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Race as Catachresis in Novels of Passing
(James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* and Nella Larsen's *Passing*)

In this essay I will explore passing as racial and social performance in James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* and Nella Larsen's *Passing*. These are novels where discourses of race and power intersect in plots of multiple transgressions. Moreover, in these texts 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 occur.

The discourse of power 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" (201). As such, the black or African American subjectivity does not preexist its historical appearance, slavery, and the subsequent postcolonial 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 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 Jeffrey T. Nealon puts it, "human identities do not exist as 'originals'; they come into being as they are named" (114).

Race is therefore a marker which lacks its referent; a signifier which is not only without a signified but is produced out of its differences from other signifiers. As such, race is catachresis. Race, moreover, joins those other catachrestic inflections whereby the subject is constructed; among these, most prominently, gender and sexuality.[1]

Catachresis is generally understood as a metaphor—albeit a forced and excessive one—lacking its literal referent. Not brought about by duplication and replacement, catachresis is not a "proper" metaphor, but an "improper" one, a misnomer. The French Du Marsais (1757) and Fontanier (1827) insist that catachresis is a trope of abuse, adding that what catachresis actually abuses is the figure of metaphor informed by substitution (qtd. in Herman, et al. 47). In catachresis, changes in meaning come about by extension, not substitution; that is, by what Roman Jakobson termed, famously, the horizontal, and not vertical, structure of language.

As catachresis, race is indeed a misnomer—or a "fiction," as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has put it ("Writing 'Race'" 4)—thereby marking the racialized person a catachresis as well. I would go even further and claim that as a catachresis lacking its signified and structured solely by difference in relation to other signifiers, race—together with gender and sexuality, those other catachrestic markers that construct the inflected subject—satisfies the definition of Derridian *différance*: its meaning derives from always differing and deferring. Nowhere is this *différance* more obvious than in narratives of transgression, where performance wholly leaves the body. Instances of passing—whether race passing, gender passing, or sexuality passing—all reveal the catachrestic nature of the markers of race, gender, and sexuality, and allow for the performance of the constructed subject as catachresis. Of these three types, I will discuss race passing in this essay.

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

[1] I discuss the subject performatively brought about by the catachrestic markers of gender, race, and sexuality in my book *THEY AREN'T, UNTIL I CALL THEM—On Doing Things with Words in Literature*.

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. Whiteness too proves to be not a biological given but a cultural construct, a chatachresis 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" (193). Carby calls for admitting that everyone is a racialized subject and that whiteness is also an invented category.

Foregrounding race as catachresis: Johnson's *Autobiography*

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 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 Gates 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 Elaine

K. 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 the genre of the confession which allows his multiple self-constructions. 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 Goellnicht 20; Pfeiffer 403; 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 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 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 US 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). His has been interpellated by white supremacist ideology, thus has no 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 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 all 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.

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 Kristevan 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. 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—becomes white by association—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 Gates 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 in Larsen's *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 protagonists: 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 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. Both trying to pass by contiguity, by sitting with whites, 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 (160). Yet the scene is notable for another reason too: although Irene attaches the 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 Judith Butler puts it (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 (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. 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 middleclass 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 observes, "Irene's 'no' constantly becomes a yes," thereby providing another "sign" of their sexual-erotic attraction (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" (185–86). 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 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" (186). Clare's heterosexual transgression—or Irene's fantasy of it—seems to provoke the fantasy of homosexual transgression for Irene.

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 defamiliarized. Clare emerges as the ultimate passer and performer, the alien trespasser and, let us 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" (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.

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Narratives of race passing problematize race as catachresis, a misnomer lacking its referent. Moreover, race is presented in its interaction with other identity markers such as gender, sexuality, and power, 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 preexist the making of the subject; they are both produced in power relations, where the discourse of power structures the discourse of race, gender, and sexuality. 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 the three protagonists—Johnson's ex-colored man and Larsen's Clare and Irene—all experience both as they pass back and forth between races. Of the three characters, however, only the ex-colored man and Clare perform instances of passing that involve unmarked categories: they perform masquerades 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 whiteness, while blackness is the unmarked "natural" category for her.

Moreover, shuffling between identities, races, genders, and sexualities, all three characters give performances where the inflected subject is constructed by association. For example, the ex-colored man performs white heterosexual manhood when marrying a white woman; Clare performs white heterosexual womanhood by marrying a white man but performs blackness (black homosexuality even) when she associates with Irene's race conscious friends; and both women perform middle-class whiteness, by association or by contiguity again, in the Chicago restaurant. Race then is not simply catachresis lacking a literal referent, but *différance*, the figure of difference and deferral. Lacking in concrete

signified anchored in biology, race as *différance* is always constructed and interpreted with regard to other constructions.

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