

THE LANGUAGE TRAP:  
U.S. PASSING FICTION AND ITS PARADOX

BY

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Masami Sugimori

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Doreen Fowler, Chair

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Marta Caminero-Santangelo

---

Cheryl Lester

---

Philip Barnard

---

Jacob Dorman

Date Defended: December 2, 2009

The Dissertation Committee for Masami Sugimori certifies  
that this is the approved version of the following dissertation:

THE LANGUAGE TRAP:  
U.S. PASSING FICTION AND ITS PARADOX

Committee:

---

Doreen Fowler, Chair

---

Marta Caminero-Santangelo

---

Cheryl Lester

---

Philip Barnard

---

Jacob Dorman

Date Approved: December 3, 2009

## Abstract

Through exploration of William Faulkner's, James Weldon Johnson's and Nella Larsen's "passing novels," this dissertation points out that narrative representation of racial passing facilitates *and* compromises the authors' challenge to the white-dominant ideology of early-twentieth-century America. I reveal that, due to their inevitable dependence on language, these authors draw paradoxically on the white-dominant ideology that they aim to question, especially its system of binary racial categorization. While the "white" body of a "passing" character serves the novelists as a subversive force in white-supremacist society (which depends on the racial other to define "whiteness"), language, which is essentially ideological, traps the writers in racial binary and continually suggests that, while the character looks white, s/he is *really black*. Accordingly, the authors have to write under the constraints of the problem that American discourse of race must and, for the most part, does systematically suppress its own essential fictiveness.

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## Introduction

### The Passing Paradox: Representing Racial Chaos within the Symbolic Order

America saw blacks' increasing mobility in the early-twentieth century, as exemplified demographically by the Great Migration which began around 1910. Somewhat reflecting the general anxiety about the categorical aspect of such racial mobility, the January 21, 1932 issue of *The Philadelphia Tribune* included an article, "Careful Lyncher! He May Be Your Brother." Its anonymous writer provides examples of undetected passing and emphasizes the fallibility of whites' eyes in their attempt to police the line between white and black. This article is worth quoting and analyzing at length, since it demonstrates the complex interrelations between racial passing and white ideology—interrelations that inform the central controlling arguments of this dissertation:

At last it seems as if this "you can tell by their walk, you can tell by their talk, you can tell by their uncouth manners" theory of the white man is breaking down.

The last two or three weeks have brought an additional amount of proof to substantiate the conception of most Negroes, that the superior whites are "not so smart as they think."

The front page of a prominent Negro weekly told, last week, of how a Negro woman bore the illustrious first Secretary of the United States treasury, Alexander Hamilton, two sons. One of the sons married into a white family and went his merry way. The other married a "very light" Negro woman, and one of the sons of this union "turned white" and is now living in a Jersey town, married to a "white" woman.

And the miracle of it is, the superior whites, whose perfect beings are said to react naturally when “one drop” of Negro blood heaves into view—never found out!

Two weeks ago a Lieutenant of the United States Army was found shot; most probably murdered, on a lonely road. His record showed brilliant service. He had been steadily promoted on merit and suddenly it is found that he was a Negro.

A number of women of the “superior” group had fallen along the army man’s paths. He married one from Georgia who “hated niggers” . . . . and they never found out.

There’s a moral in these cases for Southerners, who seem so very bent upon lynching Negroes: be careful how you do it—the man may be your brother. (qtd. in “Contemporary Coverage” 124-25)

First of all, this article shows the essential lack of physical difference between a “real-white” body and a “passing-white” body.<sup>1</sup> Despite the widely believed “you can tell by . . .” theories, these cases of passing were “never found out” by those who saw the presumably white men. And, with the real-white/passing-white difference dissolved, any “white” person can be “passing-white”; as the article’s concluding “moral” goes, a “white” man may be the “brother” of the “Negro” he lynches. This racial chaos has a pernicious implication for the article’s own logic—i.e., the logic that *blacks are passing for white* without being known to *real whites*—which also assumes the difference between real-white and passing-white. Indeed, while the article’s author bases his argument upon textual “proof” such as “a prominent Negro weekly,” his own second example, of a man who eluded the “record” of “the United States Army,” foregrounds the essential unreliability of a text’s claim on a physical body. Indeed, concerning



this murdered lieutenant, the author strategically uses a passive voice to evade the fundamental question who “found that he was a Negro” and how.

Secondly, the article foregrounds how the blurred boundary between real-white and passing-white undermines whites’ racialized *and* racializing frame of reference. For whites’ inability to detect racial passing betrays the ineffectiveness of their race-policing eyes. Indeed, while whites’ preeminence (as “superior whites”) and completeness (as “perfect beings”) derive from their ability “to react naturally when ‘one drop’ of Negro blood heaves into view,” their actual inability to detect passing compromises the validity of whites’ perspective. And the failure of whites’ eyes in turn opens up a space for “Negroes” subjectivity by “substantiat[ing] the conception of most Negroes, that the superior whites are ‘not so smart as they think.’” This example indicates the precarious process in which white subjectivity enforces and reinforces its power by naming, fixating and objectifying a non-white otherness and defining itself as *not non-white object*. Racial passing, neutralizing the very difference between whiteness and non-whiteness, confounds this process and exposes white subjectivity’s fictive authority and dependence upon the racial other it fabricates.

Lastly, despite its critique of the generally assumed real-white/passing-white difference, the article draws upon the same assumption in structuring its argument that *blacks are passing for white* without being known to *real whites*. Given that white ideology maintains itself by at once endorsing and dictating the real-white/passing-white binary,<sup>2</sup> the author ends up writing for the very ideology that he problematizes. Indeed, the article’s subversive potential is already stifled when he writes it in the ideo-linguistic context where racial passing means the combination of “fake whiteness” and “true blackness.” And the ideologized language of race even implicates us as readers, who have to rely upon the same language in our interpretive act.

Unless we question the article's subtly ideologized rhetoric, the writing looks like a logical critique of the white-dominant racial system, not a self-contradictory site where ideological challenge and entrapment occur at the same time.

Such conflict and interaction between the endless indeterminacy of racial passing and the difference-imposing function of white ideology bear particular significance in early-twentieth-century American fictional narratives of racial passing. Through analysis of William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) and *Intruder in the Dust* (1948), James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912) and Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929), this dissertation illuminates the paradox that accompanies the authors' attempts to explore the ideologically disruptive phenomenon of racial passing in an already ideologized medium, i.e., language. Indeed, passing characters put into question the very ideas of blackness, whiteness and even passing-whiteness, and refute the notion of binary distinctions promoted by the white-dominant ideology that underlies the U.S. racial system.<sup>3</sup> As a result, these characters are a subversive force in white-supremacist society, which depends on the racial other to define whiteness. However, even as the authors strive to challenge the racial status quo with passing characters, the already ideologized medium of language forces them—even African American writers like Johnson and Larsen—to write from a white-subject position and entraps them in the framework of real-white/passing-white binary difference. Thus, the language used by the novelists contradicts the endless indeterminacy of racial passing that they aim to emphasize; this language suggests that, while the character looks white, s/he is *really black*. In other words, they have to write under the constraints of the problem that American discourse of race must and, for the most part, does systematically suppress the essential lack of physical boundary between a real-white body and a passing-white body. This ideological intervention, while compromising the

authors' investigation of racial indeterminacy, nevertheless enables their narrative to achieve coherence, development and closure by means of clear-cut racial difference. Such a narrative order, though in fact fictive, offers the reader an uninterrupted reading experience and in turn dissuades him/her from reading for the actual contradictions and contentions in the narrative.

Analyzing passing narratives in terms of the covert operation of white ideology, my dissertation breaks new grounds in literary criticisms of the individual novels, in whiteness studies and in studies of passing fiction. On the level of literary criticisms, my study ameliorates the current scholarship's inadequate scrutiny, especially concerning the novelists' painful struggles to engage racial passing in its fundamental indeterminacy. For example, visually white Charles Bon's passing-whiteness is not evidenced in *Absalom, Absalom!* but only claimed by the last two of the novel's four white character-narrators. However, critics such as James Snead, Margo Crawford and Maritza Stanchich have betrayed their own ideological entrapment by at once acknowledging the undecidability of Bon's race *and* suppressing that very undecidability to structure a stable critical discourse around Bon as an oppressed racial other. Scholars of *Passing*, such as Helena Michie, Catherine Rottenberg and Kate Baldwin, point to the multiple, open-ended and thus subversive qualities of the work activated by the factor of racial passing. However, finding those qualities in scenes after the novel stabilizes visually white characters' "passing-whiteness" as opposed to "real-whiteness," the critics miss the earlier scenes where Larsen simulates passing's actual invisibility and indeterminacy by not racializing the characters' white body. In doing so, the critics fail to recognize the extent to which the novelist manages to push her exploration amid the paradox that narrative representation of racial passing necessarily compromises its invisibility and indeterminacy. Not only do my chapters reveal the mechanism in which white ideology subtly contains the novelists' investigation of racial passing, but they

also elucidate how the ideology entraps us literary scholars in a white-subject position where we can figure challenges to the racial status quo *only within* the framework of real-white/passing-white difference.

Focused on the interrelation between the essentially indeterminate white body and the difference-imposing language of white ideology, my study integrates the insights from whiteness studies into studies of passing narratives and, by doing so, contributes to the current debates in both disciplines. For one thing, while whiteness scholars such as Ruth Frankenberg illuminate how the notion of whiteness—one of the principal effects and instruments of white hegemony—operates as a “race-less, unmarked norm,”<sup>4</sup> my analysis of this normalizing process in a “passing” setting (which lacks a physical boundary between whiteness and non-whiteness) reveals the precariousness of a white norm further than whiteness studies have done. In *Playing in the Dark*, for example, Toni Morrison shows how canonical white American writers structured and authorized white subjectivity through covert recourse to the silenced and objectified black other. Whites’ identity construction, she argues, depends on their “projection of the not-me” onto blackness (38), i.e., making the silenced “Africanist” body signify non-whiteness and thus, instead of resorting to a substantial or self-sufficient whiteness (which does not really exist), identifying themselves as *not non-white*.<sup>5</sup> While Morrison points out that “the dramatic polarity created by skin color” (38) has made such projection possible, my reading of passing novels shows how their substitution of a visually white body invalidates the visual binary in Morrison’s model and unsettles whites’ narrative agency including that which enables them to name the body “actually black” in the first place.

The last two chapters of my dissertation complicates Morrison’s model even further by revealing African American novelists’ entrapment in this process of white-subjectivity formation.

With only the white-ideologized, difference-imposing language available for narrativization of racial passing, both Johnson and Larsen, despite their efforts to emphasize the actual racial indeterminacy of “passing” characters, have eventually to take a white-subject position in their writings and base their narratives upon a clear-cut difference between real-whiteness and passing-whiteness. Here, my argument also points to the formerly unacknowledged relevance of Du Boisian “double consciousness”—defined as a “sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others [i.e., whites], of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (2)—to the way in which whiteness depends on a racial other to establish itself. As Du Bois’ term points to how a history of psychological oppression has forced blacks to internalize white subjectivity—as well as the black objectivity it automatically assigns to them—in their self-image and self-expression, in African-American passing fiction this objectification occurs when the language of white ideology forces the writer to name an essentially indeterminate white body “actually black” against his/her will to challenge the ideology.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, as my chapters will demonstrate, when Johnson’s and Larsen’s narratives define their respective character-narrators as “actually black,” that coincides with the character-narrators’ ideologically loaded look at their own white bodies through the eyes of white characters or white audiences.

Conversely, my reading of white ideology’s difference-introducing intervention in passing narratives helps us answer one of the major questions that studies of passing fiction ask: why stability and fluidity, closure and open-endedness coexist in literary works of racial passing—a paradoxical coexistence exemplified by “how passing narratives produce the sense of an ending or narrative resolution in the context of the contradictions that the subject-who-passes must inevitably confront in appropriating that stability on which the fluidity of ‘race’ depends”

(Wald 7).<sup>7</sup> As my following chapters demonstrate, such coexistence of mutually contradicting elements derives significantly from the tension between the authors' will to emphasize the essential instability of racial passing and the language they have to use, which imposes a stable real-white/passing-white difference on their narrative. As Wald suggests, such a contention often surfaces at the work's concluding scene, where the novelist has to finalize his/her investigation of racial passing which actually defies finality.<sup>8</sup> Accordingly, each of my chapters analyzes the ending of the focused work and elucidates the ways the author strives to sustain a sense of indeterminacy in the closing scene—ranging from foregrounding the character-narrator's ambivalence on race (Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*, Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*) to making a racio-narratively stable ending follow an ambiguous one and dropping the stable one in later printings (Larsen's *Passing*).<sup>9</sup>

As I have suggested above, the language of white ideology that constrains the novelists' representation of racial passing also entraps us as readers, who have to rely upon the same already ideologized language in our interpretive act. Indeed, the narratives' coherence, development and closure, enabled by the clear-cut difference between real-whiteness and passing-whiteness, invite readers to read along the ideological grain. Furthermore, as my analysis foregrounds, the readers' own preexisting immersion in the system of binary racial difference—whether themselves white or not—also promotes this ideological complicity. Stanley Fish's theory of "interpretive communities" informs this dimension of my argument. For Fish, "the stability of interpretation among readers" results not from the text itself but from the readers' shared approach to the text, as they belong to the same "interpretive community" "made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading (in the conventional sense) but for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions" (167, 171). Due to

the long history of white dominance in American discourse and the resulting discursive indoctrination of non-whites, American “interpretive communities” are white-subjective, if sometimes only subtly or covertly, regardless of their actual racial demography—even more so in the early twentieth century than today. Discussing readers’ role in white ideology’s systematic suppression of racial passing, the following chapters also foreground the discursive scenes of early-twentieth-century America. Here, even as white writers like Faulkner wrote assuming somewhat unconsciously the whiteness of their readers, black writers’ creations were more or less an accommodation to white interpretive communities. Indeed, Harlem Renaissance writers’ literary success, or even publication, depended considerably upon the evaluation of white patrons, white publishers as well as white-dominant national audience.<sup>10</sup>

Given the persistent white hegemony of the U.S. today, dominant ideology’s cooption of contemporary readers into the binarized racial system indicates a paradox that faces us twenty-first-century scholars, that is, our own possible complicity in the production and reproduction of white-subjective meanings. Indeed, in its argumentative reordering of the more or less chaotic worlds presented by fictional narratives, literary-critical discourse in general is prone to linguistic framing, which inevitably contains subversive factors—such as essentially indeterminate racial passing—in favor of the status quo. Hence comes the entrapment Abby L. Ferber warns us “researchers” of: “By failing to explore our own role in the construction of race and continuing to use it as a category of analysis, we produce race as a prediscursive category. We reproduce race as a given, obvious, natural category, existing outside of discourse. In other words, we counteract and delegitimize our very own claims that race is socially constructed” (160). Attempting to address this critical predicament, I begin each of my chapters by carefully analyzing the existing criticisms and identifying their often subtle entrapment in white ideology,

exemplified by the assumption of the difference between real-white and passing-white. Indeed, “we researchers” who are susceptible to entrapment inevitably include me, who, with all the caution I take, have to write in a language not only available (thus already ideologized) to me but also accessible (thus, again, already ideologized) to my reader. For example, in the last paragraph I mentioned American interpretive communities’ “actual racial demography.” But, especially given my main claim of problematized racial boundaries, how could I define the races, much less *actual* races, of the members of given interpretive communities? If what I really meant by the phrase was “the demography of the racial categories to which the members believe themselves to belong,” this more accurate but lengthy (and out of context, given the last paragraph’s focus on interpretive communities, not on the dissolution of racial categories) alternative would most likely be corrected because of its disruption of both my own and my reader’s sense of normative writing.

In an attempt to overcome my own ideo-linguistic entrapment, I take particular caution in using the terms “whiteness,” “white subjectivity” and “white ideology” among other principal keywords of my study. As Frankenberg accurately notes, the very concept of “invisible” and “unmarked” whiteness, if casually used as a fixed, essentialized and homogeneous catchword, runs the danger of suppressing the actual fluidity, contextuality and multi-dimensionality of whiteness to the very advantage of white ideology: “I would argue that whiteness is always constructed, always in the process of being made and unmade. Indeed, its characterization as unmarked marker is itself an ‘ideological’ effect that seeks to cover the tracks of its constructedness, specificity, and localness, even as they appear” (16). Thus, in my analysis of how white ideology subtly controls the way passing fiction is written and read, I take pains not to treat the concept as a fixed analytical angle nor as something to bring from outside the text or



context. Rather, I analyze the complex web of discourses—the author’s, the narrator’s, characters’, the implied reader’s and contemporary readers’, to name just a few—that underlies the text itself, as well as the context of the book’s production, in my attempt to address the unique, complex and multifaceted construction of white subjectivity in each individual novel. The white subjectivities thus extracted necessarily vary from author to author, from work to work. For example, while *Absalom, Absalom!* defines white subjectivity mostly in terms of whites’ epistemological and narrative perspective, *Intruder in the Dust* focuses more on whites’ ideologically determined social praxis. In Johnson’s and Larsen’s narratives, on the other hand, the novelists’ “double-conscious” consideration for white norms, narrative as well as social, influences their representation of racial passing—in, of course, significantly different ways from each other.

Lastly, poststructuralist interrogations of subjectivity also inform my analysis, if only subtly in some chapters, throughout the dissertation. Indeed, Jacques Derrida’s theory of “différance” bears particular relevance to my proposition that, while language introduces binarized racial difference, its signification is essentially empty due to the actual lack of such a difference, as exposed by the indeterminate presence of passing characters. Also, one can consider white ideology’s linguistic/narrative containment of racial passing’s endless indeterminacy in terms of the Lacanian “Symbolic order” which authorizes fictions of coherence through suppression of the “real” categorical chaos. This dissertation also uses such poststructuralist concepts as Louis Althusser’s “interpellation” and Mikhail Bakhtin’s “dialogic discourse” to incorporate their respective examinations of discourse as a vehicle of dominant and/or dissident ideology. For example, Althusser’s theory of “interpellation” helps illuminate the performative ways in which a reader of passing fiction becomes a white-subjective reader;

upon the text's subtle invitation, the reader structures meaning—and by extension his/her own subjectivity—by practicing the white-ideologized interpretive strategy already charged with the real-white/passing-white difference: “you and I are *always already* subjects, and as such constantly practice the rituals of ideological recognition, which guarantee for us that we are indeed concrete, individual, distinguishable and (naturally) irreplaceable subjects” (172-73).

The first two chapters of this dissertation elucidate Faulkner's attempt to expose the precariousness and fictiveness of white identity and subjectivity. Even as his white characters and narrators define their subject position as opposed to the narratively constructed black object, the visual complication of passing or mixed-race characters neutralizes such a fiction of distancing difference. I point out that *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Intruder in the Dust* explore, on the narrative and social levels respectively, how Southern racial ideology suppresses this predicament and provides whites with the sense, if illusory, of distinct and superior racial identity.

The first chapter, “Racial Mixture, Racial Passing, and White Subjectivity in William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*” foregrounds the narrative dimension of the issue. The novel's white narrators, after repeated failure to structure a coherent story of the Sutpens (a failure that would discredit the authority of white subjectivity), resort eventually to reading Charles Bon's white body as that of a racial passer and attributing his mysterious murder to his “miscegenational” relationship with the murderer's white sister. While helping the narrators to make their story coherent and thus stabilize their subject position, this narrative operation, as well as their invention of other “passing” characters, is essentially precarious. Indeed, the narrative authority that endorses them to name and thus objectify a visually white person as

“passing-white” does not derive from pre-existing validity of white-subjective interpretive approach. Rather, the very act of naming—which is at best fictive, given the lack of physical difference between real-white and passing-white—enables the narrators to differentiate themselves from the invented “actually black” object and thus become white subjects. Therefore, the whole strategy depends already upon the very white subjectivity that the narrators aim to establish.

As I demonstrate in this chapter, in *Absalom, Absalom!* Faulkner refutes the assumption of real-white/passing-white difference by describing visually white characters—such as Charles Etienne and even “coffee-colored” Clytie—in ways that put the very existence of racial mixture into question. If a passing person by definition looks the same as whites, Faulkner seems to ask in those scenes, how could one tell whether s/he is really passing? While suggesting his own answer that one could not and thus foregrounding the essential lack of the real-white/passing-white difference, Faulkner takes pains to portray how white ideology works to suppress the question through the dichotomized language it endorses. Despite the actual racial instability of white-looking characters, the already ideologized language contains them in the “passing-white” object position. In so doing, this language also translates them into a fixed and manageable narrative material for the storytelling of the novel’s white character-narrators, as well as for the critical discourse of literary scholars, who have not seen the white body firsthand but only heard/read of it (as “passing white”) in the language that dictates its user’s distinction between real-whiteness and passing-whiteness.

The second chapter, “Signifying, Ordering, and Containing the Chaos: Whiteness, Ideology, and Language in William Faulkner’s *Intruder in the Dust*,” reveals the novelist’s exploration of white ideology on the social level. Here, the ideology operates to frame a racially

indeterminate body into the white/black binary by encouraging people's participation in public discourse, such as the derogatory slurs "nigger" and "Sambo," and social practices such as lynching. Though the character Lucas Beauchamp does not pass for white, his background, life and action which defy racial categorization create all the more confusion in the white/black racial binary, as indicated by Faulkner's portrayal of him as "not black nor white either." Indeed, the story of Lucas offers a noteworthy case of how, reacting to this in-between being whose presence undermines a distinct white identity, Southern whites invent a monolithic subjectivity through white-supremacist discourse as well as ritualized social praxis. These mob actions in turn reinforce the same ideology that has conditioned the whites' mental and social activities in the first place.

This chapter also illuminates the linguistic dimension of this mechanism, as Faulkner's novelistic treatment of Lucas indicates how whiteness is a discursive construct predicated upon the reductive operation of language in ordering the essentially chaotic world through signification. With no intrinsic signified in material reality, whiteness as a signifier defines itself only as opposed to blackness which, as the liminal Lucas shows, also lacks a substantial signified. The novel dramatizes the situation where, as dominant ideology penetrates people's mental activity through a particular language it endorses, Southern whites, with their monolithic subjectivity authorized by white-supremacist ideology, cannot conceive of blacks except as an abstract and homogeneous otherness. This also renders whites unable to question their own ritualized social practices such as lynching, thus further reinforcing the same ideology that determines their behavior. I point out that in *Intruder in the Dust* Faulkner strategically uses the word "Vocabulary" (with capitalized V) as opposed to "vocabulary" (with small v), the former of which denotes the capacity for verbalizing ideas regardless of their ideological correctness. In

my reading, Faulkner portrays Chick Mallison's attempt to save Lucas from impending lynching in terms of finding a "Vocabulary" with which to express the idea of the man's innocence. This pursuit of "Vocabulary," I go on to argue, challenges white ideology, because it helps Chick question the stereotypical notion of "murderous nigger" which not only frames the racially indeterminate Lucas into the white/black racial binary but also allows whites to reconfirm their "superior" identity as opposed to the inferiorized racial other.

These chapters also argue that Faulkner's critical scrutiny of race has its own paradox, because the Southern white writer himself has to write in the already ideologized language and thus cannot be free from the same white subjectivity that he questions. This predicament is exemplified by the closure of *Absalom, Absalom!* where the white narrators' "interracialization" of the visually white Bon indicates the author's own failure to finalize his writing with the endless indeterminacy of the white body intact. Through analysis of Faulkner's intentional or unwitting stylistic/thematic twists like this, I reveal the author's strenuous negotiation with the white-dominant ideology that even extends to his own writing, and with the undeniable dependence of his creative activity upon a stable white subjectivity.

The second half of my dissertation points out that white ideology even entraps African American writers in a white-subject position to contain their representation of essentially indeterminate racial passing. The third chapter, "Narrative Order and Racial Hierarchy: James Weldon Johnson's Double-Consciousness and 'White' Subjectivity in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* and *Along This Way*," demonstrates how, in the novel *The Autobiography*, the character-narrator's internalized white subjectivity leads him to read his own unclassifiable white body as "looking white but actually black." In so doing, the chapter also reveals how the dichotomously racialized body serves as a fixed narrative material with which to achieve

coherence, development and dramatization—qualities that the narrator and even the author, in their consciousness of white audience, implicitly and explicitly associate with whiteness.

Whereas Johnson foregrounds the narrator's blatant espousal of white norms to alienate his readers and encourage their critique of white hegemony, the racialized language that presupposes the real-white/passing-white difference entraps the author, as well as the readers who have to read with the same already ideologized language, in a white-subject position where one cannot figure the essential indeterminacy of racial passing.

The second part of this chapter discusses Johnson's own autobiography, *Along This Way*, not only because of the author's continued dependence upon the language of white ideology but also because the work foregrounds an intersection between race and text in terms of categorical indeterminacy. Indeed, Johnson's anonymous publication of *The Autobiography*, making the novel look like an autobiography written by "an ex-colored man," exploits the falsifiability of a text's genre and authorship. And the resulting destabilization of the very notion of autobiographical self—here the narrator of an "autobiography" can be "fictional"—opens up an endless uncertainty that could nullify *Along This Way*'s claim of authentic black autobiography. In this space of endless indeterminacy, just as with the actually non-existing difference between a real-white body and a passing-white body, genre and authorship do not have material foothold in a body of writing but are merely one's subjective interpretation. Indeed, the authorship/genre mix-up of *The Autobiography* and *Along This Way* causes confusion in racial identity as well; here, the "passing" Ex-Colored Man, the fictional narrator of *The Autobiography*, takes "black" Johnson's place and "passes" for the author of *The Autobiography*. Amid this categorical chaos, in *Along This Way* Johnson repeatedly draws on rhetorical devices derived from white discourse—such as white mentors' advice on his writing—to stabilize *The Autobiography*'s

fictionality (against which to define *Along This Way* as real autobiography). Somewhat similar to *The Autobiography*, thus reestablished binary difference between the two texts' genres provides *Along This Way* with an apparent logical flow and development and, by doing so, convinces the reader of the actually precarious difference between Johnson's autobiographical black self and the white-looking, passing and fictional Ex-Colored Man. I point out that this narrative strategy, in its reliance on white-oriented discourse, significantly constrains Johnson's challenge to white ideology. Since *Along This Way* defines Johnson's racial integrity and autonomy through his ability to scrutinize and confront the white-supremacist America, the narrative's actual dependence on white subjectivity undermines the alternative discourse he aims to create to critique white hegemony.

The final chapter, "Ordering the Racial Chaos, Chaoticizing the Racial Order: Nella Larsen's Narrative of Indeterminacy and Invisibility in *Passing*," elucidates how the white hegemony of 1920s America, as well as the dichotomizing language it endorses, significantly undermines the novelist's effort to represent racial passing in its actual indeterminacy. Though Larsen tries to explore the indeterminate and invisible operation of racial passing (in opposition to the binarized "looking white but actually black" model endorsed by white ideology), that very indeterminacy/invisibility, narratively unmanageable if engaged as it is, would not allow her to discuss racial passing in the first place. Hence comes her paradoxical reintroduction of the binary racial framework in the scene where visually white Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry recognize each other as old "black" friends. This narrative move undermines Larsen's earlier, more faithful and thus ideologically disruptive treatment of racial passing. In those early scenes, Larsen does not racialize her characters nor her narrative itself, thus keeping the reader uninformed that they are "passing" at the white-only café and even that the novel concerns race. Here, taking

advantage of the way whiteness operates as a “race-less, unmarked norm” in the U.S. context, Larsen recreates a real-life situation where a “passer” is not a “white-looking black” but an unracialized—and thus no different from “white”—individual. Indeed, in its actual operation, racial passing does not present itself as “faked whiteness” nor “concealed blackness” but works indeterminately without even presenting itself. However, to convey this insight to her reader, Larsen has to present it in language, as she does in the scene of Irene and Clare’s reunion, which paradoxically makes passing visible and stabilized in the binary categorization.

This chapter also points out that Larsen’s narrative treatment of racial passing has its counterpart within the novel’s fictional world, namely, the character Irene’s internalization of whites’ gaze. Indeed, the visually white Irene, the viewpoint character of the novel’s third-person narrative, introduces difference and hierarchy to scenes of racial chaos by looking at herself, as well as other racially ambiguous people, through the categorizing eyes of “white” characters. This process also serves to order Irene’s narrative perspective, otherwise full of confusion and contradiction due to her emotional turmoil as well as the categorical chaos she witnesses, into coherent and structured units, thus encouraging the readers’ complicity in the white-subjective racio-narrative order as they construct meanings in their interpretation.

The chapters on Johnson and Larsen also contextualize the authors’ ideo-linguistic entrapment against the backdrop of the 1920s Harlem Renaissance. As indicated by Alain Locke’s call for overcoming the white-dominant America’s discursive constraints and “concentrat[ing] upon self-expression and the forces and motives of self-determination” (ix), the movement advocated blacks’ creative subjectivity first and foremost. At the same time, the project depended significantly on white power such as white patrons, white-dominant audience and white-owned publishing houses—factors that eventually failed the movement once the boom



cooled off and the Great Depression hit the general consumption of art. Placing Johnson's and Larsen's respective narrative maneuver in this context, especially their relationship with the principal white patron Carl Van Vechten, I point to a parallel between the authors' discursive framing of racial passing and that of their own self-expression, which, just like the passing body, may defy whites' frame of reference but must be contained in an ideologically correct form.

My study even suggests that this parallel applies to the creative activity of Southern white Faulkner, who struggled to get his stylistically and thematically unorthodox, and thus potentially subversive, works accepted by the white-dominant readership of early-twentieth-century America. Indeed, despite the three authors' immense difference in backgrounds and writings, there are also remarkable similarities between the ways they strived to portray racial chaos in the ideologized language that necessarily suppresses indeterminacy. As the following chapters will demonstrate, these writers had to scrutinize racial passing at the paradoxical crossroads between order-defying body and order-imposing language, ideological critique and entrapment, challenge and accommodation to white-dominant audience, and artistic self-expression and self-containment.

## Chapter 1

### Racial Mixture, Racial Passing, and White Subjectivity

in William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*

In his 1987 study of the critical reception of *Absalom, Absalom!* Bernd Engler points out that “since the mid-Seventies the only interpretations to gain favour have been those which, at least partly, regard *Absalom, Absalom!* as the conscious realization of an open work of art” (246). Somewhat testifying to how the text’s indeterminacy specifically concerns the interconnection of race and narrative, Engler’s survey also shows that noteworthy monographs from the decade include those concerning “Faulkner’s attitude towards racial questions” (252) as well as “the novel as a study in narratology and/or epistemology” (256). Indeed, even as Quentin and Shreve finalize their reconstruction of the endlessly uncertain past by reading Charles Bon’s white-looking body as “passing white,” Faulkner does not supply any evidence for Bon’s racial mixture outside the white character-narrators’ invention.

Engler is quick to note, however, that most race-related scholarship does not fully attend to the novel’s open-endedness, as exemplified by four studies from 1983: “Walter Taylor, Eric J. Sundquist, Thadious M. Davis, and Erskine Peters begin, as do most others, with the dubious assumption that Bon’s identity as Sutpen’s part-negro son has been clearly established in the text” (253). And it seems that this problem is still compromising the *Absalom, Absalom!* scholarship.<sup>1</sup> For example, while critiquing the discursive domination of “‘legitimate’ white caretakers of history,” Maritza Stanchich bases her postcolonial reading upon the same white “legitimacy” and uncritically follows Quentin and Shreve’s re-creation of Bon as “a free mulatto who can ‘pass’ as white”: “When the narrators of different generations are faced with Bon, a free

mulatto who can 'pass' as white and threatens to upset the South's rigid race caste, their pre-Civil War and post-Civil War fears overlap and intermingle. . . . The strategy of the narrative seeks to uphold white domination by representing all characters of color through Rosa, Quentin, General Compson and Shreve, the 'legitimate' white caretakers of history" (608).

Margo Crawford's 2004 psychoanalytical study of racial mixture in *Absalom, Absalom!* shows the same problem. For, while revealing how the novel's white subjects cannot represent "interracialness" as a coherent other but only as "abstract contradictions," and thus exposing their own "méconnaissance, the recognition that is misrecognition, the 'me' that is 'not me'" (76), Crawford fails to apply her critical paradigm to the white subjectivity that has made Bon—her most discussed example—"interracial" in the first place. Given that the narrators do not racialize Bon until Quentin and Shreve's conclusion, her discussion sounds highly questionable when she finds in Mr. Compson's "limbo halfway" metaphor for Bon's elusive existence (*Absalom* 98) a reference to his racial mixture: "He [Mr. Compson] connects 'blackness' to the body as pure corporeality and 'whiteness' to the power of the mind ('mentality'), and he imagines Bon as being a mind that is limited and trapped by a body" (Crawford 81).<sup>2</sup>

Besides the sense of closure the work appears to offer by ending with Quentin and Shreve's subjective account, one can rightly attribute this persisting pitfall of *Absalom, Absalom!* scholarship to the critical discourses applied by readers. For, attempting to examine the racial oppression, physical or discursive, dramatized in the novel, race-oriented readings have necessarily had to name Bon a racial other—whether it be Stanchich's narratively colonized "character of color" or Crawford's "interracial abstraction." By turning Bon's indeterminable white-looking body into a fixed object of racial investigation, and by doing so for their own argumentative agenda, those criticisms have echoed Quentin and Shreve's narrative invention

and thus unwittingly reinforced, rather than elucidated Faulkner's deconstruction of, white subjectivity.<sup>3</sup>

That, to make a coherent narrative whole and thus fashion themselves as authoritative discursive agents, Quentin and Shreve (and commentators on the level of critical discourse) transform Bon into a "black son of a bitch" (*Absalom* 286) demonstrates Toni Morrison's theory on how white subjectivity relies upon blackness in a circular manner. Whites' identity construction, she argues, depends on their "projection of the not-me" onto blackness (38), i.e., making the silenced African American body signify non-whiteness and thus circularly identifying themselves as not non-white. (Hence, as Ruth Frankenberg aptly puts it, "the notion of whiteness as unmarked norm" is already "a white delusion" [73].) While Morrison points out that "the dramatic polarity created by skin color" (38) has made such projection possible, however, Faulkner's substitution of white-looking Bon neutralizes the visual "polarity" and unsettles whites' narrative agency including that which enables them to name him a "passing mixed-race" in the first place. Thus, in *Absalom, Absalom!* Faulkner intensifies Morrison's model—which bases itself upon visible white/black difference—with racial passing and points to a deeper circularity built in the process. Here, with no substantial reference point for difference, one names/fabricates an "interracial object" against which to define himself or herself as "white subject," but in its discursive arbitrariness this strategy depends already upon the very white subjectivity that it has to establish.

Indeed, as the first section of this chapter will point out, *Absalom, Absalom!* occasionally describes characters with "passing" light skin—such as Charles Etienne and even "coffee-colored" Clytie—in ways that put the very existence of racial mixture into question. If a passing person by definition looks the same as whites, Faulkner seems to ask in those scenes,

how could one tell whether s/he is really passing? While suggesting his own answer that one could *not*, Faulkner takes pains to portray how the language of race works to suppress the question. To sustain its system of differentiation, racial ideology capitalizes on the dichotomizing operation of language to cover up the essential lack of physical boundary between whiteness and passing whiteness—by labeling as “passing interracial” those who show no bodily difference from “whites.”<sup>4</sup> Hence (apart from the occasional complication mentioned above) come the mostly stable “interracial objects” in the narrative space of the novel’s white characters, as well as in the critical discourse of literary scholars, who have not seen the white-looking body firsthand but only heard/read of it (as “passing white”) in the already loaded language.

While my first section illuminates Faulkner’s exploration of racial passing in terms of indeterminate body versus binarizing language, the following section demonstrates how the novel’s central plot of mystery solving deepens his investigation. For, as Faulkner revolves *Absalom, Absalom!* around white character-narrators’ attempts to find truth (and, accordingly, to claim their legitimacy as narrative agents), linguistic containment of racial passing *at once* enables them to become white subjects *and* hampers their epistemological enterprise, thus compromising that very white subjectivity. I will point out that, by repeatedly frustrating the white narrators’ reconstruction of the past, Faulkner posits the paradox that language in its differentiating/distancing operation enables one to order the essentially “chaotic” world (exemplified by the endlessly obscure line between white and passing white) into comprehensible units *and* denies him/her access to the same world through inevitable reduction and distortion. Thus, Faulkner arranges the final chapters, which approach the heart of the Sutpen mystery “where there might be paradox and inconsistency but nothing fault nor false” (253), so that Quentin and Shreve have to abandon their subject position and merge with their narrative

object: “now both of them were Henry Sutpen and both of them were Bon, compounded each of both yet either neither” (280). Only through such de-subjectification can the white narrators question a white-looking man’s whiteness—a move that foregrounds the essential uncertainty of white/passing-white difference—though, as the last part of this chapter will problematize, their eventual interracialization of Bon fails to embrace this uncertainty.

While Faulkner explores racial passing as regards the conflict between differentiating language and difference-proof body, the narrative setting of *Absalom, Absalom!* favors the former for the most part. For, having seen few personages of the Sutpen legend firsthand, the white character-narrators reconstruct the past referring not to physical evidence but to yet another set of narratives which, transmitted in language, have already contained the actual indeterminacy of white-looking bodies.<sup>5</sup> A typical example comes from the story of Bon’s “octoroon” mistress, passed down from General Compson, a contemporary, to Mr. Compson and then to Quentin. Despite her passable “magnolia-face” reported from General Compson’s firsthand observation (157), the whites’ consistent use of “the octoroon” in their reference translates her misleading skin color into a definite marker of racial mixture and thus suppresses the possible uncertainty of her race. Here, as I have proposed above, white subjectivity contains the racially elusive body to recertify itself through a circular process; the term “octoroon” self-explanatorily interracializes the woman despite her white-looking body and allows the speaker to establish his white subjectivity as opposed to this differentiated/distanced “interracial object,” which retroactively endorses his initial application of the “mixed-race” label.<sup>6</sup> Protected by this discursive self-sufficiency, Mr. Compson manages to appropriate racial passing itself for his own narrative purpose. When he develops his “bigamy theory” for Bon’s mysterious death by replacing Judith—whose picture the dead Bon’s locket holds in Rosa’s eyewitness account—with the

“passing” octoroon (75, 114), this narrative operation carries an ideologically disruptive implication as it assumes the visual homogeneity between white and passing-white women. However, with “the octoroon” already objectified as a stable other, Mr. Compson has no trouble turning the debunked white/passing-white difference into a narrative device with which to tell a plausible story and, by doing so, reinforce his subjectivity.

Such narrative formation of interracial object, however, betrays its fictiveness when the white-looking body directly confronts the white observer to invalidate the linguistically constructed difference. Faulkner suggests this when Mr. Compson, drawing upon his father’s firsthand account, reports Judge Jim Hamblett’s confusion about Charles Etienne’s racial identity. As the passing “olive face” (164) of Charles Etienne leads the justice to believe his being “a white man” and include him in “we [white Southerners]” (165), General Compson’s corrective gesture fails to exert an immediate effect: “he [Hamblett] looking at the prisoner now but saying ‘white’ again even while his voice died away as if the order to stop the voice had been shocked into short circuit, and every face in the room turned toward the prisoner as Hamblett cried, ‘*What are you? Who and where did you come from?*’” (165). Hamblett’s “shock” at the white-looking man’s possible racial mixture and the resulting “short-circuit” dysfunction of his discursive censor (“the order to stop the voice”) cause him to let the word “white”—a marker of sameness—escape his lips one last time. Faulkner suggests the ideologically pernicious potential of Charles Etienne’s body by making the judge, an instrument of the Southern legal system, overreact with the anachronistic language of slavery (“*What are you? Who and where did you come from?*”) where a mixed-race body belongs to the white master as a literal object.

In contrast, Mr. Compson, with no access to Charles Etienne’s physical body but only to stories about him, can ignore the question of whether the light-skinned man is white or passing

white. Unlike Jim Hamblett, Mr. Compson manages to picture Charles Etienne as a mixed-race man who happens to have the passing white look, rather than as a white-looking man who may or may not be mixed-race. Therefore, in chapter 6, Mr. Compson's critique of the fictionality of race begins with the already interracial Charles Etienne (whom the "one-drop rule" fictively classifies as black) and skips the deeper-level fictionality of his white-looking body being interracialized with no substantial evidence. Accordingly, Mr. Compson finds Charles Etienne's predicament in the fact that his blackness overshadows his whiteness under Southern racial ideology, not that his body resists any signification of the black. For instance, the white narrator refers to Charles Etienne's outfit at Sutpen's Hundred as "the delicate garments of his pagehood already half concealed beneath that harsh and shapeless denim cut to an iron pattern and sold by the millions—that burlesque uniform and regalia of the tragic burlesque of the sons of Ham" (159-60). Here, Mr. Compson shows his sense of racial mixture as a simple sum of white and black, not as a threat to whiteness as a distinct category which has enabled his subjective rendering of racial mixture in the first place. Consequently, in Mr. Compson's somewhat stereotypical configuration, Charles Etienne's identity problem manifests itself as an awkward coordination between his original "delicate garments" made of white silk and "that harsh and shapeless denim" emblematic of the black race, not between his white-looking body and the problematic signs of racial hybridity he has to wear.

Significantly, when Mr. Compson does mention Charles Etienne's visual appearance through dramatization of him "examining himself" in a shard of broken mirror, the narrator does not foreground Charles Etienne "himself"—i.e., his white-looking body—but his no longer "white" clothing which, covering the racially indeterminate body, signifies his loss of whiteness: "who to know what hours of amazed and tearless grief he might have spent before it, examining



himself in the delicate and outgrown tatters in which he perhaps could not even remember himself, with quiet and incredulous incomprehension” (162). Objectifying Charles Etienne as interracial and claiming his difference this way, Mr. Compson enables himself to exert narrative subjectivity with which to recount the unknown. Mr. Compson’s acknowledgement of the inaccessibility to the scene (“who to know”) does not keep him from telling Charles Etienne’s inner feelings but rather opens to him a free narrative space to fill with his own perspective, as registered by the adverb “perhaps.”<sup>7</sup>

Thus, in *Absalom, Absalom!* white narrators’ general lack of direct sighting allows them to treat racial passing solely in language and ignore the white-looking body and its subversive implication to their subjectivity. Conversely, in rare cases of immediate confrontation such as Hamblett’s with Charles Etienne, the white-looking body nullifies the observer’s sense of difference and his discursive dominance predicated on it. Faulkner furthers this paradigm by applying it even to Clytie who, with her “*coffee-colored*” skin and publicly known parental origin, otherwise occupies a stable interracial position. By doing so, Faulkner suggests that, just like the “octoroon” label, the “coffee-color” epithet does not faithfully reflect the reality of her body but rather carry the speaker’s will to differentiate. In chapter 6, Shreve checks with Quentin about the excursion to Sutpen’s Hundred during which the boy Quentin and his friends see Clytie,

*watching you with eyes like two shoe buttons buried in the myriad wrinkles of her coffee-colored face, who just looked at you and said without even removing the pipe and in a voice almost like a white woman’s: ‘What do you want?’ and after a moment one of you said ‘Nothing’ and then you were all running without knowing which of you began to run first nor why since you were not scared, back across*

*the fallow and rain-gutted and brier-choked old fields until you came to the old rotting snake fence and crossed it, hurled yourselves over it, and then the earth, the land, the sky and trees and woods, looked different again, all right again.*

(174)

While Rosa's preceding reference to Clytie's "*coffee-colored face*" (109) leads Shreve (and presumably Quentin, when he first told Shreve about the episode) to repeat the same color description, Clytie's voice "*almost like a white woman's*" renders the confused boy Quentin and his friends unable to cast the mixed-race woman in the stereotype of frightening "mixed-breed": they run away "*without knowing . . . why since [they] were not scared.*"<sup>8</sup> Faulkner attributes the boys' puzzlement to Clytie's ideologically disruptive "sameness" in the metaphorically charged second half of the quotation; the boys manage to collect themselves only when they cross "*the old rotting snake fence*"—a half-wrecked boundary that barely splits their ordinary world and the world of the other—back into the former sphere where, tellingly, things "*looked different again, all right again.*"

Faulkner suggests that firsthand—and so not linguistically mediated—experience of the supposedly passing body can disrupt the circular process of white subjectivity formation. He does so most dramatically in chapter 5, where Rosa narratively revisits her post-Civil War life at the Sutpen mansion in stream-of-consciousness style, giving us some direct access to her prediscursive psyche.<sup>9</sup> Rosa's report of her confrontation with Clytie (who "passes" for Henry to the eye of Rosa who, "*running out of the bright afternoon*" into "*the dim light*" [109], has yet to adjust to the darkness) testifies unwittingly to a tension between her transfixion with Clytie's visual sameness and her defensive impulse to name the woman "interracial other." And, through his portrayal of Rosa's discursive struggle against bodily sensation, Faulkner foregrounds how,

even as language helps a white subject differentiate himself/herself from the constructed “interracial object,” the visual homogeneity created by racial passing can complicate this dichotomizing function of language.

Rosa’s mental process during her face-off with Clytie illustrates this disruption, as she rushes into the mansion without knowing what has happened there,

*and saw the Sutpen face and even as I cried ‘Henry! Henry! What have you done? What has that fool [Wash Jones] been trying to tell me?’ realised that I had come, not too late as I had thought, but come too soon. Because it was not Henry’s face. It was Sutpen face enough, but not his; Sutpen coffee-colored face enough there in the dim light, barring the stairs: and I running out of the bright afternoon, into the thunderous silence of that brooding house where I could see nothing at first: then gradually the face, the Sutpen face not approaching, not swimming up out of the gloom, but already there, rocklike and firm and antedating time and house and doom and all, waiting there (oh yes, he chose well; he bettered choosing, who created in his own image the cold Cerberus of his private hell)—the face without sex or age because it had never possessed either: the same sphinx face which she had been born with. (109)*

Rosa’s confusion of Clytie with Henry shows the former’s passing “white” look in this particular scene. The way the passage registers the confusion also indicates that Clytie’s “coffee color” reflects Rosa’s interested preconception as much as the body’s physical attribute. For, at first referring to what she finds as “*the Sutpen face*,” Rosa cannot attach “*coffee-colored*”—a marker of racial hybridity—until she realizes that “*it was not Henry’s face*” but Clytie’s. Desperate to

neutralize her mistake and reestablish difference, Rosa translates her misrecognition into that of race-free time (she “*had come, not too late as I had thought, but come too soon*”) and deduces it illogically from a sudden reassertion of difference: “*Because it was not Henry’s face.*” In contrast with Mr. Compson’s logic-controlled representation of racial mixture from a secure subject position, Rosa’s direct sighting of the passing body de-subjectifies her and thus makes her rendition a chaotic, self-contradictory assortment of images. For instance, Clytie, whom Rosa has just positioned on a timeline to claim Henry’s difference, later transcends time (“*antedating time*”) as the white narrator tries to objectify her as “*rocklike and firm.*” Rosa intends her “*Cerberus*” metaphor (juxtaposed with Sutpen’s masterly “*choosing*” which had equated Clytie’s slave mother with “the other livestock” in Mr. Compson’s account [48]) to objectify Clytie through Gothicizing and bestializing of the “half-breed.” However, developing the image into a “Sphinx,” another Greek mythological figure, Rosa unwittingly emphasizes the visual sameness of Clytie’s passing face. For, though the human-animal hybrid composition of a “Sphinx” can suit her desire to solidify Clytie’s “half-breed” otherness, the whole passage’s exclusive reference to face attests that in the dark house Rosa can only see the monster’s face (“*the same sphinx face*”) which, unlike its body of a lion, belongs to generic woman.

In this scene, Faulkner also implies that, as temporally and spatially distanced narrators objectify passing characters more easily, physical distance goes hand in hand with conceptual differentiation in white subjectivity construction. When Rosa finds the distance violated by Clytie’s stopping her from going upstairs, despite her racially binarizing reference to Clytie’s “*black arresting and untimorous hand on my white woman’s flesh*” (111), Rosa cannot help realizing that the physical touch, in its bodily directness, exposes the two women’s sameness (as a “*flesh*” and another “*flesh*”) and dissolves the hierarchical “*caste and color*” on which her

black-and-white description predicates itself: “*let flesh touch with flesh, and watch the fall of all the eggshell shibboleth of caste and color too*” (112). Thus, desperately resisting the nullification of difference, Rosa’s interjection strives to distance (physically) and differentiate (racially) Clytie’s body at the same time: “*Take your hand off me, nigger!*” (112). Faulkner suggests that this interrelation between physical distance and categorical difference also has a social dimension. For, as the disintegration of Southern slave system forces Rosa, Judith, and Clytie to live close together (they, for example, “*slept in the same room*” [126]), whiteness and mixed race, and even the three women’s selves, become indistinguishable. As Rosa admits, “*Clytie . . . in the very pigmentation of her flesh represented that debacle*” (126) of the South, which has brought the post-Civil War situation where “[*i*]t was as though we were one being, interchangeable and indiscriminate” (125).

In *Absalom, Absalom!* as I have demonstrated, Faulkner deploys the factor of racial passing to expose a discursive circularity built in white subjectivity formation. Here, with no substantial reference point for difference, one names/fabricates an “interracial object” against which to define himself/herself as a “white subject,” but in its discursive arbitrariness this strategy depends already upon the very white subjectivity that it has to establish. As exemplified by Mr. Compson’s representation of “the octoroon” and Charles Etienne, this procedure works for those narrators whose dependence upon already narrativized materials helps avoid dealing directly with the white-looking body. As in Rosa’s direct sighting of Clytie, however, when whites do encounter the white-looking body of reputedly mixed-race individuals, its visual invalidation of the white/passing-white difference unsettles the former’s narrative agency including that which enables them to name the latter “passing mixed-race” in the first place. Through comparison between these cases, I have pointed out that, in Faulkner’s observation,

language as a naming/binarizing medium, just as physical mediation in time or space, functions to the advantage of the Southern racial system by distancing the white-looking body—whose physical sameness would otherwise neutralize white subjectivity as a distinct entity—into a fictive “interracial object” position.

On the level of the racial ideology under which whites in *Absalom, Absalom!* perform discursive activity, their mostly successful objectification of racial passing means an empowerment for becoming independent “white subjects.” However, on the narrative level, where the goal is to elucidate the Sutpen saga full of irrationality and inconsistency, the fictive nature of their subjectivity and of the narrative reconstruction it executes works against the whole enterprise. For instance, as I have shown, Mr. Compson’s ordering rendition of Charles Etienne’s racial mixture (as a logical sum of white and black) endorses and is endorsed by the narrator’s secure subjectivity, but his portrayal, unlike Judge Hamblett’s shocked speech, fails to capture the difference-defying reality of the passing body.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, though in total disarray, Rosa’s retrospective monologue about her confrontation with the “passing” Clytie does register the two women’s “actual,” if “contradictory” and thus rationally unacceptable, homogeneity as “*the two abstract contradictions which we actually were*”(111). I shall argue in this section that, by setting the white narrators’ truth-seeking efforts as the novel’s thematic centerpiece, Faulkner develops his investigation of racial passing and points out a paradox that surrounds the differentiating operation of subjectivity, narrative, and ultimately, language. For, while ordering the essentially “chaotic” world (exemplified by the endlessly indeterminable white/passing-white difference) into comprehensible binaries, such an operation at the same time denies one access to the same world through inevitable reduction and distortion.

Indeed, Faulkner draws a parallel between the passing body and chaotic reality by alluding to a binary paradigm's limitation in capturing their lack of order. While temporal and spatial distance enables the narrators to objectify the world they recount, Faulkner implies that, just as the passing body defies the white/passing-white dichotomy, the unordered universe resists the fictive differentiation between North and South, present and past—and by extension that between subject and object which relies upon distance.<sup>11</sup> The North/South difference does not inhere in the continent's topography but only comes from fictive categorization, as evidenced by the Mississippi River which, impervious to measuring lines, "is very Environment itself which laughs at degrees of latitude and temperature" (*Absalom* 208). The distinction between past and present, too, betrays itself as a doomed attempt to order the intrinsically amorphous flow of time; Faulkner foregrounds the disintegration of the dichotomy by describing Quentin in 1909 as "still breath[ing] the same air in which the church bells had rung on that Sunday morning in 1833" (23).

Predicated upon such fictive difference and distance, narrative subjectivity itself turns out fictive and thus insufficient to comprehend reality in its pristine disorder. Inevitably imposing its own perspective to create meaning, consistency, and teleology, subjectivity-based reconstruction cannot but suppress real-life complexities while providing a rationally organized interpretation.<sup>12</sup> Thus, in *Absalom, Absalom!* the narrators' mostly stable subjectivity distanced/differentiated from the fictively created narrative object serves paradoxically to frustrate their truth-seeking efforts. While taking advantage of their secure subject position in exerting imagination, the narrators—whose ultimate goal is to reveal the truth, not a story, of the Sutpens' lives—find themselves repeatedly reminded of their limitation in retrieving actual human actions which defy logical reasoning, especially in the personae's extreme situations. As the characters of the Sutpen

saga “in life had acted and reacted to the minimum of logic and morality, [and] dying had escaped it completely, [and] dead remained not only indifferent but impervious to it” (225), Mr. Compson locates the root of his narrative impasse in human inability to “know” what is “incredible” and “does not explain”: “It’s just incredible. It just does not explain. Or perhaps that’s it: they don’t explain and we are not supposed to know” (80). Somewhat drawing a parallel between the epistemological chaos of passing body and of human action itself, the Rosa-Clytie homogeneity (“*the two abstract contradictions which we actually were*” [111]) echoes Faulkner’s annotation on the rationality-defying “love” factor, on which Quentin and Shreve finally zero in as the key to solving Henry’s mysterious murder of Bon: “love, where there might be paradox and inconsistency but nothing fault nor false” (253).<sup>13</sup>

In tandem with his critique of subjectivity, Faulkner arranges the novel’s final chapters, which approach the heart of the Sutpen mystery, so that Quentin and Shreve have to abandon their subject position and fuse with their narrative object. Only through such de-subjectification can the narrators question a white-looking man’s formerly taken-for-granted white identity—a move that exposes the fictiveness of white/passing-white difference. In chapter 8, by merging Quentin and Shreve with Henry and Bon, Faulkner confiscates the narrators’ subjective vantage point and instead provides them with a direct access to key events of the Sutpen legend. Faulkner’s meticulous description of different modes of such merging indicates that the novelist intends the technique to represent Quentin and Shreve’s varying levels of access to the unmediated reality. Initially “the two” in a detached subject position, Quentin and Shreve then come to share Henry and Bon’s time and place as “the four” and see the scenes, including Bon’s white-looking body, directly. Later “the four” confound further into a new form of “the two,” where Quentin and Shreve directly experience Henry’s and Bon’s lives and perspectives and,



thus drawing upon the subjectivity of their once narrative objects, abandon their distinct subjectivity.<sup>14</sup>

For example, by putting themselves in the antebellum South and joining Henry and Bon as “the four,” Quentin and Shreve manage to witness the youths’ mysterious departure on the Christmas eve of 1860 (“not two of them there and then either but four of them riding the two horses through the iron darkness” [237]) as well as to see Bon’s mother whose vindictive plot explains his approach to the Sutpen family. When Quentin and Shreve later come back to the Christmas eve as the second form of “the two,” their fusion enables them to retrieve Henry’s psychology in italicized interior monologue: “So that now it was not two but four of them riding the two horses through the dark over the frozen December ruts of that Christmas eve: four of them and then just two—Charles-Shreve and Quentin-Henry, the two of them both believing that Henry was thinking *He* (meaning his father) *has destroyed us all*” (267). Only by “exist[ing] in” Bon and approaching the world from his viewpoint can Quentin and Shreve restore the “love” factor in its pre-narrativized “paradox and inconsistency”: each of the narrators

forgave condoned and forgot the faulting of the other—faultings both in the creating of this shade whom they discussed (rather, existed in) and in the hearing and sifting and discarding the false and conserving what seemed true, or fit the preconceived—in order to overpass to love, where there might be paradox and inconsistency but nothing fault nor false. (253)

However, given this strategy of critiquing the fictive subject/object, white/passing-white differences and de-subjectifying the truth-seeking plot, it seems highly contradictory that Faulkner arranges the ending so that Quentin and Shreve finish their reconstruction by reverting to the initial binary frameworks. Why does Faulkner allow the white narrators to reject the

permanent indeterminacy of Bon's white-looking body, to objectify him instead as "passing interracial," to reestablish Southern racial hierarchy which this "passing" Bon has allegedly violated, and thus to reclaim their white subjectivity (as opposed to the interracial object) with which to complete a coherent narrative? This double-sided treatment by Faulkner, I will argue, indicates a dilemma inherent in the author's novelistic activity, i.e., having to use language—a medium intrinsically unfit for capturing the chaotic, signification-proof world—to finalize a book of truth seeking. Indeed, Faulkner prevents this predicament of language from undermining his work by sneaking Quentin and Shreve's subjective intervention into the very moment their de-subjectified narrative merging helps retrieve the unmediated past. By so doing, he subtly transfers the problem to the level of Quentin and Shreve's reconstruction and holds *them* responsible for the failure to recoup the true past in its original disorderliness.<sup>15</sup>

The following passage exemplifies this. Here, as "four of them," Quentin and Shreve share the same space with Bon's mother and note her "parchment-colored skin"—a marker of possible racial mixture:

. . . four of them who sat in that drawing room of baroque and fusty magnificence which Shreve had invented and which was probably true enough, while the Haiti-born daughter of the French sugar planter and the woman who Sutpen's first father-in-law had told him was a Spaniard (the slight dowdy woman with untidy gray-streaked raven hair coarse as a horse's tail, with parchment-colored skin and implacable pouched black eyes which alone showed no age because they showed no forgetting, whom Shreve and Quentin had likewise invented and which was likewise probably true enough). . . . (268)

Despite the “four of them” narrative setting that features direct sighting, Faulkner implies Quentin and Shreve’s subjective intervention by referring to the woman’s retrieved figure not only as an “invention” but also as “probably true enough,” thus insinuating the working of a standard for likelihood and acceptability. By doing so, Faulkner sets the report’s authenticity level as no higher than General Compson’s imaginative re-creation. When Sutpen’s storytelling makes General Compson feel as if “he had just seen her too for a second by the flash of one of the muskets,” the evoked image of Sutpen’s future wife has “a white slender arm,” reflecting the listener’s presupposition of her whiteness (201). Making Quentin and Shreve’s departure from General Compson’s master account sound not like a correction (based on substantive counterevidence) but like a *rereading* (of what is formerly considered “white” as “parchment color”), Faulkner subtly undermines the epistemological integrity of the youths’ narrative operation.<sup>16</sup>

Faulkner makes the narrators’ subjective bias undermine the direct spectatorship licensed by “four of them” fusion also when, just before the coexistence of “the four” at the scene develops into the compounded “two,” Shreve refutes Mr. Compson on who got wounded at Pittsburg Landing:

Because your old man was wrong here, too! He said it was Bon who was wounded, but it wasn’t. Because who told him? Who told Sutpen, or your grandfather either, which of them it was who was hit? Sutpen didn’t know because he wasn’t there, and your grandfather wasn’t there either because that was where he was hit too, where he lost his arm. So who told them? Not Henry, because his father never saw Henry but that one time and maybe they never had time to talk about wounds and besides to talk about wounds in the

Confederate army in 1865 would be like coal miners talking about soot; and not Bon, because Sutpen never saw him at all because he was dead;—it was not Bon, it was Henry. (275)

Despite the “four of them” setting that would allow him to see and check by himself, Shreve’s rebuttal depends not upon visual counterevidence but upon a lack of testimonial, and thus discursive, evidence: “So who told them?” With this Faulkner implies that Shreve’s revision of preceding narratives, just as that of Bon’s mother, is not a correction based on direct experience of the real past but yet another reading of the same, already narrativized material. Quite fittingly, Shreve’s discursive move serves to translate the essentially chaotic and indeterminate world, where Bon’s white-looking body dissolves difference and makes him interchangeable with Henry (so it *could be* Henry who got injured), into a differentiating assertion (that it *is* Henry). Tellingly, to justify his claim of interchangeability, Shreve compares the ubiquity of wounded soldiers to that of sooted “coal miners,” evoking the image of darkened and de-individualized whites. While the visual homogeneity between a white master and “wild niggers” (4) shocks Rosa when she witnesses the mud-plastered Sutpen and his black slaves “distinguishable one from another by his beard and eyes alone” (28), Shreve’s subjectivity covertly at work allows him to appropriate the disintegration of visual—and by implication racial—difference as a rhetorical tool for advancing his own interpretation.<sup>17</sup>

In this way, Faulkner foregrounds Quentin and Shreve’s narrativization—and thus spoilage—of their direct experience of the original, disorderly past. By doing so, he manages to claim language’s fundamental inadequacy in capturing chaotic reality *and* use language to elaborate a truth-seeking plot (in which he has to make that claim). This method operates most fully in the climactic “revelation” of Bon’s ancestry at the Carolina encampment:

They were both in Carolina and the time was forty-six years ago, and it was not even four now but compounded still further, since now both of them were Henry Sutpen and both of them were Bon, compounded each of both yet either neither, smelling the very smoke which had blown and faded away forty-six years ago from the *bivouac fires burning in a pine grove, the gaunt and ragged men sitting or lying about them, talking not about the war yet all curiously enough (or perhaps not curiously at all) facing the South.* (280)

Fitting to the ultimate “two of them” setting, the Quentin-Shreve-Henry-Bon fusion comes not only with the 1909 narrators’ direct sensation of a “smell” from 1865 but also with a stylistic transformation from roman type to italics signaling a pre-discursive dimension. However, as the parenthetical addition and its diction of a third party (“*perhaps*,” “*curiously*”) indicate, the passage does not faithfully register Henry’s or Bon’s perception. On the contrary, its logic suggests Shreve’s narrative control over what appears an unmediated presentation of inner truth. The “curiosity” the quote mentions indicates the working of Shreve’s perspective, since the Confederate Army’s paradoxical habituation to wartime anomaly such as its “*facing the South*” has attracted particular attention from the Canadian native, for whom the Civil War is “something my people haven’t got” (289). And, indeed, Shreve’s theory of Henry’s injury inspired by the wartime ubiquity of wounds—another extraordinariness that has aroused his curiosity—makes its way into the same conversation between Sutpen and Henry that interracializes Bon: “*You were hit at Shiloh, Colonel Willow tells me, Sutpen says*” (282).<sup>18</sup> Thus manipulating the narrative situation of the scene, Faulkner avoids settling Bon’s essentially indeterminable race except on a doubly discursive level—i.e., Shreve’s narrative invention of Sutpen’s verbal disclosure (283) and of Bon’s self-“nigger”-ing (285, 286) to Henry.<sup>19</sup>

As I have demonstrated, Faulkner's dual treatment of the de-subjectified narrative situation in *Absalom, Absalom!* indicates his paradoxical attempt to point out the predicament of language and prevent the same predicament from compromising his own novelistic narrative. To finish his book of truth seeking while claiming truth's imperviousness to ordering language, Faulkner transfers this impasse to his character-narrators and holds them responsible for the failure to recoup the true past in its original disorder. Thus, while communicating the message that no narrative can finalize the racial origin of white-looking Bon nor his and the Sutpens' actions and motives, Faulkner manages to give the novel a sense of closure, which, ironically, has led readers to accept Bon's racial mixture uncritically. Indeed, just as Quentin and Shreve redefine their white subjectivity circularly as opposed to a fabricated narrative object (i.e., Bon as "passing interracial" and, by extension, the whole, rationally acceptable version of Sutpen legend that they have invented), Faulkner scholarship has sustained itself as an authoritative body of critical discourse by presupposing the mixed-race Bon as its object of investigation. And, as Engler argues, such a "dubious assumption" (253) has at the same time affected interpretation of *Absalom, Absalom!* because it does not reflect the novel's actual open-endedness.<sup>20</sup>

The same dilemma faces Quentin and Shreve just after their conclusion. For, with all their "solution" to the Sutpen mystery, its—and their regained subjectivity's—inevitable fictionality constantly comes back to frustrate them. Though Jim Bond's mental disability, "saddle-colored" (173) skin and resulting "nigger" position had earlier enabled Shreve to objectify him casually into a discursive construct (calling Jim's mind "what you (not he) would have had to call his mind" [174]), in chapter 9 the white narrators realize that the mixed-race character is beyond their epistemological comprehension and will not fit into "the whole ledger" (302) of their reconstruction: "You've got one nigger left. One nigger Sutpen left. Of course you

cant catch him and you dont even always see him and you never will be able to use him. But you've got him there still. You still hear him at night sometimes" (302).

Thus developing the character of Jim Bond as a subtle symbol of dysfunctional white subjectivity, Faulkner furthers his deconstruction of whiteness. While Quentin and Shreve intend their conclusion of interracial Bon to reestablish the white/passing-white difference, at another level this narrative operation serves to blur that very difference by drawing upon the proposition that any white-looking person can be passing mixed-race. Faulkner charges Jim with this paradox when the "saddle-color" epithet does not completely disqualify the character for passing; the 1909 confrontation at Sutpen's Hundred activates Quentin and Jim's possible interchangeability so that the third-person narrator has to clarify his pronoun reference (e.g., "he (Quentin) hurried forward" [297])—as he did to name two out of the "four of them" fusion: e.g., "It did not matter to them (Quentin and Shreve) anyway" (236). The closure-defying presence of Jim naturally reminds Shreve that, in interracializing Bon's white-looking body, he has unwittingly opened up the possibility of his own passing. Thus, at the ending of *Absalom, Absalom!* Shreve cannot help imagining that "whites" like himself, a seeing subject ("I who regard you"), can always be in fact mixed-race passers and thus "have sprung from the loins of African kings"—though his language barely suppresses its pernicious implication by setting the time "in a few thousand years" (302) and manufacturing a temporal distance from the chaotic scenario.

## Chapter 2

### Signifying, Ordering, and Containing the Chaos:

#### Whiteness, Ideology, and Language in William Faulkner's *Intruder in the Dust*

Coming out of Faulkner's "dark years," after his period of "authentic originality and greatness" (Minter 192-93), *Intruder in the Dust* has attracted relatively little critical attention since its publication. When critics do discuss the novel at length, their approach has often drawn upon the general conception that "Faulkner failed to give it the intensity and resonance we associate with his finest work" such as *The Sound and the Fury*, *Light in August*, and *Absalom, Absalom!* (Minter 212). Accordingly, most of this scholarship has treated *Intruder in the Dust* as a kind of political novel and thus focused on Faulkner's personal attitude toward contemporary Southern race relations and how this attitude manifests in his narrative. Unlike the "work of authentic originality and greatness" from his prolific years, the novel's philosophical investigation of race itself has suffered critical disregard.

With its major attention to the author's explicit or implicit self-expression, the prevailing political approach to the novel predicates itself upon a rather simplistic question of whether, and to what degree, the character of Gavin Stevens represents Faulkner. Observing that "Stevens clearly echoes many of the author's recorded sentiments," Carl Dimitri identifies one with the other and attributes Stevens's inconsistency on racial equality to Faulkner's own inconsistency: "It is a testimony to the confused nature of Faulkner's stance on civil rights, as well as to the confused nature of *Intruder in the Dust* itself, that Stevens contradicts [himself on] these sentiments" (21). In contrast, while admitting their shared moderate conservatism, Noel Polk emphasizes there is "plenty of distance between Gavin Stevens and William Faulkner" (143),



between the hypocritical character “so completely wedded, even if he does not know it, to the status quo” and the author whose “concern was consistently with the *individual* Negro” (141). Pointing to a middle ground, John E. Bassett describes Faulkner’s attitude toward Stevens as “identification mixed with self-irony” (212). However, resorting to the same framework which reduces their relationship to identification, opposition, or in-between and, in so doing, presupposes a “politicizably” unproblematical, monolithic notion of race, Bassett misses Faulkner’s socio-epistemological inquiry into race itself—an inquiry made *through* his characters’ ideologically charged practices. Thus, for Bassett, *Intruder in the Dust* conveys the novelist’s message more explicitly than his preceding “great works”: “In one sense the message had been implicit ever since Faulkner first considered the modes of knowing and communicating [racial blackness] in *Light in August*. Now in the last novel in which he confronts the issue directly, it is more explicit” (216).

Keith Clark’s study of Lucas Beauchamp overcomes the reductive critical model of placing the character on the same level as the author: “In my treatment of Lucas . . . I approach Faulkner’s protagonist not so much as an extension of the author’s own views on race and racism, but instead as a character in the matrix of Faulkner’s art” (67). Through analysis of the way the novelist describes Lucas’s blackness in “The Fire and the Hearth” and *Intruder in the Dust*, Clark points out that Faulkner’s background as a white Southerner limits his artistic imagination to the extent that his black character cannot attain manhood without “disassociating” from African American identity. Clark expands this thesis on Faulkner’s characterization of blacks to include his no less problematical narrative configuration in *Intruder in the Dust*: “not only does Lucas’s limited communal *place* further blemish Faulkner’s depiction, but his narrow *narrative space* reinforces his marginality. Faulkner pushes him to the periphery, rendering him not a voice in the

text but instead an idea who is abstracted and filtered through the minds of Chick and Gavin” (73). As Clark argues, Lucas’s silence “reinforces his marginality”; it not only keeps the character from telling his own version of the story but also de-historicizes him out of the African American cultural tradition of oral communication (78). However, the critic’s treatment of this marginalization as “a deterioration of Lucas Beauchamp” (74) “contrary to what the author may have desired” (73) sounds rather precarious, given the novel’s critique of language, which Clark does mention but seems to suppress in his exclusive focus on the “special rhetorical significance” of language and voice (78). As I shall demonstrate in this chapter, Faulkner suggests that Lucas’s narrative marginalization does not necessarily mean “a deterioration” but rather indicates the character’s relative freedom from the already racialized language of the South which contains human diversity in a dichotomized racial classification. While Clark’s assumption that Lucas could improve only by claiming a black identity derives from another assumption that “Lucas Beauchamp does not occupy the liminal position of a Joe Christmas or a Charles Bon” (69), the novel’s scrutiny of the binarizing function of language demands us to reevaluate the character’s racial ambiguity, which complicates the notion of blackness—and that of whiteness, too, defined as its opposite in the Southern socio-linguistic context.

Indeed, through his characterization of Lucas in *Intruder in the Dust*, Faulkner points to the problematical nature of Southern whiteness as a construct predicated upon the reductive operation of language in ordering (by signification) the essentially chaotic world. With no intrinsic signified in material reality, whiteness as a signifier defines itself only as opposed to blackness which, as the “liminal” Lucas plainly shows, also lacks a substantial foothold. The novel dramatizes the situation where, as dominant ideology penetrates people’s mental activity through a particular language it endorses, Southern whites, with their monolithic subjectivity

authorized by the Southern racial ideology, cannot conceive of blacks except as an abstract and homogeneous otherness nor question their own ritualized social practices such as lynching, thus further reinforcing the same ideology that determines their behavior. Therefore, I shall argue, Lucas's silence indicates not only his "marginalization" but also a liberation from the ideologized language that reductively defines him as a "nigger" and in turn helps "whites" to become such. Chick Mallison's attempt to save Lucas from impending lynching corresponds with his struggle with ideo-linguistically charged whiteness which, as exemplified by Gavin Stevens's talkative acquiescence to mob violence, limits one's thinking to that of racism.

"Race," as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. argues, "is the ultimate trope of difference because it is so very arbitrary in its application":

The sense of difference defined in popular usages of the term "race" has both described and inscribed differences of language, belief system, artistic tradition, and gene pool, as well as all sorts of supposedly natural attributes such as rhythm, athletic ability, cerebration, usury, fidelity, and so forth. The relation between "racial character" and these sorts of characteristics has been inscribed through tropes of race, lending the sanction of God, biology, or the natural order to even presumably unbiased descriptions of cultural tendencies and differences. (5)

Gates's adroit diction of "tropes of race" foregrounds a gap any racial classification entails between an actual human (who has his/her own unique combination of "language, belief system, artistic tradition, and gene pool, as well as all sorts of supposedly natural attributes") and a discursively conceptualized "racial character" attached to the person. Being "tropes," racial categories do not really signify substantially distinct entities; they only introduce a fictive order into an infinite diversity of human beings. As Gates points out, such an arbitrary language of race

reaffirms itself as the authorized classification through “popular usages” which repeatedly “inscribe” in one’s thinking the figuratively “described” racial differences.

Faulkner dramatizes this descriptive and inscriptive operation of race in *Intruder in the Dust*. In the postbellum Southern setting of the novel, the “one-drop rule” serves to binarize a chaotic variety of individuals into “whites” and “blacks,” with the former on the top of the hierarchy. To reinforce the racial hierarchy on which it founds itself, the white-supremacist society further describes/inscribes “blacks” with another trope, “niggers,” which not only suppresses their diversity, individuality, and personhood but also attaches to them stereotypically inferior—and somewhat mutually contradicting—attributes such as “ignorance,” “cowardice,” “childishness,” “subservience,” “savageness” and “brutality.” Thus, white men in the novel insist on imposing the “nigger” label upon Lucas all the more for his essentially unclassifiable (and so potentially disruptive) in-betweenness in terms of race, appearance (e.g., his eyes belong to “not black nor white either” [13]), and behavior (“not arrogant at all and not even scornful: just intolerant inflexible and composed” [13]): “*We got to make him be a nigger first. He’s got to admit he’s a nigger. Then maybe we will accept him as he seems to intend to be accepted*” (18). Faulkner also utilizes Chick’s interior monologue to demonstrate how the white youth, influenced by his discursive environment, unwittingly thinks in a fashion already built into the highly racialized language. Looking at Lucas sleep silently in jail on the night following his alleged crime, Chick conceives of the suspect as a “nigger”:

*He’s just a nigger after all for all his high nose and his stiff neck and his gold watch-chain and refusing to mean mister to anybody even when he says it. Only a nigger could kill a man, let alone shoot him in the back, and then sleep like a baby as soon as he found something flat enough to lie down on. . . .* (57)

Here, following the stereotype of “coward nigger,” Chick defines Lucas as a “nigger” based on the false allegation that Lucas has “*kill[ed] a man . . . [and shot] him in the back*” (which itself originates from the “word” [27] of a white man). This “nigger” tag in turn leads Chick to describe Lucas’s sleep of the just as that of a “childish nigger” (“*like a baby*”), which reinscribes the old man’s “nigger” identity to reconfirm the original definition. In this passage Faulkner also takes pains to represent the tension between chaotic reality and ordering language through his syntax; with the concessive preposition “*for all*,” he presents the reductive “nigger” epithet (“*just a nigger after all*”) as suppressing all the uncategorizable complexities of the real-life Lucas such as “*his high nose and his stiff neck and his gold watch-chain and refusing to mean mister.*”

Such “tropes of race” describe and inscribe racial characters not only of their addressee but of their addresser. Faulkner suggests this through the whites’ obsessive desire to linguistically contain Lucas: “every white man in that whole section of the country” has wanted to make a “nigger” out of him “for years” (18). The whites’ oversensitivity to what Lucas “*seems to intend to be accepted*” as indicates their own lurking anxiety about self-image, as the old man’s boundary-blurring presence exposes the fictiveness of racial difference and, accordingly, of their “superior whiteness.” Thus, the whites need Lucas as a “nigger” to define their own racial identity; they would allow Lucas to be what he “*seems to intend to be accepted*” as only if he “*admit[ted] he’s a nigger*” (18) and did not hinder their own becoming what they “intend to be” as opposed to the “nigger.” Indeed, predicated upon the existence or nonexistence of a drop of black blood in the white vein (that is, “purity” or “impurity” of one’s white blood), the Southern one-drop rule seems to define blackness as “non-whiteness” and not vice versa. However, that very whiteness fails to be the absolute center of meaning against which to determine the other racial category, because it actually defines itself as “non-blackness” and thus

relies back on blackness for its origin. One can prove his/her “whiteness” only through demonstrating that there are no “black” lineal ascendants—whether really demonstrable or not.

Here Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalytic theory on language and human subjectivity bears much relevance. The following passage elucidates, though not specifically in racial terms, the interplay between the lack of substantive, “real” signifieds corresponding to signifying words, the performative (i.e., at once descriptive and inscriptive) function of language which apparently covers the lack, and the “symbolic” construction of self which depends upon the empty signification:

the function of language in speech is not to inform but to evoke.

What I seek in speech is a response from the other. What constitutes me as a subject is my question. In order to be recognized by the other, I proffer what was only in view of what will be. In order to find him, I call him by a name that he must assume or refuse in order to answer me.

I identify myself in language, but only by losing myself in it as an object. What is realized in my history is neither the past definite as what was, since it is no more, nor even the perfect as what has been in what I am, but the future anterior as what I will have been, given what I am in the process of becoming.

(84)

According to Lacan, language works to form human subjectivity not by signifying (“informing” of) something “real” about one’s identity (which does not really exist). Rather, the speaker “evokes” a sense of difference from the addressed “other”<sup>1</sup> (though, again, such difference does not have a substantial counterpart in the real world) who is to recognize the speaker as a subject by “assuming” or “refusing” the term of address. As a result, in identifying a person’s self,

language operates performatively, at the same time describing and inscribing “what I am in the process of becoming.” Thus, the white men’s frustration at labeling Lucas a “nigger”—and in turn defining themselves as opposed to that “nigger”—derives from the old man’s transcending indifference to “assuming” or “refusing” the epithet, a transcendence that disrupts the whole system of racial identity construction. Tellingly, when his gold watch-chain and toothpick infuriate a white man with their out-of-place extravagance, Lucas responds only to the color-blind, familial part of the white’s abuse (“You goddamn biggity stiffnecked stinking burrheaded Edmonds sonofabitch”) but does not “assume” nor “refuse” the racially charged term “burrheaded”: “I aint a Edmonds. . . . I’m a McCaslin” (19).

By having “every white man” buy into the dynamics of racial identity formation based on hollow signification, Faulkner sheds light upon the socio-cultural dimension of the issue. He alludes to this dimension in his description of the night following Vinson Gowrie’s murder when black residents shut themselves up fearing the whites’ displaced revenge. As “they were acting exactly as Negroes and whites both would have expected Negroes to act at such a time,” the blacks’ absence from the town center enables the whites to recognize their power and freedom as opposed to the “patient” blacks who “were still there, they had not fled, you just didn’t see them—a sense a feeling of their constant presence and nearness . . . —but not here, no sense feeling here of a massed adjacence, a dark human presence biding and unseen” (94-95).<sup>2</sup> The “dark human presence” as a homogeneous “mass,” against which the whites define their racial identity, does not exist “here” in reality but only exists “there” in the whites’ imaginary and therefore empty signification. Because of the physical absence of blacks “here,” the whites cannot “sense,” “feel,” or “see” the blacks, whereas “there” in their imagination they can “sense” and “feel” but, significantly, still cannot “see” due to the complete “darkness” that blacks must

signify for the whites to retain their white, “non-black” identity.

Not only the blacks assuming the (self-)assigned role of patient endurers but even Lucas, whose boundary-blurring existence had frustrated the whites, can serve their significatory construction of whiteness when abstracted into a stereotypical “murderous nigger.” Faulkner represents the situation in a richly symbolical description of the Jefferson town square on the following morning:

the men and the women and not one child, the weathered country faces and sunburned necks and backs of hands, the clean faded tieless earthcolored shirts and pants and print cotton dresses thronging the Square and the street as though the stores themselves were closed and locked, not even staring yet at the blank front of the jail and the single barred window which had been empty and silent too for going on forty-eight hours now but just gathering, condensing, not expectant nor in anticipation nor even attentive yet but merely in that preliminary settling down like the before-curtain in a theatre . . . —the same weathered still almost inattentive faces and the same faded clean cotton shirts and pants and dresses but no crowd now waiting for the curtain to rise on a stage’s illusion but rather the one in the courtroom waiting for the sheriff ’s officer to cry Oyez Oyez Oyez This honorable court; not even impatient because the moment had not even come yet to sit in judgment not on Lucas Beauchamp, they had already condemned him but on Beat Four, come not to see what they called justice done nor even retribution exacted but to see that Beat Four should not fail its white man’s high estate. (133-34)

Portraying the white country people amassing for Lucas’s upcoming lynching, Faulkner’s



“theatre” simile highlights how the abstracted “murderous nigger” (which, as “the blank front of the jail,” its “empty and silent” window and the uselessness to “even stare” at these indicate, signifies nothing but a void) enables the onlookers to claim their homogeneous whiteness. In “gathering, condensing,” and “settling down” as a spectator differentiated/distanced from the “stage’s illusion” of blackness (by a “curtain” which the “crowd” expects to remain unraised and keep the dichotomy’s fictiveness from showing), the whites assume “the same” look and enjoy the illusion of a monolithic racial identity despite their actual “absolute lack of trust in one another” (198). Later in the passage Faulkner develops the “theatre” image into that of a “courtroom” which will give a “judgment” not on Lucas’s case (which, with its uniqueness suppressed by the whites who “had already condemned him,” will not even require one) but on Beat Four’s enforcement of lynching. In so doing, the novelist foregrounds the white mass’s desire to finalize its “superior whiteness” through identifying with the bereaved’s violent action which inscribes and describes—i.e., demonstrates and is endorsed by—“white man’s high estate.” The illusory nature of such uniformity exposes itself in Beat Four’s actual difference from other whites, who, deeming Mr. Gowrie “violent foulmouthed godless” (hence Chick’s “amazement” to find him mourning for Vinson: “*Why, he’s grieving*”) and his six sons “lazy idle violent more or less lawless a good deal more than just more or less worthless,” would in fact regard Vinson’s death as “benefit[ing] his community” (158). As for the Beat Four members’ part, too, they “didn’t like most of the things which people from town (and from most of the rest of the county too for that matter) did” (93).<sup>3</sup>

Faulkner’s exploration of the racialized collective behavior in Southern society necessitates that we consider Louis Althusser’s theory of ideology in the essay “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses.” Influenced by Lacan’s study of the working of empty

signification in subjectivity construction, Althusser expounds how ritualistic practices fashion individuals as social subjects. As I have explained above, Lacan's speaker finds his/her identity not by signifying something real for proof but by "evoking," through performative enforcement of empty signification, a fiction that offers an imaginary foundation for selfhood. For Althusser, similarly, while individuals believe that they conduct rituals voluntarily as a signification of their social identity, the rituals themselves do not vouch for a solid identity (which does not really exist outside ideology). Rather, in a circularly performative fashion, *the fact that* they behave ritualistically, thus unwittingly buying into the ideology underlying such rituals, lets the individuals invent their subjectivity in terms of that ideology and define themselves "mistakenly" as those who are autonomously acting on the ideology: "you and I are *always already* subjects, and as such constantly practice the rituals of ideological recognition, which guarantee for us that we are indeed concrete, individual, distinguishable and (naturally) irreplaceable subjects" (Althusser 172-73). Suggesting a continuity between this theory of "interpellation" (i.e., ideology's transformative recruitment of individuals into ideologically defined subject positions) and Faulkner's representation of the Southern racial ideology, the novelist's description of the whites' "ritual" of gathering at the town square to subjectify themselves (as opposed to Lucas as a "murderous nigger" as well as to absent black residents) foregrounds their actual lack of substantial, distinct or independent selfhood due to the totalizing operation of ideology. To become white subjects, the onlookers assume "the same . . . faces" (134), leading them to a "complete relinquishment of individual identity into one We" (135). As part of this de-individuated, identical "We," they are "not faces but a face, not a mass nor even a mosaic of them but a Face: not even ravaging nor ununsatiated but just in motion, insensate, vacant of thought or even passion" (178).

In his particular concern with language in *Intruder in the Dust*, Faulkner demonstrates the interaction between ideology and discourse in the white-supremacist South by pointing out that the reductive function of racialized language prevents whites from thinking (and thus acting) outside the scope of ideology. Highlighting certain aspects of reality while excluding others and also reinforcing itself through repetitious description/inscription processes, racist discourse not only needs just a limited lexical resource but also anesthetizes its users into thinking and speaking comfortably within the limit. Thus, as Faulkner alludes to the interchangeability of white subjects under the racial ideology, Chick hears the same explanation about Lucas's crime and forthcoming lynching three times (at the barbershop, from Mr. Lilley, and then from his uncle Gavin):

“But just suppose——” he said again and now he heard for the third time almost exactly what he had heard twice in twelve hours, and he marvelled again at the paucity, the really almost standardised meagreness not of individual vocabularies but of Vocabulary itself, by means of which even man can live in vast droves and herds even in concrete warrens in comparative amity: even his uncle too. . . . (79)

Frustrated in his attempt to make Gavin imagine the possibility that Lucas did not kill Vinson Gowrie (“Suppose it wasn't his pistol that killed him” [78]), Chick realizes that his uncle does not have a language in which to think of the possibility. By characterizing this impasse as a problem “not of individual vocabularies but of Vocabulary itself,” Faulkner makes the point that it results not from the intellectual inadequacy of white men (Gavin, to the contrary, commands a sophisticated discourse as an educated lawyer) but from their want of the very vehicle for communicating ideologically unorthodox ideas such as the innocence of Lucas, a “black” man, who “was caught within two minutes after the shot, standing over the body with a recently fired

pistol in his pocket” (79). By precluding whites from getting beyond a shared, closed set of conceptual possibilities, the “paucity” of “Vocabulary itself” encourages them to live in the peace and harmony of well-tamed animals, which further benumbs them to the ideological containment: “by means of [the paucity] even man can live in vast droves and herds even in concrete warrens in comparative amity” (79).

As “Vocabulary” (whose capitalized *V* foregrounds the language’s primal function of expressing ideas, whether ideologically correct or not) fails white Southerners, this “paucity” not only hinders independent thinking but also determines their action by denying them a specific language (“vocabulary” with a small *v*) with which to question their ritualized racist practices. On the following night of Lucas’s arrest, Mr. Lilley, a white storekeeper, gives an account of the old man’s fate which is “almost exactly what the man in the barbershop had said this morning” (47). Through Chick’s response to such repetition, Faulkner points out that, with “vocabulary” reduced to the level of cliché, the only language available for a white man to describe Southern race relations not just limits but de-individualizes his thinking and feeling and contains him as an ideologized subject “within his whole type and race and kind”: “he [Chick] remembered his uncle saying once how little of vocabulary man really needed to get comfortably and even efficiently through his life, how not only in the individual but within his whole type and race and kind a few simple clichés served his few simple passions and needs and lusts” (47).

In his focus upon the dichotomizing function of racialized language, Faulkner represents the operation of Southern racial ideology in a way that seems to further modify Althusser’s model. Echoing the Lacanian “Other” with a capital *O*, the father as the imagined authority of identity, Althusser introduces “a Unique, Absolute, *Other Subject*” with a capital *S*, the imagined “center” of subjectivity with whom ideology interpellates individuals into identifying themselves

(178). Thus, for Althusser, ideological subjects shape themselves as the Subject's "*mirrors*, his *reflections*"—such as Christian subjects "made *in the image* of God" (179)—thus becoming a set of de-personalized, indistinctive and replaceable instruments of ideology. On the other hand, as I have demonstrated through discussing the whites' obsessive "niggering" of Lucas as well as their gathering at the town square, Faulkner proposes a somewhat dyadic model of interpellation at work in Southern racial ideology. For people in the novel become racialized subjects, whether "white" or "black," not by identifying themselves with any "Subject" who has self-sufficient racial identity but rather by differentiating themselves from what they should not be; without an absolute authority, "whites" define their racial identity only as "non-black" and vice versa. Faulkner describes such a dualistic mechanism through Gavin's annotation on a ritualistically racialized comment by Mr. Lilley (whose name, punning on "lily-whiteness," signals the fictionality of discursive whiteness since the grocery storeowner, who trades mostly with "Negroes," looks "darker than shadow" [46] when Chick sees him):

"You see?" his uncle said. "He has nothing against what he calls niggers. If you ask him, he will probably tell you he likes them even better than some white folks he knows and he will believe it. . . . All he requires is that they act like niggers. Which is exactly what Lucas is doing: blew his top and murdered a white man—which Mr Lilley is probably convinced all Negroes want to do—and now the white people will take him out and burn him, all regular and in order and themselves acting exactly as he is convinced Lucas would wish them to act: like white folks; both of them observing implicitly the rules: the nigger acting like a nigger and the white folks acting like white folks and no real hard feelings on either side (since Mr Lilley is not a Gowrie) once the fury is over. . . ." (47-48)

Despite his own entrapment in the Southern racist ideology which renders him unable to question the equation of Lucas with “murderous nigger,” Gavin’s commentary illuminates the way ideology, through the channels of racialized discourse and ritualistic practice, interpellates people into “white” or “black” subject positions. Alluding to the empty signification of the “nigger” epithet (the word does not refer to actual human beings but rather tautologically to “what he calls niggers”), Gavin explains that the denomination molds “blacks” into “act[ing] like niggers” and wanting to kill “whites.” Once a murder takes place, the “whites” define their racial identity as opposed to those “niggers” through playing the role of a magisterial punisher; as suggested by Gavin’s telling juxtaposition, acting “like white folks” must always entail acting as they—just like Mr. Lilley—are “convinced [a ‘nigger’] would wish them to act.” All this subjectivity construction occurs in ritualistic practices in which both “whites” and “blacks” participate: in a fashion “all regular and in order,” they “observ[e] implicitly the rules” prescribing what “whites” should do to the “murderous nigger” as well as what “blacks” should expect “whites” to do. Here, significantly, ideological predetermination contains the working of feelings. For the lack of “Vocabulary” allows “no real hard feelings on either side” of ideological subjects outside the preset proceedings of retaliation and patient endurance, nor, just as the “nigger” epithet conceptually necessitates Lucas’s “blow[ing] his top,” does it allow a subject to imagine how individual humans really feel.

Engaging mostly white men in such repetitious discourse of race, Faulkner seems to consider white adult males a major subject of Southern racial ideology as opposed to blacks, women, and children. Ephraim, an old black sage, insinuates that white “menfolks,” bound up with already ideologized “facks” (70), cannot see “truth”—such as the whereabouts of Mrs. Mallison’s ring—which could go “outside the common run”: “If you ever needs to get anything

done outside the common run, dont waste yo time on the menfolks; get the womens and children to working at it” (70). As Carl Dimitri pointedly argues, “If the ‘common run’ implies the established order or the mainstream concerns of the community, then it would follow that white men—or the powerholders—are apparently capable of only working within and affirming the rules established by a thoroughly racist order” (20). Furthermore, Faulkner highlights women’s and children’s relative freedom from ideological control by representing how language, especially “vocabulary” and “Vocabulary,” operates in their discursive activity. As I have illustrated above, Faulkner makes the point that the ideological containment of white male subjects’ “Vocabulary” (capacity for communicating ideas regardless of their ideological correctness) causes a shortage of specific “vocabulary” with which to speak outside the norm. Even a mastery over a certain kind of “vocabulary,” however, does not necessarily liberate one from ideological constraint, as demonstrated by Gavin’s self-deceptive grandiloquence which serves to defend the status quo. Conversely, as the sixteen-year-old Chick’s questioning of ideologized social practices suggests, a small lexical resource does not always mean a lack of “Vocabulary.”

Faulkner points this out also through a conversation between Chick and Miss Habersham, whom he carefully characterizes as “a kinless spinster of seventy” living “on the edge of town” (75) to indicate her marginalization from the white-male-dominant social system. Chick’s small “vocabulary” causes him difficulty in verbalizing the idea of “go[ing] out there and dig[ging] him [Vinson Gowrie] up and bring[ing] him to town where somebody that knows bullet holes can look at the bullet hole in him” (88). However, though communicated “badly,” Chick’s explanation is “explicit and succinct” enough to move Miss Habersham to challenge the town’s accusation of Lucas (88-89). As he listens to her rumination of the idea, Chick notices that,

unlike adult males' lack of "Vocabulary," her lack of "vocabulary" (which obliges her to "repeat" and "paraphrase" Chick's sentence) does not prevent her from thinking outside the racist society's assumption of "murderous nigger":

"Yes," Miss Habersham said. "Of course. Naturally he [Lucas] wouldn't tell your uncle. He's a Negro and your uncle's a man:" and now Miss Habersham in her turn repeating and paraphrasing and he thought how it was not really a paucity a meagerness of vocabulary, it was in the first place because the deliberate violent blotting out obliteration of a human life was itself so simple and so final that the verbiage which surrounded it enclosed it insulated it intact into the chronicle of man had of necessity to be simple and uncomplex too, repetitive, almost monotonous even; and in the second place, vaster than that, adumbrating that, because what Miss Habersham paraphrased was simple truth, not even fact and so there was not needed a great deal of diversification and originality to express it because truth was universal, it had to be universal to be truth and so there didn't need to be a great deal of it just to keep running something no bigger than one earth and so anybody could know truth; all they had to do was just to pause, just to stop, just to wait: "Lucas knew it would take a child—or an old woman like me: someone not concerned with probability, with evidence. Men like your uncle and Mr Hampton have had to be men too long, busy too long.—Yes?" she said.

(88)

Miss Habersham's "repeating and paraphrasing" of the idea of reinvestigation, enabling her to think against the grain of racist ideology, show Chick that "it was not really a paucity a meagerness of vocabulary" that had caused Lucas's false arrest. Indeed, despite its mostly



monosyllabic diction which lacks “diversification and originality,” the repeated sentence (“Go out there . . .”) claims its substantial “Vocabulary” by expressing the “universal” truth about the fallibility of “facts” (which, as Ephraim intimates, depend on the observer’s preconception), “probability” (predicated upon an assumption of regular course of events), and “evidence” (which entails an interpretation to be “evidenced”).<sup>4</sup> Unlike “a child—or an old woman” whose peripheral social position makes it possible “just to pause, just to stop, just to wait,” white men are “busy too long” with ideologically formulated rituals. In the discursive practice of such white male subjects, the want of the “Vocabulary” with which to defy the ideological orthodoxy reduces “a human life” of Lucas to an abstracted “nigger” and thus, by encouraging violent racism, causes physical destruction through “the deliberate violent blotting out obliteration of a human life” as in lynching. Because this whole process predicates itself upon “so simple and so final” a reductive ordering of in fact chaotic realities, “the verbiage” in which white male Southerners like Gavin justify their dominance does not grant them “Vocabulary” to signify complex realities with but rather remains “simple and uncomplex too, repetitive, almost monotonous even.”

As Faulkner critiques the ideologized language of the South in *Intruder in the Dust*, Lucas’s silence, which Keith Clark criticizes as the author’s “devoic[ing] [of] his ‘strong’ black protagonist” (78), rather indicates a disruption of the reductive categories of the “black” and the “nigger” when it helps him evade responding to (i.e., “assuming” or “refusing”) these epithets.<sup>5</sup> Even when he does talk, Lucas’s reticent words, such as the above-discussed remark that “I aint a Edmonds. . . . I’m a McCaslin” (19), work to defy the racializing function of the language. Tellingly, when the situation forces him to adopt a racially hierarchizing language, Lucas does so in such a way that he “said ‘sir’ and ‘mister’ to you if you were white but . . . you knew [he] was

thinking neither and he knew you knew it” (18); thus exposing to the whites the emptiness of the honorific signifiers and the fictiveness of the “niggerish servility” which supposedly underlies their usage. On the whites’ part too, in a somewhat different way, silence—in tandem with “Vocabulary”—can help liberate individuals if it provides a receptive space for ideologically unorthodox discourse. Thus, whereas white male adults resort to filling in Lucas’s frustrating silence with the “murderous nigger” stereotype (as Gavin scolds him in jail, “if you just said mister to white people and said it like you meant it, you might not be sitting here now” [60]), Chick’s capacity to “hear the mute unhoping urgency of [Lucas’s] eyes” (67) and accept his account against the ideological grain leads eventually to the old man’s release. Symbolically, in accepting Lucas’s rescuing “voice,” the drowning twelve-year-old Chick unconsciously overcomes his already learned sense of racial difference which would have forbidden him to get help from a “nigger”: “it didn’t matter whose [voice it was]” (6). In contrast, the white boy later resents the same “voice” which—saying, “Pick up his money . . . Give it to him” (16)—refuses the money he offers for a dinner at Lucas’s house. Back under the influence of racist ideology, Chick cannot listen to the “voice” that hinders his ritualistic self-subjectification as a “superior white.” According to Chick’s ideologized sense of “honor,” as Erik Dussere cogently argues, “having been given the gift of Lucas’s hospitality, [Chick] is now metaphorically in the position of social inferior to a ‘nigger’” (46).

While illuminating the liberating potential of silence and “Vocabulary,” Faulkner takes pains to represent a paradoxical dilemma whites must face in developing a discursive resistance into a real one. For, in the 1930s Southern society of Yoknapatawpha, to act on one’s own requires white adult citizenship accompanied by ideological subjectification especially for males. Faulkner strategically portrays Chick as “going on seventeen years old and almost a man” and

yet “sitting there [in Sheriff Hampton’s car] like a spanked child” (186) and thus places him in between boyhood naïveté and adult indoctrination, so that the white male protagonist not only manages to think outside the ideological norm to save Lucas but also has to face his own powerlessness in challenging adults’ persistent racism as well as to struggle with the temptation to succumb to ideology’s interpellation and himself become a subject. Discerning but unauthorized, Chick needs Gavin’s intervention (and, in Gavin’s logic, Miss Habersham’s supervision) to convince Sheriff Hampton of the need to reinvestigate Lucas’s case: “‘You aint listening just to two sixteen-year-old children,’ his uncle said [to the sheriff]. ‘I remind you that Miss Habersham was there’” (107). Likewise, Chick’s designation as Lucas’s vindicator results not from the former’s fully autonomous individuality as “himself, Charles Mallison junior” nor from the white youth’s ideologically charged desire to offset his shameful indebtedness to a “nigger” (for having “eaten the plate of greens and warmed himself at the fire” [67] when the old man rescued him from drowning) but from the fact that Chick’s adolescent apprenticeship to his lawyer uncle “with some similitude of responsibility even if not actually of necessity” (21) makes him available (hence Lucas’s initial request: “You, young man. . . .Tell your uncle I wants to see him” [44]) and unique in his attentiveness among “all the white people Lucas would have a chance to speak to”:

[Chick] saw, heard Lucas saying something to him not because he was himself, Charles Mallison junior, nor because he had eaten the plate of greens and warmed himself at the fire, but because he alone of all the white people Lucas would have a chance to speak to between now and the moment when he might be dragged out of the cell and down the steps at the end of a rope, would hear the mute unhoping urgency of the eyes. (67)

Faulkner dramatizes the tension between the emancipatory potential of and the ideological pressure due to Chick's adolescence when the character, willing to help Lucas but lacking the necessary resources available only to adults, gets overwhelmed by the difficulty expected in digging out Vinson Gowrie's body for reexamination. In his imaginary conversation with Lucas, Chick cannot help but subjectify himself as a "superior white" to suppress his frustration as a powerless minor. In so doing, with all his scrupulous reading of Lucas's reticence earlier in jail, Chick fills in the old man's absent and thus silent body with his wishful invention—echoing adult white male Southerners' imposition of stereotypical qualities upon silenced blacks in defining themselves as opposite to the "niggers." With no convincing excuse at hand for asking an adult—whether it be Gavin, Mr. Mallison, or Miss Habersham—for an automobile (81), Chick finds himself "thinking seeing hearing himself trying to explain that to Lucas too":

*We have to use the horse. We cant help it:* and Lucas:

*You could have axed him for the car:* and he:

*He would have refused. Dont you understand? He wouldn't only have refused, he would have locked me up where I couldn't even have walked out there, let alone had a horse:* and Lucas:

*All right, all right. I aint criticising you. After all, it aint you them Gowries is fixing to set afire. . . . (83)*

Bakhtin's theory of dialogic discourse helps us examine this passage. According to Bakhtin's analysis of the relationship between language and ideology, one's language receives deep-rooted influence from someone else's discourse, which makes the language heterogeneous as well as "socio-ideological":

As a living, socio-ideological concrete thing, as heteroglot opinion, language, for the individual consciousness, lies on the borderline between oneself and the other. . . .Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker's intentions; it is populated—overpopulated—with the intentions of others. Expropriating it, forcing it to submit to one's own intentions and accents, is a difficult and complicated process. (293-94)

As exemplified by the white men's identical commentaries on Lucas's impending lynching which Chick hears three times in twelve hours, language does not serve as a "neutral medium" for free communication of independent ideas; it is rather "populated—overpopulated—with the intentions of others" already subjected to the dominant ideology. A speaker, Bakhtin acknowledges, has to follow "a difficult and complicated process" to transform such an ideologically charged language into "private property."

Significantly, Faulkner fashions the above-quoted interior dialogue by Chick in a way that adjusts Bakhtin's theory to accommodate the dyadic working of Southern racial ideology—just as the novelist's representation dualizes Althusser's monistic model of interpellation to depict the situation where "whites" construct their subjectivity as opposed to "blacks" and vice versa. While "privatization" and "appropriation" (293) of someone else's language can promote liberation from the dominant ideology, Bakhtin's nuanced diction suggests the possibility that this very act could rely upon the speaker's own ideologically endorsed dominance; much more so if one is filling in someone else's "silence" and thereby monopolizing the discursive arena. Imaginatively constructing Lucas's verbal response, Chick's interior dialogue betrays his unwitting but highly ideologized cooption of the "black" man's silence, as it reflects the "white" youth's concern, anxiety, and eventual settlement of such inner conflicts

through subjectifying himself as opposed to the racialized “someone else.” Echoing the Bakhtinian paradigm, Chick has difficulty repelling from the imaginary conversation Lucas’s possible “intention” to complain about the minor’s incompetence in launching a reinvestigation: “*You could have axed him for the car.*” Betraying his dilemma caused by young age, Chick’s excusatory response predicates itself upon his sense of ineffectiveness against an authoritative male adult—whether his father or uncle—who not only denies Chick an empowering car but also inhibits the youth’s intellectual and physical freedom: “*He wouldn’t only have refused, he would have locked me up where I couldn’t even have walked out there, let alone had a horse.*” Chick overcomes his frustration in the white-adult-male-dominant society only when he *at once* subjects himself to the racial ideology through differentiating himself from the “black” Lucas (who, in Chick’s imagination, admits that “*it aint you*”); privatizes Lucas’s discourse by filling in his silence with ideologically correct contents (the “black” man’s patient acquiescence to lynching); *and* constructs an imaginary Lucas who, through forgiving the conflict-ridden Chick, helps the adolescent become a coherent “white” subject: “*I aint criticising you. After all, it aint you them Gowries is fixing to set afire.*” Though in this *interior* dialogue the actually silent Chick tries to listen to the silenced Lucas, he cannot help basing this potentially liberating activity upon his ideological/epistemological subjectivity as a white.<sup>6</sup> Through the dilemma Chick encounters as an “in-between” white male adolescent, Faulkner demonstrates the difficulty of developing discursive freedom into substantial resistance and of avoiding the constant and penetrative working of ideological recruitment.

White male adults serve as a major instrument of Southern racial ideology in Faulkner’s observation; thus Chick’s burgeoning sense of white manhood subtly dissuades him from acting outside ideological normality. There are other, feminine influences, however, whose liberating

marginality to male authority and its rational, hierarchical ordering helps encourage Chick in his attempt to help Lucas. Whereas Chick cannot help but imagine himself begging for a car from his uncle or his "*Pop*" (81) (who, as the "he" in Chick's interior dialogue with Lucas, denies the youth access to the potentially subversive means), Miss Habersham's alienation from white male power relations spares Chick such an imaginary encounter with the interdicting authority: "not Miss Habersham; he never thought of her again. He just remembered a motor vehicle sitting empty and apparently unwatched on the street not fifty yards away" (81). On the contrary, just as her "*Vocabulary*" impresses Chick with its attentiveness to ideologically unorthodox "truth," Miss Habersham's voluntary offer of her truck and other tools, along with her inclusion of the adolescent into a nonhierarchical, cooperative "we," surprises him with its departure from the ideologically correct course of events: "[Miss Habersham] saying, already turning: 'We'll need a pick and shovel. I've got a flashlight in the truck—' . . . 'We?' he said" (88).

Faulkner also characterizes Mrs. Mallison, Chick's mother, in terms that elude logical ordering. In her universal "motherhood" which, as Gavin notes, "doesn't seem to have any pigment in its skin" (121), Mrs. Mallison vehemently opposes Chick's growth into self-help—e.g., "button[ing] his own buttons and wash[ing] behind his ears" (34)—as well as his initiation into riskily competitive sports such as football, shooting, and hunting on horseback (121-23) and into the world of the racist South. (She rebukes Chick for using the word "nigger" as she keeps him away from the town center on the night of Lucas's arrest [31-32].) The "long-worn verbiage of wailing" (123) she resorts to—echoing Julia Kristeva's "semiotic" language which, originating from the pre-Oedipal mother-child oneness, transcends "the dominant symbolization systems" of the symbolic order (Kristeva 30)—contrasts markedly with the male version of "verbiage" (88) which, unlike Miss Habersham's plain but effective

“Vocabulary,” serves to restrict the speaker’s thinking to that of racist orthodoxy. In tandem with her cry which defies logical reasoning, Mrs. Mallison’s overtly inconsistent actions such as her resilient enthusiasm for what she had fiercely resented—including Chick’s ballgame, riding, and involvement in Lucas’s case—place her outside the Southern ideological framework predicated upon the “battlefield”-like binary between the “defeater” and the “defeated”: Gavin and Chick realize through Mrs. Mallison “how you not only couldn’t beat them [women], you couldn’t even find the battlefield in time to admit defeat before they had moved it again” (121).<sup>7</sup> Faulkner presents these “feminine” attributes as enabling spontaneous action. Contradicting the “agreement” she herself had forced Gavin into, Mrs. Mallison serves coffee to her not-old-enough son (125) and symbolically encourages him to grow up and confront the world dominated by adult white males. Though Chick’s incomplete adulthood obliges him to thin the coffee with “hot milk” (126) indicative of the permeating female influence upon the youth, it does help him stay awake to rescue Lucas: “But at least he was awake. The coffee had accomplished that anyway” (131). Significantly, Mrs. Mallison’s offer invites a negative reaction from Mr. Mallison who, saturated with the sense of hierarchy between white adults, white children, and “darkies,” trivializes Chick’s potentially disruptive enterprise by “reducing it to the terms of a kind of kindergarten witchhunt” (130) and by facetiously asking the son if each grave-robbler acted out his/her ideologically assigned role:

asking him just how scared Aleck Sander was and if he wasn’t even scareder than Aleck Sander only his vanity wouldn’t allow him to show it before a darky and to tell the truth now, neither of them would have touched the grave in the dark even enough to lift the flowers off of it if Miss Habersham hadn’t driven them at it.  
(127)



Faulkner's strategy of scrupulously depicting the tension between both sides of the Southern racial scene—i.e., between possibilities of resistance and the formidable ideological status quo—continues into the final chapter with a sketch of the unaffected Jefferson square on the first Saturday after Lucas's successful exculpation: "that Saturday and Sunday and Monday only a week past yet which might never have been since nothing of them remained" (231). Faulkner suggests the same tension as he ends the novel with Lucas's demand of a receipt—an act that has struck most scholars as the old man's pointed resistance.<sup>8</sup> For instance, in Noel Polk's reading the request shows Lucas's firm distrust of Gavin in "a symbolic way of protecting himself" (Polk 143). For Neil Schmitz, Lucas's action, in "out-patronizing Stevens, out-ironizing him," turns the table on whites and reveals "Lucas's racism [which claims] white folks lie, cheat, break their promises" (259). Faulkner's highly tactical representation, however, shows how Southern racial ideology, which has endangered Lucas's life throughout the book, still works to contain the released old man with all his subversive potential. Gavin's description of the legal process reveals that Lucas's discharge has involved normalizing "in such a way that Mr Hampton could get enough sense out of it" all the ideologically aberrant parts of Lucas's account which frustrated Gavin so much that "the more I tried it the worse it got and the worse it got the worse I got until when I came to again my fountain pen was sticking up on its point in the floor down here like an arrow" (239). Also, as it turns out, Lucas's acquittal results as much from the vocal lawyer's discursive power endorsed by "the county" as from Chick's unconventional action which Gavin playfully forbids to be rewarded because of the "minor"'s out-of-place "practicing [of] law without a license" (238): about what Lucas could pay back for his release, Gavin explains that "Of course the paper belongs to the county but the fountain pen was mine and it cost me two dollars to have a new point put in it" (239). Faulkner makes his point through

a subtle symbolism when Lucas pays the two dollars first in a dollar bill, a half dollar, four dimes and two nickels and then, upon second thoughts, replaces the half dollar with “four bits in pennies” (240). Despite his meticulous management of coins, whose puzzling eccentricity prompts a page-long “defamiliarized” description, Lucas ironically accedes to a form of acknowledgment, the receipt, that suppresses the complexity of his action by documenting only the two-dollar payment and *not* the specific means by which he has paid that amount. Faulkner pushes the symbolism further by making Lucas, through a mirror image, physically face an embodiment of hierarchical ordering (“the purse [that] had at least two different compartments and maybe more” [240]). Somewhat echoing Althusserian ideological subjects who fashion themselves as the Subject’s “*mirrors, his reflections*” (179), Lucas’s effort to buy himself out of the ideologically defined “dependent nigger” category paradoxically involves looking at himself reflected in an “ordering” mirror: “Lucas stood looking down into it [the purse] exactly as you would look down at your reflection in a well” (240). Thus, while Lucas’s request of “My receipt” (241) can demonstrate the old man’s discursive ability to exploit Gavin’s jesting role-play (“This is business” [240]), in responding to Gavin’s remark Lucas at the same time “assumes” the white man’s subtle “evocation” of a racialized hierarchical relationship where, just as the twelve-year-old Chick had insisted (16), the “black” Lucas has to be “the one to count them [coins]” (240).

*Intruder in the Dust* dramatizes the interaction between Southern racist ideology and the racialized language of the South. Through his description of white Southerners’ ideologically ritualized response to an alleged race murder, Faulkner makes the point that, in reducing the chaotic complexity of realities to simple notions, the racially clichéd discourse of the South denies people a language in which to think or act outside the scope of ideology. In contrast with

the talkative white males who have “vocabulary” but not “Vocabulary,” Lucas’s silence, Miss Habersham’s attentiveness to “truth” with her “Vocabulary,” and Chick’s willingness to listen to the discursively oppressed show a certain potential for escaping the control of ideologized discourse. At the same time, Faulkner’s careful description of how the racist regime works subtly to hinder or even incorporate potentially subversive thoughts and actions suggests a predicament at a broader, literary-artistic level. As Toni Morrison elucidates in her *Playing in the Dark*, regardless of their attitudes toward the racial ideology, white writers’ narrative conceptualization of the silenced African American body has necessarily entailed a certain ideological framing. Written in the racially charged mid-twentieth-century South, *Intruder in the Dust* shows the novelist’s keen struggle to write against the linguistic-ideological grain. Not only does he adopt lengthy and convoluted run-on sentences to complicate the differentiating operation of the language, Faulkner also scrupulously depicts the problematics of the racist society which may even have extended to contain his own writing.

## Chapter 3

### Narrative Order and Racial Hierarchy:

James Weldon Johnson's Double-Consciousness and "White" Subjectivity

in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* and *Along This Way*

As indicated by its self-explanatory title, Johnson's 1912 novel *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* sets as a given the protagonist's racial movement from "colored" to "passing for white." As Samira Kawash points out, however, such a binary reading of fake whiteness versus true blackness would only "repeat the cultural logic of race and passing" which the text actually refutes:

The narrative itself works against the simple "black passing for white" logic of passing . . . and its attendant model of race as the expression of a prior, embodied identity. Although the narrator claims to be "really black," the terms of blackness and whiteness as they emerge in the narrative belie the possibility of identity or authenticity that would allow the narrator to *be* black *or* white. As the novel unfolds, Ex-Coloured Man's relation to blackness is shown to be as inauthentic as his relation to whiteness; rather than being "both black and white," he is in fact neither black nor white. (70)

This "cultural logic" derives from the white-dominant culture of the U.S., as it has helped to order the boundless diversity of human beings into a hierarchy with "whites" on top.<sup>1</sup> Kawash reveals how this logic operates in the Ex-Colored Man's narrative to reduce his endlessly unclassifiable white body to the dichotomized model of "black passing for white."<sup>2</sup> One may, however, rightly note her careful diction for what exposes such reduction in *The Autobiography*.

For, in the above passage and elsewhere, Kawash writes so that “the narrative” itself—not Johnson—resists the binary framework, thus leaving the author’s involvement unclear.

Indeed, critics have yet to elucidate Johnson’s own position adequately,<sup>3</sup> not only because of the long-lasting influence of New Critical “intentional fallacy”<sup>4</sup> but also because of the novel’s own ambiguity. On one hand, as Kawash shows, Johnson’s text implicitly disproves the Ex-Colored Man’s culturally predicated notion of racial passing. On the other hand, by making his character-narrator end up bitterly regretful of living as white, the author seems to advocate African American identity and thus betray his own failure to recognize the actual instability of that very passing. The uncertain distance between the author and the narrator also adds to the difficulty. As Donald C. Goellnicht notes, Johnson’s critical inquiry of white-supremacist society uses the Ex-Colored Man as his mouthpiece *and* a negative example: “The narrator is frequently self-consciously ironic in his treatment of significant issues concerning himself and his race, and thus appears to be a subject of considerable self-knowledge; but at other times he is blind to the narrowness and bigotry of his own perspective and thus becomes the object of Johnson’s, and our, ironic gaze” (116). Furthermore, as Johnson’s novelistic writing coincides with the Ex-Colored Man’s autobiographical narrative, it is not easy to isolate the two and identify what the narrator’s limited understanding of race means about the author’s own attitude toward it. This overlapping even bothered Johnson himself. He ended up repeatedly claiming his difference from the fictional narrator—first through Carl Van Vechten’s explanatory introduction to the novel’s 1927 republication and, when it failed to convince readers fully “that the story was not the story of my life” (*Along* 239), then in his own 1933 autobiography, *Along This Way*.

This chapter attempts to reveal Johnson’s creative strategies behind *The Autobiography*’s problematization of racial passing vis-à-vis the complex author-narrator relationship—strategies

which even affected the autobiographical *Along This Way*. As I demonstrate in the first section, Johnson's configuration of *The Autobiography* shows that, in order to investigate and critique the dominant "cultural logic" of passing, he must apply and even embody that logic within his writing, as reductive and white-oriented as it is. Johnson uses the Ex-Colored Man's endlessly indeterminate white body to expose the fictiveness of race, but that very indeterminacy, if engaged as it is, would undermine the whole novel which draws plausibility, coherence, development and dramatization from the character-narrator's belief of his part-blackness. Hence comes Johnson's paradoxical reintroduction of the conventional racial logic, indicating not only his narrative application of but also accommodation to white subjectivity. For his "national, largely white readership" "expecting a pleasant excursion into black life as local color" (Andrews xvi) necessarily requires the white-looking protagonist's stable black identity and resulting difference/distance from itself.

Johnson's simultaneous challenge and recourse to the ideologically loaded framework of racial passing also accounts for the overlapping of his writing with the Ex-Colored Man's narrative. Through this device, Johnson subtly shifts to the narrator the responsibility for drawing upon the white-derived paradigm he has to critique. As I will argue below, Johnson does so by repeatedly foregrounding the Ex-Colored Man's absorption of whites' viewpoint in the form of "double consciousness"—a term defined by W. E. B. Du Bois as the "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (2).<sup>5</sup> In such moments, Johnson turns the narrator into "the object of Johnson's, and our, ironic gaze" (Goellnicht 116) to camouflage his own "double-conscious" conformity to white audience's expectations. And, as Goellnicht's apt diction indicates, this operation places "us" readers in a subject position from which to "gaze" critically at the

“objectified” narrator. The subjectivity thus activated is *white* subjectivity, since its indictment of the Ex-Colored Man’s lack of black pride results from reading his white body as “black passing for white” according to the cultural logic. Thus implicated in the Ex-Colored Man’s in fact unstable passing position and convinced by the plot that revolves around this fictively stabilized identity, the readers of *The Autobiography*—whether themselves white or not—incline themselves to overlook the text’s actual problems such as the one illuminated by Kawash.<sup>6</sup>

The second part of this chapter focuses on Johnson’s own autobiography, *Along This Way*, demonstrating his continued dependence upon the white-derived structure of racial and textual order. By claiming to be an autobiography written by “an ex-colored man,” *The Autobiography* exploits the falsifiability of a text’s source. And the resulting destabilization of the very notion of autobiographical self opens up an endless uncertainty that could nullify *Along This Way*’s claim of authentic black autobiography. Here, genre and authorship are not a text’s intrinsic identity but only its interpretive effect—just as neither whiteness nor passing-whiteness inhere in a white body. Amid this categorical chaos, Johnson repeatedly draws on white-oriented rhetorical devices—whether they be white personae or “double-conscious” storytelling—to stabilize *The Autobiography*’s fictionality (against which to define *Along This Way* as real autobiography). The thus reestablished binary difference between the two texts’ genres provides *Along This Way* with an apparent logical flow and, by doing so, helps convince the reader of the difference between Johnson’s autobiographical black self and the white-looking, passing and fictional Ex-Colored Man. At the same time, I will go on to argue, since *Along This Way* defines Johnson’s racial integrity through his ability to scrutinize and confront the white-dominant America, the narrative’s actual reliance on white subjectivity paradoxically compromises his black selfhood.

To make *The Autobiography* a legitimate passing narrative, Johnson puts the protagonist's actually unstable race under multiple discursive containments—such as the name “Ex-Colored Man”—until it becomes the clear-cut identity of “black passing for white.” Indeed, to co-opt the reader into uncritically believing the character-narrator's passing, the very first chapter begins with a confessional reference to his racial “deception”: “I know that in writing the following pages I am divulging the great secret of my life” (1). And the thus solidified passing identity helps structure a coherent, plausible and dramatic story by making available the prototypical plot factors of passing or mixed-race narrative—e.g., the protagonist's move out of his birthplace due to the white father's intra-racial marriage (3-4, 30), his subsequent return because of “[t]he peculiar fascination which the South held over my imagination” (36), his aspiration to become “a colored composer” who incorporates “all the joys and sorrows, the hopes and ambitions, of the American Negro, in classic musical form” (108), and his eventual failure as he ends up living as white in the North.<sup>7</sup>

At the same time, Johnson's critical scrutiny of racial passing even confounds the narrator's self-definition. For example, toward the end of the novel, the Ex-Colored Man cannot help wondering if he is really part-black:

It is difficult for me to analyze my feelings concerning my present position in the world. Sometimes it seems to me that I have never really been a Negro, that I have been only a privileged spectator of their inner life; at other times I feel that I have been a coward, a deserter, and I am possessed by a strange longing for my mother's people. (153)

The Ex-Colored Man's occasional feeling that “I have never really been a Negro” betrays how the “black passing for white” model cannot really frame his existence. This racial uncertainty



threatens to disrupt the narrative's structure, purpose and operation. For, quite opposite to the 1912 edition's preface which promises to illuminate black subjectivity by "giv[ing] a view of the inner life of the Negro in America" (*The Autobiography* xxxiv), if the Ex-Colored Man has "never really been a Negro" then the whole narrative would be just another white-biased look at blacks. In other words, the narrator would not qualify as an authentic "ex-colored autobiographer" but "only a privileged spectator of their inner life"—very much like the novel's white audience to whom the preface promises "an elevation where he can catch a bird's-eye view" (xxxiv). As the questionability of the Ex-Colored Man's part-blackness undermines the narrative framework, the passage's rhetoric itself is rife with illogical "feelings" (which are "difficult to analyze"), uncertainty ("it seems to me that . . .") and inconsistency ("sometimes . . . at other times"). And this logical instability in turn foregrounds the instability of his race. Instead of knowing his part-blackness for sure, the Ex-Colored Man "feels" that "a strange longing" has "possessed" him to pursue the black identity.

As these examples show, in *The Autobiography* the stability of "black passing for white" identity secures that of the narrative itself and vice versa. Conversely, once the ultimate indeterminacy of the white/passing-white difference returns to the surface, the whole narrative suffers from a weakened control over its logic and structure.

As I have proposed above, to prevent racial uncertainty from undermining the work, Johnson reactivates white subjectivity and its "cultural logic" under the guise of the Ex-Colored Man's "double consciousness." Thus, when the narrative detects a "passer" in a group of whites and accordingly reintroduces the difference between white and passing-white, it also registers the narrator's application of whites' viewpoint. For example, as a boy the Ex-Colored Man notices his mother's "almost brown" skin and "differ[ence] . . . from the other ladies" (12) exactly when

his newly acquired self-consciousness as “colored” begins to frame his mental activity in the “dominant,” “all-pervading” white supremacy: “From that time I looked out through other eyes, my thoughts were colored, my words dictated, my actions limited by one dominating, all-pervading idea . . .” (14). Likewise, when informing his future wife of his “passing,” the Ex-Colored Man feels as if it was the white woman’s gaze that “object”-ified and “black”-ened him: “she was gazing at me with a wild, fixed stare as though I was some object she had never seen. Under the strange light in her eyes I felt that I was growing black and thick-featured and crimp-haired” (149).

Thus, in the Ex-Colored Man’s narrative space, white subjectivity stabilizes racial passing by turning it into a discernible entity. And Johnson subtly invites his readers to see it the same way. Indeed, the foregrounded double consciousness of the Ex-Colored Man—itsself predicated upon the assumption of his “black passing for white” identity—serves to place the readers in a white subject position from which to judge his racial “desertion.” Furthermore, given the narrative setting that blurs the lines between the narrator’s storytelling and the novelist’s writing and between the Ex-Colored Man’s narratee and Johnson’s reader, Johnson designs the narrator’s white-oriented perspective to appeal to his own white-dominant audience, especially in its expectation of a rational, well-organized and entertaining passing narrative structured tightly around the “cultural logic” of race.<sup>8</sup>

Johnson’s assumption of—and covert accommodation to—such an audience expectation is suggested by the narrative’s repeated reference to the readers’ possible response. For instance, in Chapter IX on the Ex-Colored Man’s European trip with the white “millionaire friend,” Johnson foregrounds the character-narrator’s entertainment of his white patron and of his white narratee so that the author’s own white-audience consciousness will not show as such:

I played for the guests at all of them [the millionaire's parties] with an effect which to relate would be but a tiresome repetition to the reader. I played not only for the guests, but continued, as I used to do in New York, to play often for the host when he was alone. This man of the world, who grew weary of everything and was always searching for something new, appeared never to grow tired of my music; he seemed to take it as a drug. He fell into a habit which caused me no little annoyance; sometimes he would come in during the early hours of the morning and, finding me in bed asleep, would wake me up and ask me to play something. This, so far as I can remember, was my only hardship during my whole stay with him in Europe. (95-96)

Here, to disguise as the Ex-Colored Man's his own double-conscious consideration for the white audience, Johnson activates a narrative counterpart of the character's subordination to the white patron and thus holds the character-narrator accountable for cutting out the piano performance's "effect." While "the reader" to whom "to relate [the effect] would be but a tiresome repetition" can be Johnson's real-life audience as well as the Ex-Colored Man's narratee, the passage's language silences the former possibility by foregrounding the parallel between the Ex-Colored Man's accommodation to whites' desire as a character and as a narrator. Indeed, as the shared diction of boredom ("tiresome," "weary" and "tired") connects the two dimensions, the passage's avoidance of "repetition" strikes the reader as a logical consequence of the narrator's within-story subservience to whites exemplified by his disruption of life routine to offer the white patron "something new." Similarly, as Johnson elaborates the last sentence of the quotation, the Ex-Colored Man restrains his account in a way that shows his scrupulous consideration for white audience both within and of the narrative. According to the sentence's logic, the minimal

description of the “hardship,” which would help avoid villainizing the white inflictor as well as antagonizing the white reader, results not from the power they have over the character-narrator but from his own limited memory.

Johnson’s assumption of and consideration for an impatient audience that expects straightforward narration show through his character-narrator also at the end of the European plot. To keep the chapter compact, the author has the Ex-Colored Man explain that, despite the millionaire’s “peculiar and striking character” which could be entertaining, he refrains from dwelling upon it. Taking “several chapters,” a full account would not only “tire the reader” but also stray from “my narration” and disturb the story’s order: “My affection for him was so strong, my recollections of him are so distinct, he was such a peculiar and striking character, that I could easily fill several chapters with reminiscences of him; but for fear of tiring the reader I shall go on with my narration” (108).<sup>9</sup>

As I have proposed, Johnson’s (though disguised as the Ex-Colored Man’s) double-conscious recourse to white subjectivity helps him stabilize the character-narrator’s passing-whiteness and, accordingly, reorder the narrative itself. And the reinforced narrative structure in turn invites us readers to follow the text’s logic without questioning its validity. This is exemplified in Chapter IV. Here, set in what he calls the “strange city” of Atlanta, no one can tell the Ex-Colored Man’s race, so his white body assumes more categorical indeterminacy than ever before. Accordingly, the narrative foregrounds the Ex-Colored Man’s white body when the Pullman porter tells him, “they wouldn’t know you from white” (41). Also, when the company of this black friend is likely to cause the weary repetition of eating at dirty places “where a colored man could get a meal” (41), the narrator’s language resembles that of the impatient white audience he has in mind: “For the instant his friendship bored and embarrassed me. I had visions

of another meal in the greasy restaurant of the day before” (42). This heightened indeterminacy of race also affects the narrative level. In tandem with the blurring of racial boundaries, for instance, the narrative loses its control of chronological order. Indeed, Johnson leaves time-markers throughout the narrative by, for example, making his scrupulous character-narrator mention his birth year (2) as well as specify his age (23).<sup>10</sup> But, in this chapter, the character-narrator “somehow mixed my dates” and nearly misses the opening day of Atlanta University (42).

To contain this racio-narrative instability and bring the Atlanta chapter to a sound conclusion, Johnson foregrounds the character-narrator’s self-definition as black, thus accommodating the white audience’s expectation of racial difference as well as plausible plot development. The day after his arrival at Atlanta University, the Ex-Colored Man loses his \$400 school funding:

After thinking for a while as best I could, I wisely decided to go at once back to the University and lay my troubles before the president. I rushed breathlessly back to the school. As I neared the grounds, the thought came across me, would not my story sound fishy? Would it not place me in the position of an impostor or beggar? What right had I to worry these busy people with the results of my carelessness? If the money could not be recovered, and I doubted that it could, what good would it do to tell them about it? The shame and embarrassment which the whole situation gave me caused me to stop at the gate. I paused, undecided, for a moment; then turned and slowly retraced my steps, and so changed the whole course of my life.

If the reader has never been in a strange city without money or friends, it is

useless to try to describe what my feelings were; he could not understand. If he has been, it is equally useless, for he understands more than words could convey.

(45)

When the Ex-Colored Man “turned and slowly retraced my steps, and so changed the whole course of my life,” the narrative reads his swerved “course” on two different levels—namely, the course of his steps within the story and the course of his life which corresponds with plot development. This signals the continuity between the Ex-Colored Man’s double consciousness as a character-narrator and Johnson’s own as an author, with the white president of Atlanta University (whom the Ex-Colored Man is to tell “my story” about the stolen money) as a within-text counterpart of the novel’s reader. Here the Ex-Colored Man as a character-narrator absorbs the white-dominant racial ideology and defines himself as opposed to the white president—a “busy” white audience whom he does not want to bother “with the results of my carelessness.” By “chang[ing] the whole course of my life,” this white-oriented discourse dissuades the Ex-Colored Man from reentering into the white sphere—as indicated by the fact that the gate he “stop[s] at” to turn back is the same gate that he had walked through before, leaving the visually black Pullman porter (43).

The reestablished racial boundary in turn helps re-stabilize the narrative structure, thus discouraging us readers from reading against the grain and questioning the Ex-Colored Man’s “black passing for white” identity. For example, the foregrounded blackness of the Ex-Colored Man makes a slave-narrative technique—namely, that of making a point through emotionality and indescribability<sup>11</sup>—available for Johnson to overturn the character’s “wisely” and “best” thought-out decision to tell the president the true story. According to the second paragraph of the quotation, the “feelings” that have changed the Ex-Colored Man’s mind defy “words” and the

logical reasoning those words had produced. Through this rhetoric, Johnson not only makes the Ex-Colored Man's withdrawal sound understandable but also places the character-narrator in the mold of slave narrator, a more familiar model to the white audience.<sup>12</sup>

One can situate this process of racio-narrative reordering in Toni Morrison's theory of white subjectivity formation in American fiction. She argues that white writers have narratively structured a monolithic subjectivity through "projection of the not-me" onto "Africanist" presence (38), i.e., making the silenced black body signify non-whiteness and thus circularly identifying themselves as not non-white. Johnson's white-audience-conscious writing not only follows but also complicates this schema by connecting white subjectivity and a "non-white" body in one character-narrator. Influenced by the white-oriented cultural logic, the Ex-Colored Man projects non-whiteness onto his own white body. And the thus stabilized "black passing for white" presence in turn helps to suppress narrative instability and indeterminacy and offers a monolithic interpretive space for readers who read with white-subjective frame of reference.

This procedure even underlies multiple chapters of *The Autobiography*, such as Chapters VI-VIII on the Ex-Colored Man's New York life. In the environment where gamblers, entertainers and bohemians live chaotically hedonistic lives, boundaries break down between genders (exemplified by "the girlish-looking youth" among the millionaire patron's male guests [87]), between classes (as rich people can gamble away "all the money and jewelry they possessed" and become "virtually prisoners" [70]), between individuals (as initially well-dressed gamblers become "a dozen men . . . similarly clad" in identical "linen dusters" [70]) and, most important, between races. Indeed, with the Club frequented by "both white and colored" (77) and with "several [colored patronesses] just as fair" as whites (79), the Ex-Colored Man cannot tell if the white-looking women he sees are really white: "When I first saw them, I was not sure that

they were white” (78-79).

And, as in the Atlanta University segment, the disorderly world within the story affects the narrative order itself. On the stylistic level, in the first portrayal of the Club’s habitués, the disintegration of categories necessitates an awkward subordinate clause for clarification of racial identities: “When we got inside, I saw a crowd of men of all ages and kinds grouped about an old billiard table, regarding some of whom, in supposing them to be white, I made no mistake” (68). Furthermore, not only do past-tense sentences such as “Whether these mystic incantations [of a gambler] were efficacious or not I could not say” (69) indicate the Ex-Colored Man’s lack of epistemological control as a character; the heightened indeterminacy also reaches the present time of storytelling, thus directly affecting Johnson’s novelistic writing. Indeed, these chapters include a considerable number of present-tense references to narrative uncertainty such as “I am not sure” (88), “I cannot tell” (90) and, most frequently, “I do not know” (69, 85, 90). The weakened control of narrative materials disrupts chronological order as well. As the Ex-Colored Man dissipates at “late hours” and loses his former lifecycle (82), the beginning of Chapter VIII succeeds Chapter VI to recount his second day in New York; the in-between chapter, Chapter VII, describes what he finds out *after* the first days.

To suppress these narrative problems, Johnson has his character-narrator resort overtly to white subjectivity. In the chapters’ “Club” setting characterized by carnivalesque fluidity and mobility, the Ex-Colored Man repeatedly annotates his narrative moves to justify them as coherent, teleological, and fitting to the white audience’s expectation. For instance, when the wild first night in New York disrupts the temporal order of his life (he goes to bed when “day was just breaking . . . . with ragtime music ringing continually in my ears” [74]) and his narrative (leading to the chronological inversion between chapters), the Ex-Colored Man declares,



I shall take advantage of this pause in my narrative to describe more closely the “Club” spoken of in the latter part of the preceding chapter—to describe it as I afterwards came to know it, as an habitué. I shall do this not only because of the direct influence it had on my life, but also because it was at that time the most famous place of its kind in New York, and was well known to both white and colored people of certain classes. (75)

Here, the Ex-Colored Man addresses a specifically white audience, as indicated by the proposed fulfillment of the preface’s promise to give “a view of the inner life of the Negro in America” (xxxiv). The curious but impatient addressee he assumes also overlaps with the “parties of white people” whose rather capricious curiosity results in the random duration of their stays: “some of them would stay [at the Club] only for a few minutes, while others sometimes stayed until morning” (78). Johnson foregrounds the Ex-Colored Man’s anxiety about this white audience’s response through the narrator’s repetitious reference to, as well as defensively redundant justification of, his storytelling (“not only because . . . but also because . . .”). According to this self-reflective rhetoric, while the “pause in my narrative” would affect the chronological linearity expected in an autobiography, the inserted description of the Club would not only serve the genre’s objective (because of “the direct influence it had on my life”) but also accommodate the audience’s curiosity about “the most famous place of its kind in New York.”

As white subjectivity defines itself in opposition to an objectified racial other, this narrative strategy involves restoration of the racial hierarchy undermined by the Club’s boundary-lacking setting as well as the Ex-Colored Man’s visual whiteness. At the beginning of the New York segment, somewhat preempting the upcoming categorical fluidity, Johnson has the narrator compare the mobility of the city’s toilers to that of the “galley slaves” enchanted by the

metropolis' "alluring white face" (65). Later, when the Ex-Colored Man's wild life reaches at its chaotic peak, Johnson activates the language of slave narrative to reframe the character-narrator's storytelling:

My New York was limited to ten blocks; the boundaries were Sixth Avenue from Twenty-third to Thirty-third Streets, with the cross streets one block to the west. Central Park was a distant forest, and the lower part of the city a foreign land. I look back upon the life I then led with a shudder when I think what would have been had I not escaped it. But had I not escaped it, I should have been no more unfortunate than are many young colored men who come to New York. During that dark period I became acquainted with a score of bright, intelligent young fellows who had come up to the great city with high hopes and ambitions and who had fallen under the spell of this under life, a spell they could not throw off. (82-83)

Drawing upon the slave narrative tradition familiar to a white audience, this quotation serves to stabilize not only the Ex-Colored Man's racial position but also the narrative itself. Associating the protagonist with "many young colored men," Johnson makes the language of a fugitive slave available to his narrator. The Ex-Colored Man's "shudder," for instance, alludes to Frederick Douglass' when the slave, intending to escape, imagines what would happen if he gets caught: "It required no very vivid imagination to depict the most frightful scenes through which I should have to pass, in case I failed" (Douglass 69). Comparing the "under life" in New York to that on Southern plantation, the words Johnson puts in the narrator's mouth also draw on the tradition by foregrounding the spatial circumscription where "limits" and "boundaries," clearly demarcating the area of movement, restrain his physical mobility. Quite fittingly, a "forest" and "a foreign

land”— through and toward which Southern slaves ran for freedom—are unavailable until he “escapes.” And the passage’s failure to specify time translates itself into an associative reference to blackness (“dark period”) which echoes ex-slave narrators’ typical diction for slavery, e.g., Douglass’ “the darkest hours of my career in slavery” (28) and “the dark night of slavery” (45).<sup>13</sup>

Similarly, right after the Ex-Colored Man “regret[s] that I cannot contrast my views of life among colored people of New York” because his disorderly life distances him from the black community (83), Johnson has him compensate the white audience with an entertaining—and racially binarized—melodrama between a “very black young fellow” and a white widow with “very white skin” (79). While this side story eventually provides a logical plot development toward the Ex-Colored Man’s flight to Europe, Johnson puts the transgressive aspect of the miscegenational relationship under multilayered containment. For example, the Ex-Colored Man, who has himself got children with a white woman at the time of his narration, here conforms to the general white sentiment of early-twentieth-century America against interracial union: “somehow I never exactly enjoyed the sight [of the couple]” (79). Johnson also checks the Ex-Colored Man, on the pretext of avoiding digression, when the narrator mentions how common such relationship is among the Club habitués: “I learned, too, that he was not the only one of his kind. More that I learned would be better suited to a book on social phenomena than to a narrative of my life” (79).

At the end of this plot segment, the gruesome murder of the white widow puts the Ex-Colored Man to narrative disarray—so “how many [shots the black man fired] I do not know” and “[h]ow long and far I walked I cannot tell” (90)—as well as beyond the above-discussed “boundaries” of his activity: “Just which streets I followed when I got outside I do not know, but I think I must have gone towards Eighth Avenue . . .” (90). Here, again,

Johnson draws upon white subjectivity to reestablish order. He arranges for the white millionaire to rescue the Ex-Colored Man from the jumble spatially (by checking his out-of-place presence “on Fifth Avenue,” saying, “What on earth are you doing strolling in this part of the town?” [90]), racially (by substituting the Ex-Colored Man for Walter the valet [91]) and narratively (by functioning as “the means by which I escaped from this lower world” [84] and thus leading the story to the next phase set in Europe). Along the same line, the New York chapters’ conclusion equivocates on the disruptive potential of the miscegenational relationship not only by killing off the white widow but also by immediately translating her “beautiful white throat with the ugly wound”—symbolical of the penetrated white womanhood—into a less racialized “red stain” (91). With its subversive potential thus stifled, the episode disturbs the Ex-Colored Man’s “memory” only in the past tense (i.e., as a character), not at the present time of his narration: “still I could see that beautiful white throat with the ugly wound. The jet of blood pulsing from it had placed an indelible red stain on my memory” (91).

As I have shown, Johnson’s novel draws its plausibility, coherence, development and dramatization from the Ex-Colored Man’s “black passing for white” identity, which, given his white body, is in fact endlessly uncertain. To contain the racial and narrative instabilities which occasionally claim themselves in the story, Johnson resorts to white subjectivity under the guise of the character-narrator’s double-conscious application of whites’ perspective. This paradigm of dominant ideology not only endorses the Ex-Colored Man’s self-definition as part-black but also, by providing clear-cut frameworks, enables the narrator—and, accordingly, the author—to produce an ordered narrative discourse which in turn recertifies the paradigm’s (actually fictive) validity and authority. Thus enforced and reinforced in a circular fashion, white subjectivity works to discourage the novel’s reader from reading against the grain for the Ex-Colored Man’s

essentially indeterminable race and the text's actual precariousness.

Johnson first published *The Autobiography* in 1912 as an anonymous autobiography and did not reveal its fictionality and his authorship until 1927, when the work was republished with his name on the title page and Carl Van Vechten's explanatory introduction. Even this edition did not fully convince the readers, however, as Johnson reports in his 1933 autobiography, *Along This Way*:

When the book was republished, I affixed my name to it, and Carl Van Vechten was good enough to write an Introduction, and in it to inform the reader that the story was not the story of my life. Nevertheless, I continue to receive letters from persons who have read the book inquiring about this or that phase of my life as told in it. That is, probably, one of the reasons why I am writing the present book.  
(*Along* 239)

Through exploitation of the falsifiability of a text's origin, the 1912 edition ended up putting into question the very notions of genre and authorship. Here, as indicated by the miscommunication between Johnson and his readers, genre and authorship are not a work's inherent identity but themselves "texts" to be written and then interpreted.<sup>14</sup> These de-essentialized parameters threaten to invalidate *Along This Way*'s claim of "true autobiography" and, by extension, the selfhood Johnson structures through the text. Thus, the last sentence of the quoted passage suggests a tension between Johnson's endangered autobiographical self and his attempt to salvage it. On one hand, through the present-tense self-reference to his "writing the present book," Johnson tries to capture his authorship and the book's autobiographical truthfulness in the very moment of producing the text. On the other hand, the interpolated "probably"—rare in the

book's present-tense sentences—betrays how, in this precarious narrative moment, he cannot fully explain himself nor specify the causal origin of the text.

Due to *Along This Way*'s primary focus on race, the interaction between the instability of genre/authorship and that of narrative does not occur without racial undertone. Indeed, the interaction shows a significant parallel with the causal connection between racial passing and narrative order in *The Autobiography*. In both cases, first of all, narrative instability derives from the ultimate fictiveness of the identities attached to a racial or textual body; just as neither whiteness nor passing-whiteness exists outside one's reading of a white body, genre and authorship are not a text's essential attribute but only its interpretive effect. Secondly, Johnson's attempt to clarify the distinction between fictional *The Autobiography* and autobiographical *Along This Way* involves racial differentiation between the narrators—i.e., between the Ex-Colored Man, a white-looking “passer,” and the dark-skinned Johnson proud of his black identity.

This continuity between race and genre/authorship evidences itself also in the intertextuality between the two works. When *Along This Way* describes his feelings about the anonymous publication of the 1912 *The Autobiography*, Johnson's rhetoric echoes the Ex-Colored Man's explanation of his racial passing. While the Ex-Colored Man makes a covert enjoyment out of unsuspecting whites and “frequently smiled inwardly at some remark not altogether complimentary to people of color” (*The Autobiography* 144), Johnson draws a similar “pleasure” from those uninformed of his authorship: “I did get a certain pleasure out of anonymity, that no acknowledged book could have given me. . . . I had the experience of listening to some of these discussions [about the author's identity]” (*Along* 238). And Johnson's regret for his shortsighted decision (“But, perhaps, it would have been more farsighted had I

originally affixed my name to it as a frank piece of fiction” [*Along* 238]) echoes the Ex-Colored Man’s when he, at the end of his narrative, “cannot repress the thought that, after all, I have chosen the lesser part, that I have sold my birthright for a mess of pottage” (*The Autobiography* 154).

The similarity between the two works concerns not only their (racio-)narrative problems but also Johnson’s strategy to solve them. As I will demonstrate below, in *Along This Way* Johnson repeatedly draws on white subjectivity to stabilize *The Autobiography*’s fictional status, confirm *Along This Way*’s autobiographical truthfulness (as opposed to the now stabilized *The Autobiography*), and thus authenticate his black selfhood (as opposed to *The Autobiography*’s narrator now stabilized as a fictional passer). As in *The Autobiography*, the white subjectivity that underlies *Along This Way*’s narrative derives from Johnson’s “double-conscious” application of whites’ perspective as well as consideration for the white part of his audience;<sup>15</sup> indeed, his acceptance of whites’ help—from Brander Matthews (193, 238, 289-90), Van Vechten (239) and H. L. Mencken (305)—accompanies all of *Along This Way*’s four references to *The Autobiography*. And the thus reestablished difference between the two texts, authorizing *Along This Way* as Johnson’s authentic life story, invites the reader to disregard the fundamental contradiction that white subjectivity underlies a black autobiography—especially an autobiography that claims black selfhood through the protagonist’s confrontation with white-supremacist society.

*Along This Way*’s reference to Van Vechten’s 1927 introduction to *The Autobiography*—which I have discussed as an example of the two works’ genre/authorship instability—also registers Johnson’s strategic resort and accommodation to white subjectivity in his attempt to silence the problem. As Kawash points out, this white patron of the Harlem

Renaissance, acknowledging that “to a person who has no previous knowledge of the author’s own history, it reads like *real* autobiography” (Van Vechten v-vi), unwittingly highlights that “[t]he distinction between true history and fictional narrative is not in the text but in the reader” (Kawash 60). His authentication misfires concerning the book’s origin as well. Instead of proving Johnson’s authorship conclusively, he suggests how the text goes beyond the scope of an individual’s work as if it were “a composite autobiography of the Negro race in the United States in modern times” (Van Vechten vi). Nevertheless, Johnson’s account in *Along This Way* foregrounds the helpfulness, not failure, of the white voucher whom Johnson would naturally expect to read the passage. Johnson’s juxtaposition of his “affix[ing] my name” and Van Vechten’s introduction focuses so heavily on the “good” white’s contribution that it makes a lengthy, syntactically awkward sentence: “When the book was republished, I affixed my name to it, and Carl Van Vechten was good enough to write an Introduction, and in it to inform the reader that the story was not the story of my life” (*Along* 239). Moreover, while apparently repeating Van Vechten’s observation, Johnson’s report in *Along This Way* subtly belittles *The Autobiography*’s authorship problem by transforming the confused readers’ profile from Van Vechten’s “a person who has no previous knowledge of the author’s own history” to those familiar with Johnson enough to “inquir[e] about this or that phase of my life as told in it” (*Along* 239). According to this rhetoric, readers mistook the novel for an autobiography because they knew the author well, not because they did not.

*Along This Way*’s application of white subjectivity stabilizes *The Autobiography*’s fictional status—and, in turn, its own autobiographical narrative—also in Chapter XVII featuring the first half of the 1900s decade. As Johnson lives a double life as the principal of Edwin M. Stanton School in Jacksonville, Florida, and an increasingly popular composer for Broadway, the



chapter is full of unrealities and uncertainties. For instance, the immense fortune from the song *The Maiden with the Dreamy Eyes* “seemed to possess an element of magic” (*Along* 187); Johnson now has to decide which career, educational or musical, to pursue, which “was by no means a simple matter” (188), and his eventual choice of the latter would lead him “to a path that led I knew not just where” (189). These instabilities carry a potential for disordering Johnson’s autobiographical narrative. Indeed, at once dealing with “facts” to reopen the fire-torn Stanton (184) and writing songs for “some rather inconsequential dreams” (187), Johnson’s dual life itself blurs the generic boundary between reality and fiction. Johnson also finds his autobiographical persona, now one of the “Broadway personalities” (191), so different and distant from his present self that he has to discontinue the segment abruptly, saying, “All of this [his celebrity status] seems to me now to belong to a distant and distinct existence” (192).

Here Johnson inserts a two-page-long episode to finish the chapter, describing his talk with Brander Matthews, white professor of dramatic literature at Columbia University:

I continued my work at Columbia for three years, not allowing for an interruption of several months in the spring of 1905. Before I left I talked with Professor Matthews about my more serious work, and showed him the draft of the first two chapters of a book which, I said to him, I proposed to call *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. He read the manuscript and told me he liked the idea and the proposed title, and that I was wise in writing about the thing I knew best. I also showed him some of my poems. After he had looked them through, he gave me a note to Professor Harry Thurston Peck, who was then editing *The Bookman*.  
(*Along* 193)

This passage deploys Matthews as a genre-stabilizer for *The Autobiography*, when the white

advisor endorses Johnson's novelistic moves—such as borrowing episodes from his life experience—by “lik[ing] the idea and the proposed title.” Here, despite the misleading potential of the title “The Autobiography,” the white professor's approval, predicated upon the casual presupposition that the book is a piece of fiction (so “writing about the thing I knew best” is a “wise” strategy to choose, not a necessary prerequisite), silences the genre problem as out of question.<sup>16</sup>

This generic stabilization of *The Autobiography* (and, by implication, *Along This Way* itself) authorizes Johnson's autobiographical voice to reorder the chapter's jumbled narrative materials in a convincing anecdotal sequence. At the end of the quoted passage, Matthews' endorsement leads to Johnson's meeting with Harry Thurston Peck. This, on the narrative level, justifies the associative chronological leap to the next, chapter-ending paragraph, where, “about ten years later,” after “the difficulties he had had at Columbia . . . which had led to his severance from the University,” the devastated professor commits suicide (193). And, in turn, this poignant episode of a professor's downfall supplies a narrative flow back to the interrupted story of Johnson's prosperity as a songwriter. Thus, grafting the tone of Peck's story onto the content of the main plot, the following chapter opens with a sober observation about success: “Success is a heady beverage. It can be as deleterious as any alcoholic drink. It seems to me that a man drunk with success is more of a fool than the maudlin inebriate; and, certainly, he is more dangerous to himself and to others” (194). Aptly, though the remaining uncertainty about “the distant and distinct existence” still necessitates a reservational “probable,” Johnson's narrative comeback coincides with the autobiographical persona's distinction between fancy and reality as well as grasp of the latter: “It is probable that one of the reasons why I did not fly off at a tangent was that I was not able to feel completely that our success was real” (194).

As I have shown in this chapter, in Johnson's writing, race is a narrative construct and narrative is racially conditioned. With this close interconnection between race and narrative, restoring the narrative order of *Along This Way* involves reestablishing the racial hierarchy between white and black. The above-discussed reordering of Chapters XVII provides an example, as Johnson's sense of blacks' appropriate place in relation to whites underlies the development of events. According to Johnson's reasoning, "it may have been the shadow of race" that prevented him from "offer[ing] him [Harry Thurston Peck] some little help" (193), leading to the suicide of the former professor.

Likewise, when describing how, as the "real" but yet unidentified author, he enjoyed people's confusion about *The Autobiography's* origin, Johnson activates the binary between white and black to the extent of invalidating the novel's exploration of the instability of race:

The authorship of the book excited the curiosity of literate colored people, and there was speculation among them as to who the writer might be—to every such group some colored man who had married white, and so coincided with the main point on which the story turned, is known. I had the experience of listening to some of these discussions. I had a rarer experience, that of being introduced to and talking with one man who tacitly admitted to those present that he was the author of the book. (*Along* 238-39)

Given that "most of the reviewers, though there were some doubters, accepted it as a human document" (238), the object of people's search should naturally be a suspicious "white" who, like the Ex-Colored Man, is "the owner and part-owner of several flat-houses" in white society (*The Autobiography* 143). Yet, by reporting how the readers checked "some colored man who had married white," Johnson replaces racial passing with interracial marriage. In so doing, he not

only translates the indeterminate white body of the searched man into the detectable binary combination of “colored man” and “white woman.” He also underrepresents his scrutiny of race in *The Autobiography* by naming interracial marriage, not racial ambiguity, “the main point on which the story turned” and thus making the Ex-Colored Man’s race visible. Moreover, this narrative maneuver displaces the factor of passing into a safe episode of comical “rarer experience,” portraying the pretender of “the author of the book” as a laughable joke, not as a threat to Johnson’s authorship which he potentially is.

Johnson’s final reference to *The Autobiography*, again regulated by the white/black racial hierarchy, similarly displaces the novel’s investigation of race. Chapter XXVIII covers the period “nearly a decade before” the Harlem Renaissance, when blacks have difficulty getting their writings published. Here, Johnson goes to meet H. L. Mencken, “then one of the editors of *Smart Set*,” to broaden his network with white men of letters (305). The racial schema of this scene somewhat echoes the above-discussed Atlanta University segment in *The Autobiography*. Johnson characterizes himself as “a mere stranger” as opposed to “busy” Mencken who sustains “a very pleasant relation” with Johnson but has little interest—especially “that of an editor”—in his work (305-06). When Mencken claims that “What they [black writers] should do . . . is to single out the strong points of the race and emphasize them over and over and over; asserting, at least on these points, that they are *better* than anybody else,” Johnson “called to his attention that I had attempted something of that sort in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*” (305). Here Johnson foregrounds his authorship of *The Autobiography* only to distort the work’s contents in accordance with the white’s opinion. Johnson’s response involves his willful misreading not only of the Ex-Colored Man who, far from reiterating blacks’ “strong points,” passes because of the “[s]hame that I belonged to a race that could be so dealt with [i.e., lynched]” (*The Autobiography*

137) but also of the novel's challenge to racial difference and hierarchy which assume that one race is "better than" another.

Hence comes a paradox. For, though itself designed to help buttress Johnson's autobiographical self, *Along This Way's* incorporation of white subjectivity and resulting reintroduction of racial hierarchy compromise that very selfhood. In other words, while his self-fashioning as a black subject predicated itself upon his resistance to white ideology, Johnson's narrative strategy necessarily requires his autobiographical persona to act within white-oriented frames of reference. An example comes from Chapter XII, in an episode at a bicycle shop in Jacksonville:

One afternoon I stopped in at Gilbert's and found a half-dozen or so white men gathered there, none of whom I knew particularly well. I joined in the talk, which, through me, I suppose, finally shifted to the race question. I was expressing some of my opinions when I was interrupted by a nondescript fellow, who remarked with a superb sneer, "What wouldn't you give to be a white man?" The remark hit me between the eyes. The sheer insolence of it rocked me. The crowd tittered. The hot retort surged up for utterance. With great effort I collected and held myself and replied in as measured and level a tone as I could command, "Let me see. I don't know just how much I would give. I'd have to think it over. But, at any rate, I am sure that I wouldn't give anything to be the kind of white man you are. No, I am sure I wouldn't; I'd lose too much by the change." (135)

This scene promotes Johnson's black selfhood by depicting his courage to initiate "the race question" to an all-Southern-white audience as well as his rejection to "be a white man"—a marked contrast with the Ex-Colored Man who, by becoming "an ordinarily successful white

man,” “sold my birthright for a mess of pottage” (*The Autobiography* 154). His convincing declaration of racial pride notwithstanding, as Jennifer Schulz points out, the scene’s controlling dynamics—allowing Johnson to participate in the conversation only as an “inferior” non-white—shows how Johnson has to buy into the white-dominant ideology to make that very declaration: “In order to enter into the American social contract [of democracy], Johnson must consent to the racial hierarchies of citizenship that preclude social equality and that, in effect, undermine the contract’s own logic” (33).

I would add to Schulz’s discussion and argue that Johnson’s inevitable participation in “racial hierarchies” involves *narrative* accommodation to whites, since Johnson’s language also indicates his meticulous caution not to antagonize the white part of the readership. Indeed, the within-text “half-dozen or so white men” who amusedly await Johnson’s response to the condescending question correspond with Johnson’s real-life white audience who, yet unfamiliar with black subjectivity, “might be brought to understand the African-American point of view” (Fleming 225).<sup>17</sup> As his claim of black selfhood depends significantly on white audience’s acceptance both within and outside *Along This Way*, Johnson writes so that, immediately after his answer, the white crowd stops “titter”-ing and its insulting gaze becomes “the eyes of the witnesses to the incident” checking the possible retaliation of Johnson’s challenger (135-36). With the challenger characterized as a “nondescript” straw man whose despicability is obvious to any reader, Johnson’s refusal “to be the kind of white man you are” would not apply to the fair white audience in the scene, let alone the white reader of *Along This Way*.

Such dependence on white subjectivity underlies another major form of Johnson’s black self-fashioning, namely, his rejection of segregation. As he states that “all my life I have made it a principle never to ‘Jim Crow’ myself voluntarily” (*Along* 86), this “principle” practices itself in

numerous scenes of Johnson's train ride to define him as an outspoken protester against racism. Also, Johnson's righteous composure in the white car posits a direct antithesis not only to the Ex-Colored Man's silent entrance into the "smoking-compartment" for whites (*The Autobiography* 115) but also to the character's "admiration" for the "principle"-d racism he overhears there: "I must confess that underneath it all I felt a certain sort of admiration for the man [a racist white passenger] who could not be swayed from what he held as his principles" (120). Twice in *Along This Way*, Johnson manages to stay in the white car with impunity because whites, seeing his Spanish-speaking friend and Panama hat respectively, misidentify him as a Cuban black (65, 88-89). Despite his successful self-placement in "the first-class car" (64) and "the men's [smoking] room" (88), Johnson's action suggests his internalization of the ideology of white-dominant America on multiple levels. For one thing, the success derives actually from whites' exoticizing gaze on otherness, which differs little from racial discrimination in limiting his subjectivity. In the latter example of his Latino passing, the white passengers abandon their racial "scrutin[y]" of Johnson only to fetishize his Panama hat, "then rare in the United States," "pass[ing] around and examin[ing] [it] with expressions of admiration" (88). Also, Harilaos Stecopoulos finds in Johnson's appropriation of fake Latino identity "his own version of the imperial aggression so tantalizing to white Americans, north and south" (41), considering the U.S. imperialistic interests in the post-Spanish-American-War Latin America as well as Johnson's own ambition leading to his consulate career in Venezuela and Nicaragua. Accordingly, as Stecopoulos argues, "His Latino act in the Jim Crow South at once challenges and supports the white hegemony of an expansionist United States" (41).

Another train ride provides an instance where Johnson allows himself to follow Jim Crow. He does so, however, only after protesting with calm dignity. When asked to use the black car

during his 1896 travel from Charleston to Jacksonville, Johnson examines the car before making a decision:

After my inspection I went back and told the conductor that I couldn't ride in the forward car either. When he asked why, I gave as a reason the fact that there were white passengers in that car, too. He looked at me astonished, and hastily explained that the two men were a deputy sheriff and a dangerously insane man, who was being taken to the asylum. I listened to his explanation, but pointed out that it didn't change the race of either of the men. He pleaded, "But I can't bring that crazy man into the 'white' car." "Maybe you can't," I said, "but if I've got to break this law I prefer breaking it in the first-class car." The conductor was, after all, a reasonable fellow; and he decided to stand squarely by the law, and bring the two white men into the "white" car. (87)

The white conductor, who understands Johnson's claim, is the within-text counterpart of *Along This Way's* white readers, whom Johnson tries to convince not only of "the absurdity of the situation" (86) but also of the logical consistency of his racial protest and, by extension, the validity of his black subjectivity. To accommodate and eventually win this real-life audience, Johnson foregrounds the "not objectionable" but "apologetic" manner the conductor bears when asking him to move (86). And, once Johnson "gave . . . a reason" and this "reasonable fellow" accepts it, the two form a law-abiding comradeship as opposed to the white passengers whose illogical protests would naturally alienate *Along This Way's* white readers: "As I left the car, there were protests from men and women against the change. The maniac continued his ravings; but both I and the conductor stood squarely by the law" (87). However, Johnson's white-audience-conscious insistence on "law" and "reason" necessitates the application of these



parameters within the framework of white-dominant racial ideology. Thus, Johnson's argument begins with the essential stability of racial identities, assuming that circumstances will not "change the race." Furthermore, while apparently expressing his challenge to Jim Crow, Johnson's conclusion that "I prefer breaking it in the first-class car" only reiterates its precepts. For, with white supremacy's identification of "white" with "first-class"—and with the scene's observance of it by binarizing the setting into "white first-class" and "black" cars to the exclusion of other divisions—the tautological idea of "breaking it in the first-class car" does not carry a personal "preference" but repeats the very definition of the law.

As I have argued, both *The Autobiography* and *Along This Way* indicate Johnson's strenuous negotiation with white-dominant racial ideology and its subjects who read the books. While white subjectivity offers him an authoritative narrative framework with which to structure a racial investigation as well as a black selfhood, the resulting dependence on what he aims to critique makes his projects the arena, not end-product, of his struggle as a writer. Given all this, Johnson's impressively multidimensional career in literature (e.g., as journalist, critic, poet, novelist, and editor) and elsewhere (e.g., as educator, lawyer, songwriter, diplomat, politician and activist)—in some of which he was the first African American to establish himself—may suggest his constant search for new modes of (self-)expression outside the oppressive frameworks assigned by the white-supremacist society. Indeed, recounting his first try at prose fiction with *The Autobiography*, Johnson's language evokes that of an ex-slave now away from the master's yoke: "The use of prose as a creative medium was new to me; and its latitude, its flexibility, its comprehensiveness, the variety of approaches it afforded for surmounting technical difficulties gave me a feeling of exhilaration, exhilaration similar to that which goes with freedom of

motion” (*Along* 238). The appropriateness of Johnson’s comparison goes beyond its literal meaning. Just as the Emancipation was far from the end of African Americans’ fight with the persistently white-dominant America, *The Autobiography* marks only the beginning of Johnson’s narrative struggle with the stultifying discursive frames that circumscribe his subjectivity.

## Chapter 4

### Ordering the Racial Chaos, Chaoticizing the Racial Order:

#### Nella Larsen's Narrative of Indeterminacy and Invisibility in *Passing*

In May 1932, Nella Larsen visited James Weldon Johnson, then professor at Fisk University, and his wife Grace in Nashville. During the first week of her stay with the couple, the light-skinned Larsen, together with more “passably” white-looking Grace, passed for white for the first time in her life. She excitedly reports this experience in a letter to Carl Van Vechten, a major white patron of the Harlem Renaissance:

You will be amused that I who have never tried this much discussed “passing” stunt have waited until I reached the deep south to put it over. Grace Johnson and I drove about fifty miles south of here the other day and then walked into the best restaurant in a rather conservative town called Murfreesborough and demanded lunch and got it, plus all the service in the world, and an invitation to return. Everybody here seems to think that quite a stunt. Jim told me to be sure to tell you. (“To Carl Van Vechten” 170; emphasis in orig.)

At this time, Larsen and Johnson had already written and published thoughtful inquiries of racial passing that questioned the whole notion of racial difference. Given that, Larsen's tone, as well as Johnson's suggestion to tell Van Vechten, sounds strikingly frivolous. Indeed, while treating the ambiguity, if only temporary, of her race, Larsen's report predicates itself upon the writer's, the reader's and “everybody's” unquestioned presupposition that she may look white *but is actually black*. Despite its implication of dismantling the binary difference between white and black and thus putting the very idea of whiteness into question, Larsen's action is here an

“amusing” “stunt” casually presentable to white Van Vechten. It is particularly noteworthy that Larsen refers to her passing as “a stunt”—a word defined by *The New Oxford American Dictionary* as “an action displaying spectacular skill and daring,” “something unusual done to attract attention.” While her race was invisible and indeterminable to the whites at the Tennessee restaurant, her letter to Van Vechten, another white audience, not only visualizes her passing as a public performance but also re-stabilizes the racial binary that her action has put into question; if Larsen’s passing is audacious and extraordinary as the word “stunt” connotes, it is precisely because she *cannot be white*.

To present the difference-defying racial passing within the framework of white/black binary opposition, Larsen’s language also suppresses Grace Johnson’s passing which occurred along with her own. “[A]s fair as any White woman in the country” (Fleming 228), Grace has a more racially indeterminate body which would expose the essential lack of difference between a “real-white” body and a “passing-white” body.<sup>1</sup> To downplay the disruptive potential of this liminal figure, the second sentence of the quotation portrays the two women’s action in one unit under the plural subject “Grace Johnson and I” and, by doing so, brackets in Larsen’s “amusing stunt” Grace’s passing which does not really require extraordinary skills. As Larsen tells her story in an undisruptive, entertaining fashion to Van Vechten, her linguistic binarization of in-between beings even applies to the scene of her passing. Categorizing Murfreesborough, Tennessee, somewhat forcibly as “the deep south,” Larsen highlights the binary opposition between the North and the South, thus distancing Van Vechten, a New Yorker, not only from the white people she tricked but also from the “rather conservative” site of collective racial anxiety.<sup>2</sup>

This letter to Van Vechten foregrounds a gap between racial passing as it really is and as represented in language—the language that, inevitably carrying the white-dominant ideology of

early-twentieth-century America, dictates a clear-cut difference between white and black as well as between “real-white” and “passing-white.”<sup>3</sup> Indeed, actual “passers,” whose bodies show no definitive evidence for either real-whiteness or passing-whiteness, refute the notion of racial difference promoted by white ideology. In addition to this categorical indeterminacy, racial passing is also invisible; when a person “passes” in a group of “whites,” to everyone else in the group she is not a “passer” but just one of the “whites.” When put in words, however, racial passing loses its indeterminacy and invisibility, because the medium of language inevitably translates passing into an expressed, dichotomously (though fictively) stabilized combination of “fake whiteness” and “actual blackness.” The most striking example is the very word “passing.” A “passer,” by definition, shows no visible difference from “whites” on the level of physical body, but a “passer,” by definition, is not “white.”

As I demonstrate in this chapter, this tension between the chaotic, invisible and indeterminate nature of racial passing and the order-imposing function of language underlies not only Larsen’s personal letter to Van Vechten but also her fictional narrative *Passing* (1929). Unlike the letter, however, Larsen’s configuration of the novel indicates her will to engage the chaotic reality of racial passing and thus challenge the binary racial system of white ideology. Nevertheless, since Larsen has to do so in writing, the ordering function already built in language entraps her in a visible, stable and binary representation of passing. Thus, once she mentions racial passing in the novel, her language contradicts the endless indeterminacy and invisibility she aims to emphasize. Whereas Larsen strives to expose the actual lack of difference between a “real-white” body and a “passing-white” body, this language suggests that, while the character looks white, she is *really black*.

The complex racial situation of *Passing* necessitates a brief summary focused on the

racial dimension of Larsen's characterization and plot construction. In this novel, a third-person narrator tells the story from Irene Redfield's point of view. Both Irene and her childhood friend Clare Kendry Bellew have "passable" white skin. Irene, married to a dark-skinned physician Brian and proud of her black identity, commits herself to "[u]plifting the brother" (39) as a member of the "Negro Welfare League." Larsen, however, suggests Irene's espousal of white middle-class norms through, for example, her occasional passing "for the sake of convenience, restaurants, theatre tickets, and things like that" (70). On the other hand, Clare leaves the black society and passes for white to marry John Bellew, a wealthy white businessman. In the summer of 1925, Irene and Clare accidentally reunite after twelve years of no contact at the rooftop café of the Chicago Drayton Hotel, a segregated place where both women have entered by racial passing. (This scene first reveals their "passing-whiteness" to the novel's reader.) Several days later, Clare invites Irene to join her and Gertrude Martin, their common "passable" friend, at her suite. Irene becomes angry when John, who does not know that Clare, nor her white-looking guests, is "black," affectionately calls his wife by the nickname "Nig," but Irene keeps passing before him to protect Clare. In the meantime, unable to resist her desire "to see Negroes, to be with them again, to talk with them, to hear them laugh" (51), Clare repeatedly visits Irene and her black circle in New York. Then, unable to overcome her disagreements with Brian, who wants to leave the U.S. for racially liberal Brazil, Irene comes to suspect his affair with Clare and wishes to remove Clare from her life. One day, Irene runs into John while walking arm in arm with a friend who is "golden, with curly black Negro hair" (70). John, realizing Irene's, and by implication Clare's, "blackness," later breaks into a black-only party and confronts his wife there. The story closes when Clare dies by falling from the sixth floor, though the ending does not clarify whether Clare committed suicide or Irene, running up to Clare, intentionally or

unintentionally pushed her through the window.

By illuminating Larsen's effort to capture racial passing in its invisible and indeterminate reality, my argument ameliorates the critical inadequacy of the current Larsen scholarship. For, while critics have discussed Larsen's description of Clare's and Irene's racial passing to show the novelist's challenge to the U.S. racial system, the most ideologically subversive part of Larsen's racial scrutiny actually comes *before* she writes about the women's passing, i.e., before the Drayton-café scene makes the characters' race visible and dichotomously fixed as "looking white but actually black." Larsen informs the novel's opening scenes with racial passing's invisibility and indeterminacy paradoxically by not writing about racial passing.

Failing to recognize this actual depth of Larsen's racial investigation, scholars of *Passing* have generally neglected the racial chaos that opens the novel. For example, while pointing to the "dangerous" and "problematical" nature of Clare's passing, Helena Michie finds her evidence in the Drayton-café scene where Larsen actually compromises her inquiry by identifying the character as *actually black*. Accordingly, for Michie, the "danger" and "problematics" of racial passing result from the character's disregard of "other people's opinions, assumptions, glances" (149), not from the essential lack of real-white/passing-white difference to which Larsen alludes earlier in the novel. Catherine Rottenberg accurately points out that passing puts the very existence of racial categories into question: "passing interrogates and problematizes the ontology of identity categories and their construction" (435). However, the example she analyzes to "unravel some of the distinctive mechanisms through which race norms operate" (436) is the Drayton-café scene where, as Rottenberg herself acknowledges, "the reader understands Irene has been 'passing herself off as white'" (438). Kate Baldwin cogently argues that the generally assumed notion of passing, predicated upon the idea of true identity from which to "pass" away,

is already a social construct combined with racial essentialism: “Passing faces its own impossibility, that is, the possibility that it cannot exist without some prior ascription to either (racial) essentialism or (social) constructionism both of which, as *Passing* demonstrates, insist on understanding the self without examining the structures of the symbolic (or ‘white’ superiority) in which these discourses are embedded” (465). Nevertheless, Baldwin erroneously reads the novel’s opening chapter as “Irene’s racializing account of Clare’s body” (474), assuming that “Clare is a passer” (473) at this point of the narrative already. In so doing, she misses Larsen’s strategy of carefully removing racial evidence from the scene; here, the “impossibility” actually includes that of applying any “racializing account” to Clare’s indeterminate white body.<sup>4</sup>

This chapter traces back to the novel’s opening Larsen’s struggle with the conflict between order-defying racial passing and order-imposing language. Here, she attempts a faithful depiction of racial passing by, paradoxically, not writing about it. Larsen’s first reference to racial passing, however, inevitably forces her to write about passing and thus make it visible and fixed in the binary characterization of “looking white but actually black.” Thus, in my reading, the Drayton scene registers the onset of her strenuous pursuit of alternative narrative modes to depict racial passing’s invisibility and indeterminacy *within* the framework of ideologized language. My analysis of Larsen’s configuration of post-Drayton scenes will reveal how, with Irene’s and Clare’s white bodies fixed in the “passing-white” position, the novelist substitutes Irene’s “unreliable” narrative perspective as an alternative site of invisibility and indeterminacy. In so doing, Larsen also foregrounds Irene’s entrapment in what the character herself criticizes as “white people”’s erroneous racial views, thus turning the reader’s attention away from the writer’s own dependence on the ideological real-white/passing-white difference.



As I have pointed out, *Passing* does not mention race or racial passing until the Drayton-café scene where Irene and Clare identify each other. And this “race-less” opening, I argue, is not a contingent plot arrangement but Larsen’s highly intentional strategy to recreate the real-life situation of passing. Here, racial passing works invisibly to refute the generally assumed difference between a “real-white” body and a “passing-white” body.

Indeed, Larsen’s first novel *Quicksand* (1928) already evidences her keen awareness that, since racial difference is a linguistic construct, a mixed-race individual, who does not fit into the normative system of white/black categorization, often eludes signification and, accordingly, is “nonexistent” on the level of discourse. When Helga Crane, *Quicksand*’s “impassable” but light-skinned protagonist, tells Mrs. Hayes-Rore, a black rights activist, about her black West Indian father and white Danish mother, the issue of racial mixture undergoes a silent containment:

During the little pause that followed Helga’s recital, the faces of the two women, which had been bare, seemed to harden. It was almost as if they had slipped on masks. The girl wished to hide her turbulent feeling and to appear indifferent to Mrs. Hayes-Rore’s opinion of her story. The woman felt that the story, dealing as it did with race intermingling and possibly adultery, was beyond definite discussion. For among black people, as among white people, it is tacitly understood that these things are not mentioned—and therefore they do not exist.

(*Quicksand* 42)

Here, Larsen’s narrator attributes the characters’ silence primarily to their reaction against “race intermingling and possibly adultery,” rather than to the epistemological elusiveness of racial mixture itself. However, the passage indicates Larsen’s insight into how, as racial categories form

themselves through discourse, one's racial identity derives not from the physical reality of the body but rather from the discourse that surrounds it. Symbolically, the two women's attempt to act within ideological correctness (which both "black people" and "white people" are to follow) suppresses the bodily dimension of their existence: their "bare" faces are now "masked." And, being "beyond definite discussion" and thus "not mentioned," Helga's binary-defying background virtually does "not exist."

Drawing upon this observation of race and discourse, Larsen alludes to the existential problem of racial passing—i.e., the problem that there is no physical clue to "passing-whiteness" as opposed to "real-whiteness"—paradoxically by not mentioning race or racial passing in the novel's opening scenes. Larsen carefully de-racializes her language when describing those elements that could otherwise carry racial connotations. In the opening chapter, for example, Larsen describes Clare's attempted return to Irene's social circle without showing the racial attribute of that community: "Nor would she [Irene] assist Clare to realize her foolish desire to return for a moment to that life which long ago, and of her own choice, she had left behind her" (7). Likewise, when mentioning the "derisive rhyme" the neighborhood boys sing to Bob Kendry, Clare's mixed-race father as a janitor, Larsen portrays it as directed to his race-neutral bodily feature ("certain eccentricities in his careening gait" [6]), not as a racial derision which would cohere with the novelist's primarily racio-economic characterization of him later in the story. Furthermore, in the opening scenes, every time she refers to Irene's or Clare's skin color, Larsen takes pains to describe the color as a manifestation of the body's non-racial aspect. For instance, the end of the first chapter presents Irene's "warm olive cheeks" as an indicator not of race but of her emotion ("humiliation, resentment, and rage") aroused by Clare's letter (7). With regard to Clare, too, Larsen portrays "the ivory of her skin" as a trait that makes the character "[a]n

attractive-looking woman” (9) without evoking the factor of race.

Here, taking advantage of the way whiteness operates as a “race-less, unmarked norm” in the U.S. context,<sup>5</sup> Larsen recreates a real-life situation where a “passer” is not a “white-looking black” but an unracialized—and thus no different from “white”—individual. Larsen’s de-racialization of the opening directly influences the reader’s interpretive activity. On one hand, to the reader who is willing to read race or racial passing into these scenes, Larsen does not offer any definitive evidence. On the other hand, a reader immersed in the unconscious (though in fact ideologically derived) presupposition of whiteness as an “unmarked norm” would not imagine the possible presence of race in these scenes. And Larsen seems to encourage her reader to take the latter approach and unsuspectingly join this supposedly homogeneous “white” sphere, so that racial passing remains invisible and indeterminate in the reader’s mind.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, given the multiple meanings of the title, “*Passing*,” most of which do not concern race, as well as the book cover which identifies Larsen only as “the author of *Quicksand*,” readers with no prior knowledge of Larsen’s race and work, unless deliberate enough to read the disproportionately small-fonted blurb (“Cover of *Passing*”), would not even suspect that the novel concerns race.<sup>7</sup> Larsen invites those readers to translate the characters’ “race-lessness” automatically into “whiteness” just like those whites tricked by the passer do.

Paradoxically, however, this rendition of the invisibility of racial passing makes that very rendition invisible and unnoticeable to the reader. And, to communicate her point, Larsen has necessarily to make racial passing visible and, accordingly, stabilized in the binary-oriented identity of “black passing for white,” as she does at the Drayton scene when first revealing Irene’s and Clare’s “passing-whiteness.” While the thus introduced real-white/passing-white difference inevitably compromises Larsen’s racial critique, she strives to resist the binary

framework by presenting it as an effect of white ideology rather than as a real difference in the physical body. In this scene, as Irene rests at the segregated Drayton café, she finds herself stared at by a “white” woman (who later turns out to be the “passing” Clare):

And gradually there rose in Irene a small inner disturbance, odious and hatefully familiar. She laughed softly, but her eyes flashed.

Did that woman, could that woman, somehow know that here before her very eyes on the roof of the Drayton sat a Negro?

Absurd! Impossible! White people were so stupid about such things for all that they usually asserted that they were able to tell; and by the most ridiculous means, finger-nails, palms of hands, shapes of ears, teeth, and other equally silly rot. They always took her for an Italian, a Spaniard, a Mexican, or a gipsy. Never, when she was alone, had they even remotely seemed to suspect that she was a Negro. No, the woman sitting there staring at her couldn't possibly know. (10-11)

As Larsen attempts to avoid essentializing “passing-whiteness” as a physically corroborated identity, the second paragraph of the quotation refers to Irene’s “passing” not in the third-person narrator’s objective description of her body but in Irene’s interior monologue indicative of her entrapment in white-dominant ideology. Here, in naming herself “a Negro,” Irene looks at herself through a “white” eye; Irene envisages her body objectified “before her [the ‘white’ woman’s] very eyes.” To suggest further that racial difference derives from white-subjective interpretation of an in fact uncategorizable body, Larsen has Irene claim the failure of “white people”’s reading of bodily features such as “finger-nails, palms of hands, shapes of ears, teeth.” Thus, a body can be that of “an Italian, a Spaniard, a Mexican, or a gipsy” at the same time, depending on the white observer’s approach.

While exposing the subjective and fictive nature of “white people”’s racial differentiation, Larsen takes pains to emphasize the power that this dominant viewpoint wields over the psychology of “black” Irene. In so doing, Larsen also foregrounds Irene’s immersion in white-dominant ideology, thus subtly shifting the responsibility for the activation of racial binary to the character. Indeed, Larsen arranges her diction so that, reading retrospectively, the reader can find a causal relationship between the “white” woman’s stare and Irene’s increased self-awareness as “colour”-ed: Irene “[f]eel[s] her colour heighten under the continued inspection” (10). This scene also indicates the pervasive effect of an ideologically dominant perspective. The “white” gaze that forces Irene to identify herself as “a Negro” belongs actually to “passing-white” Clare, thus showing how Irene’s (this time mistaken) *consciousness* of white gaze, rather than the white gaze itself, evokes racial difference in her mind. While indicating the fictiveness of white subjectivity and its authority, this process also exemplifies its penetrating and persistent operation in the form of “double consciousness,” defined by W. E. B. Du Bois as the “sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others [i.e., whites], of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (2). Du Bois’ term points to how a history of psychological oppression has forced blacks to internalize white subjectivity—as well as the black objectivity it automatically assigns to them—in their self-image and self-expression. In the above passage, Irene looks at her own white body through a “white”’s gaze and names the body “passing-white” according to the white-dominant ideology that she has internalized which dictates the real-white/passing-white difference.<sup>8</sup> This “double-conscious” introduction of the racial binary to the uncategorizable white body even applies to Irene’s realization of Clare’s “non-whiteness.” Irene suspects that the “white” woman may not be “white” when the woman, calling Irene by the nickname “Rene,” does not fit any of

the white women who know the nickname (11). Here, too, Irene's self-consciousness vis-à-vis whites' viewpoint, namely the way they call her, serves to position Clare's white body in the category of "passing-white."

Larsen's introduction of the real-white/passing-white difference necessarily frames her narrative into the "white"/"black" racial dichotomy, with which, as I will demonstrate later, she has to negotiate in order to explore race and racial passing for the rest of the novel. Indeed, the Drayton scene binarizes into "white" and "black" not only the characters' races but also the narrative itself, which now draws upon the "black" Irene's mental process influenced by the double-consciously internalized "white" viewpoint. This racially dual narrative situation also places the novel's reader in "white" and "black" subject positions at the same time. For example, when Irene as "a Negro" claims "white people"'s inability to detect racial passing, the reader, informed of Irene's perspective as well as her "passing-whiteness," is placed on this "black" character's vantage point. At the same time, the same scene activates the binary racial positioning between the "white" spectator (Clare as a "white" woman and Irene who looks at herself from Clare's "white" viewpoint) and the "black" spectacle (Irene's racialized body), defining the reader as the former—whether himself/herself white or not—who, to comprehend the scene, has to read Irene's "Negro" body with racial binaries in mind.

And this coexistence of "white" and "black" narrative perspectives problematizes and even undermines Larsen's challenge to white supremacy.<sup>9</sup> For example, John Bellew does not suspect Clare's "passing" until the novel's ending, despite his insistence on the racial "line" between white and black: "I draw the line at that. No niggers in my family" (29). Here, foregrounding the white supremacist's villainy, ignorance and bigotry, Larsen tries to alienate her reader from the racial "line" he claims. However, the reader has to read this scene simultaneously

from the subject position that Larsen defined as “white” at the Drayton scene, because another ideologically loaded “line”—i.e., between real-white and passing-white—already constitutes the story’s premise. Indeed, the reader can cast an ironical gaze on John because, unlike this unsuspecting husband, the reader *knows* that Clare is *not white but passing-white*. Here, too, the “black” subjectivity introduced to the reader, while providing him/her with this “knowledge,” is already embedded in the binary racial system of white ideology.

Larsen’s narrative framing of Irene’s and Clare’s white bodies into “passing-white” identity undermines her prior engagement in the invisible and indeterminate operation of racial passing. The Drayton scene’s introduction of the white/black racial binary also undermines the “race-less” narrative space she created for her exploration, as the scene splits the space into “white” and “black” narrative, as well as interpretive, perspectives. For the remainder of the novel, as I will elucidate below, Larsen has to negotiate a narrative framework essentially unsuitable for capturing racial passing’s chaotic reality.

While the Drayton scene entraps Larsen in the system of binary difference, the novelist’s configuration of the rest of the narrative indicates her continued effort to expose the chaotic operation of racial passing as well as white ideology’s systematic suppression of that chaos. For instance, Larsen uses the character Brian Redfield to address how racial passing, if engaged in its real indeterminacy, can nullify racial difference. Indeed, Larsen characterizes Brian as resistant to the racist ideology that, through circulation and repetition in American public discourse, naturalizes racial difference and hierarchy in people’s mind. The novel’s white characters obtain and reinforce their assumption of the white/black (and by implication real-white/passing-white) hierarchy through racist publications, such as “the papers” that convince John that blacks are

“[a]lways robbing and killing people. And . . . worse” (30) as well as the “long articles headed: ‘Will the Blacks Work?’” that lead Clare’s white great-aunts to assign “hard labour” to this visually white girl (18-19). In contrast, long anxious to move to the less racially prejudiced Brazil, Brian makes an issue of “a lynching . . . in the evening paper” and points out how America—the site of “the pleasant routine of her life” for his ideologically entrapped wife Irene—is in fact a “hellish place” (72-74). Larsen develops Brian’s will to see beyond the orderly surface of American racial situation to the extent of questioning the difference between real-whiteness and passing-whiteness. He attributes the unanswerable question why “passers” identify themselves as “black,” as well as why they always come back to the black society, to the elusiveness of the concept of “race” itself: “If I knew that [the reason for passers’ return], I’d know what race is” (38). Accordingly, in his discussion of racial passing, Brian refers to whites as “the so-called whites” (39), thus insinuating that, given the discursive and fictive nature of the real-white/passing-white difference, “whites” are “white” not for any substantial reason but only because they are “so called.”

We should note, however, that Larsen limits her own use of Brian as a perceptive analyst of race and racial passing. Indeed, she bases the plot of *Passing* thematically upon the disagreement between Irene and Brian and stylistically upon Irene as the narrative center. In the above-discussed scene, for example, “Irene didn’t at all agree” with Brian’s observation of racial passing and simply drops the topic from the conversation, which, on the narrative level, necessarily cuts off the reader’s access to his insight: “Ignoring his unqualified assertion, she slid away from the subject entirely” (39). In this way, Irene’s entrapment in white-dominant ideology does not grant Brian’s critique much voice in the narrative.

As I will demonstrate below, Irene’s immersion in white-dominant ideology and the



resulting suppression of Brian's racial views connect to the strategy Larsen devises to describe the actual indeterminacy of racial passing after the Drayton scene. This strategy consists of making narrative confusion mirror racial chaos. To create an alternative mode of racial scrutiny, Larsen appropriates Irene's narrative space which, despite the character's claim of representing a "black" perspective, is loaded with "white" discourse and is thus self-contradictory, unstable and unreliable. In other words, now that Clare's and Irene's white bodies are named "passing-white" and cannot serve as the site of invisibility and indeterminacy, Larsen uses Irene's consciousness, which repeatedly but unsuccessfully attempts to signify reality in an orderly narrative, as a substitute for the arena of racial chaos. When Irene does manage to order her narrative, Larsen foregrounds the operation of "white" discourse, thus at once indicating the fictiveness of racio-narrative order and downplaying the novelist's own dependence on the ideologically charged language in structuring those scenes.

Indeed, after the Drayton scene, *Passing* revolves around what Irene does not know as much as what she does. Even about what Irene claims she does know, Larsen makes the character contradict herself, thus emphasizing to the reader the unreliability and instability of Irene's narrative perspective. With regard to Brian, for example, Larsen not only refutes Irene's pride that "[s]he knew him as well as he knew himself, or better" (41) but also signals that the character's inability to accept her falsity will baffle the reader's attempt to stabilize meaning: "And she, who had prided herself on knowing his moods, their causes and their remedies, had found it first unthinkable, and then intolerable, that this [Brian's restlessness] . . . should be to her incomprehensible and elusive" (60). Thus, when Irene first suspects an affair between Brian and Clare (which Larsen never verifies in the narrative), Larsen presents Irene's psychology in terms of contradiction ("So that was it! Impossible. It couldn't be" [62]), silencing (Irene "recoiled

from exact expression” [63]) and lack of evidence: “Nothing. She had seen nothing, heard nothing. She had no facts or proofs” (67).

Into this unstable narrative space of Irene, Larsen strategically weaves the factor of race to create the impression that the character’s “black” identity itself is questionable. For example, at the end of Part 3, Chapter 2, distressed by the alleged affair of her husband, Irene thinks of acting against her “allegiance” to “her race” and telling John of Clare’s repeated contact with the black community (69). While this thought presupposes Clare’s and Irene’s “actual blackness,” Larsen subtly undermines it by satirizing Irene’s overemphasis on her responsibility as “a Negro.” Indeed, Larsen arranges Irene’s occasional “passing” for convenience, as well as her dismissal of black beauty as an effect of blacks’ “repugnan[ce]” (55), so that the character’s racial pride strikes the reader as opportunistic and even spurious by this point. Larsen also suggests that Irene’s conflict is actually personal, rather than racially motivated, when the character wishes “that Clare’s Margery [mixed-race daughter] were ill, or dying” so that Clare will leave America soon (69). While encouraging the reader to cast an ironical eye on Irene’s thoughts, Larsen makes the character wish to become a race-less “woman, an individual” so that no “burden of race” would oblige her to protect Clare from the white husband: “Irene Redfield wished, for the first time in her life, that she had not been born a Negro” (69). Whereas Irene believes that her “born a Negro” identity would not allow such de-racialization, Larsen suggests to the reader that Irene *is* somewhat “a woman, an individual,” given the way her “Negro” identity, as well as “the burden of race,” results from her self-naming and self-appointment throughout the narrative.

Larsen utilizes Irene’s unstable and self-contradictory narrative space as an alternative site for representing racial indeterminacy also when the character directly mentions racial

passing. Irene's claim of whites' inability to detect racial passing, along with that of blacks' ability to do so by "[j]ust—just something. A thing that couldn't be registered" (56), helps Larsen disprove the validity and authority of white subjectivity *and* compromises that very critique by paradoxically essentializing the real-white/passing-white difference under the name of "blacks" perceptiveness. To minimize the latter effect and indicate the ultimate indeterminacy of racial passing, Larsen repeatedly portrays Irene as herself confused by the real-white/passing-white difference she assumes. For example, having just recognized Clare at the Drayton café, Irene casually deduces the "passing-whiteness" of Clare's great-aunts from that of Clare even though she has heard of their "real-whiteness": "[Irene said,] 'I see. They were "passing" too.' [Clare said,] 'No. They weren't. They were white'" (18). Also, when at Clare's Chicago suite John Bellew's blatant racism forces Irene and Gertrude to "pass" together with Clare, Larsen portrays the scene as follows:

It was, Irene thought, unbelievable and astonishing that four people [Irene, Clare, Gertrude and John] could sit so unruffled, so ostensibly friendly, while they were in reality seething with anger, mortification, shame. But no, on second thought she was forced to amend her opinion. John Bellew, most certainly, was as undisturbed within as without. (31)

As her indignation at John's remarks destabilizes Irene's narrative space (as indicated by the interjection, "But no"), this scene registers Irene's decreased epistemological control over what she perceives. For instance, Irene not only "could not define" what Clare's eyes tell when John calls her "Nig" (28) but also "couldn't tell which," "a snort or a giggle," the sound is that comes from Gertrude (30). Taking advantage of this uncertainty in Irene's narrative perspective, Larsen suggests the physical lack of real-white/passing-white difference. The writer makes Irene first

bracket all the four people, including “white” John, in the “passing-white” position where “anger, mortification, shame” smolder due to John’s racist remarks. Only after correcting her initial thought does Irene distinguish John, whose “whiteness” exempts him from such inner commotion, from the three “passing-white” women.

Furthermore, to prevent Irene’s theory of “blacks”’ ability to detect passing from implying an essential real-white/passing-white difference, Larsen makes Irene contradict herself in the very application of the theory. While dismissing as “silly rot” (11) “white people”’s belief in bodily evidence for passing, Irene herself asserts the “Negro” identity of Clare’s eyes once she recognizes Clare at the Drayton scene: “Ah! Surely! They were Negro eyes! mysterious and concealing. And set in that ivory face under that bright hair, there was about them something exotic” (21). Larsen refutes Irene’s racializing reading of Clare’s eyes by repeatedly foregrounding the impossibility of *any* reading; indeed, as Irene realizes later in the story, Clare’s eyes are un-“define”-able (28), “unfathomable” (29, 33), un-“name”-able (33), “masked” and “unrevealing” (65). Moreover, Larsen exposes Irene’s own entrapment in “white people”’s illusion also through the character’s “exotic”-izing objectification of what she finds “mysterious and concealing.” Here, too, Larsen portrays Irene as falling into her (Irene’s) own critique of “white” viewpoint, as the character claims elsewhere that whites find blacks “beautiful” simply because of “something so different that it’s really at the opposite end of the pole from all your [whites’] accustomed notions of beauty” (55).

This strategy of creating narrative confusion to simulate racial indeterminacy culminates in Part 2, Chapter 3. Here, utilizing Irene’s unstable narrative perspective, Larsen informs a significant portion of the chapter with dissolved racial categories. By doing so, the novelist makes the point that racial ambiguity really abounds in the seemingly ordered world. To create a

scene of categorical chaos, Larsen fills this chapter, featuring the Negro Welfare League's dance party in 1927 to which Irene takes Clare, with narrative uncertainties and disorders on account of Irene's exhaustion and lack of epistemological control. Here, the third-person narrative does not give an orderly or real-time account of Irene's experience but depends upon "[t]he things which Irene Redfield remembered afterward," which "seemed, to her, unimportant and unrelated" (53). As many as seven paragraphs in this four-page chapter, whose mutual connections Irene herself does not know, begin with the phrase, "she remembered" (53, 54, 56), thus indicating an increased unreliability and disorganization. This setting breaks down boundaries and hierarchies necessary to create meanings out of the chaotic assortment of narrative materials. While what Irene does not remember degenerates into "a blurred memory," what she does remember loses not only its causal interconnection but also its distinction from its likes: "Except for these few unconnected things the dance faded to a blurred memory, its outlines mingling with those of other dances of its kind that she had attended in the past and would attend in the future" (56).

In such a disorderly narrative sphere, Larsen situates a breakdown of clear-cut racial differences. Indeed, admitting anyone who pays a dollar, the Negro Welfare League party serves actually as a site of diversity where "[a]ll sorts of people go" (50). Thus, one of the segments that begin with the phrase "she remembered," featuring a conversation between Irene and white Hugh Wentworth, reflects the racial and narrative jumble simultaneously:

She remembered a conversation she had with Hugh Wentworth in a free half-hour when she had dropped into a chair in an emptied box and let her gaze wander over the bright crowd below.

Young men, old men, white men, black men; youthful women, older women, pink women, golden women; fat men, thin men, tall men, short men; stout women,

slim women, stately women, small women moved by. An old nursery rhyme popped into her head. She turned to Wentworth, who had just taken a seat beside her, and recited it:

“Rich man, poor man,  
Beggar man, thief,  
Doctor, lawyer,  
Indian chief.”

“Yes,” Wentworth said . . . . (54)

In the second paragraph of the quotation, the purposeless “wander”-ing of Irene’s “gaze” and thought registers the miscellaneous crowd in a syntactically awkward sentence whose subject Irene’s whimsical enumeration makes a long compound noun phrase. The heterogeneity of the attendees then invokes in Irene’s mouth a “nursery rhyme” that only signifies the categorical chaos of the sight. As Irene’s consciousness gradually loses its clarity, those adjectives related to racial identity (“white,” “black”) get more and more outnumbered by those that directly concern physically and visibly recognizable features (“fat,” “thin,” “tall,” “short,” “stout,” “slim,” and “small”). By deactivating the “white”/“black” racial difference (while sustaining the “men”/“women” gender difference throughout the paragraph), Larsen suggests that racial identities do not reside in physical bodies but rather in the observer’s interpretation. Furthermore, the “white”/“black” *racial* binary that categorizes Irene’s first description of men shifts to the binary-defying *colors* “pink” and “golden.” Indeed, in the context of early-twentieth-century passing fiction, the color “pink” often signals unknown or undecidable racial origin, such as “the pearl and pink whiteness of Amy’s skin” in Jessie Fauset’s “The Sleeper Wakes” (286). And, in *Passing*, “golden” refers either to blond hair like Clare’s (21)—a “white” feature that enables her

to “pass”—or to a mixed-race skin like Felise’s “golden cheeks” (70). Utilizing Irene’s chaotic narrative space and semantically ambiguous language, Larsen insinuates that racial passing might be occurring anywhere in the scene, invisibly and indeterminately.

Just as in the Drayton scene, however, Larsen has to suppress this chaotic narrative space in order to articulate her claim of indeterminate racial passing. Indeed, to develop Irene’s random perception of the miscellaneous crowd into a structured and explicit racial critique, featuring Wentworth’s acknowledgement that he “couldn’t pick some of ’em [passers] if my life depended on it” (55), the novelist has paradoxically to reestablish a racial binary. In so doing, on the narrative level, Larsen has also to structure her writing around the order-imposing gaze of Wentworth, characterized by his “long, searching look that was really a stare” (55) reminiscent of the “white” Clare’s stare that introduces racial differences to the Drayton scene. Right after Irene registers the scene’s racial chaos with the “nursery rhyme,” Wentworth turns her attention to what he calls a “[n]ice study in contrasts” between white-looking Clare and “unusually dark” Ralph Hazelton (54-55). This leads Irene to rewrite her original description, which was all the more faithful to the racial chaos for its lack of ordered meaning, into an expression of binary antithesis: “Clare fair and golden, like a sunlit day. Ralph Hazleton dark, with gleaming eyes, like a moonlit night” (54). Wentworth’s impulse to identify and categorize Clare by “find[ing] out . . . the name, status, and race of the blonde beauty out of the fairy-tale” (54) goes so far as to reintroduce the real-white/passing-white difference to the scene when he asks Irene about the possibility of Clare’s passing: “Or isn’t she [white]?” (55). While this development of conversation leads the characters to discuss the actual elusiveness of racial passing, the very reference reestablishes the real-white/passing-white difference in the reader’s interpretive activity; as the characters’ talk reminds the reader of Clare’s “actual blackness,” Irene’s attention,

and accordingly the narrative itself, never revisits the racially chaotic crowd.

Just as the Drayton scene, in tandem with the restored racial order, Irene's perspective regains narrative order as well. While all the other "she-remembered" segments are fragmentary with no more than three short paragraphs, only this one covers multiple pages, developing with a sound causal relationship once Wentworth's "stare" guides Irene's "gaze." And, given that Irene's inner experience constitutes the novel's plot development, Larsen's configuration of this chapter indicates the novelist's own dependence on "white" subjectivity as she organizes the character's perceptions into logical and meaningful narrative units. Here, too, on account of the ideological nature of language, Larsen's project is inevitably paradoxical; to represent racial chaos in a structured narrative, she has to use a language that, as a vehicle of white-dominant ideology, necessarily suppresses such chaos.

Given Larsen's struggle with the order-imposing language in *Passing*, what does the novel's ending, especially its two different versions, tell about her strategy to present race in its actual precariousness? After Clare falls to death from the Freeland's sixth-floor apartment, Irene loses consciousness while answering "a strange man"'s question on the ground:

Her quaking knees gave way under her. She moaned and sank down, moaned again. Through the great heaviness that submerged and drowned her she was dimly conscious of strong arms lifting her up. Then everything was dark.

Centuries after, she heard the strange man saying: "Death by misadventure, I'm inclined to believe. Let's go up and have another look at that window." (82)

While the first printings of the novel included both of these paragraphs in the ending, Knopf's third printing in 1930 and some other reprints missed the second paragraph, and no one knows



why (Madigan 522-23). Critics generally find a racio-narrative open-endedness in this multiplicity. For example, Kate Baldwin reads into it a case of “abjection”—i.e., dissolution of the subject/object dyad—where the breakdown of racial difference coincides with that of textual order: “In much the same way that *Passing* leaves us uncertain as to the real closure of the text, passing continues to spin us into the realm of the ‘imaginary,’ that is, outside the realm of the symbolic, to its underside where we find abjection” (467). Since Larsen’s narrative has long established the real-white/passing-white difference in the reader’s interpretation, however, Baldwin sounds unconvincing when she argues that the two endings’ coexistence itself “spin[s] us into” a disorderly interpretive space in which to find the chaotic reality of racial passing. Rather, I propose that the specific way the final scene is multiple indicates Larsen’s continued effort to address chaotic indeterminacy not “outside the realm of the symbolic” but *within* the framework of racially and narratively order-imposing white ideology.

Indeed, examined closely, the final section combines a racially clear-cut scene setting, which draws upon Clare’s stable “black passing for white” identity, with Irene’s unstable narrative space, where Clare’s white body bears heightened indeterminacy and invisibility. On one hand, the scene finalizes the real-white/passing-white difference with the revelation of Clare’s “passing-whiteness” to John, the last main character in the novel to discover it. Accordingly, this section treats the visually heterogeneous attendants of the Freeland’s party as a racially homogeneous crowd. Though John’s violent intrusion causes “confusion” in the scene, Felise the hostess responds to the white man with the language of clear racial difference: “Careful. You’re the only white man here” (79). On the other hand, upset by Clare’s fall, Irene’s narrative perspective registers Clare’s body in terms not only of absence and invisibility (with Clare’s body “gone”) but also of dissolved real-white/passing-white difference (where Clare is

“white”): “Gone! The soft white face, the bright hair, the disturbing scarlet mouth, the dreaming eyes, the caressing smile, the whole torturing loveliness that had been Clare Kendry” (80).

Considering this duality of the final scene, I argue that Larsen’s inclusion of both paragraphs in the first printing indicates the writer’s self-censorship which accommodates white ideology despite her attempted emphasis on racio-narrative indeterminacy. Indeed, the first paragraph ends with Irene’s “dark”-ened perception where everything is invisible and indeterminate. In the first printing, however, Larsen frames this chaotic ending with the second paragraph which features a “strange man” who, given his “official and authoritative” manner (82), is likely to be a white police officer. And this man proposes to restore order by reexamining the “window,” an act that has a significant racial implication because this “window” failed to check Clare’s move from the all-black party to “the whiteness of the [snow-clad] courtyard garden” (78). Furthermore, “inclined to believe” that Clare’s racially symbolical move is a “misadventure,” i.e., out of the normative course of events, this character even embodies white-oriented discourse that takes fixed racial positions for granted.

Larsen’s containment of the potentially disruptive concluding paragraph is attributable to the socio-historical context of her composition. As numerous historians have pointed out, the writers of Harlem Renaissance had to write in ways that accommodated the dominantly white audience, white publishers and white patrons who contributed to the popularity of the movement. Launching her literary career in the 1920s and supported by the major white patron Carl Van Vechten, Larsen herself was constrained by, and entrapped in, white-derived standards: as Thadious M. Davis argues, “Larsen and other racially defined writers” tended to consider that “[a]chievement consisted of both publication and reception by an audience, preferably a white one” (385). And their dependence on white-dominant society significantly compromised Harlem

Renaissance writers' critique of the status quo. As Nathan Huggins points out, "[a]s long as the white norms remained unchallenged, no matter what the Negro's reaction to them, he always needed to return to the white judge to measure his achievement. It would have required a much more profound rejection of white values than was likely in the 1920s for Negroes to have freed themselves for creating the desired self-generating and self-confident Negro art" (306-07).

In this chapter, I have shown Larsen's struggle to challenge white ideology by means of language that essentially impedes that challenge. Paradoxically, however, while the dissolution of real-white/passing-white difference would necessarily put the white audience's very "whiteness" at risk, Larsen's failure to present the dissolution in its entirety made the book *acceptably disruptive* according to the standards of white readership. Hence come the "largely favorable" and "insightful" reviews *Passing* received from the contemporary audience; some readers even appreciated the text's defiance of white readers' "ignorant" preconception of "racial difference": "[Margaret Cheney] Dawson, too, praised the way Larsen avoided sensationalizing racial difference for the titillation of white readers, taking the manners of her characters for granted, with no concessions to white ignorance" (Hutchinson 328-29). Considering Larsen's strategy and its effect in the first printing, I find it curious that Larsen chose to drop the final paragraph, or at least allowed the change to happen, to make Irene's blackout end the third and some subsequent printings. Whatever Larsen's intention, the fact remains that the indeterminate and invisible ending made its way to the general readership from then on. And, while Van Vechten—himself an "official and authoritative" white champion of black arts—read and actively promoted *Passing* in its first publication, Larsen would naturally expect him not to read the third printing of the same edition a year later.

## Conclusion

### Toward a Language for the Real, Chaotic and Unnamable

It was the summer of 2000. I was walking below the scorching sun of Charlottesville, Virginia, when a car pulled over to my side and an elderly woman called out from behind the wheel.

“Excuse me, do you know how to get to the chapel?”

It had been just a week since I arrived in the U.S. with no prior experience of living in an Anglophone country. Quite naturally, everything native speakers said was mystery to me. But, for some reason—probably her mild tone of voice—I understood that she was asking me for direction to the university chapel near the humanities library. I explained, stammering and stuttering. The woman, at once puzzled and willing to be nice, said in the same friendly tone,

“Thank you. Where are you from?”

“I’m from Japan.”

She said thank you again and started the car. As she turned at the intersection and disappeared, I could not help having an awkward feeling—a feeling, I later found, of being caught in the act of “passing.” When she talked to me, she most likely assumed that I was an American of Asian extraction, until my broken English exposed me. Hence her question about my national/geographical origin. As long as one’s “passing for American” is working, such a question is irrelevant, especially in a conversation about direction. Only when he is recognized as a “foreigner” does the question become an option. And, as involuntary as it was on the elderly woman’s part, the question served her to map me in an appropriate position outside of American identity. The order was reestablished. Not only did my answer, “I’m from Japan,” serve to clarify

the boundary between American and non-American, it also restored the order of things in her thoughts. Now she was convinced why this person, who at first looked like an American, did not speak English the way Americans should.

I found it also curious that I somehow *tried*, though unsuccessfully, to live up to her assumption of my “American” identity. I may simply have attempted an “amusing stunt” just as Larsen did at a Tennessee restaurant in 1932. Or I may have wanted to experience a cultural difference firsthand; in mostly mono-racial and mono-cultural Japan, no one will ask you for direction if you look racially different. But I still remember how, when I recognized the woman’s misunderstanding, I felt somewhat obliged to prevent it from surfacing and to fit myself into *her* sense of smooth turn of events. Weren’t there, I cannot help asking, power relations at work? Not only was the woman’s “majority” position unquestionable to me as a foreigner, but she, if unwittingly, also had the discursive upper hand in the conversation. Indeed, lacking in English skills, I did not have the language in which to contradict her. It is her discourse (asking me for direction) that let me “pass,” and it is her discourse (confirming my foreign origin) that terminated the action.

Two years later, again quite unexpectedly, I ended up “passing for American” for the second time, this time in Japan. It was the summer of 2002, when I was back home for a two-month vacation before moving to Lawrence, Kansas. An American friend Eric took me to a bar called *Izakaya-Ja-Nai*, a popular foreigners’ hangout in downtown Okazaki. (In a bizarre coincidence, *Izakaya-Ja-Nai* means, “It’s not a bar,” in Japanese. The bar itself was “passing”!) It was the night of the city’s firework festival, and I could feel the aftermath of the event’s excitement even from the outside. Before we entered the bar, Eric turned to me and said,

“Speak only English. Pretend to be an American. It’ll be fun.”

The inside was a site of international diversity, except for the bartenders who were all Japanese. As Eric introduced me to his friends, I found they were from various places in the world—North and South Americas, Europe as well as South and Southeast Asia. Some of them followed the Japanese tradition and wore colorful yukata for the occasion, further complicating the sense of national differences. We took a counter table, just before a Japanese bartender in a light-blue yukata. She only knew minimal English. In his broken Japanese, Eric introduced me as a Hawaiian friend, probably thinking that the large Japanese-American population in the state would make the story more plausible. My English had an accent, and I did not know how to speak Hawaiian English. But it seemed that Eric's company, as well as the fact that I only spoke English, convinced her of my "Hawaiian" origin. She brought our beers and then turned to me, rotating a hand back and forth near her ear with the thumb and the small finger extended.

"Do you do this?" She said in halting English.

"Telephone?" I said. I felt Eric's elbow nudging me under the counter.

"No, to surf." She said. I did not know this "Shaka sign" was associated with Hawaiian surfers.

"He doesn't know it," Eric took over and explained in Japanese. "It's a tourist thing. Real Hawaiians don't do that."

"I see. I thought it was a real Hawaiian thing." She said in Japanese, smiling to me. My "passing for American" was successful this time.

Though Eric's tactful intervention surely saved me from exposure, I cannot help thinking that this "passing" worked primarily because of the discursive power he and I had from the beginning—the power that I did not have in Charlottesville two years before. Then, the elderly woman's stable American identity, along with her control of English, authorized her to name and

fit me into her story. The non-English-speaking Japanese bartender, on the other hand, had inevitably to depend upon American Eric's naming of me as well as my own English self-naming. Here, that American identity is at stake makes English the vehicle of "dominant discourse" despite the scene's Japanese locale. Thus, though she did know the Shaka sign, a shibboleth for Hawaiian American identity, it was easy for Eric not only to overturn this actually valid criterion as *wrong* but also to dismiss it as *non-Hawaiians' typical misunderstanding*. Furthermore, Eric managed to do so in his imperfect Japanese, an act that could have undermined his discursive authority and empowered her, a native speaker, to oppose his explanation. With the discursive power hierarchy established from the outset, however, his potentially risky adoption of the bartender's language did not compromise his naming of me nor refutation of her. Rather, it provided him with a shared, and thus more effective, communicative space for persuasion.

When I began working on this dissertation, I found myself revisiting these memories of my own "passing." They informed me that, while passing may sound like the "passer"'s action, its mechanism, process and success depend rather upon the dominant discourse that surrounds the situation. And, given the general direction of passing from minority to majority for the latter's privilege, the logic that underlies the passer's action is often not his/her own logic. My main argument, especially its focus on *white* subjectivity (which apparently has little to do with the person whose "true identity" is supposed to be black), originates from this observation. Though it may seem that racial passing occurs at the passer's body, it is actually a discursive phenomenon on the part of the observer as an ideological subject. It is the epistemological paradigm of white ideology that turns the visually white body into a "black-passing-for-white" body in the first place. As I argued in this dissertation, on the physical level, the visual whiteness

of a “passing-white” body exposes the lack of demonstrable difference between “real-whiteness” and “passing-whiteness.” When we conceive of racial passing as opposed to “real-whiteness” (as we usually do), we unwittingly buy into white ideology, placing ourselves in a white-subject position whether we are ourselves “white” or not.

My individual chapters analyzed Faulkner’s, Johnson’s and Larsen’s novelistic treatments of racial passing and revealed the authors’ struggle with such ideological entrapment. I particularly foregrounded the linguistic dimension of their struggle; for, to write about racial passing, writers have necessarily to transform the endlessly indeterminate—thus narratively unmanageable—white body into an ideologically loaded “black-passing-for-white” body. I demonstrated that, in one way or another, the authors have to negotiate with the ideologically subversive but essentially indescribable phenomenon of racial passing, and with the medium of language which, always already ideologized, enables them to describe the indescribable only through suppression of the subversiveness. I pointed out that, in a move that indicates their own awareness of this paradox, Faulkner, Johnson and Larsen all foreground the ideological entrapment of their character-narrators (Shreve and Quentin, the Ex-Colored Man, and Irene Redfield) to conceal, if not always successfully, their own inevitable application of the real-white/passing-white binary difference.

One of the most disruptive dimensions of racial passing is that, given the essential lack of difference between a “real-white” body and a “passing-white” body, there is no such phenomenon as “racial passing” on the level of physical reality. Against this actual lack of the signified, white-supremacist ideology has repeatedly named “racial passing”—through discursively formulated policies such as the “one-drop rule”—to create and maintain the illusion that “real-whiteness” is normative, desirable and *possible*. Indeed, the word “racial passing” does



not depict material reality but operates as a “performative” language, which, according to J. L. Austin’s definition, “do[es] not ‘describe’ or ‘report’ or constate anything at all, [is] not ‘true or false’; and . . . [its utterance] is, or is a part of, the doing of an action, which again would not be *normally* described as saying something” (5). In other words, referring to a white body as “passing” is not a “description” nor a “report” but an “action” of *making* that body a “passing” body—just as Austin’s sample sentence: “I name this ship the *Queen Elizabeth*” (5). Here, too, racial passing is subversive only in a paradoxical fashion; addressing racial passing in language, even if intended to challenge the binary racial system, brings “passing-whiteness” into existence, thus ultimately serving that very racial system.

In their inevitable emphasis upon racial passing for critical investigation, scholars of passing narratives also run the risk of serving the racial status quo. Indeed, to be a literary-critical genre distinct from other race-related approaches, studies of passing fiction have necessarily to keep naming, and thus *making* and *remaking*, “passing-whiteness.” As I pointed out in my individual chapters, some scholars have uncritically followed the novels’ subscription to the real-white/passing-white difference, while others have themselves activated the binary paradigm to facilitate their interpretation. And, with all my attempts to point out and eventually overcome such a predicament, my writing itself, as just another discourse on racial passing, cannot be free from the same predicament. Throughout the composition, I found myself constantly checked by language from addressing the actual uncategorizability of a physical body.

Let’s take an example from the fourth chapter on Larsen’s *Passing*. In the first draft, I concluded my thesis statement as follows:

Whereas Larsen strives to expose the actual lack of difference between a real-white body and a passing-white body, this language suggests that, while the

character looks white, she is really black.

At that point I casually thought that it would not give the false impression that I myself was assuming the presence of “real-whiteness,” “passing-whiteness” or “real-blackness,” because the sentence treats the “real-white”/“passing-white” difference as “actually lacking” and the character’s “real blackness” as “language’s suggestion.” Then, as I went through the draft for a revision, I realized that, on the level of discourse, the very use of the phrase “a real-white body” would bring such a body into existence, especially without clarification that I quoted the phrase from somewhere else as a generally-held, questionable preconception. Indeed, as Jacques Lacan pointedly argues, it is “a language’s [*langue*] world of meaning . . . in which the world of things will situate itself” (64) and, accordingly, language creates things in the world of discourse. As a result, the final draft saw quotation marks around “real-white” and “passing-white,” and italicized the phrase “really black.”

It was, however, not the end of my struggle with linguistic entanglement. Language’s resistance to the real complexity of the material world further obstructed that chapter’s body argument. In its textual analysis, quotation marks should be used primarily for direct quotations from Larsen’s novel, which rendered me unable to put in quotation marks every argumentatively delicate phrase related to racial passing. Moreover, just like words themselves, quotation marks as a sign function in binary opposition—i.e., indicating someone else’s word as opposed to mine. And, again just like words in general, this binarization reduces the dichotomously conceived other (“someone else’s word” in this case) into a homogeneous object. This further confounded my effort to distance my discourse from that of white-dominant ideology; here, quotation marks can indicate either a general preconception or Larsen’s critique of the preconception, both of which are “someone else’s word.”<sup>1</sup>

Then, as long as we have to use language to address “racial passing,” are we—authors as well as critics—doomed to reproduce “passing-whiteness” and by implication “real-whiteness,” to suppress the subversive potential of the endlessly indeterminate white body, and ultimately to reconfirm white ideology? Friedrich Nietzsche may help us answer this question with his theory of how we mistake linguistic representation for truth:

Are they [conventions of language] perhaps products of knowledge, that is, of the sense of truth? Are designations congruent with things? Is language the adequate expression of all realities?

It is only by means of forgetfulness that man can ever reach the point of fancying himself to possess a “truth” of the grade just indicated. If he will not be satisfied with truth in the form of tautology, that is to say, if he will not be content with empty husks, then he will always exchange truths for illusions. (81)

Nietzsche’s argument bears remarkable relevance to my discussion, with material “truth” corresponding to the indeterminate white body and “conventions of language” corresponding to the ideo-linguistically constructed “real-white”/“passing-white” difference. Indeed, we mistake the “conventions” for “truth” because we are reluctant to admit the “tautology”—i.e., that we call the body “passing-white” not because it is really “passing-white” but simply *because we let ourselves call it “passing-white.”* Readers of passing fiction believe the protagonist’s “actual blackness” to be “truth,” not a linguistically wrought “illusion” which even entraps the author.

It is worth noting that Nietzsche attributes our misunderstanding to “forgetfulness,” pointing out that “metaphorical,” “rhetorical” and thus fictive representations of reality, “after long usage, seem to a people to be fixed, canonical, and binding [as truth]” (84). If the long history of language has made us “forget” the actual gap between linguistic order and chaotic

reality, then I believe that we have to keep “reminding” ourselves of the gap, as paradoxical as this attempt may be due to its inevitable dependence on language. Such a project would necessitate a language that “defamiliarizes” familiar concepts to address the chaotic reality behind the smooth and ordered surface that language presents to us. Furthermore, this “defamiliarizing” language would call for those readers who are ready to engage it in its inevitable awkwardness, complexity and unorthodoxy. By delving into conflicts and contradictions—intentional or unintentional on the part of the authors—in Faulkner’s, Johnson’s and Larsen’s writings, I tried to be such a reader, while striving to make my own critical language at once “defamiliarizing” and articulate. It almost felt as if I had to be my 2000 self, whose unfamiliarity with English paradoxically exempted me from the language’s deceptive influence, and my present, more discursively competent (but ideologically vulnerable) self at the same time. I sincerely hope that, in one way or another, my dissertation has evaded the ideologically correct language and captured the complex, uncategorizable and irreducible reality of human existence.

## Notes

### Introduction

<sup>1</sup> In his study of blackness in Euro-American ideological contexts, Anthony Appiah argues that even genes are not a definitive indicator of racial difference; disproving the claim of nineteenth-century race sciences, “[w]hat modern genetics shows is that there is no such underlying racial essence” (39). Indeed, Appiah reports, “[a]part from the visible morphological characteristics of skin, hair, and bone, by which we are inclined to assign people to the broadest racial categories—black, white, yellow—there are few genetic characteristics to be found in the population of England that are not found in similar proportions in Zaire or in China, and few too (though more) that are found in Zaire but not in similar proportions in China or in England” (35). Racial passing puts to an extreme this lack of physical difference between races. While, as Appiah suggests, “the visible morphological characteristics of skin, hair, and bone” may give us a rationale for racial classification, a “passer”’s visual indeterminacy even nullifies such clues.

<sup>2</sup> Robyn Wiegman clarifies the interconnection between white ideology and the binarized racial categories of America in her observation that “the black/white axis works to secure the tenuousness of race to a framework of stable boundaries, which in turn provides the necessary grounding for the ideology of white supremacy” (9). As the American “one-drop rule” reads passing-whiteness automatically as blackness, the real-white/passing-white difference endorses, and also is endorsed by, white ideology just as “the black/white axis,” by helping order the boundless diversity of human beings into a hierarchy with whites on top.

<sup>3</sup> Elaine K. Ginsberg points out how passing compounds generally assumed notions of race, such as the existence of essential racial identity and the body as physical evidence for that

identity: “Whatever the rationale, both the process and the discourse of passing interrogate the ontology of identity categories and their construction. For the possibility of passing challenges a number of problematic and even antithetical assumptions about identities, the first of which is that some identity categories are inherent and unalterable essences: presumably one cannot pass for something one *is not* unless there is some other, pre-passing, identity that one *is*. Further, passing forces reconsideration of the cultural logic that the physical body is the site of identic intelligibility” (4).

<sup>4</sup>To challenge this invisible hegemony of whiteness, Rebecca Aanerud calls for critics’ foregrounding of the covert operation of whiteness in the works where all the characters are “unmarked”-ly white: “Reading whiteness into texts like *The Awakening* that are not overtly about race is an essential step toward disrupting whiteness as the unchallenged norm. Moreover, this critical reading practice will inevitably lead to a more complex and thoughtful understanding of whiteness and race in general. As readers of U.S. fiction and culture, we cannot avoid the politics of race that informs both the production and the reception of all texts. We must recognize that race is a vital and constant component of our literature even when all the characters are white” (43). My dissertation attempts to do this dismantling on the level of language and narrative, by exposing the “unmarked whiteness” of the logic—especially the assumption of the real-white/passing-white difference—that controls the work’s representation of racial passing and our interpretation of it.

<sup>5</sup>As suggested by this example, the act of defining “whiteness” already entails wielding the power of “white supremacy,” thus attesting to the mutual reinforcement Mason Stokes finds between the two terms: “In part, white supremacy makes whiteness possible because it allows whiteness the space of moderation and normality that it needs to survive. White supremacy, so

often imagined as extreme, allows whiteness once again its status as the nonthreatening, as the good. White supremacy, then, becomes something of a scapegoat for whiteness, the convenient location of white violence and lawlessness, distracting our attention from the violence and lawlessness of whiteness itself” (13).

<sup>6</sup> Naomi Zack accurately points out that Harlem Renaissance writers contributed paradoxically to the perpetuation of the “one-drop rule” and, by implication, of the idea of white racial purity: “it [one-drop rule] has survived slavery to this day, partly because it was taken up by black Americans themselves during the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and partly because it reinforces both black and white myths of white racial purity: to be white, an American need to have no known nonwhite ancestor, which is to say that to be white one must be purely white” (xvii).

<sup>7</sup> Valerie Smith’s study of passing fiction points out how, despite its subversive potential, racial passing often undergoes discursive containment in the system of binary racial difference as well as in the stereotypical images of “passing as betrayal, blackness as self-denial, whiteness as comfort.” Thus, she continues, classic passing narratives “become sites where antiracist and white supremacist ideologies converge, encouraging their black readers to stay in their places” (43-44).

<sup>8</sup> As Carol Roh Spaulding points out (and my reading of individual passing novels will demonstrate), the stability/instability duality of racial passing manifests itself also in the mixed-race protagonist’s conflict over his or her racial position. Spaulding argues that mixed-race characters, “serv[ing] a kind of barometric function [and] revealing the racial tensions embedded in the text,” eventually reach “a crisis point in the narrative when they are forced to confront in some manner their indeterminate racial status” (Spaulding 98).

<sup>9</sup>These endings' resistance to finalizing a white body's "black" identity is particularly noteworthy when contrasted with other passing novels from the early-twentieth-century America. As Sterling Brown points out in his 1937 study, most passing novels of the era follow the prototypical conclusion of the passer's racial homecoming: "Negro novelists urge his unhappiness, until he is summoned back to his people by the spirituals, or their full-throated laughter, or their simple sweet ways" (144). For example, the ending of Walter White's *Flight* (1926), while registering the passer's "white" body ("brilliant gold of her hair"), "frees" the passing protagonist Mimi Daquin, a successful dress designer in white society, only by bringing her back to black identity: "'Free! Free! Free!' she whispered exultantly as with firm tread she went down the steps. '*Petit Jean* [an extramarital son between Mimi and a black man]—my own people—and happiness!' was the song in her heart as she happily strode through the dawn, the rays of the morning sun dancing lightly upon the more brilliant gold of her hair . . ." (300). George S. Schuyler's *Black No More* (1931), too, follows the convention by creating a denouement with passers' embracement of black identity—despite the work's anomaly that its passing characters are either "blacks" who have gained a white look through a medical operation or "whites" whose part-black ancestry is not revealed until late in the story. To facilitate his application of racial binary, Schuyler even darkens the characters' bodies at the novel's conclusion. Here, framed in "a photograph of a happy crowd of Americans arrayed in the latest abbreviated bathing suits on the sands at Cannes," the passing characters "were quite as dusky as little Matthew Crookman Fisher [the protagonist's mixed-race, dark-skinned son] who played in a sandpile at their feet" (179-80).

<sup>10</sup>Nathan Huggins points out how the dominance of white-oriented value system, as well as black artists' inevitable accommodation to it, confounded and even undermined the Harlem



Renaissance's project of promoting blacks' self-expression and self-determination: "As long as the white norms remained unchallenged, no matter what the Negro's reaction to them, he always needed to return to the white judge to measure his achievement. It would have required a much more profound rejection of white values than was likely in the 1920s for Negroes to have freed themselves for creating the desired self-generating and self-confident Negro art" (306-07).

## Chapter 1

<sup>1</sup> One of a few exceptions to such a tendency, Barbara Ladd's study delves into the subjectivity that interracializes Bon and elucidates why, "[a]lthough both [Quentin and his father] imagine Bon as a creole possessed of the expected creole decadence and capable of corrupting the innocence of Sutpens, it is only in Quentin's narrative that Bon is constructed as black" (540). Ladd asserts that both Mr. Compson and Quentin, as historically conditioned subjects, invest in their narrative reconstruction their own anxiety over America's constantly embattled providential design. Thus, Ladd argues, their fashioning of Bon varies due to the different historical forces that frustrated the American mission—i.e., Old World colonialism for Mr. Compson as the first postbellum generation, and racial "amalgamation" for his son. And, alienated from the lost cause, the narrators find their own identities in the respective Bons they construct: "it is really not very far, in terms of metaphorical development, from Jason's creation of Bon (and by extension of himself) as cynical or fatalistic European charged with the seduction of the South through the unveiling of the white negro—the beautiful octoroon woman or 'apotheosis of chattelry' (*Absalom* 89)—to Quentin's creation of Bon (and by extension *himself*) as the white negro, a man who has inherited both the violence and the illegitimacy, and whose blood demands vengeance. Both Jason's and Quentin's accounts are dramatizations of the white

southerner's sense of his own construction by postbellum history" (Ladd 542).

<sup>2</sup>Despite his acknowledgment that "we never learn whether in fact Bon has black blood" (117), James Snead's analysis of race and narrative in *Absalom, Absalom!* also fails to attend to Bon's white-looking body in its endless indeterminacy. Noting that Shreve manages to expose "figures of merging" (e.g., Bon as an interracial Sutpen) of which the preceding Southern narrators dared not conceive, Snead argues that Shreve's narrative operation still has a limitation:

Shreve finds the black in the most intimate circles of Southern and Northern white society . . . but his "admission" seems a non sequitur. Even were the black to be restored, the "carrier" would resist total signification here, as in *Light in August*. To Rosa, Clytie has an "inscrutable coffee-colored face" (*Absalom* 110); Sutpen cannot "read" the truth about his first wife from her "parchment-colored" face (*Absalom* 268); the parchment is written in an ink that was black until society made black invisible. Bon, the most "invisible" black, becomes real only by crossing the black shadow of the fence posts. "Crossing the fence" in every sense means the death of the black. Dead, he vanishes: "I never saw him. I never even saw him dead" (*Absalom* 121). The final message to be suppressed by the chain of carriers is that the tale, like the "natural formation" of color designation, contains hiatus-like joints, each of which may sooner or later develop sprains, challenging its latent inaccuracies, particularly concerning its black figures. (131-32)

Here, Snead ascribes the white narrators' failure in "total signification," exemplified by the lack of definitive blackness, to their willful concealment of the "sprains" symptomizing the "latent inaccuracies" of the restored "black figures." In so doing, however, the critic predicates his

discussion upon Bon's blackness as "accurate" information and accordingly upon the very white subjectivity that it has to critique. Given the significant role that racial passing plays in the novel's thematic and structural complexity, I would argue, Faulkner seems to intend the not-black-enough bodies to indicate a deeper "sprain"—namely the fact that the narrators' "restoring" move itself draws arbitrarily upon reading characters with inadequate bodily evidence as "interracial" or "black."

<sup>3</sup> We can locate the implicit working of white subjectivity also in commentators' New Critical impulse toward artistic unity, whose irrelevance to *Absalom, Absalom!* not only affected the book's early reception but also formed a detrimental "trend in its future development" (Engler 221). Terry Eagleton points out that, while celebrating democracy of interpretations, New Criticism's synthetic approach to texts paradoxically served the ideological status quo which, in an American racial context, took whites' discursive legitimacy for granted: "Pluralism was all very well, provided that it did not violate hierarchical order; the varied contingencies of the poem's texture could be pleurably savoured, so long as its ruling structure remained intact. Oppositions were to be tolerated, as long as they could finally be fused into harmony. The limits of New Criticism were essentially the limits of liberal democracy: the poem, John Crowe Ransom wrote, was 'like a democratic state, so to speak, which realizes the ends of a state without sacrificing the personal character of its citizens.' It would be interesting to know what the Southern slaves would have made of this assertion" (43-44).

<sup>4</sup> With such a binarizing function built into the very medium of representation, even those works that feature passing characters to question racial hierarchy have drawn upon the same hierarchy unwittingly. Gayle Wald's study of twentieth-century American "passing narratives" illustrates how they as a genre build upon, rather than undermine, the distinction between white

and black. She points out that, as a discursive act of stepping from one to the other binary division, racial passing predicates itself upon “a negotiation of categories that are authorized by racial ideology”: “whereas passing is conditioned on the radical instability of the racial sign, the fluidity of race that it appropriates is a function of its (socially produced) stability in marking out the binary possibilities of the national narrative. As my readings of various passing narratives have demonstrated, representation is the means by which race establishes social power—hence the metaphor of a dividing ‘line’ between black and white identities; yet it is through representation that we are able to envision challenges to the color line’s authority” (187). As I will argue in this chapter, *Absalom, Absalom!* indicates Faulkner’s struggle with this entrapment by making infinitely unclear the very existence of passing.

<sup>5</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr. regards race as “the ultimate trope of difference” (5) which does not signify substantial reality but only introduces a fictive order to the infinite diversity of human beings. He claims that such an arbitrary language of race reaffirms itself as authoritative classification through representational “popular usages” which repeatedly “inscribe” in one’s thinking the figuratively “described” racial differences: “The sense of difference defined in popular usages of the term ‘race’ has both described and inscribed differences of language, belief system, artistic tradition, and gene pool, as well as all sorts of supposedly natural attributes” (5). Mr. Compson’s use of “the octoroon” shows that Gates’s theory applies also to mixed-race as a racial category. Supposedly describing a physical feature of the woman, the term of address at the same time inscribes and thus imposes a stable interracial identity on her confusing “magnolia-colored” body.

<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, the narrators’ storytelling skips the question whether she is really mixed-race, and instead concerns how to picture an already mixed-race character. Constructed as

an “interracial object,” she undergoes a fully subjective portrayal influenced by common stereotypes about mixed-race females. Looking for the cause of Henry’s murder of Bon, Mr. Compson conceives of her as “a woman with a face like a tragic magnolia, the eternal female, the eternal Who-suffers” (91) saved from slavery but sexually exploited by Bon. When Mr. Compson highlights her sexuality by referring to her as “a woman created of by and for darkness whom the artist Beardsley might have dressed, in a soft flowing gown designed not to infer bereavement or widowhood but to dress some interlude of slumbrous and fatal insatiation, of passionate and inexorable hunger of the flesh” (157), his description fits into the mold of the “tragic octoroon”: “an Anglo-American stereotype before the Civil War, [who] was usually a beautiful girl with only the slightest trace of Negro blood and no dialect; a conventional victim, threatened by the slave owner’s lust. . . . The beauty and innocence of the fated mixed-race heroine are, of course, a male fantasy, inevitably seeking to invest the object of desire with an exciting element of forbidden fruit. Behind the innocence (her whiteness) lies the temptation of the sexually exotic (her blackness)” (Malchow 174). In Mr. Compson’s imagination which assumes Bon’s whiteness, “the octoroon,” a woman “created of” dark skin “by” the dark deeds of white men, is fatally “created for” the same deeds by whites like Bon. Here, somewhat betraying his own “male fantasy,” the narrator renders her potentially misleading “magnolia”-color as “darkness,” thus foregrounding her “sexually exotic” African part (“passionate and inexorable hunger of the flesh”) rather than her desexualized paleness appropriate for “bereavement or widowhood.” And, as a reference point for later narrators, this cliché-ridden depiction by Mr. Compson in turn controls Quentin and Shreve’s reconstruction; tossed about by whites’ affairs—of Bon, his mother (both considered as white at this point) and their scheming lawyer—“the octoroon” appears in the story repeatedly as a suffering figure, wailing over the

loss of her guardian lover (249) and then over the poverty it causes (271).

<sup>7</sup> Just as with his “octoroon” mother, Charles Etienne as Mr. Compson’s mixed-race narrative object undergoes a stereotyping peculiar to the nineteenth-century Anglo-American discourse on “half-breeds.” Describing him as “the boy with his light bones and womanish hands struggling with what anonymous avatar of intractable Mule, whatever tragic and barren clown was his bound fellow and complement beneath his first father’s curse” (162), Mr. Compson juxtaposes Charles Etienne with the “Mule” which bears a symbolical association with racial hybridity: “The most common analogy [concerning racial hybrids] drawn from agricultural breeding practice was that of the mule (*mulatto* itself may be derived from the Spanish word for mule), a useful but ill-tempered and, of course, infertile, beast, fit for its task but awkward to handle” (Malchow 179). Somewhat informed of Charles Etienne’s adulthood, e.g., his emotional instability as well as begetting of a mentally challenged son, Mr. Compson tries to authenticate his version by presenting these stereotypes as the character’s deep-rooted attribute (“his bound fellow and complement”) that determines his future life. Also, Mr. Compson’s depiction of Charles Etienne’s “light bones and womanish hands” bases itself upon the contemporary stereotype of mixed-race emasculation: “The half-breed man . . . was often represented as somehow feminine in his emotional/biological instability” (Malchow 183).

<sup>8</sup> Malchow’s analysis of Victorian cultural imagination finds the same Gothicizing mechanism in the making of vampire and that of “half-breed”: “there is also lurking in the vampire the powerful suggestion of an explicitly racial obsession—that of the ‘half-breed.’ Both vampire and half-breed are creatures who transgress boundaries and are caught between two worlds. Both are hidden threats—disguised presences bringing pollution of the blood. Both may be able to ‘pass’ among the unsuspecting, although both bear hidden signs of their difference,

which the wary may read” (168). In the quoted scene, Faulkner has Clytie transcend such a Gothic horror in the boys’ mind, thus suggesting how the white-dominant discourse on racial mixture fails to comprehend the issue in its bodily dimension.

<sup>9</sup> J. G. Brister points convincingly to the pre-linguistic, pre-subjective, “semiotic” quality of Rosa’s narrative in the chapter: “Rosa is presented as a subject ‘in process’ and ‘on trial,’ as her long middle chapter of italicized monologue attests. . . . Rosa’s italicized monologues are also an incursion of the semiotic on the narrative level” (46). Here, yet to gain stable subjectivity with which to signify the world and put it in order, Rosa has little linguistic control over the chaotic reality she experiences.

<sup>10</sup> Tzvetan Todorov points to the “scientific mode of thinking” at work in racial categorization which puts to reasonable order the chaotic diversity of humanity: “on the one hand human beings differ in physical appearance, and on the other they differ in social behavior. Racism begins when one proceeds to reason that the two series cannot possibly be independent of one another; the first must vary as the second, or vice versa. Now, this is a typically scientific mode of reasoning, since science consists in the effort to replace chaos with order” (372).

<sup>11</sup> Betina Entzminger’s study of whiteness and homosexuality in *Absalom, Absalom!* perceptively locates a continuity between the dissolution of difference in narrative and that in cultural identity such as race: “*Absalom, Absalom!* emphasizes the lack of definitive borders between black and white (Charles passes for white and the reader and characters ‘discover’ that he has black blood only near the end of the novel), between the past and present (the narrative shifts in time without demarcation or warning), between individuals (the narrative also shifts without demarcation or warning from one narrative voice to another), and even between thoughts themselves (as sentences are often unpunctuated and blend into one another). Through these

techniques, the narrative's blurring and crossing of boundaries unsettles the culture's insistence on seeing other types of difference, such as those related to race, gender, and sexuality, in black and white" (91).

<sup>12</sup> In her study of postmodern historiographical metafiction, of which critics have rightly called *Absalom, Absalom!* a modern precursor, Linda Hutcheon aptly argues that the genre's problematization of history construction amounts to that of narrative itself, especially its "imposition of meaning and formal coherence on the chaos of events": "many theorists today have pointed to narrative as the one concern that envelops all of these [subjectivity, intertextuality, reference, ideology], for the process of narrativization has come to be seen as a central form of human comprehension, of imposition of meaning and formal coherence on the chaos of events" (121).

<sup>13</sup> Anticipating the Derridian "signifying chain," Faulkner also ascribes language's incapability of mirroring reality to its self-contained circularity. According to Derrida, in an endless series of differentiative deferments, a signifier refers not to a real presence but only to another signifier: "One could call *play* the absence of the transcendental signified as limitlessness of play" (50). The "shadows" Quentin and Shreve retrieve in their narrative re-creation turn out to be not of physical bodies ("flesh and blood which had lived and died") but of yet another set of narratively evoked images ("what were . . . shades"): "the two of them creating between them, out of the rag-tag and bob-ends of old tales and talking, people who perhaps had never existed at all anywhere, who, shadows, were shadows not of flesh and blood which had lived and died but shadows in turn of what were (to one of them at least, to Shreve) shades too" (*Absalom* 243).

<sup>14</sup> The 1960s and 70s saw the dominance of the school that, regarding the chapter as a



case of “success of imagination,” “tended to accept the Quentin/Shreve version on the sheer strength of its imaginative force and evocativeness” (Engler 234-35). Engler rightly points out the school’s theoretical problem in privileging particular narrators’ imagination over others’: “If they assert the hypothesis that ‘history is not “out there,” but is a function of the consciousness of the historian’ (See Henderson 247), they should also concede that all reconstruction is but subjective conjecture, exhibiting only the prejudices of its author” (238). As my reading goes, Faulkner’s technique not only depicts Quentin and Shreve’s exertion of imagination but more specifically follows the process in which they overcome narrative distance to reach real-life occurrences. Indeed, Faulkner makes a careful distinction between imaginative re-creation and direct sighting when Mr. Compson portrays Sutpen’s troops in such a way that “it seemed to Quentin that he could actually see them” (154). Tellingly, Quentin soon realizes that the imagined picture has already reduced the complex original accessible only to those present at the scene: “he could see it; he might even have been there. Then he thought *No. If I had been there I could not have seen it this plain*” (155).

<sup>15</sup> This strategy foregrounds Faulkner’s own subjectivity comparable to his character-narrators’ desire to control their narrative object. Indeed, as Philip Weinstein perceptively points out, one can detect such a parallel in Faulkner’s “own subjective lineaments writ large in the lives and landscapes of his shaping,” since his “masculine urge toward self-ratification appears everywhere in the novels themselves, aggressively in the dynastic ambitions of a Sartoris or McCaslin or Flem Snopes, but just as often defensively as the need for sanctuary . . . or as the intensifying narrative desire for completion” (1). For Weinstein, with all its potentially “subject-altering” critique of the ideologically endorsed objectification of otherness, *Absalom, Absalom!* rather ends up “subject-constituting” in that the very critique

serves to structure “Faulkner” as an authoritative representer/representative of Southern ideologized discourse: “*Absalom’s* ‘illimitable courage for rhetoric’ (*Selected Letters* 188) registers less the subject-altering encounter with the voice and body of the Other than the subject-constituting drama of ‘Faulkner’ (through his various but kindred-voiced narrators) quarreling with—but more deeply insisting upon—the terrible beauty of his trope-saturated inheritance” (142).

<sup>16</sup> Faulkner’s use of the symbolically charged “parchment color,” echoing Joe Christmas in *Light in August*, indicates his observation of race, especially racial mixture, as cultural inscription rather than bodily feature. As Doreen Fowler points out, “Faulkner’s choice of parchment-color skin denotes that otherness is not determined by skin color (or any other physical trait) but by what other people project onto physical characteristics. Parchment is a sheet of writing material prepared from the skin of a sheep or a goat, and Joe’s parchment-colored skin symbolizes that Joe is a blank slate on which others write, that his identity as racial other is culturally inscribed” (171). Indeed, Quentin and Shreve’s reading of “parchment color” into the “white”-looking body of Bon’s mother, opening up the possibility of passing, lays the ground for their later inscription of “interracial otherness” and construction of a culturally and ideologically acceptable discourse.

<sup>17</sup> Not only the “four of them” state but also its further fusion into “the two,” which would allow Quentin and Shreve to experience scenes of the mid-nineteenth-century South from Henry’s and Bon’s perspectives, shows the narrators’ paradoxical reliance upon distinct subjectivity. Compounded into “just two—Charles-Shreve and Quentin-Henry” (267), they restore Henry’s thoughts as regards repudiating his birthright (which were inaccessible to the “four of them” in their prior visit to the same scene [237]) through italicized interior monologue:

So that now it was not two but four of them riding the two horses through the dark over the frozen December ruts of that Christmas eve: four of them and then just two—Charles-Shreve and Quentin-Henry, the two of them both believing that Henry was thinking *He* (meaning his father) *has destroyed us all*, not for one moment thinking *He* (meaning Bon) *must have known or at least suspected this all the time; that's why he has acted as he has, why he did not answer my letters last summer nor write to Judith, why he has never asked her to marry him*; believing that that must have occurred to Henry.

(267)

Here, though the Charles-Shreve, Quentin-Henry fusion gives a direct access to Henry's mental process on the Christmas eve of 1860, Faulkner describes their epistemological move as "believing"—an act that entails subjective agency. Indeed, at the very moment of retrieval, the passage has already edited what Henry actually said to himself ("He has destroyed us all") to fit into the story Quentin and Shreve prepare. In order that the interior remark will not belie their version of Henry, Quentin and Shreve clarify the originally ambiguous "he" reference with a parenthetical annotation that assigns "his father," and exclude the likely possibility of "Bon." The statement that "He must have known or at least suspected this all the time" existed nowhere in Henry's mind because it is what Henry was "not for one moment thinking." Juxtaposed and thus contrasted with this forged content, what Henry actually thought comes to bear connotations—such as his naïve trust in Bon—that are compatible with Quentin and Shreve's ongoing reconstruction.

<sup>18</sup> *Absalom, Absalom!*'s revision process also attests Shreve's virtual control of the bivouac scene. For, before publication, Faulkner reassigned the segment from Shreve to the

compounded viewpoint without changing its content much: “In this chapter Faulkner made a final change in the viewpoint of narration. In the manuscript the account of the Confederate retreat was part of Shreve’s narration. . . . In the book this passage—an italicized interruption of Shreve’s recital—is presented as a shared visualization of the action instead of an oral account of it” (Langford 39).

<sup>19</sup> Once it interracializes Bon, Shreve’s imagination significantly limits the character’s subjectivity, which had earlier operated in the form of interior monologue, to that of “seeing”: “*Bon pauses and looks at Henry; now he can see Henry’s face*” (284). What little epistemological agency Bon keeps, however, suffers a further discursive containment, since Shreve’s representation makes Bon see “*the whites of Henry’s eyes*” (285), thus symbolically foregrounding the “whiteness” of Henry’s gaze that now differentiates Bon as racial other.

<sup>20</sup> Faulkner suggests the permanent indeterminacy of the book also through Quentin’s 1909 interview with Henry in the final chapter. The conversation, far from clarifying Henry’s motive for murdering Bon, turns out a circular, near-palindromic exchange of sentences which, symbolizing the impossibility of a straightforward causal chain, goes no deeper than Henry’s will “*to die*” (298) keeping his inner truth never verbalized.

## Chapter 2

<sup>1</sup> In her psychoanalytic study of Faulkner’s novels, Doreen Fowler makes a careful distinction between Lacan’s use of “Other” and “other.” According to Fowler’s explication, a baby identifies itself with the mother whom it later begins to recognize as “other” (though still identical with it) as it develops a sense of subjectivity in the “mirror stage.” Then it “castrates” itself from this “other” and desires the authority of the “Other,” the father, who provides

meanings by (fictively) ordering the chaotic world through performative signification: “Lacan pointedly distinguishes between the Other (*Autre*) with a capital *O* and the other with a small *o*. The other that is designated with the lowercase *o* originates with the mother, the first figure in whom the subject identifies itself, as well as the first from which it splits off. The use of the same word, changed only by the use of the upper- and lowercase first letter, calls attention to the metonymic substitution that takes place in the oedipal moment. As the mother is excluded, (made other), an Other, the father as imagined originator of being, is substituted for her and becomes the object of desire” (9).

Fowler’s reading of the distinction further demonstrates the continuity between Lacan’s theory and Faulkner’s representation of Southern race relations. Lacan’s use of the lowercase “other” in the quoted passage indicates the paradoxical sameness/difference between the speaking subject and the addressee, as well as the linguistic imposition of difference as a symbolic “castration” forced by the ordering law of the “Other.” Echoing this, Faulkner describes Chick and Aleck Sander as inseparable childhood companions who “spent a good part of [their] life [together] . . . when they were little” (12). Faulkner goes so far as to suggest their sharing of perceptive subjectivity: at the cabin of Aleck’s mother they eat “the food tasting the same to each” (12). Tellingly, Sheriff Hampton, an embodiment of the “symbolic order,” cannot but hierarchize the pair and see the “black” Aleck as the “white” Chick’s “secretary” (155).

<sup>2</sup> Suggesting the connection between whites’ creation of their racial identity in social practice and that in literary imagination, Toni Morrison’s wording echoes Faulkner’s when her *Playing in the Dark* points out that, despite its tacit self-recognition as a sufficient entity in and of itself, the white American literature has always relied for an existential foothold on blackness: “a dark, abiding, signing Africanist presence” (5).

<sup>3</sup> Robyn Wiegman's study of race in America documents its categorical shift from "natural history" to "human sciences" during the early-nineteenth century. While the former, based upon empirical observations, comprehended race "as a product of climate and civilization, as a variation within the human species" (30), the latter's essentialist approach "produced not simply the constancy of race as an unchanging, biological feature, but an inherent and incontrovertible difference of which skin was only the most visible indication" (31) and thus provided the white-supremacist ideology with a theoretical ground. Wiegman's analysis offers a historical testimony to Faulkner's representation of Southern race relations as she argues, drawing on Michel Foucault's theory of panoptic discipline, that whites' "community gazes" work to police the problematics of such "visible indication" through at once "reading," "rendering," and "producing" the dichotomized racial difference: "The binary cleavage of race to which this panoptic system applies radiated its signficatory value through the ever-present production of community gazes, inscriptions that read and rendered the truth of the body and, in doing so, produced the experiential truth of the subject as well. This experience has and continues to situate every subject in U.S. culture within the panoptic vision of racial meanings, regardless of the extent to which whiteness prefigures its own seeming invisibility" (40).

<sup>4</sup> Regarding women's potential for escaping the language of the symbolic order, Julia Kristeva proposes "semiotic" language, which, derived from the pre-Oedipal mother-child unity and characterized as orderless, subversive, and heterogeneous, can embrace the world in its chaotic state and thus complicate the speaker's subjectivity: "thus poetic language making free with the language code; music, dancing, painting, reordering the psychic drives which have not been harnessed by the dominant symbolization systems . . . all seek out and make use of this heterogeneity and the ensuing fracture of a symbolic code which can no longer 'hold' its

(speaking) subjects” (30). Curiously, Miss Habersham’s language achieves similar effects with all its “non-semiotic” plainness and clarity. For, while the semiotic registering of the world defies reductive ordering, the old woman’s language—just like Chick’s that calls for “just suppos[ing]” unreduced possibilities (79)—signifies the “unsignifiability” of such an ordering language; Miss Habersham’s “repeated” and “paraphrased” statement, as well as Chick’s original, expresses the need to “dig up” and “bring to town” Vinson Gowrie’s body—the origin of the, in fact, empty “murderous nigger” signification—which, tellingly, turns out to be someone else’s (102) and then absent (162).

<sup>5</sup> Karl F. Zender’s analysis of Lucas in “The Fire and the Hearth” provides a critical response to “postmodernist critics” (he quotes Clark as an example) who, focusing heavily on ideological containment, disapprove of “the limit [Lucas’s characterization] suggests on Faulkner’s ability to envision alternative forms of black male identity” (86). Applying Homi K. Bhabha’s theory of “hybridizing” cooption of colonial representation, Zender reads an empowerment into Lucas’s self-admitted dependence on Old Carothers’s voice. Zender argues that, to claim “black self-affirmation and . . . the integrity of the black family,” Lucas appropriates the white patriarch’s discourse through “invert[ing] the relation of dominance and subordination” between “Old Carothers’s dominant sense of racial superiority” and “his subordinate sense of family feeling for the black descendants ensuring from those relations” (95). As my argument goes, Faulkner’s development of Lucas’s taciturn character in *Intruder in the Dust* enables the old man to unsettle, rather than exploit, “the relation of dominance and subordination”; in so doing, the novelist questions the very master-slave dialectic built in the ideologized language of the South.

<sup>6</sup> Toni Morrison theorizes the situation where whites appropriate the silent black body by

imaginatively making it respond to their self-subjectifying language. She points out that white writers have constructed a coherent white American identity (which, given the actual “internal conflicts,” is highly problematical) through investing discursively in the silenced Africanist presence and making the silence speak for them in their literary creation: “artists—and the society that bred them—transferred internal conflicts to a ‘blank darkness,’ to conveniently bound and violently silenced black bodies” (38).

<sup>7</sup> Faulkner seems to find in the dissolution of hierarchical tension a clue toward liberation from Southern racial ideology. Long bothered by his childhood failure to pay Lucas back for a rescue and a meal—a failure which in his mind has reflected upon “his masculinity and his white blood” (26)—Chick finally “frees” himself from the highly racialized sense of dishonor when his interior dialogue with the old man abolishes the differences between the addressing subject and the addressed object, between the superior and the inferior, and between the dominant and the dominated:

and he saying to Lucas: *I was the boy who when you gave me half of your dinner tried to pay you with some things which people in those days called seventy cents' worth of money and so all I could think of to save my face was to fling it on the floor? Dont you remember?* and Lucas: *Was that me?* or vice versa, turned around and it was Lucas saying *I was the man when you throwed your money on the floor and wouldn't pick it up I had to have two niggers pick it up and hand it back to you? Dont you remember?* and he this time: *Was that me?* Because it was over now. He had turned the other cheek and it had been accepted. He was free.  
(26-27)

Besides having it both ways with the addresser/addressee dyad, this inner conversation



invalidates the underlying hierarchy itself, since in either case the addressee—not answering the addresser’s question but rather asking back, “*Was that me?*”—neither “assumes” nor “refuses” the addresser’s self-defining “evocation” of a racialized hierarchical relationship. With the original master-slave dialectic nullified this way, “the other cheek” Chick turns to express his surrender gets an “acceptance,” not a subjugating slap, from the imaginary Lucas.

<sup>8</sup> Erik Dussere is one of a few critics who point to the problematics of the scene. While acknowledging that “Lucas’s preoccupation with *business* debt and repayment” defines him as an economic agent equal to the white Gavin and liberates the black man from the paternalistic race relations based on “debt of honor” (53), Dussere also stresses Lucas’s simultaneous containment in the Southern social system: “Because Lucas’s insistence upon repayment is presented within the context of his Southern gentlemanliness, because his authority to insist is derived from his aristocratic lineage, he is able to make such a demand without actually challenging the structure of honor” (54).

### Chapter 3

<sup>1</sup> I find Kawash’s apparently race-free term “cultural logic” at once arguable and appropriate, because this actually white-oriented paradigm does present itself as racially neutral so as to incorporate even those whom it oppresses. Whiteness studies investigate how white-dominant ideology has presented itself as a race-less, unmarked norm. For example, while cautioning us to note “its constructedness, specificity, and localness” (16), Ruth Frankenberg characterizes the general working of whiteness as “mak[ing] itself invisible precisely by asserting its normalcy, its transparency, in contrast with the marking of others on which its transparency depends” (6).

<sup>2</sup> Gayle Wald's study of twentieth-century American passing narratives illustrates how, by reading a white-looking body as "actually part-black," they as a genre draw unwittingly upon the same dominant ideology of racial difference that they critique. She points out that, as a discursive act of stepping from one to the other binary division, racial passing as portrayed in those works predicates itself upon "a negotiation of categories that are authorized by racial ideology": "[W]hereas passing is conditioned on the radical instability of the racial sign, the fluidity of race that it appropriates is a function of its (socially produced) stability in marking out the binary possibilities of the national narrative. . . . [R]epresentation is the means by which race establishes social power . . . yet it is through representation that we are able to envision challenges to the color line's authority" (187).

<sup>3</sup> For example, Neil Brooks' study of U.S. passing novels correctly points out that "Johnson's narrator relies on America's 'certainties' about race to destabilize those very categories" (180) but does not delve into Johnson's own "reliance" in creating such a narrator. One of the few exceptions to this critical tendency, Jennifer Schulz's analysis of *The Autobiography* and *Along This Way* reveals how Johnson constructs his autobiographical self out of the Ex-Colored Man by "re-see[ing], although not . . . remov[ing] or discount[ing], the limitations and fictions embedded in the American social contract [of race] during the early twentieth century, which condition the ex-colored man's experience" (34).

<sup>4</sup> I hold that, since a text reflects—if in subtle, complex and even contradictory ways—its context and vice versa, close analysis of Johnson's discourse will help us better understand the author who wrote with a particular set of motives as well as the socio-cultural context that affected the way he thought and wrote. As I argue below, New Criticism has also affected the Johnson scholarship by encouraging an actually white-oriented reading under the name of "unity

of meaning.” See Note 6 for more discussion.

<sup>5</sup> Du Bois’ term points to how a history of psychological oppression has forced blacks to internalize white subjectivity—as well as the black objectivity it automatically assigns to them—in their self-image and self-expression. On Johnson’s use of the concept, Robert Stepto’s much quoted study observes that “the Ex-Coloured Man radically reduces this [duality] to a nearly grotesque oneness: ‘the view-point of a *coloured* man’” (Stepto 113). I would argue that the white-dominant, mainstream American perspective still polices the Ex-Colored Man’s thinking even as he makes such a “radical reduction.” Johnson later elaborates “the viewpoint of a *colored* man” (14) as “look[ing] at everything through the prism of his relationship to society as a *colored* man” (55) where, of course, “society” means that which operates under white hegemony. Also, as my thesis goes, the Ex-Colored Man’s self-definition as “a *colored* man,” as well as the reductive thinking it enables, derives from the white subjectivity he has assimilated.

<sup>6</sup> White subjectivity’s influence upon the act of reading also takes the form of “New Critical” impulse toward artistic unity of meaning. Terry Eagleton exposes the ideological nature of this seemingly universal methodology. He notes that, while celebrating democracy of interpretations, New Criticism’s assumption of “hierarchical order,” “ruling structure” and “harmony” paradoxically served the ideological status quo which, in the American racial context, took whites’ discursive legitimacy for granted: “The limits of New Criticism were essentially the limits of liberal democracy: the poem, John Crowe Ransom wrote, was ‘like a democratic state, so to speak, which realizes the ends of a state without sacrificing the personal character of its citizens.’ It would be interesting to know what the Southern slaves would have made of this assertion” (43-44).

<sup>7</sup> Studies of American “mulatto fiction” show how it draws upon a series of archetypal

plot elements, some of which Johnson utilizes, directly or with some twist, in *The Autobiography*. Judith R. Berzon points to the “rejection” of mixed-race people “by their white fathers and white siblings” as a source of “tragic mulattoes” psychological suffering (52). Sterling Brown notes that urban black novels typically portray “mixed Negroes” as “discontented, aspiring, and therefore tragic” (144). Brown continues that, especially for “the mulatto who ‘passes,’” the genre prepares the plot of homecoming: “Negro novelists urge his unhappiness, until he is summoned back to his people by the spirituals, or their full-throated laughter, or their simple sweet ways” (144).

<sup>8</sup> Paul Gilroy’s study of the “Black Atlantic” intellectual history shows how black discursive agents, whether ex-slave narrators or post-slavery activists, had to negotiate with “the totalising power of universal reason held exclusively by white hands, pens, or publishing houses” (69). As the parameters of “the Enlightenment project”—a hemispheric promotion of the “universal reason”—Gilroy names “the idea of universality, the fixity of meaning, the coherence of the subject, and, of course, the foundational ethnocentrism in which these have all tended to be anchored” (55). In *The Autobiography*, strategically activating this association between rationality and whiteness, Johnson makes the Ex-Colored Man conceptualize emotionality in terms of being “colored.” For instance, what surprises the narrator when he meets his future wife—who is “as white as a lily,” “dressed in white” and “the most dazzlingly white thing I had ever seen”—is the “passionate color” her voice bears (144). When it comes to storytelling, the Ex-Colored Man considers such “color” detrimental due to the logical incoherence it causes. When his mother tells about his white father whom “She loved . . . [and] more, she worshiped” (30), the Ex-Colored Man regards the story as “colored by her feelings” and thus not truthful nor understandable: “All she said was so limited by reserve and so colored by her feelings that it was

but half truth; and so I did not yet fully understand” (26).

<sup>9</sup> The long tradition of autobiography offers many examples of digression from and self-reflective return to the main narrative, such as in Benjamin Franklin’s *Autobiography*: “By my rambling digressions I perceive myself to be grown old. I us’d to write more methodically. But one does not dress for private company as for a public ball. ’Tis perhaps only negligence. . . . To return: I continued . . .” (Franklin 9). As my analysis will show, in marked contrast with Franklin’s race-free approach, the Ex-Colored Man’s treatment of narrative problems indicates his, and Johnson’s own, racial anxiety resulting from their consciousness of a white-dominant audience.

<sup>10</sup> Significantly, this reference to the Ex-Colored Man’s age occurs when he answers the white father’s question, thus indicating Johnson’s strategic insinuation that the narrative’s meticulous register of time results from the character-narrator’s, not the author’s, white-audience consciousness. In remembering the scene, the narrator reads the father’s inquiry as “a test of my intelligence” which he answers to prove himself: “He asked me how old I was; which, of course, he must have done merely to say something more, or perhaps he did so as a test of my intelligence. I replied: ‘Twelve, sir’” (23).

<sup>11</sup> Among the numerous examples available from the slave narrative tradition, Lewis Clarke’s account—of the South’s grievous legal inequality concerning rape—shows a remarkable parallel to Johnson’s configuration of the Ex-Colored Man’s rhetoric:

Kentucky is the best of the slave States, in respect to the laws; but the masters manage to fix things pretty much to their own liking. . . . I can’t tell these respectable people as much as I would like to; but jest think for a minute how you would like to have *your* sisters, and *your* wives, and *your* daughters, completely,

teetotally, and altogether, in the power of a master.—You can picture to yourselves a little, how you would feel; but oh, if I could *tell* you! A slave woman an't allowed to respect herself, if she would. (*Slave Testimony* 155-56)

The Ex-Colored Man's description of being alone "in a strange city" without resource ("money or friends") echoes the ex-slave narrator's of Southern slaves who lack legal protection amid the white-supremacist society. And, as Johnson's narrator emulates in his version, Clarke makes his story effectively poignant not only by challenging his "respectable" white audience to empathize but also by addressing the limitation of that very strategy.

<sup>12</sup> William L. Andrews notes that, at the time of Johnson's composition, the slave narrative format was virtually the only option if a black writer sought a commercial success addressing racial issues to the white-dominant readership (xvi).

<sup>13</sup> These instances of conformity to the slave narrative genre are particularly noteworthy because the opening of *The Autobiography* reverses the traditional "first sentence beginning, 'I was born . . .,' then specifying a place but not a date of birth" (Olney 50)—a convention that attests a slave's lack of education and strong sense of place due to restricted mobility. While identifying his birth year as "a few years after the close of the Civil War," the Ex-Colored Man admits that, though he could "mention the name of the town," he has "only a faint recollection of the place of my birth" (2).

<sup>14</sup> Michel Foucault argues that "the name of the author," itself a text, functions within the network of socio-culturally charged discourses: "It [the author name] points to the existence of certain groups of discourse and refers to the status [i.e., existence, circulation, and operation] of this discourse within a society and culture" (123-24). As my analysis will show, *Along This Way* somewhat exemplifies this theory. Indeed, the authorship Johnson constructs in the text gains its

apparent stability from white-subjective discourse, the dominant discourse of the society in which the work circulated.

<sup>15</sup> Robert E. Fleming documents how, to address the racially “double audience” of *Along This Way*, Johnson had to suppress his negative feelings toward whites: “In spite of the fact that he spent a good bit of time during these prewriting exercises venting his anger at White America, Johnson also reminded himself that the message he was attempting to convey required a ‘delicate’ touch because it was addressed to a ‘double audience’ (Item 110)—his Black readership and the large body of uninitiated Whites who might be brought to understand the African-American point of view” (225).

<sup>16</sup> Johnson’s later re-reference to Matthews’ comment on *The Autobiography*, juxtaposed with its black counterpart from John Rosamond Johnson, also indicates the scene’s racial undertone: “Brander Matthews had expressed a liking for the title, but my brother had thought it was clumsy and too long; he had suggested *The Chameleon*. In the end, I stuck to the original idea of issuing the book without the author’s name, and kept the title that had appealed to me first” (238). In the setting that binarizes the available options into “black” or “white,” Johnson emphasizes the concurrence of his subjectivity (“my original idea” as well as what “had appealed to me first”) with the white mentor’s “liking” which outweighs the black brother’s commentary. Significantly, in this “reasoned and reasonable book” (Fleming 225) full of detailed explanations, Johnson does not offer a reason for dismissing Rosamond’s more logic-oriented critique that the title “was clumsy and too long.”

<sup>17</sup> One can find textual evidence to the parallel between the two audiences in that, while Gilbert’s bicycle shop functions as “a place for the exchange of masculine talk and gossip” (135), Johnson’s use of the pronoun “you” situates the reader in terms of bike-riding as well as male

“gallantry” and flirtation: “I got lots of fun out of the then current gallantry of teaching the art of riding to young ladies, many of whom . . . would with nice little screams turn loose the handle-bar and throw both arms around your neck” (135).

#### Chapter 4

<sup>1</sup> In his study of blackness in Euro-American ideological contexts, Anthony Appiah argues that even genes are not a definitive indicator of racial difference, as “[w]hat modern genetics shows is that there is no such underlying racial essence” (39) as was claimed by nineteenth-century race sciences. Indeed, Appiah reports, “[a]part from the visible morphological characteristics of skin, hair, and bone, by which we are inclined to assign people to the broadest racial categories—black, white, yellow—there are few genetic characteristics to be found in the population of England that are not found in similar proportions in Zaire or in China, and few too (though more) that are found in Zaire but not in similar proportions in China or in England” (35). A person like Grace Johnson puts to an extreme this lack of physical difference between races, because her visual whiteness even nullifies “the visible morphological characteristics of skin, hair, and bone.”

<sup>2</sup> In a further strategy to contain the disruptive potential of her passing, Larsen presents the incident only as a personal episode, thus suppressing the political implications of her encroachment on the white sphere. Other letters Larsen wrote about her Tennessee trip similarly avoid broaching the political dimension of race. As George Hutchinson notes, despite her otherwise close correspondence with Van Vechten and his wife Fania Marinoff, Larsen somewhat awkwardly avoided the topic of segregation when reporting her trip: “Costing no more than she would spend on meals if she took a train the whole way (as she told Carl and Fania), it [flying to



Nashville] also avoided the insult and injury of Jim Crow accommodations (something she did not mention)” (402).

<sup>3</sup> As Robyn Wiegman points out, the white/black racial binary, as a discursive construct, serves white ideology by introducing a fictive hierarchy with whites on top to the actually unclassifiable diversity of human beings: “the black/white axis works to secure the tenuousness of race to a framework of stable boundaries, which in turn provides the necessary grounding for the ideology of white supremacy” (9). This ideological “black/white axis” also dictates the in fact fictive difference between “real-whiteness” and “passing-whiteness,” on which the American “one-drop rule” predicates itself to maintain the system of racial hierarchy.

<sup>4</sup> I consider that the most subversive of Larsen’s challenge to the racial status quo consists in her attentiveness to racial passing’s invisibility, indeterminacy, and defiance of racial categories themselves. Accordingly, I find Martha J. Cutter’s claim inadequate and itself trapped in the white/black binary paradigm the novelist aims to dismantle, when the critic finds a “freedom” from the oppressive racio-class system in Clare’s mobility between two racial categories, i.e., whiteness and blackness: “Clare initially passes from the black to the white race to transcend her class position, but to flaunt this new class position, she must pass back from a white racial identity to a black one. To have all she wants, Clare must maintain multiple identities—multiple subject positions—and pass back and forth between them. . . . Larsen’s text indicates that Clare demands to be central, not marginal, to a variety of different social networks, actually finding freedom in her plural and often contradictory subject positions” (92).

<sup>5</sup> Whiteness studies reveal how whiteness, as at once an instrument and effect of white-supremacist ideology, operates in the U.S. as a “race-less, unmarked norm.” For example, while noting the complex variations due to “its constructedness, specificity, and localness” (16),

Ruth Frankenberg characterizes the general working of whiteness as “mak[ing] itself invisible precisely by asserting its normalcy, its transparency, in contrast with the marking of others on which its transparency depends” (6).

<sup>6</sup> Carol Roh Spaulding points to mixed-race fiction’s inevitable dependence on the “white”/“non-white” binary racial paradigm, where the mixed-race character’s racial position is defined only in relation to whiteness as the norm: “What has not changed is the binary system of classification itself. One is designated ‘white’ (or passes for ‘white’); one is designated ‘raced’ (or passes for ‘raced’). The more creative or adventurous may play at one designation or another in various times or places, but the choice of either-or remains intact. No matter how mixed one’s ancestry, racial identity in American literature is most influenced by a character’s status in relation to how the narrative defined ‘whiteness’” (99). My reading of *Passing* finds Larsen’s challenge, if only temporary, to this paradox. In the novel’s “race-less” opening scenes, Larsen carefully keeps whiteness undefined and thus unfixed, rendering it impossible for the reader to position the characters in the system of racial classification.

<sup>7</sup> Considering the semantic multiplicity of the novel’s title, “Passing,” as well as Larsen’s relative unfamiliarity to the contemporary white-dominant readership, I have reservation about Jacquelyn Y. McLendon’s claim that “[t]he simple title *Passing* suggests that what is to follow is the classic tale of the mulatto, usually the victim of uncontrollable urges of mixed blood, who tries to escape the miseries of black life by passing white” (96). Indeed, Van Vechten took advantage of the novel’s race-less first impression when devising a marketing strategy targeted for the formerly uninitiated white audience: “Since most potential readers would never pick up a black-authored novel in a bookstore, they would learn that *Passing* was a ‘Negro novel’ only after being drawn in by the tantalizing hoopla surrounding it” (Hutchinson 319).

<sup>8</sup> Irene's "double-conscious" look at herself also operates on the socio-cultural level. As numerous critics have pointed out, Irene internalizes the white-dominant society's value system as she strives to maintain a stable and respectable middle-class life. For example, Jennifer DeVere Brody notes that "Irene consistently aligns herself with conservative and bourgeois elements in American society . . . . She persistently fights to preserve her 'security' and the status quo" (396).

<sup>9</sup> Valerie Smith points to "a range of contradictions inherent within" passing texts, such as that between the character's racial instability and his/her fixation in the binarized black-passing-for-white identity. Thus, she continues, classic passing narratives "become sites where antiracist and white supremacist ideologies converge, encouraging their black readers to stay in their places" (43-44).

## Conclusion

<sup>1</sup> The writers treated in my dissertation, especially Faulkner, all suggest that language reduces chaotic reality on multiple levels of its operation. As my first two chapters indicate, Faulkner's idiosyncratic typography as well as convoluted syntax suggests his keen awareness that, depending on the writer's approach, even formalistic aspects of writing can limit or enable his exploration of the chaos. In his letter to Ben Wasson, co-editor of *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner specifically claims that, to portray the "confused" inner truths of the character Benjy beyond his apparently "unbroken" and "logically coherent" position as an "idiot," the author needs to complicate typography by means of italics and even different-colored ink: "I think italics are necessary to establish for the reader Benjy's confusion; that unbroken-surfaced confusion of an idiot which is outwardly a dynamic and logical coherence. . . . I wish publishing

was advanced enough to use colored ink for such . . .” (“To Ben Wasson” 44).

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