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Transnational Gendered Subjectivity in Passing across the Black Atlantic: Nella Larsen's *Passing*, Michelle Cliff's *Free Enterprise* and Zadie Smith's *Swing Time*

KERRY-JANE WALLART

A paradoxical paradigm, “passing” implies both a departure from, and a reconfiguration of, essence and essentialism. As such, it is a practice suspending any certainty regarding either fixed or endlessly mutable identities. Indeed, passing relies on stereotypical characterization (as “white” for instance) as much as on the possibility of transgressing such stereotypes. The paradigm of racial passing has naturally intersected episodes of other such (im)postures: cross-dressing, for instance, where a woman passes as a man and vice versa. Not coincidentally, the first novel to adopt the phrase “passing” as a title, Nella Larsen’s *Passing*, was written by a woman and the main protagonists in the text are all female characters. The three texts which I compare and contrast in the present chapter (Nella Larsen’s *Passing*,¹ Michelle Cliff’s *Free Enterprise*² and Zadie Smith *Swing Time*³) share an interpretation of “passing” which is, to a degree, a female vision. All three novels intersect racial transgression with sexual and gendered ambiguation and re-activate the American motif of self-fashioning on an expanded, transnational scale.

The collusion of cross-dressing and “whitefacing” has been addressed by a number of scholars attending to the phenomenon of passing, starting with the opening pages of Elaine Ginsberg’s spearheading study, *Passing and the Fictions of Identity*.⁴ While I am embracing Ginsberg’s nexus of gendered and ethnic provocations to ontology, I wish to open up her geographic mapping and extend it to a transnational space traversed by the persisting exploitations and

¹ Nella Larsen, *Passing* (1929) in *The Complete Fiction of Nella Larsen* (New York: Anchor Books, 2001), 163-275.

² Michelle Cliff, *Free Enterprise* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1993).

³ Zadie Smith, *Swing Time* (London: Hamilton, 2016).

⁴ Elaine Ginsberg (ed.), *Passing and the Fictions of Identity* (Durham: Duke UP, 1996).

discriminations resulting from transatlantic slavery. While Ginsberg circumscribes the specificities of criss-crossing racial and sexual identitarian transgression to “American history”,⁵ by which she means “of the USA”, I will argue that post-plantation structures of cultural representation have framed the entire Black Atlantic and its representations of racial passing. Through the diasporic space of the Caribbean, an archipelago situated far at sea, between Africa, America and Europe, one can start looking at passing as a spatial practice of “dislocation,” both figuratively and literally speaking. Intertextual reverberations can easily be spotted between these “passing” novels by three Black Atlantic authors, Nella Larsen, Michelle Cliff and Zadie Smith, although the scope of their fictional geographies differs. The backdrop of Larsen’s *Passing* is provided by the unofficial racial segregation of the North and South sides of Chicago and New York; in Cliff’s *Free Enterprise*, the setting is enlarged to the North, South and Far West of the United States but also to the Caribbean, while in Smith’s *Swing Time*, the setting is broadened to a global North encompassing England and the USA, as well as a global South comprising Jamaica and West Africa. I argue that a narrative pattern of racial passing, which was originally circumscribed to plantation societies in the Caribbean and the Southern States of the USA during slavery times, has morphed into multidirectional performances of cultural appropriation. In these performances, the concept of “race” is deconstructed neither through a focus on the individual bodily experience, not through the exposure of the fabricated nature of national ideologies. All three authors imagine sites of negotiations in-between the intimately private, and the institutionally public, realms. The fluidity with which passing is envisaged “doesn’t reify the concept of race, [...] doesn’t try to fix ethnicity absolutely but sees it instead as an infinite process of identity construction”⁶.

In this transnational and diachronic analysis of passing, I wish to outline configurations of diffraction and instantiation whereby passing as white, or passing as male, are to be regarded as a fleeting practice

⁵ Ginsberg, *Passing and the Fictions of Identity*, 5.

⁶ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic, Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993), 223.

rather than a life-changing choice; an experiment rather than an identity. Thus the tragic trajectory of Clare Kendry, one of the female characters of Larson's novel, obviously reverberates in Cliff's and Smith's novels, but it is both repeated and transformed through trajectories no longer leading towards the sacrificial elimination of the transgressor; the—admittedly intermittent—transgressor of racial boundaries becomes a paradigm of how multitudinous existences can be led in one's life-time. Although the act of passing posits an implicit border, the character who performs it is someone who does not know his, and worse, her, "place" on either side of that border. By "de-routing" the North American theme of passing, one can interpret it mostly as a source of metaphorical and literal motion, and as a motif and a process which is inherently transcultural.

I contend that read together, all three authors make for a centrifugal take on what hides behind the term of "America". Like Claude McKay and Audre Lorde, two other Harlem Renaissance authors, Nella Larsen has been appropriated by the hegemonic culture of the United States, an all-encompassing one even when dealing with its minorities. I suggest that these Caribbean-American authors share a privileged site on which to excavate the ambiguities of the Emancipation promised by Uncle Sam: while the phrase "Harlem Renaissance" has been coined as a tribute to the "American Renaissance" of the mid-nineteenth century, the derivation silences the fact that Melville, Hawthorne and Whitman were writing during times of slavery, and were not outspoken abolitionists either. In retrospect, the limitations of their manumission to the white male subject is blatant. If themes of self-fashioning have irrigated American literature ever since, they are always adopted and adapted by "subaltern" subjects with difficulty and diffidence.

Passing as a Black Atlantic motif: Self-fashioning beyond "American" borders

The Black Atlantic outlines of my corpus are meant to suggest that Nella Larsen should not be understood solely as an African-American author but also as one of the first transnational and transcultural trespassers of "Black" modernity at the time of the Harlem Renaissance. Paul Gilroy's analysis of the Black Atlantic asserts a unity of themes

and intellectual frameworks across the Atlantic Ocean and connects Africa, the Americas in the plural, and Europe; in so doing, Gilroy insists on the necessity of “renounc[ing] the easy claims of African-American exceptionalism in favour of a global, coalitional politics in which anti-imperialism and anti-racism might be seen to interact if not to fuse”.⁷ Almost at the very outset of *The Black Atlantic*, Gilroy ponders on the whirlwind of History and histories attached to Turner’s famous painting of a slave ship caught in a storm—the only major painting by Turner to have travelled to the American continent, exhibited in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.⁸ The same painting makes a dramatic appearance in Michelle Cliff’s *Free Enterprise*,⁹ pointing to the intermingling of European, Caribbean and American histories which Gilroy is considering.

Discussions around the exhibition of the painting, at Parker House in Boston, in 1874, hold centre-stage in *Free Enterprise*, as they take up most of the third and longest part (of a total of four), entitled “She was a friend of John Brown”. While non-linearity and intertextual and intermedial practices are aligned with a postmodern awareness that language will fail to grasp the real, a postcolonial excavation of silenced agencies is also undertaken. Indeed, letters are exchanged between Mary Ellen Pleasant, who is often relegated to footnotes in the historiography of nineteenth-century America because “she was a friend of John Brown”, and Clover Adams, whose letters were destroyed by her more famous widower and who, strangely, does not appear at all in *The Education of Henry Adams*.

Indeed Cliff’s *Free Enterprise* narrates in ways that are postcolonial, postmodern, and transnational, the fate of Mary Ellen Pleasant, a heretofore minor figure in the history of the USA. To a large extent, the novel can be seen as a biographical fiction narrating the destiny of Mary Ellen Pleasant, a historical figure probably born a slave (or at least an indentured servant), who passed as white in nineteenth century New England, married one John Smith who also passed as white, moved to San Francisco declaring herself white, and who only publicly defined

⁷ Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 4.

⁸ Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 13–4.

⁹ Cliff, *Free Enterprise*, 71–3.

herself as African-American after the end of the Civil War and ensuing Emancipation.¹⁰ The encounter between Mary Ellen Pleasant and Annie Christmas, their common dedication to the abolition of slavery and the characterization of the two women as potential candidates to racial passing and as sisterly doubles echoes the exploration of the motifs of doubleness and duplicity in Larsen's *Passing*.

In Zadie Smith's *Swing Time*, two mixed-race girls, again not unlike Larsen's Irene and Clare, and Cliff's Mary and Annie, grapple with such appropriations of black culture by the white West as Fred Astaire's eponymous blackface number where Bojangles' legacy is snatched away and assimilated into mainstream cultural norms. Authored by a second-generation immigrant whose parents hailed from Jamaica (like Michelle Cliff), *Swing Time* stages two women who are passing on and off, and whose passing provokes motion, from hotel to street, from high road to rented rooms, from theatres in London to theatres in New York, as in Larsen's seminal 1929 text.

The transnational perspective self-evidenced in *Swing Time* and *Free Enterprise* makes for a retrospective glance at *Passing* and allows us to acknowledge Nella Larsen as the partly Caribbean author that she also very probably is, being the daughter of a West Indian father whose last name she did not bear. The wide range of contraventions to norms of racial and sexual differences, in all three novels, are placed under the sign of fluctuation: they come and go, are adopted and dismissed, they criss-cross and alternate, they overlap, they travel—they “race” along, as it were.

Homi Bhabha's notion of “third space” may seem to have become ubiquitous to the point of meaninglessness, but it proves useful to define racial passing not only as the performative transgression of a rule, but also as the spatial exploration of a hybrid site. For instance, Zadie

¹⁰ Like Frederick Douglass, the most photographed of all Americans in the nineteenth century, a form of photographic voyeurism developed around Mary Ellen Pleasant. One of the photographs at issue represents her with a veil, adopting the pose of the (white) English bourgeoisie of the Victorian era. The photograph was taken by Clover Adams, who was to commit suicide by swallowing very toxic products used to develop pictures—used, in other words, to distinguish white and black in photography. Marian Hooper “Clover” Adams, the wife of Henry Adams, is one of the key protagonists in *Free Enterprise*.

Smith's novel explores and brings together a creolized continuum of places, so that a Senegalese village may be adopted by Granger as a better home than his former one in England has ever been. "Passing for someone else" becomes synonymous with literally moving into a new territory and adopting it as one's home—with the act of adopting a new identity at a distance from one's previous history and geography. In Smith's novel, racial passing is a trope designating the voyage out, the passage away from predetermination towards the unknown. This is how one might interpret the dissonances gleaned in any novel making racial passing its subject: not as mistakes of non-conformity, but as signs beckoning towards a form of self-fashioned voyage out. A brand of reinvention which promises freedom from being labelled and disciplined, but also from rootedness and stability – an imperative of *wanderlust* which could be seen as Whitmanian, not in the sense that reintegrates Smith's novel into a hegemonically American sphere of influence, but on the contrary, in a way that connects Whitman with a fundamental yearning for mobility and placelessness that may be irreducible to the expression of a national myth.

The migrations which I trace to our times and globalized spaces had started early on around the theme of passing, as reinventing oneself as white fitted the obsession with being one's own (white) man in nineteenth-century America. The practice of "passing" one's ancestors under silence, leaving one's roots behind, had, after all, proceeded to nation-building at large. One could consider that Americans generally "passed" as New World people, omitting to mention their "past" as Europeans (and, more recently, as Asians, Africans, South Americans or Middle Easterners). In this respect, the blank blinding Ishmael in chapter 51 of *Moby Dick* becomes a charade not only of "race" but also of the desired clean slate, the tabula rasa which is the fiction denounced by Toni Morrison in *Playing in the Dark*.¹¹

When considered in the context of the American history of self-erasing and self-fashioning, passing as white is a form of double passing – passing as someone (white) already passing as someone who has no (European) past. The unstable positionality resulting from this re-

¹¹ Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark. Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).

doubled form of passing translates in all three novels in the recurring presence of such spaces as hotel rooms and restaurants, spaces which replace an intimate domesticity but are linked to a life spent away from home. In a scene from Larsen's *Passing*, the argument about the practice of passing is translated into spatial coordinates where Brian is "at home" in his belief that biology is key to the matter, and where Irene "slid[es] away" from the controversy, in her intuition that passing has two sides to it:

Zulena came in, bringing more toast. Brian took a slice and bit into it with that audible crunching sound that Irene disliked so intensely, and turned back to his paper.

She said: "It's funny about 'passing.' We disapprove of it and at the same time condone it. It excites our contempt and yet we rather admire it. We shy away from it with an odd kind of revulsion, but we protect it."

"Instinct of the race to survive and expand."

"Rot! Everything can't be explained by some general biological phrase."

"Absolutely everything can. Look at the so-called whites, who've left bastards all over the known earth. Same thing in them. Instinct of the race to survive and expand."

With that Irene didn't at all agree, but many arguments in the past had taught her the futility of attempting to combat Brian on ground where he was more nearly at home than she. Ignoring the unqualified assertion, she slid away from the subject entirely.¹²

In this passage, Larsen contrasts a feminine viewpoint with a masculine one. Irene's grasp on paradoxes and fluid behaviours ("and at the same time", "and yet", "but", "everything can't be explained by") is set against the caricatural certainty of a man who resorts to one "unqualified assertion" after the other. The vagueness of the dominant discourse ("same thing") leads to generalizations about "race" which miss numerous dimensions of racial passing. Irene's remarks draw attention to the gendered, the social, the affective and the intimate factors in a complex equation. The lability of the feminine, as defined by Derrida (1979, 57), is foregrounded here and suggested to be more apt at circumscribing another fluid practice, that of racial passing. The narration proceeds to yet another twist of "so-called" (as Brian would say) representational stabilities as Irene is said to be slipping "away"

¹²

Larsen, *Passing*, 216–7.

from the one space where women are conventionally confined, that of the home – now fully occupied by Brian, as he eats his piece of toast, in a blatant imitation of English respectability.

The space that is “away” from “home” could function as a metaphor for postcolonial positionalities, as well as for the text we are reading, but it may also operate as a reference to the hotels and empty rooms through which the bodies merely transit: the Drayton Hotel in Chicago (*Passing*), Parker House in Boston (*Free Enterprise*) and an impersonal rented flat in London for the first-person narrator in Smith’s *Swing Time*, after she has been made redundant and is shunned by all her friends and relatives. In Cliff’s *Free Enterprise*, the title of the novel is also the name of Mary Ellen Pleasant’s restaurant and hotel (patronized both by the white gentry of Gilded Age California and by runaway slaves on their way to Canada). Belonging nowhere in particular, these characters live, if not in the wilderness like pioneers, at least out in the open, travelling under various guises, racial and sexual. The polysemy of “pass” undermines identity as much as it collapses racial mimicry, and journeying:

“I was a dark-skinned man, a transformation obtained with a magic elixir, one endorsed by preeminent minstrels. The empty bottle hangs on that tree yonder. Another souvenir, like the cloth. I carried forged papers [...] Some papers declared us free. Others said, ‘Please allow my slave Hezekiah, Goliath, Holofernes, Queen of Sheba, whomsoever to pass. He-she-it is on an errand, et cetera, signed Massa whatsoever.’ Things like that. We might have been a troupe of traveling players.”¹³

Brian’s “same thing” has branched out into the diversity of “things like that”.

I shall return to the dismissive treatment made here and elsewhere of the written word, of pen put to paper, but wish to suggest that this troupe of “travelling players” constitutes a site of transatlantic creolization. Indeed, they send the reader back to the carnivalesque moment of Jonkonnu alluded to in the earliest pages of the novel: “African seeped into the parlance of the better class: *le gens inconnu*, trying to trick it into *Jonkonnu*”.¹⁴ Jonkonnu, whose probable etymology is *gens inconnu*

¹³ Cliff, *Free Enterprise*, 194.

¹⁴ Cliff, *Free Enterprise*, 8.

(unknown people), has been a post-Emancipation practice whereby light skin (but also an unfortunate inability to trace one's ancestry) had been declared sufficient proof of whiteness; it had been, in actual fact, a legal and political validation of passing. It also became a carnivalesque practice entailing cross-dressing and whiteface, a moment in the calendar of Carnivals which I read alongside the equally traditional gendered cross-dressing. Cliff's novel, like Larsen's and Smith's, outline the connections between racial and gendered transgression; in so doing, they interrogate the Black Atlantic structures (the society of the Old South and of the Midwest; the historiography of the Civil War and of the Gilded Age ; the myth of a multicultural London and of a serenely globalized planet) where such transgressions might take place and suggest a communality of tensions between newness in forms, and the weight of the past. Passing becomes a means towards emancipation which conflicts with a fair amount of entrapment within stereotypical expectations. All three texts, I suggest, show that no work frame can deconstruct essences better than that of masks and appearances; on the other hand, to re-cast such "types" becomes a possible confirmation of such types. The reader finds herself faced with her own contradictory reception: a recognition of traits conventionally attributed to male/female, to white/black bodies, and an exploration of an in-betweenness which is partly trespassing, partly re-tracing, these borders between binaries. In all three novels, characterization signposts ambiguity—geographically, socially, ethically, and aesthetically so.

In *Free Enterprise* Michelle Cliff foregrounds epistemological difficulties through the identitarian politics of the Gilded Age. Cliff writes how her motivations held onto a counter-discourse to America's belief in "facts" (literally, what "has been done"). In resuscitating the figure of Mary Ellen Pleasant, she also interrogates how "belonging" is premised upon forgetfulness and an embracing of futurity. The novel indexes its own dead ends, but it also justifies its fictional discourse over that of historiography:

Neither will it do us any good, as some have suggested, as my own, exhausted father did, to take a boat back to Africa in search of home, as if a reverse passage can reverse history. The time has passed for all that. We are

no longer African. We are New World people, and we built this blasted country from the ground up. We are part of its futures, its fortunes. We belong to the here and now.¹⁵

The identities concealed and reinvented in all three novels are a far cry from any pre-existing paradigm. The narrative insists that it is reductive and possibly patronizing to ascribe them to the remnants of the carnivalesque and performative forms of expression which had prevailed in times of slavery. Strikingly, they are often alluded to in indirect manner. Cliff's novel presents passing as a fleeting strategy, picked up and discarded again as circumstances come and go. The processes of racial and sexual passing are shown to be practices which are both fleeting and reiterative. I will now argue that their actual situatedness is not geographical but interpersonal, hence their tendency or ability to spread throughout the Black Atlantic. The next section of my argument brings to the fore the entwined notions of visibility and spectatorship. Indeed, the process of passing interrogates the onlooker's own prejudices: imitating the salient features of masculinity and/or whiteness is only successful when endorsed by visual recognition among the audience. Passing becomes the focus of spectatorship more than scrutiny, as characters invent variations of racial stereotypes which collapse and reverse these very stereotypes; the subjectivity emerging through passing is endowed with an agency denied the (presumably white) viewer.

Situatedness and Spectatorship: "Passing" in whose eyes?

The reader's attention is drawn over and again, in *Passing*, to the conspicuous smile of Clare: surely, a strategy to deflect the gazer's attention from the usual markers in racial detection: complexion, eyes, and hair. The smile functions in the novel both as an avoidance of presumed "racial" and "sexual" characteristics, and as a patent signposting of them. In effect the smile is associated with stereotypical behaviour of African Americans. *Swing Time* all but opens on the

¹⁵

Cliff, *Free Enterprise*, 150-1.

“Bojangles grin”¹⁶ of a blackfaced Fred Astaire. It is also associated with women who have been reduced by patriarchy to silence and prettiness, an association already deployed in the title *Smile Please*, by Jean Rhys, who was another white creole whose specific marginal identity went largely ignored for decades.¹⁷ As part of the mediated, intrapersonal deception of passing, smiling suggests a tension between what is hidden and what is exhibited. I argue in this section that the dissimulation entailed by passing goes hand in hand with a flaunting of the characteristics of ethnic and gendered categorical relegation, and that the combination of absence and presence of signs is left to the perspective of the gazer, of the voyeur, of the audience. A case-in-point, the smile is predicated upon the presence of a spectator, who is also an implicit addressee. The smile and the practice of passing are equally autotelic. In this part I draw largely on remarks made by Homi Bhabha in chapters 3 and 4 of *The Location of Culture* where the critic suggests a reversibility in roles between the colonized and the colonizer:

... it is difficult to conceive of the process of subjectification as a placing *within* Orientalist or colonial discourse for the dominated subject without the dominant being strategically placed within it too.¹⁸

In the wake of Edward Said’s own critique, Homi Bhabha’s analysis helps us to grasp the existentialism lurking behind all matters “racial”, including the phenomenon of passing. Passing is, I argue, as much a construction of whiteness as a deconstruction of blackness, and *vice versa*. What is highlighted in all three novels is how derivative blackness might be in a perspective which collapses all essentialisms, but also how dependent upon individual and collective perceptions it is. Mary Ellen Pleasant is ceaselessly irked by those who call her “Mammy”, a stereotypical representation of the ageing yet strong black woman. For all her skills at passing (as man, as white), she fails to modify or inform certain gazes upon her body; there is an excess, or a supplement, to passing, which is its reception by the viewer. This line of

¹⁶ Smith, *Swing Time*, 5.

¹⁷ Jean Rhys, *Smile Please* (London: Deutsch, 1979).

¹⁸ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 103.

investigation underscores how passing represents not an identity, but a moment of identification through visual recognition.

The crucial importance of spectatorship is broached and even embedded by all three novelists, as when the narrator, in *Swing Time*, sees her old friend Tracey on stage impersonating a white character in *Show Boat*, a musical whose very plot hinges round a passing act:

... she had a part on the West End stage. It was a revival of one of our favourite shows, *Guys and Dolls* ... “We’re in proper dress rehearsal now. They use flat irons on me every night, it’s killing me”. She touched her hairline and underneath the wax that had been used to slick it down I saw that indeed it was already frayed and patchy.¹⁹

Behind the apparently mundane conversation about hair, threat is lurking: in a Black Atlantic context, the “irons” are reminiscent of capture, and of the branding of (or “on”, to borrow the minatory preposition which is used here) slaves while agency is transferred to an anonymous “they”. In such a passage, the phrase “it’s killing me” must also be read as a catachresis, or reactivation of the literal meaning of a figurative turn of phrase. That being said, the musical is also the occasion to ponder upon the erasure of a foregrounded female character which it marks, as it is an adaptation of a text by Damon Runyon entitled *The Idyll of Sarah Brown*. The promise of “colour” and femininity has been stifled by a pillar of popular, “white” American culture, but its appearance in Zadie Smith’s novel makes for a symptomatic re-reading reintroducing ambiguity around racial discrimination (as the plot partly takes place in a pre-revolutionary Cuba) and the domination of female characters by patriarchal marriage.

The text of *Swing Time* circumnavigates a character which is evolving ceaselessly and is potentially transformative, including through the figure of the double—a paradigm in all three novels. The hesitation lodges itself in the eye of the beholder. Passing juggles yet another invisibility than the one evoked by Ralph Ellison: an invisibility occasioned not by blackness *per se* but by an impression of whiteness. Judith Butler’s reflection on the alienation of the modern body is relevant here, when she evokes the vulnerability, that is to say the

¹⁹ Smith, *Swing Time*, 330.

potential violence inflicted upon, “the flesh exposed to the gaze of others”:

The body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others but also to touch and to violence. The body can be the agency and instrument of all these as well, or the site where “doing” and “being done to” become equivocal. Although we struggle for rights over our own bodies, the very bodies for which we struggle are not quite ever only our own. The body has its invariably public dimension; constituted as a social phenomenon.²⁰

An illustration of such bodily vulnerability is offered in *Free Enterprise* when Annie Christmas is raped repeatedly after she has been discovered to be a woman (“until a guard spied a trickle of blood down my leg”).²¹ A voyeuristic witness then declares Annie’s racial identity to be strange: “‘What is she?’ A woman friend of one of the keepers come to enjoy the daily entertainment, asked”.²² The hyperbolic violence of the exposure of the vulnerable flesh pointedly involves the risk of revealing her “genuine” race as well as of her “true” gender identity. The visual exposure of who Annie might be warrants what can be said about her body, with a culmination of her vulnerability in the visibility of a tabooed element: menstrual blood. These moments of violence and/or resistance to the potentially optimistic and democratic self-fashioning of nineteenth-century America, as represented by the practice of passing, may be enlightened by Judith Butler’s joint definition of performance and performativity. Butler posits performance as the repetition of behaviour and places performativity on the side of transgression and renewal of that repetition. The critical issues that bear upon passing not as a result but as a practice, implicate imitation and derivation—reproduction, even. With performativity, a process of dis-

²⁰ Judith Butler, *Prearious Life, The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso, 2004), 26.

²¹ Cliff, *Free Enterprise*, 207. With the introduction of musicals through *Swing Time*, one is retrospectively tempted to connect this scene in Cliff’s novel and the one in *West Side Story*, in Doc’s drugstore, when Anita is symbolically raped by the Jets after one of them has declared that she was “too dark to pass”—with a polysemic use of “pass”. This scene is one of the most pivotal ones as it provokes the false rumour according to which Chino has murdered Maria.

²² Cliff, *Free Enterprise*, 208.

embedding initiates a liberation from stereotypes. In Butler's stride I read passing not as hypocrisy or even transgression, but as disorientation, as a fleeting moment of hesitation *on the part of the onlooker*. Obviously, this hesitation does not cancel the vast possibilities offered by the act of passing in terms both of theatricality and subversion; I merely suggest that the narrative possibilities linked to racial passing depend on a contingent confusion that racial passing will produce for some, not for others.

These hesitations have to do with perceptual experience; passing may trigger very different reactions according to its audience. In the second chapter in Larsen's *Passing*, Clare recognizes Irene: it is the permanent passer who recognizes the occasional one, in the deferred moment, or process, of recognition taking place between the two women. The theme of the double, Irene/Clare, Annie/Mary, Tracey/the narrator, presents racial passing as dependent upon the audience – and possibly as the origin of homo-erotic desire. The very term “passing” could be seen to be taken up by the explicit queerness in all three novels. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick recalls the etymology of the term “queer”:

The word “queer” itself means across – it comes from the Indo-European root—*twerkw*, which also yields the German *quer* (transverse), Latin *torquere* (to twist), English *athwart* ... Keenly, it is relational, and strange.²³

“Strange relationality” draws the reader's attention to the queerness of the performed identity but also to the relational nature of that identity, where the oddity of appearances triggers a chain of associations for us in the audience. This is evidenced in a key scene of recognition, or unmasking, when, in *Passing*, Clare's husband is the one who recognizes Irene. This mediation is operated through an accident where both characters turn the street corner: a spatialisation of passing and a representation of the turning point in the novel. The lost hat functions here as a mask which is snatched away.

Instinctively, in the first glance of recognition, her face had become a mask. Now she turned on him a totally uncomprehending look, a bit questioning. Seeing that he still stood with hand outstretched, she gave him the cool appraising stare which she reserved for mashers, and drew Felise on.

²³

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke UP, 1993), xii.

Felise drawled: “Aha! Been ‘passing’ have you? Well, I’ve queered²⁴ that.”
“Yes, I’m afraid you have.”²⁵

Felise is the clue and missing link to a chain which is reconstituted in a pattern of association and contagion, while the scene opens yet more sexual possibilities, as is intimated by the colloquial term of “masher” attached to Brian as he stares at Irene. *Free Enterprise* also draws on the epistemologies of queer commentary, as Clover Adams imagines that she leaves the East Coast with a woman to start anew, including sexually. The reverie falls through (“the fantasy ended”) and connects again to Turner’s painting of black bodies not seen, not seeable, apart from a hand and a foot: “Imagine the Turner hanging in a sod house”.²⁶

The emphasis on the agency of the audience is often operated in all three novels through the visual arts, cinema and/or photography. This is probably because the written word is a practice heavy not only with the white male *logos* but also with an appropriation of Black voices, for instance through slave narratives (see the ending in *Free Enterprise*, where Sarah parodies the beginning of a slave narrative while “Mary Ellen could no longer remember the rest of it”).²⁷ The revelation dreaded but also promised by practices of passing points to hermeneutics in which the looker-on appears as a figure of the reader – a reader of slave narratives and beyond. Passing calls for the uncovering of what is *in the text*. Not coincidentally, *Passing* opens on a letter exchanged between Irene and Clare, and the whole plot of *Swing Time* hinges round an unsigned hate letter sent in the prologue by Tracey. There are also, in Cliff’s text, letters written and not sent but read by someone else, as when Mary Ellen Pleasant writes to Clover.²⁸

“Passing” as Authorship and Mode of Reading

²⁴ Queer has designated homosexual desire ever since the late nineteenth century. The ambiguity can therefore have been intended by Larsen.

²⁵ Larsen, *Passing*, 259.

²⁶ Cliff, *Free Enterprise*, 97.

²⁷ Cliff, *Free Enterprise*, 211.

²⁸ Cliff, *Free Enterprise*, 79–80.

Combining forms of burlesque, carnivalesque topsy-turvidom, and gallows' humour, a scene in Cliff's *Free Enterprise* stages a cross-dressed Mary Ellen Pleasant as she kills three white boys, burns their bodies and leaves a note saying that "These were some mean niggers".²⁹ In this instance, passing is performed and performative, but it is also a means to snatch authorship, to write a fiction of "passing" in which a black woman becomes a white supremacist killer and white men become black corpses.

The right to write was doubly problematic for Mary Ellen Pleasant, as a woman and a former slave, and passing is also a way to be able to author her own narrative. There is more than one moment of authorship in *Free Enterprise*, where the capitalistic business suggested by the title is associated, or undermined, with dealing in words. While attention is paid to moments when the protagonist transfers money, turns bonds into cash, finances the cause of Abolition, this emphasis on value is part and parcel of her disguise, and of her writing her own story, as in this passage:

"How can I help you, Mammy?" a stockbroker solicitously inquired. The year was 1858.

"I'm fixin' to sell my shares in the Baltimore and Ohio; decided I don't trust money that don't look like money."

He chuckled as he was meant to, and handed over \$30,000 in cash, and when she pressed him, converted it to gold, before her very eyes.

Never in a million years, not with a gun to his head, could he have guessed its destination.

Not perceive that the woman before him, all smiles and lowered eyes, contracting into type in his mind, would be setting out the next morning for Canada, carrying a carpetbag of gold, wearing a jockey's silks. Disguised.

She wired Captain Brown ahead:

YOU WILL FIND I AM AS GOOD AS MY WORD STOP I RIDE IN THE SECOND RACE AT CHATHAM STOP I HAVE ALL CONFIDENCE IN OUT MOUNT STOP THE PURSE IS YOURS STOP AS PROMISED M.E.P.³⁰

The idea that value fluctuates infinitely is reprised in *Swing Time*, a novel where money plays a crucial role. Again, finances are associated

²⁹ Cliff, *Free Enterprise*, 140.

³⁰ Cliff, *Free Enterprise*, 105–6.

with the business of culture. And like money, culture circulates freely. This is heard in the title, a number by Fred Astaire where he dances in blackface in a reversed phenomenon of passing which is also to be interpreted as a hidden legacy. The process is not one of evaluation or devaluation, but of theft:

I hardly understood what we were looking at: Fred Astaire in black face. In the Royal Festival Hall I'd sat in the gods, without my glasses on, and the scene opens with Astaire in long shot. But none of this really explained how I'd managed to block the childhood image from my memory: the rolling eyes, the white gloves, the Bojangles grin. I felt very stupid, closed the laptop and went to sleep.³¹

Astaire in blackface, adopting tap dancing, "passed" these performative practices into mainstream American culture. In the novel, Smith explores cultural practices of appropriation, as is already signposted by the title.

Larsen's, Cliff's and Smith's novels delineate a zone of literary recognition which could help us retrospectively to understand how passing, a necessarily visual and performative activity, can translate at all into writing. As passing reuses patterns but adapts them into a singularity warranted by an authorial and authoritative position, it becomes a point of entry into (re)considerations of literary creation.

I would further contend that "passing" makes for a hermeneutic tool in order to remap ways of reading. The double movement of visibility and obfuscation implied by practices of passing can be seen as analogous to how writers display *and* hide clues in texts. Frank Kermode explains that "we may like to think, for our purposes, of narrative as the product of two intertwined processes, the presentation of a fable and its progressive interpretation (which of course alters it). The first process tends towards clarity and propriety ('refined common sense'), the second toward distortions which cover secrets".³²

In *Free Enterprise* there is something vestigial at heart, a will to monumentalize such forgotten destinies as Mary Ellen Pleasant's but also Annie Christmas' or Clover Adams', to expose their secret,

³¹ Smith, *Swing Time*, 4–5.

³² Frank Kermode, "Secrets and Narrative Sequence." *Critical Inquiry* 7 (Autumn 1980): 83–101, 86.

subaltern histories. This aspect has been duly noted by critics³³ and I would argue here for a reading which emphasizes the evanescence of a novel whose interpretation remains particularly open. As such, it foregrounds the ambiguities in the characterization of these protagonists and the active role necessitated on the part of the implied reader.

Passing opens on a long scrutiny of a letter sent by Clare. It is as if the first appearance of the racial passer had to be mediated by a text, the character of flesh and blood having been turned into an ambiguous script to be pored over by a fascinated reader. Larsen's narrative then proceeds to reveal Clare's strangeness, ambiguity and in-betweenness, producing another ambiguous script and stressing the act of authorship inherent in Clare's entire behavior, which can indeed be interpreted as a long, queer and unclear letter addressed to her friend Irene. Larsen suggests that passing also means *passing into* a queer script that calls for acceptance of open-endedness in its reader. In *Free Enterprise*, the practice of passing is again associated with a particular use of texts: Mary Ellen's is an avid reader and collapses her shape-shifting with shifting identification with a great many different characters:

"Think of my father as the King of Samarkand. Instead of his wife, Scheherazade is his daughter; in my case a slave and a daughter. As long as I am his bright little monkey, I will be spared my mother's life. Allowed to roam among his books and use them. I can vacate my situation in my mind, pass through a magic casement. Wander with Marco Polo through China. With Candide through the Hundred Years' War. With Boccaccio through the Black Death. With Madame Bovary through her infidelity, witness as the arsenic burns her throat. 'She had ceased to exist.' Remember? Poor, foolish bitch. Reading. You know. Entering another's realm".³⁴

This passage collapses the belief that literature can while death away (*The Arabian Nights*, *The Decameron*) and provoke it (*Madame*

³³ See for instance: "John Brown was financed by a black woman [Mary Ellen Pleasant—she gave him thirty thousand dollars in gold to buy fifteen thousand rifles, which he did. At the Chatham convention where Harper's Ferry was being planned, the majority of people there were black and they came up with a constitution which demanded a black state within the United States. There was a really complicated revolutionary movement prior to the Civil War. What has come down to us is this notion of John Brown, this flaming, crazy, white man who was patriarchal and patronizing—and that's not the historical case at all." (interview with Raiskin 65).

³⁴ Cliff, *Free Enterprise*, 93.

Bovary); in both cases, human existence is caught in a tension between Eros and Thanatos, between myth-making and nothingness.³⁵ The transnational scale presented here outlines the constructedness of characters, be they fictional (Candide, Emma Bovary—whose inspiration is grounded in actual fact in any case) or non-fictional (Marco Polo, about whom we have more lore than grounded facts). All of these influences bring us back to female agency in the Black Atlantic: while Scheherazade rivals men and challenges violence wielded against women, Emma uses the very poison associated with women killers, the one which, according to the etymology, “tames the male” (arsenic). As for Candide, he meets an amputated slave in Surinam (chapter 19). The threat of bovaryism recedes in front of a cluster of texts weaving power relations with literary practices.

Deployed as an exercise not only of self-fashioning but also of fiction-writing, the female protagonist’s passing translates into a mode of reading. Cliff’s accumulation of characters takes the reader away from the hackneyed note of caution against any form of bovaryism, against the inability to realize how books and real life may differ, and dwells on the evanescence of any stereotyped existence, literary and otherwise. The femininity pursued by Emma turned out to be as lethal as Cleopatra’s, produced and condemned by patriarchy, and doomed to self-destruction. Her suicide is placed alongside a “real” one, that of Clover Adams, because life imitates art as much as art imitates life.

In *Abeng*, an earlier novel by Michelle Cliff, Clare Savage³⁶ was already faced with the temptation of the colonized to surrender to a mimicry of the colonizer, including in terms of reading practice: “Maybe Kitty thought that Clare would only want this thing, to pass into whiteness, looking as she did, speaking well because of her lessons at St. Catherine’s, reading English books and English descriptions of history. Perhaps she thought it would be best for her”.³⁷ “Entering the realm” of the white colonizer may indeed involve a passive surrender to

³⁵ “They all gathered around her. She no longer existed”, my translation of “Tous s’approchèrent. Elle n’existait plus.” Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, 45. The quote combines spectatorship, recognition, and disappearance.

³⁶ A character whose first name is an obvious echo of, and homage to, Larsen’s Clare Kendry.

³⁷ Michelle Cliff, *Abeng* (New York: Penguin, 1984), 129.

whiteness, but Cliff also seems to be implying that there is such a thing as a critical, reflective racial passing—just as there is such a thing as critical, reflective reading. In her poem “Passing” Michelle Cliff writes that “Passing demands a desire to become invisible. A ghost-life”. The passer’s attempt to escape visibility constitutes a trigger to the act of writing and it is also a metaphor for writing itself when writing involves the production of supplementary, ghostly self-images.

By way of conclusion, I would add the following coda, “in passing”. Jewishness is featured in *Free Enterprise* through a minor character, Rachel DaSouza; the similarities this intimates between Black and Jewish diasporic fates meet the final reflections of Gilroy’s in *The Black Atlantic*. This parallel constitutes one more way out of the binarism between white and black, as identities are re-shuffled but also combined in an open mesh of possibilities. In *Swing Time*, Julie, the “tragic mulatress” who passes in *Show Boat*, is played by a white actress with Greek roots: “In the dim light, in the middle of this ridiculous melodrama, I checked the bio of the actress playing Julie. She had a Greek last name and was no darker than was Kramer”.³⁸ While “passing” makes less and less sense in a supposedly post-racial America, and in a world officially gone global, there is no possible last word to the identification of some groups as subaltern, but no last word either to the more or less playful confusion between racial and ethnic identities. Negotiations between the dominant and the dominated identities have a way of shifting. Tracking down these shifts involves thinking about why one writes, and reads, at all.

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³⁸ Smith, *Swing Time*, 359. In the 1951 film version, the role is played by another white actress, Ava Gardner.

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