involves not just class but visibility: this white, once privileged but now traumatized woman makes a desperate effort to become invisible, to take over the position of the “invisible man.”

Delphine Roux, the French professor, is another rational and, one might say, premeditated passer, who conceptualizes Americanization and American individualism in terms of performative constructionism:

I will go to America and be the author of my life, she says; I will construct myself outside the orthodoxy of my family’s given, I will fight against the given, impassioned subjectivity carried to the limit, individualism at its best—(273; emphasis in original)

But Roux will come nowhere close to the ideal of Transcendentalism, the withdrawing individualist and different drummer of Thureau, whose ideal emerges elsewhere in the novel, in connection with Zuckerman as well as Silk. Roux is just a petty villain, who writes anonymous letters, speaks out on political
correctness in order to bring down the Classics professor with charges of racism, and schemes, after learning of the news of Coleman’s death, to blame on the former dean an embarrassing letter she mistakenly sent to her colleagues (instead of the ads department of The New York Review of Books). “She winds up as the author of nothing,” the narrator’s verdict goes (273). She is afraid to “out” with her sexual appetite, her loneliness, or her professional beliefs; and desperately wanting to save herself, she makes a pathetic effort to ruin Silk. But her efforts prove futile: Silk will be morally redeemed after his death, while she will live the rest of her life in limbo, never able to decide who she really is or wants to be.

I see the novel turn on the trope of passing: whether it is a man legally black who full passes as white (Jew), a secular Jewish boy who makes himself into an Orthodox Jew, a once privileged girl who now lives as an invisible woman, or a woman governed by her sexual appetite and drawn to old-fashioned humanists who takes on the mask of a zealous feminist. What is shared by these passers is that their performances involve uncommon, uninvited, or unreadable transgressions. This holds especially true for the first three instances, where birth commonly determines identity now changed: passing over into Jewish, especially Orthodox, is not a move tolerated by Jewishness itself, while giving up social privilege for becoming a janitor or farm help is not a move held meaningful by society. These passers do not consider their biology or birthright as something given: rather because they see their subjectivities as catachresis, they move easily from one identity inflection to another, taking them on always by association, by proxy. “Play it any way you like, . . . that’s the way I play it,” the passing Coleman says to his one black girlfriend; “[w]hatever they think . . . let them think” (133).

Of course, Roth exhibits a tremendous sense of irony too, when he makes his plot turn on the self-making of a “black” man into a “Jew.” On the one hand, by twice racializing his hero as the ultimate Other, he locks his protagonist the category of “race,” catering, in a way, to what Virginia Domínguez calls “racialist talk” (142) dominant in American public discourse, as well as servicing and reinscribing what again Domínguez terms the “compulsory racialism of [American] nationhood” (153). Silk’s full assing from “black” to Jewish underscores the fact that any member of America’s “racialized Other” has no choice but to accept himself as the “perennially Other-ised ‘non-white’” (Domínguez 153), whether African American or Jewish. Moreover, when Roth gives his readers a “black”/Jewish passer, he evokes an era, pre-World War II, preceding what Jon Stratton sees as “the historical shift of Jews from a racial group to an ethnic group” (348). At this time before the “ethnicization” of American Jews (Stratton 349)—the time before “Jews became white folk,” to adopt the phrase from the title Karen Brodkin’s well-known book on the issue—the traditional alliance still existed between African Americans and Jews (see
Paul Berman on this topic). Passing from one to the other, Coleman Silk, who remains locked into “race,” embodies this alliance.

On the other hand, however, Silk’s racial self-reconstruction makes mock of any “facts of biology,” and, indeed, of any effort at social classification based on race. The protagonist successfully passing from one race to the other pulls the rug from under the racialist discourse setting apart “true” Americans from those who are racially marked. While ironically pointing his finger at racialist discourse, Roth exhibits Silk as the “true American,” who will beat the classifiers at their own game.

* * *

In conclusion of this chapter, I would like to reiterate the following claims. Narratives of race passing problematize not only the visibility of race, but consequently the issue of biology. Performative racial constructions foreground race as catachresis, a misnomer lacking its referent. Moreover, race is presented in its interaction with other identity markers such as power and sexuality (and/or gender), where the possibility of passing along multiple subject positions suggests that those other markers might similarly act as catachreses. Neither race nor sexuality seems to pre-exist the making of the subject; they are both produced in power relations, where the discourse of power structures the discourse of race and sexuality (and/or gender). Two types of race passing can be differentiated from the perspective of the marked/unmarked dichotomy: where the subject passes over to marked and where the subject passes over to unmarked categories. It would seem that in Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* and Larsen’s *Passing*, the protagonists experience both as they pass back and forth between races. However, in the case of the ex-colored man and Clare, neither form of passing involves unmarked categories: in each case, they must perform a masquerade of marking, while no “natural” racial home will shelter them. Only for Irene is there such a racial home, so when she passes as white, she too must perform, in a performance, whiteness, while blackness is the unmarked “natural” category for her. Coleman Silk of Roth’s *The Human Stain* passes purposefully between two marked races, black and Jewish, with the hope that his black traits would make him a “natural” Jew. His Jewishness is naturalized by association in the academic community. At the end, however, this Jewishness gains a new meaning when befriended by the “really” Jewish Zuckerman, making race meaningful as a difference, a *différance*, and not as self-presence.