



eCOMMONS

Loyola University Chicago
Loyola eCommons

English: Faculty Publications and Other Works

Faculty Publications

2005

Passing as Modernism

Pamela L. Caughie

Loyola University Chicago, pcaughi@luc.edu

Recommended Citation

Caughie, Pamela L. "Passing as Modernism." *Modernism/Modernity* 12.3 (2005): 385-406.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Publications at Loyola eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in English: Faculty Publications and Other Works by an authorized administrator of Loyola eCommons. For more information, please contact ecommons@luc.edu.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).
Copyright © 2005 The Johns Hopkins University Press.



Passing as Modernism

Pamela L. Caughie

In 1990 Barbara Johnson gave a series of lectures at the University of Chicago on psychoanalysis and African American literature. In those days many feminists were exploring the question of whether or how post-structuralist theories could be applied to multicultural literatures. At the time I was an untenured assistant professor heavily influenced by Johnson's style of deconstruction, so you can imagine my discomfort when I learned that the second lecture in that series, entitled "No Passing," was to be a reading of Nella Larsen's *Passing*, the very novel I was then writing about in an essay that would turn out to be the inception of *Passing and Pedagogy: The Dynamics of Responsibility* (1999). So at the reception following the first lecture, I cornered Johnson and anxiously spewed out all the ideas I was exploring in that essay, seeking to convince her (and possibly myself) that I hadn't taken my ideas from the lecture that I hadn't yet heard. I talked about the nature of our authority, as white feminist critics trained in a Eurocentric theoretical and literary tradition, in the African American literature classroom where, as Patricia Hill Collins and Diana Fuss remind us, knowledge derived from experience is given more credibility than knowledge acquired through training. How does racial difference inflect the process of transference that you have helped us to see as central to the pedagogical relation, I asked her? What does it mean to learn from the one presumed *not* to know, from (so to speak) an unreliable narrator? In response to these questions that I found so urgent and complicated, Johnson replied with her characteristic composure: All I know is, she said, I don't want to be another Carl Van Vechten.¹

Johnson's response came back to me several years later when I was researching and teaching at the Newberry Library in

MODERNISM / *modernity*

VOLUME TWELVE, NUMBER


THREE, PP. 385–406.

© 2005 THE JOHNS

HOPKINS UNIVERSITY PRESS

Pamela L. Caughie

is Professor and Graduate Program Director in the English Department at Loyola University Chicago. She is author of *Virginia Woolf and Postmodernism* and *Passing and Pedagogy: The Dynamics of Responsibility*. Her current project, a sequel to *Passing and Pedagogy*, is entitled "Class Acts."



386 Chicago. The seminar, entitled “Mapping Identities,” focused on modernist writers, artists, and scholars who traveled to and wrote from locales other than their countries or regions of origin. We looked at the motivations for their travels and at the ways they represented other cultural groups, to better understand that miscegenated history we now call modernism. In our unit on the southwest we read about John Collier, a promoter and defender of American Indian culture who later became the head of the Bureau of Indian Affairs at a time when the official U.S. policy toward native peoples was one of assimilation. I discovered that John Collier had stayed with Mabel Dodge and Tony Luhan in Taos around the time D. H. Lawrence was there. Yet Lawrence, who would write his own idealized vision of Indians in his 1924 novella, “The Woman Who Rode Away,” was disgusted by Collier’s enthusiasm for Native American culture and allegedly said to a friend, more or less: All I know is I don’t want to be John Collier.

What does such a statement, a peculiar kind of xenophobia, tell us about modernism and its contemporary critique? What is the common structure in these responses? Of course, the very need to deny similarity, to assert “I’m not that,” arises from the fear of resemblance, as Johnson has argued in her essays on Hurston—the recognition that in the eyes of others, even in one’s own eyes, perhaps, one may be precisely *that*, or at least that the difference one insists on may be so subtle as to be negligible. While many cultural critics are concerned with what my colleague Chris Castiglia calls “psychic blackface,” that is, the phenomenon of whites wanting to be and identifying with blacks or Indians, my concern is with the corollary phenomenon of whites not wanting to be identified with other whites engaged in similar efforts to identify across racial lines, as in “I don’t want to be Carl Van Vechten.” It is a phenomenon that I have explored in terms of “passing.”

Passing has once again become a hot topic in contemporary popular culture and a major trope for our critical and professional activity. One thinks of Danzy Senna’s *Caucasia* (1998); Philip Roth’s *The Human Stain* (2000) and the 2003 film version directed by Robert Benton; and in literary and cultural criticism, Gayle Wald’s *Crossing the Line: Racial Passing in Twentieth-Century U.S. Literature and Culture* (2000), Kathleen Pfeiffer’s *Race Passing and American Individualism* (2003), and Brooke Kroeger’s *Passing: When People Can’t Be Who They Are* (2003), to name only a few examples. In *Passing and Pedagogy* I explore this concept largely in terms of contemporary culture and criticism. Yet the echo of Johnson’s words in Lawrence’s disavowal—I don’t want to be John Collier—has led me to consider more carefully the emergence of passing, as I have refigured it, in modernism. In that Newberry seminar, I was struck by how the difference between the artistic and the touristic use of other cultures was often lost upon students as it was upon many modernists themselves. For example, in the 1920s, artists, writers, art patrons, anthropologists, and entrepreneurs came together in the southwest to promote “a romantic mix of archeology, art, tourism, and politics,” as Desley Deacon writes in her biography, *Elsie Clews Parsons: Inventing Modern Life*.² While they sought ways to incorporate native art and culture into Western lives without “patronizing, appropriating, or destroying” it, such a project was necessarily fraught with ambiguity: cultural preservation depended on Western tourism, and spiritual renewal

meant “going native.”³ In the Newberry seminar, we read works by and about Elsie Clews Parsons and D. H. Lawrence in Taos; Sergei Eisenstein and Langston Hughes in Mexico; Claude McKay and Josephine Baker in France; and Zora Neale Hurston and Melville Herskovitz in the Caribbean. We studied the music of John Alden Carpenter, the photography of Edward Weston, the drawings of Miguel Covarrubias, and the dance of Katherine Dunham. And the more we read, the more important and the more difficult it became to distinguish those who were appropriately self-aware in their representations of others from those who were shamelessly appropriative. I came to see passing and the anxieties it arouses, as well as the border crossings (both literal and imaginative) that at once enable and express it, as the peculiar identification at the heart of modernism—and not just in the sense that the androgyne and the mulatto served as cultural icons of the modernist generation. Rather, I would argue that the fluidity of identity boundaries that we have come to identify with postmodernity—especially a postmodern notion of subjectivity as constructed, discursive, and fluid—has as much or more to do with the historical conditions in which modernist art was produced as with the textual theories of post-structuralism. But first I need to explain the various ways the term “passing” has been used and how I have refigured that concept.

Passing Refigured

Let me begin with some illustrated examples.⁴ Passing as white is, of course, how modernists would have understood the term. But even in this, its first cultural sense, passing is far more complicated than the notion of wearing a mask or of assuming a fraudulent identity would suggest. In his *New Yorker* essay, “White Like Me,” on the life and writings of Anatole Broyard, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. reconceives passing as a modernist phenomenon. Gates describes Broyard (fig. 1), a well-known book reviewer for the *New York Times*, who was born a Negro in 1920 and later passed as white, as a man obsessed with modern culture and modernist literature. “The thematic elements of passing,” Gates writes, “fragmentation, alienation, liminality, self-fashioning—echo the great themes of modernism.”⁵ Passing in this sense—passing as white—is often seen as fraudulence or betrayal, as a sin against authenticity. Yet authenticity, Gates says, is “among the founding lies of the modern age,” a Romantic fallacy rejected by modernists.⁶ Extrapolating from Gates’s reading, we could argue that it was not so much that Broyard *lived* a lie as that he *refused* to live a conventional fiction.

Passing in the modernist period was more than a literary theme, and as a social practice, far more complicated than its common definition would suggest. Passing came to signify the dynamics of identity and identification in the modernist period—the social, cultural, technological, and psychological processes by which a subject comes to understand his or her identity in relation to others. Passing—actual and imaginary, conscious and unconscious—at once produced profound shifts in thinking about the boundaries of identity and aroused ambivalence about those shifting, unstable borders.

Yet the notion of passing as fraudulence and deception remains dominant today, despite the modernist erosion of such binary thinking. Madeleine Albright (fig. 2) was



Fig. 1. Anatole Broyard. Photo taken in Central Park, 1960s. Photo courtesy of Jerry Bauer.

exposed, so to speak, in 1997 for passing as a Catholic all her life. The question that preoccupied newspaper editorials and talk shows then was, what did she know of her Jewish ancestry and when did she know it? As if identity were an on-off switch, as if one woke up one day and said, “*Today* I am a Jew.” To appropriate one’s Jewish identity in that way would be to act without the cultural memory that would place that identity in a social history, spiritual tradition, and material existence. To say “I am a Jew” in this sense would be, as Alain Finkielkraut says, “an error of grammatical attribution of person.”⁷ In his autobiographical *The Imaginary Jew*, a work of intellectual history, Finkielkraut offers a scathing critique of his earlier political identification as a leftist, for his politics led him to exploit his Jewish identity without the cultural memory that would root that identity in the concrete daily lives and the social and spiritual traditions of Jews. He was, in essence, passing, not in the usual sense of disguising his Jewishness,



▲
Fig. 2. Madeline Albright. images.tvnz.co.nz/.../madeleine_albright150.jpg

but in the sense of using it, “unveiling” himself to others and “making a spectacle of [his] difference” (*IJ*, 171, 172). Finkelkraut’s term for this kind of fictive identity is “imaginary Jew.” Like my use of “passing,” the term is an effort to name what has never been considered a category of identity.

In her 1990 lecture at Chicago, “No Passing,” Barbara Johnson argued that passing is acting as if one could determine one’s subject position, as if one were an autonomous subject without heritage, family, or history. To reject passing in this sense, as Finkelkraut did, is to confront and to struggle with one’s own historically constituted identity. In reclaiming a cultural memory and a historical past in his confrontation with Judaism, however, Finkelkraut insists that he has not become more authentically Jewish. “The word ‘Jew,’” he writes, “is no longer a mirror in which I seek my self-portrait, but where I look for everything I’m not, everything I’ll never be able to glimpse by taking myself as a point of reference” (*IJ*, 179). One can imagine that Albright’s struggle with her religious and racial identity was, like Finkelkraut’s, a moral journey that was not

390 so much a process of finding one's self ("I am a Jew") but an "undoing of the self" (*IJ*, 176), an acceptance of the ethical obligation to struggle with identity as a process, not a given, and to accept responsibility for one's particular forms of passing.

Two highly publicized trials in the 1920s, one in the U.S., the other in Britain, not only epitomize the public's fascination with passing at that time, but evidence its emerging sense of identity as something one acquires rather than something one is. In 1924 Alice Jones (fig. 3), daughter of a working-class couple, married Leonard "Kip" Rhinelander, son of one of New York's leading families. Their different class status was enough to make the marriage headline material, as Earl Lewis and Heidi Ardizzone note in their book on the Rhinelander trial, *Love on Trial*; however, the disclosure a month after the wedding that Alice was "colored" prompted a media frenzy. The public trial in 1925 over Leonard's annulment suit was covered by newspapers across the country and in England and was the first occasion of the use of photojournalism. An actress was hired and photographed reenacting the partial disrobing of Alice Jones before a sequestered judge and jury in an effort to provide "ocular evidence" of her race to determine what Leonard could have been expected to know and when.⁸ Yet the legal arguments supposedly meant to determine Alice's race ended up exposing the slipperiness of racial categories, even as both sides employed racial as well as gender stereotypes to make their case. The prosecution's star witness, for example, was Al Jolson, the most famous blackface performer of the day. "The image of Al Jolson next to Alice and George Jones [her father]," write Lewis and Ardizzone, "drew into sharper focus the impossibly thin line separating blacks and whites in America, and the anxiety that closeness produced."⁹ In the end, the trial threw into strong relief popular beliefs about racial distinctions. As an editorial in the *Messenger* put it, when it comes to race as well as sex, "deception is the rule."¹⁰ The cover of the *Messenger*, with its masthead, "The World's Greatest Negro Journal," for that month (December 1925) illustrates just how ambiguous race may be, and how unreliable "ocular evidence" can be (fig. 4).

Four years later in Britain, Colonel Victor Barker, alias Valerie Arkell-Smith (fig. 5), was tried for perjury in 1929 for passing as man. In this case, the identity of her sex was not in dispute, nor was her sexuality the legal issue, even though she was married to a woman. The perjury trial centered on what we now call gender identity, raising questions about how to classify this anomalous woman. The spectacle of the closely cropped Arkell-Smith, forced to wear a dress throughout the trial, testifying that she had always felt herself to be a man before a male judge wearing a gown and a wig of curls, must have struck witnesses even then as perverse—and this at a time when the androgynous fashions of the day and the "New Woman" were arousing anxiety over what were thought to be clear-cut sex differences. As Laura Doan points out in her article on this trial, "Passing Fashions," from which this photo is taken, "The whole point of twenties fashion was that no one knew for sure" one's gender or sexual preference.¹¹ "No age," Virginia Woolf wrote in the same year as the trial, "can ever have been as stridently sex-conscious as our own."¹²

The public exposure of the Zuni *la'mana*, or "men-women," in anthropological accounts of the time, such as Elsie Clews Parsons's 1916 essay, "The Zuni *La'mana*,"



Fig. 3. Alice Jones, 1924. From Earl Lewis and Heidi Adrizzone, *Love on Trial* (Norton, 2001). Photo courtesy of Bettman/Corbis.

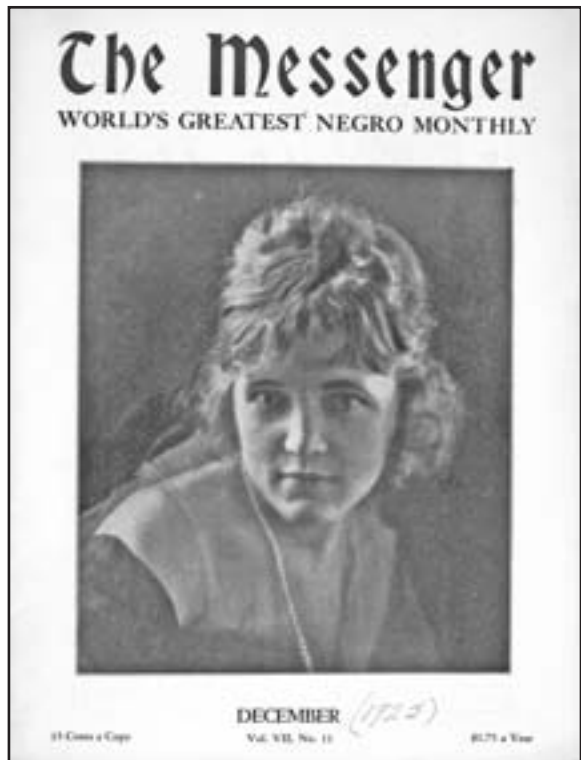


Fig. 4. Cover photo from the *Messenger*, December 1925. Mrs. C. Credit, Philadelphia PA. Photo courtesy of The Newberry Library, Chicago.



▲
 Fig. 5. *Daily Mail*, 7 March 1929: Valerie Akrell-Smith, alias Colonel Victor Barker. By permission of the British Library.

called into question the binary system of gender classification that Arkell-Smith's case also challenged. What struck many anthropologists in the 1920s as a sexual perversion, the *la'mana*—called “the Berdache” by colonialists who saw them as homosexual transvestites or male prostitutes and called “two-spirit people” in many American Indian cultures today—undergo a ceremony that marks their passage into a new identity and a third gender. That is, they literally pass over. In a later essay, Parsons writes: “This native theory of the institution of the man-woman is a curious commentary, is it not, on that thorough-going belief in the intrinsic difference between the sexes which is so tightly held to in our own culture.”¹³ How tightly is revealed in a 1925 report by the Indian Rights Association that I found at the Newberry. In an effort to discredit the views of anthropologist F.W. Hodge, the report mocks the “gullability . . . of some scientists” for accepting We-Wha (fig. 6) as a woman. “We-Wha’ is probably the best joke the American Indian ever played on men and women of trained minds . . . whose training was such that they would be expected to know the difference between a man and a woman.”¹⁴ Given that a *la'mana* is buried in women's attire on the male side of the cemetery, that difference may not be so clear-cut.



Fig. 6. We-Wha (a.k.a. Wewa) Weaving. Edward E. Ayer Collection. Photo courtesy of The Newberry Library, Chicago.

The trials and the Zuni ritual raise the question of whether identity is ever anything other than a performance. In presenting an image of oneself to others, “there is finally no getting away from the stage,” writes Finkeilkraut (*IJ*, 172). The point is brought home in this famous image of Josephine Baker (fig. 7). In this musical production, *The Chocolate Dandies* (1924), Baker is passing as black insofar as blackface performance brings out the performativity rather than the authenticity of blackness. As Eric Lott writes, blackface performance stages racial categories; it produces blackness and whiteness as racial identities to be assumed, making a spectacle out of racial difference and keeping blackness “on display and up for grabs.”¹⁵

Often racial impersonation is motivated by legal or social strictures. Susan Kohner played Sarah Jane (fig. 8) in Douglas Sirk’s 1959 *Imitation of Life*, a remake (or rather, makeover) of John Stahl’s 1934 film based on Fanny Hurst’s novel. Although Fredi Washington, an African American actress, played the original role of Peola in the 1934 production, in Sirk’s version, a white Jewish woman passes as a black woman passing as a white non-Jewish woman, because in 1959, a real black woman could not kiss a white man, as the revised script called for. The shock of the film depended on the viewer’s willing suspension of disbelief that Kohner is black.

Thirty years later another Jewish woman impersonates a black woman. Although Sandra Bernhard (fig. 9) does not don blackface in *Without You I’m Nothing* (1990), her campy performances create an effect closely related to minstrelsy. Bernhard impersonating Nina Simone is likely to be deemed more culpable than Susan Kohner playing Sarah Jane, if only because Bernhard plays herself playing Nina Simone and flaunts our racialized fantasies of identification. What disturbs many critics of her film,



▲
 Fig. 7. Josephine Baker in blackface, 1924. Billy Rose Theatre Collection,
 The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations.

I suggest elsewhere, is that Bernhard's self-conscious performance brings to mind our racial fantasies and our own forms of passing, as critics of popular culture, and moreover, that she makes no effort to disavow them; she does not insist, "I'm not Madonna." Bernhard does not fall back on a notion of her "real" subject position (as a lesbian or a Jew) to save herself from exposure or to defend her forays across racial boundaries.¹⁶ Thus Bernhard refuses to sanction the belief that the desires and motivations fostering crossover performances can be controlled, as if one could engage in border crossing without running the risk of being accused of passing.

Anna Deavere Smith passing as a Jewish man in *Fires in the Mirror* (fig. 10) does not arouse as much anger as Bernhard, perhaps because Smith is impersonating everyday people, not cultural icons, and speaking their words. Still, her act of speaking for and as another implicates her in a common structure of passing, and her theory of American identity as identity in motion, always being negotiated, works against a notion of authenticity as much as does Bernhard's camp. On stage it takes Smith about twenty seconds to pass as someone else: identity in motion is accelerated indeed.



▲
Fig. 8. Susan Kohner as Sarah Jane. From *Imitation of Life*: Douglas Sirk, Director. Rutgers Films in Print, v. 16, 1991. Photo by permission of Howard Mandelbaum, Photofest, Inc.



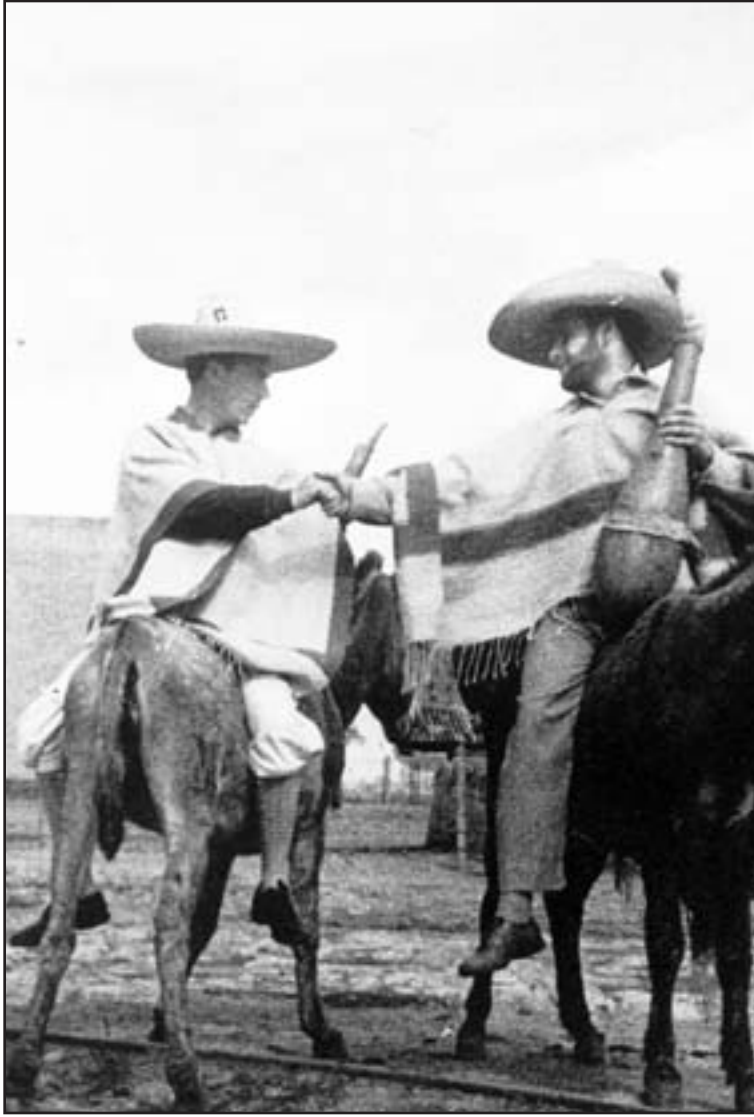
▲
Fig. 9. Sandra Bernhard, *Without You I'm Nothing*. M.C.E.G. Productions, Inc, 1990. Reproduced from Pamela L. Caughie, *Passing and Pedagogy* (U of Illinois, 1999). Still credit: Loyola University Center for Instructional Design (LUCID).



Fig. 10. Anna Deavere Smith. Reproduced from *Fires in the Mirror* (Anchor Books, 1993). Photo courtesy of Adger W. Cowans.

Tourism and travel produce their own forms of passing that are not explicit performances. Sergei Eisenstein in Mexico (fig. 11) might well have aroused Lawrence's contempt by dressing native. Donning the attire of the region, like surrounding oneself with the cultural artifacts of native peoples, is often considered a form of passing, refiguring the self by appropriating the cultural markers of another's identity. One can hear Lawrence's contemptuous voice: "put on a sombrero and knot a red kerchief round your neck . . . that is the New Mexico known to most Americans"—or in this case, the Mexico known to a Russian.¹⁷ Yet in his autobiography, *Immoral Memories*, Eisenstein expresses what Mexico meant to him in terms very like Lawrence's on New Mexico. Eisenstein writes: "During my encounter with Mexico, it seemed to me to be, in all the variety of its contradictions, a sort of outward projection of all those individual lines and features which I carried and carry within me like a tangle of complexes."¹⁸

D. H. Lawrence was not one to dress native; his writings express contempt for those who did and for the tourist's superficial interest in native culture. "I cannot cluster at the drum anymore,"¹⁹ he wrote. And yet in his paintings, Lawrence portrays himself



▲
 Fig. 11. Sergei Eisenstein. Reproduced from Inga Karetnikova, *Mexico According to Eisenstein* (U of New Mexico Press, 1991). Photo courtesy of Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN.

in a kind of blackface (fig. 12), racializing masculinity, as he does in “The Woman Who Rode Away.” In this story the Chilchui of Mexico, insistently described as black, represent a primal maleness, and the American woman (who seeks self-transformation among the Indians) personifies the white race that must be sacrificed to restore both spiritual and sexual harmony to the materialist West. Lawrence may not have identified with natives the way Collier and Eisenstein did; indeed, he portrayed himself as an outsider to both whites and natives in New Mexico. But his paintings and fiction tell another story.



Fig. 12. D. H. Lawrence, "Fight with an Amazon" from *The Paintings of D. H. Lawrence* (London: The Mandrake Press, 1929). Courtesy of The Newberry Library, Chicago.

Granted, my examples push to the limit the notion of "passing," and may seem to beg the question of the difference between any two instances. Surely, we think, there is a world of difference between Mabel Dodge marrying a Pueblo Indian and promoting Indian art; Elsie Clews Parsons adopting an Indian identity following her hair washing ceremony with the Hopi; and Mary Austin's adoption of an Indian persona in her poetry. Surely Barbara Johnson's essays on African American literature differ markedly from Carl Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven*, a novel which struck many, including Lawrence, as cashing in on the fad of the New Negro. In his 1926 review of *Nigger Heaven* and Walter White's *Flight*, Lawrence writes that in reading these novels, one is disappointed

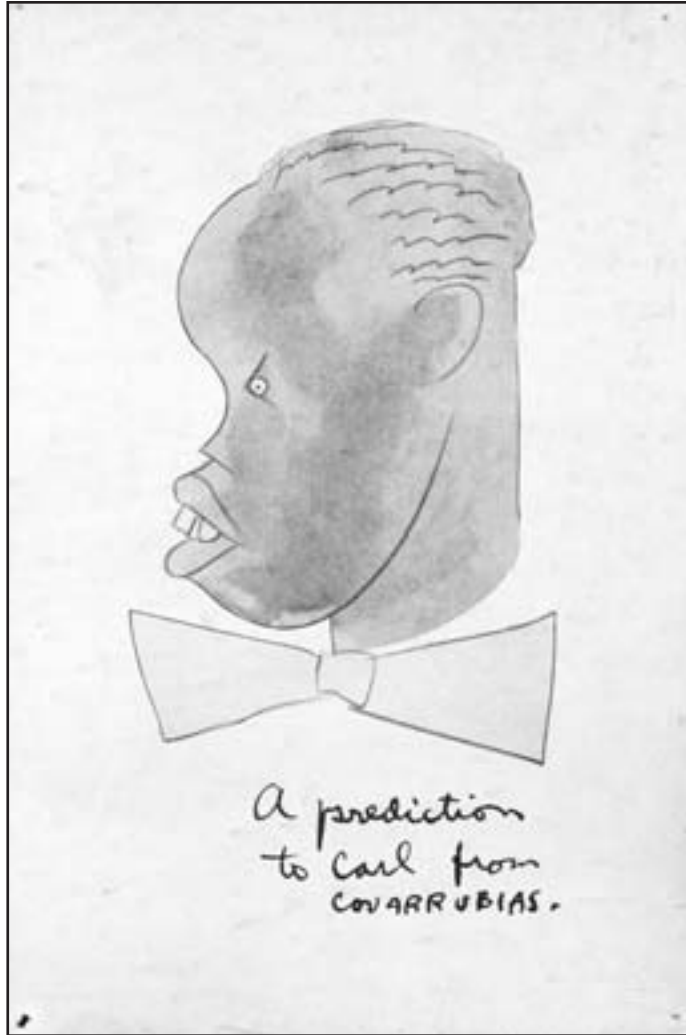


Fig. 13. Miguel Covarrubias, "Carl van Vechten: A Prediction." Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. Reproduced from Bruce Kellner, *Carl Van Vechten and the Irreverent Decade* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1968). Photo courtesy of Bruce Kellner.

to discover that the "Negroid soul ... is an Edison gramophone ... which is what the white man's soul is, just the same" ("NM," 362). For Lawrence, such "passing" across racial boundaries risks homogenizing the differences (actual and imagined) necessary to identification. Yet Wallace Thurman, in his *Messenger* review of *Nigger Heaven*, found the novel to "pulsate" with the "genuine rhythms peculiar to Harlem." Johnson may figuratively position herself as black (an argument Elizabeth Abel has made in "Black Writing, White Reading"), but Van Vechten, says Thurman, may literally be mistaken "in the provinces as another Negro writer."²⁰ Miguel Covarrubias's portrait of Van Vechten, entitled "A Prediction" (fig. 13), could be seen to bear out the truth of both Thurman's and Lawrence's reviews.

400 However, despite this anxiety about the conflation of various forms of passing, precisely one point I make in my use of the term is that one cannot always tell the difference, nor, I argue, should we even want to make responsibility—whether artistic, moral, or political—depend on refining the boundaries between appropriate crossings and appropriative ones. Indeed, it is the belief that we must draw the line between forms of passing that leads even those as smart and self-aware as Barbara Johnson to the anxiety reflected in her remark, “I don’t want to be another Carl Van Vechten.”

Modernist writers, from Lawrence in his review of *Nigger Heaven* and Walter White’s *Flight*, to Heba Jannath in her essay on passing in Nancy Cunard’s *Negro Anthology*, to Parsons in her essay on the Zuni *la’mana*, have portrayed passing as betraying conventional markers of racial or sexual difference, undermining the belief in intrinsic differences. Contemporary critics have also reconceived the social practice of passing, presenting it neither as fraudulence nor selling out but as a performative act and a strategic intervention that exposes systems of racial or sexual oppression. For both modernist and contemporary writers, passing undermines the reliability of the binary logic of identity (you are either black or white), thereby exposing, in Harryette Mullen’s words, “the actual fluidity of ostensibly rigid racial [or sexual] boundaries.”²¹

When it comes to its metaphoric use, however—when passing is applied to a situation in which one impersonates or represents another, speaking as or for a class of people—it is still commonly conceived, as it was by Lawrence, in terms of inauthenticity and appropriation. The very disruption of rigid racial, sexual, or ethnic boundaries brought about by passing as a social practice leads to the fear that the notion of fluid boundaries can, if taken too far, suggest that anyone can change one’s racial or sexual identification at will, can, in effect, become someone else. As one letter to the editor on Madeleine Albright’s case put it, this is a free country and she can be whatever she wants to be.

Well, no she can not, but that is the worry: namely, that “category crisis,” the term by which Majorie Garber designates “a borderline that becomes permeable, that permits of border crossings from one (apparently distinct) category to another,” will lead to what Phillip Brian Harper calls “category collapse.”²² That is, destabilizing identity categories risks the loss of all distinctions. The fear that crisis means collapse leads to a search for guarantees of motivation and import: I am not John Collier. Passing, in my conceptualization of the term, requires learning to live and act without such guarantees.

Marianna Torgovnick, whose 1990 book, *Gone Primitive*, exposes forms of passing in modernist culture, makes an argument that has become common in critiques of psychic blackface: “When we say ‘caveat nobody’ and revel in the postmodern melange of us and them, we are in danger of abjuring responsibilities every bit as grave as those evaded when the early colonists decided that land could be taken from colonized peoples . . . to make way for Western modernization.”²³ I question two assumptions here: one, that the melange of us and them, the loss of definitional distinctions, is characteristic of *post*modernism, and two, that the breakdown of identity boundaries is analogous to a raid upon another’s territory. This moral argument conceives identities as bounded, like territories, so that it is easy to determine who is guilty and who is victimized in

border crossing. But the responsibility modernist forms of passing have thrust upon us, the responsibility we abjure through the territorial metaphor, is to understand identity as dynamic, more like a wave, a transfer of energy from point to point, than like the transfer of land. I prefer “passing” to the more common term “performativity” to describe this concept of identity because passing brings out the historical emergence of this concept in actual social practices (not linguistic or philosophical theories) within a specific historical context. That context is late modernity.

The “Technological Substance” of Modernism and Identity

Important as social passing and passing fashions were in upsetting rigid boundaries and making those border figures, the androgyne and the mulatto, the cultural icons of a generation, another development in the early twentieth century had a more profound effect on passing: technology. Through the swift dissemination of cultural products (e.g., music, literature, fashion) worldwide by means of new technologies and the forces of mass culture, the borders separating nations and geographic regions, like those separating races and genders, became permeable and insecure. The “masthead” of British *Vogue* in the 1920s—“VOGUE KNOWS NO FRONTIERS”—captures the modernist sensibility of unlimited boundary crossing inspired by new modes of transportation, such as the motor car and the airplane, and new means of communication, such as the gramophone and the radio.²⁴ Such border crossing, facilitated by new technologies and fueled by an increasingly touristic and consumer culture in the interwar period, had a profound effect on the imagining of national and personal identity in modernist cultural productions.

New technologies enabled border crossing by making travel more accessible and affordable. It may strike us as amusing today that Lawrence wrote in a letter to Mabel Dodge Luhan that he would be arriving in San Francisco on such and such a day and since San Francisco was almost to Taos, he would soon be there. Of course, when one travels to Taos as Lawrence did by way of Ceylon, Australia, and Cuba, San Francisco seems fairly close. Still, the point is that by the early 1920s the world had become a much smaller place.

In 1924 Lawrence’s access to Taos was facilitated by the increasingly affordable technology of the automobile. Road maps, a relatively new form of cartography in the late 1920s and 1930s, displayed images of women at the wheel (fig. 14), symbolizing their liberation by this new technology (though by the 1940s women were safely returned to the passenger seat). In Woolf’s 1928 novel, Orlando enters the twentieth century with the magic of modern technology. At the sound of the clock striking the 11th of October 1928, Orlando runs downstairs, jumps into her motor car, presses the self-starter, and is off to Marshall & Snelgrove’s, where she is “shot smoothly upwards” in the lift: “The very fabric of life now, she thought as she rose, is magic.”²⁵ Not only was travel facilitated, but new technologies also produced new sensory experiences (such as those Orlando undergoes while motoring), which in turn led to new concepts of national and personal identity. As Michele Pridmore-Brown puts it in her article



▲
 Fig. 14. “Detroit Road Map,” 1932. The Rand McNally Collection. Courtesy of The Newberry Library, Chicago.

on Woolf and technology, “Britain’s island insularity offers no protection in the air age”—that is, the age of airplanes and air waves.²⁶

New modes of transportation may have made the world “small and known,” as Lawrence says in his essay “New Mexico”: “There is no mystery left, we’ve been there, we’ve seen it, we know all about it. We’ve done the globe and the globe is done.” But that, Lawrence concedes, is a superficial view. “Underneath,” he writes, “is everything we don’t know and are afraid of knowing” (“NM,” 141). In his travels in Ceylon and the southwest, Lawrence underwent a new sensory or sensual experience, “an experience deep down in the senses,” he writes, that is the “ancient race-self” (“NM,” 144.) For Lawrence that experience of a primitive identity depends on an *unmediated* relation to the other; the superficial knowledge of others is for him a celluloid image proffered by the filmmakers. On the other hand, in her 1926 essay, “The Cinema,” Woolf locates the primitive experience not *against* but precisely *in* the new technology of the cinema: “People say that the savage no longer exists in us, that we are at the fag-end of civilization, that everything has been said already . . . But these philosophers have presumably forgotten the movies. They have never seen the savages of the twentieth-century watching the pictures.”²⁷

The relation between new technologies, especially new recording devices such as cameras and gramophones, and primitivism is elaborated by Michael Taussig in his fascinating study *Mimesis and Alterity*. Taussig’s important contribution to modernist studies is his argument that recording machines, “whose job it is to reproduce likeness,” reveal “the intimate relationship between primitivism and the new theories of the

senses circulating with the new means of reproduction.”²⁸ New technologies induced, in Taussig’s words, “a tremor in cultural identity . . . in the security of Being itself” (*MAA*, 226). The experience of “voice divorced from sight” that Gillian Beer writes was made possible by radio and phonographs, the “unconscious optics” that Walter Benjamin says was introduced by the camera and revealed new structural formations of the subject, contributed to that “tremor in cultural identity,” what Theodor Adorno calls the “shudder of mimesis” (*MAA*, 211).²⁹

In his essay “On the Mimetic Faculty,” Benjamin writes that “the gift of seeing resemblances is nothing other than a rudiment of the powerful compulsion in former times to become and behave like something else”—that is, to pass.³⁰ That compulsion, which Benjamin associates with the primitive, manifests itself in the modernist period in various and fascinating ways, from tourists dressing in native attire, to new hair products promising the Valentino or Josephine Baker look, to Western writers looking to other cultures for the spiritual values that supposedly eluded their own technological society. The increased mobility and newly permeable borders of the early-twentieth century—made possible by new sound and visual technologies as much as by new modes of transportation—made people aware (perhaps for the first time, at least on such a large scale) of the production of *cultural* identity, the way identity is mediated through various cultural forms. And this awareness distinguishes the performativity of modernism from the compulsion Benjamin identifies as mimetic. Technology has been both an incentive to and a medium for passing in this special sense. As Michael North points out in *Reading 1922*, new forms of mechanical reproduction in the modernist era—such as photojournalism, broadcasting, and film—differed from earlier forms in that the sound and visual images they produced appeared to be real while at the same time new technologies made the *fact* of mediation all the more apparent.³¹ The relation between technology and passing is implied by a line in Bonnie Kime Scott’s essay in *Virginia Woolf in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. Writing about the jazz records T.S. Eliot brought into Woolf’s parlor, Scott remarks: “Victrolas crossed the color line.”³² Scott’s phrase explicitly invokes the social practice of passing and raised for me the question of how mechanical reproduction fostered passing, that desire to become something else.³³

The Americanization of popular culture throughout the world, Taussig notes, “owes an enormous amount to the music reproduced by the phonograph” (*MAA*, 198), and that musical export in the 1920s was predominantly jazz. An essay on jazz in Cunard’s *Negro*, translated from the French by Samuel Beckett, draws an analogy between jazz and the surrealist movement as new modes of sensory experience. For “the intelligent and cultivated youth of Europe,” writes Robert Goffin, “hot jazz is almost the only form of music that has any meaning for their disrupted generation.”³⁴ In his 1929 novel, *Banjo*, set in postwar Marseille, Claude McKay signals the importance of the gramophone in the chapter “Everybody Doing It”:

Two gentlemen in golf clothes, very English-looking and smoking cigarettes, were spending a long time before a shop window, apparently absorbed in a plaster-of-Paris advertisement of a little dog with its muzzle to a funnel. It was a reproduction of the popular American

painting that assails the eye in all the shopping centers of the world; under it was the legend: *La Voix de son Maître*.³⁵

My point is that we might more accurately refer to the *Aframericanization* of popular culture by new technologies.³⁶ In his essay, "Jazz at Home," published in Alain Locke's *The New Negro*, J. A. Rogers remarks that jazz "ranks with the movie and the dollar as the foremost exponent of modern Americanism."³⁷ The New Negro craze fueled by the popularity of jazz was propelled across the Atlantic by the talking machine, the wireless, and the cinema. Jazz, Rogers says, "bears all the marks of a nerve-strung, strident, mechanized civilization,"³⁸ signifying modernity in what Taussig calls the "technological substance" of its identity, but also in the way it excited passing. Identity in the modernist era, I argue, was not just mechanized, it was *racialized* by new technologies. That is to say, the age of mechanical reproduction introduced certain cultural shifts that made it increasingly necessary to think about race as a component of identity formation, inspiring new fantasies and new possibilities of identity, whether Locke's New Negro or Toomer's blue man.

I use passing to name those practices by which we try to refuse the identities that have been historically offered to us, and that continue to structure our responses even as we seek to disavow them (often through that peculiar form of xenophobia I identified earlier). If for modernists, writing was a matter of effacing—not expressing—the self, today self-disclosure seems far more pressing. Getting personal, breaking silence, coming out—these are the moral imperatives of our postmodern age. Yet as Sissela Bok writes in her book on the ethics of concealment, the metaphor of the closet with its language of private space and inside/outside boundaries personalizes interpersonal, dynamic practices.³⁹ If coming out after Eve Sedgwick et al. is no longer an unqualified good, then passing need no longer have a negative presumption against it from the beginning. Moral responsibility, Bok argues, requires being mindful of the processes of (self)-deception and how they are imputed, to whom, on what grounds, and with what power to bring about change.⁴⁰ In our anxious effort to impute passing in the pejorative sense to others engaged in practices very like our own, we risk foreclosing on the transformative possibilities opened up by modernist border crossings.

By way of returning to my point about identity as a wave rather than a territory, I end with a quotation from Virginia Woolf's 1931 novel, *The Waves*.

I have passed. . . . What then remains, when I cannot pull out my papers and make you believe by reading aloud my credentials that I have passed? . . . I am merely "Neville" to you, who see the narrow limits of my life and the line it cannot pass. But to myself I am immeasurable, a net whose fibres pass imperceptibly beneath the world.⁴¹

Notes

I presented a version of this essay at the Modernist Studies Association conference at Penn State in 1999. I have since presented versions of this material at the Ohio State University, the University of

Notre Dame, DePauw University, and Loyola University Chicago. A different, and shorter, version will introduce the section "Modernism, Gender, and Passing" in *Gender in Modernism: New Geographies; Complex Intersections*, General Editor, Bonnie Kime Scott (forthcoming, University of Illinois Press). My thanks to all those who gave valuable comments, and to my generous friends and meticulous readers, Anne Callahan, Janice Mouton, Bonnie Kime Scott, and Eleanor Skoller.

1. Writer and photographer Carl Van Vechten was a prominent white patron of African American artists in the 1920s. Nella Larsen dedicated her novel *Passing* to him in what I would like to think is a bit of sardonic humor on Larson's part but which I believe was a sincere gesture. Emily Bernard has edited some of the letters of Van Vechten and Langston Hughes, *Remember Me to Harlem* (2001).

2. Delsy Deacon, *Elsie Clews Parsons: Inventing Modern Life* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 220.3. Deacon, *Elsie Clews Parsons*, 221–2.

4. Some of these examples come from my *Passing and Pedagogy: The Dynamics of Responsibility* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999) and from "Modernism, Gender, and Passing," in *Gender in Modernism: New Geographies; Complex Intersections*, ed. Bonnie Kime Scott (forthcoming, University of Illinois Press).

5. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. "White Like Me," *The New Yorker* (June 17, 1996): 75.

6. Gates, "White Like Me": 78.

7. Alain Finkielkraut, *The Imaginary Jew*, trans. Kevin O'Neill and David Suchoff (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), 32–3; hereafter abbreviated *IJ*.

8. Earl Lewis and Heidi Ardizzone, *Love on Trial: An American Scandal in Black and White* (New York: Norton, 2001), 173–4.

9. Lewis and Ardizzone, *Love on Trial*, 107.

10. "The Rhinelander Case," the *Messenger* (December 1925): 388.

11. Laura Doan, "Passing Fashions: Reading Female Masculinities in the 1920s," *Feminist Studies* 24.3 (fall 1998): 692.

12. Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (1929; New York: Harcourt, 1957), 99.

13. Barbara Babcock, ed., *Pueblo Mothers and Children: Essays by Elsie Crew Parsons, 1915–1924* (Santa Fe: Ancient City Press, 1991), qtd. 9.

14. *Indian Truth*, vol. 2, no. 2 (February 1925, published by the Indian Rights Association), 2.

15. Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 36.

16. For a more detailed version of this argument, see Caughie, *Passing and Pedagogy*, 39–48.

17. D. H. Lawrence, "New Mexico," in *Phoenix* 1936 (New York: Penguin, 1978), 142; hereafter abbreviated as "NM."

18. Sergei Eisenstein, *Immortal Memories* 181, qtd. in Inga Karetnikova, *Mexico According to Eisenstein* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1991), 155.

19. D. H. Lawrence, "Indians and Englishman," *Phoenix*, 99.

20. Wallace Thurman, "A Stranger at the Gates," the *Messenger* (September 1926): 279.

21. Harryette Mullen, "Optic White: Blackness and the Production of Whiteness," *Diacritics* 24 (summer–fall 1994): 74.

22. Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 16; Philip Brian Harper, *Framing the Margins: The Social Logic of Postmodern Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 192.

23. Marianna Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 41.

24. Jane Garrity discusses British *Vogue* in relation to national identity in "Selling Culture to the 'Civilized': Bloomsbury, British *Vogue*, and the Marketing of National Identity," *Modernism/Modernity* 6.2 (1999): 29–58. As Garrity makes clear, the masthead captures as well the economic imperialism fostered by new technologies and new markets.

25. Virginia Woolf, *Orlando* (1928; New York: Harcourt, 1959), 300.

26. Michele Pridmore-Brown, "1939–40: Of Virginia Woolf, Gramophones, and Fascism," *PMLA* 113.3 (May 1998): 415.

- 406 27. Virginia Woolf, "The Cinema," in *The Captain's Death Bed and Other Essays* (New York: Harcourt Brace Javonovich, 1950), 180.
28. Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 206, 201; hereafter abbreviated as *MAA*.
29. Gillian Beer, "'Wireless': Popular Physics, Radio and Modernism," *Cultural Babbage: Technology, Time and Invention*, ed. Francis Spufford and Jenny Uglow (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), 166; Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 236.
30. Walter Benjamin, "On the Mimetic Faculty," In *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, and Autobiographical Writings*, trans. Peter Demetz and Jephcott Edmond (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), 333.
31. Michael North, *Reading 1922: A Return to the Scene of the Modern* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 18, 159.
32. Bonnie Kime Scott, "The Subversive Mechanics of Woolf's Gramophone in *Between the Acts*," *Virginia Woolf in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, ed. Pamela L. Caughie (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000), 98.
33. Ann Douglas has drawn a connection between modernist art and new technologies (9, 14–20), yet in her discussion of modernist performances, she uses concepts such as *impersonation*, *masquerade*, *artifice*, and *disguise* to describe the phenomena I discuss as forms of passing, implying in her word choice that modernists were simply imitating blacks or appropriating black cultural forms. Clearly Douglas grasps the difficulty of making such distinctions when she concedes that these forms of imitation "were not so easily donned and doffed" as one might think (74) and refers to this "double mimicry" as an "especially American kind of art" (76). Yet for Douglas, "terrible honesty" means "the facing of facts, exposing of pretence" (93), that is, drawing clear-cut distinctions. (I am not unaware of the irony of this note, for all its insistence that I'm not Ann Douglas.)
34. Robert Goffin, "Hot Jazz," trans. Samuel Beckett in *Negro: 1931–1933*, ed. Nancy Cunard (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1934), 379.
35. Claude McKay, *Banjo* (1929; New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1957), 134.
36. Douglas uses the term "the Negroization of American culture" (77, 298).
37. J. A. Rogers, "Jazz at Home" (1925), *The New Negro: Voice of the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. Alain Locke (New York: Atheneum, 1992), 216.
38. Rogers, "Jazz," 218.
39. Sisella Bok, *Secrets: On the Ethics of Concealment and Revelation* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 13.
40. Bok, *Secrets*, 71–2.
41. Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (1931; New York: Harcourt, 1959), 211–2.