

Post-Racial Realities
Passing Narratives in Contemporary U.S. Fiction

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Berlin, August 2014

POST-RACIAL REALITIES

PASSING NARRATIVES IN CONTEMPORARY U.S. FICTION

Yulia Kozyrakis

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1. INTRODUCTION

pass·ing, noun \ 'pa-siŋ \:
 the act of moving toward and beyond something;
 a person's death;
 the act of officially approving a bill, law, etc.¹

When on March 8, 2006 the first episode of FX Networks' reality show "Black.White" was aired, it drew four million viewers to their TV screens, making the series launch the "most successful launch of any show on cable TV" to that date.² Co-produced by the rapper Ice Cube, the show invited two families, one black and one white, to live together for a certain period of time under camera surveillance in order to explore how far the factor of race still matters in everyday life in the U.S. The show suggested that via passing—facilitated by specific "insider" knowledge about the other race, behavior coaching, and stage make-up—the show's participants would be able to experience firsthand what it means to be black/white in America.



Fig. 1: Two families cast in "Black.White": the Sparkses (above) and the Wurgels (below) in their natural and made-up look respectively.³

¹ "Passing." Merriam-Webster.com. Merriam-Webster, n.d. Web. 24 Jul. 2014.

² "Premiere of Ice Cube-produced 'Black. White.' Sets TV Ratings Rrecords." *XXL Mag.* 10 Mar. 2006. Web. 7 Aug. 2014.

³ Gilbert, Matthew. "'Black.White.' Is More Than a Reality Gimmick". www.boston.com. 8 March 2006. Web. 18 June 2014.

The fact that the experiment took place within the commercial genre of reality television precluded any insights that could function as a “pointed inquiry into the visual protocols of racial classification” and challenge the audience’s views (Wald, 3). Unlike its satiric 1980’s counterpart “White Like Me” skit by Eddie Murphy, which, despite its short length, still managed to undermine racial stereotyping, the reality show “Black.White” instead followed predictable situations of racial misunderstanding and persistence of stereotypic thinking. Gradual estrangement of both families developed in place of the expected reduction of the distance between them. Reservation against the genre of reality TV notwithstanding, the show triggers a number of thought-provoking questions concerning racial performance and authenticity. One of the central issues that arise in this context is the idea that racial identity is performative and that phenotype, which is popularly equated to race, is only a marker of race, not its content. The “content” of race is hence the constant performative repetition of socially, historically, and culturally specific ways of behavior. Furthermore, we might ask then where the difference between ‘passing for’ and ‘being’ a member of a certain race can be located, and what consequences it has for the discussion of the concept of authenticity. The audience’s urge to believe in the attainability of something like authentic experience across the color line via actors, theatrical make-up and a fixed script speaks to the returning urge for authenticity that various scholars have observed in recent fiction and popular entertainment.

The possibility of passing for a member of another race, introduced here in the context of the “Black.White” show, has always been part of American race-thinking. Every encounter of the Puritan settlers and their descendants with the racial Other—first the American Indians, then with African slaves, and later with immigrants—has immediately called into question the significance of visually distinguishable differences between the members of the so-called white and non-white races. Since these visual differences had legal consequences for the person’s citizenship, property and voting rights, and marriage, for many light-skinned individuals, passing for white constituted a viable, even if highly risky, possibility of re-

arranging their lives. It is interesting to note thereby that the fascination with the theme of passing has widely exceeded the actual practice of passing, since physically only a small portion of mixed-race individuals are able to pass, and many of them never do. As Michael Rogin suggests, “the society that developed materially from establishing rigid boundaries between the white and dark races developed culturally from transgressing those same boundaries. Hysteria over miscegenation and the mixing of bodily fluids operated alongside racial cross-dressing” (Rogin, 25). In a way, passing or refusal to do so led to the 1896 legal enforcement of the infamous ‘one-drop rule’, which designated every person with any traceable African American origin as “black”. As Marc Golub argues in his essay “*Plessy as ‘Passing’: Judicial Responses to Ambiguously Raced Bodies in *Plessy v. Ferguson**”,

Plessy’s ability to pass for white (and his publicly staged refusal to do so) called attention to the social and legal processes of racial sorting through which purportedly natural and discrete racial groups are produced and maintained. Reading Plessy as a case fundamentally about racial passing reveals the Court’s deep anxiety regarding mixed-race individuals and the specter of interracial sexuality that ambiguously raced bodies necessarily signify. (Golub, 564-565)

The sheer possibility of passing, hence, seems to be a powerful image of self-invention, of racial and cultural border-crossing, the embodiment of racial anxiety, and an inquiry into the workings of the mechanism of race. As Samira Kawash suggests in her study *Dislocating the Color Line: Identity, Hybridity, and Singularity in African American Narrative*, “in the figure of the passing body, the signifiers of race are unloosened from the signified; the seemingly stable relation between representation and the real collapses, and representation is suddenly dangerous” since it poses a “threat of the collapse of whiteness itself” (Kawash, 1997, 131-132).

In my study, I will explore the way passing has entered the U.S. cultural imaginary and how it continues to occupy writers’ and readers’ minds. I will focus on the recent revival of the passing theme in fictional U.S. literature and will base my analysis on three contemporary novels: *Caucasia* by Danzy Senna (1998), *The Human Stain* by Philip Roth (2000), and *The*

Time of Our Singing by Richard Powers (2004). These novels can be said to share a common concern for a fictional engagement with the experiences of light-skinned individuals living between the realms of whiteness and blackness. The broader context of the present exploration will be the renegotiation of ethno-racial identity as cultural self-fashioning, which U.S. fiction has demonstrated since roughly the mid-1980s.

Profound political and social changes in the second half of the twentieth century called for a reconceptualization of the notions of ethnicity, race, and gender, and for a critical reconsideration of the process of identity formation itself.⁴ Gradually this new understanding percolated into theoretic discussions within the field of literary and cultural studies, inspiring fresh readings of well-known and also previously neglected literary works. In the light of new theoretical insights, the novel of passing, which developed in the second half of the nineteenth century and had its heyday during the Harlem Renaissance, has been critically reexamined, which has unearthed its earlier unnoticed subversive potential.⁵ Within this context, the genre of the passing novel, which some had declared long dead and gone, then resurfaced on the

⁴ Since roughly the 1960's, the social sciences and the humanities have developed towards an understanding that, since identities are "constructed within, not outside, discourse, we need to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies" (Hall, 4). Identity is thus inextricably connected to the questions of cultural and political dominance. At the same time, the notions of race and racial formation in the United States have been critically reconsidered (see Omi, M. & H. Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States, from the 1960s to the 1990s*, Routledge, 1994; also see Rothenberg, Paula S., *Race, Class, and Gender in the United States An Integrated Study*, Worth Publishers, 2004.) Theoretical renegotiation of the concept of identity led to a critical reconsideration of literary narratives and of the questions of literary representation. As Bachman-Medick suggests, these developments in literary and cultural studies can be thought of as cultural turns. For her detailed discussion of the cultural turns in the 20th century, see Bachmann-Medick, D. *Cultural Turns. Neuorientierungen in den Kulturwissenschaften*. Rowohlt-Taschenbuch-Verl., 2007. There she describes the developments in culture studies as a succession of turns—linguistic, interpretative, narrative, performative etc.—that each lead to a significant change of the conceptual paradigm.

⁵ In her comprehensive study *Crossing the Line: Racial Passing in the Twentieth-Century U.S. Literature and Culture* (Duke UP, 2000), Gayle Wald, for instance, suggests that the juxtaposition of "literary, musical, cinematic, and journalistic representations renders visible the relation between cultural apparatuses and institutions and the racial passing narratives that are produced in and through them" (19). In *The Passing Figure: Racial Confusion in Modern American Literature* (1996), Juda Bennett analyzes the passing novel with respect to the moment of its emergence, its development in the 1920s, and also its counterpart, gender passing, in the late 1980s. A collection of essays on passing novels assembled in *Passing and the Fictions of Identity* (edited by Elaine K. Ginsberg, Duke University Press, 1996) offers a critical reconsideration of a number of literary works from classical passing narratives, to slave narratives and cases of actual passing.

terrain of contemporary U.S. literature.⁶ In contradiction to the U.S. multiculturalist rhetoric, which celebrates the idea of hybridity, these contemporary works feature protagonists who are light enough to pass for white, but often seem to remain outsiders to any community whatsoever. Analysis of literary passing enables deeper insight into the workings of identity enactment and demonstrates that race is much more than just a matter of phenotype. By performing a certain ethnic or racial identity, the fictional passer subverts the categories of race and ethnicity, exposes their ambiguities, and underscores the concept of identity as an ongoing process rather than a state. Contemporary fiction thus experiments with the theme of passing in a changed world, where race, however, still plays a defining role in the protagonists' lives.

1.1. REPEATING THE PARENTS' HISTORY? THE RETURN OF THE RACIAL PASSER

“It was like repeating our parents' history all over again. [...] We were like Russian nesting dolls. When you opened our parents' bodies you found a replica of their struggle, no matter how hard we tried to transcend it”, says the light-skinned protagonist of Danzy Senna's 2011 short story “What's the matter with Helga and Dave?” (Senna, 2011(b), 179). The discontent with the persistence of the paradigm of race in the social, political and cultural domains, voiced through the protagonist, is common to numerous contemporary U.S. novels on race. In their fictional engagements with the subject of race, authors like Danzy Senna, Richard Powers, Heidi Durrow, Mat Johnson, Philip Roth and many others deal fictionally with the situation that “the generally agreed upon dismissal of race does not adequately translate into contemporary realities” (Gruber, 95). The idea of race, that it is possible to infer knowledge about a person's behavior or mental abilities from his or her physical features, has been scientifically discredited. And yet race and racism continue to be influential factors in various realms of life, actual and fictional, while the idea of the *de jure* established legal equality is

⁶ For a detailed account of the gradual decline of passing see chapter four of Gayle Wald's study *Crossing the Line: Racial Passing in the Twentieth-Century U.S. Literature and Culture* (Duke UP, 2000).

often used to argue for the situation of *de facto* racial equality in the U.S. As Markus and Moya elucidate, “a claim of color-blindness often takes the form of suggesting that while there was some unfairness in the system in the past, legal equality is now a reality, so racial and ethnic differences ought to be ignored” (58). Consequently, they conclude, “the ideology of color-blindness ignores interdependence and participates in the classic confusion between the ‘ought’ and the ‘is’” (58).

At the same time, the concept of identity in general and of racial identity in particular has undergone significant changes in the course of the twentieth century. Initially viewed as a fixed, essential, and hereditary entity, identity is now understood as being performative and as an ongoing process of cross-influence between the person and his or her surroundings.⁷ Within this understanding, narrative has been recognized to be a crucial element in the process of the acquisition of a sense of self. Indeed, without narration, no palpable sense of one’s own identity can be reached. As Margaret R. Somers writes, scholars postulate that “social life is in itself storied and that narrative is an ontological condition of social life” (613). Thus, she continues, “people construct identities (however multiple and changing) by locating themselves or being located within a repertoire of emplotted stories; ... ‘experience’ is constituted through narratives; [...] people make sense of what has happened and is happening to them by attempting to assemble or in some way to integrate these happenings within one or more narratives” (Somers, 614). According to this realization, fictional narratives fulfil at least two functions. On the one hand, through fictional engagement with specific historically situated experiences, fictional writing seeks to disclose dominating and dominated cultural ideas, concepts, and ideologies. On the other hand, while it reflects upon existing ideas, fictional literature at the same time creates new, alternative fictional realities

⁷ In addition to the already mentioned study by Omi and Winant, for a concise study on the formation and the development of the concept of race and racial identity see among others Baker Lee D. *From Savage to Negro: Anthropology and the Construction of Race, 1896-1954*. (California UP, 1998). In *The Wages of Whiteness* (Verso, 2001) David R. Roediger offers a comprehensive analysis of race and whiteness with respect to class and labor. For a discussion of critical race theory see Delgado, Richard, and Jean Stefancic. *Critical Race Theory: The Cutting Edge*. (Temple University Press, 1999).

which in turn offer new narratives of resignification, and influence the readers' own processes of identification.⁸

In what will follow, I seek to fill the gap in the critical exploration of contemporary literature on passing by analyzing the return of the passing figure and its significance. Recent critical reconsideration of the classical passing novels will serve as a theoretical backdrop to my study of both the altered performance of passing and the changed audience as its recipient.⁹ My focus will lie on both the meaning-making processes of contemporary racial border crossers, who seek to circumvent prescribed subject positions, and on meaning-making in the process of reception of the novels by the readers of the post-race era.¹⁰ Furthermore, because of the sociopolitical changes during and since the civil rights era, this study proposes to broaden the definition of passing, and argues for its understanding, not only as a literary and social practice, but as a unique kind of ethno-racial self-fashioning which can potentially challenge existing stereotypes. The analysis of passing discloses that passing is inherently at work in any kind of performance of whiteness or blackness, since such performances are always oriented on matching a publicly recognizable, iconic representation of a particular ethno-racial identity. The discussion will necessarily touch upon the tension between the claim of (racial) authenticity and the accusation of imitation.

A concept which is at the same time omnipresent and ungraspable, race relies heavily on the visibility of physical features and, at the same time, cannot be reduced to it. In my study, I explicitly concentrate on the fictional works which deal with the black/white dichotomy.

⁸ Also compare Fluck's „Reading for Recognition“: the power of literature “also derives from the interactive mode of aesthetic experience that turns reading into a transfer and thereby opens up entirely new possibilities for a reconfiguration and an extension of the reader's narrative identity” (Fluck, 2013, 62-63).

⁹ For further critical reconsideration of passing novels compare Kathleen Pfeiffer, *Race Passing and American Individualism* (University of Massachusetts Pr., 2003), Samira Kawash, *Dislocating the Color Line: Identity, Hybridity, and Singularity in African American Literature* (Stanford UP, 1997) and Mar Gallego, *Passing Novels in the Harlem Renaissance: Identity Politics and Textual Strategies* (Lit Verlag, 2003).

¹⁰ As I will explain in detail further in the chapter in my reference to the 1990s and the twenty-first century, the era of ‘post-race’ implies neither a break with the period preceding it, nor that the concept of race ceases to play a role in it. The cultural imaginary of the age of post-race, the arrival of which many perceived as being marked by Barack Obama's presidential election, continues to be influenced by the idea of race. However, contemporary works and the fictional worlds that they create reflect upon a changed understanding of the concepts of race and of identity formation, and imply the idea of a certain paradigmatic break, suggested by the attribute ‘post’-race. For further explanation see pages 35-41.

Contemporary U.S. fiction offers numerous novels which explore racial passing and self-fashioning in a much broader context, creating protagonists who move not only between blackness and whiteness, but also between different hyphenated American identities, including such varied communities of origin as Chinese, Russian, Italian, Korean and many others.¹¹ However creative these ethno-racial border-crossings might be, it seems to me that the black/white color line fascinates the readers' minds precisely because of the contradiction at its root: while it suggests that a clear line between blackness and whiteness exists, the very possibility of passing undermines it. Passing requires both a certain phenotype and an appropriate performance of identity, and yet it always escapes a clear definition. Therefore, I will focus on protagonists who move between the realms of blackness and whiteness.

In the rest of the present chapter, I will briefly sketch the context in which the genre of the passing novel emerged in the 1850s, its heyday during the Harlem Renaissance, its subsequent decline, and its recent rebirth. It will be important to consider contemporaneous responses to the genre, which, by featuring protagonists who 'disappeared' into whiteness by passing for white, stood somewhat in contradiction to the growing self-confidence of African Americans both in terms of their socio-economic and artistic development. Roughly since the late 1980s, however, the notion of identity as performance has entered the academic and cultural fields and the subversive potential of the passing narratives has been rediscovered. The figure of the passer has presented an especially thought provoking case since it challenged the boundaries of racial categorization via its performance of whiteness and blackness. In addition to the renewed academic interest in the already well-known novels of passing, it is remarkable that the recently emerging new contributions to the genre have been written mainly by light-skinned authors, who themselves have faced the complex circumstances of growing up racially mixed in the 1960s. These contemporary novels on passing offer a particularly interesting perspective on the phenomenon since they re-appropriate the genre's traditions

¹¹ Compare for instance the novels *Mona in the Promised Land* by Gish Gen, *The Native Speaker* by Chang-Rae Lee, or *American Debutant's Handbook* by Gary Steyngart.

within the changed socio-historic, literary, and cultural environment. The first chapter will also prepare the ground for the analysis of the novels by briefly sketching the theoretical framework and developing working definitions of the concepts of race, ethnicity, identity, and passing.

The second chapter will be devoted to *The Human Stain* by Philip Roth. The novel presents an especially interesting case of identity negotiation: At the heart of the story of the light-skinned African American Coleman Silk who is passing for Jewish (and, by extension, for white) is the quest for dissecting Jewish American identity, a quest known to the readers of Roth's oeuvre. Thus, under the guise of an African American passing for white is a Jewish American "passing" for black, since the novel is narrated by Roth's alter ego Nathan Zuckerman, who, for the most part, is not merely narrating, but inventing the story of Coleman Silk's life. Although the story of Silk's life is largely imagined by Zuckerman, its narration is deceptively compelling. Frequently slipping into Silk's frame of mind, the novel oscillates between the desire to make Zuckerman's intrusion as a narrator almost invisible, and the intention to explicitly remind the reader of Zuckerman's formative role in it. The novel's narrative strategies, which locate it firmly within neorealism, will also be analyzed in this chapter. On the one hand, the novel subscribes to the need to narrate, to represent individual experiences, and to make them accessible to others. Narration acquires an ontological function of creating the events in the very moment of their narration. Simultaneously, however, the novel acknowledges the impossibility to represent the 'real' and underscores the fact that it can offer but one version of reality among countless others.

Roth's engagement with the genre presents a significant variation on the theme of passing, which he constructs in the grey area between blackness and whiteness by having the main protagonist pass for Jewish. As will become clear in the analysis, within the novel, passing for Jewish reflects upon the history of the "whitening" of Jewish Americans and adds an additional dimension to passing. Throughout the twentieth century, Black-Jewish relations

experienced a complex development of made and dropped alliances. In order to fully understand the fictional renegotiation of these relations in the persona of Coleman Silk, the second chapter will also provide a brief overview of corresponding socio-historic developments and of literary engagement with the topic of Black-Jewish relations. Subsequently, I will proceed to analyze Philip Roth's literary engagement with the figure of the racial passer and with the theme that permeates his whole oeuvre, the question of what it means to be Jewish in contemporary America. By placing Coleman Silk's case into the framework of Jewish American identity renegotiation, Roth significantly alters and enriches the generic figure of the passer, which had been previously limited by its melodramatic constituent. In line with the assumption of performativity of identity, close readings will reveal the significance of presenting the passer as an amateur boxer, not in the least because it initiated the protagonist's passing. By employing the elements of stage, the boxer/performer, and the audience, the author highlights the complex mechanisms of performance also common to performance of identity.

As the subtitle "Music and Racial Identity in *The Time of Our Singing* by Richard Powers" discloses, chapter three will provide an analysis of Powers' novel, with a special emphasis on music as an alternative medium of expression. Through close readings of some of the novel's scenes, I will identify and analyze the narrative strategies used in the novel, and show how the subject of music advances our understanding of race and of racial passing. In the novel, crossing the color line in terms of skin color is inextricably connected to the music the protagonists listen to and make. In *The Time of Our Singing*, Richard Powers, who describes his novel as a "hidden universalist recovery project",¹² aims at reclaiming musical appropriation as a necessary tool of development of musical form. Furthermore, through his fictional characters, he explores whether music can escape interpretation as a political tool

¹² Conversation with Richard Powers, June 3, 2009, Freie Universitaet Berlin.

and regain its focus on acoustic and emotional dimensions as a preeminently aesthetic medium.

By claiming the realm of Western classical, “white” music for themselves, the main protagonists, the brothers Jonah and Joseph Strom, wish to transcend racial boundaries. Their careers within the then predominantly white professional realm of classical music serve as a vehicle which, to a great extent, enables their passing: as light-skinned African Americans (who visually cannot fully pass for white), Jonah and Joseph are gradually granted access into predominantly white social spaces. Thus, even though the brothers do not intentionally seek to pass for white, I will argue that, in the novel, they are constructed as passers: cultural passers, who ‘sing’ themselves into the social realm of whiteness and perform racial passing through cultural practices. In my view, the passing phenomenon in fiction has developed beyond its original meaning of matching a certain phenotype. I will argue for a broader understanding of the term “passing”, which would highlight its cultural dimension and extend to include protagonists like Jonah and Joseph Strom, who perform passing only temporarily.

A further important aspect that I will analyze in the context of *The Time of Our Singing* is how, by creating the racial border-crosser as a performative artist, the novel points to the performative nature of identity formation. In allusion to duBoisian double consciousness, the novel depicts the racially mixed subject as being onstage, which causes his split perspective: the narrator Joseph is imaginatively positioned both as a performer who is onstage, and as part of the audience, watching his own performance. The specific situation of being the agent and a part of the audience is what characterizes the novel’s take on the subject of race. The split between the position of the observer and the observed, the very activity of looking, is of course also an indelible part of the passing phenomenon, which refers to both the outsiders’ scrutinizing look at the racially ambiguous figure of the passer and, in turn, the passer’s own, likewise scrutinizing, introspective look. Exemplified in the apt metaphor of a performance artist, the reader encounters the intricate dynamics of passing, which pends between

delivering to the audience the expected “correct”, tediously practiced performance, and the protagonists’ wish to subvert it by integrating elements that would disrupt the limits of the expected, and challenge the observer.

Testing the limits of the expected is also a theme which figures centrally in *Caucasia* by Danzy Senna, which will be the subject of chapter four. In her fictional exploration of what it meant to be white/black/mixed for the “post-soul generation”,¹³ the author offers a new take on the genre of the passing novel and on the figure of the passer. The novel suggests that, along with the progressive positive resignification of blackness, aimed against the long-held assumptions of the inferiority and undesirability of blackness which circulated in the mainstream white society, the new ideal image of blackness expressed symbolically in the slogan “Black is Beautiful” started to exercise a similarly suffocating interpellative pressure on light-skinned African Americans, who suddenly felt estranged from both the black and the white spheres.¹⁴ As Michael E. Dyson remarks in his foreword to Touré’s *Who’s Afraid of Post-Blackness? What It Means to Be Black Now* (2012), “[a] lot of Blacks are silently excommunicated from Blackness inside the borders of race while being seen as only Black outside the race” (xvi). In order to be recognized as black within the borders of race, *Caucasia*’s characters are shown to pass “everyday, in thousands of miniscule and major ways” (Jackson & Jones, 14), and do this not only across the color line, but also within the realms of blackness or whiteness. As the novel makes clear, not does only Birdie Lee pass. Her darker-skinned sister Cole also learns that she “talks white” and starts to model her

¹³ In referring to the post-soul generation, I am borrowing from Bertrame D. Ashe’s theoretical discussion in “Theorizing the Post-Soul Aesthetic: An Introduction” (in *African American Review*, 41.4 (2007): 609-623). There, he understands the term post-soul as referring to “art produced by African Americans who were either born or came of age after the Civil Rights movement” (611). For Ashe, the crucial distinction between this generation of artists and the one preceding it is that the younger generation does not have “lived, adult experience with that movement” (611). He takes his cue from Mark Anthony Neal, who, in *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic*, suggests that, although the post-soul generation profited from the successes of the movement, it is “divorced from the nostalgia associated with those successes and thus positioned to critically engage the movement’s legacy from a state of objectivity that the traditional civil rights leadership is both unwilling and incapable of doing” (Neal, 103).

¹⁴ On interpellation, see “Ideology and ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards and Investigation)”, in *The Anthropology of the State: A Reader*, Aradhana Sharma & Akhil Gupta (Eds.), Blackwell Publishing, 2009, pp. 86-112.

behavior on the behavior of her classmates in the all-black Nkrumah elementary school. In addition, the girls' African American father is also occasionally passing: Through imitating the popular jargon and behavior of the 1960s, he tries to embody a hip race man and pass for the then popular image of a black masculinity. As a critique of colorism and elitism, *Caucasia* articulates the unique situation of light-skinned protagonists of mixed race, who had to offer a clearly recognizable performance of blackness in order to claim membership in the African American community: In its wish to expose inclusive and exclusive racial practices on both sides of the color divide, the novel aligns passing with white with passing for black, highlighting the absurdity of the wish to replicate a desired ideal of blackness.

In my analysis of Senna's novel, I will also explore the narrative strategies the author uses, and show how she succeeds in presenting the racial status quo of the post-soul generation by building upon two specifically African American literary traditions: the slave narrative and the novel of passing. Since both genres and Senna's novel employ the factor of traveling and change of location, I will investigate the textual strategies used in the novel to negotiate the connection between Birdie's geographical movement and her growing racial self-understanding. Further analysis of the novel's narrative strategies will also reveal why and how it belongs to the evolving trend of neorealist writing. As Eva Gruber remarks, *Caucasia* and many other contemporary neorealist texts on race "situate themselves in an ongoing negotiation of race's socio-cultural implications, and they do so through making the abstract concrete by tying it to the level of personal experience" (102). While the text recognizes the existence of a multitude of possible ways of perceiving and interpreting "the Real", "neorealist writing allows for a representation of lived and felt human experience—and thus ultimately enables empathetic engagement" (Gruber, 93). The novel therefore subscribes to the underlying premise of this study: the transition from experiences of difference and marginalization to the idea of an underlying universality of experience. Within its narrative, it exposes the tragedy "that society has chosen arbitrary categorizations, [and] constructed a

meta-narrative of race that cannot be applied adequately to personal narratives of its individual members” (Brooks, 23). While the novel exposes the contingency of representation of experience, it simultaneously foregrounds the necessity of its narrative representation as a way to a better apprehension of the controversial issues around the subject of race.

By way of concluding this study of contemporary passing narratives, the afterword will relate passing as a literary phenomenon to the questions of literary interpretation with respect to identity politics. As will become clear in the main chapters, the actual ethno-racial identity of the authors often overdetermines the reading of their texts. The fact that the author is an African American may thus predefine subsequent textual interpretation, marking the text as black. However, as the case of the mistaken identity of the writer Emma Dunham Kelley-Hawkins exemplifies, classifying novels as black texts on the assumption of the author’s identity as a black person bears certain risks. First assumed to be an African American, Kelley-Hawkins has been included in the canon of African American black female writers. Under the assumption of her presumed racial origin, her works, which feature almost exclusively white protagonists, have been called the literary predecessors of Zora Neal Hurston and Toni Morrison (Gates, xi). Building upon this assumption, themes of passing and blackness have been forcefully read into her work where most probably neither has ever been present. As has been already voiced by many writers, often the politics of identity impose a defining angle under which the works of the author are to be read.¹⁵ The question posed in the concluding chapter will thus be the following: Does being grouped together with other works under the label of African American literature make the work in question a ‘black’ text?¹⁶ And, even more significantly, can there be such a thing as a black or a white text? As various scholars argue, it might be the time to refrain from judging literary texts from the perspective

¹⁵ See, for instance, Percival Everett’s metafictional critique of the influence of identity politics on literature in his highly satirical novel *Erasure* (2001). In a comment on a review of one of his novels, he states, “Even if the novel had African-American characters, I don’t know why it makes a difference that I’m an African-American writer.” (Bengali, 2012).

¹⁶ In this context, also see Kenneth Warren, *What was African American Literature?* (Harvard UP, 2011) and Charles Johnson’s essay “The End of the Black American Narrative” in *American Scholar* 77.2 (2008): 32-42.

of their authors' (assumed) identity. Especially in the light of the contemporary scholarly consensus on the performative and processual nature of identity formation, calling for the authenticity of a literary text on the grounds of the author's racial identity becomes a claim impossible to uphold. Texts labeled black or white become themselves passers, which, akin to their own protagonists, move between the definitions of whiteness and blackness.

1.2. FOCUSING ON THE PASSING FIGURE

All three works considered in the present study can be said to share a common objective: their wish to fictionally reenvisage not only the scope of ethno-racial identity, but also the underlying terms of its negotiation. Among these very diverse works, two novels explicitly deal with passing, while *The Time of Our Singing* does not construct its protagonists as passers in the traditional sense. However, what unites all protagonists is the wish to transcend the constraints of having to choose one side of their racial origin over the other, and the resulting difficulty to escape race-thinking. All of the novels considered create protagonists who wish to escape the confines of being defined by their physical appearance and the stereotypes associated with it. In its essence a truly American wish, the protagonists' process of self-invention results in abandoning family ties, breaking romantic relations, the reassessment of old and starting new friendships. By means of dismantling the economy of optics under which ascribed racial categorization in the U.S. functions, the novels seek to expose its absurdity.

The common denominator of my approach to these very diverse novels will thus be the analysis of the dynamics of passing as it is performed by contemporary protagonists, and of the role of passing in the process of the protagonists' identity formation, since passing exposes the ambiguity and fluidity of race. As Samira Kawash notes, "while the mulatto challenges the myth of racial purity, the figure of the passing body goes a step further, challenging the stability of racial knowledge and therefore implicitly the stability of the order

that has been constructed on that knowledge” (1997, 131). Although both permanent and non-permanent crossings over the color line will be considered here, the main emphasis will lie on temporary passing. Since our understanding of the processes of identity formation has changed considerably during the twentieth century, leading to the contemporary definition of identity as something fluid and multifaceted, identity can be regarded as “temporary attachments to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us” (Hall, 6). Rather than being a fixed position, identity is now understood to be a process, therefore often referred to as ‘the process of identification’. Within this context, Stuart Halls notes that

identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not ‘who we are’ or ‘where we came from’, so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves. Identities are therefore constituted within, not outside representation. (Hall, 4)

It is consequently important to give due attention to the analysis of the recent fictional engagements with such temporary affiliations to communities of choice and their impact on identity formation. As David Hollinger argues in his seminal work *Postethnic America*, “individuals should be allowed to affiliate or disaffiliate with their communities of descent” and can choose affiliation with “whatsoever nondescent communities [that] are available and appealing to them” (1995, 116). In contrast to the formerly assumed view that a certain authenticity necessarily arises from belonging to a community of descent, according to Hollinger, affiliations to nondescent communities do not imply artificiality, a characteristic often associated with passing. Because affiliations may be chosen or dropped, for different periods in life they play a defining role in identity formation. In my analysis of the protagonists, I will therefore view passing not only as the permanent choice it sometimes is or used to be, but I will also concentrate on those instances, however long or short they may be in duration, where the protagonists switch, rearranging their patterns of identification with regard to specific racial or ethnic backgrounds. In this context, it is as crucial to analyze the

success of passing as it is to consider the reasons for its failure, because both equally help to reveal the underlying processes of social recognition of one's chosen identity.

In general, classic (i.e. light-enough-to-pass) permanent border-crossers are rare in contemporary U.S. fiction, which is, in my opinion, not because of the decline of passing in social and literary realms, but to a large extent due to the fundamental change that the process as such has undergone both in life and in fiction. While U.S. society faces growing cultural and ethno-racial hybridity (the U.S. Census Bureau predicts that, by 2060, non-Hispanic whites will no longer constitute the majority of the U.S. population), racism has by no means vanished. Due to the changes in U.S. legislature, racial passing as such is no longer illegal.¹⁷ Keeping in mind that, due to antidiscrimination laws, racism has become much more subtle, I would argue that marginalized subjects have not only learned to refine their passing, but also that currently it is a much more frequent (cultural rather than legal) practice than one might suppose. By this, I once again primarily have in mind those who perform their border-crossing temporarily. Sociological research shows that, although much has been done to prevent race and gender discrimination, the persistence of social generalization about marginalized identities still urges numerous individuals to make use of passing. According to Daniel Renfrow, everyday passing frequently occurs not only actively and with respect to highly stigmatized racial or queer identities, but also reactively, when individuals “embrace an identity others have mistakenly assigned to them” (485). The students’ accounts that he analyzed in his study displayed the high frequency of passing practices especially in ordinary, day-to-day situations, such as laughing along with a sexist or racist joke. As a part of what Goffman termed “impression management”, passing thus occurs whenever a miscategorized individual decides to go along with the miscategorization instead of contesting it (Renfrow,

¹⁷ However, changing one's legal racial status remains far from an easy issue, as a 1985 legal suit shows. When routinely applying for a passport, Mrs. Phipps, a white New Orleansian, discovered that her legal race was denoted as black, based on her relation to a French slave who moved to Louisiana in 1764. Mrs. Phipps' appeal to change her status from black to white was denied by the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeal, which explained that she was unable to present sufficient evidence of her whiteness (“Around the Nation; Louisiana Court Denies Change in Racial Status”, *New York Times*, 19 October 1985).

484). Certainly, long term passing for white/black cannot be set equally with temporary situational passing, but both involve similar strategies.

As Renfrow correctly observes, these minute instances of passing are “particularly significant in light of postmodern claims that identities and the boundaries between them are more fluid than ever before” (486). Performances are shaped by social expectations concerning particular identities. At the same time, they also influence the very social expectations that underlie them, since they demarcate the boundaries of the acceptable performance and recognition/misrecognition. This process hints at individual agency and “highlights how social scripts and cultural schemas shape identity performance and negotiation by setting limits for what selves are plausible in an encounter” (Renfrow, 493). These observations prove to be particularly interesting with respect to the analysis of fictional temporary passers in contemporary literature, which reflects upon the altered understanding of identity and passing. This is, for instance, the case with Jonah in *The Time of Our Singing*, who cannot fully pass due to his skin color, but is nevertheless accused of passing for white because of his dedication to Western classical “white” music as opposed to jazz as the culturally more “appropriate” form of expression for an African American. The phenomenon of the color line in the United States is such that, although it is heavily dependent on the visibility of the phenotype, it is, on the other hand, crucially determined by cultural components such as ethno-racially or class-specific language, behavior, and affiliations. Especially the short-term passing performances render evident the boundaries of the dominant definitions of race and ethnicity. Without the danger of being discovered, or the psychological stress of living in disguise, the temporary, or what can be called the situational¹⁸ passer gains

¹⁸This practice is probably best illustrated by Nella Larsen's protagonist Irene Redfield from the now classic novel *Passing*, who decides to take a tea in the fancy Drayton hotel, by passing for white. Living her life as an African American, Irene is described as occasionally seizing opportunities (such as the coolness of the Drayton hotel in order to escape the heat of Chicago streets) offered by her ability to pass, which makes her a situational passer in contrast to the melodramatic passing figure of Clare Kendry, her childhood friend, who decides to pass for white permanently and conceals her identity from her white racist husband (Larsen, 146-150).

more space for experimenting with different modalities of ethno-racial performance and the environment's reaction, that is, the recognition or misrecognition of it.

Considered from the aspect of “authenticity”, temporal cross-racial performance does not imply its artificiality. As social reality shows, and recent critical and fictional literature suggests, the acceptance and therefore the authenticity of racial performance does not require this performance to be based on a particular ethno-racial descent. As Hollinger argues, “superficiality does not follow from volition any more than authenticity follows from submission to tradition and authority” (1995, 119). For a long time African American passing for white has been viewed as artificial. This view is grounded in the particular U.S. understanding of race in terms of the ‘one-drop’ rule, which designates all individuals with African American ancestry, however distant it might be, as black. It is therefore all the more astonishing to observe evaluation procedures of the groundbreaking 2000 U.S. Census. Although it has been widely praised as great progress for introducing the possibility to check more than one race on the form, during its evaluation, only persons who checked exclusively ‘white’ (as opposed to ‘white’ combined with another racial category) were actually counted as white.¹⁹

As Catherine Rottenberg points out in her illuminating work *Performing Americanness*, the particular hue of the skin ceases to matter under the overall assumption of whiteness (2008, 39). The legal status resulting from this assumption implied, for instance, that whiteness of a white slave owner would never be questioned, whereas light skin color would not reverse a slave's subordinate position. It is the literary investigation of the factors aiding or impeding the acceptance of passing for a certain race or ethnicity that will be at the center of the present study.

¹⁹ All instances, where only one race was checked, were counted within the “race alone” category as opposed to “two or more races” category in cases of multiple checking (Jones & Bullock, 3).

As for the main protagonists of the novels considered here, as passers, they invoke many of the elements of the melodramatic tragic mulatto/a figure.²⁰ This fact does not, however, mean that contemporary novels reproduce the classic passing narrative as it developed in the decades around 1900. While they still manage to depict the high price often paid by the passers for neglecting one side of their heritage, these novels simultaneously renegotiate the framework of the genre. Tying in with the developments in critical theory, they concur with what Stuart Hall termed as “the radically disturbing recognition that it is only through the relation to the Other, the relation to what it is not, to precisely what it lacks, to what has been called its constitutive outside that the ‘positive’ meaning of any term—and thus its identity—can be constructed” (Hall, 4).

In their rejection of the interpellation into the historically and socially constructed roles, the novels seek to free their protagonists from the confines of prescribed racial categorization. However, the outside that tries to force a certain identity role onto them is no longer only the dominant white society. The novels also depict the wish of African American communities to claim the light-skinned individual for themselves—as black, not mixed, persons, compelling the individuals to fully dissociate themselves from their white ancestry and upbringing. However, since contemporary protagonists feel that they belong to both worlds, the role suggested to them by the black community sometimes seems to become just another cloak, a costume, a role, which enables them to exist within the black community, but often fails to convey any profound meaning. Thus, apart from the usual passing for white, the mixed-raced protagonists perform a kind of passing for black, suffering from the obliteration of the other part of their racial heritage and from colorism within the African American community.

In order to achieve the possibility of complex, varied representations of blackness, stereotypes, which have long dominated U.S. literature and media, have to be deconstructed.

²⁰ For a comprehensive study of the role of the tragic mulatto/a figure in the U.S. fiction and popular entertainment, see among others Linda Williams’s study *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O. J. Simpson* (Princeton UP, 2002).

As the writer and cultural critic Touré remarks, “to experience the full possibilities of Blackness, you must break free of the strictures sometimes placed on Blackness from outside the African-American culture and also from within it” (4). With respect to these considerations, there is an interesting parallel to the recent satiric representation of blackness by the artist Dave Chappelle. In his comedy show *Chappelle’s Show*, which ran on Comedy Central from 2004 to 2006, Chappelle challenged racist prejudices fostered by whites and blacks alike. Through impersonating different races and ethnicities, he managed to satirize existing racial stereotypes. However, Chappelle quit the show during the production of the third season’s Pixie sketch, which featured him in overtly exaggerated blackface make-up.

As Chappelle explained, when one of the crew members, a white man, laughed particularly loud at the sketch, Chappelle doubted whether the man was not “laughing with [him] but at [him]” (“Chappelle’s Story”, 2012). The initial aim of the sketch, subversion of racist imagery, had in this case led to the confusion of the imagery’s critique with its perpetuation. By reviving vaudeville imagery of the minstrel shows, the sketch lost its deconstructive stance. However, despite Chappelle’s objections and his termination of the contract, Comedy Central and the show’s co-producer, Neil Brennan, proceeded to air the already taped episodes and release them on DVD as the third season of *Chappelle’s Show*. Thus, Chappelle’s passing for an image of caricatured blackness can be interpreted as having ‘misfired’, losing its intended disruptive effect in favor of easy commercial entertainment.²¹

On the other hand, the fact that his reservations concerning the reception of the sketch ignited

²¹ As Rogin suggests, blackface minstrel shows were “the first and most popular form of nineteenth-century mass culture”, which was later taken up by film (12). He locates the origin of this performance tradition in the “European imperialism, the material and psychological investment in the peoples being incorporated into the capitalist world system of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries” (Rogin, 19). A comprehensive history of the minstrel shows and their influence on the further development of the U.S. popular culture can be found in Eric Lott’s seminal study *Love and Theft. Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (Oxford UP, 1993). Lott states that “the black mask offered a way to play with collective fears of a degraded and threatening—and male—Other while at the same time maintaining some symbolic control over them” (25). For further reference, see the collection of essays on the tradition of minstrelsy and blackface *Inside the Minstrel Mask: Readings in Nineteenth-Century Blackface Minstrelsy* by A. Bean, J. V. Hatch and B. McNamara, eds. (Wesleyan University Press, 1996), and *Raising Cain. Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop* by W. T. Lhamon Jr. (Harvard UP, 1998).

critical debates may in the end prove that Chappelle succeeded in challenging social expectations among many of his viewers. As Michael Rogin points out in his seminal study *Blackface, White Noise*, “blackface, the performance of the white man’s African American, opens the door to the meanings of whiteness in the United States” (Rogin, 27).

Similarly, the narrative voices of the recent novels show the ambivalence of passing and of ethno-racial identity as such. While the authors attempt to deconstruct prevailing racial images, often such a critical stand strips the ethnic subject of any recognizable features, or even renders her invisible. As Wald correctly notes, due to “the intimate link between identity and agency”, preserving a palpable notion of ‘identity’ may benefit the marginalized subject (187). If the passing figure is not recognized as such by her surroundings, then what value does her crossing the color line have in terms of renegotiation of racial categories? If Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* remains invisible, where can a moment of resistance be located? As Mita Banerjee remarks, for the subversive work of ethnicity to be politically significant, the subversion of the norm “must not be in the (deconstructionist) eyes of the observer” (226).

In his chapter on passing in *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both*, Werner Sollors identifies what for him constitutes the main catalyst for crossing the color line. He states that “only a situation of sharp inequality between groups would create the need for the emergence of a socially significant number of cases of passing” (Sollors, 1997, 248). This might have been the case with the passing practices of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries. However, from the second half of the twentieth century on (especially during and after the Civil Rights Era), the dynamics of passing and its underlying motivation have radically changed. As one of the two main causes for this changed situation, I would identify the fact of the *de jure* attainment of full civil rights for African Americans and (in general) the achievements of the struggle for civil rights, such as the integration of schools, working and social spheres. This period has also witnessed the emergence and proliferation of the new black aesthetic and of the ideal of African American identity, expressed by the “Black is

Beautiful” slogan—circumstances which will be significant for the present study of literary engagement with passing.

The second reason for the altered dynamics of passing as it re-emerged in the late twentieth century may be attributed to the developments in critical theory. Ever since Ferdinand de Saussure developed his theory about the arbitrariness of the relation between the signifier and the signified, critical thought has continuously sought to further emancipate knowledge from authority, ideology, and power.²² Initially starting from the assumption of the essential nature of racial identity, the accumulated interrelated developments in the fields of linguistics, structuralism, psychoanalytical thought, poststructuralism and deconstruction gradually led to the present day consensus about viewing identity as a social construction, about identity not as a given, but as an ongoing process, comprising reiterative performative acts. Borrowing from Stuart Hall, identity can be seen as a “meeting point, the point of *suture*, between on the one hand the discourses and practices which attempt to ‘interpellate’, speak to us or hail us into place as the social subjects of particular discourses, and on the other hand, the processes which produce subjectivities, which construct us as subjects which can be ‘spoken’” (Hall, 5). This meeting point is hence not a fixed entity, not a genetically inherited core, but a fluid, loosely connected sequence of performative acts of an individual, at the intersection between the individual and her surroundings. As Markus and Moya suggest in their study *Doing Race*, each individual is simultaneously a receiver and a giver of different ideas about race and ethnicity, with varying degrees of influence and power “to shape the meaning and consequences of what” race or ethnicity means (19).

Within this constellation, narrative plays a central role since it not only offers various points of identification for the individual, but is also the very tool by which any sense of

²² As Saussure stated in his *Course in General Linguistics*, “[t]he bond between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary. Since I mean by sign the whole that results from the associating of the signifier with the signified, I can simply say: the linguistic sign is arbitrary” (67).

identity can come into existence.²³ As Winfried Fluck remarks, “identity is the result of an ongoing process of narration that is put together by an “I” out of a range of choices drawn from the personal and the cultural imaginary” (49). Following Margaret Somers, he attests to the shift of the function of narrative from being representational to ontological and notes that “narratives are not representations of identity, then, they constitute identity” (Fluck, 2013, 50). Self-narration hence coordinates “the various experiences and identity positions” in order to establish a “minimal degree of continuity and consistency” (ibid). Language, then, functions not just as an expression of identity, but also creates identity through linguistic manifestation, thus operating within, and not outside representation as is expressed in the statement by Stuart Hall cited above. These developments have had a particularly formative influence on fictional representations of passing, since the realm of the imaginary offers more freedom for experimental negotiation of racial, gender, and class self-fashioning. As opposed to fictional passing, passing as a social practice underlies the dynamics of social interactions where a performance always strongly depends on its audience. As Renfrow observes, “plausible selves emerge as others actively construct definitions of the situation, and this definition largely depends on who others’ cognitive templates allow us to be” (489). Thus, as Fluck argues, in our search for recognition we “submit to a recognition regime that establishes a cultural frame for recognition and, in doing so, puts constraints on the possibility of full recognition” (2013, 51). In this sense, fictional literature offers the freedom from such

²³ In the second half of the twentieth century, various critics discussed the challenges to the “ontological foundations of the person as the author of their own acts and centered in a unitary, reflective and directive consciousness” (du Gay, 21). As Paul du Gay suggests, although the standpoints of authors like Butler, Derrida, Althusser, Lacan and others significantly differ in their methodological and conceptual frameworks, their positions can nevertheless be loosely defined by the idea of “their opposition to the notion that individual human beings are essentially ‘free agents’, directed by a sovereign and integral consciousness” (21). Thus, as Butler formulates, “the account of myself is never fully mine” (Butler, 2001, 26). However, Fluck suggests that, instead of “considering the existence of a norm itself as a problem”, we have to “look at the particular norm that is transported by narrative and the way this is done” (Fluck, 2013, 52). As he continues, “otherwise, if identity is constituted by narrative and narrative is always and inevitably providing plots that are dependent on a ‘set of norms that govern recognizability’, the only way to escape this constraint would be to give up narrative altogether” (Fluck, 2013, 52). Since people can “gain a sense of self only through narration”, for Fluck, giving up narrative does not present a viable option (ibid).

restraints and allows for experimenting with the special case of the identity as a passer between the worlds of blackness and whiteness.

In the light of these developments, passing has mutated from being an economically necessitated act prompted by the inequality between two social groups, as mentioned by Sollors, to functioning as a self-fashioning practice motivated by a number of reasons ranging from the wish to blend into certain cultural surroundings, such as, for example, black urban culture, to setting up a conscious performance of whiteness/blackness in order to challenge the audience, or to the wish for recognition as an individual, and not as a representative of a certain race. Correspondingly, within the realm of the imaginary passing, narratives likewise reflect upon this change, using the altered situation as an invitation to ponder on the limits of racial self-fashioning. As will become clear from the analysis in the main chapters, within this set-up, for example, the danger of being discovered as a passer, an indispensable element of classical passing narratives, becomes less significant since, in contemporary fiction, individuals of mixed race frequently perform passing without having to hide their legal identity from their surroundings. Such is, for instance, the case with Birdie Lee in *Caucasia*, who, being optically white, stages a performance of blackness in order to be accepted in her all-black surroundings; this is also, significantly, the case with her darker-skinned sister Cole, who is optically black, but is accused by her classmates of speaking and behaving “white”. What makes such performed identity passing, then, is the difference between the individuals’ inward self-identification as mixed, and their outward performance as unambiguously white/black. In this new context, I would consequently refer to racial passing as a particular form of identity performance which arises primarily from the gap between the person’s self-perception with regard to racial identification and the contradicting role she is assigned by her surroundings. The outward performance is modeled on existing ideas on and images of blackness or whiteness. The fear of disclosure of the person’s legal identity is a possible, but no longer a necessary element of passing, since “acting black” or “acting white” can be used

in order to blend into a community which is aware of the individual's mixed origin, as in the cases of Birdie and Cole. Although it is clear that all identity is performative, passing can be distinguished as a special case since it is clearly targeted to matching a certain ideal of culturally and socially accepted performance (i.e. whiteness, blackness, class position, or gender ideal). The analysis of fictional texts can then help to identify and investigate these popular ideals and ideologies, especially with regard to the ideas about iconic, or appropriate/accepted images of blackness as they developed in the post-soul era.

The selection of the texts for my study has thus been guided by the overarching idea that racial passers and their inherent displacement bear strong potential for challenging existing racial categorization. Based on the assumption that all identity is performative and that race is, essentially, a set of ideas, symbols, and myths, loosely based on visual appearance, my study will suggest that the passer is best suited for examining racial performance due to the implied notion of passing *for* something/somebody. Analogous to poststructuralist thought on gender identity, this study will view performing racial identity as “an imitation without an origin” (Butler, 1990, 175). The proposition “for” hereby aptly points to the formative role of the unattainable ‘correct’ idea of a certain race (for example, iconic blackness or whiteness) on the racial performance of the passer, and of the audience, that is, the passer’s surroundings. The paradox thereby lies in the fact that all passing is constructed after a certain view of race which itself is socially and culturally constructed. However, exactly this circumstance offers the most potential for subversion since the reiterative act can (and eventually will, since identical imitation is impossible) bring about a performance with a difference.²⁴ Ambivalent cultural markers and practices, present in the imitated performance, may be further transformed by the passer’s racial self-fashioning. A light-skinned African-American passing for white, or, rather, for an idea of what it is to be white in America, inherits the elements of African American (or any other ethno-racial) culture she or he has already absorbed or

²⁴ The notion of difference as used here does not imply the existence of an original to which the imitation is compared, but instead points to a difference between two distinct performances of race which are non-identical.

reappropriated. Passing for white in the mid-nineteenth century is different from passing for white during the Harlem Renaissance, and is certainly an entirely different issue than contemporary passing. As Fluck notes, “narration, including self-narration, is an interpretive activity that exceeds iterations, because it has to make sense of a constant flow of daily encounters and novel experiences” (Fluck, 2013, 51). Contemporary novels and their protagonists build on this flow of preceding images and ideas on race and passing and creatively transform them into new ways of narration and identification. Thus, the passer, far from being a passive and often pitied figure, who fits on neither side of the color divide, becomes an agent, a hidden chemical ingredient in the American alchemy of race.

1.3. THE GENRE OF THE PASSING NOVEL

Fictional engagements with passing, which emerged as a genre during the times when racial identity was still unanimously viewed as essential, traditionally used to reflect upon the trials of those light-skinned African Americans who decided to break the infamous Jim Crow rule and cross the color line permanently to live as white. Often cast in distinctly melodramatic terms, these novels zoomed in on the “disconnect between a character’s inner (supposedly black) self and his or her outer (ostensibly white) self” (Pfeiffer, 3). In general, the theme of breaking rules, family ties, and friendships, or what sociologists have termed as “sociological death and rebirth” (Drake & Cayton, 163), became central to the genre which concentrated on the emotional costs the passer had to pay for his or her life under the guise of whiteness. Since the underlying motivation for passing was usually located in economic gain and an improved social position, for a long time passing was viewed as treason to race. Protagonists, who were condemned for “selling their birthright for a mess of pottage” (to say with the concluding words of James Weldon Johnson’s “Ex-Colored Man”), appeared to be tragic figures, confused and unable to embrace their ‘true’ race. The subversive potential and complex handling of the subject of race in the narratives of passing went often unrecognized. The

history of the novels' reception attests to the readers' and critics' ambivalent attitude towards the genre. Initially, although many novels depicting passing for white were well-received, "contemporary reviews agreed that these novels were more important for what they said than for how they said it" (Wall, 83). The widespread opinion was, as the poet Sterling A. Brown observed, that Charles W. Chesnutt "wrote melodramatically, but [that] his social understanding should not be underestimated" (284).

Especially the fiction by female authors has been criticized for presenting "unconvincing endings" and contradictory, tragic female protagonists (McDowell, xi).²⁵ The contradictory, tragic nature of these female protagonists was usually located in the circumstance that, "alienated from both races, she [the tragic mulatta] is defeated by her struggle to reconcile the psychic confusion that this mixed heritage creates" (McDowell, xvii). Often the novels were dismissed as sentimental fiction, unfitting and undesirable, especially during the flourishing of African American literature of the Harlem Renaissance. Even though some of the novels received positive critical reviews, such as, for example, the by now canonical *Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* by James Weldon Johnson, and sought to expose the absurdity of the 'one-drop' rule, generally the passers offered no room for breaking away from essentialist understanding of race. Within their plots, so went the contemporaneous argument, the novels propagated the idea that, while passing for white, any African American would be forever condemned to feel foreign within the white culture, and would secretly wish to reconnect with the black community. The categories of whiteness and blackness, which the novels sought to abandon, were once more reestablished as insurmountable hurdles in the passer's way.

Although these novels sought to expose abhorrent racist discrimination and have been celebrated for advocating equal rights regardless of racial origin, the underlying conflict depicted in them was usually located in the passers' tragic choice of life in disguise over their (true) place among the people of their race. Thus, while undermining the basis of racial

²⁵ As Deborah E. McDowell notes, this was mainly due to the contingencies of expressing double marginalization of black female sexuality within a realm of white, male dominance (McDowell, xvii).

categories, the novels (to a varying degree), but much more so their contemporaneous critical interpretation, subscribed to the notion that “one drop confers genuine blackness, a moral imperative, and a duty to the community” (Pfeiffer, 13). It is interesting to note that the reading and critical reception of the classic novels of passing tended to lag behind the criticism of backward racial stereotypes that the novels themselves displayed.

The novels’ subversive potential has gone largely unnoticed and was rediscovered only as late as in the 1980s. As is for example the case with Nella Larsen’s novel *Passing*, the generic figure of Clare Kendry, a tragic passer seeking a better economic standing, has received much more attention by contemporaneous critics than the more complex figure of her friend Irene Redfield. Such issues as Irene’s occasional passing for white, her possible emotional attention to Clare, and her dissatisfaction with the seemingly perfect life as a middle-class African American (I would even suggest, her passing for an idea of the middle-class black housewife) have been largely overlooked in favor of a (dismissive) reading of the sentimental tragic figure of Clare Kendry.

Within the context of the Reconstruction Era and the subsequent gradual reinforcement of legal segregation (especially after the 1896 Supreme Court’s decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson*), the U.S. literary scene has witnessed a rise of fiction about the difficulties of living in the blurred space between blackness and whiteness, attesting to W.E.B. Du Bois’ prophetic statement that “the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line” (Du Bois, 3). Taking their literary origin partly in the melodramatic genre of the tragic mulatto/a and partly in the confessional slave narratives, novels of passing novel started appearing from the 1850s on. The first of their kind (and, in fact, the first published novel by an African American) was William Wells Brown’s *Clotel, or the President’s Daughter: A Narrative of Slave Life in the United States* (1853), a fictional narrative which depicted the life of Clotel, a visually white daughter of Thomas Jefferson and his slave mistress. By alluding to the rumors

about Jefferson's affair with his slave Sally Hemings,²⁶ the fictional narrative exposed the hypocritical double logic of many a liberal politician: although Thomas Jefferson asserted shared human rights in *The Declaration of Independence*, he continued to be a slave owner and helped enforce the system of slavery.²⁷ The circumstance that is even more interesting is that, as Blyden Jackson notes, as the first African American novel, *Clotel* was written by a "black man who did not look black" and was an American novel "that was not written in America" and was first published in London (Jackson, 1989, 326).

Other novels on passing followed, such as William Dean Howells' *An Imperative Duty* (1892), Frances E. Harper's *Iola Leroy* (1892), Charles W. Chesnutt's *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900), James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* (1912), and many others. Indebted to the tradition of American literary realism, these novels sought to construct fictional texts as models for the reality, "the true character of which is still to be negotiated", and invoked the ideal of the free-willed individual, but were in turn influenced by emerging naturalism.²⁸ This often resulted in the tragic and pessimistic tone of the novels, which saw "little hope for meaningful human choice so long as contemporary problems of racial violence, monopolization, labor unrest, and urban corruption went unaddressed" (Belluscio, 5). The subsequent emergence of passing novels which later came to be regarded as canonical was initially considered somewhat contradictory to their era: written and published during the Harlem Renaissance, the novels *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929) by Nella Larsen as well as *Plum Bun* (1928) by Jessie Fauset depicted melodramatic passing figures, who stood in sharp contrast to the evolving experimental modernist African American

²⁶ For a detailed report on the findings in the case Jefferson-Hemings see the *Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation (TJMF) Research Committee Report on Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings*, released in January 2000, accessible online at <http://www.monticello.org/site/plantation-and-slavery/report-research-committee-thomas-jefferson-and-sally-hemings>.

²⁷ As has been noted by Garry Wills, no Southern politician of the period could pursue a large-scale political career without acting as a "protector and extender of the slave system" (xviii). Jefferson, for example, won the 1800 presidential election largely due to his support of the three-fifth clause of the Constitution, "which provided that each slave would count for three fifth of a person" (ibid).

²⁸ Full original quote: "Insofern ist der amerikanische Realismus nie nur Versuch eines Abbilds von Wirklichkeit, sondern immer auch durch das Bemühen geprägt, 'vorbildlich' auf eine Realität einzuwirken, deren wahrer Charakter noch zur Verhandlung ansteht" (Fluck, 1992b, 10).

fiction and the concept of the New Negro. Instead of asserting a distinct African American identity and resisting white supremacy, the novels of passing (so went the general contemporaneous argument) were focusing on treason to race. As Martin Japtok points out, “passing novels advocate preserving the strength of African American culture vis-à-vis white materialism”, since they “often present ‘blackness’ in terms of altruism, spirituality, and artistry (...) and ‘whiteness’ in terms of the proverbial ‘mess of pottage’” (490). Similarly, Wallace Thurman’s novel *The Blacker the Berry: A Novel of Negro Life* (1929), which broke the silence surrounding taboo topic of colorism and complexion discrimination among African Americans, was largely discarded in the literary circles of the time.²⁹

Ever since the 1930s, the booming film industry has been quick to recognize the economic potential in the themes of racial passing. The two productions of Fannie Hurst’s 1933 novel *The Imitation of Life* (1934, 1959), *God’s Step Children* (1939), and *Pinky* (1949), but also more recent films such as *Illusions* (1982) and *True Identity* (1991) are only some among many engagements with the racially ambiguous figure of the passer. Popular film, perhaps due to its stronger economic dependence on box office success, usually tended to simplify and stratify the passing plot, obliterating its subversive elements in favor of the intensification of its melodramatic plot lines. Thus, the turn towards a more critical consideration of race, discernible in the literary development of the genre, is almost nullified even in the most recent representations of the light-skinned multiracial subject on screen. The film adaptation of *The Human Stain*, for example, foregrounds the sensational aspect of the relationship between a retired professor and a school janitor half his age. The critical questioning of race negotiated through the persona of the main protagonist falls completely flat. Similarly, the 1986 production *Soul Man* invests in the reactionary rhetoric of Reagan era conservatism, which

²⁹ For instance, Sterling A. Brown characterized Thurman’s *The Blacker the Berry* as lacking depth in the characterization of the main protagonist. He further noted that, in general, “another problem unduly emphasized was that of the ‘passing’ heroine, the octoroon of long standing in American literature” (287). In his view, both white and black novelists “made more of her [the passing heroine’s] problems than they seem to deserve” (Brown, 287).

viewed minorities as ‘playing the race card’, in its depiction of white passing for black in order to enter the university on a minority scholarship.

Taking up the literary theme of passing, recent novels offer their readers comprehensive and thought-provoking engagements with the topics of race, class, and gender identification. Their reassessment of the racial status quo reflects upon both the contemporary understanding of race and of identity formation. Certainly all of the novels considered here and other recent fictional works challenge thinking in binary categorization of race. They depict protagonists who do not imitate whiteness or blackness, but perform one or the other through various reiterative, often potentially subversive acts. In addition, contemporary fictional works reflect upon the role of narrative itself in the process of racial identification, as will be closely analyzed in the main chapters.

Consequently, the overall assumption of the present study is that identity is processual, that it is socially constructed and has therefore not an unchangeable, inheritable essence. This not only rejects an essentialist understanding of race, but also any view that something like racial essence can lead to authenticity. Something that we might refer to as ‘authenticity’ then necessarily stems from the influence of one’s environment and acculturation. As Ulla Haselstein observes, in the light of the “postmodern skepticism regarding the grand narratives of origin, telos, reference, and essence”, authenticity “is making a comeback” in the realms of literature, television, music, politics, and religion. (2010b, 19).³⁰ With respect to literature, as Caroline Rosenthal clarifies, the perceived authenticity of the texts can be explained by the fact that, right from the start, the texts have been “calibrated and styled to match the important stereotypes, thereby creating an unmistakable effect of recognizability” (qtd. in: Assmann, 48).³¹ Furthermore, according to Assmann, the explanation as to why many texts are widely

³⁰ For a comprehensive investigation of the turn towards authenticity of expression in American culture, see the essay collection *The Pathos of Authenticity. American Passions of the Real*. By Haselstein, Ulla, Andrew Gross and Maryann Snyder-Körber (eds.), (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2010).

³¹ In her work, Rosenthal discusses the question of perceived authenticity in the specific context of fake autobiographical narratives.

accepted as authentic can be found in the correspondence between the form of the work and contemporaneous reader expectations (47). By way of transferring this idea onto the literary engagements with racial identity, I would suggest that the passer, like a writer with the readership in his or her mind, considers the probable reaction to the performed identity and adjusts his or her performance according to the desired effect. Disagreeing with Walter Benn Michaels in his assertion that “a truly performative conception of race would make passing impossible” (Michaels, 133), I would suggest that acting black does not equal being black; it only manifests the representation of blackness and the surroundings’ acceptance or rejection of such a performance. In other words, while Walter Benn Michaels is right to claim that, for example, “a formal description of the blues requires no reference to the color of those who perform it (anymore than a formal description of a sonnet does)” (Michaels, 134), the performers’ socialization can provide for something like authenticating effects, since the performer is well acquainted with the culturally specific milieu.

Paraphrasing Werner Sollors’ comment on the formation of race, I would suggest that, due to the lack of a consensus in defining whiteness/non-whiteness, it is particularly important to analyze the “cultural operations which make them seem natural or self-evident” (Sollors, 1997, 3). As will be shown in the following chapters, even individuals who are actually not ‘light-enough-to-pass’ frequently display passing behavior and can be ‘accused’ of passing by their surroundings. Combined with fair skin color, a certain professional occupation such as a lieder recitalist (in *The Time of Our Singing*) firmly locates the protagonist within the professional, predominantly white domain of performers of Western classical music, and thus invokes passing. Likewise, in my analysis of *Caucasia*, I will show that Birdie Lee’s darker-skinned sister Cole is also initially passing for black once she encounters the unfamiliar surroundings of the all-black school she is sent to. Navigating her way through acceptable performances of blackness, in the beginning she performs blackness through purely imitative acts. Thus, the paradigm of skin color, or more generally, appearance proves to be an

indispensable element within the construct of race, but on its own it is insufficient when talking about ethno-racial border crossers.

The notion of performance is thus central to the discussion of racial identity. In this study, I will depart from the understanding that passing consists of numerous acts of performance, which are executed in accordance with the protagonists' idea of what is the appropriate pattern of behavior of the ethno-racial group they want to blend in. Since critically we have departed from the idea of the authenticity of cultural behavior as an attribute of racial origin, I will refrain from regarding passing as artificial. However, what distinguishes older passing narratives from recent novels is the degree to which the passer seeks to match her performance on a certain iconic ideal of whiteness or blackness, and the varying level of racial awareness. Whereas classic passing narratives unfolded before their readers (melodramatic) stories of trying to "escape" into whiteness in order to gain better social standing, contemporary passing novels concentrate less on the question "what happens" in terms of the plot, and more on the "how it happens" with respect to race as such. How is passing for white/black performed? Which kind of behavior is recognized or declined by the passer's surroundings? What impact does racial thinking have on the racialized subject's psyche and how does she deal with it? The mechanisms operating passing are hence the focus of contemporary passing narratives by authors whose own perspective is informed by the twentieth century developments in critical theory. The novels underscore the idea that performing involves the repetition of norms which "necessarily precede the emergence of the subject and initiate the subject into the dominant social order" (Rottenberg, 2008, 6). At the same time, however, as Catherine Rottenberg maintains in her study *Performing Americanness*, "the fractured and competing nature of the norms circulating in society opens up potential spaces for subjects to 'perform differently'" and novels "can be said to point to the fissures and gaps that emerge from within the dominant social order itself" (14).

In her analysis, Rottenberg concentrates on early twentieth century novels which deal with blackness and “Jewishness” and investigates them through the lens of performativity. In the present analysis, I am taking up Rottenberg’s idea that novels uncover “the way in which regulatory ideals of race produce a specific modality of performativity” (Rottenberg, 2008, 34). In addition to my focus on the modalities of performativity which contemporary novels create, I will put special emphasis on the changed forms of narration. All of the novels of the study can be characterized by a neorealist style of narration. The awareness of the crucial role narration plays in the process of (racial) identity formation influences the novels, which expose contingencies of representation. My analysis will be informed by current discussions of the emerging literary neorealism, a mode of representation that is guided by the recognition that, “while any attempt to approach or reach the real with the help of language or other tools has been unveiled by various philosophical schools as epistemologically questionable, the anthropological desire to nevertheless keep on trying is in itself very real” (Claviez, 7).

1.4. THE REPERTOIRE OF RACE: LABELS, TERMS, AND DEFINITIONS

By way of returning to the point of departure of the present study, I would like to note that the reference to the 1990s and the twenty-first century as the era of ‘post-race’ indicates neither a break with the period preceding it, nor that the concept of race ceases to play a role in it. The cultural imaginary of the age of post-race, the arrival of which many perceived as being marked by Barack Obama’s presidential election, continues to be strongly influenced by the idea of race. However, contemporary works and the fictional worlds that they create reflect upon a changed understanding of the concepts of race and of identity formation, and imply the idea of a certain paradigmatic break, suggested by the attribute ‘post’-race. In dealing with fiction on race in my study, I will differentiate between the concepts race and ethnicity, blackness and whiteness. Recognizing that any effort to provide a definition of these terms

would greatly exceed the limits of the present study, I nevertheless see the need to sketch some basic assumptions that underlie my approach.

First of all, I would like to acknowledge that, despite the blurriness of both categories, I wish to refrain from using the notions of race and ethnicity interchangeably as some of the sources that I will quote do. In my view, there are some insurmountable differences in the way the two categories are both constructed and perceived. Without trying to impose any rigid distinctions between these often rather fluid definitions, I would follow contemporary critics' understanding that the aspect of personal choice constitutes one of the most graspable differences between the terms ethnicity and race (see Sollors, Markus & Moya). Whereas ethnicity is mostly viewed as being a possible, but not necessary or indispensable option of individual identification, in common understanding race still places an unavoidable, also mostly a visible mark upon the individual.³² Thus, whereas ethnicity represents a choice and an opportunity to combine individualism with a sense of belonging to a special (even if symbolic and highly idealized) community, racial belonging in general robs the individual of the possibility of *not* being identified with a certain race. From the very beginning then, the individual is forced to define herself in terms of either accepting or rejecting such racial interpellation.

Speaking about the invented character of ethnicity, one cannot avoid mentioning Werner Sollors' seminal work *Beyond Ethnicity. Consent and Descent in American Culture* (1986), where he explores the intricate workings of racial and ethnic categorization. By his proposition to shift the critical attention from the invented category of ethnicity to thinking in

³² As the categories of race and ethnicity have been constantly redefined in the course of time, most immigrant groups in the United States have undergone the process of being included/excluded from the category of whiteness. Various scholars have shown that many ethnicities viewed as white at present were considered non-white some hundred years ago. A detailed analysis of these developments is offered by the works of Karen Brodtkin Sacks in *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race in America* (Rutgers UP, 1998), Eric Goldstein in *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race and American Identity* (Princeton UP, 2008), Noel Ignatiev on *How the Irish Became White* (Routledge, 1995), or Thomas Guglielmo's *White Upon Arrival: Italians, Race, Color, and Power in Chicago, 1890-1945* (Oxford UP, 2003). A more general perspective on the development of the understanding of race and ethnicity in the U.S. can be found in Werner Sollors' seminal work *The Invention of Ethnicity* (Oxford UP, 1989).

terms of consent and descent culture, Sollors challenged the culturally radical attitudes of the 1970s and early 1980s on the question of race and ethnicity. As he suggests, the nature of American exceptionalism is such that, in its framework, it combines the antagonisms ‘consent’ and ‘descent’. Thus, although the idea of consent is given utmost importance in defining typical ‘American’ myths and symbols (the self-made man, the melting pot, from-rags-to riches scenarios), American society nevertheless developed the rigid racial distinctions of the one-drop rule and regulated the immigration of ethnic groups judging by their proximity to whiteness, which thus focused on the citizen’s descent. After all, the fact that we are still talking about hyphenated identities designates their deviation from the ‘pure’ form of being non-hyphenated, plain American. Kathleen Pfeiffer correctly points out that, in its essence, passing is the epitome of the ur-American idea of individual self-invention. As she puts it, “[i]n a strategy of radical individualism, literary characters who pass for white demonstrate the liberation available to Americans seeking self-actualization (14). By valorizing consent over descent, the passer seeks the freedom expressed in the myth of American individualism, and yet traditionally the passer has been denied this freedom of self-realization with regard to race.

As many scholars have already observed, in American understanding, ethnicity often seems to be devoid of content and functions merely by cultural markers and symbols. The aesthetic realm of literature offers a fruitful framework for pondering on, questioning or challenging such symbols, since, as Sollors correctly notes, literature plays a particularly important role in the “process of rhetorical boundary construction” (1986, 28). In my analysis, I will pay special attention to the symbols which contemporary fiction employs to mark or unmark its protagonists with respect to race or ethnicity, as well as to the importance the protagonists are shown to attach to these symbols. For instance, within the figure of Birdie Lee in *Caucasia*, Jewishness is used as a symbolic ethnicity, as a kind of empty marker without any referent: while passing for Jewish, the protagonist wonders whether her cheap

Star of David pendant discloses the inauthenticity of her performance as compared to the expensive golden Star of David she once saw on a Jewish girl. Similarly, pointing to the epistemological emptiness of racial and ethnic markers, the passing protagonist of *The Human Stain* wonders whether his wish to marry a Jewish American woman is motivated only by her wild, curly hair which could serve as a handy explanation for the possible racially ambiguous features of their children's appearance. For the siblings in *The Time of Our Singing*, music becomes the cultural marker against which their racial identity is judged.

My understanding of the categories of race and ethnicity will furthermore be largely based on the theoretical discussions of these terms by Hazel R. Markus and Paula B. Moya. In their study *Doing Race* (2010), the authors point out that “race and ethnicity are social, historical, and philosophical *processes* that people have done for hundreds of years and are still doing. They emerge through the social transactions that take place among different kinds of people, in a variety of institutional structures (e.g., schools, work places, government offices, courts, media), over time, across space, and in all kinds of situations.” (4). The authors see the crucial difference between race and ethnicity in the fact that, while ethnicity is mostly a positive, active process involving the element of personal choice, in most cases race is a process that is done to others and involves the subordination of minorities defined by racial categorization. Thus, as the authors continue, although individuals sometimes choose to identify as members of a certain race, “doing race is very often a one-sided process in which people associated with one group impose a set of negative characteristics on people associated with another group (usually, but not always, one with less power) and relegate them to an inferior status. For the most part, people do race *to* others; they do not do race to themselves” (22-23). In a way, this argument builds upon Werner Sollors' distinction between the U.S. communities of descent (race) and consent (ethnicity).

As Hazel R. Markus notes, for our understanding of race, it is crucial to recognize “the fact that a person's identity comes in part from her relationships to others leads to a ... significant

feature of identity: because identities depend on the contexts from which they emerge, they are dynamic and evolving” (364). This means that “the question ‘Who am I?’ captures only the part of identity that a person is conscious of at a given moment in a given context, like a snapshot or a stop-action film clip of the whole identity” (Markus, 365). Since identity is processual and in constant flux, analysis of the ideas about racial identity as they emerge and are circulated in the cultural imaginary “can help us to see the dominant ideas and values of any given society and to understand how the social processes of gender, race, and ethnicity affect individual experience and identity” (Moya, 504).

For the purpose of the analysis of the novels, I will thus combine Markus and Moya’s understanding of race and ethnicity with Hollinger’s concept of ethno-race, and will refer to ethno-racial passing. In my view, this term is best suited to describe the dynamics of the protagonists’ experience without confining them to the ossified categorization. It also accounts for the cross-influence of races and ethnicities upon each other. As Hollinger correctly observes, the use of the category of race necessarily evokes the history of “unequal treatment of people on the basis of biological ideas long since discredited” (1995, 35). In a paradoxical way, speaking about race when analyzing historical, literary or social conditions does not in the least force us to recognize the actual existence of race as a biological fact. Its invented character long proven, we can use the category “when we want to be aware of a pattern of behavior” (Hollinger, 1995, 35). Ethnicity, on the other hand, is for the most part defined in terms of culture. This fact not only points to the often mentioned element of choice in being ethnic, but also to the highly differentiated nature of the groups subsumed under racial terms. Consequently, a race-based definition of African Americans as a group disregards highly nuanced cultural differences, for example, between those sharing slave ancestry and others who immigrated to the U.S. much later. This factor becomes particularly significant when considering how these culturally specific differences influence the particular processes of upward mobility of these groups in the U.S. society. As recent studies have

shown, such differentiations have to be considered particularly in the case of African Americans: Since discrimination is not based exclusively on skin color, but also on class belonging, recent immigrants of African descent (many of them high-skilled young professionals) seem to face less discrimination than U.S. born African Americans, who suffer under the consequences of enslavement, Jim Crow legislation, and practice of institutionalized discrimination (Hollinger, 2008, 1034). In addition, Hollinger suggests that the recent regrouping of whites into Euro-Americans should make us aware of the underlying multiplicity of ethnic experience of its subgroups, such as the Irish, the Greek, the Jewish and others, which the new category seems to eradicate. Thus, combined in the term ethno-race, the two categories can help us analyze the dynamics of border-crossing not only in terms of the color line, but also through viewing the dynamics of ethnic cross-influence.

In addition to the categories of race and ethnicity, it is also necessary to explain the use of the notions of blackness and whiteness. Instead of repeating the discussion on the emergence of the terms “whiteness/blackness” and “the white/black race” which has by now been thoroughly explained in numerous critical works, I would like to note that, in the present study, I will refer to whiteness and blackness as social constructions, which both rely on the phenotype, but also involve performative elements.³³ Looking white does not necessarily lead to being accepted as white if the performance, that is, the behavior, language, culturally specific knowledge, dress code, does not match the idea of whiteness, held at a certain moment in time in a certain location. “Whiteness” and “blackness” are fluid concepts by the investigation of which fictional literature reflects upon the existing ideologies and racial

³³ For a comprehensive investigation of the category of whiteness see following studies: Delgado, Richard, and Jean Stefancic, eds. *Critical White Studies: Looking Behind the Mirror*. (Temple UP, 1997); Fine, Michelle, ed. *Off White: Readings on Race, Power, and Society*. (Routledge, 1997); Frankenberg, Ruth, ed. *Displacing Whiteness: Essays in Social and Cultural Criticism*. (Duke UP, 1997); Gates Jr., Henry Louis, and K. Anthony Appiah, eds. *White Pages: Black Writers on Whites and Whiteness*. (Soft Skull Press, 2005); Hill, Mike, ed. *Whiteness: A Critical Reader*. (New York UP, 1997); Rasmussen, Birgit Brander, et al., eds. *The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness*. (Duke UP, 2001); Rodriguez, Nelson M., and Leila Villaerde, eds. *Dismantling White Privilege: Pedagogy, Politics, and Whiteness*. (P. Lang, 2000); Roediger, David R., ed. *Black on White: Black Writers on What It Means to Be White*. (Schocken Books, 1998); Rothenberg, Paula S. *White Privilege: Essential Readings on the Other Side of Racism*. (Worth Publishers, 2002).

paradigms. At the same time, it tries to challenge them by offering the readers fictional worlds for experimenting with alternative frames of thinking about these categories.

By way of returning to the chapter's epigraph, it is interesting to note that novels on passing invoke all three linguistic definitions of the word 'passing'. As my analysis will show, the element of moving toward and beyond something, both geographical and symbolic, is an indispensable element of classic and contemporary novels on passing. In addition, the process of identity formation itself is strongly influenced by location and movement. The second meaning of the word listed in the dictionary is a person's death, which absolutely fits the way passing for white has been long viewed among African Americans. Out of fear of disclosure, passers usually decided to break all contacts with their African American family and surroundings, and were thus 'lost' or 'dead' to them. The elements of (symbolic) death and of disappearance continue to play an important role in contemporary passing narratives. Finally, the definition of passing as "the act of officially approving a bill, law, etc." pointedly speaks to the legal side of passing in the sense of effectively changing the individual's legal status from black to white. In brief, juncture between the different contexts of these connotations associated with the word and the phenomenon of passing as well as the changed ways of narrating them is then the very subject of the present study.

2. THE BOXER IN THE RING: NARRATING IDENTITY IN *THE HUMAN STAIN* BY PHILIP ROTH

In the 1960s, the slogan of a famous advertising campaign which featured New Yorkers of different ethno-racial descent tasting rye bread proclaimed that “You don’t have to be Jewish to love Levy’s”. On the one hand, the statement suggests that a specifically Jewish product (or a tradition) may appeal to the tastes of other Americans and, in the long run, might become mainstream, a development that can be observed, for example, in the influence of Jewish humor on the U.S. popular culture. On the other hand, by inversion (whether intentionally or not), it comments on the idea that possibly you do not even have to be of Jewish descent to become an American Jew.

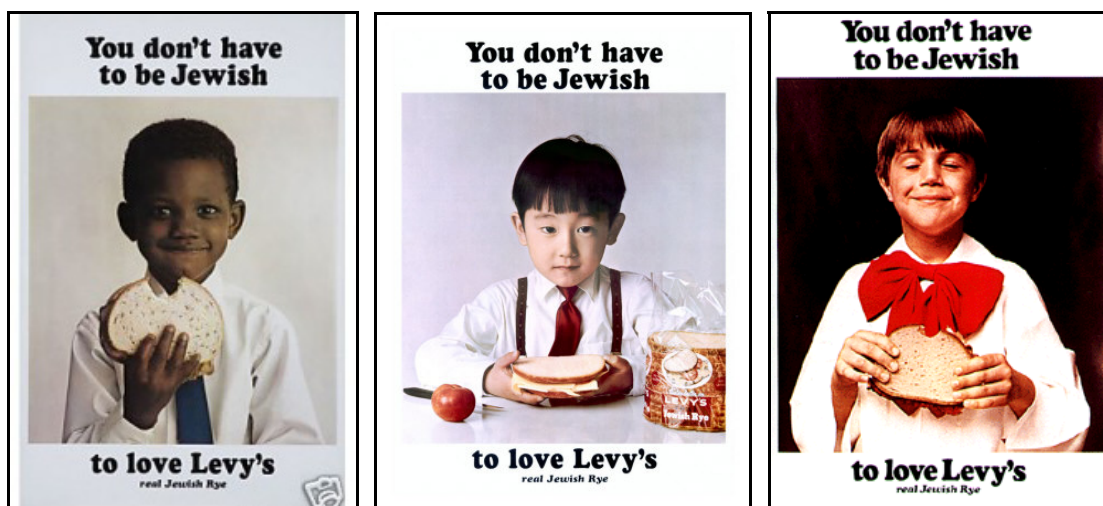


Fig. 2: Levy’s rye-bread advertisement

Living as a Jewish American without being of Jewish descent is the story of Coleman Silk, the main protagonist of Philip Roth’s novel *The Human Stain* (2000). Although in its core *HS* is a novel of passing—Coleman Silk is a light-skinned African American passing for Jewish/white—anyone familiar with Roth’s fiction will immediately recognize that one of the central concerns of the novel is the question of what it means (and what it takes) to be Jewish American in the U.S. in the second half of the twentieth century. Embedded in a story of passing, the reader encounters Roth’s ongoing engagement with balancing an individualist

quest for self-definition with the limitations one's ethno-racial descent imposes on it. Concluding his *American Trilogy*, which first dealt with the paranoia of the McCarthy era in *I Married a Communist* and then with the "hedonistic, undisciplined 1960s" in *American Pastoral* (Rubin-Dorsky, 221), in *The Human Stain* Roth explores the absurdities of exaggerated political correctness, "the ecstasy of sanctimony" (*HS*, 2) in the context of the Clinton/Lewinsky affair, and the individual quest for freedom of self-definition. It is this quest seen through the lens of the passing phenomenon that will be at the center of the analysis in the present chapter. What further ties the novel to the overall concern of my study is the analysis of how passing opens up a new perspective on the subject of ethno-racial identification. As I will show, far more than being a matter of phenotype, passing enables deeper insight into the workings of identity enactment: by performing a certain ethnic or racial identity, the passer subverts the categories of race and ethnicity, exposes their ambiguity, and promotes the concept of identity as an ongoing process rather than a state. Owing to the history of Jewish American assimilation in the U.S. and the transition from non-whiteness to whiteness within the American society, the case of passing for Jewish is of special interest since it exposes the paradox of the attainability of whiteness for Jewish Americans and the impossibility of becoming white for African Americans. In this sense, the dynamics of passing as played out between these two groups brings to focus the social, political, and fictional discourse on race.

In his ambitious enterprise of tackling the dynamics of the Black-Jewish relations, Roth successfully ties the ur-American concern with individualism and self-reliance to both the African American literary tradition of the passing narrative and to his own concern for exploring Jewish American identity. Roth suggests that both groups, African Americans and Jewish Americans, cannot fully escape their tragic history of slavery and the Holocaust,

respectively.³⁴ For them, the ur-American promise of freedom of self-definition does not live up fully to its promise. As Eric Sundquist proposes in his analysis of *HS*, the story of Coleman Silk shows that “the racism Silk wished to escape has come full circle” (521): his career ends over a supposedly racial slur, and he is killed by an anti-Semitic violent Vietnam veteran. For Roth then, the key to tying the African Americans and Jewish Americans together is their burden of history and the impossibility of ignoring the legacy of socio-historic developments. The impossibility of ignoring Jewish history in the process of Jewish self-definition is of course an idea which Roth explored in great detail in his previous fiction. In his earlier novel *Counterlife* (1986) for instance, a text in which he first explores the conflicting attitudes of Jewish Americans and Israeli Jews, he highlights the burden of history, which constantly tries to lay a claim upon the individual and impedes him in his striving to make ethno-racial identification a matter of personal choice. Narrated by Roth’s alter ego Nathan Zuckerman, the novel demonstrates how the Jewish American identity has to constantly legitimize itself against the radicalized Israeli reproval of assimilation and racial betrayal. Taking up the exploration of how “the American self ... can be reborn and Jewish history... cannot be reinvented” in *Counterlife* (Rubin-Dorsky, 218), *The Human Stain* in turn addresses the dichotomy within the context of African American history, and the legacies of slavery and Jim Crow legislation, which also cannot be unmade. These legacies continue to be a defining factor in any consideration of African American identity, culture, and socio-economic situation. In contrast to the U.S. ideology of individualism and the American myth of the self-made man, obstacles in the form of individual prejudices and institutional racial discrimination often render African American self-invention nearly impossible.

³⁴ Although American slavery and Nazi Holocaust were profoundly different, both can be considered traumatic paradigms that have exercised a formative influence on the cultural imaginary of African Americans and (American) Jews, respectively. Putting possibility of comparing slavery and the Holocaust aside (see chapter “Holocaust” in E. Sundquist’s *Strangers in the Land*), it remains certain that both paradigms continue to be an interpretative lens for literary representation and criticism in the spheres of African American and Jewish American literatures.

A snapshot of the chastity-obsessed late 1990s U.S., *The Human Stain* tells the story of Coleman Silk, a retired professor of classics who, as we learn right from the first sentence, has an affair with Faunia, a school cleaning woman half his age. During his years as dean at the Athena College in the Berkshires, Coleman Silk thoroughly reforms the college, considerably raising its academic prestige. However, Silk's career ends sadly: Upon referring to two students who have not shown up in his class halfway into the semester term, the professor asks whether anyone had seen the students or whether they were "spooks".³⁵ Ironically, the two students turn out to be African Americans and accuse Dean Silk of racially derogatory language. The irony of the story lies thereby not so much in the fact that Silk was "referring to their [the students'] possibly ectoplasmic character" (*HS*, 6), meaning their invisibility, but in the professor's personal secret, since neither his colleagues nor his friends and family are aware of Coleman Silk's almost life-long passing for white. A further level of irony lies in the fact that exactly the measure that could re-establish Silk's academic reputation, disclosing his African American descent, is not an option available to him, since it would automatically put the racial label back on him. In his lifelong wish to detach personal achievement from racial descent, Coleman Silk seeks to escape labelling at all costs: Even for the sake of personal protection, he cannot let the protective affiliation with the group of African American embrace him.

Out of all the novels in the present study, *The Human Stain* can be said to come closest to the classic passing narratives of the decades around 1900. The figure of a light-skinned African American who seeks to escape the social fact of his blackness, the deep inner conflict, the desirability of whiteness, and the unavoidable drama at the end of the story are elements that have become constitutive of the traditional passing narrative, and all of them can be found in *HS*. And yet Roth's engagement with the genre presents a significant variation on the theme of passing, which he constructs not along the black/white color line, but in the grey

³⁵ As Sundquist remarks, since the word "spook" was originally used by blacks to refer to whites as ghostlike, the epithet itself is built on a psychological inversion" (Sundquist, 513).

area in between by having the main protagonist pass for Jewish. Thus, as will become clear in the analysis, within the novel, passing for Jewish reflects upon the history of “whitening” of Jewish Americans and adds an additional dimension to passing. While blending into the whiteness was possible for many immigrant groups, for African Americans, claiming whiteness was illegal, which also made passing a crime.³⁶ The contradiction between an essentialist understanding of race and the history of Jim Crow legislation on the one hand, and on the other the “whitening” of Jewish Americans and of other immigrant groups, a process which was illegal for African Americans for the most part of the twentieth century, is the point of departure of *HS*. Described (or, in large stretches, imagined) by Philip Roth’s well-known alter ego Nathan Zuckerman, the fictional life of the light-skinned African American Coleman Silk and the nascent relationship between him and the narrator can be said to reflect upon the relationship between the two ethnic groups they belong to.

As a literary and social commentary, the novel fictionalizes the specific group dynamics of assimilation and the processes of racial identification in the U.S. in the second half of the twentieth century. At the same time, Roth’s engagement with the subject occurs within the specifically African American literary tradition of the passing narrative. The focus of this chapter will hence be two-fold: on the one hand, my main focus will lie on the analysis of passing as it is enacted by Coleman Silk. As I will show, Silk’s position between blackness, whiteness and “Jewishness” offers a new perspective on the figure of the passer, since it destabilizes the black/white dichotomy by adding to it the dimension of culturally “acquired” whiteness. This dimension in turn modifies the figure of the passer, signaling the departure from the classical passing narrative. It also adumbrates the emergence of the passing figures

³⁶ As Werner Sollors suggests in his study *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both*, the literary theme of passing seems to have been inspired by the social practice of passing, which was first mentioned in notices concerning runaway slaves, which warned that, due to their light complexions, these slaves might attempt to pass for white (255). Initially, thus, passing for white was connected to gaining legal status of whiteness. Also, as already mentioned in the introduction, passing, or refusal to pass, has in many ways been instrumental to the 1896 *Plessy vs. Ferguson* decision. Later prominent cases such as the *Rhineland* case (1925) or *Loving vs. Virginia* (1967) also dealt with racial passing and miscegenation.

in recent novels of the “mulatto millennium”, a somewhat satiric name for the twenty-first century America, which is defined by both the idea of color-blindness, advocating that race or skin color no longer matters, and the instrumentality of race in political, social, cultural and economic spheres, which attests to the further worsening of the living conditions of racial minorities.

On the other hand, as in any other novel by Philip Roth, *HS* is unavoidably an engagement with the issue of Jewish American identity. Therefore Silk’s passing will be analyzed within the context of the history of relations between the two ethno-racial groups, their struggle for recognition in the U.S. society, and also as Roth’s further literary engagement with the issue of identity. What it means to be Jewish American and who has the right to decide about it are questions of first and foremost importance in *HS*. Both Roth’s and Zuckerman’s concern in the novel is thus largely the exploration of the “Jewishness” of contemporary Jewish American identity, an exploration which is conducted in this case through the figure of an African American passer. Within this context, I will analyze Zuckerman’s narrative of Coleman Silk and show how, through Zuckerman, Roth imagines both the African American passing figure and the American Jew. As will become clear in the analysis, the special case of the passing identity sheds light on the struggle for recognition, which many scholars see as the main driving force of identity formation.³⁷ For the passer, the label “black” constitutes misrecognition, which he seeks to escape by passing for white. The category of whiteness allows the passer a free choice of identity position. However, since the passer then will only be recognized as white, his mixed race origin will remain hidden. Thus, the recognition that the passer gets as a white person also constitutes yet another misrecognition. I will also emphasize the meaning of Silk’s hobby, amateur boxing, to his struggle for recognition and to

³⁷ For a detailed discussion of the emergence of the concept of recognition in western thought see Charles Taylor’s essay “The Politics of Recognition” in *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton UP, 1994), 25-73. An interesting discussion of the way in which the concept of recognition can be useful in the field of literary interpretation can be found in Winfried Fluck’s recent essay “Reading for Recognition” in *New Literary History*, 44.1 (2013): 45-67.

a better understanding of the categories of race and whiteness. Finally, I will point out that, in the novel, the themes of fighting (boxing) and romance (across the color line) provide important insight into our understanding of passing and help to free *HS* from the usual confines of the classic, melodramatic passing plot.

2.1. FICCTIONS OF IDENTITY AND IDENTITY AS FICTION

Throughout the twentieth century, the history of Jewish assimilation into the white U.S. mainstream can be said to be exemplary for the process of “whitening” of immigrant communities. The swift upward mobility of Jewish Americans paired with gradual acceptance of them as whites highlight the gap between the understanding of the notions of race and ethnicity in the United States and demonstrate once more that, while ethnicity may be chosen or dropped, race for the most part cannot. Hazel R. Markus and Paula B. Moya, who argue that race is a doing, explain that, in contrast to a more positive idea of the concept of ethnicity, “doing race is very often a one-sided process in which people associated with one group impose a set of negative characteristics on people associated with another group (usually, but not always, one with less power) and relegate them to an inferior status” (Markus & Moya, 22-23). In contrast, ethnicity is usually understood in more positive terms as

a dynamic set of historically derived and institutionalized ideas and practices that allows people to identify, or be identified, with groupings of people on the basis of presumed, and usually claimed, commonalities, including several of the following: language, history, nation or region of origin; [which] when claimed, confers a sense of belonging, pride, and motivation; can be a source of collective and individual identity. (Markus & Moya, 22)

U.S. history of immigration and assimilation of immigrant communities offers numerous examples of such dynamics: while Jewish, German, Irish, Scandinavian and Eastern European immigrants defined as ethnicities have been able to blend into the white mainstream, African

Americans could not, and in many respects are still significantly influenced by the factor of race.³⁸

True to the American myth of the self-made man, Coleman Silk decides to free himself from the legal and social constraints of being black in post-WWII America. His decision to pass for Jewish/white is led less by the attraction of an economic advantage, but by his strong wish for freedom: freedom to define himself, freedom to choose his profession, freedom from miscegenation laws. From the very first pages of the novel, the reader understands that Coleman Silk, as many a character of Philip Roth's fictions, is an individualist in every respect, who seeks to escape the constantly categorizing, judging, and evaluating public opinion. Through the main protagonist, who decides that he will not identify with a stigmatized "we" of a certain ethno-racial group, Philip Roth strives for the freedom from the "tyranny of the we" (*HS*, 108), of this "coercive, inclusive, historical, inescapable moral we with its insidious *E pluribus unum*" (*HS*, 108). The figure of Coleman exemplifies the specifically American problem of identification. On the one hand, the "we" that demands that the individuals should identify with a particular group's interest can refer equally to African American and Jewish American communities, which deal with overcoming the legacies of slavery and Jim Crow rules and the Holocaust, respectively. On the other hand, the *E pluribus unum* at the end of the sentence points to the de facto requirement to assimilate into the American melting pot. For Coleman Silk, both requirements are too restrictive, and he seeks to escape their constraints: "You can't let the big they impose its bigotry on you any more than you can let the little they become a we and impose its ethics on you" (*HS*, 108).

There is, of course, a significant distinction between the imposing "we" of the Jewish American and the African American communities. What Philip Roth articulates in *The Human Stain* and his other novels is the tyranny of the "we" as can be found within the

³⁸ This idea does by no means wish to imply that African Americans ever considered it desirably to blend in; it just suggests that this option was not available to them in the ways it was available to members of other ethnic groups.

Jewish American middle-class and its wish for conformity. As Ulla Haselstein suggests, while in his earlier fiction Roth presents “satirical portraits of the neurotic behavior of the protagonists as a consequence of the claustrophobic constriction of the high extent of familial influence on the Imaginary of Jewish American culture”, his fiction in the 1980s and 1990s reflects upon the growing multiculturalism in the U.S. where ethnic identity has ceased to become a matter of fate and has largely become “a result of a personal decision to adopt a cultural role profile” (2010a, 205).³⁹ In addition, the fictional world of *The Human Stain* reflects upon the swift upward mobility of Jewish immigrants and their descendants, who made their blending into the conformity of the American middle-class increasingly a matter of choice, a luxury, which, as an African American, Coleman Silk did not possess. The tyranny of the “we” that Coleman Silk seeks to escape also points towards Silk’s realization that, because of his African American descent, his actions will always be viewed as representative of the members of his race. Partly because of this circumstance, the unspoken consensus within the African American community has gradually elevated uplifting the race to the status of the personal responsibility of all African Americans, who by their personal achievements should disprove prejudices against blacks. It is important to note that Coleman never doubts his future professional success: for him it is not the matter of “if” but of “how”. He does not pass in order to be successful; he passes in order to reach professional success that is unmarked: he wishes to drop his racial affiliation because he dislikes the idea of having to be the first *black* professor instead of being just a professor, repeating the way his mother after years “had at last become the first colored head nurse of a Newark hospital” (HS, 123). Ironically, for this he first has to mark himself as Jewish in order to live unmarked.

³⁹ My translation. Original quote: “Während in den 1950er und 1960er Jahren Roths satirische Portraits die neurotischen Verhaltensweisen der Figuren als Konsequenz der klaustrophobischen Enge eines stark familial geprägten Imaginären der amerikanischen jüdischen Kultur herausstellten (...), so gilt für Roths Texte aus den 1980er und 1990er Jahren, dass sich die einst in der Karikatur ebenso präzise wie polemisch erfasste soziale und kulturelle Lage für die Protagonisten wie für den sich in ihnen spiegelnden Autor in dem Maße zu verwischen beginnt, als sich die USA nach der Bürgerrechtsbewegung der 1960er Jahren zu einer multikulturellen Gesellschaft entwickeln, in der ethnische Identität nicht mehr als Schicksal, sondern als Resultat einer persönlichen Entscheidung zur Übernahme eines kulturellen Profils gilt” (Haselstein, 2010a, 205).

Many critics have speculated on the idea that the fictional figure of Coleman Silk might be based on the well-known literary critic Anatole Broyard. In any case, whether the intentionally or not (Philip Roth recently disavowed the speculation⁴⁰), the *Human Stain* manifests clear parallels to the life of the prominent literary critic. Indeed, the similarity between Silk and Broyard arises not even so much due to details of personal lives of the fictive and the real-life passer. The resemblance lies much more in the characterization that Philip Roth gives Coleman Silk, in the “passionate struggle for singularity”, the wish to be free from the restraining “we” of an ethnic or racial group, which he shares with Anatole Broyard (*HS*, 108). Though the wish not to be viewed as a “Negro” scholar (or a “Negro” intellectual, artist, writer etc.) is certainly neither new nor limited exclusively to Broyard or Silk, unquestionably what both do share is their wish to see race as something of an “elective affinity” (to borrow from Henry Louis Gates, Jr.) rather than as a legal or biological matter (Gates, 1997, 182).

It seems that, akin to the fictional Coleman Silk, Anatole Broyard enjoyed the feeling of living in disguise, as a black man passing for white, as someone who felt the ambition to be secretive “in the grand and elaborate way” (*HS*, 135), since Broyard had literally let his surroundings decide about his origins. While his second wife and many of his friends knew that, officially, he was one quarter black, others (including his children) did not. However, both Silk and Broyard share the need for the thrilling experience of being secretive. His fictitious counterpart Coleman (as imagined by Zuckerman), who decided to pass for white permanently, is delirious about the “gift to be secretive again” (135).⁴¹ While Silk finds that his previous romantic engagement with an African American girl named Ellie was enjoyable,

⁴⁰ For information on Roth's inspiration for writing *The Human Stain*, see his “Open Letter to Wikipedia” (*New Yorker*, September 7, 2012), in which Roth states that he learned about Anatole Broyard only after having written the novel. Instead, he claims that the novel is inspired by a factual “spooks” incident that occurred to his friend Melvin Turmin, a former sociology professor at Princeton.

⁴¹ While it has previously been assumed that Anatole Broyard was one-sixteenth black, combined genealogical and DNA research conducted by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. together with Broyard's daughter discovered that in fact he was one quarter black (Gates, 2009, 393).

he feels that, due to the missing secrecy in their relationship, “the whole thing lack[ed] the ambition” (*HS*, 135). His marriage to the Jewish American Iris Gittelman gives him back the ambition, the challenge of living in disguise. Likewise, for Broyard, having passed for white in the liberal atmosphere of Greenwich Village seemed to have not been challenging enough. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr. comments on Broyard’s move away from New York, “it was as if, wedded to an ideal of American self-fashioning, he sought to put himself to the ultimate test. It was one thing to be accepted in the Village, amid the Beats and hipsters and émigrés, but to gain acceptance in Cheever territory was an achievement of a higher order” (Gates, 1997, 194).

Although there are several parallels between Anatole Broyard’s real life and Coleman Silk’s fictional one—the similarities between Broyard’s second wife Sandy and Silk’s girlfriend Steena Paulsson (both of Scandinavian origin and visually about as white as possible), the period of life that both spent in Greenwich Village, the fact that both concealed their origins from their children—the most interesting aspect is perhaps Broyard’s “short-temperedness” (Gates, 1997, 202) with regard to African Americans. As Sandy Broyard recounts, “he had paid the price to be at liberty to say things that, if you didn’t know he was black, you would misunderstand. I think it made him ironical” (qtd. in Gates, 1997, 202). It seems as if it is precisely this irony that short-circuits Coleman Silk’s academic career, since the mere acknowledgement of his racial origin would have let the claims of racial discrimination appear ridiculous. In a way, *The Human Stain* recounts the imaginary version of Broyard’s life in the era of the absurdities of political correctness. But Coleman Silk goes even further. In a fit of rage, typical for Philip Roth’s protagonists, he declines to play the social role assigned to him: not only the role of an African American earlier in his life, but also much later, the role of a ‘respectably retired’ college professor (*HS*, 155), who, according to the mores of the time should not romantically engage with women half his age and below his social standing.

The irony intrinsic in *The Human Stain* is that, despite Coleman Silk's striving for individual self-definition, his life story is narrated, and at long stretches of the novel even merely imagined, by Nathan Zuckerman. The strategy of withholding from Coleman the possibility of recounting his story by himself is in itself a comment on the nature of identity construction. As Paul Ricoeur formulated in *Narrative Identity*, through narrative "we learn to become the narrator and the hero of our own story, without actually becoming the author of our own life" (Ricoeur, 32). By way of reflecting upon this understanding, Philip Roth constructs the narrative of Coleman Silk's life as a combination of Silk's own account and Zuckerman's account of it. But prior to discussing Silk's identity, it is important to point out its consequences for Zuckerman. The now aging, impotent narrator leads a secluded life in the Berkshires. Once his neighbor Coleman Silk enters his life, Silk simultaneously "dances" Nathan Zuckerman back into life, albeit only as an observer, a guest to Silk's adventures. While the novel ostensibly foregrounds the story of the retired professor's life, its less conspicuous meaning is to hand the weakened Zuckerman back some of the control he lost—if not the control over his own bodily functions, then at least the control over another person's life narrative. Indeed, Coleman Silk is not the nexus of the novel. Instead, it is Nathan Zuckerman, his rage and his opinions about contemporaneous America that constitute the core of the novel. Since personal narratives we recount are always "mediated by the need to represent the self as possessing a sense of identity and control" (Giles & Middleton, 52), Zuckerman writes himself back into the American literary scene by taking control over Coleman Silk's story. A skillful writer, he lulls the readers into the myth of the utter truthfulness of the story told by him. Pointing to the fact that he has to imagine some of the details of Coleman's life, he nevertheless succeeds in weaving a narrative, the fullness and fluency of which at times resembles the translucency of a camera lens. Among other effects, the frequent use of free indirect discourse for conveying the protagonists' thoughts further invokes the impression of immediacy of the insight, functioning as a "convenient vehicle for

representing [...] ‘indirect interior monologue’” (Rimmon-Kenan, 115). In the novel’s crucial scene where Coleman communicates to his mother his decision to marry Iris and pass for white permanently, his interior struggle with this decision is conveyed in free indirect discourse: “Don’t most people want to walk out of the fucking lives they’ve been handed? But they don’t, and that’s what makes them them, and this was what was making him him. Throw the punch, do the damage, and forever lock the door” (*HS*, 139).

In addition to invoking the immediacy of the interior monologue of the protagonist, free indirect discourse fulfills an even more important function in *The Human Stain*. As Rimmon-Kenan notes, free indirect discourse “enhances the bivocality or polivocality of the text by bringing into play a plurality of speakers and attitudes” (115). By effectively mingling the thoughts of various characters and of Zuckerman as he constantly alternates his roles as extra- and intradiegetic narrator with correspondingly differing levels of omniscience, the use of free indirect discourse gives the novel a deep polyphonic quality. It not only leaves the questions concerning the “who-said-what” open, but also connects the themes and attitudes voiced in *HS* to Roth’s earlier fiction, not least due to the overarching role Zuckerman fulfills as a narrator. According to Rimmon-Kenan, free indirect discourse thus creates not only intra-textual polyphony, but also an inter-textual one (117). Apparently, in *The Human Stain* much of what is communicated about the nature of African American identity and its formation, such as the constant struggle between the “we”, “they” and “I” already mentioned above, resonates with various other protagonists of Roth, who like Silk, but also like Zuckerman himself, are entangled in a constant process of identification.

Nevertheless, the decision to tell Coleman’s story from the perspective of Zuckerman can also be seen as a gesture of respect for the complex and tragic legacies of slavery and Jim Crow legislation that African Americans continue to confront. Distancing himself from the African American Coleman Silk twice (once through the medium of the novel, the second time through handing narrative authority over to Zuckerman), Roth creates a safe territory

where he can engage in fictionalizing the African American experience. Through this double lens, he creates Silk's story not as a representative narrative of African American passing, but as an account of such as imagined by Nathan Zuckerman. In short, it is not Philip Roth imagining Coleman Silk, but Philip Roth imagining Zuckerman imagining Silk. By using Zuckerman as a reflector figure, Roth creates the illusion of immediacy of reflection: Zuckerman's thoughts seem to flow, masking the fact that they are also carefully preselected. As Christoph Bode writes, such a reflecting focalizer, who voices thoughts and feelings he himself has yet to understand and order, puts the reader as a recipient in the same position: "[h]e [the recipient] as well has to make sense of the just registered and reflected [information]" (Bode, 187).⁴² Such a narrative move underscores the difficulty of the subject of Jewish-Black relations: in the figure of Zuckerman, the author creates a narrator whose strong urge to reflect on and understand the events (personal as well as social and historical) points to the necessity of such constant reflection and reconsideration on the part of the reader. Leaving certain ends of the plotline open (such as the circumstances of Coleman's death, or the lack of clarity around Faunia's illiteracy) invites the reader to return to these issues and circle around them once again.

2.2. THE BOXING RING AS A STAGE

Within the genre of the passing narrative, a melodramatic plot has usually constituted a limitation, since it typically featured an economically driven and unavoidably unsatisfied, tragic passer. As has been mentioned above, one way Roth escapes these confines in *The Human Stain* is by integrating African American and Jewish American narratives into one within the figure of Coleman Silk. On the other hand, on the level of the metanarrative, he introduces the motif of romance (or a fight for a girl, as he calls it through Zuckerman) as the strongest driving force of all literature, including the Classics, and thereby also suggests that

⁴² Original quote: "Auch er [der Rezipient] muss sich auf das Registrierte und Reflektierte erst einen Reim machen". Translation YK.

the passing plot is also based on romantic involvement. In order to articulate this idea, the main protagonist is constructed as a professor of Classics, and it is through him (or, more precisely, through Zuckerman) that the idea of romance as the driving force of literature is communicated to the reader. The story of Coleman Silk starts with Zuckerman's (imaginary) account of Silk's opening lecture on ancient literature. Put shortly, Roth speaking through Zuckerman speaking through Silk indicates to the reader that *HS* is a story of a fight over a girl, not more and not less. Two elements should then be pointed out as instrumental for the present analysis: the element of a fight, and the element of romance. In the novel, the first element is taken up through Coleman's career as an amateur boxer and the metafictional allusion to the Battle Royale in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Romance, on the other hand, is in many ways indispensable for any passing narrative, since it necessarily invokes the history of miscegenation laws in the U.S. As I will show, for many a passing character (and certainly so for Coleman Silk), romance across the black/white divide has been a major driving force in favor of crossing the color line permanently. Therefore, the aspects of a fight and of romance are instrumental to the understanding of Roth's specific take on the figure of the passer, an interpretation which Roth communicates to the reader via Silk's specialization in Classics.

Aligning Coleman Silk to numerous characters in literature, the author (via his alter-ego Zuckerman) suggests that, in its essence, "all of European literature springs from a fight" over a woman (*HS*, 4). Does this statement implicitly suggest that, by inversion, American literature arises from different motives? Indeed, the novel shows the complexities of individual destiny, such as Silk's life-long passing for white (adding yet another dramatic element to the novel, the element of masking and disguise).⁴³ However, what costs the main protagonist his life is, in the end, his unwillingness to give up a girl: After his retirement, Coleman Silk, already a widower, starts a relationship with a 34-year-old Faunia Farley. In addition to their relationship being of a purely sexual nature, which alludes to the

⁴³ In a way, passing can be called an indispensable ur-element of theatre since, in Ancient Greece, the female roles in theatrical performances were played by male actors, which invokes the idea of gender passing.

Clinton/Lewinsky affair and the debates on sexual appropriateness around it, a further social taboo is transgressed due to Faunia's occupation as a school janitor. This in many ways controversial affair is complicated both by Faunia's traumatic past, by her "thirty four years of savage surprises" (*HS*, 27), and by her jealous, violent Vietnam veteran ex-husband Les Farley. In his typical manner, one which has not lost any of its initial passion, Philip Roth invents characters who shock, fight, and rage, characters whose resistance is incited by the "rampant moral didacticism" of their surroundings (Posnock, xvii). The relationship between Coleman and Faunia moves between the accusations of sexual exploitation and the desire to disrupt social conformity, thereby highlighting the still tabooed nature of romantic liaisons across class boundaries in America.

In a self-reflexive move of commenting on its own structure and plot development, the novel points to the reason for this choice of Silk's occupation already in its very beginning. Zuckerman starts his narration by citing (or, really, imagining) Coleman Silk's usual introductory lecture to the course in classical literature. His introduction serves as a meta-commentary on fiction writing and reading, pointing to the main distinction between fiction and actual life: the purposefulness of fiction and the lack of purpose in actual life. By oversimplifying the drive underneath imaginative literature (being, as in many Roth novels, the "phallic dignity"), the novel contrasts the idea that in fiction, unlike daily life, many details "fall into patterns" (Davis, 112). As Lennard J. Davis remarks, not only must fictional characters "be consistent, but they must fit into a pattern within the novel to make sense" (Davis, 112). By opening the novel with Silk's introductory comments on classical literature, the author not only uncovers the readers' own wish for closure, but, through the intricacy of Silk's life as imagined by Zuckerman, also shows the impossibility of attaining such closure via a consistent, all-explaining life narration. Thus the self-reflexive nature of contemporary fiction on race is what distinguishes it from classical novels on passing, which were often criticized for presenting "unconvincing endings" and contradictory, tragic female protagonists

(McDowell, xi).⁴⁴ Contemporary novels point towards the impossibility of such closure, and attribute the wish for it to the readers' own desire for encountering consistent, patterned narratives.

Through Coleman Silk, the author claims that “the phallic dignity, of a powerhouse of a warrior prince, is how the great imaginative literature of Europe begins, and that is why, close to three thousand years later, we are going to begin there today” (*HS*, 5). By this self-reflexive narrative move (i.e. this is also why the narrative of Coleman Silk's life begins where it begins), the novel foregrounds the idea that determining a *single* cause or driving force behind the deeds is an illusion created by the reader's personal drive for attaining closure. The reader is thus driven by the need to find consistency within the fictive narrative as a counterpiece to actual life, which cannot provide it. Similarly, Coleman Silk's passing, put in oversimplified terms, could be defined by “not getting the girl” (first Steena, his first girlfriend, then by refusing to give up Faunia). Counter to the idea that passing is generally motivated by social and economic advantages for the passer, Roth presents romance as a possible and powerful driving force for crossing the color line. Numerous classic novels of the genre also support such an interpretation: In the case of James Weldon Johnson's anonymous *Ex-Colored Man*, most prominently, it is the attraction to a “most dazzlingly white” woman, and not economic and social standing that makes the passer cease to regard his passing as a “capital joke” he has been playing, finally prompting him to pass for white permanently (Johnson, 1912/1989, 198).

At this point, it is interesting to note the device both writers use to convey the idea of the racial mark: In order for both passing protagonists to suddenly feel a possible flaw, attributed to their African American origin, the novels contrast the otherwise white-enough-to-pass protagonist with a “dazzlingly white” female figure (Johnson, 1912/1989, 198). In the case of both the *Ex-Colored man*, who at the sight of the object of his attraction ponders whether he,

⁴⁴ As Deborah E. McDowell notes, this was mainly due to the contingencies of expressing double marginalization of black female sexuality within a realm of white, male dominance (xi).

“after all, [possessed] an indefinable something which marked a difference” (Johnson, 1912/1989, 200), and of Coleman Silk, whose mind is preoccupied with detecting whether for Steena his passing, his one drop of blackness, was “seeable [...] because she was a blond Icelandic Dane from a long line of blond Icelanders and Danes, Scandinavian raised” (*HS*, 113), it is clear that, in order for blackness to be defined as flawed, it requires a pondering and scrutinizing white gaze. Thus, almost a century apart, both fictional works not only expose the absurdities of prejudices against interracial romance, but also point to the relative and arbitrary ascription of values to racial categories. It is neither the one drop of black blood in Coleman that makes him black, nor the long line of Scandinavian origin and upbringing that makes Steena white. Instead, it is the constellation of power relations that has been established between the categories of whiteness and blackness, valorizing the former over the latter, that constitutes the construct of race. Furthermore, as Samira Kawash correctly notes, novels of passing are generally less concerned with the manner in which race is represented, but instead deal with “the failure of blackness or whiteness to provide the grounds for a stable, coherent identity” (Kawash, 1996, 63). Neither of these categories can serve as a source of identification for the protagonists. It is only through the constant moving between them that meaning can be attained.

Exploring the intricate connection between race and sexuality, *The Human Stain* highlights the high degree of internalization of the prejudiced beliefs about both. When Zuckerman (and the reader) meets Coleman Silk, he is a retired professor who has an affair with a woman half his age, period. Silk’s sexuality does not seem to display any connection to race. However, as Nathan later learns, Coleman Silk was a boxer in his youth, secretly sneaking away from his Shakespeare-admiring father to go to amateur prize fights in East Orange County in New Jersey. It is significant to note that neither his father’s discovery of and indignation about his hobby, nor his moving to the Village prompt him to quit it. However, what does motivate him to stop prize fighting is his relationship with Steena Paulsson, whom he never informs about

his hobby. The explicit reason for such secrecy concerning boxing is Coleman's fear of Steena finding out his racial origin, but underneath it, as I argue, there is a deeper connection between boxing, sexuality, and race which can be traced through Philip Roth's novel and which deserves further exploration.

As Richard Dyer argues in his seminal study *White* (1997), "dark desires are part of the story of whiteness, but as what the whiteness of whiteness has to struggle against. Thus it is that the whiteness of white men resides in the tragic quality of their giving away to darkness and the heroism of their channeling or resisting it" (28). Originally stemming from Christianity's split between the (clean) spirit, or the mind, and the (unclean, unholy) body, and from attributing spirited, human qualities to white and uncontrollable, beastly ones to non-white races, the paradigm of struggling against dark desires has had a formative influence on the Western literature and thought. As Dyer correctly notes, Christianity is a religion grounded on the paradox of strongly emphasizing the body (the body of Christ, the pieta, the rituals of baptism, communion, unction etc. engaging with watering, oiling, feeding the body) and simultaneously discarding the body as evil and as being only a material vessel for the spirit which is in but not of the body (Dyer, 15).⁴⁵ The gender role models which arose from these Christian beliefs are based on the ideals of chastity, innocence, purity and virginity of Mary, and again the paradoxical duality of Christ, simultaneously representing humanness (i.e. his human needs and desires, including carnality) and godliness (i.e. the pureness of the spirit which in the end defeats the weak human nature). Reappropriated in order to serve the ends of the imperial enterprise, this religious ideology has been reinscribed into the racial Other: by marking the Other as a subject unable to control his body as a savage, whiteness is once again repositioned as being superior to blackness due to its ability to control the body

⁴⁵ For a detailed analysis of the mind/body split in Christian religion as well as its secularized version in the thought of Enlightenment, which according to Dyer, distanced itself from the idea of divinity, but retained the concept of the spirit/mind in the body, see chapter one in *White* by Richard Dyer (Routledge, 1997).

(Dyer, 31). Thus, as Dyer points out, the white male character is often presented as struggling with (and defeating) his bodily desires.⁴⁶

Within the cultural Imaginary, boxing occupies a somewhat paradoxical place. Boxing (and fighting in general) cathartically connect with the audience's "human need to fight" (Berlin, 25). Its display of manliness, strength, and superiority over the defeated also goes in hand with the myth of the triumph of the white conqueror over savage peoples. On the other hand, however, boxing strongly evokes savage images of violence, blood, sweat, dirt, and rage, elements which have been often attributed to non-whiteness and imagined bestiality of the racial Other. In his novel, Philip Roth takes up the ambiguous associations around boxing. He implicitly highlights its ambiguity as a racial or class marker: although boxing has been a means of social ascent available to many African American men, Coleman Silk starts his career as an amateur boxer by passing for Jewish. Indeed, the very possibility of passing is suggested to Coleman by his Jewish coach Doc Chizner, who advises his protégé to drop the question of race altogether: "if nothing comes up, you don't bring it up" (*HS*, 118). Initially used as his initiation into the white social sphere, later during his relationship with Steena, boxing acquires a touch of inappropriateness. Against her immaculate Nordic whiteness, any demonstration of his "bestiality" could point to him as a "primitive creature, more animal-like, not yet emancipated", features that, as Anatole Broyard once mentioned, have often enough been attributed to describe African Americans (Broyard, 60). Such culturally coded vocabulary surfaces further in the narration when Coleman's sexuality gradually retreats into the background the more he integrates into his white surroundings. Whereas his (doomed)

⁴⁶ Dyer remarks that, over the course of time, representations of white masculinity have changed, leading to its crisis and inability to represent the strong white male defeating bodily desires. However, although there have been significant changes in the representation of blackness, offering the readers varied, rich, complex characters, stereotypical associations of blackness with dirt, rage, savage feelings, and promiscuity unfortunately are still prominently at work in contemporary fiction, film and television. For a discussion of representation of whiteness through blackness in American literature see Toni Morrison's groundbreaking work *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Harvard UP, 1992). For a comprehensive study of the iconic image of whiteness in film see Daniel Bernardi's *Classic Hollywood, Classic Whiteness* (University of Minnesota Press, 2001). Also see the study by *The Black Image in the White Mind. Media and Race in America* by Entman, Robert M. and Andrew Rojecki (University of Chicago Press, 2001).

relationship with Steena is highly sexual, the description of his married life bears virtually no references to sexuality. It is significant then that the racially laden spooks incident is closely connected with Iris' death and the unleashing of Coleman's sexuality, all to the moral uproar of respectability at the quiet college town.

In *The Human Stain*, boxing, which Joyce Carol Oates once called "America's tragic theater" (Oates, 116), figures as one of the axes along which the character of Coleman Silk can be interpreted. The boxer, or more precisely, the boxing activity itself, becomes a metaphor for the passer, who is "boxing" his way through life. As Oates pointedly remarks in her book *On Boxing*, the ring provides the individual with a unique possibility to assert himself: "there, for a dramatic if fleeting period of time, the great world with its moral and political complexities, its terrifying impersonality, ceases to exist" (Oates, 114). Probably it is this circumstance that fascinates the young Coleman Silk, who wishes to assert himself by "struggling with an opponent, by finally struggling with himself, testing the limits of his body and mind" (Berlin, 26). Following up on Oates, in his illuminating essay "Traffic of Our Stage: Boxing as Theater" Normand Berlin suggests that boxing is "tragic drama, with almost all characteristics of such drama—action, conflict, character, spectacle, catharsis" (26). Seen through the lens of this metaphor, numerous text passages shed new light on the protagonist. The boxer, who by definition carries out his fight onstage, receiving immediate responses from his audience, illustrates the very understanding of passing, or more broadly, of identity as a performance. The fact that considerable attention is devoted to Coleman's boxing career and also the frequent use of boxing terminology to describe his actions and attitudes hints at the importance of boxing as the overall interpretative framework of the novel. In this manner, for instance, foreshadowing Coleman Silk's undoing in the spooks incident, his father prophetically warns him: "I've seen men get hit with a punch that they never saw coming. And when that happens, [...] it knocks them cold" (*HS*, 96). As the story has it, the absurdity of political correctness is the blow Coleman never sees coming, a blow that eventually leads

to the circumstances that first figuratively and then quite literally knock him cold. Akin to boxing, which “strips the individual down to an elemental level where our attention is fixed not only on the body but also on its approaching doom” (Morris, 258), we read the story of Coleman Silk’s life influenced by the knowledge of his tragic undoing.

As Tim Parrish notes in his essay “Becoming Black: Zuckerman’s Bifurcating Self in *The Human Stain*”, Philip Roth takes up the theme of boxing also in direct response to Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952), which features the main protagonist in an unfair and humiliating boxing scene termed as his Battle Royale (Parrish, 217). Under the guise of an invitation to give his speech as a valedictorian, the nameless protagonist is forced to box blindfolded against other African American youths for the amusement of a white audience. Apart from being a sad testimony to the self-victimization of minority members, the fight metaphorically exposes how “African Americans are positioned to fight one another in the cultural arena in ways that can only reinforce their own cultural impotence” (Parrish, 217). In spite of the deep humiliation during the set-up fight, the Invisible Man does not give up his hope of delivering the speech, by which he “felt that only these men could judge truly [his] ability” (Ellison, 25). In a hyperbolic vision of his contemporaneous America, Ellison presents his depiction of a life where African Americans, like the main protagonist, may in the end get the prize (the black college scholarship, in this case), but cannot escape the humiliating treatment required to earn it. As the novel develops, it also becomes clear that each of the subsequent achievements fails to end such humiliating treatment. Interestingly, in *HS*, Coleman Silk also becomes a valedictorian, but he fights a different fight. When Dr. Fensterman, a Jewish doctor, suggests that Silk should try to achieve a B grade in two of his subjects so that Fensterman’s son can become valedictorian in exchange for an interest-free loan, Silk does not grasp the importance of the situation. As Fensterman argues, by becoming a salutarian, “Coleman would still be the highest-ranking colored student in the 1944 graduating class, not to mention the highest-ranking colored student ever to graduate E.O.”

(*HS*, 87).⁴⁷ He would then probably become “the highest-ranking colored student in the county, even in the state”, and it would “make no difference whatsoever when he enrolled at Howard University” (87). The complex relationship between the progress of Jewish American and African American is aptly reflected in Fensterman’s discriminatory race-thinking.

Later in his life, however, Coleman Silk changes the terms of the game. Instead of being a puppet dancing at the will of the white audience, Silk is a successful fighter with an intuitive mastery of boxing technique, demonstrating his “strength of the body, agility of mind, the ability to improvise” (Berlin, 27) not only in the ring, but also in life. Whereas the fight in *Invisible Man* adheres to no established rules, Roth’s novel presents it to the reader as a regulated amateur boxing ring, even though it is premised by Silk’s passing for white in order to circumvent the restrictions of legal segregation. Silk’s boxing, a combination of slyness and physical ability, symbolizes his way to “box” himself through life, navigating around the obstacles which he encountered due to his African American origin. Electrified by the fact that the audience is not aware of his blackness, Coleman finds “the power and the pleasure [...] in being counterconfessional in the same way you [are] a counterpuncher” (*HS*, 100). The narrator describes the way Silky Silk could immerse himself in the act of boxing as follows:

And not only did nothing external make any difference, neither did anything internal. If there were people shouting at him, he could pay no attention to that, and if the guy he was fighting was his best friend, he could pay no attention to that. After the fight there was plenty of time for them to be friends again. (*HS*, 100)

Similar to the way he concentrates during a boxing match, Coleman prepares for the difficult conversation with his mother, in which he reveals his intention to pass for white permanently. Although he is aware of the cruelty his actions inflict upon her, Coleman “then as now, [...] was experiencing the power of it as a fighter. Because that is the test too, to give the brutality of the repudiation its real, unpardonable human meaning. [...] This is it. The man and his

⁴⁷ E.O. stands for East Orange High School (YK).

mother. [...] This (was) the major act of his life, and, vividly, consciously, he (felt) its immensity” (*HS*, 139). As Julian Henneberg points out, “via stylistically similar rhetorical structures the encounter between mother and son is equated with a box fight” (Henneberg, 59). As he argues further, the description of Silk’s preparation for this conversation bears strong resemblance to the phrases he usually chants before box fights: “It was not a moment for him to be recalling his childhood. (...) It was not a moment to allow himself to be subjugated... (...) It was not a moment to think thoughts other than the thoughts he’d come armed with...” (*HS*, 138; Henneberg, 59). The rhythmic repetitions here clearly echo the repetitions in the quote above about Silk’s level of concentration before a fight, describing how “he could pay no attention” to distracting factors (*HS*, 100).

As the setup of the scene signals, identity in *The Human Stain* is understood largely in terms of a fight: a fight for recognition, a fight against racial stereotypes, a fight for the freedom of self-definition. First Coleman fights for the right to make his decisions free from racial restrictions; afterwards, Zuckerman continues Coleman’s fight by narrating his life in an attempt to make public the injustice done to the retired university professor. As Zuckerman argues, the absurdity of the ‘spooks’ incident lies in the realization that it instantly made Silk’s extraordinary contribution to the development of the Athena College null and void. He is certain that had Silk retired, “without the incident, in his own good time, there would have been the festschrift, there would have been the institution of the Coleman Silk Lecture Series, there would have been a classical studies chair established in his name, and perhaps (...) the humanities building (...) would have been renamed in his honor after his death” (*HS*, 5). Thus, after his death, Silk would have been “officially glorified forever” (*HS*, 6). However, the absurdity of political correctness negates Coleman Silk’s life achievement.

In *The Human Stain*, identity is depicted in terms of a performance, an act that the individual presents to the surroundings. Careful monitoring of the way his outward identity performance is perceived by his surrounding becomes a necessity for Coleman Silk, since

being exposed as a passer would, at least during a long stretch of his life, become his undoing. Unlike Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Coleman is far from being shy and confused: instead, he enjoys playing with his audience. It becomes his adrenaline kick. This is true for his brief boxing career, for his student time in Greenwich Village, and, albeit in a different form, true for the most dramatic encounter with his mother. In the tragedy of the moment, not for a second does Coleman lose his perfect control. Borrowing from *Cool Pose: The Dilemmas of Black Manhood in America* *Cool Pose*, a 1992 study by Richard Majors and Janet M. Billson that describes displaying control as one of the main black male coping strategies, I would suggest that "playing it cool" in this conversation of paramount importance is Silk's strategy of coping with the immensity of the step by which he cuts all family ties. As Majors and Billson explain, "cool pose is the black man's last-ditch effort for masculine self-control" (29). The cool pose has been a coping strategy that they see going back to the days of slavery, since enslaved African Americans soon realized that "masking behavior is a supremely useful device" (Majors & Billson, 8). In the case of Coleman Silk, it is evident that such ultimate control over his feelings has been a feature he inherited (in the sense of internalization) from his father, who never spoke with his children about the racist treatment he experienced every day. As Majors and Billson indicate, the loss of control can be experienced as extremely threatening, since "if he [the black male subject] loses control, he becomes dangerously vulnerable to pressures that he fears will undermine him" (29). Thereby it is interesting to note that, due to the novel's narrative design, we never get a glimpse behind Silk's mask of cool pose, since both Silk's open outbursts and his inner motivation and thoughts are representations and fantasies of Zuckerman. Thus, although the mask of passing is disclosed in the novel, black male interiority remains hidden.

2.3. RACIAL ENCOUNTERS: AMERICAN JEWS AND AFRICAN AMERICANS

“So why don’t you turn plain American,
if this country’s so great?” asks Alfred.
“Why do you still call yourself American Jew?”
Mona in the Promised Land, Gish Jen

The question that Alfred asks Mona in the quotation above pinpoints the complex dynamics of relationship between various minority groups in the U.S. Expressing his disillusionment with the promise of the American dream, Alfred, an African American cook in a Chinese restaurant, wonders why Chinese American Mona wishes to “turn Jewish” in order to prove the possibility of American self-invention. The background of the scene exemplifies the problematic relationship between these three groups: as the Jewish gradually blended into the American mainstream, the broadly defined group of Asian Americans often labeled as the ‘model minority’ followed them into the affluence of the American middle-class. Both groups often advanced at the cost of African Americans, whose ascent on the U.S. social ladder has not been as successful, largely due to specific socioeconomic circumstances such as slavery and Jim Crow legislation. During the twentieth century, the swift economic progress of the American Jews has turned them into ethnic ‘scouts’ of sorts: speaking through the fictional figure of Coleman Silk, Philip Roth suggests that Jewish Americans were “shrewd people showing the outsider his way in, [...] showing an intelligent colored family how it might be done” (*HS*, 97).

The relationship between American Jews and African Americans, as well as the alliances made and dropped between them, represent a special case of an ethno-racial love-hate bond. Although both minorities have faced different problems within the U.S. society, for a long stretch of the twentieth century they were equally invested in the struggle for Civil Rights. Ironically, just as mutual efforts started to be successful, the ideological gap between the two groups widened, mirroring the gap in their respective social and political advancement. Passing into the white mainstream, Jewish Americans have encountered acceptance, gradually

blending into the large group of Euro-Americans, whereas large numbers of African Americans continue to face institutional and economic hurdles in getting better education, employment, financing real estate, and accessing better health care.⁴⁸ In many respects, African Americans still have to wage their battle to attain equal opportunities and defy their status as the racial Other. However, as a result of the conservative backlash of the 1980s, and due to the currently strong neo-conservative tendencies, the idea of de facto racial equality in the U.S. society has gained broad acceptance. While racism and discrimination are generally associated with slavery, especially immigrants' descendants eagerly embrace the argument that present generations do not owe any reparations to African Americans since these generations did not in any way profit from slavery. According to George Lipsitz, the reason for the wide acceptance of this view lies in the failure on the part of many whites and whitened ethnicities to understand the complex system of institutional discrimination and the ways in which white or light skin color still goes hand in hand with economic privilege. In his seminal study *Possessive Investment in Whiteness* (1998), which explores the connections between whiteness, politics and discrimination, Lipsitz explains that “the ‘disadvantages’ facing minority communities have everything to do with having been taken advantage of in the past and present” (46). Hence, along with whites, whitened ethnicities profit from their privileged position while those who are excluded from white privilege continue to suffer from institutionalized racism. Lipsitz also uncovers the complex mechanisms underneath what he terms America’s “possessive investment in whiteness” and discloses developments and policies which mask white privilege. In particular, the failure to understand that, on their way up the social ladder, Jewish Americans were able to profit from being nearly white prompts

⁴⁸ As Gary Younge notes, recent research by ProPublica shows that “black children across the south now attend majority-black schools at levels not seen in four decades”. A combination of class and racial inequality, he continues, has led to a dramatic reversal of the gains during the Civil Rights Era since “in many areas—income, wealth, incarceration, employment—the gaps between black and white are the same as 50 years ago or worse” (Younge, in *The Guardian*, 20 April 2014).

many to disregard the elements of race and skin color as having contributed to their swift social ascent.

The possibility of choosing whether to be Jewish or not—for the most part an inaccessible option for African Americans—can certainly be counted as one of the main reasons for the black-Jewish dissent. A 2006 television show offered yet another interesting demonstration of the ambiguous position of Jewish Americans. In an interview with Mike Wallace, the actor Morgan Freeman openly opposed the notion of a Black History Month, arguing that such an institution supports the labeling/Othering of African Americans.⁴⁹ “Black history is American history,” he explained, and asked Wallace whether there is a so-called White history month, to which Wallace fled into the apologetic answer, “Well, I’m Jewish.” The interviewer’s response exposes American Jews’ current status as insiders to white privilege, as seen by African Americans, and their self-perception as outsiders to the white mainstream which has for a long time (and some would argue, still does) opposed Jews as a group. On the other hand, in Roth’s novel, which offers a fictional engagement with this double position of Jewish Americans, Coleman Silk adopts a new identity as Jewish American and instantaneously becomes exactly that: an insider to white privilege. However, as Eric Sundquist remarks, “even as he [Coleman Silk] renounces blackness and its liabilities, he inadvertently exposes the illusion that Jews are safe, white enough to escape the rage of nativist racists. In Coleman Silk’s charade, the fates of black and Jew remain bound together as tightly, as fatally, as ever—the expiation of blood by blood, race by race” (Sundquist, 522). In the end of the novel, Coleman Silk is “not only ‘buried as a Jew’ but also ‘killed as a Jew’” (Sundquist, 522) by Faunia’s anti-Semitic ex-husband. This is why, as Sundquist further suggests, “Silk might simply have passed for white, but his more nuanced choice to present himself as a Jew allows Roth to recalculate the faltering relationship between blacks and Jews in terms appropriate to the late twentieth century” (513).

⁴⁹ 60 Minutes’ Mike Wallace, June 14th, 2006; CBS News online.

As a glance at the vast scholarship on the issue reveals, the case of the broken Black-Jewish alliance has been a topic of keen interest.⁵⁰ As fundamentally different as they were, the institutions of American slavery and the Holocaust have left a deep imprint on the respective group's social development and individual self-perception.⁵¹ Blacks and Jews, who share a history of persecution based on essentially conceived ideas of 'Blackness' and 'Jewishness', and who both romanticize the notion of an (imagined) homeland, might seem to have sound reasons for forming political alliances. And yet, although both share experiences of discrimination and exclusion from equal opportunities, there are both anti-Semitic sentiments among Blacks and anti-Black attitudes among Jews. In the course of the struggle for Civil Rights, these sentiments were deepened by the discrepancy of the social progress between the two groups. The last century bears witness to the uneasy relations between African Americans and Jewish Americans and to the intricacies of political, social and cultural engagements between them. When, at the turn of nineteenth century, a vast number of Jewish immigrants from Eastern and Central Europe arrived to seek a new home in the U.S, the Promised Land greeted them with anti-Semitic prejudices and restrictions such as humiliating immigration procedures, anti-Jewish discrimination with regard to housing and

⁵⁰ Various scholars have tried to account for the reasons of the broken alliances between the two groups. While it is certainly impossible to mention all of them, some works can be referred to here, such as the historic accounts in *What Went Wrong: The Creation and Collapse of the Black-Jewish Alliance* by Murray Friedman (The Free Press, 1995), *Struggles in the Promised Land: Toward a History of Black-Jewish Relations in the United States* by Jack Salzman and Cornel West (eds.) (Oxford UP, 1997), *African Americans and Jews in the Twentieth Century* by Vincent P. Franklin et al. (University of Missouri Press, 1999), and a more personal, journalistic encounters in *Broken Alliances, The Turbulent Times between Blacks and Jews in America* by Jonathan Kaufmann (Touchstone, 1995), just to name some. In American literature and culture studies, a work that clearly stands out among others due to the fullness and depth of its analysis is Eric Sundquist's now classic *Strangers in the Land: Blacks, Jews, Post-Holocaust America*. His reading and analysis of the literary works by African Americans and Jewish Americans through the lens of their individual and shared histories provides deep insights into the literary terrain of the imaginary onto which the impact of such histories has been projected. Apart from Sundquist's work, Cheryl Greenberg's perspective on the history of Black-Jewish relations and its place within the current multiculturalism debate will inform my analysis. Among Greenberg's numerous works, I will mostly concentrate on her article "Pluralism and Its Discontents: The Case of Blacks and Jews" in the volume *Insider/Outsider: American Jews and Multiculturalism* by David Biale, Michael Galchinsky and Susannah Heschel (eds.) (University of California Press, 1998).

⁵¹ Among others: Laurence Thomas, "Characterizing the Evil of American Slavery and the Holocaust": "American Slavery and the Holocaust were fundamentally different. They were such radically dissimilar institutions that no sense whatsoever can be made of the view that one was more evil than the other" (153).

employment policies, and through quotas in higher education (Greenberg, 1998, 61).⁵² Nevertheless, as Sundquist notes, discrimination against American Jews was never “formalized as a practice of the state” in the way slavery and Jim Crow were (Sundquist, 20). Thus, from the very beginning of their presence in the United States as a group, Jewish Americans can be said to have faced a different, less restrictive and humiliating form of racism than African Americans.⁵³

Perhaps largely due to this circumstance and to the high level of Jewish immigrants’ professionalization, the newcomers did not dwell in the low social status for longer than was necessary to survive through the initial adaptation phase (Greenberg, 1998, 67).⁵⁴ Gradually, Jewish Americans started their progress up the social ladder, and soon initial official cooperation with African American groups was established, leading in the 1940s and 1950s to what is commonly seen as the heyday of Black-Jewish mutually coordinated political activity (ibid). At this point, both groups “supported an assimilationist form of pluralism”, which insisted, however, on maintaining a distinct ethno-racial identity (Greenberg, 1998, 65). As Greenberg notes, “the element of choice was crucial” to this position, which in the public sphere demanded tolerance and equal treatment of all ethno-racial groups, and left the individual’s choice of her racial or ethnic identity a matter of private life.

Obviously, this position ignores that, for European Jewish immigrants, the possibility of the choice to be “plain American” in public and Jewish in their private lives was available to a degree that only very light-skinned African Americans could ever achieve. Long after the infamous one drop rule ceased to have legal consequences, its logic has influenced the circulating ideas on race in the U.S. To African Americans, successful Black-Jewish political

⁵² This third wave of Jewish immigration, which lasted roughly until the mid-twenties when the Immigration Act of 1924 severely restricted the number of immigrants, has gradually increased the overall Jewish population in the United States up to an overall 4,000,000 citizens.

⁵³ This is not to say that personal experience of racism can (or should) be in any way measurable or comparable. The comment refers merely to the different extent of institutionalization of racist practices these two minorities have faced and the resulting gap in their upward mobility.

⁵⁴ The following description of the development of the Black-Jewish relations is based on Greenberg, 1998, pp. 61-69.

actions (such as, for instance, the campaign against compulsory indication of race and religion on job application forms) did not alter employment discrimination based on their Otherness in terms of their recognizable skin color and facial features (Greenberg, 1998, 68). Thus, exceedingly (and disproportionately) profiting from mutual Black-Jewish political activism, Jewish Americans gradually started blending into white America, often failing to recognize the enormous role their class and ethnicity played in their rapid ascent, so Greenberg. This led, on the one hand, to the growing misconception among Jews of African Americans as unable to pull themselves up “by their bootstraps” in the way Jews did (Brodkin Sacks, 395). Unwilling to see the obstacles darker-skinned Americans faced on a daily basis in employment, housing, education and medical care, American Jews increasingly attributed the fault for the slow economic ascent of African Americans to their own inability.⁵⁵ This has ignited anti-Semitic sentiments within African American communities, within which Jewish Americans soon became shop owners, employers, and landlords—initially having faced similar obstacles, Jewish Americans now joined their white counterparts in the economic exploitation of African Americans—so went the widespread contemporaneous opinion in black communities (Greenberg, 68). When Jewish shops were looted in the riots of the 1960s, Martin Luther King, Jr. sought to remind African Americans of “the contribution that Jewish people have made toward the Negro’s struggle for freedom—it has been so great.” (qtd. in Sundquist, 32). On the other hand, in their own view, American Jews were highly dissimilar to their racially prejudiced white exploiters, and many felt offended by the newly developing anti-Semitic sentiment (Greenberg, 1998, 67).

Such discrepancy in the social positions of the two groups led to a growing alienation between them, not least due to the increasing role of radicalized and separatist voices within the African American community. Although numerous liberal white and Jewish Americans actively participated in the Civil Rights movement, paradoxically it was their involvement

⁵⁵ This observation has been made by various scholars, such as Cheryl Greenberg, Karen Brodkin Sacks, George Lipsitz, just to name a few.

that once more exposed the high extent to which racism infiltrated the American society. The sudden nationwide attention to the two of the three murdered Civil Rights activists who were white/Jewish stood in sharp contrast to the numerous African American victims who either went unmentioned or largely unnoticed. Gradually, “there was growing dissension within the ranks over charges of white paternalism and elitism” (“Freedom Summer”, online). Ironically, once the problem of racial violence at last reached the high level of publicity and of media attention needed to bring across to the rest of the United States the unbearable conditions of African Americans in the South, the very focus on the two white victims caused much disappointment and disillusionment among Blacks.

Since the 1960s, the political interests of Blacks and Jews have been growing further and further apart. Ideologically, Jewish Americans, still invested in the pluralistic idea of assimilation, no longer represented a helpful ally for African Americans, who by then disapproved the idea of assimilating into the melting pot (Greenberg, 1998, 70). Political leaders such as Malcolm X strongly opposed the integration of African Americans into a “value system which blacks ought instead to repudiate” (Greenberg, 1998, 70). Sundquist notes that “blacks’ admiration of Jews’ communal and economic power was often mixed with resentment of their paternalism or, worse, their suspected malevolence” (24). As John Howard Griffin remarks in the epilogue to his remarkable book *Black Like Me* wherein he describes his experiment of travelling through the American South passing for a black man, “in order to succeed, he [the black man] had to become an imitation white man”, denying his own distinct culture (Griffin, 1990). Termed as fragmented individualism, this ideology underneath the logic of integration has been understood and reversed by African Americans, who instead have concentrated on asserting their difference and racial pride. Culminating in such slogans as “Black is Beautiful”, the New Black movements often rejected the previously welcomed

alliances with whites (and Jews).⁵⁶ While Jewish Americans were steadily moving closer toward the centers of economic and political power, African Americans started to view them as opponents rather than allies.⁵⁷

Failures of the Black-Jewish alliance certainly contributed to the feelings of alienation between the two groups. Gradually American Jews switched from being outsiders to being insiders in the U.S. Scholars identify two major factors that aided such a shift: the swift upward mobility of Jewish Americans and a shift in ideological perspective (Greenberg, 60). As Greenberg shows in her insightful analysis of the Jewish-Black relations in the U.S., multiculturalism as an ideology reversed the logic of the desirability of the insider/outsider positions. While in the pluralist view, the inside has always been the ideal, “where everyone, minority and majority wanted to be ...now to be an insider is to be a cultural imperialist” (60). Thus, just as Jewish Americans moved from the outside to the inside, the status of an insider “lost its moral legitimacy” (Greenberg, 60).⁵⁸ Notwithstanding their improving political, economic, and social status, American Jews still often do not see themselves as insiders to the mainstream culture that has for such a long time (and still often does) excluded them (ibid).

In the light of these developments, it has been often pointed out that perhaps Jewish assimilation in the U.S. society has been too successful: as the number of observant Jews declines and the rate Jewish intermarriage grows, American Jewry is in danger of vanishing into the white mainstream.⁵⁹ Some radical thinkers have even designated marriage to Gentiles

⁵⁶ By the end of the 1960s, both Student National coordinating Committee (SNCC) and Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) became all-black organizations (Greenberg, 1998, 71).

⁵⁷ Gradually, such opposition changed from being just felt to being openly expressed by officially taking different sides in conflicting political and legal issues, such as the Ocean Hill-Brownsville school district confrontation in 1968, and most prominently in the affirmative-action cases *De Funis v. Odegaard* in 1974, and *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* in 1978, where Blacks and Jews publicly took oppositional sides for the first time (Greenberg, 1998, 72).

⁵⁸ For a detailed analysis of the Jewish Americans' place within the multiculturalism debate, see Greenberg's article “Pluralism and Its Discontents” cited here. Further resources such as the already mentioned *How Jews Become White Folks and What that Says about Race in America* by Karen Brodtkin Sacks and *Blacks in the Jewish Mind. A Crisis of Liberalism* by Seth Forman (New York UP, 2000) also give a comprehensive account of the history of Jewish American assimilation into the white U.S. mainstream.

⁵⁹ The high level of attention which is given to the topic of intermarriage in Jewish American debates points to the problematic self-understanding of contemporary American Jewish identity, which by now occupies much of scholarly and fictional literature by and about Jews. Compare the chapter on Jewish intermarriage in *Mixed*

as “the posthumous victory of Adolf Hitler”, thereby conceiving of it as a cultural Holocaust (see Spickard, 191). Although certainly not a prevailing attitude among the American Jews, the underlying idea that a Jew in an interracial/interethnic marriage is lost to Judaism is still shared by some Jewish Americans and is certainly widely shared among Israeli Jews.⁶⁰ In addition to the fact that the Jewish religion does not recognize as Jews children of Gentile mothers, the more basic assumption underneath it is that, in a marriage out of faith, the Jewish religious education of the children and observing Jewish traditions will be neglected. Thus, similar to the fictive case of Roth’s Coleman Silk, in the U.S. being publicly recognized as an American Jew often requires a mere claim to be one, which equates ethnicity with little more than “food and family heritage” (Brodkin Sacks, 395). A privilege Jewish Americans enjoy, the element of choice (as discussed in the introduction with regard to Sollors’ categories of consent and descent) prompts the individual as well as the Jewish community to reconsider what it means to be Jewish. In addition, the extent to which Jewish culture has influenced and become constitutive of not only mainstream popular culture, but also American literature, frequently makes it difficult to distinguish the two. Especially in the genre of the novel, the works of Bernard Malamud, Henry Roth, Saul Bellow, and Philip Roth (among others) have had a formative influence on the development of a distinctly American novel.

Encounters between African Americans and Jewish Americans also occurred in fictional literature.⁶¹ The common denominator of fiction by both groups seems to be “the lesson to be learned from experiences of catastrophe, such as the holocaust and slavery” (Budick, 201). As

Blood: Intermarriage and Ethnic Identity in Twentieth-Century America by Paul R. Spickard, or Yaakov Botwinik’s “Intermarriage: A Jewish Obsession”, http://ohr.edu/explore_judaism/marriage/2525.

⁶⁰ As recently as in May 2012, the interfaith marriage of the Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg to his Chinese American fiancé caused various responses among the Jewish American community, and many have accused him of disconnecting himself from the Jewish people (see Benari, online). Some even gravely lamented over the lack of general public attention to the fact that a prominent Jew married a Gentile (Kaplan Sommer, online).

⁶¹ Comprehensive analysis of the literary engagements between African American and Jewish American authors can be found in Budick, Emily Miller. *Blacks and Jews in Literary Conversation*. (Cambridge University Press, 1998); Harap, Louis, *Dramatic Encounters. The Jewish Presence in 20th-century American Drama, Poetry, and Humor and the Black-Jewish Literary Relationship*. (Greenwood Press, 1987). For further literary encounters also see Cohen, Sarah B. & Koch, Joanne B. (eds.) *Shared Stages: Ten American Dramas of Blacks and Jews* (State University of New York Press, 2007). For a comparative analysis of ethnic literatures see Franco, Dean J., *Ethnic American literature. Comparing Chicano, Jewish, and African American writing*. (University of Virginia Press, 2006).

Budick suggests, “the black-Jewish dyad interrogates the responsibility of any writer to the ethnically specific materials of neighboring communities, which are themselves contributors to, even as they are resisters of, the larger cultural construction in which all of them exist” (206). However, as James Baldwin once remarked, African American and Jewish American histories of discrimination differ significantly since many Jewish Americans (for Baldwin, mistakenly) believe that “Holocaust ends in the New World, where mine [the African American’s] begins. My diaspora continues, the end is not in sight.” (Baldwin, xix).

Perhaps it is the uneasy history of black-Jewish relations that renders Philip Roth so sensitive to the ownership of voice, the question of who represents whom. He chooses to speak through an African American protagonist not directly, but via Zuckerman, thereby preserving a safe distance to the question of racial discrimination and African American interiority. As Zuckerman explains, the narrative of Coleman Silk’s life becomes a book, which Coleman “had asked [him] to write in the first place, but [was] written not necessarily as he wanted it” (*HS*, 213). By this, Roth alters the terms of the relationship between Blacks and Jews. Initially, passing novels, which displayed both the similarities and the differences in the situations of the two minorities, generally tended towards the overweighting of differences. As Adam Meyer has shown in his essay about the representation of Jews in novels of passing, the complexity of their situation can be described with the phrase that Blacks and Jews “are not entirely strange to each other, but [that] they are not entirely friendly either” (Meyer, 447). Over centuries, the absurdity of valorizing optic whiteness over darker skin tones has led minorities with similar concerns to fight each other and internalize white supremacist prejudices. Thus, while Jewish protagonists in passing novels might show discontent with discrimination they encounter, also within their own ethnic group (for example, around the issue of marrying Gentiles), more often than not they display acquired prejudice against African Americans. Among other novels of the period that display similar prejudices, Walter White’s novel *Flight*, which juxtaposes African American and Jewish

American passing, can be seen as exemplary. A Jewish friend of the passing protagonist complains that her wedding to a Gentile had to be called off by her parents. While she is indignant about the confinements of Jewish intermarriage, she nevertheless objects to her friend's wish for the abolition of all prejudices with regard not only to intermarrying of Jews and Catholics, but also of blacks and whites. Still in distress over her own situation, the protagonist counters, "Oh well, [...] I wouldn't marry a nigger in any circumstances. Why, would you?" (White, 1969, 313). Unaware of the addressee's passing for white, she is unable to correctly interpret her bitter laughter in response to such bigotry. As Adam Meyer concludes, in the passing novels of Harlem Renaissance, African American and Jewish American protagonists "remain divided by the color line, unable to obliterate that barrier which, intangible though it may be, always separates them" (448).⁶²

The *Human Stain* presents a different story. In their first encounter, Coleman Silk asks (or even urges) Nathan Zuckerman to write a book about the "spooks" incident. Overwhelmed by the injustice he experienced, Coleman is unable to write down his own story; his aporia in the novel functions as a symbol for the difficulty to describe the indescribable injustice done to African Americans. The Jewish American narrator in turn possesses both a memory of his own discrimination and a safe distance to the African American suffering, a position which enables him to narrate the story in place of Silk. Gradually both become friends. Although the color line is still, stubbornly, at work in the society the narrator describes, the novel displays that the way it functions has changed in the course of the twentieth century. Within the fictional world of the novel, which reflects upon socio-political changes in the U.S. society, deep racial hatred has now been displaced by petty, painstaking concerns with political

⁶² The question of representation of blacks in Jewish fiction and vice versa has been explored by various scholars. With respect to the present engagement with passing, Catherine Rottenberg's analysis of this reciprocal literary process stands out. She considers fictional identity constructions of the two groups under the angle of performativity in general, (and of performing what she calls 'Americanness' in particular), since both races/ethnicities have struggled to "move from margin to center by carving out a niche for themselves in mainstream U.S. society" (Rottenberg, 2008, 130). Others, such as Budick, have argued that, "for a significant number of African and Jewish American writers, the other group becomes a vehicle by which to think through their own ethnic identities" (Budick, 1).

correctness. Whereas in the long stretch of the twentieth century, strong feelings of antipathy and hatred have been the main obstacle to racial affiliation, *The Human Stain* describes the U.S. of the 1990s as a divided society, which is hindered by artificial and bureaucratic obstacles. As the spooks incident at Athena College exemplifies, faculty members who understand the absurdity of the claims directed to the former dean feel unable to follow their conviction and officially support him. Out of the fear of being mistaken for racists themselves, they are puppets of self-imposed bigot regulations and attitudes. The raging Coleman Silk, the indignant Zuckerman, and, with them, the furious Philip Roth attest to a paradoxical situation in a society where the ideal of freedom has mutated to become a censoring practice.

What is left to a writer in such a situation is the comfort of irony, and indeed its abundant use a salient feature of the novel. It is through irony that Roth undermines racial categorization. For instance, as mentioned above, in the beginning of the novel, the narrator describes Dean Silk's modernization of Athena College as radical, making it competitive, and sees in Silk's competitiveness a typical Jewish feature. However, whereas the reader at this point is not aware of Silk's passing, the narrator is, although he pretends not to be. Zuckerman, who retrospectively recounts the story after Coleman Silk's death, is fully aware of the secret of the protagonist's life, and thus such attribution of racially biased description can only function as irony in the novel, and underscores the arbitrariness of ethno-racial stereotypes.

Roth's consideration of the Jewish American identity revolves around the questions of what is and what is not Jewish. In his statements that he does not wish to be seen as a Jewish American writer, but as a writer who happens to be a Jew (Flood, online), Roth reflects upon the confines he and other so-called minority or ethnic writers face: Their fiction is read and analyzed primarily through the lens of ethnic or racial particularity. As Philip Roth recently remarked in an interview, his family has been living in the United States for more than a half

of America's existence. He added, "[i]f I don't measure up as an American writer, at least leave me to my delusion" (ibid.). On the other hand, heated debates take place on the question of what constitutes the Jewish American literary canon, what themes and topics it should, and most notably, should not feature (consider here the frequent accusations cast towards Philip Roth and his not always favorable depiction of Jewish protagonists).⁶³ Some have argued for a reconceptualization of the approach to Jewishness in general and to Jewish American literature in particular. In his article "The Failure of Identity: Toward a New Literary History of Philip Roth's Unrecognizable Jew", Benjamin Schreier criticizes the approach to literature based on the politics of identity. Echoing Nietzsche's critique of the self-referentiality of all human knowledge, Schreier writes that literary texts are usually analyzed for their "Jewishness" only after they have been declared Jewish texts: "once the decision is made to treat a text as Jewish, the Jewish signified overdetermines the textual signifier, making the text representative of 'its' Jewish identity" (105).⁶⁴ Contributing to the project of securing the "coherence of a specifically Jewish subject formation that unifies all historical expressions of Jewish culture", such an approach largely takes "that subject for granted" (Schreier, 103). Lamenting that most of literary criticism (and certainly much of the criticism addressing Roth's oeuvre) presupposes the existence of an identifiable Jewish subject, Schreier rightly notes that these scholars have failed to recognize that "such identification is conditioned by our critical practices" (103). Similarly, Philip Roth also remarks that the label 'American-Jewish writer' "is an inaccurate if not also a sentimental description, and entirely misses the point. (...) The novelist's obsession, moment by moment, is with language: finding the right

⁶³ Among those outraged by Roth's fiction was Irving Howe, who initially showed enthusiasm for the then young writer. However, in 1972 he attacked Philip Roth for being "in the grip of an imperious will prepared to wrench, twist, and claw at its materials in order to leave upon them the scar of its presence" (Howe, I. "Philip Roth Reconsidered", *Commentary*, December 1972).

⁶⁴ In his essay "On Truth and Lie in an Extra-moral Sense" (original title: "Über Wahrheit und Lüge im aussermoralischen Sinne"), Nietzsche argues that the epistemological value of human knowledge is low since new insights and results provided by scholars only confirm the truth of the categories which these scholars have invented themselves. As he writes, "If I make up the definition of a mammal, and then, after inspecting a camel, declare 'look, a mammal!' I have indeed brought a truth to light in this way, but it is a truth of limited value" (Nietzsche, 57).

next word. For me, as for Cheever, DeLillo, Erdrich, Oates, Stone, Styron and Updike, the right next word is an American-English word” (Flood, online). Instead of reading Roth’s works as a search for the Jewish subject or, in fact, for the Jewishness of the text itself, in Schreier’s view, we should analyze the protagonists’ self-fashioning and the “failure of available terms and paradigms to express Jewish identification compellingly” presented in Roth’s fiction (Schreier, 101).

In his fictional engagement with Jewishness as an empty marker, Roth allows the main protagonist to become Jewish. His non-religious convergence occurs when he meets his future wife. As Sundquist remarks, by choosing to marry “the ‘non-Jewish Jew’ Iris, a left-wing artist whose hair and coloring, he calculates, will help provide the physiognomic mask for any dark shadow that might emerge in their offspring, Silk also preserves the semblance of ‘colored’ authenticity” (514). Instrumental to Silk’s decision to pass as a Jew, Iris’ hair receives a detailed description in the novel: “Her head of hair was something, a labyrinth, billowing wreath of spirals and ringlets, fuzzy as twine and large enough for use as Christmas ornamentation. All the disquiet of her childhood seemed to have passed into the convolutions of her sinuous thicket of hair...” (*HS*, 129). Curiously, the idea that his choice to marry Iris might be based solely on the texture of Iris’ hair occurs to Coleman as late as in the conversation with his mother, in which he informs her about his marriage plans and the decision to pass for Jewish: “The important thing was to forget about Iris’s hair and let her [his mother] speak, let her find her fluency and, from the soft streaming of her own words, create for him his apologia” (*HS*, 137). Contrary to his earlier assumption that marrying Iris (as opposed to marrying his earlier African American girlfriend Ellie) would give him back the “gift to be secretive” again, for a brief moment he realizes that he might indeed have thought like a slave since, as his mother points out to him, he is choosing a wife according to the possibility of an explanation of the “texture of their children’s hair” (*HS*, 136). As Henneberg suggests, “the presence of his mother provokes in Coleman an unwelcomed self-

reflection, calling to his mind the questionable aspects of his marriage choice” (Henneberg, 58).⁶⁵ Presumably, in this moment, the similarity between the hair of both women becomes clear to Silk and manifests itself in his thoughts. It is clear that Iris’s Jewishness is hereby reduced to her ethnic origin and her physical appearance. Coleman reduces Jewishness to a label: Iris’s hair, his own appearance and a forged story about his Eastern European descent enable him to claim the identity of an American Jew. Given his inability to pass for white, passing for a Jew grants Coleman Silk the freedom of self-expression for which he so fervently strives. He instrumentalizes Iris’s ethnicity to ensure his successful passing and the freedom of self-definition which he envisions will come with it.

The negotiation of Jewish American identity can truly be called a leitmotif appearing throughout Roth’s fiction. Seen from this standpoint, the story of Coleman Silk becomes not only a revision of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, but an experiment in fabricating a Jewish American identity, stripped of both of its originally essential factors: descent and religion. Under the guise of telling the story of an African American protagonist, Nathan Zuckerman tests the limits of identity categorization. Coleman Silk, who is neither Jewish by descent nor by conversion, manages to live successfully accepted as a Jew. The acceptance of his identity by the society and his new Jewish family is narratively structured parallel to the oversimplified social understanding of African American identity, basically equating it to skin color. But, whereas in the latter case, it is the Jim Crow legacy of the one drop rule, what can be identified as the basic assumption at the root of Silk’s Jewish identity? Does claiming Jewish descent suffice in order to authenticate a Jewish American identity? Or is it reduced to the role of being a kind of symbolic mediator between whites and non-whites? In this constellation, Jewish identity becomes both a signifier for a better social standing, and, at the same time, a kind of an empty signifier, since in this case it equates Jewishness to visual identification and fully neglects cultural and religious heritage. Thereby it lacks, as Pamela L.

⁶⁵ Own translation.

Caughie phrases it, “the cultural memory that would place that identity in a social history, spiritual tradition, and material existence” (Caughie, 388). In a way, by the end of the novel, African American Coleman Silk posthumously becomes Jewish American: Zuckerman narrates his life and ends the novel by his anticipation of entering Coleman’s boyhood house. Although Zuckerman imagines himself as “the white guest at Sunday dinner” with Silk’s family, his deep emotional involvement lets the reader sense that somehow it is Coleman (or his ghost) who finally returns to sit down with his abandoned family at the dinner table.

The reciprocal complementation of African American and Jewish American identities thereby operates as a tool in order to approach the controversial theme of passing—a tool known to Philip Roth’s readers from his novel *Operation Shylock*, in which he tackled the conflicting attitudes of American and Israeli Jews toward the questions of Jewish identity and Israel’s politics. There, the narrator named Philip Roth encounters his *doppelgänger*, a false Philip Roth who lives in Israel and turns out to be his look alike. The debate on Jewish identity and Israel’s politics is hence carried out between the narrator and the impostor, who begs him to let him to continue to act as Philip Roth in order to “utilize the author’s cultural capital for the Jewish cause, which the author failed to accomplish himself” (Haselstein, 2010a, 208). The split of the narrator into two functions, narrator and protagonist, paired with the pretention to facticity via allusion to the author allows for a level of narrative complexity that would otherwise not be possible. As Haselstein observes, in this way *Operation Shylock* displays a concern common to all Roth’s works: “a splitting, re-writing and invention of one’s own subjectivity in various figures of the novels, which can be read as staging typical antagonisms of Jewish existence” (2010a, 209). Similarly, in *The Human Stain*, the author uses the split between Zuckerman and Silk in order to reach a higher level of complexity and the freedom of fictionalizing both the Jewish American and the African American passer.

As the narration unfolds, both ethno-racial backgrounds inform each other by being tightly interwoven in the person of Coleman Silk. By way of constructing his novel around the

passing figure, Philip Roth does not merely pay tribute to Ralph Ellison's novel, which he has often acknowledged as having had a formative influence on his work. Narrating one ethno-racial identity through another suggests the impossibility of negotiating one *without* the other. As is the case in most contemporary novels on race and ethnicity, and true for all the novels discussed in the present study, in their constant cross influence, ethno-racial identities tend to evolve not side by side, but rather through each other. Coleman's decision to become not white but Jewish reflects upon the history of the whitening of ethnic minorities; similarly, the protagonist Birdie Lee in Senna's novel *Caucasia* (see chapter 4) at different points in life imagines that she could be Italian, Puerto Rican, or Jewish, associations which also refer to particular ethnic histories, social standing and culture.

By invoking the idea of Jewish American identity functioning as a mediator in Silk's passing, Roth reflects upon the minorities' different histories of discrimination. The differences gradually seemed to outweigh the similarities, and by the end of the Civil Rights Era, the relations between the two peoples were moving towards a "political and cultural divorce that was well on its way to being irreversible" (Sundquist, 5). Divided not only over the questions of the Jewish vicinity to whiteness and the role it played in their social mobility, but also in the disputes over attitudes to the Shoah, and to the Middle Passage and slavery as a possible genocide, both minorities found far more points of conflict than those of mutual interest.⁶⁶ In the novel, Jewish American advantages in upward mobility and the obstacles that African Americans faced are reflected upon by Coleman's smooth and almost effortless path of academic and later professional achievement. His upward mobility as a Jew is a completely different story compared to what one imagines might have been his corresponding path as an African American. Thus, it is the Jewish American Coleman Silk who, as a Dean, appoints the university's first African American professor, a circumstance suggestive of the different

⁶⁶ A detailed discussion of the Holocaust and the African American attitudes towards the Middle Passage and slavery as the "black holocaust" can be found in Sundquist's comprehensive analysis in his study *Strangers in the Land. Blacks, Jews, Post-Holocaust America*.

levels of privilege available to both minority groups. Although he is marked as a Jew, his upward mobility is not hindered by racial discrimination.

2.4. IDENTITY FORMATION AND SOCIAL RECOGNITION

As a passing narrative, *The Human Stain* certainly inherits many of the genre's conventions, such as its being centered on a (tragic) mulatto figure. Whether it is the suffering of abandoning one's family or the feeling of displacement, the fear of being exposed or the tragic death, the novel's formal configuration seems to be rather conventional. However, underneath this seemingly conventional formal structure, the novel challenges the genre's conventions and yields a different interpretation of them. One of the most important aspects for which passing novels have been criticized from both sides of the color line is the contradiction between their aspiration to challenge the racial boundaries by a protagonist who belongs to both sides, and the melodramatic plot development, which hints at the impossibility of such an enterprise. Usually, the protagonists of passing novels suffer deeply from their life in disguise, are in constant fear of psychological and physical consequences of being exposed, and are either unable to find their place in the white society, or to reposition their "rightful place" (Meyer, 448) within the black community. Thus, "classic passing narratives seem ideologically self-contradictory" (Smith, 1994, 44) and often reinstall the boundaries they initially seek to destroy.⁶⁷ Even though recent scholarship has discerned the novels' strategies of challenging and subverting the racial thinking of the readers contemporaneous to the time of novels' emergence, the protagonists themselves remain tragic figures, and they cannot escape the confines of their (fictional) worlds, a circumstance which makes them decidedly different from contemporary novels of passing. The tragedy at the

⁶⁷ However, as Werner Sollors points out, the consideration that passing narratives might reessentialize the discourse on race by splitting clearly into the black/white dichotomy might be the result of reading which reduces these novels to the tragic mulatto plot. For Sollors, such limiting reading devalues "much nineteenth-century interracial literature" and supports racial essentialism (1997, 242). Instead, he considers that a typical novel of passing "rarely seem(s) to fit the stereotype that it supposedly so rigidly and unchangingly and ineluctably embodies" (Sollors, 1997, 238).

heart of the mulatto figure is common to all passing plots of the time, and although the passing figure might help expose the absurdity or racial thinking to the reader, it usually provides no promising future for the protagonist himself. By “selling [their] birthright for a mess of pottage” (Johnson, 1989, 211), the protagonists’ future is, more often than not, doomed.

While initially many critics rejected novels of passing as sentimental literature, and others opposed them for propagating ‘selling out’ to whiteness, from the late 1980s on, these novels have been rediscovered and proved to be a rich source for literary analysis.⁶⁸ Along with the growing demographic variety in the North American and Western European societies, the premises of identity formation and the questions concerning belonging to several racial, ethnic, social, and cultural terrains have been critically reconsidered. The celebratory discourse on hybridity and multiculturalism has foregrounded the possibility to belong to several terrains at the same time, a possibility which the classical passer sought but was never granted. With this multiplicity and seeming freedom of choosing identity, the notion of authenticity became more significant. How much ethnic origin would suffice to be able to belong to a certain ethnic group? Does mere descent suffice? Where do such aspects as culture and religion come into the equation? The question of the 1990s and 2000s, when *The Human Stain* was written, would not be whether Coleman Silk perpetuates the existing structures of dominance. The question would rather be the following: if, in some alternative fictive reality of the novel, Coleman were to discover Jewish roots within his family history, would this fact make his adopted identity as a Jewish American more authentic? Would it play a role?

Distancing himself from the attitude toward the passing figure as ‘selling out’ to whiteness, Roth lends Coleman Silk the possibility of conceiving his quest for identity as the fulfillment of the ur-American promise for self-definition (or, to put it in Werner Sollors’ terms,

⁶⁸ For a detailed description of the development of the genre of the passing narrative and its reception see Introduction.

valorizing a consent over a descent identity). As Kathleen Pfeiffer notes, passing is in a sense the epitome of American individualism, evoking “the mythology that animates the American notions of autonomy, self-determination, and free choice” (Pfeiffer, 4). I would argue that Roth’s African American protagonist is able to escape the confines of the passing genre (condemning the passer as “selling out”) precisely because Roth’s passing narrative is modified by Zuckerman’s narrative mediation. Much of Coleman Silk’s attitude towards self-definition can be found in one or another form in Zuckerman’s thoughts in Roth’s previous novels. Prominently, in *Counterlife*, he explains his view on what constitutes a Jewish American identity in the following passage:

to be the Jew I was, ... which was neither more nor less than the Jew I wished to be, I didn’t need to live in a Jewish nation. ...my sacred text wasn’t the Bible but novels... nor was I a believing Jew, a scholarly Jew, or a Jewish xenophobe who couldn’t bear the proximity of goyim... (*Counterlife*, 57).

At the same time, Philip Roth uses the double structure of Coleman Silk’s ethno-racial identity through intertwining African American and Jewish American identities. It is by having Coleman Silk adopt a Jewish American identity that Roth escapes the confines of the melodramatic passing plot. Coleman is not a tragic mulatto, who is unable to feel at home in either the white or the black world. Silk is perfectly fine with his place as an American Jew precisely because he is not motivated by racial self-hatred or the desire for whiteness, but by the desire for label-free recognition. The freedom from the label ‘black’ is what he seeks; the fairly neutral, invisible status as a Jewish American provides him with this possibility. Freed from the label and awarded for his achievement, Coleman Silk moves away from the tragic mulatto figure. Hence, the theme of suffering moves into the background and makes space for Silk’s indulgence in his “gift of secrecy”.

For the large part of his life, Coleman Silk effectively keeps his identity as an African American secret and, as far as the reader is informed, is satisfied with the course his life takes. In the course of the novel, it is always the misrecognition that motivates Coleman Silk to

either modify his behavior, or protest against his environment's reception of it. It is in such moments when, in Althusser's sense, the subject misrecognizes the interpellation or refuses to answer to it. His inward identity does not correspond to the identity implied by the hailer and the subject is challenged to reposition himself. As numerous scholars have pointed out, constant struggle for recognition is central to the process of identity formation.⁶⁹ Whether we consider Charles Taylor, for whom "the struggle for recognition is necessary to re-establish a social balance", or Alexis de Tocqueville, who sees it as "one of the main sources for ever new imbalances", in modern societies, identity formation is inseparably linked with the struggle for recognition (qtd. in Fluck, 2013, 48). As such, recognition gained in importance once rank ceased to automatically provide a priori social recognition (Fluck, 2010, 47). In rank societies, "general recognition [was] built into the socially derived identity by virtue of the very fact that it was based on the social categories that everyone took for granted" (Taylor, 34). In contrast, within a rank-free democratic society, as Tocqueville saw the United States, "nobody can claim to be better than others because of prerogatives of birth or rank" (Fluck, 2010, 47). This circumstance exercises pressure on the individual to earn social recognition. Thus, as Fluck argues referring to Tocqueville's analysis of the early American democracy, not only did America become a pioneer in "developing advanced forms of performance and conspicuous self-representation, but also in reinstrumentalizing culture for the search of recognition" (Fluck, 2007, 81). In Coleman's case, it is the misrecognition of him as an African American (or, more broadly, as a member of a fixed, identifiable ethno-racial group) that is formative with respect to the decisions he makes. For him, the recognition he would get as an African American is too restrictive, a label he wishes to discard. As Zuckerman recounts, for Coleman, the future course of his life was defined by "his father who had been

⁶⁹ For a discussion of recognition see, for example, Taylor, Charles, "The Politics of Recognition", in *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton University Press, 1994), 24-73; Thomas Bergedorf, *Verkennende Anerkennung: Über Identität und Politik* (Suhrkamp, 2010), Frazer, Nancy and Axel Honneth, *Redistribution of Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange* (Verso, 2003). For a discussion of the concept of recognition within the field of literary analysis see Winfried Fluck's essay "Reading for Recognition" (*New Literary History*, Vol. 44.1 (2013): 45-67.

making up Coleman's story for him" up to the day when Coleman decided against starting at Howard University (*HS*, 107). Instead, Coleman decided to free himself from his father's (and, by extension, African American) influence, a moment which, as he describes, bore similarity to "finding that all the clocks wherever he looked had stopped, and all the watches, and that there was no way of knowing what the time was"—a sense of freedom, which he perceives as "exhilarating" (*HS*, 107).

In *The Human Stain*, recognition (or its lack) certainly plays a central role. Indeed, as Fluck observes, "the search for recognition is one of the central themes of literature" (Fluck, 2010, 45). In his view, "a majority of literary texts draw their (often powerful) impact from narratives either of successful recognition or painful misrecognition" (Fluck, 2010, 45). In the case of the passer, "painful misrecognition" is the starting point of the story, since the passer cannot identify with either one of the categories of blackness and whiteness. Furthermore, if all identity is processual and if its fuel is the struggle for recognition, then, in a sense, the only full recognition the passer can attain occurs through the passing narrative. Within the fictional world of the protagonist, the recognition that the passer attains only refers to the passing identity (as white or Jewish), since the passer's ethno-racial origin remains secret. Therefore recognition plays a role in narratives of passing on more than one level: in addition to its function as the trigger for crossing the color line, it also prompts the transfer of meaning between the reader and the text. According to Fluck, encountering a text can be compared to encountering another person; for him, "identity formation, then, cannot be exclusively linked to encounters with persons, and insofar as recognition plays a key role in identity formation, this also applies to recognition" (Fluck, 2010, 61).⁷⁰ Since people "make each other and themselves into" members of certain races "through the images, narratives, metaphors, conversations, policies, and everyday social routines that are already part of their worlds"

⁷⁰ Fluck bases his observation on George Herbert Mead's concept of social interaction as "taking the attitude of the other" (qtd. in Fluck, 2010, 61). Since it is impossible to encounter the other in a way that is not mediated by preformed images, ideologies, and anticipations, "we respond [to the other] on the basis of a mental image" (Fluck, 2010, 61) which makes it comparable to encountering the fictional other.

(20), literature has a great potential to alter these constituent parts by creating alternative fictional worlds. As Fluck suggests, “fictional texts and other aesthetic objects provide material that allows the reader to rewrite and extend the narrative of his own identity” (Fluck, 2010, 59).

As a neorealist novel, *The Human Stain* presents the reader with a narrative which, on the one hand, constructs worlds in which the reader can partake, but on the other hand communicates the “instability of meaning” (Fluck) which all neorealist texts inherit from postmodernist theory and writing. The narrator is invested in communicating Silk’s story to the readers; however, his narration also indicates that the Other is unknowable and that the narrative of Coleman Silk is in stretches imagined by Zuckerman. For example, the story of Silk’s racial passing is skillfully complemented by Faunia’s class passing, partly caused by her traumatic personal history: A victim of her stepfather’s sexual rapacity and later her husband’s violent outbursts (Les has been diagnosed with PTSD), Faunia Farley is caught in the world of male dominance. Even after the divorce, she is unable to free herself from Les Farley, which is reflected in her decision to keep his surname. The reader never learns her true last name. There is even room to doubt the truthfulness of her story. What Coleman does not know, and dies without discovering, is that Faunia’s illiteracy has been a lie, or better, “an act, something she decided her situation demanded” (*HS*, 297). Just as Coleman passes for white, Faunia decides to pass for an illiterate lower-class woman, a conclusion at which Zuckerman arrives by overhearing a conversation between Faunia’s father and his caretaker after the funeral. Apparently, all the time Faunia has written a diary containing thoughts, reasons, and ideas that, mirroring her act of illiteracy, are not revealed to the reader. Hers is thus also a case of passing, an act, which Zuckerman suspects to be “her one and only source of power” employed in order to “spotlight the barbaric self befitting the world” (*HS*, 297). It is interesting to note that the fact that the diary remains concealed to both the readers and to the narrator can be interpreted either as a gesture of respect to the privacy of Faunia’s thoughts, or

as a further instance of her social muteness. The openness of such plot details and the ambivalence of their interpretation are typical for the way in which the narrator makes the reader aware of the variety of possible meanings: Against the “everyone knows” credo of the 1990s (alluding to the publicity of Clinton’s private life), Zuckerman convincingly shows the opposite. The truth is elusive not only to the public, but also to the very individual herself. What the reader is left with is one possible version of a story among its many equally possible interpretations.

It is interesting to note that the tragedy of double meaning, which proves to be Silk’s undoing in the spooks incident, was an indispensable element of Greek tragedy.⁷¹ As Roland Barthes remarks with respect to Vernant’s discussion of drama, the nature of Greek tragedy is “constitutively ambiguous [...], its text being woven from words with double meanings that each character understands unilaterally (this perpetual misunderstanding is exactly the ‘tragic’)” (Barthes, 148). The ambiguity of the word ‘spooks’ therefore becomes not only the starting point of the novel, initiating events that eventually lead to the protagonist’s death, but also functions as a symbol of the general failure of mutual human understanding, epitomized in the phrase “everyone knows”, which also implies its negation, “nobody knows”. From this angle, it becomes clear that the real tragedy in the novel is not the event of Faunia’s and Coleman’s deaths, but the impossibility of “setting the things right”, the impossibility of attaining “the truth”. The circumstances of Coleman’s life, under which he invents himself, become, in turn, an invention of Zuckerman’s imagination. For instance, when Zuckerman observes that he is sure that Coleman confessed the secret of his passing to Faunia, he admits that he cannot know it for sure: “I can’t know. Now they’re dead, nobody can know. For better or worse, I can only do what everyone does who thinks they know. I imagine. I am forced to imagine. It happens to be what I do for a living. It’s my job” (*HS*, 213). The public

⁷¹ It is interesting to note that the novel itself is comprised of five parts, an allusion to classical drama and its five constitutive parts.

“we”, however, constantly imposes as truth an invented fiction; the tragedy of Coleman Silk becomes the tragedy of “everyone knows”.

Knowing and not knowing is thus central to *The Human Stain* where it alludes to the passer’s secret, to the Clinton/Lewinsky affair, and also to the illusion of the ability to know the other. This message becomes especially clear when reading the novel’s beginning and its end against each other. The novel opens with the introduction of the main protagonist to the reader already in the long first sentence, which I would like to quote here in its full length:

It was in the summer of 1998 that my neighbor Coleman Silk—who, before retiring two years earlier, had been a classics professor at nearby Athena College for some twenty-odd years as well as serving for sixteen more as the dean of faculty—confided to me that, at the age of seventy-one, he was having an affair with a thirty-four-year-old cleaning woman who worked down at the college (*HS*, 1).

In addition to the abundance of specific information on Coleman Silk already in the first sentence, what strikes the reader right from the beginning is that the protagonists are characterized first and foremost by their social standing: professor/cleaning woman. The narrator seems very anxious to present Silk’s academic credentials in great detail, which creates a sharp contrast to then nameless woman with whom he has an affair. What is also significant is that the theme of a secret is also introduced in this sentence: echoing Zuckerman’s later knowledge of Silk’s passing, he is entrusted with the secret about Coleman’s affair.

The ending of the novel also concludes with a secret, but a slightly different one: in the final scene, Zuckerman has a conversation with Les Farley, Faunia’s violent, anti-Semitic ex-husband, who is ice-fishing on a frozen lake. When the narrator is about to leave, Les Farley, who is ignorant of the subject of Zuckerman’s novel, reminds him to send him the book once it is finished. Zuckerman apprehends that the book would not only make Coleman’s passing publicly known, but would also disclose Zuckerman’s suspicion about Les Farley’s involvement in murdering Coleman and Faunia. Walking away from Les, who is still holding

the auger, Zuckerman realizes that, once the book is published, he will be in danger: “If I even made it [to the car], I knew that my five years alone in my house here were over. I knew that if and when I finished the book, I was going to have to go elsewhere to live” (*HS*, 360). In a way, Zuckerman becomes the passer who is in danger of being disclosed: he has to flee.

The middle part of the novel is thus framed by two contradictory scenes. In the beginning, the protagonists seem to be knowable: via their profession, location, personal relations and interests. The environment the reader encounters is that of a small American town with an “American flag at the junction of the two roads that mark the commercial center of this mountainside town” (*HS*, 1). The time reference is also given; it is summer of 1998, which is the summer when the Clinton/Lewinsky affair became public; the summer which was characterized by what the narrator calls “the ecstasy of sanctimony” (2). On the other hand, the ending of the novel is staged in winter on a frozen lake, with Les Farley as “the only human marker in all of nature, like the X of an illiterate’s signature on a sheet of paper” (*HS*, 361).

And so it is that, at its core, the novel features the self, and “the self, when the writer turns upon it all his attention and talent, is revealed to be a remarkable thing” (Roth, 1961, 232). As Philip Roth once pointed out in an article in *The Commentary*, in the face of the stupefying, embarrassing, and sickening reality of American life in the twentieth century, the author’s own self (or his well-established alter ego) “might, in a variety of ways, become his subject, or even the impulse for his technique” (Roth, 1961, 233). In his criticism of the over-extensive, unconvincing elaboration of the ‘I’ in the fiction of Herbert Gold, Curtis Harnack, Saul Bellow and others, Roth notes the sudden affirmative stand at the end of several novels by contemporaneous American writers during the mid-twentieth century (Roth, 1961, 231). Whether it is Bellow’s Henderson finally coming back to the America he has held in disgust, or Gold’s hero crying out “More! More! More!” while taking up his lumps, one thing is clear for Roth: once “the self can only be celebrated as it is excluded from society”, there is no

reason to be cheery about it (233). In a move of what I interpret as partly paying tribute to these writers, partly distancing himself from them, Roth concludes his novel with an instance portraying individual solitude, which, emphasizing its merely seeming peacefulness, is far from conveying an affirmative message. In a homage to Saul Bellow's "pure white lining of the gray Arctic silence" (qtd. in Roth, 1961, 232), at the end of *The Human Stain* the readers are left with the image of Les Farley quietly ice-fishing on a frozen lake. Against the illusory peacefulness of the scene comes the image of the auger, by which Nathan Zuckerman feels endangered. The irony of the situation is expressed in the sentence referring to the picture of Les sitting on a bucket on the frozen lake: "Only rarely, at the end of our century, does life offer up a vision as pure and peaceful as this one" (*HS*, 361). The contrasting image of peacefulness with the reader's knowledge of Farley's aggressiveness and of the probability of his involvement in murdering Coleman and Faunia undercuts the possible nostalgia in this pastoral picture. For Roth, there can be no "regret over the loss of idyllic condition" (Cooley, 3), since the idyllic condition itself does not exist. An ice-fisher on a frozen lake is a bucolic idealization, but the tragedy, the rage, and the conflict are there in the picture, symbolized by the character of Les Farley. In its complexity, this pastoral ending "depicts the experience of nature in a manner that emphasizes social forces [...] as well (as) the vagaries of love and loss in the lives of individuals" (Barillas, 12). Thus the racially and ethnically specific experience of Silk and Zuckerman is taken back to the level of universality of human experience, tying the particular to the universal.

3. THE RECITALIST: MUSIC AND RACIAL IDENTITY IN *THE TIME OF OUR SINGING* BY RICHARD POWERS

mu·sic: noun, \ 'myü-zik\
sounds that are sung by voices or
played on musical instruments.⁷²

When sounds are sung by voices or played on musical instruments, that is, when music is made, skin color should not play a role. Or should it? Is music an art with a universal appeal or does it speak to particular cultural tastes or demands? Exploration of the possible connections between music and race is the prism through which Richard Powers interprets the passing figure in his 2004 novel *The Time of Our Singing*. In the saga about the life of four generations of the African-American and German-Jewish family of David and Delia Strom, the author manages not only to address conflicting ideas concerning music's particularity or universality, but also to fictionalize on a micro and macro scale the history of U.S. racial relations during the twentieth century. One of the problems of writing on race is the realization that, as Toni Morrison formulated in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and Literary Imagination* (1992), "for both black and white American writers, in a wholly racialized society, there is no escape from racially inflected language" (12-13). Ever since the emergence of Ferdinand de Saussure's breakthrough linguistic theories, language has been generally understood as a system of arbitrary connections between signifiers and signifieds, which are subject to consensus in a certain society at a certain time. This means that culture inevitably influences the words' connotations, and, as a result, language is always already "racially inflected". Therefore, as various scholars have argued, racial minorities face difficulties in expressing themselves in a language corrupted by racial prejudices. For Morrison, then, the task of the writer is "to unhobble the imagination from the demands of that language", a task which is "complicated, interesting, and definitive" (13). It comes as no surprise that contemporary writers, who are aware of both of the traps of linguistic

⁷² "Music." Merriam-Webster.com. Merriam-Webster, n.d. Web. 24 Jul. 2014.

representation and of the impossibility to represent the Real, try to find alternative ways of constructing their fictional worlds. As Millard points out, contemporary novels in particular feature the struggles of mixed-race protagonists. These struggles “to transgress racial norms and create new ethnicities for themselves are invariably contained and compromised by the old, indelible markers of race and by the limitations of language itself” (Millard, 152). The question that *The Time of Our Singing* and other contemporary novels seek to answer is how a norm can be defied or altered in words corrupted by the legacy of discrimination.

In the present chapter, I will show that, in his fictional engagement with the subject of race, Richard Powers turns to music as an alternative form of expression. In the novel, crossing the color line in terms of skin color is inextricably connected to the music the protagonists listen to and make. Instead of portraying the brothers, for example as jazz musicians, the author constructs them as performers of western classical music, of white music, as various members of their own family see it. As will become clear in close readings of the novel, Powers seeks to restore to music its status as a purely aesthetic form of expression and dissociate it from an interpretation as a possible political statement. Even if a certain genre has traditionally been viewed as white or black, the author argues for the artists’ individual freedom to claim any music as their own form of expression. In *The Time of Our Singing*, Richard Powers, who describes his novel as a “hidden universalist recovery project”, aims at reclaiming musical appropriation as a necessary tool in the development of musical form.⁷³ Through his fictional characters, he explores whether music can escape being interpreted as a political tool and regain its focus on acoustic and emotional dimensions as a preeminently aesthetic medium. As the narrator remarks about his brother, “[s]inging, he owned what his speaking voice disowned” (*TS*, 306).

For this purpose, the author employs music on multiple levels. On the level of the plot, for example, the novel characterizes the Strom family as highly musical, and structures the plot

⁷³ Conversation with Richard Powers, June 3, 2009, Freie Universitaet Berlin.

development along Jonah's and Joseph's careers as professional musicians. In addition, the narrative uses musicalized language and musical references as an alternative way of communication between the members of the family and, in turn, between the text and the reader. Musical references activate the readers' acoustic perception and create a soundtrack of sorts which adds an additional dimension to the reading experience. Most importantly, however, on the level of the metanarrative, the subject of music functions as a way to address the questions of artistic creativity and ownership, not only in the realm of music, but also in fictional writing. Through close readings of some of the novel's scenes, I will identify and analyze the narrative strategies used in the novel. In doing so, I will show how the subject of music advances our understanding of race in general and how it alters our understanding of the racial passing in particular.

Richard Powers uses the figures of the three Strom siblings to take up the issue of passing and reflect on the dynamics between the worlds of blackness and whiteness as they have unraveled in the United States in the second half of the twentieth century. I will examine the renegotiation of the passing figure in *TS* with a specific emphasis on performativity: since the brothers are performers, being on stage becomes a metaphor for the performative and negotiated nature of identity. As I suggest in the introduction, in my view, the passing phenomenon in fiction has developed beyond its original meaning of passing optically for white. I argue for a broader understanding of the term "passing", which takes into account its cultural dimensions and extends it in order to include protagonists like those of *The Time of Our Singing*, who perform passing only temporarily. Due to the cultural, performative dimension of the phenomenon, the term has to be understood in a broader sense of not only fitting a certain phenotype, but more importantly, of matching certain stereotypes of behavior. Optically white passers would never be accepted as white if they behave in a way that is unusual for whiteness; language, gestures, tastes, political views, and attitudes are an indispensable part of the behavioral repertoire that the passers have to master in order to be

recognized as white. In return, though, it also means that individuals whose physical features are ambiguous might readily be accepted as white if their behavior matches the cultural stereotype. Passing, thus, is much more than optics; rather, I would say, light-skinned African Americans perform racial passing through cultural practices. As a cultural signifier, music plays a formative role in the ethno-racial identification of the protagonists of the *TS*. For them, passing is no longer aimed at a better economic and social standing, but creates an experimental space for an ethno-racial masquerade.

3.1. LIFE BEYOND COLOR

The Time of Our Singing introduces the reader to the racially mixed family of Delia (an African American singer) and David (an exiled German Jewish scientist) Strom and their three children. Raising two sons and a daughter in the decade when their marriage was still considered a crime in roughly half of the country's states, the parents live a dream of providing a race-free home for their children, preparing them for a life beyond race. The project proves to be utopian once the turbulent events of the 1950s and 1960s start finding their way into the life of the inner family circle, hitherto shielded from the outer world. In their wish to prevent their children from coming face to face with racism, the parents decide to homeschool them. Once Jonah's prodigious talent as a singer is discovered, he embarks on a career as a professional lieder recitalist, followed to the prestigious Boylston boarding school by his brother Joseph as his nearly lifelong accompanist. The color line splits not only the protagonists' society, but also quite literally their family. Whereas Jonah and Joseph are light-skinned, their younger sister Ruth is much darker in skin tone. This fact and the age difference between the brothers and Ruth symbolically suggest a conflict in their relationship, which will escalate in the course of the radicalized sixties.

The siblings' story, as well as the story of their parents' lives, serve as a case study for an introspection of racial relations in the United States. David and Delia become acquainted at

Marian Anderson's historic Easter performance at the Lincoln Memorial in 1939. Witnesses to Anderson's powerful performance, David and Delia are enthusiastic about the vision of a life beyond race and see music as a medium that can overcome racial prejudices and appeal to something like universal human experience. Because both parents are musically gifted, they surround their children with music and instrumentalize it as a medium of communication that, in their view, is free from racial prejudice. This surfaces in the novel not only in abundant musical references, but also on the metaphorical level, since the narrator often depicts feelings and events using musical terms. Describing his brother's face, for example, Joseph remarks that "[h]is face is the key of E, the key for beautiful" (*TS*, 16). Similarly, he depicts the audience's attitude towards their performance at *America's Next Voice* as follows: "We're a moving violation of everything in their creed. But out here in classically trained public, they keep that major-key smile" (*TS*, 7).

Although there is some reference to spirituals sung by Delia, for the most part, the music in the Strom household is Western classical music. Lieder dominate the family's musical landscape. It is in this context that the question of musical ownership enters the novel and becomes inextricably connected with the question of racial identification. The questions concerning who owns particular types of music and why individual musical tastes are often interpreted as political attitudes are central to the lives of all members of the Strom family. Racial affiliation is what separates Delia from her parents, in whose view any race-free upbringing is equal to white upbringing. When she informs her father that she and David have "decided to raise the children beyond race", to "raise them for when everybody will be past color", her father is struck: "'Past color?' The doctor sounds out the words, saying them out loud the way he repeats his patients' symptoms. 'You mean you're going to raise them white'" (*TS*, 425).

Racial affiliation is also what separates Ruth from her father and brothers: As a member of the Black Panther Party, she interprets their attitudes such as noninvolvement in the Civil

Rights movement as siding with institutionalized whiteness. To her, singing lieder means not only singing white music, but also not singing black music, a betrayal to the duty of adhering to and cultivating black culture. When Joseph informs her that Jonah is “doing what he can. What he does best in the world”, implying singing, his sister counters, “Being white, you mean? ... You don’t have to defend him, Joey. Really, you don’t. So he’s got a secret. I ain’t gonna tell no one!” (*TS*, 376). Her comment implies that she sees her brother as a passer and a traitor to the African American race. Her husband Robert, who is also actively involved in setting up the New York chapter of the Panthers, adds, “We could use a voice like that. ... Whole world’s on fire. We could use everyone.” (*TS*, 376). The split in the family thus also runs along the lines of music the family members listen to and make. The question that the novel poses is whether musical taste can be detached from its possible interpretation as a political attitude, or vice versa, whether racial affiliation and racial identity have to be interpreted (among other factors) also in terms of the individual’s musical taste.

Touring the country in the sixties, after Jonah’s graduation from Juilliard, the brothers give concerts in cities which are on the verge of rioting. Singing classical “white” music in concert halls in front of white audiences is contrasted with racial violence in the streets. Although neither brother becomes politically involved in the Civil Rights movement, riots play an important role in their lives. Ironically, while both of them luckily survive the Watts riot with little harm, Jonah dies from an incidental injury during the Rodney King riot. Here, the novel contrasts the brothers’ presence at the riots motivated by mere curiosity to their ambivalent position on racial relations: although due to their racial origin the brothers share the concerns of African Americans, they seem to be estranged from the world of the Civil Rights struggle. As will be analyzed later, the scenes at the riots lay bare the brothers’ conflict between their self-perception and the way they are perceived by others.

Towards the end of his career, Jonah turns to medieval music, to chanting, to be precise, which for him symbolizes a race-free, pre-slavery, purely aesthetic realm.⁷⁴ The brothers part, Jonah successfully touring in Europe with the ensemble *Voces Antiquae* and Joseph first earning his living as a bar pianist and later following his sister to Oakland to become a music teacher at a community school. While his life as a mediocre bar pianist proves to be highly unsatisfactory to him (mediocre not due to want of technique, but to the lack of originality of his improvisations), teaching at the community school offers Joseph a chance to come into his own and finally find his way to musical creativity. Mixing classical and popular music in his classroom echoes the game of “crazed quotations”, the Stroms’ cherished leisure activity.⁷⁵ The novel ends with a variation of the scene at the Lincoln Memorial where David and Delia first met—but with the difference that, through an impossible collision of timelines, the little boy they meet there is their own grandson.

The novel takes up the question of the limitations mixed-race protagonists face when expressing themselves in a language “infected” by racially prejudiced connotations and thus contrasts the contrary claims about the universality of music’s appeal, on the one hand, and of the particularity of the emergence and status of its different genres on the other. Similar to language, music is also a system, which comprises notes and signs that describe how a musical piece should be performed. The definition of music given in the epigraph to the present chapter suggests that music is something universal: it does not stipulate whose voice or what instruments produce music. And yet, similar to the way language has lost its previous merely representational, ‘neutral’ status, music is also understood first and foremost as a

⁷⁴ Jonah’s romantic idea of medieval music as being free from the ideas of race somehow echoes his parents’ utopian prospect of creating a race-free home via music. The transcendental acoustic character of music paired with the fact that it precedes the institution of American slavery and the invention of the concept of race as we know it lead Jonah to his conclusion, and he ignores the fact that slavery can be traced back to antiquity. Although the concept of race as such has developed in modern times, racial distinctions and animosities can be also traced much further back in time than the history of racism in the U.S.

⁷⁵ In the evenings, the parents (later joined by the children as they get older) play a musical game called “Crazed Quotations”: while the first singer starts the game with a melody, the other has two rounds to find an answer. In the course of the game, the most unlikely songs and composers are thrown together to form one musical piece. Through the musical syncretism, the novel suggestively combines and reconciles different epochs, histories and styles.

product of culture. Its development and reception is thus inseparably connected with cultural assumptions, including those about race, or gender. As Jason V. Serinus writing for the *San Francisco Classical Voice* suggests, “regardless of our race, the racial characteristics of singers and musicians are not supposed to matter ... some of the time” (Serinus, 2009). In his article “Looking the Other Way: Race in Classical Music”, he addresses the difficulties African American classical singers continue to face in their professional careers due to hiring limitations. A white Othello and a black Desdemona might have been a possible cast for Oakland Bay Symphony’s performance in March 2009, but this is far from being a standard. As reviews of classical performances show, often while opera pieces for white characters can be performed by African American singers for studio recordings, impersonating these characters onstage has been more of an exception rather than a rule. Although African Americans have given great, in some cases foundational, contributions to all prominent musical genres of the twentieth century, such as jazz, blues, rock’n’roll, hip-hop, and rap, hiring practices within the professional field of classical music have often limited African American singers to performing roles of racial Others, such as Othello, the Ethiopian princess Aida, the slave girl Liu in *Turandot*, and other racially marked roles (Serinus, 2009).

In his fictional take on these tensions, Richard Powers presents the readers the narrative of two light-skinned African American artists: Jonah, an African American lieder recitalist, and his younger brother Joseph, his accompanist at the piano. Narrated by Joseph in retrospective, the novel portrays the brothers’ coming-of-age in post-war America and their careers as professional musicians during the Civil Rights era. Although neither of the brothers ever openly seeks to pass for white, their unusual acceptance in the then white world of professional classical music performers allows for a reading of them as passing figures. Singing what can be arguably called white (i.e. Western classical) music enables their professional careers and locates them between the white and black cultures. As the narrator recounts, only upon entering the Boylston boarding music school did he learn what

“whiteness was—how concentrated, how solid and self-assuming” (*TS*, 50). Remembering that “everything about Boyston was white” (*ibid*), Joseph remarks that, although his new roommates already spent a year sharing their room with his Jonah, his “brother’s honey-wheat color did not prepare them for [his] muddy-milk” (*ibid*). In the all-white surroundings of the school, Jonah’s origin has been largely ignored due to his appearance and musical talent. As the narrator later wonders, “[d]id the boy soprano think he, too, was white?” (*TS*, 62). The dilemma that Powers addresses in his novel is as follows: if musical expression speaks to the sensory level of the audience, why should the performer’s skin color matter?

In contrast to the limitations African American performers face with respect to the choice of roles available to them, the possibility of performing the parts of the racial Other by means of blackface has been always open to white singers. Blackening the artist’s face has been an acceptable form of impersonating blackness throughout the nineteenth and the greater part of the twentieth century. The practice of blackface, which goes back to minstrelsy, was later adopted in film productions and often served as a way to avoid a mixed cast and to stage blackness without hiring black actors.⁷⁶ This inevitably calls to mind such prominent performances as Al Jolson’s Jackie Rabinowitz singing “My Mammy” in *The Jazz Singer* (1927), Lawrence Olivier’s Othello in the 1965 Hollywood production and numerous others. Even in productions with a mixed cast, producers have often been anxious to keep the color line clearly visible: as Serinus points out, “in the 1951 Technicolor version of *Show Boat*, Max Factor’s “Light Egyptian” makeup was used to darken the skin of Ava Gardner (as Julie), but “Dark Egyptian” was used on the fair-skinned “Negro” Lena Horne during an early screen test, so that no one would mistake her for white” (Serinus, 2009).⁷⁷

⁷⁶ For further details on the tradition of minstrelsy, see page 21 of the Introduction.

⁷⁷ For a comprehensive investigation of the images of whiteness as they have been constructed and perpetuated in Hollywood film production, see Gwendolyn Audrey Foster’s study *Performing Whiteness: Postmodern Re/Constructions in the Cinema* (SUNY, 2003), in which she introduces the concept of ‘whiteface’ when referring to representations of whiteness. See also Daniel Bernardi’s two collections of essays on whiteness in Hollywood films: *The Persistence of Whiteness: Race and Contemporary Hollywood Cinema* (Routledge Chapman & Hall, 2007) and his earlier *Classic Hollywood, Classic Whiteness* (U of Minnesota Press, 2001).

Often seen as a domain of music by white men for white audiences, western classical music continues to be broadly associated with white performers and white audiences. In 1996, Dieter Flury, a solo flutist of the Vienna Philharmonic, stated that classical music is inseparable from central European cultural roots, and from gender. Therefore, he continued, he is “convinced that it is worthwhile to accept this racist and sexist irritation [that all members of the orchestra are white and male], because something produced by a superficial understanding of human rights would not have the same standards” (West German State Radio, “Musikalische Misogynie”).⁷⁸ The underlying assumption that the difference between performances by male and female, white and non-white musicians is audible, however, stays unchallenged, since the orchestra does not allow closed-curtain auditions and requires a photograph in the application.

The essentialist assumption that musicians’ race will always influence their musical performance has also been a part of heated debates about African American art and fiction in the twentieth century, and especially during the Harlem Renaissance. The dictum that, for a piece of art or fiction to be authentically African American, it has to dissociate itself from white influence prevailed in critics’ reviews. A prominent example can be found in Langston Hughes’ accusation of Countee Cullen as a white poet. For Hughes, Countee Cullen’s wish “to be a poet—not a Negro poet” stands for his wish to be white, and Hughes seriously doubts whether, “with his desire to run away spiritually from his race, this boy would ever be a great poet” (Hughes, 32). As Jonathan Shandell points out, the difference between Hughes’ and Cullen’s utterances lies in the fact that, for Hughes, the quote “implies an interior, ontological struggle with racinated identity”, whereas for Cullen, it expresses his “discomfort not with blackness per se but with the cultural prejudices that attach to it, with the manner in which America knows its Negro poets: through restrictive and often falsifying demands for ‘racial’

⁷⁸ Vienna Philharmonic orchestra has first allowed women to participate in its auditions as late as in 1997. Currently, only six out of its forty members are female. The orchestra’s hiring practices with respect to race have been similar, keeping the composition of the orchestra almost exclusively white.

writing” (Shandell, 155). Similarly to Philip Roth’s wish to be seen as a writer who happens to be a Jew (see previous chapter), Cullen wished to be accepted as a poet, and not a specifically African American poet. His poetry, though, faced accusations of imitating formal traditions of white poetry which saw in it “enslavement to white forms and values” (Gates, Jr. qtd. in Shandell, 157). However, as Shandell argues, for Cullen, “the challenge facing black poets was the realization of an undiluted freedom of self-expression that American culture had historically denied to its African American artists” (Shandell, 158). Cullen once wrote that

without in the least deprecation of the beauty of Negro spirituals or the undeniable fact that Negro singers do them, as it were, to the manner born, we have always resented the natural inclination of most white people to demand spirituals the moment it is known that a Negro is about to sing. So often the request has seemed to savor of the feeling that we could do this and this alone. (Cullen, qtd. in Shandell, 158)

His comment is important because it seeks to make it possible for African American artists to claim any cultural domain for their artistic creativity, regardless of the history and connotations of their emergence. This continues to be a controversial issue especially in the realm of classical music. As Milton H. Williams recalls, when the soprano Leontyne Price “first visited the Eastman School of Music to sing Tosca, many in Eastman’s Voice Department were offended. ‘Why doesn’t she sing Aida instead?’ was the question thrown at him. ‘Who’s been singing Aida all these years?’ was his reply” (Servinus, 2009). *TS* reflects upon this limitation of African American artists to the roles of racial Others: a reviewer’s comment on Jonah Strom’s voice as “brilliant, if dark” (*TS*, 313) and that he will soon become “one of the finest Negro recitalists this country has ever produced” (*TS*, 313) infuriates Jonah. He expresses his indignation concerning the absurdity of bringing the issue of race to a musical review in the following words: “Dark purity: *C’est moi*. Only question is: Who’s going to be the white Jonah Strom?” (*TS*, 315).

As the events of *TS* unfold, it becomes clear that, in the fictional world of the protagonists, music has irretrievably lost its previously unquestioned status as a universal medium of

expression and started to be interpreted through the prism of individual political attitudes and possible social uses. In his typical manner, Powers creates in *The Time of Our Singing* an entire net of interwoven timelines, subplots, and themes. It therefore comes as no surprise that, in addition to the realm of music, the author also opens up the dimension of physics and introduces discussions on the nature of time as another backdrop to the issue of race. Here, as in nearly all of his novels, Richard Powers includes scientific research in the representation of a fictional world. Through this combination, the author exposes the intricacies of the 'one drop' rule and the consequences it has on the individuals caught up in its web. The reader is presented with a physicist's abstract and seemingly impartial notion of time as being relative, instead of an axis with a past and a future a tree-like net, which allows for alternative realities coexisting in the present. Thus the emerging fictional world is a world of possible alternative chains of events, of a society where such notions as race do not exist, since "race is only real if you freeze time, if you invent a zero point for your tribe" (*TS*, 94). By trying to solve the paradox between two different theories of time flow, those of mechanics and thermodynamics, the physicist David Strom, the father of the main protagonists, metaphorically tries to reconcile the conflict between the idea of a life beyond race and the reality which makes it impossible. In a sense, the title already discloses the main themes of the novel. In fact, it is the novel itself in a nutshell: 'time' refers to physics; 'our' reflects the narrator's search for belonging, and restoring his family's unity, whereas 'singing' marks the crucial role music and especially singing as an activity of joint music making will play in the novel. On the other hand, the aesthetic realm of music is used as a backdrop for exploring life between blackness and whiteness, functioning as a way of escaping the social constraints of racial categorization.

In *The Time of Our Singing*, Richard Powers utilizes the activity of joint music-making as an indicator of the state the family is currently in, as a kind of thermometer testing the patient's health. Sections of the novel flavored with nostalgia for the communal music-

making of the Strom family when it was still intact are contrasted to the episodes cast in minor tones, depicting the disintegration of the family and the lack of common musical activity. The Strom's family home can be said to represent a microscale stage of identity performance. According to the *Oxford Dictionary of English*, home is "the place where one lives permanently, especially as a member of a family or household".⁷⁹ The simple definition presupposes the factors of permanence of the stay and membership in a familial community, factors which prove to be difficult to maintain for the protagonists of the novel. But the definition of home that I found most fitting to describe these protagonists was placed further in a specific context: in games, "home" is "the place where a player is free from attack". For children of mixed heritage, growing up between the worlds of blackness and whiteness in the United States during the second part of the twentieth century usually meant being constantly under attack, which took the form of accusation of being either too black, or being too white, or equally, for either forming or not forming alliances, the former being interpreted as attesting to a lack of race consciousness. The more society attacks, the more important it becomes to possess a home as a shield from these attacks. For the protagonists of *The Time of Our Singing*, such a home is needed to provide a space of race-free identification and they try to create it with the help of music. As the narrator recounts, his mother Delia "turned their rented half of the freestone into a fortress. And for pure safety, nothing beat music. Each of the three children shared the same first memory: their parents, singing" (*TS*, 9); music was "their last line of defense against the outside" (*TS*, 9).

The (aesthetic) line of defense fails to protect the protagonists from racial violence: The problem of trying to feel at home in a country where the white majority sets the rules of the game is contrasted with the traumatic loss of the family home which the Strom children experience. While Jonah and Joseph are at the boarding school, the heating furnace at their house explodes:

⁷⁹ "home." OxfordDictionaries.com. Oxford University Press. n.d. Web. 24 June, 2012.

We went back home with Da. I say “home”, but the place was gone... Our building looked like the target of a stray artillery shell. Wood, brick, stone, and metal – things that couldn’t have come out of our house – lay heaped up in a twisted mass. But everyone – our neighbors, our invalid landlady, Mrs. Washington, even Mrs. Washington’s Jack Russel terrier – had gotten out alive. Every living creature but my mother (*TS*, 138).

The trauma of losing Delia further splits up the family. The father gradually withdraws into the abstract world of physics; the boys have to take care of the practical things; their traumatized younger sister Ruth, who witnessed the fire, suffers from the loss of her mother and of everything—photos and personal belongings—that could remind of her. Only later in the novel, when adult Ruth joins the Black Panthers, is the allegation that the fire has been an act of racial violence made. While the brothers refuse to believe it, Ruth is confident that her mother has been murdered; in a police report, she finds out about fire accelerants in the cellar. The issue around the fire is left ambiguous in the novel, with two conflicting versions of the event symbolizing the different black and white attitudes to racial discrimination. While it is possible that Joseph struggles against the idea of the fire as a hate crime, it is just as possible that Ruth, influenced by her involvement in the radical political movement, forcefully wants to read the tragic accident as an act of violence. The truth about the event evades both the narrator and the reader.

Thematically, the novel can be said to oscillate between two centers of gravity: the Strom’s urge to view music as a space for race-free self-fashioning, and the rigidity of social restrictions imposed on the individuals. The two centers force the siblings to make certain choices and choose affiliations. Whereas Jonah represents the former extreme, refusing to be involved in anything other than music and his musical career, Ruth symbolizes the other extreme, seeing the urgent need for social and political activism. The middle brother Joseph is positioned between them, constantly trying to accomplish the Sisyphean task of reconciling the two. Through him, the novel articulates the renegotiation of the color line. By authorial design, the siblings Jonah and Ruth also represent the extremes in terms of skin color, Joseph

once again being in between.⁸⁰ Reenacting the motif of passing for white, the novel exemplifies how the light color of the brothers' skin in combination with their talent in performing western classical music aids them in receiving excellent professional musical training in predominantly white institutions during the era of segregation.

In terms of structure, *The Time of Our Singing* offers its readers numerous subthemes and breaks in the timeline. Referring to musical pieces is only one strategy by which Powers musicalizes his fiction. On the formal level, his novel is built on a particular musical form, a double rondo, which defines the whole narrative flow and constructs an implied author's perspective upon the issue of race. As Renwick points out, a rondo is "in essence [...] an open-ended form," and is well suited for negotiating the issue of race, which also does not allow for an ending. The rondo is built as an ABACAD etc. structure, whereas the main motif A regularly reappears, but in a form modified by the preceding subtheme. For example, the folk saying "The bird and the fish can fall in love. But where they gonna build their nest?" (*TS*, 630) reappears a number of times in different scenes of the novel, voiced by different characters. Varying at times in its phrasing, the saying serves as a musical motif, which is reappropriated according to the situation ("The bird can make a nest on the water. [...] The fish can fly" (*TS*, 631)). Depending upon scene, it is used to reflect either the protagonists' hope for a common future (imitating the major key), or their present despair (the minor key respectively).

In addition to thematic variations, the novel makes use of the rondo structure formally by presenting the reader with variations of recurring scenes or plot details. These are shown to depend not only on the narrative time and place they are set in, but also on the focal point of view. For example, the opening scene at the contest *America's Next Voice* is told several times, and each subsequent narration is modified by the preceding scenes. The subtheme of

⁸⁰ Although all three Strom children are racially mixed, only Ruth can be said to have a strong sense of identification as an African American. Whereas Jonah as the most light-skinned of the children seeks to ignore the question of race altogether, Joseph is positioned between the two. For Ruth, however, both brothers are 'white' and can only avoid talking about race due to their light skin color.

rioting is also developed gradually (imitating the musical crescendo), starting with its function as background information describing the brothers touring the country in the 1960s, then to the scene at the Watts riot where the brothers barely escape violence, finally to the theme's tragic culmination recounting Jonah's death at the Rodney King riot. Such imitation of the themes' diminuendo and crescendo development is characteristic of *The Time of Our Singing*. The alternation of these equivalents of musical technique (the novel's scenes and motifs) and their variations yield a dynamic narrative flow. In a rondo, the main theme may disappear and resurface, vary or appear in its initial form. It permeates the whole piece, emphasizing the influence of subthemes upon its variation. Imitating the rondo, the novel utilizes this musical structure, highlighting the importance of subthemes (plot details) and the particularities of their embedment (focalization; narrative time vs. narrated time, etc.) in shaping the main theme. The rondo structure thus allows for a multifaceted look at those situations where the protagonists grapple with the issues of race and try to come to terms with existing racial prejudices.

On the narrative level, frequent change of focalization, streams of consciousness, use of free indirect discourse and change of narrative voice (varying between Joseph and a third-person narrator) are used to further highlight the processual nature of identity and its understanding as a constant exchange between the self and the others. The reader has to do the work of deciding who exactly is speaking, as, for example, in the following scene from Joseph's childhood, when his parents argue with Delia's father on the question of race education:

Past color. My mother speaks these words to my grandfather in late September of 1945. I'm three years old. What can I hope to remember? My brother lies on his belly in our room's doorway, spying on adulthood down the hall. He's thinking about just one thing: how to get back to that piano and make some noise. How to recover the throne of sound that alone rights the world and sets him at the center of love. [...]

Papap says, *Beyond color? You know what beyond color means? We're already there. Beyond color means hide the black man. Wipe him out. Means everybody play the one annihilating game white's been playing since—*
 The world is ending. Jonah and I know this already, and we know almost nothing (TS, 425).

Although present tense is used here to produce the effect of immediacy of narration through Joseph as a child, the language used makes clear that the passage is narrated by an adult Joseph in retrospective. Furthermore, the brothers' young age renders such detailed memory of the adult conversation impossible. By implication, then, the described situation is not a recollection, but the conversation as imagined by adult Joseph, who is trying to reconstruct the scene. The scene actively comes to life via the narrative, a move by which the novel subscribes to the idea that narration does not represent the real, but constructs a version of it in the very moment of narration. The novel's sub-theme, the instability, or variability of memory and the subjectivity of experience, is also conveyed through the siblings' dialogues in which they are confronted with conflicting memories of the same events. For instance, when the brothers overhear their parents' discussion on the question of whether to expose the children to the photos of Emmett Till's disfigured face, Joseph later remembers that it was his mother who did not want them to know about the murder. However, Jonah insists on the opposite. He claims that their mother wanted to prepare her children for the way they might be treated as African Americans, whereas their father David insisted on keeping their "dreams musical and clean" (TS, 107). Joseph is so sure of his memory that, upon hearing Jonah's version of it, he "can't wrap (his) head around his words. The people he describes: I don't know them. My mother couldn't have said those things to my father. My father couldn't have thought such stupidity" (TS, 108). This illustration of the irretrievability of the original event as well as the impossibility of congruence of different memories can be viewed as an imitation of the nation's seemingly futile attempt to come to terms with the turbulent events of the twentieth century, futile insofar as there exist millions of varying memories and interpretations of these events. True to the credo of neorealism, the novel thus is self-

conscious of the fact that it can offer but one possible fictionalized version of reality among countless others.

The combination of family history and the history of the nation is characteristic of this race saga, which in a way fictionalizes the history of U.S. racial relations within the Strom family as its micro scale model, and as an allegory addresses the utopian idea of race-blindness, an ideal of life beyond race that David and Delia envision for their children. My further analysis will concentrate on three scenes that, in my view, are indispensable for the understanding of the novel. In the rest of this chapter, I will offer a close reading of the opening pages of the novel, which set the stage for the over six hundred subsequent pages. Following this, I will analyze the scene at the Watts riot, in which the ambiguity of the brothers' position on the verge of the color line is voiced. By way of concluding the present chapter, I will offer an interpretation of the novel's ending in the light of the episode at the Lincoln Memorial, which will involve the juxtaposition of its different versions. I will view them side by side, the way they are embedded in the framework as well as how they relate to the opening of the novel.

As suggested in the beginning of the chapter, within my focus on passing, I argue that, in order to surpass the confines of viewing racial identification as a matter of phenotype, as is often done in the case of passing, we have to analyze and better understand the mechanisms, both individual and collective, which enable it. Furthermore, in my reading of the brothers' *cultural passing*, I view the metaphor of stage as a formative element in the process of racial identification of the fictional subjects. Whereas, as I argued in the previous chapter, the stage Coleman Silk acts on is a boxing ring, in *TS* the brothers are positioned on the stage quite literally by being performers. Assuming the author's knowledge of performativity theory, the choice of the protagonists' profession becomes an important clue in understanding the novel's overall design.

Music and Jonah's career as a professional recitalist function as a point of departure in *The Time of Our Singing*, and so the novel opens with his groundbreaking performance at the 1961 competition *America's Next Voice*, a scene which I am citing at length here due to its importance to the novel's interpretation:

December 1961

In some empty hall, my brother is still singing. His voice hasn't dampened yet. Not altogether. The rooms where he sang still hold an impression, their walls dimpled with his sound, awaiting some future phonograph capable of replaying them.

My brother Jonah stands fixed, leaning against a piano. He's just twenty. The sixties have only begun. The country still dozes in its last pretended innocence. No one has heard of Jonah Strom but our family, what's left of it. We've come to Durham, North Carolina, the old music building at Duke. He has made it to the finals of a national vocal competition he'll later deny ever having entered. Jonah stands alone, just right of center stage. [...] He grins at the odds against being here, breathes in, and sings. (*TS*, 3)

The scene is narrated in retrospective by Joseph, who reflects upon the forty years which have since passed. Already this early in the novel the scene shows that Jonah, and not his brother, the narrator, will be the main protagonist. It is he who is standing center stage; it is his brother who watches and nostalgically describes him some forty years afterwards. However, before turning to this description of the concert, distanced both emotionally and in terms of time, the novel begins with Joseph's stream of consciousness, envisaging some abstract space where his brother still lives: "In some empty hall, my brother is still singing" (3). The stream of consciousness in the first paragraph, however short, reveals the tight grip the past has on Joseph. The chapters to come will be similarly characterized by his desire to catch the right moment in time and freeze it.

Although the stream of consciousness seems to be of purely descriptive quality, an implicit assumption can be detected in it: Since the hall is empty, there is no audience to grasp the magnificence of Jonah's voice. Furthermore, at that moment, there is no audience capable of fully perceiving Jonah's performance; it is a future audience who will be able to understand Jonah's mission. The narrator's comment on the performance supports such an interpretation:

“The audience this night will claim they heard him. [...] But the person they’ll recall won’t be my brother. [...] The voice they’ll remember won’t be his” (8). This passage voices one of the main concerns of Powers’s novel: the subjectivity of perception and the narrator’s nostalgia for the brief moment of harmony, a moment in time which the protagonist continuously tries to reconstruct in his mind. However, by suggesting that every listener would have a subjective perception of Jonah, necessarily varying from Joseph’s own reminiscence, the text highlights the impossibility of accurately perceiving events and the incoherence that arises when comparing one’s own memories with those of others. The person onstage is always perceived in new and different ways affected by forgetting and specifically situated reconstruction. There is no way memory or representation can be infallible, since there is no original, only varying subjective interpretations. Just like the audience in the concert hall, U.S. citizens lived through the same events, of which each has a different memory. Through this scene, here in the context of the early sixties, the novel reflects upon the utopian dream of living in the “last pretended innocence” (*TS*, 3), alluding to the “calm before the storm” atmosphere in the country. The phrase emphasizes the constructed, romanticized nature of the moment as it might be remembered by many. In a similar way, the Strom children grow up in the utopian harmony of their home, which is also a pretended innocence since segregation, racial prejudice, and violence do find their way into the family circle.

In the beginning, the narrator already informs the readers of his dual position: he is an observer and a participant in the events depicted. The duality of his position is introduced on the second page when he claims,

I’m here, up onstage with him. But at the same time, I’m down in the hall, in the place I always sit at concerts: eight rows back, just inside the left aisle. I sit where I can see my own fingers moving, where I can study my brother’s face—close enough to see everything, but far enough to survive seeing. (*TS*, 4)

Establishing the narrator’s dual position is necessary for him to claim the privilege of having direct experience of the events, and, at the same time, of possessing a certain distance towards

them by being an observer. On the level of the plot, he experiences the social constrictions of growing up in a mixed-race family that all members of the Strom household, albeit to different degrees, have to face. On the other hand, Joseph reflects upon these constrictions from his privileged position as a narrator. Constantly rearranging the details of the Strom family history, he tries to balance out the contrary positions of his siblings, acting as a kind of mediator between them, a passer for white and black interchangeably. Throughout the novel, it becomes obvious that, due to the strong fixation on his siblings, mostly on Jonah, Joseph is either unable or unwilling for a long time to contemplate his own process of racial identification; instead, he seems to follow his brother not only literally in terms of his career, but also ideologically in terms of his attitudes on race. His case epitomizes the ambivalent situation of a light-skinned mixed raced subject whose identity formation process occurs on the verge of the color line, and is strongly influenced by the contradictive and mutually exclusive ideals of iconic blackness and whiteness, an aspect that will play an important role in the analysis of Danzy Senna's novel *Caucasia* in the next chapter. Symbolically shown through Jonah and Ruth, the black/white categories exercise a kind of push-and-pull dynamic on Joseph's process of identity formation, putting him into the position of trying to reconcile the two extremes.

At the same time, it is clear that Joseph's vision is a Du Boisian double-vision: instead of describing the scene from his position on the stage, the narrator sits "down in the hall" looking at it from a different subject position, the position of an observer. Such double positioning of the narrator, his mixed perspective as a protagonist and a narrator, characterizes the novel. The beauty of Power's fiction exists hereby in raising an impression of a fluent and seamless narration. The combination of speaking for himself, for his brother, for random spectators, that is, Joseph's double position of a protagonist and a narrator, leaves the reader with an impression of having seen everything there is to see, of being inside and outside of the events simultaneously. By this narrative move, the novel puts forth the idea that reality, for

example, in the form of memories, is not something fixed, or something that exists similar to a file in a computer; rather, reality is constructed in the very (and every) moment of its narration. The simultaneity of the fictional happening and the moment of its narration expressed through Joseph's double position puts forth the idea that the lived reality comes to life through narrative and necessarily through dialogue with others. As Margaret Somers points out, "[i]f persons are socially constituted over time, space, and through relationality, then *others* are constitutive rather than external to identity" (Somers, 629). This becomes clear, for instance, in the scenes where the siblings argue about the correct version of certain events in their family history. Thereby the novel points to fiction as a medium which "does not attempt to reflect "the Real"—a claim that has become impossible since the postmodern crisis of representation at the very latest—but understands itself as a representational technique which necessarily selects and orders, offering but *one* version" (Gruber, 92). As Eva Gruber argues further, the emerging genre of neorealist fiction "acknowledges both the subjectivity of experience and the intricacies inherent in the process of representation" (Gruber, 92). It is this tension that characterizes *The Time of Our Singing* as a novel that attempts to create particular, subjective experiences and at the same time somehow to highlight their universal, human appeal. As Heinz Ickstadt remarks, "[w]ith the means of fiction, it explores the theoretically loaded question of whether the concept of an abstract universal can be reconciled with the lived reality of the particular" (Ickstadt, 17). In its process of meaning construction, *TS* is reminiscent of other recent neorealist novels, in which, as Fluck notes,

instead of anchoring and stabilizing the textual system, as in classical realism, the representation of reality is now infected by the instabilities of the process of signification itself, so that reality, as represented in new realism, is dominated by the unstable, decentered features that also characterize the system (Fluck, 1992b, 83).

By pendulating between "promise of meaning and its constant deferral" (Fluck, 1992b, 83) the protagonists try to find their standpoint in relation to the color line and to each other.

However, while race and the color line can never be defined or grasped, both strongly define the protagonists' lives. Instead of providing a stable referential framework, the category of race is shown to be a mark empty of any referential content (Kawash, 1996, 63). Nevertheless, as Gruber argues, "while the concept of race, strictly speaking, thus may have no real-life referent, its social consequences are real enough" (Gruber, 90) and "race as an *identity marker* has lost little of its tenacity" (91).

The Time of Our Singing is a novel that reaches across the color line in more than one way: not only the (white) author transgresses the color line by taking on the subject of race, but also the novel's protagonists experiment with various possibilities of racial self-fashioning. The novel reflects upon the widespread tendency to view race in binary, mutually exclusive terms of blackness and whiteness. Simultaneously, it points to the necessity of a dialogue between the two conflicting realms, since ideas about race are subject to constant negotiation. However noble the idea of a race-free home might be, the lack of dialogue on race renders Jonah and Joseph almost illiterate in terms of their abilities to decode race relations in their environment. Their grandfather's opinion about equating race-blindness to whiteness points towards the understanding that, while ignoring race does not eliminate its influence, a lack of dialogue on race further impairs the position of the racially mixed subject, who, like the Strom siblings, grows up in a secluded sphere of a "race-free" home. The lack of dialogue is problematized several times in the novel when Joseph's long-held assumption about his family members, their attitudes and formative events in their lives are often completely overturned, so that he has the feeling he does not really know the people he is talking about. On the narrative level, such lack of dialogue is reflected by the literary structure of the novel. Formally, the novel contains hardly one lengthy dialogue which is not interrupted by the narrator's comments after four or five lines. The narrator constantly intervenes in order to describe the gestures and feelings of the protagonists. The conversations are often interrupted by the narration of events or even by whole chapters, after which the dialogue is then resumed. The dialogues' narrative

time then greatly exceeds their narrated time; their content is rendered subjective by the narrator's intervention. Similar to the way in which the reader of *The Human Stain* is made aware of the formative role of Zuckerman as the narrator of Coleman Silk's life, *The Time of Our Singing* also formally points to the fact that its narration is strongly focalized through Joseph's perception and interpretation of his surroundings.

3.2. STAGING RACIAL PERFORMANCE

My country, 'tis of thee,
sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing;
land where my fathers died,
land of the pilgrims' pride,
from every mountainside let freedom ring!
("America", Samuel F. Smith)

Marian Anderson's performance of "America (My country 'tis of thee)" at the Lincoln Memorial on Easter 1939 plays a central role in the novel, since it is, in more ways than one, its starting point. As Powers once said, a newsreel covering the performance inspired him to write a novel on race in the United States.⁸¹ This performance is a recurrent motif in the narration, around which other events revolve. Similar to the way it inspired the author to write the novel, the performance inspires David and Delia to launch their race-defying experiment: they seek their own way of transgressing racial boundaries by turning to music and to its universal appeal. This historic performance thus functions as a common denominator of the different parts of the novel. It displays the entanglement of the issues of cultural belonging and identity, institutional racism and individual agency, ambivalence of musical ownership and its political ramifications.

Like many other acclaimed African American classical singers of her time, whose national careers were limited by racial prejudice and the politics of segregation, Marian Anderson went to Europe, where she experienced sweeping success. On Easter 1939 she was to perform

⁸¹ Kozyrakis, Y. Conversation with Richard Powers, June 2009, Freie Universitaet Berlin.

at Washington City Hall, but because of her race, the location was declined to her by the Daughters of the American Revolution, an organization that at that time managed the facility. Upon learning about the rejection, Eleonore Roosevelt openly condemned the DAR's decision and cancelled her membership in the organization. It is also mainly due to her involvement that Marian Anderson was allowed to performed open air at the Lincoln Memorial. Admission to the concert was free, and so hundreds of thousands of people came to hear Anderson. The performance, which was later termed America's "lesson in tolerance",⁸² sets the stage for the themes of central concern in the novel: Although the performance is inspired by a promise of a race-free society and free self-expression, the text of Anderson's song, also very aptly catches the bitter irony at its very root: "My country, 'tis of thee/sweet land of liberty" the artist sings, and refers to a country in which an established performer can be denied a concert location on the basis of race. Another theme the song introduces is the ambiguity of musical ownership, since its melody is that of the British National Anthem, "God Save the Queen", a fact of which Samuel F. Smith was allegedly unaware.

As Eva Gruber points out, *TS* explores "over several decades the gap between theory and lived experience with regard to race, and thus inherently questions the liberal American credo of race as a negative function of time, automatically decreasing in social importance as history progresses" (Gruber, 98-99). Against the popular assumption of *de facto* racial equality and of racist prejudice largely being a matter of the past, the question of individual agency of performers, who, like Marian Anderson before them, try to redraw racial boundaries, remains still precarious. As recently as 2008, for instance, the controversy over Rene Marie's performance at the annual state of the city address in Denver displayed the fixed role minority subjects are ascribed in their society. While singing the National Anthem, Rene Marie substituted its lyrics by those of "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing", which is also known as the Black National Anthem. The Black National Anthem has strong symbolic meaning for the

⁸² "News of the Day: Marian Anderson sings at the Lincoln Memorial. Washington, D.C., 4/9/1939", Newsreel story, UCLA Film & Television Archive's "Hearst Metrotone News Collection". Web. 3 May 2009.

African American community, which is frequently either underrepresented in U.S. mainstream culture, or depicted by the dominant culture's stereotypic representations of it. Vehement protests followed, rejecting Marie's attempt at blending the symbols of both cultural traditions, the majority's music with the minority's words. The negative reactions to this experiment clearly demonstrates that the terms of including African American culture and history in the mainstream are set by the hegemony of whiteness. State officials' condemnations of the singer's deviation from the accepted norm are a testimony to the status quo of the country's race relations. In his comment "'The Star-Spangled Banner' is sacred, one of our most beloved traditions" (Ocher, 2008), the angry mayor of Denver John Hickenlooper excludes African Americans from the "we" of the U.S. society he refers to, by suggesting that, for the majority of its citizens, the Black National Anthem does not (and will not) take the place of a sacred tradition. The marginalized position of African Americans is also evident in the comment "[t]his is the State of the City Address. It's not an NAACP convention" by Charlie Brown, Councilman of Denver (Ocher, 2008).

Such ambivalence around the questions of music and race is what characterizes the novel *The Time of Our Singing*. The high promise of sweet liberty, of living beyond race, collides with everyday racism. The protagonists' race-free upbringing at home cannot hold its own when confronted with the violence outside of this home. The idealistic, universal world of musical expression is depleted by the attitudes of the audience and of the critics. As Lars Eckstein once wrote, "the blissful transcendence of identity in music ... is never permanent, but something that may only be created performatively and, at the end of the day, transiently in a world that otherwise demands at least some sense of a defined self" (60).

Evident from Marian Anderson's performance and inherent in the design of the novel is the position of the protagonist (and, by extension, of the racial subject) on stage. The titles of several of the novel's chapters, referring to Jonah playing a role ("My brother as Aeneas", "My brother as Hänsel", and others) hint at the role performativity plays in the process of

identity formation. The choice of the brothers' occupation as professional musicians is indispensable for the novel, since it spotlights the aspect of performativity involved in ethno-racial self-fashioning. The mechanism of instilling music with racial meaning is explicated particularly in the scene at a Boylston school performance, where Jonah plays Hänsel along his anemic, whiter-than-white partner Kimberly Monera playing Gretel. The chapter, which is introduced by Joseph's retrospective narration, voices moments filled with unease, unease about Joseph being a-shade-too-dark for an angel, the presence of his (black) mother and sister in the audience, unease about the mixed couple in the audience (David and Delia) and their echo on stage (Jonah and Kimberly). It is interesting to note that, as in the cases of Roth's *Coleman Silk* and of Johnson's *Ex-Colored Man*, discussed in the previous chapter, the protagonists' race (blackness) is marked especially by the dazzling whiteness of the object of desire contrasted to it. These moments illuminate how, in the western cultural imaginary, blackness is always marked as such only by the scrutinizing white gaze.

The rest of the chapter is narrated in the present tense and recounts the details of the performance. For the most part, Jonah and Joseph are described from the outside by an externally focalized heterodiegetic narrator. However, it remains largely unclear whether Joseph is still the narrator of the scene. Alternating between occurrences Joseph cannot know—"Her [Kimberly's] terror draws him [Jonah] inward, like a lens" (*TS*, 63)—on the one hand, and deictic references to Joseph as a narrator on the other—"This is how *my* brother closes out his childhood" (63)—the narrator's position is left intentionally ambiguous. This in turn allows for mixing the unobtrusive, camera-like depiction of events with Joseph's personal reminiscences. Only rarely does the narration explicitly shift back to Joseph's perspective. In this way, personal feelings are kept to a minimum in the description, which instead concentrates on the effect the stage performance has on its audience. The passage is filled with narrative ambiguity: For the most part, it is not quite clear which lines belong to Joseph and which to the impersonal narrator. Several times adult Joseph takes over the

narration, commenting and interpreting the events from the privilege of his retrospective position. He notes that, while the performance took place, both he and Jonah lacked the ability to interpret the event. Similar to what Lucinda MacKethan notes about James Weldon Johnson's *Ex-Colored Man*, they seem to have been illiterate by not being able to read their own race (qtd. in Kawash, 1997, 147). As Joseph says: "I can't see my own face, yet I know how it must play. I can see its wrongness in the eyes of the seraph host" (*TS*, 64). The distance between the narrator and his childhood self is even double: once through the analepsis, twice by observing the scene as a staged performance. It is the adult Joseph who knows how his face must have played, and yet he still cannot *see* his own face. The same can be said of Jonah: The narrator mentions that, while onstage, Jonah "can see his own arms and legs sticking out of the Schwarzwald fantasy costume. But he can't glimpse the full-dress discord the audience must sort out" (62). Once again pointing to the lack of race education at home, Jonah is described as having no such notion as race in his vocabulary: "Race was no place he could recognize, no useful index, no compass point" (62). The helplessness which surfaces in the way the children cannot see through the events catches up even with the adult narrator Joseph, who, for a brief moment, slips back into his childhood self: "Mama dresses up majestically [...] She does something to her face, almost like her own stage make up. She smells like babies" (64).

However unclear the effect of one's own performance might be, it seems to offer a possibility of experimentally expanding the parameters of identity constructions. Even if the brothers were not aware of the effects their performance had on the audience, it nevertheless challenges the audience's expectation of who can and who cannot play Hänsel, and whether "angels [do] need skin" (62): While Jonah is singing, "no one sees any seams, so lost are they in the seamless sound" (62). By appropriating "white" classical music, the brothers transgress the carefully preserved racial demarcation between black and white culture and, the racial spectacle being something that "the audience must sort out" (62), challenge their audience's

most basic assumptions. The brothers allow the spectators to fathom what they are, and they play on the spectators' expectations. As adults (in the opening scene at the competition *America's Next Voice*), the brothers are aware of the "full discord" that their performance is likely to invoke in the audience. Joseph's bitter irony in reference to the allegedly liberal standpoint of the audience at Duke University, where the 1961 competition in the opening scene takes place, is expressed in the following comment: "We're in a major university town. [...] They haven't strung up anyone for high spirits in these parts for at least half a dozen years" (7).



Fig. 3. Cartoon by Charles R. Johnson from his collection *Black Humor*. (Chicago: Johnson Publishing Co., 1970)

The fact that two African American performers could win the contest, a victory which Joseph terms as the liberal audience's pretended "victory for democracy" (6), does not protect the brothers from being categorized. After the performance, an openly hostile guest asks them, "What exactly *are* you boys?" (6; original italics). The spectator's attitude clearly surfaces in

his utterance, since the word “boys” echoes its pejorative use by whites addressing African American men. Jonah counters the question by singing Robert Burns’ couplet “I am my mammy’s ae bairn,/Wi’ unco folk I weary, Sir[...]”(6).⁸³ Not only is it significant that Jonah stages his response in a musical performance, but also that he turns to an eighteenth century Scottish poet to do so. In his answer, he plays on the seeming mismatch of his (perceived) identity and his own way of expressing it. Although in terms of content the answer is universalist (i.e. I am my mother’s son, as everyone is), its assertive power lies in exchanging Jonah’s racial Otherness for the culturally specific otherness of the Scottish dialect. Jonah appropriates a piece of white cultural heritage for his own purposes, and it makes the spectator go livid. These playful but strong strategies are exactly the elements that distinguish the brothers from the stereotypic tragic mulatto figures and from the characters of classic passing novels. Jonah’s answer plays on the audience’s expectations and does so openly. It is not Johnson’s capital joke which the Ex-Colored Man keeps for himself, nor is it Ellison’s Invisible Man’s attitude of secretly enjoying his invisibility. It is a performance which seeks to challenge and stir the observer. The novel has the brothers play, with an intuitive or implicit self-confidence, on the ways in which they are perceived by the audience.

3.3. PERFORMATIVE IDENTITY AND THE SPECIAL CASE OF THE PASSING FIGURE

The Time of Our Singing challenges the readers’ understanding of the racial dilemma in multiple ways. It also significantly alters the credo of the classical passing figure. Instead of aiming at invisibility, the contemporary passer has to be “found out” by her surroundings in order to “render visible the contradictions of race as a locus of identification” (Wald, 186). Whereas classic passing figures, conditioned by their secrecy, have often been criticized for their inability to change the existing race relations, the temporary passers of *The Time of Our Singing* challenge their audience by their performance. For both Jonah and Joseph, music

⁸³ “I am my mother’s child/strange people weary me, Sir” (literal translation from Scottish dialect, Y.K.)

functions as an indispensable element in the process of their identity formation, and it is through musical performance that they exercise influence upon their surroundings. It is clear that the protagonists, as much as they wish to, cannot do away with racial affiliations. By inverting the process of identification (the siblings identify first with music and then deal with its racially conditioned social context, and not the other way around),⁸⁴ the novel seeks to subordinate the social to the aesthetic realm, which operates as the siblings' primary "locus of identification". Music and musical performance are thus in the privileged position of providing a space for "celebrating the power of creating personal as well as collective identities by transcending biological, social and political boundaries" (Eckstein, 60).

Nonetheless, the novel also makes the reader aware of the paradox at the root of musical performance: its seeming ease is attained by tedious training, which is especially characteristic of Western classical music. Using the aspect of training the author implicitly draws an analogy to the performativity of identity, which is also formed by way of constant repetition of reiterative acts. The choice of classical Western music is therefore highly symbolic: since it could be interpreted as the protagonists' advance into the realm of white culture, classical vocal training, with its strict adherence to sheet music and to a standardized idea of a classical voice, stands as a metaphor for social codes and processes of disciplining the racial subject. In contrast to performing jazz, which is generally more open to variation and individualization of the musical performance, singing lieder is characterized by what Eidsheim calls narrow "adherence to [the] established aesthetic, technical, and stylistic conventions", and taking liberties "is not rewarded in the classical vocal world" (Eidsheim, 644). As Eidsheim explains, in contrast to popular music,

not only does classical repertoire feature narrowly defined conventions of pronunciation, timbre, and stylistic range determined by a work's historical period, geography, and composer, but the notated compositions also dictate fixed pitches and durations for syllables and pauses, which therefore must be produced in the same way by each singer. (Eidsheim, 629)

⁸⁴ As Joseph recounts, "[e]ach of the three children shared the same first memory: their parents, singing" (*TS*, 9).

Here, speaking in terms of performativity theory, the ideal is quite literal repetition without a difference, at least without a difference in terms of content: notes and lyrics. The only difference which is desired and which distinguishes prominent classical singers can be found in the artist's individual interpretation with regard to mood and expression, but never as an interpretation of the content. Thus, via repetition, the individual internalizes the piece of music and the technicalities of its performance, just like the subject internalizes social codes by day-to-day repetitions of social acts. The practice, however, can never match the ideal, and therefore both the artist and the subject are likely to "repeat norms in unpredictable and potentially contestatory ways", which Jonah does, for example, by singing "white" music, or playing traditionally white roles in opera productions (Rottenberg, 2003, 447).

For the apparent reasons of its performative character and its subversive potential, the passing figure has been time and again analyzed in light of performativity theory.⁸⁵ Kathleen Rottenberg's analysis of Nella Larsen's protagonist Irene from the novel *Passing* offers an insightful adjustment of Butler's notion of performativity of identity to the special case of performativity of race. In her article "*Passing: Race, Identification, and Desire*", Rottenberg argues against transferring Butler's notion of gender performativity to the problem of racial identity formation without adjusting it to the singular logic of racial identification. As she explains, in terms of gender, the subjects are encouraged to strive to reach an ideal, for example, the ideal of femininity (441). This desire-to-be, which in psychoanalysis is juxtaposed to the desire-to-have directed from the child towards the parent of the other sex, is, in spite of it being an ideal, a condition which can somehow be attained; a girl will become a woman, even if she will never attain the ideal of femaleness. Thus, Rottenberg concludes, the

⁸⁵ Among the critics who analyzed the notion of passing with respect to performativity theory are most importantly Judith Butler (*Bodies that Matter*, Chapter 6), Valerie Smith in "Reading the Intersections of Race and Gender in Narratives of Passing" (*Diacritics*, 24.2-3 (1994): 43-57), and Liora Moriel in "Passing and the performance of gender, race, and class acts: A theoretical framework" (*Women and Performance: Journal of Feminist Theory*, 15:1 (2005): 167-210).

aspiration to achieve the ideal of perfect femaleness, motherhood, or wifehood organizes women's lives and determines the ways in which they perform various practices (441). However, as she continues, "this is where the similarity with gender ends, since white racist regimes create a distinct bifurcation between identification and 'desire-to-be', such that certain subjects are encouraged to privilege and thus desire attributes associated with whiteness, but concurrently these same subjects are *forced* to identify as black" (442). While no woman would be animated to strive for femaleness and in the end be forced to identify as a man, the non-white subject is motivated to strive for the ideal of whiteness only to have the possibility denied (*ibid*).

Considering the special case of the passer, Rottenberg's modification of Butler's theory of performativity may be extended in its application to light-skinned mixed-race subjects in particular. The crucial difference in the case of individuals who are light enough to pass for white is that, for them, the identification with both black *and* white is precluded. Although visually they can pass for white, the psychological conflict within the passers will constantly point to the unattainability of "true" whiteness, since, according to Rottenberg, for passing to function, the origin of the subject has to be obscured. The inner perception of the passer thus will often be the feeling of being a fraud, of deluding those in her surroundings. Just like in the case of Coleman Silk in Roth's *The Human Stain*, for whom the thought of disclosing his own origin is not even an option once the trouble with the spooks incident began, the passer will refrain from revealing the secret out of fear of losing the trust and respect of significant others. For the passer, the fact that she might be fully accepted as a white person by those in her surroundings does not nullify the problem of the desire-to-be at the root of identification trouble. Although unaware of the passer's origin, her surroundings would implicitly suggest the unattainability of "true" whiteness for non-white subjects and, by extension, the fraud intrinsic to the practice of passing. However, Rottenberg disregards alternative attitudes to passing, such as the individualistic stand taken by Coleman Silk in *The Human Stain*. As

discussed in the previous chapter, for Coleman, the fear of public disclosure of his identity as an African American is grounded not in the element of fraud, but in the suffocating pressure of the collective label “black”, which would limit his individualism. In addition, although I would second Rottenberg’s distinction between identification and the ‘desire-to-be’, I insist that *TS* and other contemporary novels reflect upon the changed nature of passing, which does not necessarily require disclosing the passer’s origin. For an African American, being black also involves performing a certain accepted version of blackness and thus in my view it often becomes passing for black, only without the risk of the possible disclosure of the racial origin of the passer. This is an aspect which is gradually gaining an increasing degree of attention in contemporary fiction, for which the figures of Cole and Deck Lee in Danzy Senna’s *Caucasia* can be seen as exemplary, as will be discussed in the next chapter.

In *TS*, the case of performing a kind of black passing for black is exemplified in the figure of Ruth. Generally, while the unattainability of whiteness might generally pose a problem for the black or dark-skinned mixed-raced subject, it is assumed that a black subject can find a niche for herself in identifying with the black community. Hence, although Ruth finds her niche by connecting to the African American community, it often occurs at the cost of dissociating herself from the white side of her family, her upbringing and, by extension, the “white” part of her identity. Although to some extent her (black) performance also includes passing elements, for someone who is light-enough-to-pass, such possibility of attachment to the black community is often refused: due to her light skin color, the individual tends to be viewed as an outsider. As the next chapter will demonstrate, this situation has given rise to a certain revival of the passing theme in contemporary literature. In the course of the last twenty years, numerous light-skinned writers have fictionalized their experiences of growing up during the radicalized 1960s under the crossfire of contrary ideas of iconic whiteness and blackness. Most prominently, Danzy Senna has made the mixed-race subject a distinguishing feature of her fiction. The assumption of whiteness and blackness, from the white and the

black community respectively, is represented as a repressive intrusion, which strongly influences the protagonists' formation of their sense of self, and their relationships.

The situation of the mixed-race subject pendulating between the ideals of whiteness and blackness is described in the scene where Jonah, unable to choose between two famous vocal trainers, decides to be secretly trained by both at the same time. In the course of practicing the same musical piece, Donizetti's "Una furtive lagrima" ("Furtive Tear"), according to two completely contrary vocal training techniques, Jonah has to rub the teacher's comments off the music scores for each lesson, since he cannot afford to buy second copies. By way of illustrating the contrary social rules of performing whiteness and blackness, the novel shows how, through music, Jonah tries to perform the trick of belonging to both realms and, metaphorically, of mastering the two racial codes. The naïveté of his wish is disclosed once he realizes that his teachers have been playing a joke on him: The assignment of the same piece of music was by no means incidental, but the result of their mutual decision to teach Jonah a lesson "in the politics of performance" (*TS*, 192). A further level of irony can be found in the very piece assigned to Jonah: Similar to Nemorino, who is trying to win Adina's love by buying a fake 'love potion', by his trick of parallel training, Jonah tries to win the appreciation of both of his masters only to learn about their experiment of setting him up: "Whom did you imagine you were fooling?" (*TS*, 192), asks one of his teachers and thus speaks for the society which would not be "fooled" by a racial trickster.

Although Jonah is never explicitly shown to seek identification as black (or, for that matter, to consciously strive to be considered white), and refuses to devote his career to "uplifting the race" by becoming famous specifically as an African American singer, he is well aware of his position in between. However, Jonah does strive for his sister's recognition, which, by extension, symbolizes the recognition by his deceased mother, and possibly even the recognition of the African American community. As he comments upon his presence and injury during the riot, "Wait until your sister hears this. She's gonna love us all over again.

Old times” (*TS*, 325, 327). By playfully identifying himself and his brother as black, he tries to find his way in. On the contrary, when his African American origin is mentioned in connection with his musical achievement, he becomes furious. Similar to Coleman Silk, who avoided being recognized as a Negro classics scholar, Jonah does not wish to be referred to as a promising Negro vocalist. After having been offered the part of a nameless Negro in a new opera production, Jonah opposes his brother’s suggestion that singing the part could constitute something like belonging to the African American community or the Civil Rights struggle. As Jonah objects, “Belong? Belonging with all the other Negro leads? A leading light unto my people, maybe? An exemplar?” (*TS*, 392). Caught between two worlds, he is shown to be never truly part of either of them. In defiance of the racial categories, music comes to occupy a central role for Jonah, providing a locus of identification, a sense of home, and he tries to keep race completely out of it. It is only through musical expression that he can achieve the ideal he strives for; it is for having attained a certain quality of his vocal expression that he wishes to be recognized and praised. Music becomes a medium of expression, a stand-in for the otherwise nonattainable points of identification, and as a realm within which the individual can gain recognition for his personal achievement.

As a point of (missing) attachment to African American identification, the theme of originality, or rather its lack, is introduced by depicting Joseph’s inability to compose his own music. The novel’s hope for reconciling both extremes concentrates on Joseph, who oscillates between the two radical poles, Western classical music and African American improvisations, between his brother Jonah and his sister Ruth. However, with frustrated bitterness, he has to face his inability to break out of the framework of classical musical training. Throughout the novel, technique operates as a restriction on his improvisation skills: “[e]very shred of technique I’d ever mastered held me shackled to the block” (*TS*, 188). The allusion to slavery is signaled here by the metaphor of the shackles and the auction block, aligning Joseph’s musical enslavement with the physical one of his ancestors on his mother’s side. His (African

American) talent seems to be caught in the cage of white music. Joseph becomes aware of this fact after meeting Will, a fellow African American piano student, who is a talented improviser. As a trained classical musician himself, Will's fingers possess a degree of artistic freedom which Joseph can only dream of. When asked where he learned to improvise, the student answers, "[a]round [...]. Same place you're gonna learn it" (188). Alluding to his lack of contact to the African American branch of the family, the narrator can only regret: "[s]ame place I should have. Could have" (188). Comparable to the idea expressed by James Weldon Johnson's *Ex-Colored Man*, thus, the originality of the African American musical expression is located in the possibility "to live among the people, and drink in [...] inspiration firsthand" (Johnson, 1989, 142). But, due to his upbringing, Joseph Strom cannot claim firsthand racially specific experiences. It is his socialization and not his classical musical training per se that "shackles" him. After all, Will's training as a classical pianist does not limit him in his expression. Rather, the richness of Western classical music offers him a valuable resource for producing hybrid music which reaches across the color line.

By contrasting the question of musical creativity with existing racial prejudices, the novel depicts Joseph's inner conflict: unable to improvise, he is caught between society's assumption that, as an African American artist, he is by way of his racial origin at home within the realm of musical improvisation, and his own assumption of classical musical training as the cause of this inability. True to his overall tendency to view music as a universal art, Powers is far from suggesting a reaffirmation of racial difference in musical terms in which classical music would be exclusively white and jazz improvisation exclusively black. With its assertion that anyone can perform or create music of any art or cultural tradition, *TS* consciously distances itself from traditional passing novels which criticized racial essentialism but were unable to overcome it. For example, Joseph's inability to improvise stands in sharp contrast to James Weldon Johnson's novel, which is entrapped by essentialist understanding of race since the latter connects musical creativity with African American

racial identity, suggesting that African American talent is passed in a hereditary manner from generation to generation. Although Johnson's *Ex-Colored Man* claims that, as an African American, his musical creativity is inspired by living among other African Americans, he is quick to designate white musician's jazz improvisations as imitations. Here as in other instances of the novel Johnson still clearly subscribes to an essentialist understanding of race, contrary to the many passages where he (perhaps unknowingly) tries to subvert it. In contrast to this, *The Time of Our Singing* shows that Joseph's lack of talent as an improviser is not of essential, but of social nature: since the African American musical tradition was not a part of the brothers' upbringing and, for the most part, they had contact neither to Delia's family nor to other African Americans, the brothers did not experience black culture. When his friend Will comments on Joseph's inability to improvise ("That's okay, brother Joe. Let every soul praise God in his own fashion"), Joseph remarks: "I was old enough, now, not to ask where he'd learned them [the words]. He'd picked them up the same place my mother had: around" (*TS*, 189). 'Around' hence points to being around black people, which the Strom children were not. Joseph's lack of such experience and the whites' assumption of African American talent for improvisation as something essential is the core of his inner conflict.

After a period of life cast in negative terms (describing Joseph's mediocre job as a bar pianist and his fruitless efforts at composing music), the narrator nevertheless finds his way to a personally fulfilling production of music. During an improvised jam session in an African American community school for underprivileged kids, Joseph, together with his students, finds a way to combine classical music with the African American call-and-response tradition. Although, as Ruth Mayer correctly points out, the scene calls to mind one of the numerous cliché Hollywood movie scenes where "an inspired [...] teacher drives his crowd of underprivileged high school or college or university kids into a frenzy of authentic expression which carries the day, wins the prize, and overcomes prejudice and injustice" (Mayer, 170), the novel does open up a niche for Joseph's self-expression. Seen in the overall context of the

story, Joseph's community school experience repositions African American musical expression in a communal context where music is open for participation. There, it is not dominated by written notes, but is embedded as an improvised experience, transforming the passive audience into active co-performers. Juxtaposed to the brothers' lifelong commitment to the dominance of sheet music over improvisation and to the passivity of their audience, this scene opens up a space in which the African American heritage of the Strom family can re-emerge and contribute to creating new musical traditions by mixing the existing ones. Collective improvisation then is presented as a "form of art that radically values performance and self-creation over essence and determinism" (Eckstein, 51) and stands as "a metaphor for being and identity formation" (ibid).

Although *TS* highlights the nature of music as a purely aesthetic activity, the novel also returns to the idea that detaching music from its nature as a social activity can be destructive for the individual, since he loses the connection with his surroundings, which is demonstrated through the juxtaposition of Jonah's self-destructive development to Joseph's self-repositioning within the African American community. As Fluck points out, within the tradition of classical American realist fiction of the late nineteenth century, the individual has to recognize his social dependence and the fact that he can only realize his potential through interaction with others (Fluck, 1997, 260). Similarly, by contrasting Jonah's wish for living solely in the realm of the aesthetic with Joseph's self-realization in his new role as a community school music teacher, the novel highlights the often irreconcilable strivings for limitless individual self-realization on the one hand and for social recognition on the other. Ironically, Jonah's search for the purely aesthetic experience leads him in the end to consumer market thinking: After the inspiring music session with Joseph's class, all the older brother can think of is marketing the sound. Talking in flat, advertisement style phrases—"Come on. Classics meets the streets. Make your baby hipper *and* smarter" (*TS*, 614)—he tries to win his

siblings to commercially promoting some of the brightest kids in the class. He cannot decipher Ruth's rejection, and he is unable to grasp the inadequacy of his elitist approach.

3.4. THE SAFE PASSAGE OF WHITENESS

Although *The Time of Our Singing* does not revolve around a passing figure in the usual sense—a light-skinned protagonist who explicitly seeks to identify as white—passing is not only an important point of reference in the protagonists' life, but is also a concept which aids the reader's understanding of the novel. Although it is straightforward to the reader that Jonah's music choice, that is, his specialization in classical music, in singing lieder of Brahms and Schumann, affiliates him with white culture, the protagonist does not realize it until he is accused of playing "the white culture game (...) while [his] brothers are dying in the streets" (*TS*, 381). While Jonah and his brother see music as a universal medium of expression which is free from racial bias, a reviewer of their performance brings them back into the(ir) reality of the radicalized sixties:

The Harper's accusation chewed him [Jonah] up. He'd been passing, and it had never even occurred to him. All those boys his age, ground down, locked out, threatened, beaten, killed, while he'd been granted the safe passage of lightness. [...]

Music was that place where look fell away and sightless sound was all. But here was someone insisting the opposite: Music was just what we put on ourselves, after we put on ourselves. How a piece sounded to his listeners had everything to do with who was up there making the sounds. (*TS*, 381)

As the passage uncovers, the previously unquestioned status of music as universal crumbles, and music becomes a cultural and political choice, an affiliation which will allocate the individuals their place in the rigid grid of race relations. A particular music choice then is interpreted as a means of racial identification, making it a tool for either affiliating or distancing oneself from a certain culture. What it loses in the process is its ability to be free of any markers, the freedom to be just what it is; a musical taste. The scene mentioned is thereby only one out of many which reflect on the protagonists' possible cultural passing.

To talk about a passing figure in *The Time of Our Singing* is to talk about all three Strom children, since all three grow up in David and Delia's experiment of race-free upbringing. In order to analyze cultural passing, we have to detach it from its seemingly indispensable element of phenotype to include individuals who are optically too dark to pass for white. This would include Ruth Strom in the analysis of passing, since she identifies as (only) black and completely neglects the white side of her origin, which makes her a passer, a passer from mixed to black.⁸⁶ In its prevailing understanding passing has been interpreted as an instrument of escaping sociopolitical marginalization and of submerging into a privileged social group, which has typically resulted in the fictional representation of it as tragic. Ruth's passing for black on the outset of the sixties' struggle for racial equality would mean the opposite of such practice. In fact, since the process of identity formation is constituted by performance of reiterative acts, it is important to analyze Ruth's dissociation from the lighter-skinned, father's (or male) side of the family. Furthermore, paraphrasing Judith Butler, one can say that, since radicalized blackness and whiteness depend in their existence upon each other, Ruth's blackness depends on her total disavowal of any connection to whiteness that she might possess. In order to become black, she has to eliminate her own partial whiteness.⁸⁷ But even her partial whiteness cannot be abandoned for good: during an argument with her older son, he calls her white, which she cannot comprehend. Ruth is all indignation when she tells Joseph: "He called me 'white' [...] The boy's fourteen years old, and he is holding his genes against me! Hating me for infecting him!" (*TS*, 591).

While Ruth can be said to pass for black, and Jonah (often perhaps unintentionally) is passing for white, Joseph becomes the key to analyzing both. However, what strikes the reader is that, for his self-definition, Joseph necessarily needs at least one of the siblings,

⁸⁶ It is necessary to mention that, in the present work as well as in the novel, David Strom, a German-Jewish immigrant, is consistently referred to as white. The ambiguity of Jewish Americans' status as white has been already discussed in chapter two with respect to Coleman Silk.

⁸⁷ In her analysis of Nella Larsen's *Passing*, Judith Butler claims that Clair's husband "cannot be white without blacks and without the constant disavowal of his relation to them. It is only through that disavowal that his whiteness is constituted" (Butler, 1993, 171).

which suggests that the light-skinned passer needs both the realm of whiteness and blackness in order to develop his sense of identity. Joseph spends most of his life first accompanying Jonah, and then (after a short and unsatisfying life on his own) follows Ruth to Oakland to become a music teacher. Joseph defines himself always through articulating the difference from one of his siblings. When he is together with Jonah, he is protecting Ruth while, when he is with Ruth, he necessarily tries to protect Jonah from their sister's accusations. His way is the way of the middle, the compromise. Whereas Jonah is more adherent to his principles (for example, he does not hesitate to turn down a Mets' offer of a part in a major opera production, the part as a nameless "Negro"), Joseph is always trying to see discriminatory occurrences as misunderstandings. Thus, although Jonah never does take a political stand in the struggle for race freedom, in this aspect he is actually the more radical of the two brothers.

The arbitrariness of the labels 'black' and 'white' is the motif permeating the novel. The only way for the protagonists to see each other is by looking at each other. The only point of reference is an unstable, constantly changing image of the other person: brother, mother, sister, the audience, or even the magazine photos of murdered Emmett Till. The novel shows that difference becomes the defining factor of the self-image: "Are you related to him?" (*TS*, 103) Joseph asks his mother, who is crying over the photo of Till's disfigured face. The question is not "are *we* related to him". Joseph distances himself not only from the boy, but also from his mother's ancestry. 'I am not him' is what he is really saying. Speaking in Lacanian terms, "any sense of its [the subject's] 'whole' identity is forever after only to be sought *in* others or those symbolic objects that symbolize the aim of desire" (Mellard, 19). Such seeking for one's identity in the others is complicated in the passer's case with the question of skin color, which, for the Strom siblings, is defined in relative terms, in being either darker or lighter than their brother or sister. Furthermore, it is significant that the mirror image scene, a classic element of earlier fiction involving passing, is missing, which points

towards the absurdity of any absolute definition of skin color. Instead, it is described as relative to the skin color of significant others.

However arbitrary thinking in binary terms of black and white might be, the harsh reality of race relations closes in on the brothers once they are caught in the middle of the Watts riot. Having finished recording in Los Angeles, Jonah insists on throwing a glance at the turmoil. The scene describing their presence at the riot contrasts the brothers' detachment from the Civil Rights struggle, their living in the bubble of classical music, with the situation on the streets of U.S. cities throughout the sixties:

Jonah hovered, turning to inspect the flames that shot up fifteen feet to his left. His hands cupped unconsciously, lifting from his sides, beckoning to the roving packs, cuing their entrances and attacks. He was *conducting*. Beating time, phrasing the chaos the same way he always did when listening to the music that most moved him. I came alongside him; he was *humming*. At his command, a drone rose up behind us, pitched but variable, matching his throb, a hybrid of rhythm and melody (*TS*, 323).

In the chaos of violence, all Jonah sees and hears is music. His domain is the world of acoustic experience, his way of perception, listening, absorbing his surroundings. He is not there to fight or to make a political statement. Intoxicated by the turmoil, he is not able to decode the events around him or to recognize the dangers, whereas Joseph clearly sees that his brother “is too light to be (t)here” (*TS*, 323). Here, the issue of racial literacy is taken up once again, showing how unprotected Jonah is in this situation since he is unable to correctly assess the situation. Injured by two rioters, who take him for a rich white man, Jonah is unable to decipher the struggle for Civil Rights and misinterprets his injury as a sign of his affiliation with the African American community: “He got me good? [...] We’re all set then, Mule. Passport stamped. Visa. Safe passage.” (*TS*, 325).

Setting the scene in the middle of the riot, the author highlights the inadequacy of the brothers' presence there. Being injured during a riot does not equal participation in it, a point Jonah mistakes for his initiation ritual, his entry into the community of the oppressed. Thereby the space in which the action takes place is significant for the characterization of the

protagonists. As Mieke Bal notes, “a dynamically functioning space is a factor which allows for the movement of characters” (Bal, 139). In a reversal of this statement, the novel suggests that the space between blackness and whiteness robs the protagonists of the possibility to move around freely. The physical space between the police lines around the riot effectively highlights the compulsion to define oneself in terms of black and white: one is either on this side of the line, or on the other. As Joseph remembers, “My brother was too light to survive inside, I was too dark to get us out” (*TS*, 326). During the riots, the virtual, blurred color line becomes a quite literal, material line: the line of police, which does not allow for an existence in between the two worlds. Driven by their wish to ignore the political side of race, the brothers shut politics out of their lives; now life has no adequate space for these racial border-crossers. After their arrest, the two brothers are viewed by the police as being worse than the rioters: “We were the future’s hope, and we’ve betrayed it. Our crime was sight-seeing, coming to watch while the city went up in flames” (*TS*, 327). Irony is audible in the narrator’s comment: being the future’s hope refers to the brothers’ victory at *America’s Next Voice*, where they symbolically stood as icons of democracy for the self-proclaimed liberal audience. Here, the novel exposes the impossibility of escaping being labeled and categorized: although throughout their lives Jonah and Joseph carefully tried to stay out of everything political, they cannot avoid being marked first as somebody’s hope, and then as traitors to it. The tension between defining oneself and being defined by others is omnipresent: it is voiced through the rioters, police officers, music reviewers, audience. Taken together, this multitude of voices speaks to the brothers, forcing them to clearly identify with either blackness or whiteness: an interpellative pressure, which suggests that neutrality is not on the list of options for the subjects of mixed racial origin.

The siblings pursue different paths as a way of dealing with this situation. Jonah finds his refuge in medieval music, going not only temporally back in time, but also spatially, touring Europe with *Voces Antiquae*. Ironically, his return to the United States for a performance at

the Berkeley Festival coincides with the Rodney King riot. Feeling strangely attracted to it, Jonah goes to the riot to relive the electrifying acoustic experience of the turmoil. History finally catches up with him here: he dies in his hotel room from an incidental head injury during the riot. His death once more underpins idea of multiple possible (mis)interpretations of events: during the 1995 Million Man March in Washington D.C., in which Joseph participates with his two nephews Kwame and Ode, demonstrators call out the names of victims of racial violence, and Kwame starts crying out Jonah's name. As Joseph reflects, "the notion's so crazy I have to laugh" (*TS*, 624). When Kwame brags, "[m]y uncle died in the Los Angeles riot" (*TS*, 624), it becomes clear that, to a great extent, individuals are indeed never fully the authors of their own lives (Ricoeur, 32), and others play a significant role in writing one's own narrative. Perhaps this is the very reason why Joseph becomes introspective: he is caught in the past, continuously replaying various formative events in his family's life. His nostalgia for the past is omnipresent, but in every memory that he replays, he seeks to reconcile the conflicts that split his family. Like the inventor of a time machine, he goes back in his memory searching for the crucial moment in which he can "correct the unmade future" and reunite his family (*TS*, 8). This task is seemingly accomplished in the last chapter of the novel, where Ode, David and Delia's grandson, travels back in time from Washington D.C. of 1995 to Washington D.C. of 1939 to bless the daring union of his own grandparents.

By way of concluding my engagement with *The Time of Our Singing*, I will turn to the scene at the Lincoln Memorial, which describes the acquaintance of David and Delia at Marian Anderson's historical performance and is crucial to the overall understanding of the novel. This scene is narrated four times in the novel, but for the present analysis, I would like to concentrate on two of its versions: once as it is incorporated into the middle part of the novel, and the last one as it is used to round up the novel, functioning as its last chapter. Some of the elements of its components are left the same, for instance, parts of the dialog between David and Delia, which are restored in an unaltered form. However, the two versions also

disclose significant differences, which leave the scene open and allow for several possible interpretations.

In the initial description of the episode at the Memorial, which guides the reader throughout the novel, David and Delia become acquainted at the Marian Anderson performance and discover their common interest in classical music. After the performance, as they are about to part, they see a little African American boy who has lost his parents in the crowd. David and Delia talk to the boy, whose name happens to be Ode, and take him to the Lincoln Memorial. While Delia is trying to spot an African American family frantically looking for their lost child, David and Ode are “discussing the planets, the stars, laws of the expanding universe” (*TS*, 225). After the boy sees his brother in the crowd, he leaves David and Delia without a word: “They stood on the white steps, abandoned, without thanks or reassurance that all would be well” (*TS*, 226).

As it is reintroduced in the last chapter, the occurrence at the Memorial displays several significant alterations, the first of them being the way it is embedded in the novel: the preceding chapter recounts Joseph’s and his nephews’ (Kwame and Ode) presence in the 1995 Million March Man at the Memorial. Joseph describes that his younger nephew Ode is lost in the crowd. After a short time they find him “walking from up on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial” (*TS*, 625). Later, on the plane back to California, Ode starts asking his mother about wavelength and planets, the subject that David discusses with a boy named Ode in the first scene at the Memorial. It is now that the last chapter retells the story of Delia’s and David’s acquaintance, making it clear that, somehow breaking the laws of physics, they have met their own grandson. A further meaningful change distinguishes both scenes: in the last chapter, Ode does not leave. He serves as a kind of blessing for the future union of David and Delia. While Delia looks at the boy, she is thinking that “she remembers everything, all that must come to them. [...] She knows this boy. He’s fighting to bring himself into being, willing them the way on” (*TS*, 630). In the previous Memorial scene, the boy leaves without

blessing their union, but this time Ode is David's and Delia's promise, showing them the way into the future.

After the boy wonders whether David and Delia "don't know about black and white" (630) and neither of the adults have a ready answer, Ode says:

"The bird and the fish can fall in love. But where they gonna built their nest?"

Now the German jerks up, a shock beyond reflex. "Where have you heard this?" The boy cups his hands into the armpits, scared. "This is a Jewish saying. How have you learned this saying?"

The boy shrugs. "My mama sang it. My uncle."

"Are you Jewish?" [...]

He's undone by wonder. "How can you know this, unless... This is remarkable. You have this, too?" (*TS*, 630).

The fact that this information matches the details about the Strom family (Ruth as mother, Joseph as uncle, and the Jewish saying as a part of the Strom's family narrative) suggests that the readers should suspend disbelief and allow for the meeting of generations. Obviously, in some impossible, fantastic way, the conflicts that have torn the Strom family apart are leveled out, and the opposites are finally reconciled. The novel ends with Delia's response to David, who is pointing out that she is blushing: "Yes, we have this, too" (631).

In contrast to the earlier Memorial scene, this version is presented as Delia's memory mixed with her speech in free indirect discourse and with description from a camera-eye third-person position. Apart from the last lines, the last chapter is focalized exclusively through Delia. Although the overall impression left by the novel's meeting of generations is fantastic, close analysis of the narrative technique of the passage also allows for a different interpretation. It is also possible to view the last chapter as Joseph's dream, in which he envisages his parents' meeting, and which is thus narrated not by Delia, at least not directly. If we look back at the scene directly preceding the last chapter, we will find Joseph, Ruth, and her sons on the flight from Washington, D.C. back to Los Angeles. As Joseph mentions, "it's dusk when we get to the airport, and night for the length of the flight" (626). Let us remember that, during the Million Man March, his nephew Ode became lost at the Lincoln Memorial

and on the flight back started questioning his mother about stars and planets. Apparently, all these occurrences, combined with Joseph's nostalgia for his lost mother and brother, his desire for a reconciliation of the past with the present, may have caused this impossible meeting of generations in his dream. There are a number of details that support such an interpretation within the narrative. First and foremost, in contrast to the rest of the chapter which is seemingly narrated through Delia, the concluding lines of the last chapter point to Joseph as the narrator: while Ode chants the words of the Jewish saying, the narrator notes that

All he wants is to go on playing. All available combinations. Go on singing himself into existence, starting up *my piece, my song*.⁸⁸

That fierce, haunted beat shakes the white man loose. He, too, places the boy. Who else? What else? The inevitable enters him with the full force of discovery. "The bird can make a nest on the water."

My mother looks out on the long space spreading in front of them. "The fish can fly." She drops her eyes and colors deeply.

"You are blushing," *my* father exclaims. Already learning.

"Yes," *my* mother nods. Agreeing, and worse. "Yes. We have this, too." (*TS*, 631)

Deictically, only one of the Strom children can be the narrator of this passage. Eliminating the improbable possibility that the ghost of Jonah is narrating the scene and assuming that Ruth as a narrator would be equally improbable within the structure of the novel, the only possible narrator left is Joseph. The preceding text of the last chapter is indeed focalized through Delia by using either camera-eye perspective or free indirect discourse, but I would argue that it is not directly Delia who is speaking; it is Delia as she appears in Joseph's dream. In the scene on the airplane, Joseph discusses music with Kwame, his older nephew, who is writing a song about the Million Man March. Kwame says,

"Me and my crew we got to get jumpin'."

This, too, is forever true. "Mine, too," I tell him. My piece is inside me, ready for writing down—the same piece that has long ago written me. My crew is inside me, jumping at last. And the first jump they make will be, as ever, *back*" (626).⁸⁹

⁸⁸ Italics added.

⁸⁹ Original italics.

So back he jumps; Joseph goes backwards in his memory to replay the scene of his parents' meeting, which, in terms of the interpretation of the novel, makes a considerable difference. Assuming that Joseph is just dreaming, the scene highlights Joseph's urge for closure, for reconciliation of the family's conflict. A possible interpretation thus suggests that Joseph is once more caught in the time machine of his mind, traveling back in time. In his dream, he seeks to articulate and call into existence an alternative reality, which would find the crucial moment to correct history and envision a different future for his family. As Ruth Mayer suggests in her article "A Rage for Authenticity", in this last scene, Powers "uses a marked change of register—from the realistic to the fantastic—to conjure up a world in defiance of identity ascriptions: a world in which self and identification exist in harmony, at least briefly" (Mayer, 177).

Speaking in terms of structure, *The Time of Our Singing* certainly defies linearity. It circles around the events temporally and in terms of content. Like in a piece of music, themes and plot lines come up and disappear to be built in later in a varied but still recognizable form. The scenes narrated twice or thrice in the novel reflect upon the instability of memory and the sheer impossibility of accurate representation of events. Every time an event is narrated, it is influenced by the narrator's current mood or preceding occurrences. Some elements of Joseph's memory stay stable, but then again, they are undermined in their reliability by their incongruence to the corresponding memories of his siblings. By problematizing temporality and representation on the thematic level, Powers creates a novel which exceeds the genre of realism by modifying both its diegetic and paradigmatic structures. As Mayer notes, while "the scene celebrating authentic expression—the scene of the community school performance—falls flat, the final take-off of Powers's novel works exactly because it *emphasizes* the utopian and magical quality of scenario on display" (Mayer, 177). The broken, jumping time line demonstrates that linearity and closure are an illusion; it is something that the readers, just like Joseph, try to reconstruct in their minds while reading the novel.

However, in their search for closure and temporal congruency, the readers are warned of the risk of slipping into false categorization by hastily ascribing meaning to the protagonists' actions. The novel foregrounds the ambivalence of how meaning is negotiated, its instability and at times even arbitrariness, of how "meanings vanish in favor of certain relationships" (Goodman, qtd. in Iser, 10).

By making a lieder recitalist the center of the novel, Powers depicts the world in which the racialized subject is caught as a stage, upon which the individual is forced to take on a role, a stand, a subject position. Whereas African American writers also broadly used music in their fiction, they mostly turned to blues, jazz, improvisation, in other words, music closely connected to African American culture, music which has often been used or seen as an instrument for gaining voice and struggling for racial equality. In contrast, Powers challenges this framework by positioning his protagonists within the context of Western classical music, showing characters that are "at home" with this cultural tradition. Although the decision to communicate the novel mainly through Joseph as a narrator might echo classical music itself, which is usually written down and fixed as opposed to joint music making and improvisation, Joseph's voice is clearly polyphonic. As his narration unfolds, it incorporates the voices of his siblings, his parents, and grandparents within itself, reconciling and merging "voices [...] within the bounds of a single consciousness" (Bakhtin, 249). Although not quite in the dialogical manner of Dostoevsky, the incorporation of other voices, the *heteroglossia* of this racial epic is precisely where fictional meaning making processes are located. Using Bakhtin's comment on Dostoevsky's fiction, one can say that, in *The Time of Our Singing*, by the means of the narrative voice, two (or more) characters "are introduced [...] in such a way that each of them is intimately linked with the internal voice of the other" (Bakhtin, 254). The novel highlights the fragmented nature of memory construction by incorporating his siblings' memories and attitudes, even events or whole chapters between the parts of one conversation. In addition, this polyphony is underpinned by the invocation of the rondo structure with its

alternations, fragmentations, and cross-influence of themes and subthemes. As Heinz Ickstadt suggests, “in Powers’s fictional world, the free unfolding of the imagination (life’s mind) is concurrent with the evolutionary unfolding of life itself. Within this cultural field, fiction is the privileged space of ‘symbolic transaction’ in which the possibly real is ethically tested through and against experience. Herein lies fiction’s political and cultural significance – its function for the mind’s survival” (Ickstadt, 26).

The importance of such polyphonic quality of the voice is picked up once more in the description of Jonah’s stubborn striving for a pure, transcendental quality of his voice, which would by inversion be free of any influence (or polyphony in this case). The search for authentic purity of musical expression, exemplified by Jonah’s life story, is utopian. Going further and further back in music history, Jonah drains his voice of all possible colorings and, in a way, of life itself. The distance from any kind of racial or political affiliation that he creates is particularly significant since the possibility of overcoming racial prejudice suggested by *The Time of Our Singing* is its constant renegotiation across the color line, social and artistic. By combining different musical traditions and styles, hybrid musical culture can not only transcend the color line, but as Heinz Ickstadt notes, it can also “regain meaning through reassertion of its social function” (Ickstadt, 26).

In his novel, Powers investigates the paradoxical situation that “how a piece sound[s] to [the] listeners ha[s] everything to do with who [is] up there making the sounds” (*TS*, 381); it is nevertheless true that precisely because it matters who is “up there making the sounds” that the audience’s thinking in racial stereotypes can be challenged by the performer. By juxtaposing the aesthetic dimension of music to the question of racial identity construction, the novel contrasts the wish to depoliticize music and the impossibility of its fulfillment for the Strom siblings. The conflicting relationship between the universal appeal of music and the fact that it is grounded in concrete socio-cultural circumstances reflects upon a similar conflict between the ontological emptiness of racial categories and their socio-cultural implications.

Both Jonah and Joseph, by going back and forth between the worlds of black and white culture, challenge their audience by their performance. Whether by appropriating Western classical music for their self-fashioning, or by defying categorization, these protagonists reflect upon the tension between self-definition and the audience's reception of it. Within the realm of fiction the protagonists of *The Time of Our Singing* transgress the border between the text and the reader, inspiring the reader's imaginary to think about the ways they define themselves. The novel thereby "turns reading into a transfer and ... opens up new possibilities for a reconfiguration and an extension of the reader's narrative identity" (Fluck, 2013, 63).

4. THE TRAVELER: THE POST-SOUL PASSING FIGURE IN *CAUCASIA* BY DANZY SENNA

A long time ago I disappeared. One day I was here, the next I was gone. It happened as quickly as all that. One day I was playing schoolgirl games with my sister and our friends in a Roxbury playground. The next I was a nobody, just a body without a name or a history, sitting beside my mother in the front seat of our car, moving forward on the highway, not stopping. (And when I stopped being nobody, I would become white—white as my skin, hair, bones allowed. My body would fill in the blanks, tell me who I should become, and I would let it speak for me.)

(...)

I disappeared into America, the easiest place to get lost. Dropped off, without a name, without a record. With only the body I traveled in. And a memory of something lost.

This is what I remember. (*Caucasia*, 1)

The short prologue, cited here almost in full length, introduces the reader to the fictional life-narrative of Birdie Lee, the main protagonist of *Caucasia*. Covering her early childhood and teenage years, Birdie's first-person narrative retrospectively unfolds in front of the reader the story of growing up as a mixed-raced child during the post-Civil Rights era, or what various scholars have called the post-soul era. As a way of framing the narration following it, this brief but very dense introduction already discloses elements which will constitute important points of departure for the interpretation of the pages to come. The interplay between the protagonist's process of racial identification and the formative factors such as location (playing games at a Roxbury playground, disappearing into America), important others (friends, sister), and bodily features (body speaking for itself) are the centers of gravity around which Danzy Senna's novel oscillates. The prologue also adumbrates the racial confusion along the boundaries of the black/white divide, which the main protagonist experiences, and introduces the story which is about to unfold as a narrative of passing. But most importantly, already in this brief opening the reader can find clues towards the very end of the novel: The past tense in the phrasing "I disappeared" paired with the present tense in "[t]his is what I remember" indicates that the protagonist has found a way to settle the conflict between her racial self-identification and the way she is perceived by others. It is the narrative

of how this came about that is laid out before the reader. As Susanne Rohr notes, opening a novel by a paragraph disclosing its crucial events “on the one hand produces a strangely anticlimactic effect, and on the other hand arouses the suspicion that something more exciting can possibly be expected on other levels, not the least on the level of the enactment of this story, on the level of the plot” (263).⁹⁰ Such is the case with *Caucasia*’s prologue, which by revealing main events directs the reader’s expectation not so much towards the plot, but to the anticipation of a narrative in which the main protagonist will try to retrace her *Bildungsweg* and to comprehend it by ordering what she considers to be her formative experiences.

Within the next 412 pages, the reader encounters the main protagonist Birdie Lee, her three years older sister Cole, and their parents, Deck Lee, an African American intellectual, and Sandy Lee, a white, radical Civil Rights activist whose ancestry goes back to the early Puritan settlers. Birdie’s early childhood memories are characterized by a very close bond to Cole, and by the constant fighting between her parents, who symbolically represent the conflicts between the black and the white spheres of influence. Gradually, the parents’ lives drift apart, which results in the painful separation of the sisters: While Cole joins Deck and his girlfriend who move to Brazil, Birdie has to follow her mother on their trip through half of the United States, fleeing from (most probably imagined rather than real) persecution by the FBI. As Birdie observes at the end of the novel, her parents’ decision concerning the separation of the sisters was motivated by the color of the girls’ skin, which explains grouping the light-skinned Birdie with her white mother and the darker-skinned Cole with her father. Within the context of the period in which the novel is set, late 1960s and 1970s, and the ongoing political and social efforts towards integration, the split of the fictional family along the color line points

⁹⁰ My translation. The full quote in the original is taken from Susanne Rohr’s analysis of the opening paragraph of Paul Auster’s *Moon Palace*: “Doch darüber hinaus wird, untypischerweise, auch schon gleich die ganze story in ihren wesentlichen Wendungen zusammengefaßt, was einerseits einen seltsam antiklimaktischen Eindruck erzeugt und andererseits die Vermutung nährt, daß dann vielleicht Spannendes auf anderen Ebenen, nicht zuletzt auf der Ebene der Inszenierung dieser story, auf der Ebene des plots, zu erwarten sein wird” (Rohr, Susanne, *Die Wahrheit der Täuschung. Wirklichkeitskonstruktionen im amerikanischen Roman 1889-1989*, W. Fink Verlag, 2004).

towards a wide gap between the *de jure* and *de facto* racial reality during the era fictionalized by Danzy Senna.

After several changes of location, Sandy finally settles in New Hampshire and invents a new identity for her daughter. Unable to completely pass for white, Birdie becomes Jesse Goldman, backing up her new Jewish identity by a story about her deceased father, a Jewish intellectual, and by wearing a cheap Star of David necklace. Sprinkled with reminiscences from her childhood spent with Cole, Birdie's narrative of her adolescent years spent as Jesse build the core of the novel. Eventually, unhappy with passing for white, at the age of fifteen Birdie flees from her mother back to Boston, and then to California, where she tracks down her father and finally reunites with her sister Cole.

In what follows, I will show that Danzy Senna's fictional engagement with what it meant to be black, white, or mixed for the so-called post-soul generation⁹¹ offers a new take on the genre of the passing narrative and a renegotiation of the concept of passing as such. In contrast to the classic works of the genre like James W. Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*, Charles W. Chesnutt's *The House Behind the Cedars*, Nella Larsen's *Passing*, and other novels of passing, which usually feature economically driven, melodramatic passing figures, *Caucasia* introduces us to protagonists who pass "everyday, in thousands of miniscule and major ways" (Jackson & Jones, 14), and do it not only across the color line, but also within the realms of blackness or whiteness. As the novel makes clear, not only does Birdie Lee choose to pass, also her African American father Deck Lee is occasionally passing; through imitating the popular jargon and behavior of the 1960s, he tries to embody a hip race man and pass for the then popular image of a black masculinity. As the grown-up narrator ironically remarks, since her father "had discovered Black Pride (just a few years later than everyone else)", he started using slang around his friends, "peppering his sentences with words like 'cat' and 'man' and 'cool'" (*Caucasia*, 10). The performance of a

⁹¹ For further reference to the post-soul generation, see page 12 of the Introduction.

contemporaneous image of blackness is a tool which Deck uses in order to authenticate his affiliation with blackness, which he feels is somehow compromised by his academic occupation. As a black man, he is thus also passing for a contemporaneous idea of blackness via repetition of stylized behavior patterns. His passing is hence a kind of blending in that allows him to be accepted in certain social groups.

Birdie Lee's fictional narrative foregrounds the realization that soon after its emergence, the ideal of iconic blackness signaled in part by slogans like 'Black is Beautiful' started to exercise strong interpellative pressure similar to the pressure exercised by the ideal of whiteness which it originally sought to counter. As a critique of colorism and elitism, *Caucasia* articulates the unique situation of light-skinned protagonists of mixed race, who now had to put up a clearly recognizable performance of blackness in order to claim membership within the African American community: By exposing inclusive and exclusive racial practices on both sides of the color divide, the novel aligns passing for white with passing for black, highlighting the absurdity of the wish to replicate a desired ideal of blackness.

In my interpretation of *Caucasia*, I suggest that, for Senna and for a number of other contemporary writers engaging with post-soul mixed-race generation, "passing is less about faking prefabbed social identities than it is about demanding appreciation of the idea that all identities are processual, intersubjective, and contested/contestable" (Jackson & Jones, 14). The literary form itself, a narrative, mirrors such understanding of identity: by narrating the events of Birdie's life, Senna underscores the insight that identity is not a fixed entity, but a process and subject to constant renegotiation between the protagonists and their surroundings, and ultimately between the reader and the text. Elements such as traveling (meaning movement, i.e. a process), dialogue or its lack (intersubjective negotiation), and racial and class self-fashioning (contestability of identities) are employed to convey a new understanding of the process of racial identification and of the fluidity of racial demarcations.

The close readings of this fictional engagement with race focus on the analysis of how the textual strategies used in the novel contribute to a better apprehension of the processes of racial identification. In particular, I argue that Danzy Senna skillfully builds on the two specifically African American literary traditions, the slave narrative and the narrative of passing, in order to present the fictional status quo of the mixed-raced post-soul generation. As the title of the chapter already signals, the themes of traveling and location are of particular importance in the current text analysis. As a generic element of both the slave narrative and of the classic narrative of passing, change of location has been indispensable for acting out a new identity, since in the old milieu the passer's (or the ex-slave's) ancestry is known and cannot be concealed. Furthermore, rephrasing Melvin Dixon's comment on Frederick Douglass's autobiography, in most slave narratives, "articulating where (one) is becomes (the) way of knowing who (one) is" (Dixon, 21), and it is this insight that also permeates the fictional narrative of Birdie Lee.

The novel's self-understanding as being indebted to the genre of the slave narrative is thus apparent from the first pages on: the fact that the protagonist disappears from her former surroundings, the reference to her physique as defining/concealing her identity, and the mention of the memory of something lost are all variations with a twist on generic elements of the genre. The protagonist's being "just a body, without a name or a history" (*Caucasia*, 1) cannot but evoke in the reader the history of slavery, when African Americans did not have legal rights, and for the most part were robbed of the possibility to know their own family history. The indication of the Roxbury playground (rather than, for example, Boston) as a starting point echoes the slave's known microcosmos, the plantation; the protagonist's ignorance of where she is heading to takes up the slave's usual lack of knowledge of geography. Numerous other variations upon generic elements of the slave narrative can be traced throughout the novel, where they function as a fictional reassessment of the racial status quo. The method of employing generic elements of the slave narrative within a different

historical setting pays tribute to preceding historical developments and to the literary tradition, and on the other hand makes clear the changed ideas, circumstances, and ways of narration.

In her renegotiation of the genre of the passing narrative, Senna underscores the importance of traveling to enact passing and for processes of racial identification, but she also goes further and shows that passing (as in the case of Deck Lee mentioned above) can also take place in the same location. As will also become clear in the further text analysis, in order to adapt within the surroundings of an all-black school, the light-skinned Birdie has to enact blackness by copying her classmates' behavior and manner of dress. Her racial and class self-fashioning is not unlike trying out clothes, since the images of blackness and whiteness she seeks to copy at various times fail to provide any meaningful loci of identification. The roles Birdie tries out are strongly influenced by the location she finds herself in, a fictional development that illustrates the social scholars' assertions that, "as is the case with buying real estate, the three rules of understanding identity are 'location, location, location.' Who you are at any given moment depends on where you happen to be and who else is there in that place with you." (Markus, 364) Since traveling and change of location play a central role in *Caucasia*, I will investigate the textual strategies used in the novel to negotiate the connection between Birdie's geographical movement and her growing racial self-understanding.

Finally, in my analysis I will also elaborate on the linkage between the renegotiation of the passing genre and the circumstance that, as a neorealist text, Senna's novel builds upon both the realist and the postmodern tradition. As with many other contemporary neorealist texts on race, *Caucasia* "constitutes an honest acknowledgement that the generally agreed upon dismissal of race does not adequately translate into contemporary realities" (Gruber, 95). While it recognizes the existence of a multitude of possible ways of perceiving and interpreting "the Real", "neorealist writing allows for a representation of lived and felt human experience—and thus ultimately enables empathetic engagement" (Gruber, 93). The novel therefore ties in with the underlying premise of this study: the transition from experiences of

difference and marginalization to the idea of an underlying universality of experience. Within its narrative, it exposes the tragedy “that society has chosen arbitrary categorizations, constructed a meta-narrative of race that cannot be applied adequately to personal narratives of its individual members” (Brooks, 23). In a way which connects *Caucasia* with other novels discussed in the present study, it exposes the contingency of representation of experience, and it at the same time also foregrounds the necessity of its narrative representation as a way to a better apprehension of the controversial issues around the subject of race.

4.1. “THIS IS WHAT I REMEMBER”: THE NARRATIVE OF BIRDIE LEE

In *Caucasia*, which clearly draws on the tradition of the passing narrative, Danzy Senna offers a fresh take on the generic figure of the passer. This renegotiation occurs in my view less on the story level, but rather more through the narrative technique employed by Senna. At a first glance, *Caucasia* presents its readers a more or less linear, chronological unfolding of events, interrupted by flashbacks, which however do not disturb the overall narrative flow. Although the novel is narrated exclusively by Birdie, close analysis of certain passages and statements allows the reader to sense a more complex narrative voice, more in the line of Bakhtin’s notion of *heteroglossia*, which has also been identified as a characteristic narrative feature of Richard Powers’ novel *The Time of Our Singing* (see chapter three). From the very beginning, the novel signals that everything that follows will be narrated by Birdie in retrospective. The difference between the maturity of the narrative voice and the experiences of the protagonist which it describes adumbrates the time gap between what would be the end of the novel (reunion with Cole) and the time of narration. Already on the first page Birdie reveals the limitations of the story to follow: its selectivity is enclosed in the words “[t]his is what I remember” (*Caucasia*, 1), which conclude the prologue and prepare the reader for the rest of the novel. The authority of the first person narrator is further undermined in the next two sentences: “Before I ever saw myself, I saw my sister. When I was still too small for mirrors, I

saw her as the reflection that proved my own existence” (*Caucasia*, 5). Clearly, since Birdie was too small to remember the events of her early childhood, the reminiscence (and many others like it) can therefore only exist as incorporation of her mother’s and sister’s memories. Later in the novel, Birdie admits that, during her first year on the road, her mother “used to tell [her] stories about the years [she] didn’t remember—the years when Cole and [Birdie] spoke Elemen⁹² and [her] grandmother thought [they] were possessed” (*Caucasia*, 287). These years, which were described by her mother in great detail, constitute the part of narration in the first chapter, among many other things which Birdie recounts as her own memories: “My father described the language as a ‘high-speed patois’. [...] My grandmother wanted us to see a child psychiatrist” (*Caucasia*, 6). Interestingly, in the first chapter called “Face”, Birdie already hints at the reunion with Cole which does not actually happen until the very last pages of the novel. While recounting how their Elemen language came into existence, Birdie switches her narration from past tense (“We even spoke our own language” (5)) to present tense in “Cole insists, that it began before I was born” (5). Thus, through a switch of tenses, the novel indicates the sisters’ later reunion.

In fact, the idea of regarding both sisters as parts of a greater whole is, in my view, the underlying idea of the novel, which can be traced on various levels. One level is the extent of mixing of their memories. While they live together in Boston, the girls constantly share their feelings, impressions and attitudes in Elemen; in this way, their very personal memories become a pool of shared memories which then surface in Birdie’s narration. The other aspect where such unity can be traced is the analysis of the girls’ names within the context of the novel. Throughout the novel, Deck Lee time and again compares his daughters, the offspring of his interracial marriage, to canaries, which due to their high sensitivity to poisonous gases were used to detect dangerous gases in coal mines, prior to the invention of technical

⁹² In their childhood, the sisters used to communicate in an invented language Elemen, which no one aside from them understood. In their fantasy, this language was spoken by a people called Elemen, who could change their color at will and thus fully disappear into their surroundings.

equipment for testing the air quality. A dead canary in a coal mine thus signaled toxic air and the need for immediate evacuation of the workers. The combination of the paradigm of the coal mine canary with the symbolism of the girls' names (Cole/Coal, Birdie/Bird or Canary) seems to point to the idea that in the post-racial society, Cole and Birdie are in fact two constituents of a bigger self, analogous to the cumulative reading of their names as 'coal bird'. Only together can they develop their own language, their own Elemenno tribe of people, who can change their color at will. The symbolism of their dates of birth is also worth mentioning here: While Cole is born in 1964, the year of the Civil Rights Act, she precedes the Voting Right Act of 1965, which is mirrored by the fact that, in the novel, she exists only within Birdie's narration. Birdie, however, born in 1967, symbolically comes to life after both Civil Rights Acts, thus legally possessing full political rights, reflected in her "right" to narrate the story (i.e. to use her political voice). Ironically though, as the white-looking offspring of Deck and Sandy, she was born in the year when Stokely Carmichael coined his famous phrase "Black Power".

In terms of its structure, the story of Birdie Lee's search for her (racial) identity is skillfully framed by the novel's opening and closing scenes. When read against each other, they reveal similar structure which employs comparable places, people, and actions. To an extent, the similarities and differences between these two important scenes express (in condensed form) the protagonist's development throughout the novel. As mentioned above, the prologue informs the reader that, at some point in her distant past, the protagonist, leaving Boston, disappeared into whiteness. Her abandoned home is referred to as a Roxbury playground; the people she leaves are her sister and schoolmates. Without a name or a history, as the narrator recounts, she has only her "body to fill in the blanks" (1). Whereas the opening scene, quite contrary to its function of introducing the protagonist, recounts her disappearance, the final scene describes her reemergence. Writing herself into her new life, Birdie Lee presents a detailed description of her surroundings, which stands in sharp contrast to the scant

description of the day of her disappearance. Instead, by naming streets, places and verbally painting her surroundings, Birdie draws the map of her new world. As she is restored to normality, the world around her comes to life again as does the city, awakening to life, on the early morning she describes. The act of writing herself into her surroundings is highly symbolic, for writing has been understood (and often equated) since the times of slavery “to the passage from slavery to freedom” (Gallego, 51). The possibility to “‘write themselves’ within the dominant white discourse” constituted an attempt “to turn their absence into presence” (Gallego, 51). Likewise, in *Caucasia*, Birdie Lee reemerges from her invisibility—the metaphor of hibernation from Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* immediately comes to mind—in order to make her story known, to demarcate the way she has traveled, and to firmly locate herself in the new surroundings.

The themes of losing and finding, forgetting and remembering, figure prominently in these two interrelated scenes. While the novel’s opening informs the reader that, embarking on her path of invisibility, Birdie retains a “memory of something lost”, the final scene shows the protagonist remembering what she “had already found” (i.e. Cole and possibly herself) (*Caucasia*, 413). Significantly, in the final scene, the allotment of the elements of presence and absence is reversed: instead of fleeing geographically and psychologically into whiteness, the ending presents the reader with a bus of school children disappearing out of Birdie’s sight. Among them is a cinnamon-skinned girl, a ghost of Cole so to say, whose departure proclaims a new phase in the protagonist’s life and, simultaneously, cuts the umbilical cord to the mirror image identification of Birdie with her sister. The protagonist resurfaces from her invisibility as a self-contained person; her further development, although not yet defined, is akin to the morning of her awakening (in more than one way) which she describes: “outside, it wasn’t quite clear what kind of day it would be. The air was crisp, and the sky was a bruise of colors from the just-rising sun” (413). The beautiful brightness of colors, accentuated by the somatic characteristic of a bruise, reflects the painful and traumatic past of the protagonist and of the

history of race relations. Despite the painful memory, it also signals the colorfulness and diversity that the future might bring.

Remarkably, exactly the same colors, yellow and black, appear in the two framing scenes: whereas in the opening it is Boston which is described as coming in “black and white, yellowing around the edges” (1), white is eliminated from the last scene, which describes, in its last sentence, the departing school bus, and the face of the Cole doppelgänger gone with it, “just a blur of yellow and black in motion” (413). Such differentiated literary use of similar elements in the opening and the final scene seems to draw on Lacan’s idea of units of meaning (signifiers) as “the topological substratum”, about which the term of the “‘signifying chain’ gives an approximate idea: links by which a necklace firmly hooks onto a link of another necklace made of links” (Lacan, 418). Since the connection between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary and subject to constant redefinition, it is obvious that also the meaning of the whole signifying chain is constantly in flux: the slightest change in one of the signifiers alters the overall interpretation. Hence, “it is in the chain of the signifiers that meaning *insists*, but that none of the chain’s elements *consists* in the signification it can provide at that very moment” (Lacan, 419). Likewise, the cinnamon-skinned face, the school children, and the colors in the opening scene are juxtaposed to their counterparts in the final scene in order to highlight their different role (changed content or meaning), or, to use Lacan’s metaphor, to show that the meaning that the rings in the chain convey has changed. The movement through the novel has led to a change of the signifiers’ meaning; the same linguistic names now differ with respect to what they refer to. The movement through the novel—geographic, temporal, and in the process of reading—explicates the movement through the signifying chain.

The idea of motion is important throughout the novel, and thus it is not surprising that it plays a crucial role in both scenes considered here. Birdie’s initial flight as a passenger in her mother’s car is contrasted to her recapturing control over her life, first by finding Cole in

California, and then, in the final scene, by crawling out of bed and going outside to meet the new day. While in the opening Birdie disappears, in the final scene she reemerges; she does not leave—she stays. What remains in motion, however, is the mirror image of racial mixture symbolized by the blurred face of the cinnamon-skinned girl in the bus. This is a sharp contrast to the influential presence of Cole, which initially dominated Birdie’s self-perception. Even during the period of Cole’s physical absence, the image of her face epitomizes an ideal which Birdie strives for. As she recollects, often she observed herself in the mirror in vain checking for signs of blackness, which she expected would surface in her physical appearance. Often thinking of her white appearance as a phase, she hoped that “if [she] was patient and good enough, [she] would transform into a black swan” (*Caucasia*, 180). Yet by the end of the novel, Cole’s face and its prominent influence which, throughout most of the novel, functions as a mirror image, leaves Birdie’s life, finally reduced to a ghostly presence. Cole is reshaped as a significant, but not a dominating other. The sisters still emerge as parts of a greater whole, but now they are on equal terms with each other.

The vaguely autobiographical narrative of Birdie’s coming-of-age presents a fictional engagement of the author with her personal experiences as part of the generation of mixed-raced youth growing up in the U.S. in the 1970s. Caught between the growing rejection of the idea of race as essence and the spreading consensus that race is a social construct, the children of the “Mulatto Millennium” experienced first-hand the impossibility of ignoring race despite increasing actions toward the end of *de jure* and *de facto* discrimination.⁹³ In the fictional figure of Birdie, Danzy Senna portrays the dilemma of light-skinned blacks who are frequently urged by their surroundings to identify themselves as *either* black *or* white. Despite the recognition that race should not matter anymore, Birdie observes that whatever idea or her own racial self-understanding she might possess, her surrounding will always try to infer her race judging upon her physical appearance. In other words, before she can identify herself, her

⁹³ See Danzy Senna’s essay “The Mulatto Millennium” (In: *‘Mixed Race’ Studies. A Reader*. Ifekwunigwe, Jayne O. Routledge, 2004, 205-213).

body will always speak for her. In a retrospective analysis of her childhood and teenage years, Birdie concludes that, while passing for white, she has let her body speak for her and has let herself be defined by it. Following the tradition of passers in classic passing narratives she reduces her physical appearance to being simply a vehicle, something she “traveled in”, and not the factor which determines her identity. Akin to James Weldon Johnson’s *Ex-Colored Man* and other literary passing figures, she is unable to assume any meaningful identification on the basis of outer appearance. Nevertheless, through the double construction of Cole and Birdie, Senna manages to go beyond the classic passing narratives which featured melodramas of inability to fully fit into homogenously white or black communities. Instead of locating the protagonist’s inner conflict in their view of blackness as a defect, as the passing figures of classic passing novels did, Senna constructs a narrative of Birdie, who strives to fulfil an ideal of blackness, as she sees it embodied in Cole.

Birdie’s story thus begins with her fixation on Cole’s face, followed by the account of her anxieties about the (in)appropriateness of her physical complexion to her respective black or white surroundings. Eventually, it develops all the way through to Birdie’s growing self-confidence about her racial identification as displayed in the closing scene of the novel. The struggle for recognition is the condition which characterizes Birdie Lee in *Caucasia*, and throughout her childhood and adolescence, she seeks an appropriate ideal she can identify with. As the protagonist describes,

[b]efore I ever saw myself, I saw my sister. When I was too small for mirrors, I saw her as the reflection that proved my own existence. Back then, I was content to see only Cole, three years older than me, and imagine that her face—cinnamon-skinned, curly-haired, serious—was my own. (*Caucasia*, 5)

Clearly, the author draws on Jacques Lacan’s theory about the mirror stage as a formative period in early childhood. According to Lacan, the mirror stage is

a drama whose internal pressure pushes precipitously from insufficiency to anticipation—and, for the subject caught up in the lure of spatial identification, turns out fantasies that proceed from a fragmented image of the body to what I will call an “orthopedic” form of its totality—and to the finally donned armor of

an alienating identity that will mark his entire mental development with its rigid structure. (Lacan, 97)

In the preceding quote, Birdie's sister Cole functions as the first significant other, a role normally fulfilled by the image of the mother. Birdie's anticipation as expressed in it is directed not towards her own (or her mother's) image in the mirror, but towards her sister's face, which is her imagined "orthopedic" form. The contradiction between the narrator's intention to present her "authentic" early childhood memories and the high level of self-reflection which discloses the adult, and not the young narrative voice uncovers the passage as Birdie's retrospective interpretation of her process of racial identification. In this way, within the logic of the novel, the substitution of the mother by the older sister and the confusion Birdie experiences stand for the dominance of Cole's face, and metaphorically, of the ideal of blackness of the era during which she grows up.

In this fictional adaptation of the Lacanian mirror stage, Birdie's self-image is shown to be not merely distorted by the mirror image's incompleteness and fragmentation, but is presented as a wholly confused one, misrecognizing her sister's face for her own. Metaphorically describing the situation common among the post-soul generation, Senna fictionalizes the circumstance that the then newly emerged, idealized image of blackness has led to profound confusion and identification problems for a whole generation of light-skinned African Americans, who came of age during the era of "Black is Beautiful". The positive re-signification of blackness soon turned into an obligation to conform to a certain way of enacting blackness, and excluded those who did not perform the role properly. Later, canonization of blackness and similar canonization of bi- or multiracialism became the target of the national pedagogical effort, which resulted in the explosion of mixed race studies and educational literature targeted at multiracial children. As Michelle Elam points out in her comprehensive work *The Souls of Mixed Folk: Race, Politics, and Aesthetics in the New Millennium*, "trying to account for multiple racial affiliations" nevertheless leaves unclear

whether establishing the category of mixed race “productively complicate(s) all racial boundaries” or whether it risks “instituting and reifying yet another kind of racial categorization” (51).

Apparently, the invocation of the mirror scene in the passing narrative of *Caucasia* is intentional, since the scene has become canonical in the classic narratives of passing in the decades around the 1900s. At some point in their story the passers usually observe their own reflection in the mirror with particular scrutiny, searching for signs of blackness. In numerous novels, this act of looking was somewhat similar to an inspection of the crime scene for any criminological evidence, since for most passers their first recognition of their blackness (or, more precisely, their non-whiteness) constituted the fall from innocence and resulted in their exclusion from the social and economic possibilities they regarded as available to them. As James Weldon Johnson’s *Ex-Colored Man* recounts, at first he “was afraid to look, but when (he) did (he) looked long and earnestly” (Johnson, 1989, 9). He then continues: “I noticed the ivory darkness of my eyes, and how the long black lashes that fringed and shaded them produced an effect that was strangely fascinating even to me. I noticed the softness and glossiness of my dark hair that fell in waves over my temples, making my forehead appear whiter than it really was” (9). Firmly connecting whiteness with beauty, the nameless protagonist then gazes at his mother “searching for defects” (10), which would explain why he cannot be white. Within this by now generic construct, the inner conflict of the protagonist can never be solved since he strives to reach the ideal of whiteness symbolized by his white-looking reflection in the mirror. He searches to fulfil a role (=whiteness) which his surroundings will deny him because of his African American origin except in the case of passing, which unavoidably leads to the protagonist’s inner conflict. These protagonists thus always fall into the category of tragic mulattos, since they are not content with living as blacks, and at the same time suffer from obliterating having to hide their blackness while

passing for white. They decide to abandon all family ties and pass, forever unable to heal the emotional cost of living in hiding.

In her renegotiation of the mirror scene, however, Senna substitutes the canonic and desirable image of whiteness with the desirable image of blackness represented by the face of Birdie's sister Cole. It is Cole's face that Birdie imagines as her own. As mentioned previously, this points towards the growing interpellative pressure on blacks to strive for a certain desirable performance of blackness. Urged by the desire to look like a black girl, Birdie lets her school friend Maria style her straight hair with a curling iron. Fascinated by her new look, Birdie imagines herself "to be just a girl who lives in this splendid pink-and-purple place where all furniture matched, a girl whose mother worked late nights as a nurse and whose big brother was in the Army. I imagined my name was not Birdie or Jesse or even Patrice, but Yolanda, and that Maria was one of my many cousins. I imagined myself Cape Verdean" (*Caucasia*, 69). Within this further variation of the mirror scene, the idea of racial affiliation based on the protagonist's physique is contrasted to the (stereotypical) image of blackness as class and ethno-racial affiliation. For Birdie, race remains an empty category, a circumstance which, however, does not diminish its influence on her life. At the same time, what is most interesting about the quote above is the conflation of time lines in the sentence describing Birdie's fantasy about an alternative name: among other declined names, she imagines that she would not be called Jesse, a name she adopts only later as her new Jewish American identity. This slip of tongue on the part of the narrating, adolescent Birdie exposes the unreliability of memory and her retrospective interpretation of the events of her childhood.

Significantly, the fact that the face in the "mirror" is not her own, but Cole's (or an approximation to Cole's face) means that Birdie can solve her inner conflict: in contrast to the passer's own mirror reflection, the external image (of Cole) can be abandoned. Birdie's emancipation occurs in the moment she recognizes that there is no need to resemble Cole, or any other black girl. The fact that, in the end of the novel, Birdie dispels her long-cherished

mirror image, paired with the maturity of the narrator's voice (which indicates temporal distance between Birdie's reunion with Cole's, and the time of narration), demonstrates the narrator's arrival at a certain image of herself, which is freed from the need to conform to a desirable ideal of race. The hint at this realization is communicated to the reader as early as in the beginning of the novel, when Birdie describes talking in the invented language Elemenó. As her sister Cole, the inventor of the language, explains to her, Elemenó is not only a language but also a tribe of people who can change their color at will and can fully disappear into their surroundings. Already as a child Birdie wonders about "the point of surviving if you had to disappear" (*Caucasia*, 8). Disappearance is also how she later describes the time spent as Jesse Goldman, when she had to conceal her African American family background.

In the closing scene, the veil of categorical black/white race-thinking is lifted and, for the first time, racial hybridity is referred to as something casual: "[The school children] were black and Mexican and Asian and white ... they were utterly ordinary" (*Caucasia*, 413). The seeming contradiction between Birdie's white appearance and her racially hybrid self-identification is challenged by her reference to a cinnamon-colored school girl as being "black, like me, a mixed girl", whereas (due to the narrator's own skin color) it is clear to the reader that, in this sentence, blackness is not used to designate the literal skin color. Consequently, in the course of the novel, the categories of blackness and whiteness mutate from being designations of physical features and the subsequent forceful inference of an essentially defined racial identity, to being understood as cultural constructions serving as options of (chosen) cultural affiliation. This last scene attests to the reversal of Birdie's identification process: While earlier in the novel Birdie measured herself against the skin tones of others, now it is she who functions as the point of departure for evaluating the whiteness or blackness of others.

Interpreted in the terms of psychoanalysis, the protagonist's dissociation from the image of the cinnamon-skinned girl designates Birdie's recognition of the impossibility of attaining the

pre-mirror stage unity of herself. The narrative of *Caucasia*, which constitutes the narrative recollection of Birdie's metaphoric passage through the mirror stage, presents a literary exploration of the subject's recognition that "it is this moment that decisively tips the whole of human knowledge [savoir] into being mediated by the other's desire, constitutes its objects in an abstract equivalence due to competition from other people" (Lacan, 98). Birdie's narrative quest for approximating a certain image of herself is explicated by the necessity to understand the racial dynamics within her surroundings. This circumstance is aptly reflected upon by the substitution of the conventional first significant other (the child's mother) by the older sister. Thus embodied in the figure of the sister is simultaneously the unattainable image of an ideal of race, which would forever differ from any image Birdie can construct of herself. I would suggest that within the psychoanalytical construct of the novel, by being displaced from her due position as the first and most important significant other, Birdie's mother is grouped together with the father, since, for Birdie, both of them are situated in the realm of the regulating Symbolic order. Only Cole, then, remains in the realm of the Imaginary, a place which she occupied long before Birdie could distinguish between the demarcations of her own and her sister's bodies. As she recounts, "[Cole's] face was me and I was that face and that was how the story went" (5). Later the image of Cole's face functions as an ideal, towards which Birdie's "internal pressure pushes [her] precipitously from insufficiency to anticipation" (Lacan, 93), the anticipation being that one day she will turn into a 'black swan'. The insecurities about her inability to approach this racial ideal characterize Birdie's coming-of-age until eventually she abandons the wish to reach the ideal of blackness symbolized in the figure of her older sister.

4.2. LANGUAGE, NARRATIVE VOICE, AND AGENCY

The aspects of agency and representation, the right to tell one's own story, have always been crucial to literature on race. Taking its origins from the slave narrative, when ex-slaves took to

writing in order to present their story to the readers, narratives of passing functioned as empowering acts by (fictional or real) racial passers, by which they reinscribed themselves into the world in which they were otherwise invisible. The examination of who is and, by inversion, who is not speaking, and of the issues of agency and representation is thus instrumental in the analysis of passing narratives in general and in my close reading of *Caucasia* in particular. Borrowing from psychoanalytical theory which states that the ability to master our surroundings comes through language acquisition, it becomes all the more important to examine closely the connection between language, narrative voice, and agency in Birdie's fictional narrative.⁹⁴ In his interpretation of Freud's ideas about the fort-da game Lacan, for example, concludes that the child learns to symbolize and how to "destroy the object that it causes to appear and disappear by bringing about its absence and presence in advance" (Lacan, 319).⁹⁵ As Lacan continues, "should the child now address an imaginary or real partner, he will see that this partner too obeys the negativity of his discourse, and since his call has the effect of making the partner slip away, he will seek to bring about the reversal that brings the partner back to his desire through a banishing summons (ibid).

In the light of this observation, it is striking that, as Ibrahim points out, the African American figures Cole and Deck are present in the novel only as absences and only through Birdie's voice. So, Ibrahim continues,

if the task [of the novel] were to imagine U.S. culture organized around a multiracialism that would disarm all racial ideology, then the approach taken here is to posit a speaking, actualized, racial subject—who through narration is extended into the post-integration future—against what are effectively phantoms of racialism's past (Ibrahim, 162).

⁹⁴ Freud, Sigmund. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Edited by J. Strachey. (Norton, 1961), 13-17.

⁹⁵ In his work *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (p. 8-11), Sigmund Freud describes his eighteen-month-old grandson's game with a wooden reel tied to a piece of string. The game, which Freud from then on referred to as fort-da Spiel, consisted in throwing the reel over the edge of a cot, and then retrieving it, respectively vocalizing his actions as fort! (gone) and da! (here). Freud interpreted the infant's game as the game of disappearance and return, eventually symbolizing the absence and presence of his mother. For Lacan's interpretation of the fort-da game see his essay "Function of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis" in *Écrits: A Selection* (103-113, especially 103-104).

However, it should be added, the phantoms of the past (which include not only the ideal of whiteness, but also the ideal of blackness) seem to exercise a strong pull on the actualized racial subject, for, as we see in Birdie Lee, for the most part of the novel the only way for her to come to terms with her racial identity is to reunite with Cole. This, though, does not imply that Birdie still shapes her own identity by taking Cole as her role model; rather, I would argue, the novel puts forth the idea that, for a meaningful identity, Birdie has to resurrect her previous role model and restore the connection to her “fellow” canary bird Cole.

This circumstance is grounded mainly in the construct of the novel, since both sisters gradually lose connection to their parents. The blackness that Birdie visually lacks and Cole shares with their father no longer serves as a binding, connecting factor in the father-daughter relationship. In contradiction to his academic work, in which he argues that race is a construct and should not matter, Deck Lee cannot connect with his white-looking daughter, and also gradually loses the attention of his favored child, Cole—the circumstance which Ibrahim in her analysis attributes to the different subject positions of Deck and Cole, meaning age, gender, and social position.⁹⁶ As Ibrahim points out, this illustrates how “racial communities are already fraught with multiple disjunctions of experience” (165).⁹⁷ Thus, Deck Lee fails to see that his lectures on the topic of race miss Cole’s ears and are taken in by Birdie, who vocalizes them in her narration. Drawing on Ibrahim’s idea that, due to “multiple intersections between race and other identity positions, (...) Birdie’s blackness, like her older sister Cole’s, is differently determined than Deck’s” (Ibrahim, 165), I believe that, by highlighting these disjunctions in the parent’s and the children’s subject positions, the novel suggests that connections between the members of the same generation outweigh those established along

⁹⁶ Although in his theoretical writing Deck Lee seeks to contest racial essentialism, the novel exposes his unconscious adherence to it, as exemplified for instance in his preference of the dark-skinned daughter Cole over light-skinned Birdie.

⁹⁷ Recently, a number of scholars have pointed out the growing differentialization of experiences connected with victimization and minority status and the fact that this development impedes group affiliations. Among others, Homi Bhabha argues that due to the evolving “culture of disparate ‘interest groups’, (...) affiliation may be antagonistic and ambivalent; solidarity may be only situational and strategic: commonality is often negotiated through the ‘contingency’ of social interest and political claims” (Bhabha, 1996, 59).

the lines of racial affiliation. Once each of the sisters surpasses the childhood's affectionate connection to the respectively more similar looking parent, they discern the outdatedness of the parent's position. Sandy's dubious activity within the radical Black Power movement then becomes as abstruse and meaningless as Deck's self-absorbed, out-of-touch with reality theorizing. In the end, what counts more is the connection to "a medley of mulatto children, canaries who had in fact survived the coal mine, singed and asthmatic, but still alive" (*Caucasia*, 412). As Mark Anthony Neal notes in his study *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic*, although the post-soul generation profited from the successes of the movement, they are "divorced from the nostalgia associated with those successes and thus positioned to critically engage the movement's legacy from a state of objectivity that the traditional civil rights leadership is both unwilling and incapable of doing" (103). The novel foregrounds the value of common experience and makes a case for the possibility of meaningful interpersonal emotional engagement. On the metanarrative level, this translates into the contemporary novels' effort to "situate themselves in an ongoing negotiation of race's socio-cultural implications, and they do so through making the abstract concrete by tying it to the level of personal experience" (Gruber, 102).

What also distinctly stands out in the novel is the monodirectionality of the parents' communication with their daughters: both Deck and Sandy talk to their daughters without ever actually inquiring about their points of view. While in their childhood, Cole and Birdie discuss the problems they encounter in an invented language they call Elemenno, which points to the dialogue between them, all interaction with their parents (Sandy's gradual retreat into the cellar and her radical activist work, as well as Deck's lengthy lectures on race) mostly occurs in the form of a monologue. The answers to the questions that Deck sometimes asks Cole are standardized responses, which are expected from her, and therefore do not count as meaningful replies in a dialogue. Usually, when spotting socially problematic situations or discriminatory representations of race, Deck Lee prompts Cole to tell him "what is wrong

with that picture". To this, bored Cole often shrugs, as if "she didn't seem to remember the right answer—or perhaps didn't care" (*Caucasia*, 72). Although Birdie, the "unintentional" target of Deck's question (Ibrahim, 165), eager for her father's recognition, often correctly responds to him, her father does not seem to hear her. Instead, he is only pleased once Cole answers (referring to the "What's Happening" sitcom, which she actually secretly enjoys), "[w]hite people love to see us making fools of ourselves. It makes them feel safe" (*Caucasia*, 73). The beat-up, trained response combined with the overall dysfunction of communication in this family triangle highlight the gap between the worlds of the daughters and of their father, and, by implication, between generations and subjectivities, what Neal calls the divorce "from the nostalgia associated" with the struggle for civil rights. Eventually, in the end of the novel, when Birdie meets her father in Oakland, his lecturing on race is, perhaps for the first time, addressed to her instead of Cole, but it is too late: like Cole before her, Birdie is tired of listening to her father's theories. As she describes, "[a]fter a while I didn't really register what he was saying, just the sound of his voice bouncing off the glass" (*Caucasia*, 397). The monodirectionality of Deck's talks makes it impossible to transform them into dialogues: after asking Birdie whether she had read Frantz Fanon, he cuts her off before she can open her mouth, wanting to quote his work.

Via the fictional figure of Deck Lee, a profound critique of the African American intellectual finds its way into the novel. Although theorizing on race is emphasized as a significant factor of influence in the narrator's coming of age (Frantz Fanon's works are shown to function almost as a curriculum part of post-Civil Rights Era black upbringing—compare the similar situation in Durrow's *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky*), in the end, it is attacked as a limiting and suffocating theoretical frame, which reduces actual individuals to empty signifiers. Here, the figure of the father has a double role. As Kenneth Millard points out, within the structure of the coming-of-age novels, "finding a place in society is coterminous with finding a satisfactory relationship with the father", since he represents the

authority of social and cultural governance (15). In addition, within the construct of *Caucasia*, for Birdie, her father Deck Lee assumes the role of the cultural authority on the part of African Americans. Pursuing this metonymy further, one can say that often Black activists and intellectuals have at best ignored and at worst subsumed the group of light-skinned African Americans, denying them a possibility of double affiliation. An overarching metaphor of this development can be found in the elaborate chart called “Canaries in the Coal Mine”, which Birdie finds in his father’s apartment. As the narrator describes, the chart “depict(s) a row of pictures of mulattos throughout history” (*Caucasia*, 393). Lumped together in it are Alexander Pushkin, Phillipa Schuyler, Nella Larsen, and Jean Toomer, and the only factor uniting them seems to be their fate as “tragic mulattos”. Having all suffered “desolate or violent deaths” (392), these pictures stand in sharp contrast to the pictures of Cole and Birdie tucked underneath. Although for Deck Lee, his daughters symbolize “the first generation of canaries to survive, a little injured, perhaps, but alive” (393), he cannot see the forced victimization such framing does to Cole and Birdie. Similar to Rebecca Walker, who in her autobiography writes “I am not a bastard, the product of rape, the child of some white devil. I am a Movement Child. (...) I am not tragic” (Walker, 24), Birdie—and on the metanarrative level the passer—refuses to be categorized as tragic. She is disgusted by her own and “Cole’s face on the bottom of this row of history’s victims” (*Caucasia*, 393), and her repulsion leads to the first ever argument between her and Deck, in which she confronts him with the questions and confused feelings that have plagued her all the years. Seeing her own face associated with tragic victims of the history of racial discrimination becomes an empowering experience for Birdie, who finally acquires a (political) voice.

A further important comment on racial identification made by Senna’s neorealist novel concerns the invented language Elemeno. As Kenneth Millard suggests, coming-of-age novels acknowledge “that the story of the self can only be conducted in a language which is to some extent prescribed” (Millard, 98). For an adolescent subject of mixed racial origin, language

gains in significance, since the individual has to express herself within the linguistic net of an already defined and prescribed racial vocabulary. As Millard notes, while many racially mixed protagonists of contemporary American fiction seek to challenge the concept of race, “their struggle to transgress racial norms and create new ethnicities for themselves are invariably contained and compromised by the old, indelible markers of race and by the limitations of language itself” (Millard, 152). Nevertheless, although it is clear that existing linguistic terms limit the subject’s way of self-expression, up to now “no new lexicon has emerged to replace them” (Freedman qtd. in Millard, 152). Thus, just as the Strom family in *The Time of Our Singing* reaches out to music as an alternative means of self-expression, so do the sisters Cole and Birdie Lee in *Caucasia*, when they invent and practice their own language Elemeno. Aware of the restrictions of the “prison-house of language”,⁹⁸ these novels “manage to conduct an analytical commentary on the form of the narrative while telling their respective stories, and this makes them both particularly subtle and sophisticated interpretations of the genre” (Millard, 98).

Elemeno is referred to by different parties either in overtly negative or positive terms, ranging from the white grandmother’s advice to show the children, who speak in tongues, to a psychiatrist, to their father’s authenticating characterization of Elemeno as “high-speed patois” (*Caucasia*, 6). For the sisters, Elemeno functions as an alternative way of communication in the sense that it avoids the traps of racial categorization inherent in the language of the grown-ups. This position is communicated to the reader from the level of the main protagonist and her sister. However, the novel also signals that the depiction of Elemeno as an alternative way of communication is illusory, and its superiority to English are subtly undercut by the described moment of Birdie’s entry into the language of Elemeno. As she remembers,

⁹⁸ The term “prison-house of language” is usually attributed to Nietzsche. The phrase re-emerged in critical discussions after the publication of Fredric Jameson’s study *The Prison-House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism* (Princeton UP, 1972).

Cole insists that it [speaking Elemenno] began before I was born, when I was just a translucent ball in my mother's womb. Cole would lean her high forehead down to the pale balloon of our mother's belly and tell me secrets with her three-year-old gibberish genius, all the while using her finger to trace a kind of invisible hieroglyphics against our mother's swollen flesh (*Caucasia*, 5).

The situation described in this opening scene of the novel (and thereby informing the rest of it) illustrates Lacan's assertion that "language, with its structure, exists prior to each subject's entry into it at a certain moment in his mental development" (Lacan, 413). Although Cole's language of Elemenno and Birdie's ability to participate in its creation might seem to both girls as a better alternative to English, the novel features Birdie as a main protagonist, and it is *her* narrative that (by alluding to the moment of her entry into the system of language) is characterized as preformed and predefined by the already existing conventions of language and meaning. Since the connection between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary and presents only the society's decision to agree upon it at a given moment, time, and place, the only structural difference of Elemenno in comparison to English is the language's author: (literally) Cole and (metonymically) the racially mixed, darker-skinned Black and Beautiful generation. However, since it is Cole who invented Elemenno, it remains just another system of meaning, which Birdie as a subject is born into. Although, as one possible interpretation might suggest, by alliteration and phonetic resemblance of its name, Elemenno seeks to *eliminate* the restrictions English imposes upon the subject racialized by it, the new invented language obeys the same principles of the relativity of meaning and of the elusiveness of the signified. Metaphorically, however, it points to the (racially mixed) in-group's wish to develop a new form of interpersonal understanding, and to the outsiders' inability to access it or even take it seriously. As Lacan remarks, "what this structure of the signifying chain discloses is the possibility I have—precisely insofar as I share its language [langue] with other subjects, that is, insofar as this language [langue] exists—to use it to signify something altogether different from what it says" (Lacan, 420-421). The possibility of resignification is

the instrument which the protagonists use in order to devise an alternative way of communication.

Within this context, Birdie's mother's occupation as a teacher for dyslexic kids becomes highly symbolic. While her ability to reach and help children with learning disabilities is described as astonishingly effective, her professional skill does not help her to find a suitable language of communication with her own daughters. Analogous to dyslexic children who encounter reading difficulties, Birdie's ability to "read" her environment is impaired, and neither her parents, nor her darker-skinned sister can adequately help her. This lack in racial education in her family resembles the upbringing of Jonah and Joseph Strom in *The Time of Our Singing*, which similarly failed to equip the brothers with knowledge of how to deal with their racially ambivalent position on the verge of the color line.

As Lacan points out, "the subject, while he may appear to be the slave of language, is still more the slave of a discourse in the universal movement of which his place is already inscribed at his birth, if only in the form of his proper name" (Lacan, 496). In literature, naming (or namelessness) has been traditionally used to reflect upon the conditions of slaves, who were named by their masters and whose last names usually indicated their legal status as their master's property. Inventing a new name or disclosing the real one has thus been a generic feature of both the slave and the passing narrative. It is only logical that *Caucasia* also takes up the theme of naming in its renegotiation of the passing figure. The degree of Birdie's racial confusion and her position in the crossfire between black and white is reflected in her name: 'Birdie' is a result of her parents' inability to arrive at a consensus concerning naming their child. While her father chooses Patrice (after Patrice Lumumba, the Congolese independence leader), her mother wishes to name her Jesse, after her great-grandmother, a white suffragette (*Caucasia*, 19). Her sister Cole starts calling her Birdie—"she wanted a parakeet for her birthday and instead got me [Birdie]" (19). Gradually, after the confusing situation when Birdie "answered to all three names with a schizophrenic zeal" (19), the

parents resort to the name Birdie. However, in a highly symbolic gesture, her birth certificate reads “Baby Lee” for the rest of her life, as if to indicate her lack of agency and the inability to become an adult. In the same way that the namelessness of Johnson’s *Ex-Colored Man* “seems to hint at a lack of definition that equates him to the condition of slaves who possess neither voice nor sense of identity” (Gallego, 52), the white/black clash concerning Birdie’s name comments on the inability of both sides to adequately deal with their mixed offspring. Like a resonance of the slave era when the slave master laid a property claim upon the slave by naming him/her, both Deck and Sandy try to claim the child for a certain political tradition which they identify themselves with. In a symbolic restoration of the agency to the emerging generation of mixed-raced children, Cole provides her sister with the name that she will keep. Within the setup of the confrontation between her parents’ idea(l)s, Birdie’s life becomes dominated by the mutually exclusive ideals of iconic whiteness and blackness, which seem to be impossible to reconcile with each other. As Eva Gruber remarks in her analysis of *Caucasia*,

that Senna’s text exposes this idealistic claim [about race as a matter of personal choice] as illusory is not to say that it entirely discards performative aspects of race and identity; quite in contrast, it often emphasizes how crucially patterns of interpellation and performativity figure in processes of racial identification. It visualizes, however, the limits of self-determination and constructivism in a society in which race-thinking still offers only two categories: either/or. (Gruber, 97)

Through narrative reconstruction, Birdie attempts to comprehend her childhood and adolescent years of living on the verge of the color line, being neither black, nor white, yet both.

4.3. “THERE’S A MIRROR LOOKING BACK AT YOU”

Mirror, mirror, on the wall
Tell me mirror, what is wrong?
De La Soul, *Me, myself and I* (lyrics)

Through the narrative of Birdie Lee, *Caucasia* effectively contrasts the nonexistence of race as a scientific given with the widespread assumption of the significance of physical appearance in determining a person’s character, intellect and physical ability. From the very beginning of the novel, the motif of looking at oneself and of being looked at by others takes on a life of its own and guides the reader through Birdie’s negotiation of her racial identification with the outside. What *Caucasia* makes clear about the process of looking and of introspection is that, at some point in the child’s life, there is a stage which alters the process of looking at oneself. As long as Birdie looks at Cole and imagines her to be her own reflection, her look can be called mono-directional. However, once Birdie is old enough to register (although certainly not yet fully interpret) the way she is seen by others, she encounters the discrepancy between her own self-perception and the perception of her by others; in short, suddenly the mirror is looking back at her.

This realization is irreversible and causes the protagonist to develop a keen sense of registering (and later) interpreting the looks of others. Although the position of the passer certainly cannot be equally compared with the objectifying white gaze cast on a dark-skinned person (who cannot withdraw into the safety of white appearance), it lacks what dark skin provides: certainty. Whereas a black person can obtain a (positively or negatively charged) certainty about her identity, the passer remains forever ambiguous and therefore exposed to the questioning and scrutinizing gazes of others.⁹⁹ Instead of Frantz Fanon’s famous “Look, a Negro!” which, as he pointed out, fixes the person like “a chemical solution is fixed by a dye”

⁹⁹ Similarly, for Cole, claiming white descent is often as difficult as claiming blackness is for Birdie. For instance, *Caucasia* depicts the usual unease with which whites acknowledge Cole and Birdie as sisters, and both as Sandy Lee’s daughters.

(Fanon, 82), there is an eternal question mark of “What exactly are you?”. Although at first glance this instability might seem the lesser evil, it bears the danger of leaving the individual with a feeling of profound displacement. Such is the case with Birdie Lee, who can neither fully connect to her African-American father, who obviously shuns her whiteness as a kind of reminder of his failed interracial marriage, nor to her mother, who in turn cannot grasp her daughter’s experiences of racial confusion. The rejection of Birdie by her father is conceived in the novel both as a plot line depicting the protagonist’s frustration with her parent, and as a sharp criticism of African-American communities which often exclude nearly white looking individuals of mixed race, or at least view them with suspicion. As Michele Elam remarks in her analysis of *Caucasia*, Birdie “bears witness to the hypocrisy of her elementary school’s ideals—its Nkrumah-inspired nationalism leads students to honor ‘mulatto heroes’ (42-45) and yet to shun her as not black enough” (103).

Significantly, it is the Nkrumah elementary school in Roxbury where Birdie first learns about race. Similar to the secluded space within the home of the Strom family in *The Time of Our Singing*, Cole and Birdie are first homeschooled by their mother, who wishes to keep her daughters “safe from the racism and violence of the world” (*Caucasia*, 26). Of course, akin to the Strom’s homeschooling, Sandy Lee’s project also fails the minute the girls have to confront the outside world, which places them within the black/white dichotomy. In a provocative reversal of the typical passing narrative scenario, however, Senna’s protagonists are not faced with their inability to fully perform whiteness, but are exposed to the pressure of performing blackness. Needless to say, the nearly white Birdie is met with suspicion and envy by her black classmates, and can adapt to her surroundings only after her sister openly declares their familial relation. Yet despite her African American features, even Cole is subjected to the scrutiny of her black classmates’ gaze. Due to their homeschooling, the lack of contact to other black or mixed-raced children did not provide the girls with the knowledge of behavior and language patterns common among the children in their neighborhood. As a

result, in their naïve attempt to fit into their new surroundings, the girls learn that they “talk like white girls” (53), an observation that they symptomatically feel in their encounters with black classmates and which they discover in *Ebony* magazine. Cole’s comment, “[w]e don’t talk like black people. It says so in this article” (53) illustrates the crooked logic of racial authenticity: while black skin, hair texture, and facial features are enough to put an individual into the category “non-white”, they do not suffice for a full recognition as black. It is this paradox that lies at the heart of the novel, and which constitutes a revision to the genre of the passing narrative. Formerly, it has always been the passer who turned his/her back to the black community and fled into whiteness. Regardless of enduring colorism among African Americans and the envy or animosities which often arose on the subject of skin tone, the affiliation within the black community was usually not questioned. In her reflection upon the atmosphere of Boston in the 1960s and 1970s, Senna uses the figure of the passer to explicate the performative aspect of race: between the idea that race does not exist and the fact that it still functions as an organizing principle in political, social and cultural life lies the recognition that race is performed by everyone, at any given time and place. As Michele Elam observes, in *Caucasia* “racial passing is borne again, reanimated as an interpretative mode of both social inquiry and literary analysis”; it “enables incomparable epistemic insight into class and racial inequities” (98).

As the girls gradually learn, performing blackness at the Nkrumah elementary school requires braided hair, lotion for dry, “ashy” knees, huge golden earrings and talking slang. The importance of performing blackness in a way that corresponds to contemporaneous “authenticating” patterns of styling and behavior is also communicated to the girls by their father and his new girlfriend. As previously mentioned, Deck Lee can be seen as passing for black, a “race man” lurking in the novel, which explains his zeal to copy popular slang and way of talking. His performance as a “race man” follows the same principles as the performance of “keeping it real” which became widespread with the rise of hip-hop culture of

the 1990s. As Henry J. Elam explicates, “‘keeping it real’ potentially ties the black performer to the black collective while drawing borders around his or her practice and how that practice relates to, or is true to, his or her community” (556). He further points out that, while “rap in performance may exalt in the flash and splash of self-conscious self-presentation, it simultaneously celebrates the seeming authenticity of ‘realness’” (ibid). It is all the more telling that, as a scholar working on the subject of race and teaching his daughters that race does not exist, Deck Lee resorts to imitating the “coolness” of a “race man” in order to gain acceptance among his friends. Thus, his fictional figure is constructed as a means of illustrating the paradox of race as a myth with manifest consequences.

The profound irony intrinsic in the figure of Deck Lee is that, as an intellectual working on the subject of race, he concentrates only on his more African-looking daughter Cole, lecturing her on the conditions of African Americans in the United States. While they talk, Birdie, who is desperately trying to gain her father’s attention, resorts to “slapstick routines—by doing a chicken dance across the living room (...), by balancing a spoon on the tip of [her] nose, or eating [her] cereal on [her] hands and knees on the floor in the pantry” (*Caucasia*, 74). However, as Birdie recounts, her humor “was too slapstick for [her] father” and certainly fails to earn her the desired recognition (74). The “othering” and alienation which Birdie experiences from her father continues once she starts going to an all-black school, where she encounters suspicious treatment and often openly hostile attitudes. Her fair skin and straight hair are perceived as a warning sign of sorts, signaling otherness to her darker-skinned co-students. The scrutinizing black gaze thereby mirrors the white gaze usually cast on blacks: it reduces Birdie Lee to a marker of whiteness and implies her foreignness to the environment. Once her sister Cole announces Birdie as her sister to other school children, the “fact” of Birdie’s blackness is openly acknowledged by her classmates (“So, you black?” *Caucasia*, 63), albeit with reserve and suspicion. The light-skinned individual must therefore legitimize her presence within the black community. Without Cole as her link to it, Birdie is not

accepted as a black person: not by the black community, and not by the white one (compare the scene in a park when Deck Lee has to prove himself as Birdie's father after a white couple notified the police: *Caucasia*, 59-61). However, being mixed, Birdie also cannot obliterate her blackness and act white, since she identifies with both blackness and whiteness. The pressure to drop one of the racial affiliations results in feelings of alienation within both of these mutually exclusive realms.

The years of Birdie's childhood and adolescence precede the celebratory multiculturalist rhetoric of the eighties and nineties, and so the reader finds her deeply confused by having to cope first in an all-black school in Boston, and then in the all-white surroundings of New Hampshire under the false identity of Jesse Goldman. While passing for white, Birdie/Jessie does not feel content, partly because of the separation from her sister and father, and partly due to the homogenous WASP surroundings she finds there. The novel does not specify the level of involvement of Birdie's mother Sandy in radical activities and leaves open the question concerning the real necessity of fleeing from Boston. However, it seems likely that pursuit by the FBI is a fixation that Sandy develops and eventually retains. The prospect of a return to Boston and of reuniting with Cole and Deck reeks of a hope-instilling lie meant to quiet Birdie; the whole trip appears to function as a childish revenge on Deck Lee moving to Brazil with his new hip girlfriend. After several years of being on the road, Sandy finally decides to settle down in New Hampshire, where she rents a little house belonging to Walter Marsh, professor of English, and his wife. The middle-aged couple, recognizing in Sandy's behavior her elitist New England upbringing, readily buy her story about a deceased Jewish husband and the need to change location. The narrator, noting that "they saw a woman and a child. No man? No problem! They knew she was one of them" (*Caucasia*, 150), underscores the importance of the cultural protocol in dealing with race and class. Birdie's remark implicitly points to the impossibility of a reversed case of a black single mother being accepted as a lodger at the Marshes' little house.

While in New Hampshire where, as Birdie recounts, part of her wanted to stay and which another part of her viewed as a temporary place of living, the protagonist learns to blend into the white, mainly lower-class group of teenagers at her new school. Here, the novel once more underscores the impossibility to talk about race without talking about class. The correct repetition of language and behavior typical to a certain class is instrumental for successful passing. A clear parallel can be detected between Birdie's passing for a white teenager and her acculturation to the black surroundings of the Nkrumah School, where she "learned the art of changing ... a skill that would later become [her] second nature" (62). Whereas dressing and talking like her fellow classmates constitute the easier elements of blending in, the inner feeling of a connection to her surroundings remains an illusion. Full emotional investment in the WASP culture of New Hampshire collapses on the subject of race; Birdie's alienation surfaces most sharply in moments when she has to witness racially derogatory remarks or jokes, which she has to endure in order not to reveal her true identity. During the time in hiding, Birdie perceives romantic relations with white men (whether in the case of her mother's boyfriend Jim, or her own brief infatuation with the Marshes' son Nicholas) as a menace, threatening to turn the game of living undercover into a real and permanent condition, eliminating the possibility of a family reunion. While she views her mother's flirtation with white men as betrayal of her father, her own romantic feelings are more complicated. As Birdie recounts her feelings toward Nicholas, "touching him felt too real, proof that the game had gone too far. It wasn't Birdie, but Jesse, who lay beneath him" (*Caucasia*, 203).

Evidently, apart from reengaging with the motif of passing, *Caucasia* also displays characteristics of a *Bildungsroman*.¹⁰⁰ On her way to adulthood, Birdie encounters major

¹⁰⁰ A detailed discussion of the genre of the *Bildungsroman* can be found (among others) in Jerome Buckley's *Season of Youth: The Bildungsroman from Dickens to Golding* (Harvard UP, 1974), Ray L. Ackerman's *Bildung and Verbildung in the Prose Fiction Works of Otto Julius Bierbaum* (Herbert Lang Bern, 1974), or Franco Moretti's *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture* (Verso, 2000). For the purposes of the present thesis, it will suffice to mention that the *Bildungsroman*, which emerged in the late eighteenth century

discord between her self-perception and the way she is perceived by others. Similar to protagonists in classical *Bildungsroman*, Birdie tries to find ways to deal with this discord, although the novel certainly does not suggest the utopian possibility of bringing both into harmonic coexistence. Her mixed-race origin confronts Birdie with two systems of meaning, the dominant white and the subordinate (but not less coercive) black one, both of which seek to prescribe modes of appropriate self-definition and behavior. The narrative of *Caucasia* fictionalizes experience of light-skinned African Americans who, like Birdie, try to find their own place in the social grid of ethno-racial identification by putting on various ethnic, gender, and class roles, trying them on not unlike clothes, checking the reactions of the surrounding society. These self-fashioning practices, which are characterized here within the practice of passing, constitute the *Bildungsweg*, the educational process of self-finding of light-skinned adolescent protagonists.

Furthermore, as was already mentioned, succeeding not just one, but two distinct American literary traditions, the passing and the slave narrative, *Caucasia* and other contemporary novels of passing feature protagonists who are moving not only from innocence to experience, but are also moving geographically, changing places and establishing their emotional attachment to these places. As Kenneth Millard argues in his study *Coming of Age in Contemporary American Fiction*, it is important to recognize the “association between movement and reincarnation”; since a “shift in location is accompanied by an important shift in subjectivity”, a new place is often “coterminous with a significantly new sense of self; it is

Germany, usually refers to novels which feature the protagonists’ process of self-formation, from childhood through adolescence to adulthood, generally identifying Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (1795/96) as the first of its kind. Typically, the individual finds himself (since, originally, the novels featured male protagonists) in conflict with his surroundings and its mores and, through the process of personal growth and acculturation, finds his way of harmonic life within his social surroundings. With the rise of women’s fiction and the developments in literary and critical theory, twentieth century’s critics have criticized the genre’s centeredness on a (white) male protagonist; some have even argued that, since postmodern societies deny a possibility of a unified self, the *Bildungsroman* is a dead genre (Karafilis, 63). However, a great number of novels and the corresponding critical discussions attest to the fact that the genre is far from gone; instead, women and ethnic writers have started to make use of this established form to describe the coming to age of young protagonists, who undergo the process of identity formation against the racism and sexism they encounter in their surroundings. Such reengagements with the form can be said to have given *Bildungsroman* a further development, enriching it with narratives of coming-of-age by marginalized subjects.

the structure of ‘born again’” (Millard, 16). Considering the construct of the passing novel against the genre of the slave narrative discloses that narratives of passing not only retained the strong autobiographic disposition, but also inherited the need for geographical movement from its literary predecessor, where a change of location was an indispensable element. For the conventional passing novel, moving to new locations also reduced the risk of being discovered. Within the structure of the recent novels of passing, geographical movement has strong features of a spiritual search for the self, and serves as a broader scene for experimental self-fashioning. Taking the reader on a tour through different local, class, and gender identities, the liminal figure of the passer shares with the reader her refined sense of living on the edge of the color/class/gender lines. In addition, one can say that, because contemporary novels modify the notion of passing to include, for example, Jonah and Joseph Strom’s artistic careers as versions of passing, but also expose the “blending in” behavior of the protagonists, passing no longer *per se* necessitates a change of geographic location. For example, when the light-skinned Birdie Lee in *Caucasia* attends the all-black Nkrumah school, she passes for black, since she engages in a performance of expected behavior associated with acceptable ideals of blackness, which does not correspond her inner self-perception. Therefore, her passing is staged within her immediate surroundings, since her classmates are aware of her “true” identity. A similar case is presented in the protagonist of Durrow’s novel *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky* (2010), who is not forced to conceal the white/Danish part of her identity, but is strongly discouraged to remember it or live it out. Thus, her performance as a black girl is perceived and narrated as passing.

In her fictional engagement with the themes of adolescence and processes of racial identification, Danzy Senna thus offers her readers an updated version of the figure of the racial passer: a passer of the post-soul generation. By depicting Birdie’s difficulties in performing both the role of a black and of a white girl, the novel exposes the absurdity of mutually exclusive racial categorization, and the impossibility to represent racial hybridity

through social codes. Through the narrative of the main protagonist, the novel not only explicates the influence of the ideal of whiteness on individuals of mixed racial origin, but with equal strength insists on the suffocating restrictions of the ideal of blackness, which, like its white counterpart, strictly regulates the limits of its acceptable performance.

4.4. CONTEMPORARY NOVELS OF PASSING AND THE POST-SOUL GENERATION

...one of the greatest jokes in the world is the spectacle of
the whites busy escaping blackness and becoming
blacker every day, and the blacks striving
towards whiteness, becoming quite dull and gray.
Invisible Man, Ralph Ellison

As follows from the above analysis, *Caucasia* features a protagonist who, in a seemingly contradictory manner, wishes to do away with racial differences and at the same time tries to retain her mixed racial heritage. In order to accomplish this difficult task of constant renegotiation of Birdie's racial identification, the novel spurs the reader to engage actively in the process of meaning-making. The use of realist effects in the novel invites the reader to partake in Birdie's childhood and adolescence. This connects the novel to the tradition of American Realism, which was invested in the belief of "the transformation potential of direct experience" (Fluck, 1992a, 301) and thus saw experience as an attestable, empirical basis for a broad social consensus (ibid., 5).¹⁰¹ However, it is needless to say that *Caucasia* does not and cannot resort to classic realism without bearing signs of the theoretical developments of the twentieth century. The realism after postmodernism surfaces in *Caucasia* especially in the instability of the processes of signification. The category of race cannot provide Birdie with any palpable point of reference, although it nevertheless continues to influence her life. Her parents are depicted as contemporary versions of Don Quixote, fighting imaginary windmills: neither Deck Lee's theoretical writing nor Sandy Lee's radical activity seem to produce any

¹⁰¹ Own translation.

effect on their surroundings. The destabilization of meaning staged in *Caucasia* (and in other neorealist novels) reflects realism's loss of authority, which Fluck parallels to "a corresponding loss of authority of that intellectual system in whose service realism stood in the United States for most of the twentieth century, the liberal tradition ... and its belief in the function of experience as a moral agent" (Fluck, 1992a, 66). However, through Birdie's narrative, Senna seeks to counter the complete dissolution of the subject. She insists on the possibility of constructing a functioning version of reality, in which the reader can partake, identify with, and share experiences of fictional protagonists, without forgetting that this reality is only one among its numerous other versions. Birdie's journey shows the reader the impossibility of the fixation of meaning. To use Habib's apt phrasing, we can say that "each signified is the 'same' country, traversed from different points of view; the difference in point of view, however, creates a difference in the signified" (595). On the level of the plot, this realization is expressed, for instance, in the aspect of traveling: a new location creates a new vision. Thus Birdie's physical movement metaphorically stands for her intellectual development, for her moving through nets of meaning.

If constructing a palpable sense of self has been an issue in realist novels on passing, it became all the more important after post-structuralism and the growing dissolution of the subject. As Susanne Rohr points out in her engagement with Paul Auster's *Moon Palace*—an observation that also holds true for *Caucasia*—"the basic question, which the protagonist faces, is 'Who am I?', and the novel's punchline shows that the answer to this question is only possible through the Other, so that the question can be rephrased as 'Do you know who I am?'" (Rohr, 282).¹⁰² What results is a fictional renegotiation of identity on the level of the (indirect) dialogue, which is built on the narrative level, and presents an "intricate amalgamation of various life stories into one, which both the main protagonist and the reader

¹⁰² Own translation. Original quote: "In *Moon Palace* ist die grundlegende Frage, die sich dem Protagonisten stellt, die des 'Wer bin ich?', und die Pointe des Romans besteht darin, daß die Beantwortung dieser Frage nur über einen anderen möglich ist, so daß sie sich auch als 'Weißt Du, wer ich bin?' formulieren ließe" (Rohr, 282).

have to reconstruct or comprehend” (Rohr, 288).¹⁰³ As the analysis of Birdie’s narrative shows, in *Caucasia* the interweavement of the family stories into one fictional character can be traced in the voice of the first-person narrator, a hybrid voice which embeds as her own the memories of her relatives, memories of which she cannot possibly have reliable direct knowledge, similar to the hybrid quality of the narrative voice of Joseph in *The Time of Our Singing*. The importance of others in the development of her self-perception and in comprehending her position within the ethno-racial system of coordinates is explicated by depicting Birdie’s struggle for recognition by Cole, her parents, and schoolmates. The passing which she stages—as a black girl, as white/Jewish—exposes the fraudulent logic at the basis of racial thinking in the United States: first desirable whiteness, then iconic blackness have functioned as ideals to be strived for and never to be reached. However, for contemporary passers, the recognition of their inability to reach their ideal does not constitute a melodramatic tragedy, but a step towards their emancipation from the influence of these ideals (and systems of meaning) upon their self-perception.

On the level of the metanarrative, this realization points to the neorealist credo of the novel itself: it presents the reader with a fictional universe, invites her to partake in it, but does not claim the moral authority for itself—a variation that clearly distinguishes neorealist novels from their predecessors in classic realism. Meaning is thus always situational and subjective, but can be constructed and shared between the fictional world and a particular reader, who actively participates in the process of meaning-making. Thus, *Caucasia* may seem to adhere to conventions of realistic representation due to the relative linearity of its plot development, the coherent narrative structure, and the lack of bold literary experimentation in the manner of “high” postmodernist literature, but its theoretical subtext challenges the reader to read between the lines. The novel’s indebtedness to post-structuralism makes itself visible on the

¹⁰³ Own translation. Original quote: “so ist in *Moon Palace* der Dialog von vornherein indirekt auf der narrativen Ebene angelegt und umgesetzt, in der intrikaten Zusammenschmelzung der verschiedenen Lebensgeschichten zu einer, die Hauptperson wie Leser gleichermaßen erstellen bzw. nachvollziehen müssen” (Rohr, 288).

level of meaning construction, since it distinctly challenges the reader's ideas about (racial) identity formation and construction of race as a category. It makes use of the theories of race that emerged in the course of the twentieth century, it experiments with variations on classical passing and slave narratives, and it also draws on the theory of psychoanalysis in its construction of Birdie Lee. However, in a paradoxical way, by seeking to deconstruct existing categorical black-and-white thinking, the novel simultaneously attempts to construct a new, differing reality, albeit recognizing that it can be just one version of reality among multitude of possible other versions. To reappropriate Fluck's comment on the works of DeLillo, we can say that Senna and other contemporary authors "are not interested in out-analyzing everybody else, but in dealing with the problem of how we can acknowledge such new realities and still continue to live with them" (Fluck, 1992b, 80). By confronting the protagonist with the discrepancy between the nonexistence of race as such, and the painful reality of the separation of the sisters out of practical reasons dictated by the logic of the black/white dichotomy, the novel in turn confronts the reader with the mismatch between the theoretical discourse and the social reality of race.

Returning to the question of passing, then, we can conclude that, by criticizing both mainstream white and neo-essentialist black racial categorization, the passer is successfully "manipulating identity as it is imbricated in a constitutive network of social conventions and institutional facts" (Elam, 2011, 105). Birdie Lee's passing refutes Walter Benn Michaels' radical claim that passing necessitates the belief in racial essence, since otherwise (i.e. according to a constructivist point of view) one would become that for what one wishes to pass (Michaels, 133).¹⁰⁴ He argues that, for instance, a working class identity is defined by a certain profession, by the performance of which the passer actively becomes a worker. Since whiteness, or blackness are not biological given, but are socially constructed, the passer who

¹⁰⁴ Michaels claims that, within the theoretical framework of performativity theory, "passing becomes impossible because, in the logic of social constructionism, it is impossible not to be what you are passing for" (Michaels, 133).

performs these roles becomes black or white in the process. If we argue that the passer cannot *become* white, but just passes for white, we (according to Michaels) continue to insist on an essential, biological difference between blackness and whiteness. However, what Michaels ignores is the insight that, although physical distinctions cannot be tied to determining intellectual abilities and behavioral patterns,

race and ethnicity are social, historical, and philosophical *processes* that people have done for hundreds of years and are still doing. They emerge through the social transactions that take place among different kinds of people, in a variety of institutional structures (e.g., schools, work places, government offices, courts, media), over time, across space, and in all kinds of situations. (Markus & Moya, 4)

Due to the assumptions that people and institutions attribute to physical appearance, becoming white or black by performing correspondingly is often not a matter of personal choice, but subject to the regulation via acceptance/rejection by individuals, communities, and institutions.

Within such processual understanding of race, which combines individual attitudes, institutional practices and communal dynamics, ideals about desirable racial performance emerge and spur individuals to strive to approximate them. Therefore, although these ideals relate to no essence and are continuously constructed, the possibility of achieving them is unattainable. As a mixed-race subject, the protagonist of *Caucasia* explicates that particularly exclusive identity is conceived of as either only black, or only white as passing, since it necessarily obliterates (or hides) an important part of the individual's self-perception as mixed. Within the novel, passing is hence always orientated on a certain differentiated, ideal performance of whiteness or blackness, accepted as a contemporaneous correct version, and consists of reiterative performing acts, aiming to match this ideal. The novel exposes the limitations of an outward performance of either whiteness or blackness that does not match the subject's inward identification as mixed. New to the genre of the passing narrative is consequently the apprehension of the idea that, in parallel to whiteness, blackness is also

constructed and requires a “correct” performance, reconceiving any self-fashioning modeled on contemporaneous ideas about blackness as a kind of passing.

In her short story “Triad”, which appeared in *Mixed: An Anthology of Short Fiction on the Multiracial Experience* in 2006, Danzy Senna sketches three nearly identical versions of an episode in the life of a girl.¹⁰⁵ In each version, another set of ethno-racial differences, expressed through cultural signifiers such as names, pop culture idols, hair styles and skin tone, is used to identify the girl as White/Black/Hispanic, respectively. However, in the light of the girl’s emotional experience of losing her mother, these differences suddenly appear to be ridiculously unimportant. The intensity of the experience remains unaltered by the ethno-racial origin of the protagonist. As the author herself puts it in a comment on her short story, “it is only from the perspective of the outsider, the reader, the watcher, the passerby on the street, that the story splits apart into three separate narratives” (Senna, 2006, 324).

Like “Triad”, much of the contemporary fictional literature on ethno-racial identity tends to highlight the universality of human experience without suggesting that racial specificity is irrelevant. As the African American and Danish novelist Heidi Durrow once remarked in an interview for *The New Yorker*, the main message of the recent fiction on mixed race is “breaking the silence around this thing called race—refusing to accept the boxes we’ve been put in and celebrating the complicated story of who we are” (Hurn, 2011). Her answer to the question of her racial origin is “I am a story”, and it is this dictum that connects *Caucasia* with a number of other recent novels, short stories and memoirs authored by writers of mixed racial origin, such as *Brass Ankle Blues* by Rachel M. Harper (2006), and *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky* by Heidi Durrow (2010). Breaking the silence against the propagated representations of mixed race “as hip testimony to American democracy, the corporeal resolution of racial diversity and national unity” (Elam, 2010, 96), contemporary writers create fictional worlds in which mixed-raced protagonists face the gap between the

¹⁰⁵ The same short story, however, under the title “Triptych” was reprinted in Senna’s collection of short stories *You Are Free* (Riverhead Books, 2011).

propagated celebration of multiracial America and the actual unwillingness of their surroundings to finally depose of the notion that racial categories are mutually exclusive. The vision of a world in which individuals would be “conceived outside of categories of race, gender, and the like” (Wald, 23) is the *leitmotiv* that can be traced through the current renegotiations of the passing narrative.

While contemporary authors seek to undermine essentialist attitudes toward race, they do not plead for erasing ethno-racial markers. Juxtaposing the arbitrariness of racial categories and their nevertheless profound influence on the life of racially othered protagonists builds the core of recent U.S. fiction dealing with the issues of race. By this juxtaposition, the authors construct their fictional worlds against the popular sentiment about the irrelevance of race in the contemporary post-racial U.S. society. As Markus and Moya explain in *Doing Race*, the ideology of color-blindness and the conviction on the part of many Americans that racial equality has been achieved are based on “the classic confusion between the ‘ought’ and the ‘is’” (58). As mentioned above, this line of thinking within the field of critical theory has been voiced by Walter Benn Michaels, who claims that, if we consider race to be a social construction and not a biological given, then in order to abolish racism, people need to stop talking about race (Michaels, 125).¹⁰⁶ As one way of illustrating the impossibility of stopping racism just by stopping talking about race, recent fictional works reassess the achievements of the Civil Rights era, and fictionally engage with the constraints regarding the processes of racial identification. Echoing a character of Lorraine Hansberry’s *Les Blancs* (1965) who notes that race is a lie, “but it also has consequences; once invented it takes on a life, a reality of its own” (qtd. in Elam, 2011, 104), protagonists in recent fiction on race not only struggle against the negative image of blackness constructed by the dominant white majority, but also

¹⁰⁶ In his article “Autobiography of an Ex-White Man” Walter Benn Michaels insists that “our actual racial practices, the way people talk about and theorize race, however ‘antiessentialist’, can be understood only as the expression of our commitment to the idea that race is *not* a social construction, and I want to insist that if we give up that commitment, we must give up the idea of race altogether. Either race is an essence or there is no such thing as race” (Michaels, 125).

against the understanding that there can be ‘a correct’, appropriate, version of how to be black. Although the image of blackness attained a positive connotation expressed in slogans like “Black is Beautiful”, this positive overwriting of the category led to a re-essentialization of the discourse on race. As blackness started to change from a category negatively coded by the white majority to a positively coded notion, providing a source of pride and belonging for many African Americans, it also simultaneously became an exclusive category, often denying access to specific ‘black’ experience to individuals who are not (really) black, such as many light-skinned African Americans. As Touré points out, “there are many [African Americans] who are unforgiving and intolerant of Black heterogeneity and still believe in concepts like ‘authentic’ or ‘legitimate’ Blackness. There is no such thing.” (4). It is within the context of this development—the perpetuation of racialized thinking in terms of mutually exclusive racial binaries despite the recognition of race as a social construction—that recent novels dealing with hyphenated identities locate their protagonists.

Returning to Michele Elam’s observation about passing as the defining marker of racial identification processes, I would like to stress the significance of the re-emergence of the passing genre, or what Elam collectively designates as millennial passing novels. Although it is clear that the recent return to a genre many declared as gone forever cannot (and should not) replicate the generic structure of its predecessor, I would like to explicitly note the change that this revival brings along. While *The Human Stain* (and the novel *The Intuitionist* by Colson Whitehead, which Elam analyzes in her study) fictionalize the times when passing for white was illegal, *Caucasia* not only places the thematic emphasis on the post-Civil Rights period, but also modifies the idea of passing as such.

As a fictional and social phenomenon, passing, in my view, has never experienced the decline propagated by many articles of the Civil Rights Era. Facilitated by the myth of the American Dream and the achievements of the struggle for equal rights, the belief that African Americans do not need to pass for white in order to achieve equal status is widespread. Such

claims disclose that, in the common understanding, the underlying assumption behind passing has been that of a vehicle for socio-economic upward mobility. With the gradual leveling out of socio-economic possibilities available to whites and blacks, the need for passing, according to the common logic, has disappeared. This line of thinking has even been used by neo-liberals to argue for the contrary: in the context of affirmative action, many politicians have argued that the only passing that is profitable nowadays is passing for black, to play out the race card, so to say. The adaptation of the passing rhetoric as a means of attacking affirmative action and securing white privilege further points to the oversimplified understanding of passing as a construction of a fake identity motivated by economic and social gains.

Contrary to this view and demonstrated in the analysis of the novels, the present study understands passing in a much broader sense, encompassing identity performance motivated by reasons not limited to those mentioned above. Thus conceived, it becomes clear that passing has not disappeared from the cultural imaginary and continues to play a role in the way we think about the processes of racial, class, and gender identification.¹⁰⁷ Thereby, I do not only mean ethno-racial identity formation, but the formation of an ‘American identity’ regardless of the individual’s particular origin. The growing hybridity of the U.S. society has made it increasingly impossible to talk about identity without considering race and ethnicity. Ralph Ellison’s remark on race relations, used as an epigraph to this subchapter, was much ahead of its time and characterizes the present situation to the point: in the amalgam of race, distinctions and boundaries are blurred and often even impossible to identify. Although Ellison was only referring to the white/black paradigm, his observation can be taken to include ethnic amalgamation. Ethnicities influence each other, blurring the boundaries between them. Subjects slip in and out of one or several categories, permanently or temporarily, actively or passively, and this is what passing is all about. It is about crossing

¹⁰⁷ The scope of this study does not allow for a comprehensive analysis of contemporary forms of passing in such varied spheres as the music industry, but also most interestingly in the internet where the anonymity of communication enables various forms of passing in terms of race, gender, class and age. See for instance Lisa Nakamura, *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet* (Routledge, 2002).

ethnic and racial, class and gender boundaries, about destabilizing the notion of authenticity and claiming the legitimacy of ethno-racial, class, or gender performance. This understanding is what unites all of the works considered closely in this study, and also connects them to many other contemporary works of fiction dealing with race. By featuring protagonists who, in a seemingly contradictory manner, wish to do away with racial differences while at the same time seeking to retain their mixed racial heritage, the novels attempt “to particularize mixed racialism, so that it becomes a distinct mode of subjecthood, neither inauthentically or tragically black nor not quite white” (Ibrahim, 157).

5. AFTERWORD. READING FICTION UNDER FALSE ASSUMPTIONS?

“Fiction, especially fiction which renounces the high modernist detachment from the world and which reintroduces subjective experience as a valid epistemological category, offers room for negotiating these issues, imaginatively testing the validity of social concepts without losing sight of their actual manifestations in the real world”, Eva Gruber correctly points out in her analysis of *Caucasia* and *The Time of Our Singing* (Gruber, 104). What are we to make of the fact that the figure of the light-skinned racially mixed protagonist reenters the realm of fictional literature at the time of the celebratory rhetoric of hybridity and multiculturalism? As Danzy Senna reflected in her satirical essay “The Mulatto Millenium”, mixed race heritage is back in style: “[a]ccording to the racial zodiac, 2000 is the official Year of the Mulatto. Pure breeds (at least the black ones) are out and hybridity is in. America loves us in all of our half-cast glory. ... Major new magazines announce our arrival as if we were proof of extraterrestrial life. They claim we’re going to bring about the end of race as we know it” (Senna, 2004, 205). Senna’s critique prompts the reader to question the reasons for the sudden popularity of mixed race origin, especially taking into account that racial mixing is “neither new nor apparently increasing” (Elam, 2011, 6). The new millennium, just as its predecessor, seems to be still defined by the Du Boisian “problem of the color line”. The paradox of race thinking in the twenty-first century seems to fluctuate between the idea of color-blindness, advocating that race or skin color does not matter anymore, and the persistent instrumentality of race in political, social, cultural and economic spheres.

The 2010 U.S. census speaks to the heart of this paradox: While the census’s changed regulations allow checking multiple boxes on the question of race, President Barack Obama, for instance, only checked “African American” on his form. As Michele Elam suggests, his decision against checking both black and white categories on the census form “serves its purposes—America unites over the idea of ‘the first black president’—and is an example of

how the discursive making and unmaking of biracialism is always in large part a function of shifting political imperatives: Obama is black again. For now” (Elam, 7). This situation is especially astonishing since his mixed race origin was strongly emphasized during his presidential campaign, contrasting the images of his Kenyan relatives with the white family of his mother and maternal grandmother.¹⁰⁸ As Werner Sollors argues in his article “Obligations to Negroes who would be kin if they were not Negro”,

Obama employed his complex family story not only to suggest harmonious American fusion (‘it is a story that has seared into my genetic makeup the idea that this nation is more than the sum of its parts—that out of many, we are truly one’) but also to stress that having both black and white relatives gives him a more sober perspective on what is secretly felt on both sides of the color line. (Sollors, 2011, 143)

The decision to officially check only “African American” on the census form, however, speaks to the ongoing workings of the color line in the cultural imaginary and in the sphere of politics likewise.

In reintroducing the figure of the racially mixed protagonist and in “[j]uxtaposing an overtly idealist parent generation with a generation of disillusioned children”, contemporary novels “implicitly ask whether the idea of race today is actually any closer to becoming obsolete than it was in the 1940s, the 1960s, the 1980s” (Gruber, 103). Moving between the constraints of optical classification and cultural affiliations that are often associated with a particular skin tone, passing is a creative space of self-invention. Whether in the case of Coleman Silk, Jonah Strom, or Birdie Lee, racial self-fashioning develops through valuing what Werner Sollors called consent identity over descent identity. The passers function as a litmus test of their society, a coal mine canary testing the quality of the air: able to move as

¹⁰⁸ As Sollors argues, “[i]n his famous ‘race’ speech, delivered in Philadelphia on March 18, 2008, then-candidate Obama reiterated his place within a multigenerational family network: ‘I am the son of a black man from Kenya and a white woman from Kansas. I was raised with the help of a white grandfather who survived a Depression to serve in Patton’s Army during World War II and a white grandmother who worked on a bomber assembly line’” (Sollors, 2011, 143-144). For further discussions of the question around Barack Obama’s race see, for instance, Ta-Nehisi Paul Coates, “Is Obama Black Enough?” (*Time*, online, Feb 1, 2007); Melissa Harris-Perry, “President Obama: Not Black Enough?” (*CBS News*, online, May 18, 2011) and Gary Younge, “Is Obama Black Enough?” (*The Guardian*, online, March 1, 2007).

insiders in more than one racial group, the protagonists expose the limitations of thinking in racial terms, and disclose the existing boundaries of accepted racial identity. Since passing is more than being the matter of phenotype, fictional engagements with it enable the gaining of a deeper insight into the workings of identity enactment. In their performance of a certain ethnic or racial identity, the passer subverts the categories of race and ethnicity, exposes their ambiguity, and underscores the concept of identity as an ongoing process rather than a state.

The revival of the figure of the racially ambiguous border crosser in recent literary works and media productions also interestingly points to the paradox at the root of contemporary understanding of race and ethnicity as a balancing act between the social constructivist consensus about identity formation on the one hand, and the politics of identity on the other. Recent advances in DNA testing have prompted the popularity of the search for roots, which, due to the specific history of slavery, has aroused the particular interest of many African Americans. Because the search for the ancestors' place of origin in Africa has been previously largely impossible, the successes of DNA testing seemed to open a promising prospect of retracing lost family histories. As recently as 2009, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., inspired by DNA search for hereditary roots, did amazing work in unearthing family histories of prominent African American personalities, which combined hereditary search with DNA testing. However, in the process of promoting his work on the PBS channel and during his engagement in the search for Oprah Winfrey's roots, Gates' critical attitude to the concept of racial identity has frequently made space for commercial populist rhetoric. In his book *In Search Of Our Roots*, he remarks that "an exact match between an American's DNA and an African's DNA reveals a shared ancestor, and possibly a shared ethnic identity, that has been lost for centuries" (Gates, 2009, 11).¹⁰⁹ Contrary to the idea that ethnic and racial identity does not stem from some phlogiston, or essence in the body, but is largely a product of the

¹⁰⁹ However, it should also be noted that, within his study, Gates is cautious towards his assumptions and points out that the results of DNA tests may be plausible, but that they do not represent definite "truth" about the racial origin of the person.

subject's socialization, the project seems to put forth the idea that a previously unknown part of identity can be recovered by hereditary search and by tracing DNA components. Even leaving the issue of the reliability of DNA results aside (see Bolnick et. al, 2007),¹¹⁰ it is incomprehensible how the knowledge of the (presumed) origin of distant ancestors in a certain place could alter the subject's ethno-racial identity. As Gary Younge notes, the prospect of DNA-supported search for hereditary roots raises "broader issues about racial authenticity and the genetic basis for racial categorisations" (Younge, 2006). While the unreliability of the results should have prompted the realization that socialization outweighs genetic findings, for the most part DNA testing elevates "race from a social construct (...) into something that appears both real and even calculable" (Younge, 2006).

The idea of hereditary roots as an authenticating factor of personal identity has gradually returned into the cultural imaginary. With respect to literature, this development also coincides with a renewed interest in the question of authenticity of literary expression in general. In the light of the "postmodern skepticism regarding the grand narratives of origin, telos, reference, and essence", it is particularly astonishing that authenticity "is making a comeback" (Haselstein, 2010b, 19). In the realm of fiction, this comeback often goes hand in hand with the question of the author's identity, which is interpreted as providing for the "authenticity" of her writing. Hence, we are facing a paradox: although the authority of the writer has been dismantled at the latest with the publication of Barthes' seminal "The Death of the Author", the importance of the author's actual ethnic or racial identity has been re-established and is frequently used as the lens for the interpretation of her work. Such is the case with many authors who are usually grouped together under racial or ethnic labels. As Benjamin Schreier explains in the context of the interpretation of Jewish literature, "once the decision is made to treat a text as Jewish, the Jewish signified overdetermines the textual

¹¹⁰ As Bolnick et al. have pointed out, "the assumptions and limitations of these tests make them less informative than many realize, and ... [that] commercialization has led to misleading practices that reinforce misconceptions" (Bolnick et al, 399).

signifier, making the text representative of ‘its’ Jewish identity” (Schreier, 105). Similar logic can be detected behind the processes of literary reception of *The Times of Our Singing* by Richard Powers, which centered on the issues of race, but has received little or no criticism referring explicitly to its treatment of racial issues and has been largely ignored by African American scholars and critics.

On the other hand, the situation of American Jews further helps to discern the paradox at the root of a particularly American discourse on race: since as a group Jewish Americans have been largely seen as outsider-turned-insider to economic privilege, the fate of their literary works has been likewise contradictory. As has been pointed out by various scholars, the influence of Jewish writers and scholars on the formation of present-day U.S. literature and on the discipline of American Studies is indisputable.¹¹¹ However, the position of American Jews as an ethnic and cultural Other has been displaced by their rapid upward mobility, which in the eyes of many critics ‘disqualified’ their literature as being representative of specific experiences of ethno-racial minorities and located it within the cultural mainstream. The debates about Jewish American literature subsequently became confined to the sphere of Jewish American scholars talking “exclusively to each other” (Horowitz, 199). Within this sphere, discussions often circle around the extreme identified by Schreier—the tendency to reaffirm the essence of a Jewish text based upon the assumption of the author’s Jewish identity, and in this way to interpret the text as being representative of a specifically Jewish artistic expression. However, as Jonathan Freedman correctly points out, Jewish American writers and scholars should not be excluded from the realm of ethnic literature since their fictional and critical investment has been instrumental to “the rethinking of racialization, whiteness, and even Jewishness-as-whiteness that has, in turn, been crucial in ethnic studies work of the 1990s and 2000s” (Freedman, 24).

¹¹¹ For a comprehensive discussion of this situation see the special issue of *MELUS: The Future of Jewish American Literary Studies* (*MELUS*, 37.2 (2012)) and in this volume more specifically the article “Do American and Ethnic Studies Have A Jewish Problem” by Jonathan Freedman (19-40).

Within the context sketched above, literary texts akin to their authors can be said to display a variation of passing behavior: depending on the particular period of time, the trends in critical theory, and on the critic's attitude towards the importance of the factor of race, the very same text can generate contrary interpretations, which mark it, for example, as either "white" or "black". Slipping in and out of a racial or ethnic category, the text itself moves between the categories of blackness and whiteness. The history of the reception of literary texts dealing with the subject of race serves itself as an interesting attest to the fluidity of race-thinking in America. As a way of concluding my engagement with passing narratives, I will thus investigate the intersections between the processes of literary and scholarly production, their critical interpretation, and the influence of politics of identity on these processes.

5.1. POSTHUMOUS PASSING FOR BLACK: EMMA DUNHAM KELLEY-HAWKINS

As the African American and Danish writer Heidi Durrow recounts, her fascination with the author Nella Larsen, also a light-skinned African American of Danish descent, has led her to follow her wish and visit the tomb of the acclaimed writer. In the light of Larsen's "re-birth" due to the rediscovery of her work in literary and academic circles, it is all the more astonishing that, as Durrow discovered, Larsen's grave at the Cypress Hills Cemetery in Brooklyn was not even marked by a tombstone. After having got the permission to install one, Heidi Durrow, almost fifty years after Larsen's death, physically re-established Larsen's place in the Cemetery's Garden of Memory, where her grave was previously unmarked.

This story speaks to the heart of the specific historic conditions under which African American literature developed, since many of its literary works had to be rediscovered and re-established within a broader literary canon. The academic scene of the post-Civil Rights Era has witnessed numerous inclusions of novels and autobiographies by hitherto unknown authors, restoring early literary artifacts by African American writers for the contemporary reader. Naturally, the works' authenticity and the factual information on the authors' identities

had to be carefully verified. In some cases, however, the desire to read a subversive treatment of the questions of race into the newly rediscovered novels seems to have overruled factual and textual evidence at hand. Such is the curious case of the author Emma Dunham Kelley-Hawkins, who, some sixty years since the publication of her first novel, has been included into the canon of African American women writers. Although her two novels almost exclusively feature white protagonists and have thus been interpreted as a certain anomaly within African American writing of the time, their 'blackness' has never been questioned under the assumptions of the author's presupposed racially mixed origin.

When in 2005 an article in the *Boston Globe* by Holly Jackson revealed that Kelley-Hawkins was most probably white, the assertion of her African American identity having been made by mistake, discussion arose around the question of how this alters the reading of her novels. As I will show in what follows, her case turns our attention to the fact that reading novels from the position of identity politics often imposes meanings and interpretations on texts which, under other circumstances, would probably be interpreted differently. Thus, once marked as a text by an African American, the author's choice of white protagonists might be explained as either the desire to reach a broader audience, or as a subversive act of challenging the limiting assumption that African American writing should be centered exclusively on the black experience. After briefly recounting the circumstances around Kelley-Hawkins's inclusion into the black literary canon, I will offer a close reading of her work, which one can say unwillingly passed for black fiction, and discuss its interpretation by other scholars, who have read blackness into these "white" novels. By way of concluding the chapter and my study, I will point to contemporary debates around the authenticity of blackness and whiteness, and to the discussion of the pull towards achieving something like authenticity of expression.

As Jackson reports in her article, the late 1980s witnessed some of the most comprehensive recovery projects in the field of African American writing. Numerous works have since been

rediscovered and anthologized. In fact, as she points out, it was the novel *Four Girls at Cottage City* (1895) by Emma Dunham Kelley-Hawkins that inspired Henry Louis Gates, Jr. to start the project of putting back into print hitherto lost works by African American writers (Jackson, 2005). The result was the impressive 40-volume *Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers*, which was published by Oxford Press in 1988. As Gates notes in his foreword to the volumes, the collection features unearthed “lost or unrecognized” works by predecessors of Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, and Toni Morrison (Gates, xi). Briefly, Kelley-Hawkins was even considered to be the first African American female novelist, until *Our Nig* by Harriet E. Wilson (1859) was rediscovered; she, in turn, was then displaced by Hannah Crafts and her work *The Bondswoman Narrative*, written around the 1850s (Jackson, 2005).

Because literary accomplishments by early African American writers were neglected by many contemporaneous publishers and readers, the process of rediscovering them has been tedious and has required thorough research. However well researched other authors may have been, the novelist Emma Dunham Kelley-Hawkins, a white author mistakenly considered to be an African American, managed to slip into the African American canon and to ‘pass for black’. In my discussion of the curious case of Kelly-Hawkins’s posthumous passing for black, I am focusing on two issues: first, on the circumstances around the initial assumption of Kelley-Hawkins’s blackness, and second, on reading her works as African American literature. What will interest me most here is how the readers’ knowledge of the author’s racial identity influences the process of interpretation, specifically when the text is praised as displaying something like authenticity of expression. Similar to reading the works by Forrest Carter, the critical reception of which was greatly influenced by the assumed Cherokee identity of the author, the reading of novels by Kelley-Hawkins was based on her presumed

identity as an African American.¹¹² Once the author was identified as African American, the literary text was interpreted as African American fiction. Identity-based reading of Kelley-Hawkins' fiction altered completely the text interpretation of her two novels, which make almost no references to race. Indeed, the complete omission of the relevance of race to the protagonists' lives attests rather to their identity as white.

In contrast to authors who wrote under an assumed ethno-racial identity other than their official one, Kelley-Hawkins turned black only posthumously. As Holly Jackson discovered during her research for a biographical note on Kelley-Hawkins for the *African American National Biography*, genealogical archives contain information on four generations of the Kelley-Hawkins family. As Jackson notes, "every one of the official records designates Kelley and every member of her family as racially white [...] Kelley was as white as anyone whose parents, grandparents, and all known ancestors claimed to be white" (Jackson 2007, 731). According to the research results, Emma Dunham Kelley-Hawkins was unmistakably white both by her origin and her upbringing. Certainly no one can exclude absolutely the possibility of passing within the author's family. However, archival evidence of her ancestors' whiteness combined with her upbringing in homogenous white surroundings clearly mark her as white.

Her posthumous 'passing for black' occurred most probably due to her having been mentioned as a black author in Maxwell Whiteman's *A Century of Fiction by American Negroes*, a bibliography which appeared in 1955. As Jennifer Harris notes, Kelley-Hawkins is missing in all bibliographies and catalogues of prominent African American female activists and writers prior to that by Whiteman and from many following it as well (403). Only in the 1970s and 1980s does she reappear in three bibliographies, and then, most prominently, in Gates's *Schomburg Library*.

¹¹² See, for instance, Laura Browder's article "The Curious Case of Asa Carter and *The Education of Little Tree*" in the volume *Fake Identity? The Impostor Narrative in North American Culture*, edited by Rosenthal, Caroline and Stefanie Schäfer (Campus Verlag, 2014, p. 62-80).



Fig. 4. Emma Dunham Kelley-Hawkins. Frontispiece of *Megda* ((1891).
Courtesy Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University

The assumption of Kelley-Hawkins' African American descent is generally traced back to her photo on the frontispiece of the first and second editions of *Megda* (1891, 1892), which shows a young woman with curly hair and full lips. This photo, a much darker, low-quality reprint of which appears in the *Schomburg Library*, has been subject to many arguments since it allows for different interpretations. Responses range from identifying Kelley-Hawkins clearly as mulatto to undoubtedly seeing her as white. When Henry Louis Gates, Jr. was asked why he thought Emma Dunham Kelley-Hawkins was black, he responded, "I think it was the picture. You put that picture up in my barbershop [...] and I guarantee the vote would be to make her a sister'" (Mehegan, 2005). Exposing the absurdity of the 'one-drop' rule and of skin color politics, the photograph stands as a symbol not only for the artificiality and unreliability of ascribing racial identity judging by physical distinctions, but also for the complexity of the debates around it. Ironically, with this comment Gates himself unwillingly perpetuates

essentialist discourse on race, since he renders facial features and hair texture as reliable markers of race. As Shawn Michelle Smith argues in her study *American Archives: Gender, Race, and Class in Visual Culture*, photographs “generated and maintained essentialized discourses of interior character, and trained observers in how to read the body for the signs of a knowable interiority” (Smith, 1999, 4). Thus, as Holly Jackson remarks, “photography standardized the visual boundaries of race” (Jackson 2007, 732). But the problem around the photo of Kelley-Hawkins would not have been as central to this case if it were not for the peculiarity of her literary works.

As it happens, not only does Emma Dunham Kelley-Hawkins look white, her works also fail to feature black or mulatto characters, they do not voice topics of racial uplift, or issues relevant to the contemporaneous black experience. The texts are ‘white’ by all standards. Indeed, as Harris and others have pointed out, they are written much more in the fashion of Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* (1868/9) than in the fashion of African American female writing of the time (Harris, 407). Clearly aligning her “with traditional nineteenth-century sentimentality” (Peterson, 111), Kelley-Hawkins’s novels feature stories of white girls, depicting their lives “from carefree youth through Christian conversion to appropriate wifhood” (Jackson 2007, 729). Although, as Gabrielle Foreman argues, such plots were not all too unfamiliar to African American writing of the time, her novels do stand out as remarkably ‘white’ novels for a presumably black writer (254). However, this aspect has been explained away by aligning Kelley-Hawkins’s work with numerous ‘white’ novels by such black authors as, for example, Francis E. Harper, Frank Webb, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and others (ibid). Others, like Carla L. Peterson, interpreted Kelley-Hawkins’s works as a fictional vision of a post-racial utopia, in which racial difference would not matter (Peterson, 114).

As Peterson explains in her essay “New Negro Modernity: Worldliness and Interiority in the Novels of Emma Dunham Kelley-Hawkins”, the author’s novels offer a world in which “characters are no longer the objects of racial discrimination, nor do they suffer from the

trauma of double consciousness, nor are they burdened by the obligations of racial uplift” (Peterson, 114). Through close readings of the two novels, her argument explicates how the allegedly either black, or passing characters indulge in the “twin exploration of modern worldly pleasures and of an inner self, divorced at last from an inauthentic racialized outer self” (ibid). Partaking in the pleasures available to the white middle class of the time, according to Peterson, the girls described by Kelley-Hawkins ponder on the possibility of living a truly Christian life and yet further pursue their luxurious and entertaining activities such as going to the theater.

However, even if we leave the question of the novelist’s actual legal identity aside, Peterson’s logic displays inconsistencies. As most reviewers have noted, Kelley-Hawkins’s fictional characters and narrators are very much invested in noting whiteness of skin color, or its relative brownness in men and lower-class women. Following the critical assumption that meaning is derived through difference, it is logical that within a truly ‘raceless’ society whiteness would not need to be highlighted at all by the narrator. The explicit, or as Jackson terms it, “almost aggressive whiteness of her characters” (Jackson, 2005) virtually speaks for the opposite argument: that in these novels race does matter and that whiteness is presented as one of the highest goods, alongside money and class status, that the girls possess. Under the unquestioned binary thinking of the time, associating whiteness with goodness and beauty and darkness with danger and ugliness, the novel *Megda* (1891), presents its readers with Dell Mandon, “the beauty of the town”, whose skin is “dazzling white, without one tinge of pink to it” (*Megda*, 221). Dell is careful to avoid her skin color being compromised, for example, by a comparison to the transparent, white skin color of the sickly Ethel. As she strongly asserts, “there is a great difference between the whiteness of my skin and that of Ethel’s.[...] Mine is a healthy white, and hers a sickly white” (ibid.). Similarly, the protagonists of Kelly-Hawkins’s second novel *Four Girls at Cottage City* (1895)—four young women who spend a three-week vacation together at Cottage City in Maryland—are quick to notice whiteness or

brownness of skin color, and ascribe character features and class status accordingly. After an unknown woman returns the watch she lost to her, Jessie, one of the protagonists, describes the encounter as follows:

I suppose she was a woman because she had on a woman's dress and hat, but there all the likeness to other women ended. She had short hair and big brown hands, and she took long steps like a man, and her voice was 'ugh, ugh, ugh,' (Jessie made her voice as gruff as possible)... and the color was what you might call a fast black... The mean old thing didn't bring the watch with her. (*Four Girls at Cottage City*, 167)

In addition to associating black skin color with mean character, Jessie even goes as far as denying the stranger her femininity, presenting her as a nameless, obscure, and ambiguous figure. The racial ideology ingrained in the girls' thinking permeates the entire novel, and surfaces frequently in such observations as "I put red paint on my cheeks, which, with my naturally white skin made my complexion quite dazzling" (*Four Girls at Cottage City*, 167), or "...my tears ... did not keep me from seeing ... the fairness and the smoothness of his beautiful skin and the bright blue of his eyes" (318). Nevertheless, such remarks concerning skin color and facial features merely attest to contemporaneous, commonly held opinions among whites about the superiority and desirability of whiteness. To suggest that these comments point to the protagonists' identity as light-skinned African Americans would be speculative at best. Certainly, if the novels were read under the assumption of the author's identity as white, neither their characters nor their plot would ever point to race as a central issue of relevance in these literary works. However, once Kelley-Hawkins was identified as a (presumably) black author, certain passages have been interpreted as tentatively voicing racial issues. As Gabrielle Foreman remarks, within this line of thought, contrasting paleness of skin color with dark eyes has been taken to echo the "almost prototypical" manner of characterization of light-skinned (sometimes passing) blacks employed by early African American authors such as Frances E. Harper and William Wells Brown (256). Similarly, when the girls discuss whether to buy the cheaper theater tickets and sit in the segregated

section, their dark eyes and dark hair may be interpreted as indications of their mixed-racial origin (*Four Girls*, 256; Harris, 410).

Under the overarching assumption of Kelley-Hawkins's blackness, instances like these have led many scholars to speculate whether the girls are actually white, or whether they are light-skinned mulattos, who are either fully accepted by their surroundings or successfully pass for white. In any case, Carla L. Peterson, for example, concludes that their skin color is ambiguous, which "reminds us that exteriority does not always reveal racial identity, that visible signs cannot always serve as an epistemological guarantee" (Peterson, 113). However, in the same section, Peterson argues that no such dilemma exists concerning the frontispiece photograph of the author, which announces her unarguably as a black person. On this premise alone, she then reads both novels as African American texts. It remains unclear why the textually declared whiteness of the fictional characters should be ambiguous and the photographic image of the very light-skinned author should not. The very practice of passing disrupts the tenacity of skin color and facial features as markers of racial difference.

Furthermore, Kelley-Hawkins' works are far from being centered on race. Instead, the novel *Four Girls at Cottage City*, for instance, prominently features discussion of religious conversion experiences and of leading a truly Christian life. The four girls get to know a woman named Charlotte who has experienced great personal suffering, and eventually finds her peace in religion. Her testimony within the novel is the true centerpiece of the work. It is interesting to note that the issue of authenticity surfaces prominently within this novel, albeit not in connection to race. Throughout the novels, the girls wonder whether theater-going is a sinful activity or not. These discussions are clearly juxtaposed to the melodramatic testimony of Charlotte's religious conversion. On several consecutive evenings the girls listen to her life story, which moves them to tears. Eventually, the girls decide to abstain from the pleasures of spending money for theater-going and instead collect money for the medical treatment of Charlotte's ill son. The artificiality of theater is thus pinned against the authenticity of real

suffering, which in turn transforms the girls. The suspicious gaze which Aleida Assmann considers to be the “foundational act of Western metaphysics” (36) seeks to distinguish between real and fake, between staged feelings and authentic suffering. Here, authenticity is thus located within the transcendence of religious experience.

This suspicious gaze, which “penetrates the surface and probes the real and deeper quality of an object, person or phenomenon”, becomes particularly important towards the end of Charlotte’s testimony, and towards the end of the novel.(Assmann, 36)¹¹³After having described her immense misfortune of losing every one of her family members, Charlotte narrates her near-death experience. While in delirium caused by fever, she experiences what she calls her trip to purgatory. There Charlotte observes that God has imposed temporary punishment on many of her acquaintances, who she considered to have been good Christians. However, as God explains to her, the appearance of leading a good Christian life does not suffice, since God can see into the inner self and disclose such qualities as greed, vanity, or egoism: “every heart is open to me, and I see it as it is” (310). Authenticity then is connected to genuine religious spirituality and contrasted with worldly appearances and conventions. It is these concerns, and not racial awareness, that constitutes the core of Kelley-Hawkins’ novels.

5.2. WHEN BLACK SUDDENLY TURNS WHITE

In the light of these considerations, it is certainly worth examining the circumstances that allowed these overtly white texts to be grouped within the African American canon without sufficient evidence. Moreover, as Jackson correctly notes, we should think about how “this discovery change(s) our understanding of African-American literary history” (Jackson, 2005). Looking at some of the critical work on Kelley-Hawkins, we can identify several problems

¹¹³ With respect to the emerging debates on the nature of authenticity, in her essay “Authenticity—The Signature of Western Exceptionalism?” Aleida Assmann traces what she terms the suspicious gaze back to Parmenides’s “fundamental distinction between opinion and truth”, which Plato then transformed into “the dualism between appearance and reality—the centerpiece of Western philosophy” (38).

with the critical reception and interpretation of her fiction in the last two decades. In her essay, Peterson, for instance, displays the above mentioned photograph of Kelley-Hawkins, stating that “visible signs of the photographed figure announce the author as black and the text as black-authored” (Peterson, 113). Trying to explain away the complete omission of black characters in her novels, Peterson goes on to argue that the reader should adopt the author’s position as a black writer and try to interpret the novelist’s intention of how her own stories should be read (ibid). Apart from the debatable issue around the value of the authorial intention for the critical interpretation of a literary text, the more important question is the following: What happens to a literary text whose alleged blackness is based solely on the identity of the author when the author turns out to be white? Taking this thought one step further, we may thus ask, what happens to the reception of the fictional work by the critic, or the reader, once the “blackness” of the text is revised? This clearly calls for a reassessment of our basic interpretative assumptions.

Within the field of African American literature, a similar line of criticism has been voiced by Charles Johnson, who suggested that, due to the changed situation within the African American community, the overarching narrative of slavery and its legacy is no longer an appropriate tool for analyzing African American literature and culture. Whereas this interpretational framework has once been enormously useful, according to Johnson, sometime after the Civil Rights Era it “outlived its helpfulness” (Johnson, 2008, 42). Hereby Johnson distances himself from earlier African American critics like Richard Wright who maintained that the themes in African American fiction should recognize “the *whole* nourishing culture from which they were torn in Africa, and the long, complex ... struggle to regain in some form and under alien conditions of life a *whole* culture again” (Wright, 273). The twentieth century witnessed seminal cultural and socio-political changes which lead (among other things) to the growing cultural and class diversity of the African American population. According to Charles Johnson, these developments make the narrative of slavery, which

clearly “emphasizes the experience of victimization” (Johnson 2008, 33), if anything, a limiting perspective, which imposes critical expectations on texts that are limited by this perspective. Johnson’s argument certainly echoes Roland Barthes’ essay “The Death of the Author”, which claims that “to give a text an author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing” (Barthes, 147). It is precisely such a limitation that Peterson and others impose onto literary works once they declare that their ‘blackness’ is derived from the identity of the author.

Similar criticism has been expressed by Claudia Tate in her study *Psychoanalysis and Black Novels: Desire and the Protocols of Race* (1998). Questioning the validity of the assumption that a black text requires a black author, she goes further to point out the restrictions put on texts by African Americans. What she calls ‘the racial protocol’ among African Americans required that “a black text [should] explicitly represent their lived experiences with racial oppression” (Tate, 3) and portray encounters with racial injustice as “the black experience” (4). The result of such racial protocol has been the marginalization of works that do not fit into such definition of a black text. Even when written by established and well-known African American authors, such nontypical texts were generally avoided, and often excluded from literary discussions. Among these works Tate lists W.E.B. du Bois’s second novel *Dark Princess* (1928), Zola Neale Hurston’s *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948), Richard Wright’s *Outsider* (1953), and many others. As Martin Japtok suggests, “a contributing factor for the neglect of African American literature on whites” can be found in the “long history of racist distortions by white writers and directors” and a corresponding desire on the part of African Americans “for image control and for socially engaged literature” (488). As Japtok further notes, “white” novels by African American authors “are little read and virtually disappear, even if their authors are renowned” (486).¹¹⁴ The general argument these novels keep facing is their “failure” “to measure up to racial consciousness”

¹¹⁴ In his article “Whiteness in African American Literature” Japtok lists numerous omissions of ‘white’ novels from the African American canon (pp. 486)

displayed in the authors' other more prominent works (Jackson, 2000, 639). Radicalizing the issue, then, we could wonder that, if a black writer can fail to create a "black" text, why cannot a non-black writer succeed at writing one? And, even more importantly, why does a black writer need to be restricted in her artistic freedom of expression by being limited to a set of racially specific themes?

This question takes us directly into the present time and the case of the literary works of the novelist Percival Everett. As an African American, Percival Everett has gone to great lengths to avoid the restrictive racial protocol. Since 1983, when his first novel *Suder* was published, he has written numerous complex novels which do not feature specifically racial themes. Ironically, however, it is his 2001 novel *Erasure*, which satirizes the author's own encounters with criticism of his work as failing to capture the black experience that earned him broad popularity. In the novel, the narrator, who bears striking resemblance to the author (a Professor of English and a writer of numerous highly experimental novels), is accused of not writing 'black enough'. Under a pen name, he then decides to submit a low-quality satire to his publisher, mimicking a generically black novel, with a plot partly based on Richard Wright's *Native Son*. The novel-in-the-novel proves to be an overnight sensation, an instant bestseller, and a prospective film production. Its extreme success with the general public is even more ironic in the light of the actual success of *Erasure* itself, which is the first 'black' novel by Everett and also the first one to have earned him broad public attention. In a commentary on a review of one of his novels, the author muses, "even if the novel had African-American characters, I don't know why it makes a difference that I'm an African-American writer" (Bengali, 2012). Such limitations that many American writers face attest to the still existing divide between audiences of their texts, a divide voiced by James W. Johnson almost a century ago. As he argued, an African American novelist faces not one, but two separate audiences—black and white—with "differing and often opposite and antagonistic points of view" (Johnson 1928 (2007), 380).

As James W. Johnson argues, before writing, an African American author has to decide which audience he wishes to address, the black or the white one, since he cannot satisfy the tastes of both at the same time. Because the white American audience has “some firm opinions about what the Negro is” (379), the author has to deal with strong reader expectations as to what kind of picture of black America he paints. However, what astonishes Johnson even more are the black audience’s pronounced reader expectations. In order to avoid arousing “bitter resentment” (380), the author has to write within the limits of the reader expectations of the black audience, which hinders his creativity. As Johnson observes, a black writer “has no more absolute freedom to speak as he pleases addressing black America than he has in addressing white America” (ibid). Thus, whether he addresses the white, or the black audience (or both), the African American writer/artist/scholar constantly encounters the obligation of representing his race, resulting in the pressure to justify himself for not embracing his ‘duty’ – a situation which exists to the present day, albeit in a slightly different form.

Although Johnson’s comments are a century old, they have not yet lost relevance. As Bernard W. Bell, for instance, notes in his 1987 study *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition* with respect to Ann Petry’s “white” novel *Country Place*, “because the major characters are white, and because time and place are more important thematically than color and class, it is not as relevant, however, to our theory of a distinctive Afro-American narrative tradition as *The Street* and *The Narrows*” (Bell, 180). What, then, would constitute a contemporary ‘black’ text in light of the large social and cultural diversity within the group generally described as black Americans? If the overarching epitome of such a text should be based on the experiences of racial discrimination, would a text by a light-skinned passer, who avoids racial discrimination by passing for white, be a black text? The factor of the author’s racial identity certainly complicates the discussion around the authenticity of literary texts. By way of referring to Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s comment that “the very act of writing has been a

‘political’ act for the black author”, Martin Japtok suggests that, “considered in that cultural logic, African American literature is something that is written in the service of African Americans—even if addressing a white audience, it addresses it on behalf of African Americans—and therefore should be for, by, and about African Americans” (Japtok, 488). As Anne du Cille remarks, “African American literary history in general and black feminist criticism in particular have taken little note of the multiple, complex, and often contradictory currents of resistance” in ‘white’ novels by African American writers. According to her, “this elision is due in part to the tendency to treat black literary texts not as fictive invention but as transparent historical documents, evaluated in terms of their fidelity to ‘the black experience’ and their attention to ‘authentically black’ subject matter” (Du Cille, 6).

The reception history of Kelley-Hawkins’s fiction and other cases of fraudulent or mistaken identities spurs discussions about the ways we read and interpret fiction, and around the processes of formation of the literary canon. Which texts do and which do not belong to a particular literary canon? What are the criteria of selection—the author’s race, the themes of her writing, or rather the particular ideas we have about what kind of writing should and should not be included? In the case of Kelley-Hawkins, for example, the authority of a prominent literary critic and of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture at the New York Public Library sufficed to have the author accepted (for a time period) as a prominent African American writer. As Katherine E. Flynn notes, once Kelley-Hawkins was included in the Schomburg’s catalog, no one questioned her inclusion, and her works were subsequently listed in further bibliographies of African American literature (Flynn, 283).

Similar authenticating processes can be observed in connection with other literary works: As Aleida Assmann argues in her article “Authenticity—the Signature of Western Exceptionalism?” the Holocaust survivors’ responses to the Holocaust testimony by Binjamin Wilkomirski, which was later proved to be fake, “authenticated” this piece of fiction, which merely reproduced common genre conventions (47). Survivors recognized the imagery of

horror told through the perspective of a child recovering from trauma, and their acceptance of the testimony marked this fraudulent testimony as authentic and “hit the relevant cultural stereotypes” within the readers’ minds (48). Fake testimonies and autobiographies seem to enjoy especially immense popularity due to the authenticity of expression that these narratives seem to convey to the readers. As Caroline Rosenthal explains, the perceived authenticity of the texts can be explained by the fact that, right from the start, the fake “has been calibrated and styled to match the important stereotypes, thereby creating an unmistakable effect of recognizability” (qtd. in: Assmann, 48). Furthermore, according to Assmann, the explanation as to why many texts are widely accepted as authentic lies in the correspondence between the form of the work and contemporaneous reader expectations (47). Thus, as numerous early works by African American writers have been rediscovered in the recent decades, it has become easy to accept yet one more previously lost literary artifact. In this process, the role of African American critics has been instrumental in the acceptance of these works as African American literature: just as the Holocaust survivors’ attestations to the authenticity of the imagery in Wilkomirski’s testimony, prominent African American critics’ opinions (and celebrities’ recommendations, like those of Oprah Winfrey’s book club) “authenticate” works of fiction, designating them as black texts.

The strong need on the readers’ part for something like authenticity in literary works is indeed truly stunning. As Julia Straub correctly observes, “the question the scholars need to ask is how they can account for the persistence of such apparently essentialist needs and demands in a postmodern world, where they are commonly depicted as staged and performed” (18). The number of testimonies and biographies exposed as fake has markedly risen in the recent decades, and this development surely answers to the favorable reception of such works on the literary market. Therefore, as Foreman reminds us, the case of Kelley-Hawkins’s fiction should not be reduced to being merely an interpretative mistake (Foreman, 249). Instead, it illuminates how the author Kelley-Hawkins is embedded in a cultural and

iconographic archive that speaks to the multiple, conflicting, and multivalent investment in reading individual bodies and texts in relationship to sociocultural bodies of racial knowledge (ibid). It is all the more interesting that the photo of Kelley-Hawkins, whose works have now been removed from the online *Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers*, still embellishes the starting page of the digital edition, which yields no hits for the search entrance ‘Kelley-Hawkins’.

As Martin Japtok correctly notes, although ‘white’ literary works by African American authors “appear to fall outside the parameters of what has been regarded as the African American narrative tradition, attention to their conceptualizations of ‘whiteness’ might well reveal them as an important part of that tradition” (Japtok, 489). In the context of the contemporary understanding of race as a social construction, the importance broadly attributed to skin color is astonishing. What becomes clear here is that we have to reconsider our approach to literary texts and re-estimate the relevance of the identity-based text analysis. Identity politics approach to fiction inherently marks African American fiction as non-mainstream on the one hand, and, by implication, suggests an essentially different, specific character of fiction stemming from the author’s ethno-racial heritage on the other. In her article on the controversy around Kelley-Hawkins’ fiction, Sherrard-Johnson is absolutely right to suggest that “just as the putative dichotomy of separate spheres has been destabilized by more fluid and complex understandings of gender, race, class, and sexuality, so also must the supposed separateness of Black and white American literary traditions be reconceived as having been wrought within mutually constitutive spaces of critical and historical discourses” (225).

5.3. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Although the present study concentrated on passing across the black/white divide, further critical engagement could encompass the analysis of passing across other races and ethnicities

in the United States, including whitened ethnicities. As contemporary literature demonstrates, races and ethnicities define themselves through each other, thereby crossing borders and blurring ethno-racial distinctions. Chinese Americans try to become more ‘American’ by passing for Jewish Americans, Russian Americans learn their lesson in ‘Americanness’ from Americans of Italian descent, and finally, Korean Americans try to stage a perfect Korean American performance in order to spy on their own ethnic group’s leader, all just for the sake of becoming more American.¹¹⁵ Although due to its limitations the present study could not embrace these multiple ethno-racial passers, it is important to adumbrate the possibility of such analysis of these novels through the lens of passing. Since all identity is performative, and passing involves the staging of an (expected) identity performance, any ethno-racial border crosser displays a variation of passing, whether temporary or permanent.

In the contested space between the realms of multiculturalist celebration of hybridity and social realities inferred by racial descent, at the intersection of oppositional ideals of blackness and whiteness, the fictional generation of mixed-race Americans emerges and seeks new ways of talking about race. Among them are certainly the protagonists of the novels of this study, but also many other protagonists in contemporary U.S. fiction, which could constitute fruitful sources of further critical investigations on racial identity. One of such recent novels is Heidi Durrow’s *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky* (2010), already briefly mentioned in chapter four. Heidi Durrow, who calls herself a black Dane, describes her experiences of having to deal with the society’s expectation towards a multiracial individual to assume an unequivocal black identity. In her essay “Dear Mrs. Larsen: There’s a Mirror Looking Back”, she writes, “Mine was a funhouse mirror. Skewed and distorted by a society governed by the one-drop rule, my mirror made me see myself as black and the truth of my mixed racial and cultural identity became a lurking ghostly shadow” (Durrow, 105). In a reversal of the infamous ‘one-drop’ rule, here it is the drop of whiteness that is lurking

¹¹⁵ In the works *Mona in the Promised Land* (by Gish Jen), *American Debutant’s Handbook* (by Gary Steyngart), and *Native Speaker* (by Chang-Rae Lee), respectively.

somewhere in the protagonist's physique. Being mixed, highlighting the coexistence of blackness and whiteness in her genes becomes then a matter of representation since the surroundings ignore her mixed origin.

Trying to learn the rules of behavior for the "new girl", as she refers to her new, African American self, Rachel compares skin color, hair texture, and the language of the others. Within the framework of the novel, thus, it is not the white surroundings that mark her as black, but the black community that seek to fully claim her for itself. The absurdities of mutual exclusiveness of the binary opposition black/white are exposed in passages describing Rachel's difficulties to understand who counts as black and what blackness/whiteness is: "There are fifteen black people in the class and seven white people. And there's me. ...Carmen LaGuardia, ... she has hair like mine, my same color skin, and she counts black. I don't understand how, but she seems to know" (9). Interestingly, Durrow's novel, akin to *Caucasia*, reintroduces the image of the mirror reflection and also describes the profound inner detachment of the protagonist to her outward racial performance. As Rachel recounts her new, more appropriate, 'black' hair-do, "I see a girl in the mirror when she's done, and she is not me. There are so many pieces to my hair. There are stiff curls that don't wrap around my finger" (*The Girl*, 12).

Varying in their take on the process of identity formation, contemporary narratives of passing unearth multiple ways of ethno-racial self-fashioning, thereby stressing the performative character of identity formation. In this process, identity becomes an act (or a series of acts) rather than state or condition. Common to all of the novels considered is the understanding that often processes of de-marginalization and deconstruction, which aim at disrupting existing categories, induce a re-establishment of new, similarly coercive categories of (racial) distinction. The celebratory multiculturalist rhetoric of mixed racialism, for instance, while trying to displace former ideals of monoculturalism and racial homogeneity, nevertheless cannot completely disregard racial distinctions. As Habiba Ibrahim notes,

instead of disrupting former paradigms of power and subordination with regard to race, however, mixed racialism here potentially creates a new centralized position of representation around which bodies are still marginalized according to their roles as signifiers of racial difference (Ibrahim, 155).

Contemporary authors, then, consciously position themselves against such rhetoric, and construct protagonists who express their wish for a distinctly mixed racial identity, which, while retaining its ethno-racial distinctiveness, foregrounds the underlying universality of all human experience. Each in their way, these neorealist novels, “rather than renouncing the validity of the very category of an extratextual reality, as postmodernist theory and literature frequently did” display “an awareness of the contingency” of the reality they work with (Gruber, 93).

As Eva Gruber remarks, contemporary novels on race “situate themselves in an ongoing negotiation of race’s socio-cultural implications, and they do so through making the abstract concrete by tying it to the level of personal experience” (102). It is this dynamic that the novels considered in the present study demonstrate. Through the figures of Coleman Silk, the Strom siblings, and Birdie and Cole Lee, the novels signal the departure from the classical passing narrative, and simultaneously resignify passing within the context of the so-called “mulatto millennium”. The element of performativity introduced to varying degrees in all three novels underscores the idea of identity as a process comprising constant repetition of performative acts. The metaphors of the boxing ring, the stage, and the theme of travelling highlight the importance of audience and location to their performative acts. In my study, I suggested that the passer, like a writer with the readership in his mind, considers the probable reaction to the performed identity and adjusts her performance according to the desired effect. Fictional engagements with passing thus provide a space for the articulation of “individual claims for recognition” (Fluck, 2013, 62) from the ambivalent position in between blackness and whiteness. As no other literary figure, the light-skinned passer embodies the elusive

nature of the idea of race and, at the same time, its persistence in setting limits to individual self-determination.

I am black. I am white. These are the words that have the power to change the terms of one's life, real or fictional. These words signal an otherwise often undetectable racial belonging, which comes into existence in the very act of the utterance. This is what passing is about, and my fascination with this subject has guided the present study. The very possibility of passing should be in itself the dismantling of the category of race. And yet the self-contradictory logic of passing is such that, in order to challenge the idea of race, passing has to fail. Since successful passing is *per se* invisible, it is its failure or end—whether due to disclosure, or to the passer's own decision to quit passing—that is always the starting point of its literary life.

Ever since its emergence in U.S. fiction, the figure of the racial border-crosser, visually ambiguous and bearing a potential to undermine racial distinctions, has aroused a level of literary fascination that widely exceeded the actual practice of passing. The sheer possibility of passing seems to be a powerful image of self-invention, of racial and cultural border-crossing, the embodiment of racial anxiety, and an inquiry into the workings of the mechanism of race. In my dissertation, I have explored the various ways in which contemporary novels pick up the theme of passing, build on canonical works of the genre and at the same time put it into the context of sociopolitical changes and the paradigmatic shifts in critical thinking. My aim thereby has been to show how contemporary narratives of passing fulfil at least two functions: Through fictional engagement with specific historically situated experiences, novels on passing seek to disclose dominating and dominated cultural ideas, concepts, and ideologies of race. On the other hand, while they reflect upon existing ideas, contemporary novels simultaneously create new, alternative fictional realities that offer new narratives of resignification, and influence the readers' own processes of identification.

The analysis of the three chosen novels has touched upon a great number of questions and conflicting issues that could be pursued further. One of the directions already mentioned is the tension between the view of African American literature as a unique medium for expression of particular African American subjectivity, and the contrary assertion that no relevant connection can possibly exist between the author's ethno-racial origin and her text. In this context, the main concern among many minority authors has been the possible negation of the only recently found and established literary voice of ethnic writers. As Toni Morrison famously argued, once "blacks discovered they had shaped or become a culturally formed race, and that it had specific and revered difference, suddenly they were told there is no such thing as "race," biological or cultural, that matters and that genuinely intellectual exchange cannot accommodate it" (1994, 370). Thus, the issue of gaining a literary voice is intrinsically connected with communal ethno-racial belonging; doing away with the ethno-racial particular threatens losing common socio-political agency.

Another set of possible questions surfaces with respect to the analysis of passing through the categories of class, gender, and age. What are we to make of the fact that the protagonists of all three novels belong to the middle-class? How would a paired analysis of Silk's racial passing with Faunia's class passing change our understanding of these categories? Do they operate through similar procedures? Or, for instance, what are we to make of the black/white divide in *The Time of Our Singing*, which occurs neatly along gender lines? Blackness is almost exclusively coded as feminine (through Delia/Ruth), and the connection to African American culture is established mainly through these female figures. Whiteness, then, is aligned with men (through David/Jonah/Joseph). We might also ask whether there is a connection between the racial alignment along gender lines and the relative absence of female and/or black voices in the novel.

Further interesting perspectives on contemporary novels of passing might develop through the analysis of the context of production of these novels. After having written *Caucasia*,

which bears significant similarities to her own biography, Danzy Senna continued the exploration of the theme of passing in her novel *Symptomatic* (2004), and then went on to write her autobiography (which appeared in 2009). Her most recent work is a collection of stories called *You Are Free* (2011). If analyzed against each other, can Senna's fictional and autobiographical work cross-influence the interpretation of each other? Does this analysis then make her fictional work more authentic, or, vice versa, her memoir more fictional? How does it relate to other similar constellations, like fictional and autobiographical works by James Weldon Johnson, or Walter White?

Another potentially fruitful area for further research would be a focused study of contemporary passing and post-race narratives by means of a psychoanalytical approach. Due to its Eurocentrism, psychoanalysis has long been regarded as an inappropriate theoretical framework for the study of African American literature, and the tradition of its application to the literary analysis of these works is therefore relatively young. With respect to a psychoanalytical approach, it would be interesting to examine in detail the figure of the racial border crosser, who disturbs the power relations. The female border crosser from black to white, for example, can be said to pose a triple danger: From the position of the black woman, the female passer leaves the realm of the twice oppressed black womanhood and repositions herself within the realm of the white master. Although she is still subjected to (white) male authority, she acquires a position of power in relation to other black women. In addition, as a white woman, she poses a danger by becoming the object of desire of the black man. For the black man, the female passer slips away from under his area of control and becomes his master and simultaneously the object of desire. Likewise, the female passer poses a threat to white masculinity since she destabilizes the demarcation line between blackness and whiteness, between power and subordination.

Finally, a thorough analysis could be done on the emergence of what many critics refer to as a new post-race, post-soul, or post-black aesthetic in the context of the fictional works by

authors who are “divorced” from the nostalgia of the Civil Rights struggle, but still have to deal with the reality of race thinking. We might join Eduardo Bonillo-Silva in asking how it is “possible to have this tremendous degree of racial inequality in a country where most whites claim that race is no longer relevant” (2). Apparently, there seems to be a huge gap between a commonplace understanding that racial prejudice is a matter of the past, and a deeply entrenched system of racial discrimination. Within the fraudulent logic of what many have called color blind racism, or racism without the racist, it is possible to assert the irrelevance of race and yet argue in favor of racial profiling; it is likewise possible to assert hybridity, and oppose affirmative action in college admission procedures.

As Ramon Saldivar suggests, “at the beginning of the twenty-first century, a changing relationship between race and social justice, race and identity, race and history now requires American writers of color to invent a new “imaginary” for thinking about the nature of a just society and the role of race in its construction” (5). Although he is absolutely right in calling for the new imaginary, his call quite obviously already sets a limitation by reserving the right to devise the new aesthetic to American writers of color.

I am black. I am white. Void of any essence, and yet inducing real consequences, race is the constant performative repetition of socially, historically, and culturally specific ways of behavior, which are influenced by and, simultaneously, influence the cultural imaginary. Contemporary renegotiations of passing expose the fluidity of the ideas of blackness and whiteness and reflect in a particular way upon prevalent ideologies and racial paradigms. They also seek to challenge them by offering the readers fictional worlds for experimenting with alternative frames of thinking about these categories.

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ENGLISH ABSTRACT

Passing for a member of another race, which in the United States traditionally refers to the practice of passing for white, has always been a part of the American cultural imaginary. The figure of the racial border-crosser, visually ambiguous and bearing the potential to undermine racial distinctions aroused a level of literary fascination that widely exceeded the actual practice of passing. My critical engagement with fictional passers hence will investigate how the sheer possibility of passing seems to be a powerful image of self-invention, of racial and cultural border-crossing, the embodiment of racial anxiety, and an inquiry into the workings of the mechanism of race. I will explore the way that the genre of the passing narrative, which developed in the decades around 1900, re-entered the literary scene in the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first century, and why it continues to occupy the writers' and readers' minds.

The common denominator of my approach to the novels of this study will thus be the analysis of the dynamics of passing as it is performed by contemporary protagonists, and of its role in the protagonists' construction of their identities, since passing exposes the ambiguity and fluidity of race. In close readings of the novels, I will analyze how fictional narratives fulfil at least two functions: On the one hand, through fictional engagement with specific historically situated experiences, novels on passing seek to disclose dominating and dominated cultural ideas, concepts, and ideologies of race. On the other hand, while they reflect upon existing ideas, contemporary novels at the same time create alternative fictional realities which offer new narratives of re-signification, and influence the readers' own processes of identification.

The present analysis of passing will be based on three contemporary novels: *Caucasia* by Danzy Senna (1998), *The Human Stain* by Philip Roth (2000), and *The*

Time of Our Singing by Richard Powers (2004). These novels can be said to share a common concern for a fictional engagement with the experiences of light-skinned individuals living between the realms of whiteness and blackness. The broader frame of the present exploration will be the growing renegotiation of ethno-racial identity as cultural self-fashioning, which U.S. fiction has demonstrated since roughly the mid-1980s. Profound political and social changes in the second half of the twentieth century called for a reconceptualization of the notions of ethnicity, race, and gender, and for a critical reconsideration of the process of identity formation itself. In contrast to the U.S. multiculturalist rhetoric, which celebrates the idea of hybridity, contemporary novels feature protagonists who are light enough to pass for white, but often seem to remain outsiders to any community whatsoever. As I will show, far more than being the matter of phenotype, passing enables deeper insight into the workings of identity enactment: by performing a certain ethnic or racial identity, the passer subverts the categories of race and ethnicity, exposes their ambiguity, and underscores the concept of identity as an on-going process rather than a state.

This dissertation will start from the understanding put forth by Judith Butler among others that identity in general and racial identity specifically is processual and performative, and that phenotype is only a marker of race, not its content. The “content” of race is hence the constant performative repetition of socially, historically, and culturally meaningful ways of behavior, which bears the potential to challenge established norms. Through their protagonists, the novels signal the departure from the classical passing narrative, and simultaneously resignify passing within the context of the so-called “mulatto millennium”. The element of performance introduced to a varying degree in all three novels is used to underscore the idea of identity as a process comprising constant repetition of performative acts. It surfaces in the metaphors of the boxing ring, the stage, and in the theme of traveling which the novels employ to

highlight the importance of audience and location to the performative acts. In my study, I suggest that the passer, like a writer with the readership in his mind, considers the probable reaction to the performed identity and adjusts her performance according to the desired effect. As no other literary figure, the light-skinned passer thus embodies the elusive nature of the idea of race and at the same time its persistence in setting limits to individual self-determination.

The second vantage point of this dissertation is the novels' awareness of the fact that narrative not only offers various points of identification for the individual, but is also the very tool by which any sense of identity can come into existence. Taking my cue from the theories concerning the role of narrative and of literature in the process of identity formation as developed by Margaret Somers and Winfried Fluck, I will examine the ways in which the novels reflect upon the shift of the function of narrative from being representational to ontological. In their understanding that language functions not just as an expression of identity, but also creates identity through linguistic manifestation, thus operating within, and not outside representation, contemporary fiction seeks to identify and disrupt existing norms and offer alternative ways of thinking about race and ethnicity. In a sense, the black/white color line seems to fascinate the readers' minds precisely because of the contradiction at its root: while it suggests that a clear line between blackness and whiteness exists, the very possibility of passing and the impossibility to articulate what blackness/whiteness means undermine it. This dissertation will thus revolve around the idea that passing requires both a certain phenotype and an appropriate performance of identity, and yet that it always escapes a clear definition.

Through the analysis of the novels' narrative strategies and by putting them into the broader socio-cultural context, I am seeking to broaden the definition of passing and argue for its understanding not only as a literary and social practice, but as a unique

kind of ethno-racial self-fashioning which seeks to challenge existing stereotypes. The present analysis of passing discloses that, inherently, passing is at work in any kind of performance of whiteness or blackness, since such performances are always orientated on matching a publicly recognizable, iconic representation of a particular ethno-racial identity. Fictional engagements with passing provide a space for the articulation of individual claims for recognition from the ambivalent position in between blackness and whiteness. Exposing the fluidity of the ideas of whiteness and blackness, contemporary renegotiations of passing reflect upon existing ideologies and racial paradigms, and, in turn, try to challenge them by offering the readers fictional worlds for experimenting with alternative frames of thinking about these categories.

DEUTSCHE ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Der Begriff *passing*, der sich in den USA traditionell auf sehr hellhäutige Afroamerikaner bezieht, die für Weiße gehalten werden oder sich als solche verhalten, war schon immer Teil des amerikanischen kulturellen Imaginären. Die visuell ambige und potentiell subversive Figur des Rassengrenzgängers entfachte eine literarische Faszination auf dem Niveau, das die tatsächliche Bedeutung von *passing* als soziale Praxis bei weitem überstieg. In meiner kritischen Auseinandersetzung mit fiktionalen Grenzgängern gehe ich der Frage nach, wie die Idee des *passing* zum Inbegriff der Selbsterfindung und zum Mittel der Überschreitung von Grenzen zwischen den *races* wurde. Gleichzeitig wurde *passing* aber dank seines Potenzials, die Mechanismen des *race thinking* zu destabilisieren, als Verkörperung der ‘Rassenängste’ wahrgenommen. In der vorliegenden Arbeit untersuche ich wie das Genre des *passing narrative*, das in den Jahrzehnten um das Jahr 1900 entstand, seinen Weg zurück in die literarische Szene des späten 20. und des 21. Jahrhunderts gefunden hat und warum dieses Phänomen weiterhin die Schriftsteller und Leser gleichermaßen fasziniert.

Das Augenmerk meiner Herangehensweise an die Romane gilt der Dynamik des *passing*, das die Protagonisten zeitgenössischer Werke inszenieren, und ihrer Funktion in den Prozessen der fiktionalen Identitätsbildung, die im Kontext der Ambiguität und Fluidität des Konzeptes *race* stattfindet. In meiner Interpretation der Romane zeige ich auf wie sie zwei Hauptfunktionen erfüllen: Zum Einen versuchen die Romane in ihren Auseinandersetzungen mit spezifischen historisch situierten Erfahrungen die dominierenden und dominierten kulturellen Ideale, Konzepte, und Ideologien aufzuzeigen. Zum Anderen erschaffen sie, indem sie die existierende ideelle Vorstellungen reflektieren, gleichzeitig alternative fiktionale Narrative, die vielfältige Möglichkeiten der Re-signifikation anbieten und die Prozesse der Identitätsbildung der Leser beeinflussen.

Die vorliegende Analyse basiert auf drei zeitgenössischen Romanen: *Caucasia* von Danzy Senna (1998), *The Human Stain* von Philip Roth (2000), und *The Time of Our Singing* von Richard Powers (2004). Das gemeinsame Anliegen dieser Romane gilt der fiktionalen Auseinandersetzung mit den Erfahrungen derjenigen hellhäutigen Afroamerikaner, die zwischen den Kategorien ‚schwarz‘ und ‚weiß‘ verortet sind. Die zunehmende Neuverhandlung der ethnischen und ‚rassischen‘ Identität als kulturelle Selbstinszenierung, wie sie in der U.S. Literatur seit etwa den 1980-er Jahren stattfindet, bildet hierbei den größeren Kontext meiner Untersuchung. Grundlegende politische und soziale Veränderungen in der zweiten Hälfte des 20. Jahrhunderts machten eine Rekonzipierung der Begriffe *ethnicity*, *race*, und *gender*, sowie einen Neuentwurf des Begriffs Identität notwendig. In starkem Kontrast zu der Idee der Hybridität, die in der Rhetorik der amerikanischen Multikulturalismusdebatte zelebriert wird, präsentieren die hier untersuchten Romane hellhäutige Protagonisten, die sich in den Welten der Schwarzen und Weißen gleichermaßen als Außenseiter empfinden. Wie diese Arbeit zu zeigen versucht, ermöglicht *passing*, das sich nicht einfach auf einen bestimmten Phentypus reduzieren lässt, einen kritischen Einblick in die Identität als Inszenierung: Gerade durch den Neuentwurf der *race* und *ethnic identity* als *performance* wird das subversive Potenzial von *passing* aufgedeckt, die Ambiguität der Rassenkategorien offengelegt und dem prozessualen Charakter der Identität Rechnung getragen.

Meine Dissertation basiert somit auf der grundlegenden Annahme, dass *racial identity*, sowie auch Identität generell, als prozesshaft und performativ zu verstehen ist—eine Auffassung, die unter anderem auch aus den Theorien von Judith Butler abgeleitet werden kann. Äußere physische Merkmale werden somit als Zeichen oder Platzhalter von *race* gedeutet, und nicht etwa als ihre sinngebende Substanz. Als ‚Substanz‘ von *race* wird nun die anhaltende performative Reiteration sozial, geschichtlich, und kulturell sinnbildender Verhaltensweisen verstanden, die das

Potenzial birgt, letztendlich die hegemonialen Normen destabilisieren zu können. Wie ich in meinen Analysen zeige, signalisieren die Romane durch ihre Protagonisten eine Abkehr von den klassischen Erzählformen des *passing*, während sie gleichzeitig das Phänomen im Kontext des sogenannten „mulatto-Jahrhunderts“ repositionieren und resignifizieren. Das Element des Performativen, das in allen der Romanen auf unterschiedliche Weise angelegt ist, wirkt dabei bewusst der in klassischen *passing* Romanen als essentiell verstandenen racial identity entgegen und untermauert die Idee von Identität als einem Prozess ständiger Wiederholung performativer Handlungen. Durch die Metaphern des Boxrings, der Bühne, und des Reisens unterstreichen Philip Roth, Richard Powers und Danzy Senna respektive auch die Bedeutung des Publikums als Rezipienten der Performance und des Ortes für die Aushandlung der Identität. Die vorliegende Arbeit legt nahe, dass der *passer* ähnlich dem Schriftsteller, dessen Augenmerk der potenziellen Leserschaft gilt, seine Inszenierung an den möglichen Reaktionen seiner Umwelt kalibriert, um den gewünschten Effekt zu erzeugen. Wie sonst keine andere literarische Figur verkörpert deshalb der hellhäutige *passer* die Brüchigkeit der Rasse als Konzept und veranschaulicht wie sie aber im Gegenzug weiterhin eine fortwährende Einschränkung auf die individuelle Selbstbestimmung des Einzelnen ausübt.

Als weiterer Ausgangspunkt dieser Arbeit dient das narrative Selbstverständnis der Romane—nicht nur als kulturelle Projektionsfläche für individuelle Identitätsentwürfe, sondern als ein Mittel, das Identität an sich erst möglich macht. Basierend auf den Theorien von Margaret Somers und Winfried Fluck über die Wirkung von Narrativen und Literatur in den Prozessen der Identitätsbildung untersuche ich in meiner Dissertation die Strategien der Romane, die das veränderte Verständnis der Funktion der Narration vom Repräsentativen hin zum Ontologischen aufgreifen. Ausgehend von der Annahme, dass Sprache die Identität nicht nur artikuliert, sondern sie durch

linguistische Manifestation innerhalb und nicht etwa außerhalb des Repräsentationsraumes erst kreiert, versuchen neo-realistische Romane hegemoniale Normen ausfindig zu machen und sie zu destabilisieren, und gleichzeitig alternative Gegenentwürfe der Konzepte *race* und *ethnicity* zu erschaffen. Gewissermaßen gründet sich auch die Faszination des Paradigma der schwarz-weißen *color line* in ihrem inneren Widerspruch: Obwohl sie eine deutliche Abgrenzung zwischen den Bereichen schwarz und weiß suggeriert, wird eben diese Abgrenzung durch die schiere Möglichkeit des *passing* und die undefinierbarkeit der Kategorien der *blackness* und *whiteness* unterminiert. Im Zentrum meiner Dissertation steht deshalb die Behauptung, dass *passing* zwar sowohl einen bestimmten Phentyp erfordert und eine entsprechende kulturell situierte Inszenierung, es aber dennoch immer dem Versuch einer Definition entgleiten wird.

In der Analyse der narrativen Strategien der Romane, die ich in den größeren soziokulturellen Kontext stelle, versucht diese Arbeit das Verständnis von *passing* auszuweiten und es nicht nur als literarische und soziale Praxis zu verstehen, sondern auch als einen einzigartigen Entwurf einer *ethno-racial* Selbstinszenierung, die den dominanten und normativen Vorstellungen von *race* und *ethnicity* entgegenwirkt. Die vorliegende Untersuchung zeigt auf, dass *passing* im Grunde genommen in jeder Inszenierung von ‚*whiteness*‘ und ‚*blackness*‘ am Werk ist, da diese stets die Anpassung an eine wiedererkennbare, ikonische Repräsentation von *race* beinhaltet. Fiktionale Auseinandersetzungen mit *passing* bieten somit Raum für die Artikulierung individueller Ansprüche auf Anerkennung aus der ambivalenten Position zwischen dem Schwarz- und Weißsein heraus. Zeitgenössische Neuverhandlungen von *passing* zeigen somit die Fluidität dieser Begriffe auf und reflektieren über dominierende Ideologien und Vorstellungen. Gleichzeitig versuchen sie diese Vorstellungen zu destabilisieren,

indem sie der Leserschaft fiktionale Welten als einen experimentellen Raum für alternative Neuentwürfe dieser Kategorien anbieten.

PUBLICATIONS

Parts of chapter three have already been published under the title “Sightless Sound: Music and Racial Self-fashioning in *The Time of Our Singing* by Richard Powers” in *Ideas of Order. Narrative Patterns in the Novels of Richard Powers*. Kley, Antje and Jan Kucharzewski (eds.). Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2012, 177-196.

Parts of chapter five have already been published under the title “Reading Fiction under False Assumptions? Emma Dunham Kelley-Hawkins and her Posthumous Passing for Black” in *Fake Identity? The Impostor Narrative in North American Culture* Rosenthal, Caroline and Stefanie Schäfer (eds.). Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag, 111–125.

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