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THEORETICAL ISSUES

Jane Grey Swisshelm, Elizabeth Keckley, and the Significance of Race Consciousness in American Women's History

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In the recent past, feminist attempts to document women's participation in all aspects of American life have been complicated by a disagreement over the meaning of "woman" as a category of inquiry and the relationship of that category to other categories of analysis, such as race, class, ethnicity, or sexual preference. Using the autobiographies of Jane Grey Swisshelm, a white newspaper editor, and Elizabeth Keckley, a former slave, as a case study, this article argues that focusing on diversity and difference has tended to obscure the ways in which the lives of all kinds of women are linked to each other and how women have exploited the differences among themselves to contextualize their experiences, to anticipate the ways those experiences might be understood by others, and to create their own public personas to suit their own purposes.

In the midst of the Great Depression, an Associated Press article appeared on one of the back pages of the *Washington Star* entitled, "Bizarre Lincoln Story is Traced, 'Sob Sister' Revealed as Writer of Tragic Tale of Widow." According to the story, David Rankin Barbee, identified as "a close student" of the Civil War period, was making the claim that a book published in 1868 entitled *Behind the Scenes, or Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House* by "Elizabeth Keckley, Formerly a Slave, But More Recently Modiste, and Friend to Mrs. Abraham Lincoln" was, in fact, written by Jane Grey Swisshelm, a well-known white, nineteenth-century abolitionist newspaper editor and woman's rights advocate from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Elizabeth Keckley, Barbee proclaimed, was a figment of Swisshelm's imagination.¹

Barbee offered two explanations for his allegations concerning *Behind the Scenes*. First, he claimed that a Washington newspaper correspondent named George Alfred Townsend had referred to Swisshelm as "the author of the Mme. Keckley book." This reference, combined with Jane's writing style, her commitment to antislavery, her experience as a dressmaker, her presence in Washington during the Civil War, and her friendship with Mary Todd Lincoln, convinced Barbee that Swisshelm was the author of the Keckley book.²

Barbee's speculations about the authorship of Keckley's book were reminiscent of charges made by whites a century before when Northern

critics questioned the authenticity of pre-Civil War slave narratives. In both cases, questions about the integrity of black women's literary voices followed a period of impressive black literary production. In the 1850s, slave narratives, such as the one Harriet Jacobs wrote, received a cool reception from whites because they considered blacks to be limited in intellectual ability, they knew that most slaves were illiterate, and they suspected that abolitionists, who often sponsored the writing of slave narratives, collaborated in the writing and editing process. Barbee's 1935 charges followed the same pattern, coming as they did on the heels of another wave of black literary production. Referred to as the Harlem Renaissance, this period saw the emergence of such authors as Zora Neale Hurston, whose contributions to the black literary heritage confirmed the eloquence of black female voices and the richness of black women's cultural experiences. Barbee's allegations illustrate the degree to which racist assumptions continued to serve as a lens through which black women's literary efforts were likely to be viewed by whites.³

Barbee's allegations of fraud in connection with *Behind the Scenes* brought two immediate responses from the members of the black community in Washington, D.C. In a letter to the editor of the *Washington Star*, John E. Washington, a longtime resident of the capitol city, testified that many in Washington had known Keckley and considered her to have been "a very intelligent and cultured woman."⁴ A second response from Dr. Francis J. Grimke appeared in the *Journal of Negro History* in January 1936. Grimke was pastor of the Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C., from 1878 to 1885 and again from 1889 to 1928.⁵ He wrote that he had known Keckley for over thirty years, visited her during her last illness, and conducted her funeral service after her death on 26 May 1907.⁶ Whatever Barbee might have thought and whatever his motives might have been, Elizabeth Keckley was not a fictional character of Jane Grey Swisshelm's invention.

The controversy that Barbee attempted to provoke over sixty years ago provides an opportunity to explore a number of issues related to race and gender in American women's history. The first concerns the ways in which the ideologies of race, gender, and class and their practical applications informed the way Elizabeth Keckley, a freed, mulatto slave from Virginia, and Jane Grey Swisshelm, a white, feminist-abolitionist from Pennsylvania, understood, contextualized, and described their lives. The second concerns the degree to which the social and economic conditions of such women as Keckley and Swisshelm rendered their race and gender consciousness interdependent. The final point concerns the significance of these issues for feminists engaged in writing and teaching women's history in the United States.

Within the past thirty years, feminist historians have searched for evidence that has allowed them to document women's participation in all aspects of American life. They have placed women's activities in their cultural context and have interpreted the significance of those activities. But as feminist scholar Denise Riley has pointed out, disagreements over the meaning of "woman" as a category of inquiry and over the relationship of that category to such categories of analysis as race, class, or ethnicity have complicated their efforts.⁷ The problem of defining women stems from the fact that, in their early attempts to place the female experience in the historical record, women's historians tended to view women as a homogeneous mass and approached their sources from a perspective that was typically white, heterosexual, and middle class.

Women of color were particularly articulate in pointing out the bias inherent in this approach and called on their colleagues to pay more attention to the diversity of women's lives.⁸ As feminist historians responded by looking for difference rather than similarity, it became virtually impossible to talk about women collectively. Women's history fragmented along class, race, and ethnic lines and was further complicated by such matters as considerations of sexual preference and geographic location. As historian Joan Wallach Scott put it, just as "feminist historians . . . made the identity of 'woman' coherent and singular . . . they . . . provided empirical evidence for irreducible differences among women."⁹

I do not mean here to denigrate or disparage emphases on difference and efforts to distinguish among various kinds of women, their conditions, their experiences, or their perspectives on those experiences. Such considerations have immeasurably enriched our understanding of the past, the notion of what it means to be a woman, and the complexity of women's role in American history. But I argue that focusing on diversity and difference has tended to obscure the ways in which women's lives are linked to each other and the way that understandings of their lives are interdependent. I further suggest that when women's historians focus primarily on how difference separates women, they inadvertently fail to acknowledge the agency of women to exploit in similar ways the differences among themselves and others. They turn a blind eye to the ways in which women use difference to contextualize the way they understand their own experiences, to anticipate the ways that those experiences might be understood by others, and to create their own public personas to suit their own purposes.¹⁰

The influence of race and race consciousness on the lives of white and black women in the United States is a case in point. In a culture where such things matter, the color of one's skin and the racial ideology that results from it have profound consequences. It is one of the things that

made the life experiences of Elizabeth Keckley and Jane Grey Swisshelm fundamentally different. The reality of race and consciousness of that reality influenced how they viewed themselves as women, their position in American society, and how their gendered identities were viewed by others. It also established the context in which they sought freedom in the form of personal autonomy and economic independence.

It is true that the experience of slavery and racial difference separated them. But it is also true that consciousness of this difference provided both of them with a framework for contextualizing their lives for themselves and for their audiences. It was on a terrain informed by race consciousness that their two lives converged. Beyond whatever might have been the similar circumstances of their lives at one point or another, consciousness of race is what made them most alike because neither could define themselves or describe their experiences without an awareness and appreciation of its influence over them. In the narratives they wrote about their respective lives, Elizabeth Keckley and Jane Grey Swisshelm exploited their audiences' understanding of and concern about race as the context for creating their autobiographical selves and as a way of soliciting their readers' validation of those creations.¹¹ Using evidence from the personal narratives of these two women to explore the ways in which race can both connect and separate women, I argue that the ideology of race gave both Keckley and Swisshelm a useful way of thinking about themselves as women, describing their struggle for personal autonomy and economic independence, and creating their autobiographical identities.

The context in which they did so was similar. During the 1860s and 1870s, ideas about race, gender, and freedom were widely debated in the nation as a whole. These debates had particular resonance in the black community. When Keckley wrote her autobiography, the status and roles of newly freed black women were in a state of flux. As a result, black women were in an exceptionally strong position to define what it meant to be black, female, and free.

Swisshelm found herself in a similar position. She spent most of her adult life testing the limits of white gender conventions and challenging the racist attitudes of her white contemporaries. When she wrote her memoir in the late 1870s, the issue of race had not been resolved, but the gender boundaries that she had so flagrantly transgressed earlier in the century were proving more flexible than might have been expected. In the 1880s, large numbers of white women self-consciously expanded the definitions of what it meant to be white and female, a process that would take on new immediacy in the 1890s with the rise of the so-called New Woman.

Swisshelm and Keckley both used race as a discursive tool that fed into the race consciousness of their readers as the context within which

they could effectively present their struggles and accomplishments.¹² For them, the possession of a particular skin color and the race consciousness that resulted from it made a difference, but it was a difference that both exploited in order to create their autobiographical selves.

Despite the fact that one was born white and free and the other was born mulatto and enslaved, the life experiences of these two women were remarkably similar. Each was born shortly after the War of 1812. Both spent some of their childhoods without the presence of their fathers. Both began to work at an early age, married men who misrepresented themselves, and bore a single child. Because their marriages were unhappy, both deserted their husbands and spent the rest of their lives supporting themselves. For both women, claim to middle-class respectability was tenuous. Both were successful business entrepreneurs; both lived and worked in Washington, D.C., during the Civil War; both were friends with Mary Todd Lincoln; both supported efforts to ameliorate the conditions of contraband in the capitol city. And each wrote and published a personal narrative that provoked controversy.¹³

While there were similarities, the fact that she was born in bondage made Keckley's life experience fundamentally different from that of Swisshelm. As a slave, Keckley suffered from the physical abuse, economic exploitation, and personal humiliation that accompanied her legal state. She was separated from her parents, forced to labor for various members of her owner's family, physically and emotionally abused, and sexually molested.

The first three chapters of Keckley's autobiography comprise a slave narrative. In it, Keckley, like other slave narrators from Virginia and elsewhere, depicted in graphic detail the brutality of slavery as well as the physical and emotional stamina required to endure it.¹⁴ She described for her readers the beating that she received as a four-year-old child for her inattention to her duties and told of an uncle so terrified of punishment at the hands of his master that he committed suicide rather than submit to it.¹⁵ She wrote of the day her father was taken away from her forever and the forced separation of children from their mothers.¹⁶

She did not spare her reader a description of the sexual humiliation, exploitation, and abuse that she experienced as a slave woman. Describing the beating that she received at the hands of a school master, she wrote, "Recollect I was eighteen years of age, was a woman fully developed, and yet this man coolly bade me take down my dress." She refused and resisted him whereupon he "succeeded in binding my hands and tearing my dress from my back. Then he picked up a rawhide, and began to ply it freely over my shoulders."¹⁷ Shortly thereafter, she wrote, a white man [Alexander Kirkland] took a fancy to her. "I do not care to dwell upon this

subject, for it is one that is fraught with pain. Suffice it to say, that he persecuted me for four years, and I—I—became a mother." Like Harriet Jacobs, who, before the Civil War had described a similar experience, she was ashamed of the circumstances surrounding the birth of her only child but felt herself blameless, shifting responsibility onto "the edicts of that society which deemed it no crime to undermine the virtue of girls in my then position."¹⁸

Nor did she hesitate to criticize a system that legalized the forced labor of slaves for the benefit of others. "With my needle," she wrote, "I kept bread in the mouths of seventeen persons" and worked "hard that others might live in comparative comfort, and move in those circles of society to which their birth gave them entrance."¹⁹ Keckley's slavery ended when she arranged to buy her freedom and that of her son for \$1200 in 1855.²⁰ "Free, free! what a glorious ring to the word. Free! the bitter heart-struggle was over. Free! the soul could go out to heaven and to God with no chains to clog its flight or pull it down," she wrote of her emancipation.²¹

In the racialized context in which she found herself, emancipation had a number of meanings for Keckley. On an immediate and practical level, it meant that she had a right to do what she pleased with her body, she could claim the money she earned as her own, she was free to live wherever she wanted, and she had legal custody of her son. Her response to that freedom was to take her son, leave her dissipated husband, and seek her fortune first in Baltimore, Maryland, and then in Washington, D.C.²²

From the moment she arrived in Baltimore, the limits that race placed on her freedom became obvious. Before the Civil War, Maryland had the largest free black population in the country, and Baltimore was home to a thriving black community. But a vast array of laws restricted the choices free blacks could make. Those who refused to work for whites, for example, could be bound to service or sold into slavery. Black children could be forcibly apprenticed. Free blacks could not own dogs or guns without a license, and opportunities to engage in trade were severely limited.²³

Keckley remained in Baltimore long enough to earn enough money to proceed to Washington, D.C., where she again found that racism impinged on the liberty she so valued. Not only did she discover that in order to reside in the city, she needed to buy a license, but that she also needed a sympathetic and well-regarded white person to vouch for the fact that she had indeed been emancipated. She was able to make the necessary arrangements to stay, but the experience clarified how precarious her claim to freedom really was.²⁴

The second part of Keckley's autobiography is, among other things,

a reconciliation and assimilation narrative.²⁵ In it, she described her life as a free woman, a business entrepreneur, and a friend and confidant of Mary Todd Lincoln. Although the narrative takes on a different form, consciousness about the significance of race was just as important in this part of her book as it was in the first three chapters. To describe her life as a free woman, Keckley pragmatically adopted a frame of reference for judging what constituted economic success, social respectability, and historical significance that was familiar to her white readers. The way she framed her narrative reflected her sensitivity to the fact that whites could be expected to bring considerable anxiety about the social, economic, and political role of blacks in post-emancipation America to their reading and interpretation of what she had written. She seemed to understand that many white Northerners looked to freed men and women to confirm their claim that slavery was not only immoral but that it also inhibited economic growth and social harmony. She also seemed to have been aware that white Southerners sought reassurance that freed blacks would remain deferential to whites and that ex-slaves could be persuaded to continue to provide services for them.

By ascribing her ability to establish herself as a successful businesswoman as much to the patronage of the white community as to her own ambition, initiative, salesmanship, and dressmaking skills, Keckley offered readers on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line assurance that ex-slaves needed whites as much as whites needed them. "Ever since arriving in Washington," she told her readers, "I had a great desire to work for the ladies of the White House, and to accomplish this end I was ready to make almost any sacrifice consistent with propriety."²⁶ But in the process of describing how she accomplished her goal, she clearly acknowledged that her ambition could not have been realized without the sponsorship of Varina Davis as well as other equally fashionable and well-connected customers who were able to provide her the entrée she wanted to the White House.

She may have been free, but, she assured her readers, she was still in a state of semi-dependence. She made little mention of her participation in the affairs of the black community in Washington. She never wrote about herself that she was well respected in the black community or that she was an active member of her church. She also neglected to write about the invisible economy of women who shared their resources in order to improve each other's lives. She mentioned only in passing the role she played in providing employment to other women who helped her to construct the elaborate clothes ordered by her customers. And she mentioned the death of her only child as a footnote to the death of Willie Lincoln.²⁷

One might interpret this lack of disclosure as part of the culture of

dissemblance. Historian Darlene Clark Hine has suggested that southern black women intentionally “developed a politics of silence . . . to protect the sanctity of the inner aspects of their lives” because they felt sexually vulnerable and economically oppressed or because they were the victims of rape or domestic violence.²⁸ The evidence that black women, particularly those who lived in the South, had reason to feel sexually vulnerable and economically oppressed is overwhelming. But it is less clear that these were the primary reasons why black female autobiographers chose not to disclose themselves fully to their readers. Whether they were male or female, white or black, northern or southern, autobiographers chose very carefully what they were and were not willing to disclose about their lives, usually for reasons that were known only to themselves. Swisshelm and Keckley, for example, both lived in a period when being a mother was considered the essence of a woman’s gendered identity. Yet Swisshelm was almost totally silent about her role as a mother. Throughout her three-hundred-sixty-three-page memoir, she barely mentioned the fact that she had a child, let alone when she was born and what her name was.²⁹ In Keckley’s case, her silences could have had less to do with her feelings of vulnerability than with her assumption that potential white readers knew nothing and cared less about the black community and her role in it.

In her memoir, Keckley wanted to reassure her white readers that she was connected to them. Thus, in her autobiography, her post-emancipation identity is intertwined with and dependent upon her contribution to the lives of whites and her knowledge of their affairs, values, and anxieties. She clearly understood that it was her association with the Lincolns that made her historically noteworthy. But she also used her position of social intimacy with them to assert her authority as a reliable historical witness and took advantage of her knowledge of the Lincolns’ domestic and financial affairs to justify her right to judge and interpret their actions.

Her desire to strengthen the connection between herself and her white acquaintances even extended to her willingness to forgive and continue to associate with the white family who had held her in bondage, thus illustrating a generosity of spirit that could be comforting to her race-conscious white readers. Of her owners, Keckley wrote that they “were not so much responsible for the curse under which I was born, as the God of nature and the fathers who framed the Constitution for the United States. The law descended to them, and it was but natural that they should recognize it, since it manifestly was their interest to do so.”³⁰ After the Civil War, she searched for them, traveled to Virginia to visit them, and entertained them as her guests in Washington.³¹

The story of Keckley’s rise from slavery to economic prosperity served as a model to other blacks who had middle-class aspirations, reminding

them of the benefits of unquestioning acceptance of the value of free enterprise and the ambition, honesty, hard work, sobriety, dependability, and thrift that was expected to accompany it.³² But it was also reassuring to whites. However free the law made her, the identity she created for herself in her autobiography was inextricably bound up in her consciousness of her relationship to the whites with whom she associated and the role gender and race played in determining that relationship.

Race consciousness and its connection with slavery played a similarly important role in the way Jane Grey Swisshelm depicted her life. Swisshelm was much better known in the nineteenth century than she is today. Born in Pittsburgh in 1815 and the daughter of a Scotch-Irish chair maker, she eventually became a well-known journalist. Her career began in 1847 when she published a series of letters to the editor of the *Pittsburgh Commercial Journal* supporting the reform of married women’s property laws in Pennsylvania.³³ In the midst of the reform debate, she began publishing her own weekly newspaper called the *Pittsburgh Saturday Visiter*. While writing for Horace Greeley’s *New York Tribune* in 1850, she became the first woman to claim a seat in the press gallery in Congress. She deserted her husband and migrated to St. Cloud, Minnesota, in 1857, where she published first the *St. Cloud Visiter* and then the *St. Cloud Democrat*. She left her nephew in charge of her paper during the Civil War while she went to Washington to work in the Quartermaster General’s Office. In the months immediately following the war, she published *The Reconstructionist*, a paper critical of the Johnson administration. Between the 1850s and her death in 1884, her letters and comments on current affairs were published by a wide variety of editors, including those of the *Boston Commonwealth*, the *Woman’s Journal*, the *New York Times*, the *New York Tribune*, the *Cincinnati Commercial*, the *Atlanta Constitution*, and the *Chicago Tribune*.³⁴

Despite the fact that Swisshelm was a staunch abolitionist, she did not know much about slavery firsthand. There were few blacks and even fewer slaves in western Pennsylvania where she grew up. Her only direct contact with the “peculiar institution” was during her short sojourn in Louisville, Kentucky, in 1838. As a Covenantor Presbyterian, she arrived in Louisville already convinced that slavery was morally objectionable. But finding herself in the position of observing how the system worked only strengthened her resolve to do what she could to destroy it. In her memoir, she presented a litany of horror stories to illustrate the unimaginable physical brutality and the debasement of the human spirit she observed during her short stay living amid what she called “a great army of woman-whippers.” There was the story of Liza, “a tall, handsome quadroon,” who rejected her master’s advances because of her love for another slave. “To punish both,” Swisshelm wrote, “the young master had

Jo [the man Liza loved] tied up and lashed until he fainted, while Liza was held so that she must witness the torture, until insensibility came to her relief. This was done three times," she continued. Jo was eventually sold "and Liza herself bound to the whipping-post, and lashed until she yielded and became the mother of . . . two beautiful boys." She also told the story of "an old rheumatic cook, Martha" who was sent to the workhouse to be whipped because she could not see to do her work. And there was the story of a white woman who disciplined her cook by nailing the woman's ear to a fence with a ten penny nail.³⁵

Swisshelm was appalled by what she saw of slavery in Kentucky. But its offensiveness was even more egregious because she equated being a slave with her own condition as an unhappy wife. She married James Swisshelm, a man who even in her old age she called her "black knight," in 1836. It was a marriage fraught with conflict over religion and property and characterized by a vicious form of psychological warfare that pitted her against her husband and his mother. Swisshelm's unfortunate marital experience convinced her that there were circumstances under which marriage and slavery were analogous. For Swisshelm, a husband's control over his wife's person and possessions, his right to custody of their children, and his ability to exploit his wife's labor to serve the interests of others all smacked of enslavement.³⁶ In essence, Swisshelm melodramatically claimed that, as a wife, she was no better than a slave.

Describing her life as a married woman in terms of enslavement may have been unprecedented, but Swisshelm was not the first to define marriage as slavery or to argue that there was a direct link between racism and sexism. Such early English feminists as Mary Astell and Mary Wollstonecraft used slavery as a metaphor to describe women's position in eighteenth-century British society. In the early nineteenth century, woman's rights advocates, many of whom were abolitionists (Swisshelm among them), simply followed their lead.³⁷ When most of these women compared the condition of married women to that of slaves, they were speaking figuratively. Ignoring the fact that slaves did not choose their condition and that wives to one degree or another did, Swisshelm used the analogy more literally.

From about 1840 on, one of Swisshelm's goals was to change the laws that held married women in what she considered to be a form of bondage. She advocated the reform of married women's property laws in Pennsylvania. And while she lived in Minnesota, she encouraged the state legislature to follow Pennsylvania's example in this matter.³⁸ She did not try to argue that marriage was the same as slavery in all its legal, economic, psychological, and social manifestations, but she did believe that marriage for a free white woman could be a form of legal bondage. Familiar

with abolitionist propaganda and possessing firsthand knowledge about the conditions of slaves in Kentucky, she chose the slave narrative as her genre to write about her life as a way of explaining to a predominately white audience the connection between marriage and slavery, sexism and racism.³⁹

Eight years before she finally ran away from her husband and fled to the Minnesota frontier, Swisshelm wrote about the enslavement of marriage and its consequences in a story called "The Locust's Song," which she serialized in the *Pittsburgh Saturday Visiter*. In as much as the circumstances of the main character, Susan Morrow, and the language Swisshelm used to describe Susan's situation are almost identical to her description of her own domestic problems in her memoir, "The Locust's Song" is transparently autobiographical.

In the story, Susan finds herself engaged and about to marry a propertied but unfeeling, inconsiderate, and stern judge named Horace Watson, who lived with his two jealous and calculating sisters. After describing the wedding ceremony, Swisshelm wrote, "Poor Susan—no—Mrs. Watson—for if there is any value in a new name and title, she ought to have it—all women who purchased them at the altar, are certainly entitled to them. They are the mess of pottage for which they exchange their birthright to liberty—the badge which, like the collar of the Saxon serf, marks them property, and entitles them to a master's protection and correction in exchange for a life of servitude."⁴⁰ Swisshelm described what it was like for Susan when, immediately after the wedding, Horace took her to live in his house, allowed her to be thoroughly demeaned and humiliated by his two overbearing sisters, made it clear that her friends and family were not welcome to visit, and expressed complete contempt for all of her efforts to please him. Susan finally ran away. Horace advertised in the newspaper for the return of his wife. "A runaway wife, slave, or apprentice," Swisshelm editorialized in her tale, "may be taken at any time without warrant or other authority than the master's order."⁴¹

Susan supported herself by teaching school and feared that if Horace found out where she was, he would force her to return to him by claiming her wages. Knowing that he had a right under the law to do this and distraught at the thought of having to return to his house under such circumstances, Swisshelm wrote that, "Susan pressed her forehead upon her palms, and murmured, 'This is being a slave without the slave's title to corn rations.'"⁴² The story ended when Susan returned voluntarily to Horace and agreed to the divorce that would free her from the shackles that had bound her to him. When she heard that a judge had granted the divorce, she found the idea of self-ownership as exhilarating as Elizabeth Keckley did. "She was in a word, *free*," Swisshelm wrote, "emancipated, disenthralled, as the American slave when he touches British soil."⁴³

Jane's husband, James Swisshelm, like Horace Watson, was a man of means. His father left the family farm to his wife during her lifetime and to his sons after her death. But from the earliest days of their courtship, Jane felt that her husband considered her to be as desirable a piece of property as the land he was waiting to inherit. In her autobiography, she wrote in retrospect, that he "had elected me as his wife some years before . . . had been assured his choice was presumptuous, but came and took possession of his prospective property with the air of a man who understood his business."⁴⁴

Jane's mother, a staunch and proud Scottish Covenantor Presbyterian, did not approve of her daughter's engagement for various reasons, not the least of which was the fact that the Swisshelms were Methodists. Before they married, Jane convinced James to agree that they would set up their own household in Allegheny, a small town near Pittsburgh, and that he would not try to interfere with her religion. Shortly before the wedding, however, James went through an emotional religious conversion experience and joined the Methodist Church. After their marriage, James reneged on both of his promises, and Jane found herself unwillingly ensconced in her mother-in-law's farmhouse where every effort was made to convince her to leave the Presbyterian Church and become a Methodist preacher.⁴⁵ In her memoir, she wrote that it was clear that James understood that after the marriage was solemnized, he was free to ignore what he had promised her: "he but followed that impulse which led the men in England, centuries ago, to enact, that 'marriage annuls all previous contracts between the parties,' and which now leads men in all civilized countries to preserve such statutes."⁴⁶

In the nineteenth century, the wives of propertied men did not ordinarily work outside their homes for wages. Jane found, however, that besides helping with the housework, working on the farm, and providing board for the hired hand, she was expected to contribute financially to the Swisshelm estate. Early in their marriage, when they moved to Louisville, Kentucky, James went into business with his brother. The business failed, and Jane found it necessary to find employment as a seamstress. She eventually set up her own shop as a corset maker and dressmaker. After they returned to Pennsylvania, she began teaching school first in Butler, Pennsylvania, and then in an abandoned meeting house built on the Swisshelm family farm. Following her mother's death, she used her separate estate to publish the *Pittsburgh Saturday Visiter*.⁴⁷

Jane died believing that her husband and mother-in-law had exploited her labor to benefit themselves. She wrote in her memoir that by the time she decided to desert James and emigrate to St. Cloud, Minnesota, her labor for the twenty years of her marriage, combined with much of the

money she had inherited from her mother, "had gone to swell his [James's] mother's estate, on the proceeds of which she kept her carriage and servants until she died, aged ninety-four."⁴⁸ Jane felt that the fruits of her labor, like those of a slave, had gone to benefit someone else.

Not only was Swisshelm, like Keckley, sensitive to the degree to which her labor was exploited, she was also concerned about the tenuousness of a mother's custodial right over her children, whether she be white or black. She knew that the law favored husbands as well as masters in this matter. And her memoir reveals that she was afraid that James would claim his custodial rights when she moved to St. Cloud without him in 1857. On the day she left, James "came upon the boat while she lay at the wharf, held baby on his knee and wept over her; when the last bell rang, he bade me good-bye, carried her to the gangway, held her to the last moment, then placed her in my arms, sprang ashore & hurried up the wharf. He would, I think, have carried her off, but that he knew she would break his heart crying for mother before I could get to her." He knew from experience, she wrote, because he had tried it before.⁴⁹

Despite the success with which she seems to have worked out a satisfactory custody arrangement with James, Jane remained sensitive to the issue and sympathetic to the threat that a husband's legal right to custody posed to other women. In 1862, she published an editorial in her paper, the *St. Cloud Democrat*, regarding a Minnesota woman who had recently left her husband and had taken her children with her. "She may have trouble about retaining her children," Jane noted, "but this is one of the penalties of the legal crime of marriage, a penalty which the law inflicts upon any woman who runs her head into that noose. Had she been living with Mr. O, and raising a family, without marriage, she could have taken her children and left at any time . . . but as the law punishes marriage in woman with a loss of her natural right to the custody of her children and to the proceeds of her own industry, all the property she may have helped him to acquire as well as her children belong to him just the same as the wages of a South Carolina slave belong to his master. But then, Minnesota, is a *Free* state. The only class of persons in it, who are 'held to service' is married women."⁵⁰

For Swisshelm, her divorce papers were comparable to Keckley's manumission papers. After reading in the *New York Tribune* that James had been granted a divorce on the grounds of her desertion, she remembered putting down the paper, looking at her hands, and thinking "Once more you are mine. True, the proceeds of your twenty years of brick-making are back there in Egypt with your lost patrimony, but we are over the Red Sea, out in the free desert; no pursuit is possible, and if bread fails, God will send manna."⁵¹

Swisshelm and Keckley were both exhilarated when they realized that they were free. Freedom gave both of them control over their own property and the benefits to be derived from their own labor. But in the context of gender and race, the way each experienced freedom was in some ways very different. One of the privileges of having white skin, for example, was that a person had freedom of movement that was unavailable to either slaves or free blacks. Keckley found that freedom did not mean that she could decide unilaterally where she would live and work. In Swisshelm's case, however, gender and class considerations, rather than race, inhibited her movement. In order to pursue her career as a editor and journalist, she had to transgress the gender conventions of the respectable middle class by asserting her right of access to male public space.

The issue of child custody provides another example of how race affected Swisshelm and Keckley differently. Three factors inherent in the system of slavery made Keckley's custody of her son relatively secure. First, under slavery, the mother-child relationship was regarded by whites as more important than the father-child relationship among slaves. Second, when she purchased her son's freedom, she technically became his owner. Finally, white fathers of illegitimate black children did not normally go to great lengths to acknowledge their role in the conception of those children. The result was that as long as she was able to maintain her own freedom, it was unlikely that her son's biological father might successfully challenge her right to custody. Swisshelm's claim to custody of her daughter was tenuous in part because of her race. Whether Jane was married to him or not, James had the stronger claim to custody of their daughter in the eyes of the law.

Swisshelm and Keckley each placed their respective versions of bondage in the larger framework of their own autobiographies. In the vast literature on the gendered dimensions of autobiography, feminist scholars have, among other things, explored the ways in which women's autobiographies differ from those of men. They have argued that women often lack the self-confidence and sense of cultural authority that might allow them as authors to see themselves as exceptional. Women, they suggest, bring to the task of writing their lives an explicit consciousness of their gender, historical invisibility, and culturally prescribed inferior, dependent, domestic roles. They understand that what they write will be read as feminine and that what is feminine is culturally devalued. Thus, when women write their autobiographies, they are consciously obliged to establish their centrality and importance in a cultural context that has little regard for the independent female persona. The woman who attempts to write her autobiography has to fear the possibility that if she portrays herself as too unique, independent, accomplished, or rebellious, she will

run the risk of having sacrificed her womanliness, being thought "unfeminine," thus ruining her reputation, alienating her audience, and undermining what little cultural authority she has. Therefore, female autobiographers, in an effort to preserve the attention and sympathy of their readers, tend to de-emphasize their deviation from social norms and the importance of their personal accomplishments. Instead, they are forced to argue that their individual actions and lives are important because they have served some larger purpose.⁵² Their anxieties often make them present themselves as instruments rather than agents. The female autobiographer tends to "submerge the personal in some 'larger' purpose in order to become the vehicle for conveying a message about history." Such "purposefulness seems to give permission for the indulgence" of self-expression.⁵³

Swisshelm needed no such "permission." Indeed, she presented her life story with a great deal of assertiveness and social authority. She claimed to be motivated by a disinterested desire to clarify the historical record in relation to the abolition and woman's rights movements and to expose the indifference of the federal government toward the men who fought to save the Union. At the same time, however, she promised to reveal how "the force of education and the mutability of human character" allowed her to change from a woman who "would have broken an engagement rather than permit her name to appear in print" to one who "had as much newspaper notoriety as any man of that time, and was singularly indifferent to the praise or blame of the Press."⁵⁴ The narrative leaves no doubt that Swisshelm saw herself as the central character in her tale. Moreover, she self-consciously and proudly presented herself as a symbol for what was possible for a white woman with education, ambition, and a particularly thick skin.

Elizabeth Keckley presented her life story with no less authority than Swisshelm, but she was considerably less self-promoting. In the preface to *Behind the Scenes*, she assured her readers that she was "prompted by the purest motive" in publishing her autobiography. She explained that she was writing about her life because she had been asked to do so and because she wanted to set the historical record straight by showing both the "dark side" and the "bright side" of slavery. She also claimed that her concern for the reputation of the former first lady, Mary Todd Lincoln, prompted her to write a narrative of her own life. Lincoln's dressmaker during the Civil War, Keckley served as Mary's companion immediately after the President was assassinated. Concerned that Lincoln's widow was being unfairly judged and viciously maligned by those who were not well-informed, she hoped to redeem both Mary Lincoln's reputation and, by extension, her own by explaining the circumstances surrounding the

former first lady's apparent imprudent and somewhat erratic behavior during the early period of her widowhood.⁵⁵

In presenting herself to the public, Keckley faced problems of self-definition with which such white autobiographers as Swisshelm did not have to contend. Like other African American autobiographers, such as Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, she had to appropriate literary conventions whites created and to adapt her life story to the "traditions of white culture," as literary scholars Stephen Butterfield and Frances Smith Foster have pointed out.⁵⁶ Moreover, while Swisshelm focused on herself as an individual, Keckley portrayed herself both as an individual and a symbol of her race.⁵⁷ Her description of her life testifies to her sensitivity to white people's need to be reassured that she and those like her bore them no ill will for their enslavement and that ex-slaves were willing to adopt a work ethic consistent with the principles of free enterprise.⁵⁸ And finally, the story of her life was filtered through an editor who was no doubt white.

Between 1863 and 1866, Swisshelm and Keckley lived, worked, and socialized in close proximity to each other in Washington, D.C. Despite the fact that they both knew the Lincolns, were associated with the Colored Home for Women and Children in Georgetown, and were active in Freedman's Aid Society work both during and after the Civil War, there is no direct evidence to indicate that they actually knew each other.⁵⁹ Nonetheless, sensitivity to issues of gender and race bound them together.

Just as they did for Keckley, issues of gender and race shaped the ways in which Swisshelm experienced her life and presented it to the public. For example, both slavery and white social conventions established the context in which Swisshelm searched for a way to support herself and her husband in Kentucky. When she applied for a position as a seamstress in Louisville, she consulted a dressmaker who advised her to return home to her mother, explaining that it was unacceptable for a white woman to work for wages and that if she did so, she would "be insulted at every step."⁶⁰ Race as well as the institution of slavery and the slave codes that supported it also gave Swisshelm a context for understanding and describing her relationship with her husband and his family. She was able to exploit the circumstances of slaves and her audience's knowledge of slavery to try to elicit sympathy for her marital situation, use that sympathy to justify her desertion and subsequent divorce, and convince her readers that marriage as it existed deprived women of personal autonomy and protection under the law. She appropriated the image of an enslaved African American woman to suit her own purposes, knowing that her white skin protected her from suffering all of the consequences that particular identity might have entailed. Her whiteness allowed her to remain

oblivious to the fact that marriage was, in fact, not slavery and that wives had ways of negotiating with their husbands that were unavailable to slave women attempting to deal with their masters. Her race privilege meant that she could ignore the degree to which her experience in what she considered to be bondage was qualitatively different from that of a woman like Keckley.

Slavery and racism meant that Keckley could expect to work for wages and that whites might have viewed her marriage as a casual relationship. In that context, the social and legal significance of her desertion was different from that of Swisshelm. But Keckley also exploited the reality of race consciousness to give her narrative resonance. Keckley and other slave narrators hoped that their readers would see the physical and sexual mistreatment of black women as abusive because many whites would have defined it as such had the victim been a white woman. Thus, Keckley's descriptions of the atrocities perpetrated against women because of their race and condition of servitude contributed to the definition of free, white woman because they were theoretically immune from such treatment. Because most whites assumed that many black women were poor and sexually promiscuous, Keckley's blackness made it acceptable that she should work for wages and unexceptional that she should separate from her husband. But her acceptance of the idea of the sanctity of property which led her to purchase herself and her son rather than run away, combined with her post-emancipation Horatio Alger economic success, were startling, admirable, and praiseworthy precisely because she had been a slave and white readers would not necessarily expect such attitudes and success from a person of color. Thus, while Swisshelm appropriated the image of a degraded, enslaved, and economically exploited African American woman to suit her own purposes, Keckley appropriated the image of a hardworking, honest, and financially successful entrepreneur to challenge the fundamental and prejudiced assumptions of her white readers.⁶¹

Keckley was a proud and highly regarded member of the black middle class in Washington, D. C., both during and after the Civil War. There is no reason to think that because she chose to emulate a model of middle-class behavior that whites claimed as their own, she had any more a desire to be white than Swisshelm had a desire to be black. Appealing to an awareness of the opportunities for personal advancement that was associated with whiteness provided her a way of claiming what she felt middle-class whites had and what she knew she deserved—respect and economic security.

But as a freed black woman, her access to those privileges was far from secure. As an ex-slave, her claim to middle-class respectability was based as much on her ability to distance herself from the masses of freed

slaves who roamed the South in general and the streets of the nation's capital in particular as it was on her own economic success, behavior, and demeanor. She suggested to her readers that in contrast to her, many ex-slaves had not yet come to understand what freedom really meant. It would take time, she explained, for them to accept the social, economic, and political responsibilities that accompanied freedom. Dependence, she wrote, was second nature to them. And they were unprepared to deal with the "cares and vexations of poverty" that accompanied their emancipation.⁶² Only by presenting herself as an exception to the rule could she hope to lay the basis for the kind of regard that would warrant her claim to the title "Madame" Keckley.

The responses of sympathy and approval that both Keckley and Swisshelm expected or hoped for were based implicitly on the understanding that neither of their circumstances could be understood outside a context in which race and gender were factors. The identities that they developed for themselves through their writing were dependent upon the existence of the "other." Race and gender consciousness also played a role in the way each of their narratives was received, revealing the way that skin color, identity, authority, and power were linked. Reviewers criticized both of them for exposing to public view affairs that should have remained private.⁶³ But Swisshelm's public reputation as a writer and social activist was well-established by the time she published her autobiography in 1880. There was no reason for anyone to question the authenticity of her narrative. And, indeed, it was generally well-received. The reviewer for the *New York Herald* described her as "one of the most prominent of American women." And the *New York Times* described *Half a Century* as "so cleverly done that one is impressed at once with its reality."⁶⁴

Keckley was unknown outside Washington, D.C., and St. Louis; she was black and she had been a slave. It was common before the Civil War for critics to question the authenticity of slave narratives. Given this situation, it is not surprising that some of those who reviewed Keckley's book expressed skepticism that she was the sole author. The *Atlantic Monthly* "put Mrs. Keckley out of the question of authorship" and The *New York Citizen* assumed that while she might have provided the information on which the book was based, it was written or heavily edited by someone else.⁶⁵ Keckley's publisher did not let such charges go unchallenged. He forwarded a letter from Keckley to the editor of the *New York Citizen* that openly accused her critics of racism. "Let me trust," it said, "that I am not denounced for writing the truth simply because my skin is dark and that I was once a slave."⁶⁶ Despite such protest, Keckley's memoir was ridiculed in the form of a vicious and cruel parody entitled *Behind the Seams; by a Nigger Woman Who Took in Work From Mrs. Lincoln and Mrs. Davis.*⁶⁷

The anonymous author of the piece rejected Keckley's claim to assimilation and attempted to remind his readers that her race precluded any legitimate claim to respectability and to suggest that her self-presentation could only be considered fraudulent.

The way the personal narratives of Jane Grey Swisshelm and Elizabeth Keckley were written, read, and interpreted testify to the degree to which both the narrators and their readers were conscious of the significance of race and gender in American life. The lives of Swisshelm and Keckley were certainly different because of race. But when race, construed as "difference," is posited as the overriding consideration in analyzing the female experience in America, it emphasizes circumstance of birth and discourages us from exploring the ways in which women are able to use difference to their advantage. It leads us to ignore the power of women to construct their own representations of womanhood from their own experiences, part of which is dependent upon the color of their skin and the prevailing ideology of race.

An awareness of and sensitivity to the race and gender consciousness of the reading public were important factors among the many factors that Keckley and Swisshelm used to define themselves and construct their lives and then describe that process of construction to others. Such women as Swisshelm and Keckley exploited that framework for their own benefit, illustrating the ways in which the reality of and depiction of women's lives, however different, are intertwined and dependent upon each other. The southern slave women's reality, as Swisshelm perceived it, gave her a way to describe, contextualize, and analyze her own condition as a northern, free, white but working and unhappily married woman. The reality of white, free Americans as Keckley understood it gave her a way to describe, contextualize, and analyze first her own condition as a southern slave and then her place as a free woman in American society.

When David Rankin Barbee questioned the authenticity of Elizabeth Keckley's memoir in 1935, he implicitly addressed the issue of racial difference. It was, from his point of view, inconceivable that a black woman could have done what she said she did or could have written *Behind the Scenes*. So he attributed the book to a white, female journalist. In doing so, he confirmed the degree to which race and its meaning bound Keckley and Swisshelm inextricably together. The terrain of race and gender consciousness was one of the places where their two lives converged.

The cases of Keckley and Swisshelm encourage us to think about the idea of difference and its significance in new and more complex ways, thereby adding nuance to our understanding of the female experience in America. It is important that we acknowledge difference and analyze its significance in the lives of American women. But it is also important to

remind ourselves that however privileged one group of women has been over another, however much race, class, ethnicity, or sexual preference may appear to have separated them, their consciousness of those differences and the way they exploit that consciousness to serve their own ends testifies to the degree to which their lives were connected. In terms of understanding those lives, appreciating what they shared may be as important as acknowledging how they differed.

NOTES

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¹"Bizarre Lincoln Story is Traced," *Washington Star*, 11 November 1935, A-10. This story was retold in the *St. Cloud Sentinel*, 14 November 1935, 1-2 and the *Minneapolis Journal*, 29 December 1935. See newspaper clippings in Elizabeth Keckley file, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, Minnesota (hereafter Keckley file). Barbee was not a professional historian. He was the editor of the Asheville, North Carolina, *Citizen* and obsessively dedicated himself to promoting a revisionist, pro-Southern interpretation of the Civil War. His interest in history and his experience as a journalist led him to attempt to expose fraudulent historical documents in *Tyler's Quarterly Historical and Genealogical Magazine*. A year before he made the claim that Swisshelm had written *Behind the Scenes*, he had charged that a group of Northerners including Wendell Phillips, William Lloyd Garrison, Henry Ward Beecher, and Charles Dana had collaborated to write *The Impending Crisis*. Hinton Rowan Helper's name was attached to it, he argued, only as "a cloak to give it circulation." In the same article, he alleged that Harriet Beecher Stowe had not written *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. See David Rankin Barbee, "Hinton Rowan Helper," *Tyler's Quarterly Historical and Genealogical Magazine*, 15 (January 1934), 145-72, quotation on 146n.

²"Bizarre Lincoln Story is Traced."

³Historian John W. Blassingame was one of the earliest to address the issue of the authenticity of slave narratives. John W. Blassingame, "Using the Testimony of Ex-Slaves: Approaches and Problems," *Journal of Southern History*, 41 (November 1975), 473-92. For a more recent discussion, see Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*, ed. Jean Fagan Yellin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), xx-xxi.

⁴"Ample Proof of Reality of Elizabeth Keckley," *Washington Star*, 15 November 1935, Keckley file.

⁵"Francis James Grimke," in Henry Warner Bowden, *Dictionary of American Religious Biography*, 2d ed. (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1993), 218-19.

⁶Typescript of a letter from Francis J. Grimke to the *Journal of Negro History*, 1 January 1936, 56-57, in Keckley file. For further discussion of the Swisshelm/Keckley controversy, see Arthur J. Larsen to Francis J. Grimke, 28 February 1936, and Carrie Syphax Watson to Francis J. Grimke, 19 March 1936, in *The Works of Francis J. Grimke*, ed. Carter G. Woodson, vol. 4 (Washington, D.C.: Associated Publishers, Inc., 1942), 545-46, 548-49.

⁷Denise Riley, "Does A Sex Have a History?" in *Feminism and History*, ed. Joan Wallach Scott (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 17-33.

⁸See Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race," in *Feminism and History*, 183-207; and Elsa Barkley Brown, "'What Has Happened Here': The Politics of Difference in Women's History and Feminist Politics," *Feminist Studies* 18 (summer 1992), 295-312.

⁹Joan Wallach Scott, "Introduction," *Feminism and History*, 3.

¹⁰Joan Wallach Scott has pointed to a definitional connection. "Part of being white," she suggests, has meant "not being black." *Ibid.*, 8. Elsa Barkley Brown and Gerda Lerner have also encouraged historians to consider the relational nature of differences among women. See Elsa Barkley Brown, "Polyrhythms and Improvisation: Lessons for Women's History," *History Workshop* 31 (spring 1991), 85-90; and Gerda Lerner, "Reconceptualizing Differences Among Women," *Journal of Women's History* 1 (winter 1990), 106-22.

¹¹For another discussion of a woman who uses race consciousness as the context for creating her autobiographical self, see Darlene Clark Hine on the autobiography of Katharine DuPre Lumpkin. Darlene Clark Hine, "Black Women's History, White Women's History: The Juncture of Race and Class," in *Hine Sight: Black Women and the Re-Construction of American History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 53-57.

¹²For a discussion of using race as a discursive tool, see Higginbotham, "African-American Women's History," 184.

¹³Elizabeth Keckley, *Behind the Scenes. Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House* (New York: G. W. Carleton & Co., 1868); and Jane Grey Swisshelm, *Half a Century* (Chicago: Jansen, McClurg & Co., 1880).

¹⁴For a more complete discussion of the narratives of Virginia slave women, see Brenda E. Stevenson, "Gender Convention, Ideals, and Identity among Antebellum Virginia Slave Women," in *More Than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the Americas*, ed. David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 169-90. Despite the fact that there is no full-length biography of Keckley, she has received considerable scholarly attention. See, for example, Elizabeth Young, *Disarming the Nation: Women's Writing and the American Civil War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 109-48; Frances Smith Foster, "Autobiography After Emancipation: The Example of Elizabeth Keckley," in *Multicultural Autobiography: American Lives*, ed. James R. Payne (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992), 32-63; Rafia Zafar, *We Wear the Mask: African Americans Write American Literature, 1760-1870* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 170-83; Jennifer Fleischner, *Mastering Slavery: Memory, Family, and*

Identity in Women's Slave Narratives (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 93–132; and William L. Andrews, "The Changing Moral Discourse of Nineteenth-Century African American Women's Autobiography: Harriet Jacobs and Elizabeth Keckley," in *De/Colonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women's Autobiography*, ed. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 225–41.

¹⁵Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 19–21, 30.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 23–25, 28–29.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 32–34; see also 36–38.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 39; for Harriet Jacobs's experience, see Jacobs, *Incidents*, 53–57.

¹⁹Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 45.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 55–62, 63. One of her patrons raised the money and Keckley worked to pay it back.

²¹*Ibid.*, 55.

²²*Ibid.*, 64. Keckley married while still a slave with the permission of her master. See *Ibid.*, 49–50.

²³Barbara Jeanne Fields, *Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground: Maryland during the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1985), 1, 7, 35, 79.

²⁴Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 64–65.

²⁵For another take on this theme, see William L. Andrews, "Reunion in the Postbellum Slave Narrative: Frederick Douglass and Elizabeth Keckley," *Black American Literature Forum*, 23 (spring 1989), 5–16.

²⁶Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 76.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 162, 222, 105.

²⁸Darlene Clark Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women: Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance," in *Hine Sight*, 37, 38, 41.

²⁹Keckley was equally reticent about discussing her son.

³⁰Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, xii.

³¹For a description of her post-emancipation relationship with the Garland-Burwell family, see Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 238–66.

³²Concern for respectability was as much a part of the lives of free African Americans as it was for whites. See Anne M. Boylan, "Benevolence and Antislavery Activity among African American Women in New York and Boston, 1820–1860," in *The Abolitionist Sisterhood*, ed. Jean Fagan Yellin and John C. Van Horne (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994), 119–37.

³³"Mrs. Swisshelm's Letter," *Pittsburgh Daily Commercial Journal*, 28 October 1847, 2; 11 December 1847, 2; and 17 February 1848, 2.

³⁴There is no full-length biography of Swisshelm. For scholarly treatment of her life and career, see Peter F. Walker, *Moral Choices: Memory, Desire, and Imagination in Nineteenth-Century American Abolition* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), 89–205; Arthur J. Larsen, *Crusader and Feminist: Letters of Jane Grey Swisshelm, 1858–1865* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1934), 1–32; Sylvia D. Hoffert, "Jane Grey Swisshelm and the Negotiation of Gender Roles on the Minnesota Frontier," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies* 18 (winter 1997), 17–39, and Sylvia D. Hoffert, "Gender and Vigilantism on the Minnesota Frontier: Jane Grey Swisshelm and the U.S.-Dakota Conflict of 1862," *Western Historical Quarterly* 29 (autumn 1998), 343–62. For examples of articles by Swisshelm or references to her opinions published by other editors, see "Letters of Mrs. Swisshelm. No. I," *New York Daily Tribune*, 12 April 1850, 3–4; "The Negro's Prediction," *Boston Commonwealth*, 22 April 1865, 2; "Hanging the Assassins: Letter from Mrs. Jane G. Swisshelm," *Pittsburgh Daily Commercial Journal*, 10 July 1865, 2; "Some Curious Statements by Mrs. J. G. Swisshelm," *New York Times*, 18 July 1865, 3; "Watchman, What of the Night?" *Woman's Journal*, 20 January 1872, 18; "Views of a Woman-Suffragist," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 27 February 1874, 8; "The Temperance Crusade," *Atlanta Constitution*, 10 March 1874, 2; and "The Woman's Temperance War," *Cincinnati Commercial*, 20 March 1874, 2.

³⁵Swisshelm, *Half a Century*, 51–59.

³⁶For a description of the Swisshelm marriage, see *Ibid.*, 40–168.

³⁷Sylvia D. Hoffert, *When Hens Crow: The Woman's Rights Movement in Antebellum America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 55–60. For other discussions of the influence of abolitionism and its language on woman's rights advocates, see Jean Fagan Yellin, *Women and Sisters: The Antislavery Feminists in American Culture* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1989), 3–52; Blanche Glassman Hersh, *The Slavery of Sex: Feminist-Abolitionists in America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978), 189–200; and Ellen Carol DuBois, *Feminism and Suffrage: The Emergence of an Independent Women's Movement in America, 1848–1869* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1978), 31–39. American feminists continued to use this analogy after the Civil War. See Elizabeth B. Clark, "Matrimonial Bonds: Slavery and Divorce in Nineteenth-Century America," *Law and History Review* 8 (spring 1990), 30–34.

³⁸"Mrs. Swisshelm's Letter," *Pittsburgh Daily Commercial Journal*, 28 October 1847, 2; "Mrs. Swisshelm's Letter," *Pittsburgh Daily Commercial Journal*, 11 December 1847, 2; and Swisshelm, *Half a Century*, 102–103, 217.

³⁹Frances Smith Foster defines slave narratives as "personal accounts by black slaves and ex-slaves of their experiences in slavery and of their efforts to obtain freedom" and continues to say that they are also retrospective efforts on the part of their authors to "define, even create, their identities as they attempted to relate the patterns and implications of their slavery experiences" as well as an attempt to expose social injustice and "work for a unity of peace and understanding." Frances Smith Foster, *Witnessing Slavery: The Development of Antebellum Slave Narratives* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1979), 3.

⁴⁰Jane Grey Swisshelm, "The Locust's Song," *Pittsburgh Saturday Visiter*, 18 August 1849, 1.

⁴¹Swisshelm, "Locust's Song," *Pittsburgh Saturday Visiter*, 27 October 1849, 4.

⁴²Swisshelm, "Locust's Song," *Pittsburgh Saturday Visiter*, 1 December 1849, 4.

⁴³Swisshelm, "Locust's Song," *Pittsburgh Saturday Visiter*, 8 December 1849, 1.

⁴⁴Swisshelm, *Half a Century*, 40.

⁴⁵In the early nineteenth century, some Methodists encouraged women to pray aloud and exhort although they were less enthusiastic about allowing them to preach or explicate biblical texts. But by the time that Jane married, the Methodist hierarchy had begun to discourage the participation of women in their services. See Catherine Brekus, "'Let Your Women Keep Silence in the Churches': Female Preaching and Evangelical Religion in America, 1740–1845" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1993), 4, 94, 114, 344. James was clearly bucking the tide when he put pressure on Jane after their marriage to consider preaching.

⁴⁶Swisshelm, *Half a Century*, 41–42, quotation on 42.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 45–46, 49, 60–64, 73, 84, 107.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, *Half a Century*, 167.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*

⁵⁰"Laws of Marriage," *St. Cloud Democrat*, 29 May 1862, 2. For an example of Swisshelm's use of the wife/slave analogy in yet another context, see Swisshelm, *Half a Century*, 49.

⁵¹Swisshelm, *Half a Century*, 216–17. Swisshelm did not directly address the degree to which she considered white women's bodies as well as their labor to be the property of their husbands. In her autobiography she gives us only a few clues about her attitudes towards physical intimacy and sexual life. She remembers so resenting the social pressure placed on her as a young, single woman to participate in the playful kissing games that followed quilting parties that she often left as soon as the quilting was over. And she wrote that she was perfectly willing to accept celibacy as the price she had to pay for deserting her husband. See Swisshelm, *Half a Century*, 38–39, 168.

⁵²Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck, eds., *Life/Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1988), 1; Margo Culley, "What a Piece of Work is 'Woman!' An Introduction," in *American Women's Autobiography: FealsIts of Memory* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 15–16; and Sidonie Smith, *Poetics of Women's Autobiography: Marginality and the Fictions of Self-Representation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 9, 10, 50. Elizabeth Winston claims this is particularly true for female writers in the nineteenth century. See Elizabeth Winston, "The Autobiographer and Her Readers: From Apol-

ogy to Affirmation," in *Women's Autobiography: Essays in Criticism*, ed. Estelle C. Jelinek (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 110–11; and Nancy K. Miller, *Subject to Change: Reading Feminist Writing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 50, 52, 59, 60.

⁵³Culley, "What a Piece of Work is 'Woman!'" 15–16. Not everyone agrees with this assessment. Liz Stanley, for example, asserts that while some female autobiographers may be self-deprecating, others' memoirs are as "highly ego-centered and preoccupied as any man's." See Liz Stanley, "Moments of Writing: Is There a Feminist Autobiography?" *Gender and History* 2 (spring 1990), 58.

⁵⁴Swisshelm, *Half a Century*, 3–4.

⁵⁵Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, xi–xvi. For a psychological analysis of the relationship between Elizabeth Keckley and Mary Todd Lincoln, see Fleischner, *Mastering Slavery*, 102–32.

⁵⁶Stephen Butterfield, *Black Autobiography in America* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1974), 47; and Frances Smith Foster, *Written by Herself: Literary Production by African American Women, 1746–1892* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 16.

⁵⁷Foster, *Witnessing Slavery*, 5, 68–69.

⁵⁸Foster, *Written By Herself*, 118–19, 124.

⁵⁹Swisshelm discusses her acquaintance with Mary Todd Lincoln in Swisshelm, *Half a Century*, 236–37. She was Secretary of the Ways and Means Committee for the National Association for the Relief of Colored Women and Children. See "Appeal" in Jane Grey Swisshelm, Consolidated Correspondence File, RG 92, Box 1100, National Archives, Washington, D.C. Keckley was founder of the Contraband Relief Association. See Foster, *Written By Herself*, 118. Keckley retired to the Home for Destitute Women and Children and willed all of her property to the National Association for the Relief of Destitute Colored Women and Children. See John E. Washington, *They Knew Lincoln* (New York: Dutton, 1942), 213–14.

⁶⁰Swisshelm, *Half a Century*, 60.

⁶¹As a member of the black middle class in Washington, Keckley knew that some black women did not have to work to help support their families, that there were many black marriages that were loving and stable, and that the entrepreneurial spirit was not confined to whites. But she had every reason to assume that her white readers were not likely to acknowledge or appreciate these realities. For discussion of the significance of black, entrepreneurial, property-owning women in southern life, see Suzanne Lebsock, *The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and Culture in a Southern Town, 1784–1860* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1985), 87–111; and Loren Schweninger, "Property Owning Free African-American Women in the South, 1800–1870," in *"We Specialize in the Wholly Impossible:" A Reader in Black Women's History*, ed. Darlene Clark Hine, Wilma King, and Linda Reed (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Carlson Publishing, 1995), 253–79.

⁶²Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 140.

⁶³In his series of articles on Swisshelm, George T. Fleming reprints a letter from her in which she mentions this criticism of her book. See George T. Fleming, "Bits of Biography—Jane Grey Swisshelm," *Pittsburgh Gazette-Times*, 4 May 1919, clippings in Jane Grey Swisshelm File, Pennsylvania Room, Carnegie Library, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. For this criticism of Keckley, see "Indecent Publications," *New York Citizen*, 18 April 1868, 4.

⁶⁴"Half a Century," *New York Herald*, 16 August 1880, 5; and "Mrs. Swisshelm's Recollecti

ons," *New York Times*, 8 August 1880, 8. See also "Mrs. Swisshelm's Reminiscences," *New York Daily Tribune*, 20 July 1880, 6; and "An American Woman's Memoirs," *The Nation* 31 (19 August 1880), 139–40.

⁶⁵"Behind the Scenes," *Atlantic Monthly*, July 1868, 128; "Indecent Publications," *New York Citizen*, 18 April 1868, 4, and "An Indecent Book," *New York Citizen*, 25 April 1868, 4. Recent scholars concur and point to James Redpath or Hamilton Busbey as possible collaborators. See Foster, *Written By Herself*, 128; Washington, *They Knew Lincoln*, 238–39; and "Notes and Comments," *Minnesota History* 17 (June 1936), 216–17.

⁶⁶"An Indecent Book," 4.

⁶⁷Anonymous, *Behind the Seams; by a Nigger Woman Who Took in Work From Mrs. Lincoln and Mrs. Davis* (New York: National News Company, 1868), pamphlet collection, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina.



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

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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 Finkelkraut says, “an error of grammatical attribution of person.”⁷ In his autobiographical *The Imaginary Jew*, a work of intellectual history, Finkelkraut 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 Ardizzone, *Love on Trial* (Norton, 2001). Photo courtesy of Bettman/Corbis.

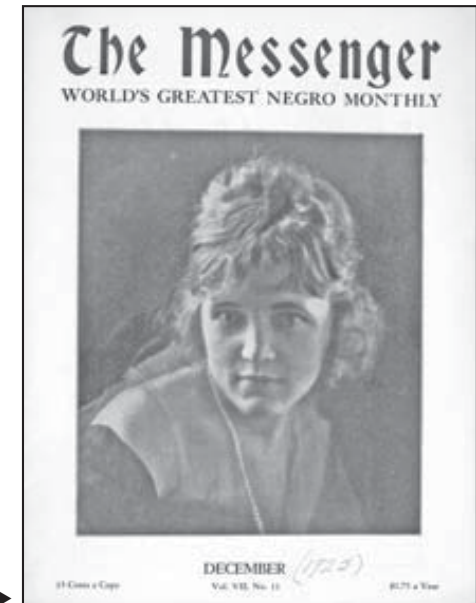
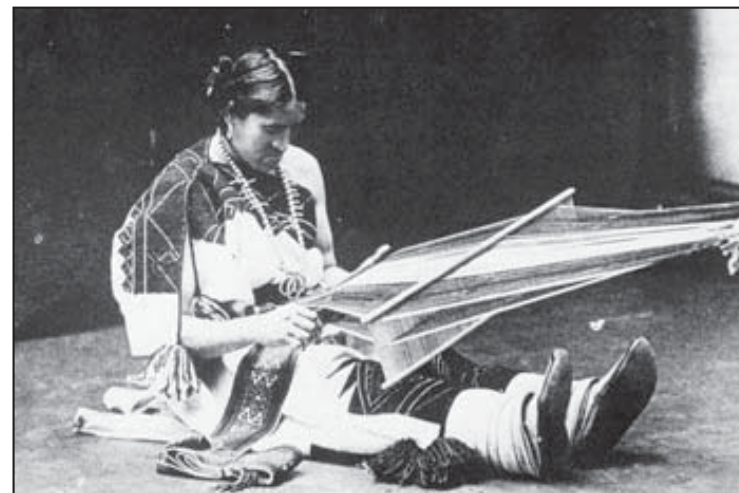


Fig. 4. Cover photo from the *Messenger*, December 1925. Mrs. Credit, Philadelphia PA. Photo courtesy of The Newberry Library, Chicago.



▲
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.



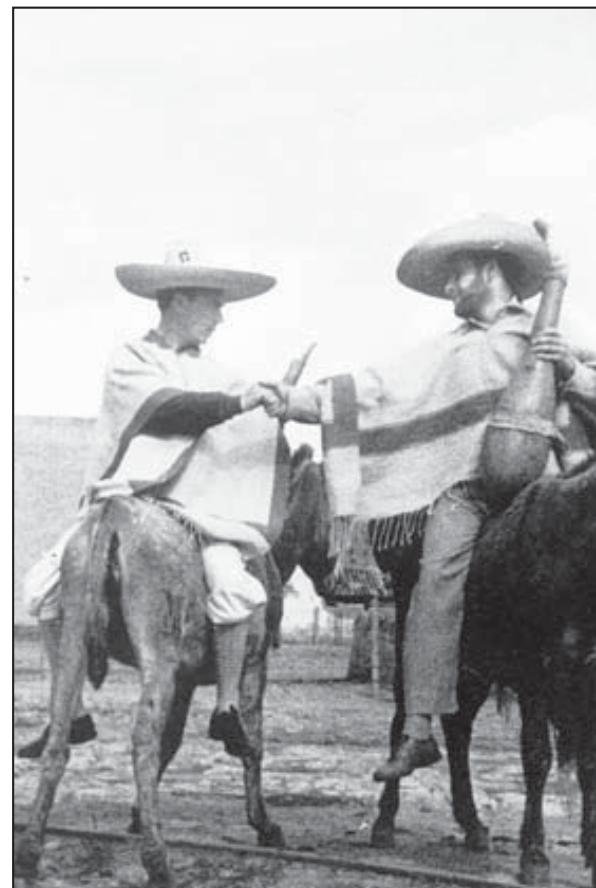
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Fig. 9. Sandra Bernhard, *Without You I'm Nothing*. M.C.E.G. Productions, Inc, 1990. Reproduced from Pamela L. Caughie, *Passing and Pedagogy* (U of Illinois, 1999). Still credit: Loyola University Center for Instructional Design (LUCID).



▲ 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



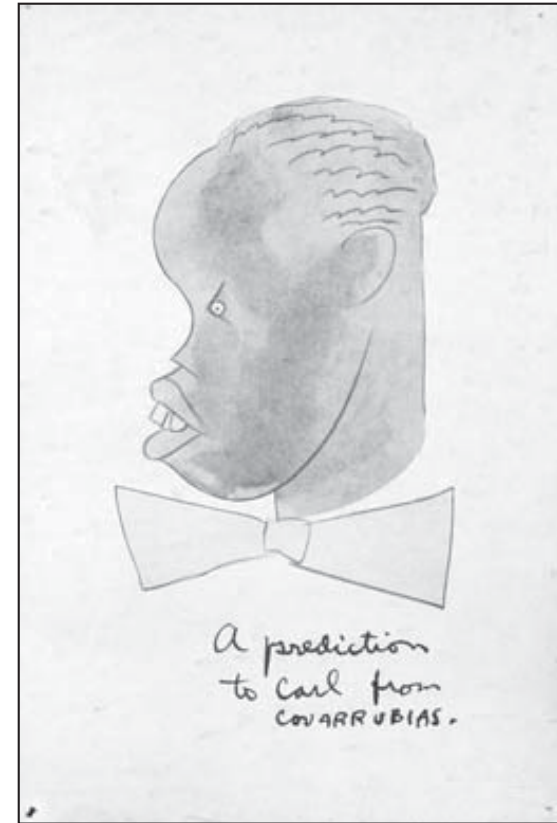
▲ Fig. 11. Sergei Eisenstein. Reproduced from Inga Karetnikova, *Mexico According to Eisenstein* (U of New Mexico Press, 1991). Photo courtesy of Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN.

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.

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 *postmodernism*, 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. Haryette 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.



Vision to Visionary:
The New Negro Woman as Cultural Worker
in Jessie Redmon Fauset's *Plum Bun*

SUSAN TOMLINSON
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Yes, she has arrived. Like her white sister, she is the product of profound and vital changes in our economic mechanism, wrought mainly by the World War and its aftermath. Along the entire gamut of social, economic and political attitudes, the New Negro Woman, with her head erect and spirit undaunted is resolutely marching toward the liberation of her people in particular and the human race in general.

Editorial, *The Messenger's* "New Negro Woman" issue (1923)

In June 1924, three months after the publication of *There Is Confusion*, Jessie Redmon Fauset confided in her friend and erstwhile protégé Langston Hughes that she planned to begin working on her next novel the following month (24 June 1924). From Paris four months later, she reported her difficult progress with this second novel, a project radically different from her earlier prose: "I like the stuff of my next novel—I have a good title for it too—but I am troubled as I have never been before with form. Somehow I've never thought much about form before except for verse. But now I think I am over zealous—I write and destroy and smoke and get nervous. I hate these false starts" (8 October 1924). The resulting novel, *Plum Bun*, represents a struggle with form on several fronts. As a feminist, anti-racist project, the novel explores the intersections of race and gender constructions of black and white American women. Written at the height of both the

New Negro and New Woman artistic and political movements, it represents the aims, outcomes, and implications of both movements. While Fauset and her text occupy the intersection of the New Negro and the New Woman, both author and text represent the limitations of each movement completely to represent its constituency. At the same time as Fauset and *Plum Bun* demonstrate a congress between two progressive cultural movements sharing a historical moment, they also underscore the mutual exclusivity and even the contradictions inherent in both movements.

Formally *Plum Bun* reconciles the New Negro and New Woman movements in a protagonist who embodies both—not, however, at the same time. Not until the very end of the novel, when Angela Murray embraces and trumpets her racial identity and devotes herself to her artistic career in a Europe removed from the cultural sites of both movements in the United States, do both gender and racial advancement coalesce in the unified female subject. Fauset unites the New Negro and the

- 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.