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DOCTORAL THESIS

“METAPHORS OF THE AMERICAN NOVEL: LIFTING THE VEIL
AND PASSING THE COLOR-LINE OR, THE MULTICULTURAL DIMENSION OF RACIAL IDENTITY”

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SUMMARY

Cultural identity and expression are set to the test in many ways by the phenomenon of globalization. Those who have the opportunity to take an active part in world cultural exchanges often realize that culture is much more a process than a product, and the feeling of their own cultural individuality makes them receptive to others' cultures. But those who cannot afford to participate to exchange or express themselves, feel globalization as a stranger mechanism and expose themselves to the inexorable risk of locking themselves into a narrow conception of cultural identity that rejects the diversity. When this negative reaction is exploited politically or exacerbated by other factors, the culture quickly became part of the conflict.

It is important to remember that the enslaved Africans have largely contributed to the European colonization and development of the Americas. But there was nothing to suggest at the outset that this would be so, and slavery as an institution began to develop slowly, amidst doubts and innumerable controversies. Historical accounts of slavery date back as long as trade itself, and in the middle of the twentieth century researchers focused on the early writings on slavery to illustrate debate on trafficking that has taken place within the European and American abolitionist movements. However, more recent studies have questioned many of the early analyzes, although these revised views have not yet benefited from wider dissemination in history books, especially because of the lack of interest in the transatlantic slave trade in history teaching around the world.

Three ideologies, (or movements), roughly covering the nineteenth and twentieth centuries aim to define the American identity: the nineteenth-century assimilationism, the theory of the melting pot (originally developed by St Jean de Crèvecoeur), and multiculturalism. Both the assimilationism and the melting pot openly oppose multiculturalism. Multiculturalism has always existed in the United States, but it was neither recognized nor admitted. In the

nineteenth century, immigrants in their New York or Chicago neighborhoods lived for many years with their original language, their country's food products; however, men were gradually becoming English in their work and at school the children learned the language of the majority. The political parties hastened to vote the newcomers, promising them American nationality. What makes that at the end of a generation these last ones were at the same time close to their roots and "integrated" in American society with its habits of consumption and entertainment.

However, the dominant ideology had "invented" at the beginning of the twentieth century the notion of melting pot, according to which immigrants quickly lost their culture to Americanize. At a time of very strong immigration (about 1 million per year around 1910), the melting pot seemed reassuring, even though it took two or three generations for the majority of immigrants to marry outside their group and integrate into society. The restriction of immigration in 1920 and 1924 resulted in a form of integration, without the pressure of new immigrants. In fact, it was not until 1965 that the immigration law led to the massive return of immigrants, the varied origins of the immigrants being more diverse than before. In his essay "A Multicultural America: Living in a Sea of Diversity", John A. Garcia focuses on the reality and importance of multiculturalism in modern societies, which he views as "rooted in race and ethnicity" and which he defines as "a sustained effort by racial and ethnic groups to recover, preserve, and achieve recognition for their distinct cultural identities from society at large. [...] a resistance to the cultural amalgamation of the American 'melting pot,' which limits the number of pathways leading to successful integration" (Garcia qtd in Harris 1995: 30).

The colonial history of North America was one of conquest and alliance: conquest because it was a question of annexing America to bring out a New Europe, and alliance because, although subordinate to that of the conquest, a dynamic of alliance between Amerindians and Europeans characterizes all the colonial history with modalities, even radical differences between the actors and according to the times. These colonial relations were fraught with tensions, misunderstandings and divergent interpretations between Native Americans and Europeans, especially with regard to the question of sovereignty. These divergences broke out in the light of the signing of treaties involving transfers of territories between European powers and involving Amerindian nations. A striking example of assimilationism pushed to

the extreme – almost complete dissolution in the American melting pot, the Native Americans are now considered as members of the multicultural American society.

Cultural diversity is a considerable wealth, a resource inherent in the human race, which must be perceived and recognized as such. On the other hand, there is no scale of values between cultures: they are all equal in dignity and in law, whatever the number of people who refer to it or the extent of the territories on which they are based. In essence, our world is a synchrony of cultures whose coexistence and plurality form humanity. It is very urgent to place this flight of cultures at the forefront of our overall response to the march of time, that is, development.

We have approached the American literature, not only the novels, but also drama and movies screenings, to discover a richness of meanings in its apparent simplicity, and determine its unique position in the multicultural context of the American “melting pot”. We have done our best to provide answers to a number of questions:

1. Long ago, a black slave tried to get meaning from the Holy Bible: he did not get it, as the book would not speak to him. The slaves were officially denied any access to the knowledge comprised in the pages of a book. Two centuries later, an African American became the first black President of the United States of America. In between the two moments, the African Americans struggled for the means to voice their specificity and attain universality. If so, what is the degree of acceptance and/or tolerance of the black *Other* by the white majority?
2. Multi-ethnic America is a reality that cannot be denied. Tracts have been and will be written on the cultural impact of the ethnic composition of the American nation on its literature. Under the circumstances, how American is the “American” in “American literature”? And where do we stand as researchers of the African American literature?
3. African American writer Richard Wright’s famous statement that “the Negro is America’s metaphor”, and W.E.B. Du Bois’s definition for 20th-century America: “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line” may be considered emblematic for our understanding of the American cultural background. What is the response of the (white) American writers to the challenge of otherness? What is the extent of the traffic across the ‘color line’?

4. If passing for white was possible due to natural physical traits—the result of miscegenation—the reverse was also made possible by artistic means. How did minstrelsy contribute to the image of the black American?
5. Our study is devoted to two defining metaphors: the metaphor of the veil and the metaphor of passing; in defining the two, I will cover a range of authors and writings, since the African American slave narratives to the Harlem Renaissance and such mainstream writers as Mark Twain and William Faulkner. What is, then, the present-day perception of the color line?
6. Last but not least, one separate chapter will be devoted to the metaphor of the veil as found in the writings of selected Arab American writers.

Even if the African American novels of passing are the starting point and the core of our thesis, the neo-slave narratives of the late twentieth century are only alluded to, just as the possible connections to the literature of other ethnic groups of multicultural America. On the other hand, although the adjective “American” in the title justifies our expanding of the discussion to include other American writers such as Fitzgerald and Faulkner, we had to limit the discussion to one title for each writer only, while the theoretical and technical references to other genres—musical, drama, movie—were restricted by limitations imposed by the main topic.

As a basic approach for our discussion of the multicultural dimensions of racial diversity in the United States, I have chosen the tools of comparative literature that searches for anything that transcends the boundaries of a singular literary text. This opens up a vast field of research which, in fact, has no bounded boundaries. We are aware that it will only be possible to explore certain tracks of this field. We will content ourselves with three aspects: intertextuality, transtextuality, and intermediality. Our critical discourse is based on the assumption that comparative literature is a methodical approach, seeking links of analogy, kinship and influence, bringing literature closer to other areas of expression or knowledge, or literary facts and texts between them, distant or not in time or space, provided they belong to several languages or several cultures, if they are part of the same tradition, in order to better describe, understand and taste them. I have also developed along the directions outlined by such authorities in the field of comparative literature as Djelal Kadir, Steven Tötösi de Zepetnek, and Susan Bassnett among others.

As regards the structure of the dissertation I decided upon an almost symmetrical approach in which the two parts equally cover the two main topics suggested by the title: *Metaphors of the American Culture: from the Talking Book to the Color-line—or, the Multicultural Dimensions of Racial Identity*. The study is preceded by a Foreword, an Introduction, and each of the two parts is divided into four and five chapters respectively, followed by final Conclusions and a Bibliography.

The purpose of the Introduction: *The legacy of W.E.B. Du Bois—historical and social background* is to provide an overall image of the historical and social conditions during the slavery and post-slavery years that triggered a wealth of reactions from the African Americans—slaves or descendants of the former slaves—both at the level of concrete protest actions against oppression and discrimination in the Southern states and, a literary level, as seen in the great number of slave autobiographies, passing narratives and, in the twentieth century, in the presence of similar themes in the works of American writers, playwrights, and script writers. The often cited contributions of the African Americans heritage to the American identity as formulated by W.E.B. Du Bois—“the gift of story and song”, “the gift of sweat and brawn”, and “the gift of the Spirit”—are carefully considered and correlated with what Cornel West called “the three basic challenges—the intellectual, the existential, and the political.” All these “gifts” and “challenges” gave shape and definition to the position that the African Americans in a country that was called either a “melting pot” or a multicultural society.

Under the circumstances, many African American intellectuals and leaders, such as Du Bois, refused to accept social and legal distinctions based on race, and they initiated the Niagara Movement (later expanded into the NAACP—National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) that dedicated itself to the promotion of racial equality, by seeking justice for those affected by racially motivated violence and by all kinds of discrimination, and challenging the legality of segregation, voicing the evils of a blind society. They openly denounced the hypocrisy of the American Dream, starting with the speeches of Frederick Douglass and W.E.B. DuBois, up to the emblematic “I Had a Dream” speech of Martin Luther King Junior.

Not surprisingly, the African American people soon grew tired of racial discrimination, private and mass racist acts of violence, voter suppression, segregated economic life and education, and determined to challenge and change the racist institutions and beliefs in a

peaceful way. The Civil Rights Movement had favourable results, and the activists intensified their efforts to assert African American identity, which made possible the birth of the Black Power Movement and the Affirmative Action. On the other hand, the significance on one's being black in a predominantly white society, and the nature of blackness also preoccupied the black women activists who were eager to demonstrate that such issues as gender and female sexuality should be included on the list of radical claims. We considered it significant to mention the positions taken by such critics and analysts as Devon Carbado, Mahassen Mgadmi, or Missy Dehn Kubitschek, and concluded with the remark that the present problems and the oppressive reality are a proof to the actuality and importance of the subjects in this selection of novels and to the compulsiveness of writing and analyzing such issues as slavery, racism, sexism.

PART ONE: *From a Ship Captain's Talking Book to Being Black in White America* is introduced by an Argument and develops around four key words: "talking book", "color line", "double-consciousness", and the "veil" and covers a number of concepts, such as multiculturalism, race and racism, the Middle Passage and "passing", essential to the understanding of the complexity of the African American literature. What is significant is that the collective experiences of discrimination and the memory of resistance and oppression have given rise in the heart of the African American community to some group strategies and critical perspectives that aim at the "acquisition of autonomy and power" by blacks. We found it necessary to define multiculturalism as a feature of the American society, to demonstrate the proven fallacy of the "melting pot" theory, the development of the multiculturalist theory, and the trope of invisibility. We have also developed on the significance of race and racism, the importance of slavery and the slave narratives, and, equally important, on the phenomenon of "passing" and the crossing of the color-line.

CHAPTER ONE: *America – a melting pot or a multicultural nation?* defines such key notions as the "melting pot" and "multiculturalism", with an insistence on the idea the assimilationist approach expressed through the idea of the "melting pot" ordered the reformulation of the construction of the nation. A starting assertion is that the ambiguity of the term "multiculturalism" can be understood as the description of a social fact, a political model or an ideology. These three dimensions are in fact linked, since the policies described as multicultural have been designed to respond to a series of social movements that demand specific forms of integration in the structures of contemporary democracies. On the other

hand, the so-called “cultural melting pot” or, simply, “melting pot” emerged in the United States, has long ceased to be a valid and complete explanation. Its metaphorical meaning in the assimilationist sense, where immigrants “lose” their ethnic and cultural distinctions, has not proven to be a viable option, especially in the US. It is a myth turned out to be a fallacy that many have considered part of an assimilationist ideology where minority cultural groups have to renounce their ethnic characteristics in order to fully participate in the social, economic and political institutions of the country to which they emigrate. We have followed the concept of the “melting-pot” since Saint John of Crèvecoeur’s *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782), to Israel Zangwill’s play *The Melting Pot* (1908). The meaning of contemporary literary multiculturalism was determined by the rejection in the 1960s and 1970s of the liberal assimilationist consensus. “Multicultural” texts have struggled for visibility, and critical multicultural reading of these texts can investigate the relationship between traditionally “visible” and “invisible” identities that have historically been used to value human identities within the context of American culture. This trope of visibility/invisibility has been embraced culturally as indicating a relationship of power that privileges the visible differences present outside of the group. Finally, ethnicity is a functional aspect of groups that allows them to compete, often using predetermined values and beliefs (self-affirming, stereotypes and negative stereotypes of the other), to strengthen their case.

Chapter Two: *America’s identity through the racial mirror* deals with the importance of the studies of the concept of *race* which, according to Luke and Carrington, is commonly associated with hereditary qualities that manifest themselves in visible physical distinctions. ‘Race’ has been replaced by categories of ‘birthplace’ origins, of ‘ethnicity’ and ‘culture’. When ‘race’ is not a category, as in sociological studies, it is “a signifier of relational identity politics, a fundamental principle of social organization and identity formation that moves people to act in certain ways”. Racism exists when people “act upon ideologies of race differentiation; hence, prejudice, exclusion, discrimination, racial slurs, or feelings of alienation, dislocation or estrangement” which are all the consequences of social and legal practices that ‘racialize’ others. Thus, ‘race’ is both about claiming an identity and having a historically and socially constructed identity imposed (named as ‘other’ by others).

A number of theoreticians—such as Sophie Body-Gendrot, Kwame Anthony Appiah, Homi Bhabha, Derick A. Bell and others—have written on the concept of race, and gradually a

critical race theory was developed. Lois Tyson points out that critical race theory is a “new approach to civil rights” and although it is not addressed to literary studies, it can be useful in our interpretation of novels because it opens the reader’s eyes to new perspectives on race and human relations to be considered in the literary analysis. The quest to understand human relations is the reason why most authors write and most readers read. Delgado and Stefancic have identified as many as six basic tenets of critical race theory, revelatory and necessary for the understanding of both the present and past reality in America. They include: (1) everyday racism which is still an American common practice although not so visible; (2) interest convergence which can have as a result racism when the financial or psychological interest of the powerful majority or individual overlaps with the interest of the minority; (3) race as part of a socially constructed classification as it changes according to political, social, and economic pressures; (4) differential racialization which means that the racial characteristics of a minority group are defined in different ways at different times in response to the shifting needs of the dominant society; (5) intersectionality which refers to the complexity of individual identity based on the intersection of race with sex, sexual orientation, class, political affiliation, and even personal history; (6) and voice of color which implies that the experiences of a minority group are generally better and more accurate rendered by writers from the respective group given their direct experience.

Regarding the African American experience, references are made to Alain Locke’s position—instead of *culture* expressing the race from which it arises, *race* is “a *cultural product*”—and his view of cultural assimilation: even though a relatively “pure” race could have a highly mixed culture, and even though “blood intermixture” or “physical assimilation” might or might not accompany or even precede cultural assimilation, race itself was ultimately nothing else than a culture-type understood in terms of culture heredity. Locke understood the African American as a sort of “cultural hybrid”. Describing race as “the central thought of all history,” W.E.B. Du Bois defined the races as vast families “of human beings, generally of common blood and language, always of common history, tradition and impulses.” “American black people”, he maintained, “must cultivate their racial gifts in order to deliver the full complete Negro message of the whole Negro race” to the world. Du Bois embraced race as an organic distinction between human beings in order to call for the cultural uplift of the black race.

Chapter Three: *Memories of passage and the struggle for freedom* discusses at length the U.S. system of enslavement, defined by its physical, psychological, and sexual brutality. As a consequence, the sons and daughters of the former plantation slaves wrote down their own experiences of slavery, and in works covering all literary genres (fiction, drama, poetry, memoir, autobiography, non-fiction) did not hesitate to stand tall against the unjust system of slavery and advocate the struggle for freedom from slavery and the emancipation of the African American people. We have given considerable consideration to Harvard scholar and activist Henry Louis Gates Jr. who demonstrated that the European Renaissance meant not only the upheaval of arts and the great geographical discoveries, but also the expansion of the Spanish and British empires and, with it, slavery and the sustained efforts of reputed European philosophers and politicians to justify the enslavement of the free Africans, and bring arguments to attest the sub-human nature of blacks.

Following the Middle Passage and the “talking book” moment, African American literature appeared in a number of forms, especially when White abolitionists encouraged the writing and publication of slave narratives, or when illiterate African American slaves were encouraged to tell their life stories to white writers who wrote them down. We have devoted a significant segment of this chapter to the slave narratives which, more than often, transcend the category of “slave narrative” and become self-conscious literary pieces, expressing the spirit of the age, sharing the concerns of the reformers and idealists of the day.

In the second half of the 19th century, race was seen as predetermined and not generated. According to Alain Locke, race is a combination of values, traditions and characteristics which in case they are modified, initiate a change on ethnic level (Locke 2012: 274). This view on race is considered as functional and dynamic. Inheritance is not viewed from the physical aspects perspective, preserving a position for inheritance. According to Locke, race is determined by culture and the particularities of a certain race are dictated by the culture, changing the direction of the exchanges between race and culture. In his opinion, ethnic groups are the outcome of their historical evolution, race being an active component in the culture (*idem* 243).

In 1903 W.E.B Du Bois predicted the major problem of the new century, which was the problem of the color line (Du Bois, 1982: xi), with major risks for the African-Americans who were severely affected by this problem especially in the first two decades of the twentieth century when the violence and racist speech took such proportions that were

considered the worst times since the slavery had been abolished (*idem* 77-78). All the works reviewed to prepare this thesis demonstrate the need to analytically link the different forms of social stratification that we observe in the current world, and to explore how different categories change and influence each other. It is obvious that the following references are intimately linked: race, ethnicity, social class, gender, age, language.

Chapter Four: *Passing, or crossing the color-line—definitions, usage, dimensions* is a discussion of the manifestation of “passing for white” as both a social phenomenon and a literary trope. It has been estimated that tens of thousands crossed the color line, or passed from black to white, particularly in the years between 1880 and 1925, years which saw the publication of many passing narratives. But the history of these stories cannot be easily confined to this narrow time period. Nor can these narratives be associated with any single school, region, or race of the writers. The concept and fact of passing, in many ways, challenges the essentialist metaphors of “black” and “white” and romantic beliefs that the outer “face” reflects the inner person. These two beliefs gave strength to the “one-drop rule,” which is unique to the United States. When we examine passing narratives, we must remember that foreign models are not available: this is a uniquely “American” theme with its own literature, which verges on becoming a genre defined not only by the uniqueness of its subject but by its symbolic and structural strategies. Although both the literary event and the actual occurrence of passing would change dramatically with the freeing of the slaves in 1865, we should remember that passing did not only help some light-skinned blacks pass into free states but would also allow for other escapes into freedom during the Reconstruction and Jim Crow eras.

Because of the importance of secrecy to the success of these passings, it has always been difficult for historians to document the phenomenon. As already stated, the idea of passing relies on a rule which gathered state-by-state acceptance in the nineteenth century and became “uniformly accepted” by the 1920s: one-drop of “Negro” blood makes a person a “Negro.” The problems in explaining this rule, not unlike the problems in explaining “passing,” relates to the inherent problems in the American racialist and racist systems of thought. This study of the passing figure has, therefore, often focused on language. One of the problems encountered has been how to underscore the various problems and histories of words such as “Negro,” “passing,” and “Americans.”

The present study, in addition to its focus on passing, argues that there is a unique history of the passing narrative that must be examined separately as well as against and within these broader histories. Although both the literary event and the actual occurrence of passing would change dramatically with the freeing of the slaves in 1865, we should remember that passing did not only help some light-skinned blacks pass into free states but would also allow for other escapes into freedom during the Reconstruction and Jim Crow eras. Because of the importance of secrecy to the success of these passings, it has always been difficult for historians to document the phenomenon. It has been estimated that tens of thousands crossed the line, or passed from black to white, particularly in the years between 1880 and 1925, years which saw the publication of many passing narratives. But the history of these stories cannot be easily confined to this narrow time period. Nor can these narratives be associated with any single school, region, or race of the writers.

Starting from Mary Helen Washington's statement that passing is "a symbol or metaphor of deliverance for women" and "an obscene form of salvation" (Washington 1987: 164), we have considered the authorized positions taken by Judith Berzon, F. James Davis, Hazel Carby, Judith Butler, and Valerie Smith. The passing figure stands as a refutation of the unbridgeable distance between "black" and "white." This figure, often defined by its invisibility, becomes apparent through the traffic between what is often envisioned as two polarized worlds. In the movement across the color line, invisibility becomes the subject, the visible preoccupation of these authors.

PART TWO: *Being Black or White, or Both: The American Culture and the Metaphor of Passing* represents the analytical dimension of our thesis and covers different instances of "passing" as found in American fiction, drama, and film. It covers selected titles from the Southern fiction: James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1923), Richard Wright's *Black Boy* (1945), Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), and Ernest Gaines's *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pitman* (1971) historically document the uniformity of and differences in the Southern black writers' treatment of the South. A special analysis is devoted to the blackface minstrelsy (the performing of America through blackness) with a stress on an unusual development: a short story turned into a play turned into a movie, *The Jazz Singer*, a striking example of racial, cultural, and religious passing. Other examples are Fitzgerald's "The Diamond as Big as the Ritz", Edna Ferber's *Show Boat*, or Wallace Thurman's novel *Infants of Spring* that show the same anxieties about

passing. William Faulkner's novel *Light in August* is amply discussed from the point of view of its passing plot, while David Henry Hwang's 1988 play *M. Butterfly* (also turned into a movie) is analysed as an example of gender passing. The final chapter lifts the veil off the face of the Arab American ethnic group and identifies other instances of racial and cultural passing that define the increasing visibility of this major ethnic community in the American landscape.

Chapter Five: *Colored, Ex-Colored, or the "Blackness of Blackness"* is an ample incursion into the passing fiction of the American South. It starts from the assumption that Southern African American fiction had its genesis in the prose narratives of the lives of African Americans who had escaped a slave existence and that the conventions of the slave narratives were continued by other writers like Mark Twain, and William Dean Howells. We have devoted generous space to James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* that combines elements of the autobiographical mode, the trope of the tragic mulatto, and the passing motif and, like Ernest Gaines's *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pitman*, is indicative of the writer's extension of the metaphor to include, besides the protagonist in the title, a large group of African Americans on the color line who are forced to cross because of racial and social repression. There is a close connection between Johnson's ex-colored man, Jean Toomer's Kabnis, and Ralph Ellison's invisible man: they are all spiritual and cultural orphans in that they are cut off from their past and its traditions, cannot come to terms with their Southern black heritage, and as Blacks cannot become a part of the mainstream culture. Yet all three are drawn to the roots of their Southern Black heritage. Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem* and Carl Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven*—through their characters, plot, and descriptions—manage to unsettle the old binary of black and white, and to unsteady the essentialist view of "race."

The passing novel conforms to constraining narrative codes and does not subvert the racist ideology, since the protagonist suffers fatally to discover or be discovered as African American: to pass is to go unnoticed, it is to silence and make invisible its black identity to give the prerogative to its white identity. On the face of it, however, the representation and study of the mulatto character fits perfectly into the context of the Harlem Renaissance. Several authors use it as a symbol of mediation, of exploration between races. At the border of two cultures, two legacies, two worlds, the mulatto makes it possible to believe in the inclusion of the African American heritage in the white and racist society, even aspires to a

certain racial equality. Its fate, although it is already planned, nevertheless allows the coexistence of two enemy races and suggests a possibility of dialogue between them.

To conclude, we may say that much of the conscious and unconscious attention to color resulted in narratives that put pressure on old ways of thinking. We might even say that “race,” cut loose from its safe and simplistic metonyms (black and white), began to show signs of being a construct. Though “race” continued to signify difference despite the disruption of a consensual nomenclature and the disruption of the old binary scheme of color, narratives of “passing” unsteadied even more the essentialist view of “race.” The sheer number of passing stories that were written between the World Wars certainly manifests the modernist’s predilection for ambiguities, but the specific interest in racial ambiguity is a distinctly American obsession.

Chapter Six: *Passing and the Mythical Journey in Quest of Freedom* continues the analysis in the previous chapter. Theoretically, the purpose of the strategy of passing as a form of resistance against racial segregation is to take advantage of the benefits reserved for whites but it has a very strong political sense, because it reveals the incapacity of the white society to assure its segregationist objectives. Moreover, it clearly shows that segregation is a cleavage first and foremost symbolic, whose “passing” betrays contingency. African American politics then poses the decisive question: if the symbolic cleavage cannot prevent the passage of the very frontier it institutes, then what is its real power? A symbolic cleavage gives the subject a certain number of identity possibilities in his relation to the yardstick. It follows as an immediate consequence that it does not allow all identity positions. In places of exclusion, the body can no longer be symbolized, as singularity, facing the other. Now, the transgression, or the crossing of the borders, is in itself one of these places and allows, as an exploration of the possible, to reveal them.

Nella Larsen’s *Passing* is about the friendship between two black women, Clare and Irene, the first of which passes for white and marries a wealthy white man. Clare, still part of the white world, returns to Harlem and asks her friend to recognize her as Black. There is no symbolic relationship, other than the segregated identity of Harlem, within which a black woman could symbolize the existence of another black woman. George S. Schuyler’s novel *Black No More* invites the reader to a social reading as well as an intellectual reflection. The theme of the novel that of a process of depigmentation of the epidermis that makes ex-blacks new whites with lighter skin than whites. Since depigmentation is not genetically

transmissible, sexuality inevitably generates problems because the birth of a black child, the fruit of the love of two whites, plunges into chaos a society restructured around a new hierarchy: racial thought is not played out in actual physical difference, but in relation to the Other and its perceived difference. Mary and William Craft's *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom; Or, the Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery* is about the play of ambiguities that accompanies any act of passing, and a good example of the authors' double passing of race and gender. In the Crafts' story of bondage and escape, the terms of desire and power (male/female, white/black, master/slave, and husband/wife) became as hopelessly confused as the most convoluted comedy of manners.

Chapter Seven: *Passing for Black: The Blackened White Face in the Racial Mirror* shifts the accent upon a different instance of passing—passing for black—as exemplified by the blackface minstrelsy phenomenon, an artistic expression of the drama of Americanization. Nearly a century before the publication of Fitzgerald's collection of stories *Tales of the Jazz Age* (1922), the popular blackface minstrelsy—generally considered the first distinctly American theatrical form—experienced a quick rise to popular attention with an ensuing debate over its importance as a national art. An interesting example of this artistic trend is what we could call “the Al Johnson phenomenon”: a musical starring Al Johnson (“Robinson Crusoe, Jr.”) inspired Samson Raphaelson to publish a short story (“The Day of Atonement”), which he converted into a play (“The Jewish Singer”), and which eventually became the script of *The Jazz Singer*, a musical movie. It does not manifest a simple ideology, racist or non-racist, but insists on the features of Jewishness and blackness. *The Jazz Singer* is only prototypical of those narratives that highlight the black mask as a way to perform Americanness. It is a narrative that does not simply graft the rags-to-riches story onto a tale of racial and religious assimilation. “Race” articulates complexly with the economics of the narrative, promoting “blackness” while it demotes “Jewishness.” It answers the question whether the American Jews are really identifying with the plight of the African Americans by wearing the blackface mask on the stage, or this is only a manifestation of racism, as “a form of exploitation of black culture that allowed Jews to situate themselves as members of the white majority”. Conflicting ideologies can be felt in the narrative's attempt to identify with African-American culture while it nowhere can imagine the African-American subject. We might imagine the diffuse force of American culture, with its attraction for African-American iconography, as asserting itself onto individual consciousness.

In “The Diamond as Big as the Ritz”, F. Scott Fitzgerald suggests how myths of blackness haunted his conceptions of history, America, and fantasy. The narrator does not attend to racist concerns, no characters function to challenge racist assumptions and even Fitzgerald, already famous at the point that he begins to write this story, escapes responsibility with his evasive ending. In contrast to *The Jazz Singer*’s juxtapositions of race and ethnicity, song and prayer, “The Diamond as Big as the Ritz” simply replaces one indulgence for another, one fantasy for another. Although Fitzgerald does not register the same interest in race as many of his contemporaries, “The Diamond as Big as the Ritz” suggests how myths of blackness haunted his conceptions of history, America, and fantasy.

Edna Ferber’s *Show Boat* takes the first step in removing the mask from blackness by focusing its attention on the mask. It manifests the same desires and anxieties about blackness, although Ferber, whose work always displayed a liberal stance, struggled to understand her own unconscious racism in later works. *Show Boat* provides a rich and subtle document of the conflicting impulses and ideologies that often are at work within a single narrative. Wallace Thurman’s *Infants of Spring* provides the most thorough critique of “impersonation,” looking at the masks worn by blacks as well as whites. Thurman’s conception of the terms of impersonation again turns to the interplay of black and white. In contrast to those narratives examined earlier, the idea of “performing blackness” here suggests quite different things: prostitution rather than entertainment; the past rather than the future; dystopia rather than utopia; Harlem rather than American. In Thurman’s novel blackness is performed at the risk of not just a sense of identity but of life itself. *Infants of Spring* denies the American dream and refuses to perform blackness for that avaricious myth of the United States.

Chapter Eight: *The Anxieties of a Culture: New Dimensions of Passing* moves the discussion to the question of sexual difference that, according to Luce Irigaray, is *the* question that defines our times. We argue that narratives of passing, whether they be through racial or gender dissimulations, provide insight into the prevailing anxieties of a culture. William Faulkner’s *Light in August* is the result of a national awareness of passing, a consciousness reliant on fiction and fact, a discourse that issues from both the prevailing majority and minority voices. The protagonist’s ignorance about his racial inheritance is not simply a plot device but the theme and thesis of the novel. Faulkner’s protagonist does not simply initiate the familiar story of racial transgression, he reenacts the even more familiar story of “the exotic primitive,” “the brute negro,” and “the tragic mulatto,” stereotypes enunciated and

underlined most clearly by Sterling Brown in his 1933 essay *Negro Character As Seen By White Authors*. *Light in August* pursues, as Faulkner himself stressed, the tragedy of not knowing. As well as the familiar tragedy of white inhumanity to African Americans, this tragedy is also felt in the ease with which hearsay and conjecture constantly suffices when there is an unknowable fact.

David Henry Hwang's 1988 play *M. Butterfly* was chosen as an example of gender passing, other than William and Ellen Craft's *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*. In this case, the Chinese American playwright David Henry Hwang subverts the two distinct stereotypes in *M. Butterfly* by portraying a reversal of roles. Unlike so many of the novels, plays, and movies that have been examined so far, *M. Butterfly* focuses our attention not on the passing character but on Gallimard the fool. *M. Butterfly* is designated a political play, and Hwang intends to radicalize his source story to the root and probe the ideas or imagined space beyond the story. The protagonist's problem is that he cannot avoid stereotyping the image of the Japanese woman who he sees on the stage, and this explains his failure to recognize the real gender of the person who impersonates Cho-Cho-san and who manages to successfully maintain the illusion in Gallimard's mind.

In many ways our cultural assumptions about race and sex lead us to conclude that the drama of passing inevitably results from our rigid constructions of these identities. Passing is possible because our definitions of race and sex rely quite heavily on an equation between the external and internal, the physical and the spiritual, visual markings and inner workings. Passing is possible because definitions of race and sex rely on faulty binarisms.

Chapter Nine: *Lifting the Veil: The Ethnic Arab American Between Acceptance and Assimilation* was suggested by our own ethnic and cultural background, and highlights the positioning of the Arab American community in multicultural America and the attempt of the Arab American writers to "lift the veil" by their writings about migration, dislocation, assimilation, hyphenated identities, and split allegiances. We considered it important to mention the first slave narratives written by Arabic-speaking slaves, and develop on the degree that double-consciousness—as formulated by W.E.B. Du Bois—has come to denote the trauma experienced by the Arab Americans, whose presence is perceived as *Otherness* by the white majority, and the acute feeling of invisibility that the Arabs in America have about themselves. The Arab Americans struggle for the reconciliation of the American and Arab culture to secure their position in racist America, trying to cope with their cultural heritage in

the new environment. Their existence spans the two cultures, two opposing identities, and the linguistic dualism. It is a hyphenated existence, which explains their disposition towards improvisation, to finally combine their Arab past and the American present into a completely new identity—the Arab American. For an example, Laila Halaby's novel, *Once in a Promised Land* gives a voice to this rejected community, which does not understand what is being criticized for, trapped in the caricature images that are attached to it. Through the integration of Jassim and Salwa into this American way of life, certainly more self-proclaimed than true, Halaby sheds even more light on the impact of 9/11 on the Arab-American community. Because, despite the degree of Americanness they seem to have reached, after the attacks of September 11, 2001, their origin will take over in the eyes of the people around them. The promise of an inclusive America, which integrates the Arab and Muslim minorities, turns out to be wrong, because the Western gaze is impregnated by a construction of the Other that does not is never quite real, a reifying performance that excludes it, leaves it outside. Laila Halaby draws a parallel between the Western and Eastern worlds, whose social conditions of poverty are widely shared. In doing so, it suggests in a roundabout way that the attacks on the World Trade Center, quickly assimilated to religious extremism, may also be due to an indirect reaction to this serious rise in world poverty, of which this extremism it would be just a symptom. In her quest for the reconciliation of different stances of otherness, Laila Halaby interweaves in her narration the languages, the narrative processes, the mythologies of the two cultures of which she is the product, thus forming part of a postcolonial tradition of minority writing. Halaby juxtaposes Arabic folklore and mythology with the tradition of the western fairy tale in order to bring East and West together, to make them talk instead of opposing them. As its title suggests, *Once in a Promised Land* plays with fairy tale conventions in which the state of Arizona symbolizes an Eldorado for the young couple of Jordanian immigrants, this Promised Land they came to tread. Taken in their quest for success, they face obstacles in their way: September 11, suspicions, racism, accident, miscarriage, adultery, etc., and struggle to make their life a fairy tale, but, it will prove illusory, the very last sentences of the novel confirming this failure, deconstruct the myth of the American Dream.

In *West of the Jordan*, Laila Halaby illustrates one of the possibilities of cultural negotiation operated by diasporic subjects, and offers a more than necessary discussion of the Arab American feminist approach to the condition of women in diaspora, who become defining elements of the way the customs of their countries of origin are perpetuated: while they may

feel strengthened by their traditions, they can also abandon them if they feel that such traditions do not fit into their strategies for survival. The distinct perspectives brought about by the four narrators/characters involve questions of identity and positioning on the part of the narrators, somewhere between two different worlds, since they are the products of two virtually distinct cultures: the Arab culture and the culture of the United States. The Jordanian-born narrator-character Hala experiences an intense contact with the American culture, since it is in the United States that she lived during her adolescence. The way she operates within the novel illuminates cultural mediation as a fundamental issue when it comes to immigrants: the balance between the two worlds to which she belongs, without rejecting any of the two facets of her hyphenated identity: the Arab facet and the American. Hala returns to Jordan, and this rapprochement with the culture of origin and the consequent reassessment of its hybridism lead her to seek a point of contact that allows for at least a minimum degree of balance between the two plates of the bicultural balance, mitigating the discomfort that many diasporic subjects experience. The novel portrays not only how the experience of the diaspora is interspersed with gender issues, but also points out that Arab feminism is passable or even nourished by biculturalism.

Instead of a CONCLUSION, we have chosen an excerpt from Ishmael Reed's novel *Japanese by Spring* (1993), in which the African American writer offers his readers a picture of multicultural, multi-ethnic America, different from the *melting pot* in which differences disappear, to give way to the *Homo Americanus*. The novel is a surprising approach to a number of issues that have concerned literary critics and researchers alike: colonialism and post-colonialism, gender and race, Afrocentrism and Eurocentrism, ethnicity and culture, minority and majority, color line and double consciousness. All these could be, in fact, the keywords and the starting points of any approach to the ethnic American writing in the larger context of mainstream American literature.