



C A T H E R I N E R O T T E N B E R G

Passing: Race, Identification, and Desire

IN THE SECOND HALF of the nineteenth century, African-American writers such as William Wells Brown and Frances Harper began invoking the phenomenon of passing in their texts as a way of investigating the complexities and contradictions of the category of race in the United States.¹ The light-enough-to-pass Negro (but usually Negress) would play a central role in the imagination of African-American writers for the next fifty years. Charles Chesnutt's *The House behind the Cedars*, Jessie Faucet's *Plum Bum*, and James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* are perhaps the best-known examples. Nella Larsen's 1929 novella, *Passing*, the text under discussion in this essay, can thus be seen as inheritor and perpetuator of a long tradition of such narratives. In recent years, Larsen's text has become the most celebrated instance of a story about passing in African-American literature, eclipsing the tradition that preceded it. This is not coincidental, for Larsen is a master of ambiguity and intrigue, and the enigmatic finale of her novella has generated heated debates and countless interpretations.

Many analyses have attempted to determine whether or not Larsen's use of passing can be seen as a subversive strategy,² that is, whether the narrative serves to reinforce hegemonic norms of race or whether it ultimately posits passing as a viable survival strategy, which has the potential to disrupt "the enclosures of a unitary identity."³ While this question still informs several critiques, in the past few years commentators have been concentrating more and more on how passing interrogates and problematizes the ontology of identity categories and their construction. Rather than trying to place passing in a subversive/recuperative binary, these articles and books use passing as a point of entry into questions of identity and identity categories more generally.⁴

In this essay I contend that Larsen's text can assist critics in understanding the specific and, as I will argue, *irreducible* features of race performativity.⁵ That is, the novella can help us begin mapping out the differences between gender and race norms since it uncovers the way in which regulatory ideals of

race produce a specific modality of performativity. *Passing* is especially conducive to interrogating the modality of race performativity because, unlike other passing narratives of the period, Larsen's presents us with two protagonists who can pass for white; yet only Clare "passes over" into the white world. The depiction and juxtaposition of these two characters reveal the complexities and intricacies of the category of race. While Irene can be seen to represent the subject who appropriates and internalizes the hegemonic norms of race, Clare's trajectory dramatizes how dominant norms can be misappropriated and how disidentification is always possible.

This essay commences with a theoretical discussion of race. Although much has been written on the constructed nature of the category of race, very few analyses have offered a convincing and rigorous account of how race might be conceived of as performative reiteration. The second section offers a reading of "passing" scenes from the novella in an attempt to unravel some of the distinctive mechanisms through which race norms operate. On the one hand, the novella suggests that race in the United States operates through an economy of optics, and *the assumption of whiteness* is one of the consequences of this economy. On the other hand, the novella reveals that skin color (i.e., optics) does not really constitute the "truth" of race.

Invoking Homi Bhabha's notion of mimicry as a supplement to Butler's concept of gender performativity in the third section, I interrogate and theorize the ways in which the definitional contradiction of race ("can be seen" versus "cannot be seen") produces race as performative reiteration. While there are two idealized genders under regimes of compulsory heterosexuality, albeit with a very great power differential between them, there has historically been only one hegemonic and ideal race under racist regimes.⁶ This difference, I argue, has far-reaching implications, one of which is the need to rethink the desire/identification nexus, a nexus that operates differently in race and in gender. Understanding the particular relationship between desire and identification in the novella also helps us begin to gauge the critical question of disidentification.

At least one clarification is needed at this point, however. This essay focuses on the ways in which power—in the Foucauldian and Butlerian sense—operates on the hegemonic level and does not make a claim about the multiplicity of social practices per se. Hegemony, though, as we will see in the last section, is never complete, indicating that there are always counter-discourses and alternative norms circulating within any given society.

1. Race as Performative Repetition

In "Race as a Kind of Speech Act," Louis Miron and Jonathan Inda argue that "race does not refer to a pre-given subject. Rather, it works performatively

to constitute the subject itself and only acquires a naturalized effect through repeated or reiterative naming of or reference to that subject.⁷ The norms that constitute the symbolic order and create “the grid of intelligibility” are produced and circulated by the relations of power existing within a given society. In a white supremacist society, for example, norms work by constructing a binary opposition between white and black (or nonwhite) in which white is always privileged over black.⁸ Subjects are thus interpellated into the symbolic order as gendered and raced beings and are recognizable only in reference to the existing grid of intelligibility. For Miron and Inda, the interpellation “Look, a Negro,” famously addressed by Frantz Fanon, is parallel to “It’s a girl!”⁹ And once interpellated, subjects must, in turn, incessantly cite and mime the very race norms that created their intelligibility (and thus their condition of possibility) in the first place. In short, according to Miron and Inda, race performativity is the power of discourse to bring about what it names through the citing or repetition of racial norms.

The two critics cogently point out that norms or regulatory ideals which constitute and make social practices possible are produced through an “artificial unity” composed of a series of disparate attributes: “Physical features, namely skin color, are linked to attributes of intellect and behavior, establishing a hierarchy of quality between white and black.”¹⁰ The concept of race, like gender, does not denote a natural phenomenon, but rather “groups together attributes which do not have a necessary or natural relationship to one another in order to enable one to make use of this fictitious unity as a causal principle, an omnipresent meaning.”¹¹ Accordingly, a series of traits linked to whiteness (civilized/intelligent/moral/hardworking/clean) and blackness (savage/instinctual/simple/licentious/lazy/dirty) have been concatenated in the service of specific social hierarchies.¹² In *Passing*, Clare recounts how her white aunts, who took her in after her father died, thought that hard labor would be good for her: “I had Negro blood and they belonged to the generation that had written and read long articles headed: ‘Will the Blacks Work?’”¹³ The “lazy black worker” has a long history in American race discourse.¹⁴ Jack Bellew, Clare’s racist husband, also invokes and reiterates this kind of discourse when he tells Irene that black people are “always robbing and killing. And . . . worse” (172). Insofar as the performative repetition of norms is the condition of possibility for viable subjects, race performativity compels subjects to perform according to these “fictitious” unities, thus shaping their identity and their preferences. Performativity is, indeed, one of the most fundamental manifestations of the Foucauldian notion of positive power.

While “Race as a Kind of Speech Act” is one of the few articles that offers a sustained and rigorous theoretical analysis of the way in which race is subtended by performativity, I have serious misgivings about the simple transposition of Butler’s notion of gender performativity onto race. Although I agree

with Miron and Ina that we need to begin understanding race as performative reiteration and thus see my intervention as a supplement to their important work, critics must be careful not to ignore the specificities of race norms. Otherwise, we run the risk of eliding the particular mechanisms through which the subject comes to be “raced.”

2. Assumption of Whiteness and the Contradictions of Race

The scene in which Clare Kendry and Irene Redfield reencounter one another after twelve years of separation serves to initiate the reader into the strange phenomenon of passing. When Irene initially escapes the searing heat of an August day in Chicago and enters the Drayton, there is no hint in the text that she is doing the forbidden, that is, ingressing white-only space. It is only once Irene becomes aware of another woman’s stare that the reader understands Irene has been “passing herself off as white.” The other woman continues to survey Irene, and this unwavering look forces Irene to wonder whether the other woman knows that “here before her very eyes on the roof of the Drayton sat a Negro” (150). Irene’s fear of detection generates an inner monologue in which she admits that the other woman couldn’t possibly “know” she is a Negro. Never, Irene assures herself, had anyone even remotely seemed to suspect that she was black. People always took her for an “Italian, a Spaniard, a Mexican, or a gypsy” (150).

Clare’s stare causes Irene to question her own (successful) attempt to pass as white. She is surprised by the possibility of being caught in the act of performing whiteness, for, as she tells us, she has never been found out. The stare does not, however, cause her to question whether the “languorous black eyes” of the other woman are part of a “black” and not a “white” body. Irene takes it for granted that the other woman is white. Even after Clare approaches her old acquaintance and insists that she recognizes her, Irene asks herself, “What white girls had she known well enough to have been familiarly addressed as ‘Rene by them?’” (151). Both Irene’s admission that she has never been questioned when passing and her failure to register the possibility of the other woman “being” something other than she seems suggest that race norms work through assumptions of whiteness. As Sara Ahmed has argued, in a society in which white is the ideal or norm, one is assumed to be white unless one looks black. “[L]ooking black’ becomes a deviation from the normalized state of ‘being white.’”¹⁵ The invisibility of the mark of whiteness is exactly the mark of its privilege.

This assumption of whiteness is also dramatically exposed when Irene first encounters Jack Bellew, Clare’s white racist husband. The tea party to which Clare invites Irene after their reencounter includes three women: Clare, Irene, and Gertrude. All three women are light enough to pass, although Clare

is the only one who has completely “passed over.” Bellew, who claims to know a “nigger” when he sees one, does not for a moment entertain the idea that one of the women sitting with his wife might be “black.” He therefore feels perfectly comfortable acknowledging that he doesn’t dislike niggers but rather hates them. “They give me the creeps,” he admits, adding, “the black scrimy devils” (172). It appears that American racial classification assumes “that racial identity marks the subject in the form of absence or presence of color.”¹⁶ In other words, racial identity and classification seem to be constituted through skin color.

But the category of race, it turns out, is much more complex, and these scenes bring to the fore the contradiction at the heart of race definition in the United States. On the one hand, as we have seen, race is assumed to manifest itself in the visible, in skin pigmentation. That is, it seems to operate in an “optical economy of identity.”¹⁷ But as Nella Larsen makes very clear in her text, the visible markings or lack thereof are not enough to tell the “truth” of race. After all, the three women at the tea party are not “white” but “black.” One of the most rudimentary lessons of passing, as Amy Robinson argues and Larsen dramatizes, is that “the visible is *never* easily or simply a guarantor of truth.”¹⁸ Irene herself is aware that optics are not enough to gauge race as it is defined in the United States, averring, “White people were so stupid about such things for all they usually asserted that they were able to tell; and by the most ridiculous means, finger-nails, palms of hand, shapes of ears, teeth, and other equally silly rot” (150). Jack Bellew also articulates the contradiction. His pet name for his wife is Nig, a strange nickname given that Clare has successfully passed into white society. He tells Clare that she can get as black as she pleases, since he “knows” that she is not a “nigger” (171). Once there is an assumption of whiteness, pigmentation does not signify in the same way. Melanin, it seems, is not the manifest truth of race, although it has played a crucial part in the construction of racial thinking in the United States.

The “assumption of whiteness” begins to reveal the specificity of race norms. In heteronormative regimes, one is assumed to be *either* a woman or a man, even if the standard and privileged position is male. The lack of visual markers “indicating” whether a given subject is male or female is destabilizing. In white racist regimes, the lack of visual markers is not destabilizing in and of itself. Rather, since whiteness is always privileged and the only desirable color, or, in other words, since there is only one ideal race, subjects are immediately assumed to be white in the absence of any telling marks of “color.” But again, as *Passing* makes very clear, race construction is about much more than visibility.

3. The Specific Operations of Race Performativity

Juxtaposing Homi Bhabha and Judith Butler can help critics conceptualize some of the differences between race and gender as performative reiteration.

Although Bhabha does not explicitly mention performativity in his chapter “Of Mimicry and Man,” it seems that mimicry does indeed operate through performative reiteration, that is, through the colonized subject’s incessant attempt to mime and inhabit the colonists’ authority and hegemonic ideals. While Butler tends to concentrate on gender, Bhabha many times isolates issues of race (“white but not quite”). My goal, therefore, is to read these two theorists as potential correctives to one another, once again using “passing” as a point of entry into the question of race as performative reiteration.

In his now classic *Location of Culture*, Bhabha states that in the colonial situation mimicry emerges “as one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge.”¹⁹ The mimic man, the nonwhite native, does not “re-present” but rather repeats and imitates the discursive effects of colonial (or racist) discourse; mimicry is an effect of colonial discourse. On the one hand, the colonizer demands that the other approximate, through mimesis, the norms of the colonizing power, norms associated with whiteness.²⁰ On the other hand, in order to continuously naturalize, justify, and authorize his power, the colonizer must constantly maintain the difference between himself, as a white man, and the other. In other words, colonial discourse moves between the recognition of cultural and racial difference and its disavowal.

According to Bhabha, there is an ambivalence, a difference, at the “origins” of colonial discourse’s authority. By rearticulating colonial “presence in terms of its otherness, that which it disavows,” the mimic man can potentially disrupt the self-grounding assumptions of whiteness (and colonialism itself), disclosing the way in which otherness always inheres in presence. Mimicry can always turn to mockery; it is a hybrid site and can lay bare the way in which the colonial presence “is always ambivalent, split between its appearance as original and authoritative and its articulation as repetition and difference.”²¹ While Bhabha invokes psychoanalytic concepts such as paranoia and narcissism in order to explain the ambivalence which “grounds” racist identification, I would like to reposition his insights (even further) within a Foucauldian framework in the context of 1920s United States.

I believe that the ambivalence Bhabha points to in colonial discourse is similar to the contradiction that *Passing* exposes as being at the “origins” of race definition in the United States. The novella manages to reveal the paradox embodied in racist discourse, and lays bare how racist discourse attempts to produce desire in the black other to mime the ways of the whites (thus there is really only one norm), while at the same time this discourse assumes that “non-whiteness” has inherent characteristics that preclude black subjects from ever really becoming “white.” In order to maintain the fiction of its own racial purity and superiority, racist discourse must constantly invoke and reinforce the “non-whiteness” of the other subject, whom it concomitantly encourages to live up to norms of whiteness.

Insofar as this is the case, white racist regimes create a particular bifurcation between identification and desire, one that is distinct from the divide characterizing heteronormativity. Taking the little boy as the standard measure of how the bifurcation of identification and desire operates, Sigmund Freud, in his *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, states, "In the first case one's father is what one would like *to be*, and in the second [i.e., the little girl] he is what one would like *to have*." The little boy exhibits special interest "in his father; he would like to grow like him and be like him, and take his place everywhere. . . . At the same time as this identification with his father, or a little later, the boy has begun to develop a true object-cathexis toward his mother."²² Identification and desire to have are therefore "two psychologically distinct ties"; desire to have is a straightforward sexual object-cathexis, while identification "endeavors to mould a person's own ego after the fashion of the one that has been taken as a model."²³ Identification, in other words, turns out not to be a sexual tie but rather an emotional one. As Diana Fuss points out, "For Freud, desire for one sex is always secured through identification with the other sex; to desire and to identify with the same person at the same time is, in this model, a theoretical impossibility."²⁴

On the one hand, I argue that the difference between the "desire-to-be" (i.e., identification) and the "desire to have" is an ambiguous one, but one that is carefully maintained in the service of heteronormativity. Subjects are encouraged *to desire* to live up to the norms of a specific gender while concomitantly encouraged (and compelled) to desire the other. Thus, to complicate the usual psychoanalytic schema, in which identification and sexual object-choice are typically seen to be necessarily and essentially distinct for "normal" sexual development, and to build on Diana Fuss's and Ann Pellegrini's insights that desire and identification are always implicated in one another, I argue that desire in heterosexual regimes operates by *engendering*, *encouraging*, and *compelling* a specific type of relationship between two forms of desire: the "desire-to-be," which induces the subject to live up to hegemonic *norms*, and a "desire for," which induces a desire for sexual intimacy with the other gender.²⁵ On the other hand, I would like to further complicate this schema by arguing that the conflation of identification with the "desire-to-be" cannot be sustained. My comparison between the way in which identification and desire operate in heteronormativity and racist regimes will focus only on the identification/"desire-to-be" axis, since I believe this is where the crux of the difference lies.²⁶

Like norms of gender identification, race norms operate by compelling subjects to assume or identify with certain identity categories. In the case of gender, subjects are interpellated into the symbolic order as either men or women and thus compelled to identify as either one or the other. By compelling *and encouraging* "women" to live up to norms of femininity and "men" to

attempt to embody masculinity, heteronormative regimes reinforce their hegemony. There is a linking and thus collapsing of identification and “desire-to-be,” which is fundamental to the operations of heteronormativity. In the case of race, subjects are compelled to identify as either black or white. But this is where the similarity with gender ends, since white racist regimes create a distinct bifurcation between identification and “desire-to-be,” such that certain subjects are encouraged to privilege and thus desire attributes associated with whiteness, but concurrently these same subjects are *forced* to identify as black (which has gained its specific signification due to white supremacist discourse such as the one-drop rule). The assumption of whiteness that I outlined in the previous section is an effect of the way in which whiteness circulates as the ideal, while the one-drop rule and all of the prohibitions linked to trying to identify differently help ensure that subjects do not transgress racial boundaries. The ambivalence or contradiction underlying the assumption of whiteness can actually be restated in the following way: identify as black (or else) but aspire to be white. This contradiction, which actually constitutes the hegemonic category of race, proves to be a very effective way of policing racial borders.²⁷ The particular modality of the bifurcation, in other words, is simultaneously a product of power relations in a given society and that which allows power to operate effectively. This analysis diverges from a Freudian analysis not only because it underscores the different relationship between identification and desire in heteronormativity and racist regimes, and posits that identification and the “desire-to-be” cannot be collapsed, but also because in both regimes desire and identification are understood to be constituted by and through Foucault’s conception of power.

Irene identifies as black despite the fact that she can pass as white. Due to the one-drop rule that was operative in the United States and inscribed in law at the time, it is no wonder that she does so. Irene’s identification with blackness is described as a “bond,” a “tie of race” (182), “the strain of black blood” (192). Although these descriptions can be read as having a positive valence, Irene’s relationship to her identification with blackness is revealed when she suspects that her husband is having an affair with Clare. She describes herself caught between two allegiances—herself or her race: “Race! The thing that *bound* and *suffocated* her . . . the *burden* of race” (225, my emphasis). Race identification is ultimately described as something imposed.

All of the narratives of passing from this period underscore, in one form or another, how the category of race is forced upon the subject. All of these light-enough-to-pass characters, from Rena Walden to the first-person narrator in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* to Angela Murray in *Plum Bum*, are interpellated into the symbolic world as black. The impact of the initial interpellation into the symbolic order is seemingly so great that the passing

subject can never free him- or herself of its psychic effects.²⁸ Attempts to identify differently are always in relation to that first initiation into subjecthood. However, many of the protagonists in these texts take the risk of identifying differently in order to access the privileges of whiteness, and most of them pay a high price or are punished for this “transgression.”²⁹

Punishment is an ever-present threat for subjects who attempt to identify differently. The “passing” mention of lynching is deceptive (231), for despite Larsen’s description of Irene’s staid middle-class lifestyle, the threat of violence against black Americans who overstepped certain racial boundaries was ubiquitous in 1920s United States. Brian’s answer to his son’s question about why “they” only lynch colored people, “Because they hate ’em. . . . Because they are afraid of them, son,” reveals some of the simmering racism that saturates Larsen’s novella.³⁰ Through prohibitions and restrictions, the one-drop rule ensures that subjects conform to these constructed norms by compelling people with any African ancestors to identify as black. Irene is, in many ways, compelled to identify as black, although her “desire-to-be,” as we will see shortly, lies elsewhere.

If *Passing* discloses that identifying as black has historically been a compelled identification, and not about the *desire* to usurp the other’s place (to be or appropriate and thus become the other), then some of psychoanalysis’s most basic assumptions about identification are put into question. Identification can no longer be understood simply as “an endless process of violent negation, a process of killing off the other in fantasy in order to usurp the other’s place, the place where the subject desires to be.”³¹ Nor can it be understood as the psychological process whereby the subject assimilates an aspect, property or attribute to the other, and is transformed.³² For identification with blackness under white racist regimes has historically not only been coerced, but it has also been coded as *undesirable*.

Desire and identification are not free-floating entities, since “we must understand power as *forming* the subject . . . as providing the very condition of its existence and the *trajectory of its desire*.”³³ But in contrast to Butler, who seems occasionally to collapse back into an ordinary desire, a “*prior* desire for social existence,” which would help explain a subject’s passionate and psychic attachment to subjugating norms,³⁴ I argue that the identification-desire dichotomy and its effect on subjects must be understood as one of the necessary productions of hegemony, that is, one of the most effective mechanisms of positive and negative power. As Butler herself says in her earlier writings, heteronormative and racial discourse are *formative* of desire and identification, and there is no reference to some prediscursive libido or amorphous desire that does not further produce the contours of that desire.³⁵

It might seem that power should work to encourage black-identified subjects to approximate blackness as defined by the hegemony. This would operate as a mechanism of control because the subject’s attempt to embody these

norms would ensure that subject's subordination. But herein lie the paradox and the complex workings of positive and negative power. If a regime privileges certain attributes, then it must also encourage subjects to desire and strive to embody them. It can and does attempt to bar certain subjects from accessing privilege and positions of power through race differentiation and classification, or, in other words, compelling race identification, but it cannot completely control the effects of its own discourse. So long as blackness is coded as undesirable under white supremacist regimes, only those black-identified subjects who strive to embody attributes associated with whiteness will gain admittance to some of the benefits of privilege and power.

Thus, in racist regimes a concatenation that is very different from heteronormativity takes place. In heteronormativity (i.e., on the hegemonic level), identification with "being a woman" almost always implies (and is inextricably intertwined with) the desire to "be a woman," that is, a desire to live up to the norms of femininity in a particular symbolic order. Femininity is posited as desirable and as something that "women" should approximate; wanting to "be a woman" is coded as positive. The forced identification with blackness, however, is not linked with a desire to live up to norms of blackness. Rather, black-identified subjects, in order to sustain a nonmarginal existence, are compelled and encouraged to privilege and thus "desire-to-be white," that is, to live up to attributes associated with whiteness. As a consequence of the trauma of colonialism, Frantz Fanon asseverates that "The black man wants to be white,"³⁶ while Stuart Hall argues that "Blacks could gain entry to the mainstream—but only at the cost of . . . assimilating white norms of style, looks, and behavior."³⁷ This again is in stark contrast to heteronormativity, where women are never encouraged to live up to norms of masculinity, nor are men urged to live up to feminine ideals. Whereas female-identified subjects (subjects interpellated into the symbolic order as women) who desire to approximate masculinity (active, aggressive, etc.) are threatening to the powers that be, black-identified subjects who attempt to approximate whiteness have often been accepted by hegemony.

Although *Passing* is ostensibly about the dangers of passing over to the white world as manifested in Clare's enigmatic death, I would argue, along with many other critics, that the novella is just as much about Irene's attempting to approximate norms of whiteness.³⁸ Despite or perhaps due to her black identification, Irene is depicted as desiring a civilized and cultured life. "Irene didn't like changes, particularly changes that affected the smooth routine of her household" (188). Thus, Brian's dream of leaving the United States for Brazil is disturbing to Irene on at least two counts. It represents a change that would disrupt the "pleasant routine of her life" (229), and Brazil, according to Irene's assessment of things, is decidedly not a civilized place. Irene's routine, it is important to underscore, consists of maintaining the appearances of white

middle-class prosperity. She occupies herself with mothering, social obligations, and “uplift work”; and despite her declaration to Clare that she is “wrapped up in her boys and the running of her house,” it seems that black maids do most of the arduous housework. As Jacquelyn McLendon avers, “Irene Redfield, in her strict adherence to bourgeois ideological codes, strives to mask any feelings or behavior that appears to be uncivilized or unladylike, measures herself by white standards, and lives in constant imitation of whites.”³⁹ Irene strives to obtain “marginal acceptance and security in American society,” and this desire-to-be a viable and accepted subject in the United States forces her to “imitate the prejudices of the dominant society.”⁴⁰

Security is the most important and “desired thing in life” for Irene Redfield (235). Any and all attributes linked to hegemonic ideas of blackness—“the open expression of emotion and feeling rather than intellect, a lack of ‘civilized refinement’ in sexual and social life”⁴¹—are carefully policed by Irene. Her occasional outbursts of temper and impetuosity are followed by self-admonishment (157, 190, 201). Even when Irene first suspects that Brian is having an affair with Clare, she refuses to display her emotions. Despite the shock and horror, Irene throws her already-planned tea party. She keeps up appearances: “Satisfied that there lingered no betraying evidence of weeping, she dusted a little powder on her dark-white face and again examined it carefully” (218). Rather than show any signs of distress, Irene “went on pouring. Made repetitions of her smile. Answered questions. Manufactured conversation. . . . So like many other tea-parties she had had” (219).

Irene also ensures that any semblance of overt sexuality is checked; the stereotype of the lascivious, oversexed black woman was still very much in circulation during the period Larsen depicts.⁴² At one point, she suddenly admits to herself that Clare is “capable of heights and depths of feelings that she, Irene Redfield had never known.” But the clincher is in the next admission. Irene has “never cared to know” these feelings (195). Brian is her husband and the father of her sons, but as she ponders what to do with the suspicion of Brian’s affair with Clare, she also tells us that she has never truly known love (235). The desire to approximate norms of civility is so powerful that Irene is willing to “hold fast to the outer shell of her marriage, to keep her life fixed, certain. Brought to the edge of distasteful reality, her fastidious nature did not recoil” (235). For to dissolve the marriage would no doubt bring the kind of notoriety that Irene tries so hard to avoid (157, 199). Moreover, if the marriage is already more about striving to embody the ideals of the white middle class, then it is not at all clear that the “substance” of the marriage would change after Brian’s affair; the two already sleep in different rooms. In short, Irene strives to be as prim, as proper, and as bourgeois as (ideals of) white middle-class ladies.⁴³

This desire to approximate norms of whiteness is reiterated in the other

two major passing novels of this period. The protagonist in James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* clearly exposes the "compelled desire" to embody attributes associated with whiteness. After witnessing a black man being lynched, he decides to pass. He abandons his ragtime career, which is associated with "black" culture, marries a white woman, and becomes a successful businessman. He expresses his anxiety of "being found out" but decides to take his chances anyway. And whereas Johnson's protagonist takes his chances as a white man, Angela Murray in *Plum Bum* finds the strain of passing too much for her and ends up married to a light-enough-to-pass black man. And while both sisters, Angela and Virginia (who is not light enough to pass), are ultimately compelled to identify as black, they, just like Irene, are also depicted as striving to live up to white middle-class norms of respectability. In order to access privilege, it seems, subjects interpellated into the symbolic order as black must constantly endeavor to embody attributes associated with whiteness.

Thus, *contra* Miron and Inda, I would like to emphasize that the raced subject, in order to remain *viable* and to *not be completely marginalized* in a white supremacist power regime, must constantly and perpetually attempt to embody norms that have historically been associated and concatenated with whiteness. Although white racist regimes help create black subjects, the racial norms that this regime produces, promulgates, and compels subjects to approximate are invariably norms associated with whiteness. I believe that the delinking of identification and "desire-to-be" is key to understanding the particular mechanisms by which and through which norms of race operate under racist regimes. Moreover, desiring to approximate blackness, as it comes to be defined by this regime, means disidentifying with the dominant norms, can be dangerous, and can sometimes even lead to death.

4. Identification Trouble

By way of conclusion, I would like to introduce some additional complicating factors and qualifications. As mentioned, in white racist regimes, attributes associated with whiteness are always privileged. While such a regime would not necessarily discourage marginal black-identified subjects from striving to embody blackness, the splitting of identification and desire-to-be serves as one of the most efficacious mechanisms of control. This delinking ensures that the desirability of whiteness is reinforced, while black-identified subjects are simultaneously prevented from accessing many of the privileges that "true" whiteness grants.

Clare, however, disrupts this schema to a certain extent. Through her characterization, the reader is exposed to an interesting process of identification, disidentification, and a further disidentification. Interpellated into the

symbolic order as a black woman, Clare “chooses” to pass over into the white world. Her marriage to a white racist who does not know that she is passing in many ways underscores the risk that this kind of misidentification carries. In her first identification crisis, Clare “decides” to perform race norms differently. Rather than remain a black-identified woman who strives to approximate norms of whiteness, Clare begins not only to approximate white norms but also to identify as a white woman. In the letter Clare sends to Irene after meeting her at the Drayton, Clare indicates that she had been on her way to “freeing” herself from her identification with blackness (145). We learn early on that Clare’s decision to pass is inextricably intertwined with her determination to “be a person and not a charity or a problem” (159). In contrast to Angela Murray in *Plum Bum*, Clare has no loving family whom she has to break ties with and disown in order to pass. The risks she takes, like the ones taken by the protagonist in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*, are, according to Clare herself, “worth the price” (160), for performing whiteness confers status and privilege.

Clare’s desire to reclaim her initial identification as a black woman, however, is one that cannot be explained according to the logic of privilege. For this very reason Larsen’s description of this further disidentification is fascinating. Clare knowingly courts danger and punishment when she shows up in Harlem; in many ways, she can be seen to be putting her social existence into jeopardy. In sharp contrast to the “status” she gains by performing whiteness, her appearance in black Harlem does not confer privilege.

Larsen’s portrayal of Clare thus suggests that the preceding discussion did not fully capture the complexity of race performativity, and of performativity more generally. Hegemonic regimes, as I argued above, cannot completely control the effects of their own discourse. Even though whiteness is privileged over and against blackness in white supremacist regimes, the very repetition and circulation of different—and at times contradictory—racial norms create the possibility of subversion. As Judith Butler has reminded us time and again, because the symbolic order is dependent on reiteration for its very existence, it is also necessarily open to variation. Moreover, since it is impossible to fully inhabit hegemonic ideals once and for all, there is an irreconcilable space between normative roles and social practices. Subjects must *incessantly* attempt to embody norms, which, in turn, creates a continuous (and potentially discernible) dissonance; gaps and fissures can and do emerge within symbolic orders as subjects strive to embody regulatory ideals.⁴⁴ Due to the noncoincidence of ideals and social praxis, there is always the possibility that subjects will repeat norms in unpredictable and potentially contestatory ways.

In a sense, this is what Clare is depicted as doing when she attempts to approximate certain hegemonic norms of blackness. Unlike Irene, Clare does not police overt signs of sexuality. The “shade too provocative” smile that she

gives the waiter at the Drayton is one of the first things Irene notices about her old acquaintance (148), and when the reader is first introduced to Clare she is with an unknown and never-named man; we find out later that he is not her husband. This linking of Clare and sexuality occurs throughout the text, from the gossip that Clare's disappearance from her aunts' house elicits, through the way she dresses in clothing deliberately meant to attract attention to her beauty, to Irene's suspicion that she is having an affair with Brian. Clare herself cultivates and performs this image; for example, during Clare's first visit to Irene and Brian in Harlem, she admonishes Irene for not writing by describing how she waited in vain for a response to her correspondence: "Every day I went to that nasty little post-office place. I'm sure they were all beginning to think that I'd been carrying on an illicit love-affair" (194).

Clare is also consistently associated with theatrics, excess, and danger. Irene describes her as having a "strange capacity of transforming warmth and passion, verging sometimes almost on theatrical heroics" (144). Clare, who describes herself as lacking any "proper morals or sense of duty" (210), is depicted as presenting a danger to the white middle-class conventions that Irene strictly adheres to (143, 181, 213). In effect, Clare's counterhegemonic performance of "blackness" can be seen as an attempt to reevaluate the desirability of "desiring to be black." But since white supremacist societies do not necessarily discourage subjects' attempt to embody norms of blackness, the importance of Clare's disidentification, for my argument, does not lie in the content of her desire. Rather, Larsen's portrayal of Clare points to some of the conditions of possibility of disidentification.

Although constituted through and circumscribed by norms, the fractured and competing nature of the ideals circulating in society seems to open a space for subjects to perform differently. Clare's second disidentification trouble, for instance, appears to be facilitated when she reencounters Irene. In the letter Clare sends to Irene after their meeting at the Drayton, she indicates that once she was glad to be free of her identification with blackness, but now she has a "wild desire" to associate with black people. Clare adds that it's Irene's fault, for if she hadn't seen the other woman in Chicago, the thought of escaping her "pale life" would never have occurred to her (145). What this points to, I believe, is that confrontations or interactions between subjects can potentially lay bare the disjunctions and contradictions within the nexus of force relations. Clare, who had initially attempted to "perform" race by identifying and desiring to be white at the risk of "being found out," is suddenly confronted by Irene, who has "chosen" not to "pass over." This encounter, in turn, opens up a space of negotiation. It is not that Clare wishes to trade places with Irene; rather, Clare recognizes that other *configurations* of identification and "desire-to-be" are possible. Thus, a nuanced conception of agency emerges, one that

derives, in large part, from the subject's ability to recognize and negotiate *between* the different possible configurations of identification and "desire-to-be" that help constitute the field of intelligibility.

Racial norms, to be sure, are spawned by a particular configuration of power relations, and these norms are both the condition of possibility of viable subjects and help produce and shape the subject's very preferences, aspirations, desire, and identification. Larsen's portrayal of Irene reveals just how powerful and effective these racial norms can be. This does not mean, however, that subjects are merely docile bodies, but rather that subjects can and do "perform differently." The depiction of Clare gestures toward the way in which identification and desire-to-be can be misappropriated and "assumed" in potentially subversive ways. Although Clare's enigmatic death ultimately precludes an unambiguously subversive or celebratory reading of the novella, tracing her identification and subsequent disidentifications can, I believe, give us insight into how power can be challenged through contestatory performances.

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Notes

I would like to thank Neve Gordon, Louise Bethlehem, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, as well as the anonymous reviewers at *Criticism* for their insightful and constructive comments.

1. In this paper, race will be discussed in terms of the black/white divide, which I believe has, in many crucial ways, been the determining divide with regard to race discourse in America.
2. See Corinne Blackmer, "The Veils of the Law: Race and Sexuality in Nella Larsen's *Passing*," *College Literature* 22, no. 3 (1995): 50–67; Michael Cooke, *Afro-American Literature in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984); Priscilla Ramsey, "A Study of Black Identity in 'Passing' Novels of the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century," *Studies in Black Literature* 7 (1976): 1–7; Mary Helen Washington, "The Mulatta Trap: Nella Larsen's Women of the 1920s," in *Invented Lives: Narratives of Black Women, 1860–1960* (New York: Anchor, 1987), 159–67.
3. Martha Cutter, "Sliding Significations: Passing as Narrative and Textual Strategy in Nella Larsen's Fiction," in *Passing and the Fictions of Identity*, ed. Elaine Ginsberg (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 75.
4. Elaine Ginsberg, for instance, claims that "passing is about identities: their creation or imposition, their adoption or rejection, their accompanying rewards or penalties. Passing is also about the boundaries established between identity categories and about the individual and cultural anxieties induced by boundary crossing." "Introduction: The Politics of Passing," in Ginsberg, *Passing and the Fictions of Identity*, 2.
5. Quite a few recent articles on *Passing* having invoked Judith Butler's notion of (gender) performativity as a means of conceptualizing the way identity gets played out in the text. See, for example, Sara Ahmed, "'She'll Wake Up One of These Days

- and Find She's Turned into a Nigger,'” *Theory, Culture & Society* 16 (1999): 87–105. Critics like Martin FAVOR (*Authentic Blackness: The Folk in the New Negro Renaissance* [Durham: Duke University Press, 1999]) and Jennifer DeVere Brody (“Clare Kendry’s ‘True’ Colors: Race and Class Conflict in Nella Larsen’s *Passing*,” *Callaloo* 15, no. 4 [1992]: 1053–65) have attempted to theorize the relationship so as to complicate Judith Butler’s emphasis on *gender* performativity. While FAVOR and Brody provide convincing arguments regarding how gender and race norms are articulated through one another in Larsen’s fiction, neither critic has managed to offer a sustained theoretical analysis of race as a unique *modality* of performativity, one that is different from gender.
6. Two qualifications need to be made at this point. First, race is isolated in this essay so that the specific processes which have produced raced subjectivities in America can be examined. Although the separation or isolation of race is necessary for methodological reasons, in social practice (as in novels) the categories of race, class, gender, and ethnicity work simultaneously as a background for one another and often find their most powerful articulation through one another. Second, my inquiry focuses on the United States in the 1920s. Norms can and do change over time; race and gender performativity, therefore, cannot be theorized without taking context and history into account. However, I do believe that even a historically specific examination of performativity—such as the one I try to offer in this essay—can provide conceptual apparatuses and tools for theorizing the difference between gender and race norms in other historical settings and contexts.
 7. Louis Miron and Jonathan Inda, “Race as a Kind of Speech Act,” *Cultural Studies: A Research Annual* 5 (2000): 86–87.
 8. *Ibid.*, 99.
 9. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Mask*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 109.
 10. Miron and Inda, “Race,” 97.
 11. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1, *An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 154.
 12. Miron and Inda do not provide specific examples of this concatenation. This is my intervention.
 13. Nella Larsen, *Quicksand and Passing* (Piscataway, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 158–59. All subsequent references to the 1986 edition will be cited parenthetically in the text.
 14. See, for example, Stuart Hall, “The Spectacle of the Other,” in *Representations: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage Publications, 1997).
 15. Ahmed, “She’ll Wake Up,” 93.
 16. *Ibid.*, 88.
 17. Amy Robinson, “Takes One to Know One: Passing and Communities of Common Interest,” *Critical Inquiry* 20 (1994): 719.
 18. *Ibid.*, my emphasis.
 19. Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 86.
 20. *Ibid.*, 88. Bhabha emphasizes the racial aspect of mimicry: “almost the same but not white.”
 21. *Ibid.*, 91, 107.
 22. Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego: The Standard Edition*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Bantam Books, 1960), 46–47, my emphasis.

23. Ibid. As Shuli Barzilai (*Lacan and the Matter of Origins* [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000]), Diana Fuss (*Identification Papers* [New York: Routledge, 1995]), and others have pointed out, Freud's conception of identification is inconsistent and, at times, contradictory (see Barzilai, *Lacan*, 112–15). However, I do think it fair to say that *ultimately* identification and desire are distinct forms of attachment for Freud. Identification, Freud reiterates in his 1933 *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-analysis*, is a very important form of attachment to someone else, probably the first, and “not the same thing as the choice of an object” (*New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis: The Standard Edition*, trans. James Strachey [New York: Norton, 1965], 79, my emphasis). Moreover, although Freud does blur the line between normal and abnormal, there is a very definite heteronormative trajectory in his notion of sexual development, in which the bifurcation of identification (the desire-to-be) and object-cathexis (the desire to have) plays a fundamental role.
24. Fuss, *Identification*, 11.
25. Ann Pellegrini (*Performance Anxieties: Staging Psychoanalysis, Staging Race* [New York: Routledge, 1997]) and Diana Fuss both argue that the separation that psychoanalysis has historically made between identification and desire is a problematic one, and they would both agree that this separation is an effect of heteronormativity. Both critics also emphasize the way in which race identifications (and not just sexuality) play a crucial role in the emergence of subjectivity, and how race and gender identification are interrelated. However, Fuss and Pellegrini, following Frantz Fanon, argue that in the colonial situation, the colonized are forced to *identify with the colonizer* (Fuss, *Identification*, 145; Pellegrini, *Performance*, 103). Thus, while emphasizing the way politics do not “oppose the psychical but fundamentally presuppose it,” they do not suggest that—for the colonized subject—there is an enforced bifurcation between identification and desire. Identification for both Fuss and Pellegrini remains “a violent appropriation in which the Other is deposed and assimilated into the lordly domain of Self” (Fuss, *Identification*, 145). I will make a case for the need to delink identification and desire when analyzing the specific mechanisms at work in racist regimes.
26. Desire for, in racist and heteronormative regimes like the one described in *Passing*, is incredibly complex. Norms of heterosexuality alongside ideals privileging whiteness are inextricable when discussing how power operates to compel and encourage “desire for.” For example, “being” a man implies desire for women. However, due to the undesirability of blackness under these regimes, black-identified male subjects’ “desire for” has historically been influenced by ideals of whiteness. The result of both the prohibition against intermarriage—in the 1920s and well into the 1960s, laws prohibiting miscegenation were enforced—and the desirability of whiteness seems to have led to black male preference for light-colored women who meet Caucasian standards of beauty. Although Brian claims that he likes his women dark, his marriage to Irene (and apparent desire for Clare), who is light enough to pass, seems to undermine his assertion. However, to complicate things even further, I would argue that black women’s “desire for” is constructed differently. Given the hierarchy and power differential, women’s “desire for” in heteronormative regimes is mostly elided. As objects of desire for men, women’s appearance is crucial; this is not true—to the same extent—for men under such a regime. For black-identified women such as Irene who strive for a nonmarginal existence, the man’s class status seems to play a crucial role in their “desire for” and thus needs to be taken into account. Thus it makes sense that Irene would marry Brian, for

- his status as a doctor gives her respectability while allowing her to approximate the “angel in the house” ideal. Here we begin to see the complicated ways in which norms of gender, race, and class are many times articulated through one another.
27. Using Eve Sedgwick’s insight in a different context, one could argue that this focus on one drop of black blood is a tool used to control the entire spectrum of race organization. In many ways, it is the very arbitrariness upon which the distinction between black and white has been made that has lent “this distinction its power to organize complicated, historical transactions of power.” Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 118. Therefore, difference—“white but not quite,” or the one-drop rule—is a necessary part of the workings of racist hegemonies, and it is maintained and guarded as a means of ensuring that the white/black hierarchy remains its force.
 28. The psychic effects of power within the context of racist regimes requires further research.
 29. James Weldon Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989); Jessie Redmon Fauset, *Plum Bum: A Novel without a Moral* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990).
 30. The anxiety expressed by both Clare and Gertrude about the possibility of giving birth to a dark child can also be seen as part of the prohibitions operating in racist regimes. For Clare, a dark baby would have spelled disaster; it would have “given her away.” For Gertrude, a dark baby would have meant possible discrimination, discrimination that she is unused to due to her light skin (and thus the assumption that she is white) and white husband. “Being found out” becomes a constant site of anxiety for “passers.” Moreover, to ensure success, the passer usually has to cut all connections to family and the past. Passing, as Irene Redfield points out in the text, is a “hazardous business” (157). And many passing narratives dramatize the dangers of race “transgression.” See, for example, Fauset’s *Plum Bum* or Charles Chesnut’s *The House behind the Cedars* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993).
 31. Fuss, *Identification*, 9.
 32. Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (London: Karnac Books, 1988), 205.
 33. Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 2, my emphasis.
 34. *Ibid.*, 19, my emphasis.
 35. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (New York: Routledge, 1993).
 36. Fanon, *Black Skin*, 9.
 37. Hall, “Spectacle,” 279.
 38. See, for example, Blackmer, “Veils”; DeVere Brody, “‘True’ Colors”; Jacquelyn McLendon, “Self-Representation as Art in the Novels of Nella Larsen,” in *Redefining Autobiography in Twentieth-Century Women’s Fiction*, ed. Janice Morgan and Colette T. Hall (New York: Garland, 1991), 149–68.
 39. McLendon, “Self-Representation,” 158.
 40. Blackmer, “Veils,” 59.
 41. Hall, “Spectacle,” 243.
 42. See, for example, Deborah McDowell, “Introduction,” in *Passing and Quicksand* (Piscataway, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1986), ix–xxxv.
 43. Ann DuCille, “Blues Notes on Black Sexuality: Sex and the Texts of Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen,” in *American Sexual Politics*, ed. John Fout and Maura Tantillo (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1993), 197.
 44. Butler, *Bodies*, 89, 124.