Signs of Identity

Signs of Identity:

Literary Constructs and Discursive Practices

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Part II. Discursive Practices

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INTRODUCTION

A hyper-theorized term, *identity*[1] has come to express nowadays a rather diffuse, fluid, contradictory set of characteristics, instead of stable, homogeneous and independent meanings. In *Introduction: Who Needs 'Identity'?* Stuart Hall (1996) noted the (post)modern explosion of the concept of "identity," its strategic position and the possibility of connecting it with conceptions of time, discourse, and history. Confronted to global communication effects, sociologists put their emphasis on discontinuity, fragmentation, fracture, and dislocation (Hall 1995: 598). The contemporary interweaving of cultures generates a "multicultural person," a new way of being "beyond cultural identity," grounded in both "the universality of the human condition and the diversity of cultural forms" (Adler 1977). The move from essentialism to constructionism highlighted the paradox of identity, its simultaneous impulses to "sameness and uniqueness" (Joseph 2004: 37) and the role of otherness in negotiated identities–collective or personal. To counter the controversial semantics of this concept we preferred to identify the signs of identity discernible in different types of discourses, considering that language is the first semiotic resource employed in the construction and performance of identities.

Literature, an exemplary semiotic object, displays a subtle rhetoric of the sign and, although we use the term *representation*, it should be noticed that some writers make the sign emerge by practicing a strategy of its overthrow, as perceived by Michel Butor (Helbo 1975: 11). Identity is a sign, functions as a sign, and allows writers to emphasise the ways signs of identity are related to those who have been assigned that identity. Literature fictionalizes and "empowers identity" (Holden Rønning 1998), dramatizing its fixity or fluidity, purity or hybridity, its deconstruction, authenticity, dilemmas and interconnectedness. The narratives of the self,

[1] *Identity*, a dominant ontological term, was declared in 2015 "the Word of the Year" (McAfee 2015). Four dimensions relating to identity have been singled out by theorists: personal identity, role identity, social identity, and collective identity (Burke and Stets 2009); to this we can add the subcategories of cultural, ethnic, racial, religious, group and gender identity.

in particular postmodern, bring to our attention the imagined[1] nature of such identities; therefore, literary codes can be analysed from the imagological perspective of identity–otherness binomial at both thematic and stylistic level. Literary communication requires the connection of signs and meaning with their discursive action.

Centred on fictional discourses of identity, this volume implies a semiotic framework and comparative ways to reveal similarities and differences. The horizon of the sign leads us to the constructed space of literature, to the infinite semiosis of iconic, indexical or symbolic signs engaged in processes of signification and communication. C.S. Peirce's famous phrase that "the entire universe is perfused with signs, if not composed exclusively of signs," rarely quoted in context,[2] was not about the "semiotic imperialism" but about the indeterminacy of signs, so much exploited in arts. The passage explains the relation of the interpreter to the process of semiosis and suggests that the solution is to be found in pragmatics. The signs relate to the world of the interpreter, who has a role to play in the determination and multiplication of meaning.[3]

If C.S. Peirce implied that all signs are dialogical and interpretable, M.M. Bakhtin imposed the anthropologic principle of dialogism and applied it to language and literature. In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Bakhtin argued that the self is "never coincident with himself" (1973: 48). His philosophical anthropology introduced the principle of otherness (the notion of "difference") into the definition of identity: "I realise myself initially through others […]. From them I receive words, forms, and tonalities for the formation of my initial idea of myself" (Bakhtin 1986: 138). Accordingly, from the vantage point of modern philosophy we

[1] "Image, in the heart of communication" (Boutaud 2005: 29). Our translation.

[2] The context is: "It seems a strange thing, when one comes to ponder over it, that a sign should leave its interpreter to supply a part of its meaning; but the explanation of the phenomenon lies in the fact that the entire universe–not merely the universe of existents, but all that wider universe, embracing the universe of existents as a part, the universe which we are all accustomed to refer to as 'truth'–that all this universe is perfused with signs, if not composed exclusively of signs. Let us note this in passing as having a bearing upon the question of pragmaticism" (Peirce 1974: 302).

[3] See Joswick (1996: 93–94). We must distinguish between the abstract meaning of the interpretant and the agentivity of the interpreter. The interpreter is exterior to the triadic model of the sign (object–interpretant–representamen). Writing about Peircean ideology, Augusto Ponzio (2004: 3439) states that "the relation between signs and interpretants is a dialogic relation."

should not regard identity simply as "being the same"[1] or "the first way of being" (Descombes 1980: 35–37) because "it coincides with the principle of otherness" (Skulj 2000: 3).

In antithesis to traditional identity studies, Jean Baudrillard, Pierre Bourdieu, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jean-Francois Lyotard stated that the „self" is a product of both the discourse[2] and social field; their anti-essentialist rhetoric of „subjectivity" have promoted the multiplicity, hybridity and liquidity, in an effort to explore the full range of "being."[3] The postmodern "self," "subjectivity" and "lifestyle" have been added to classic sociological concepts of "gender," "race," "ethnicity." Besides deconstructionists, ***Critical Discourse Analysis*** (Fairclough 1995; Van Dijk 1993) postulated that "discourse" is a social practice (not a vehicle) that shapes personal and social identities.

From the viewpoint of literary studies, literary identity requires a comparative approach[4] revealing the interconnectedness and action in the extensive context of culture.[5] The contemporary practice of rewriting, palimpsest and intertextuality, inspired by M.M. Bakhtin, confirms that fictional identity too is configured by way of negotiation between identity and otherness. There is an intricate connection between the literary construction of subjectivity and the inherent addressivity / transitivity of any aesthetically marked discourse, no matter how self-reflexive or self-referential: "Tout comme la subjectivité, le dialogisme peut être envisagé sur deux plans: comme inhérent et constitutif au discours, et comme ostentatoire et délibéré, présent dans la structure de surface du texte, pour des raisons expressives et communicatives diverses" (Popescu 2015: 143).

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[1] Among the parameters of identity, Adler values "a coherent sense of self that depends on a stability of values and a sense of wholeness and integration" (Adler 1977). On the contrary, the concept of a "dialogic self" was promoted, among others, by Hermans (2012) and Salgado (2005).

[2] A semiotic definition: "Discourse to me comprises all forms of meaningful semiotic human activity seen in connection with social, cultural, and historical patterns and developments of use" (Blommaert 2005: 3).

[3] For significant "ways of being" in literary and cultural space see Loveday & Parpală (2016); for a context sensitive and a communicational perspective on discursive identities see Parpală & Loveday (2015).

[4] We envisage comparison as an all-encompassing scientific method, which might apply to linguistics, literature, anthropology and cultural studies, while facilitating a discussion about both objects and contexts of comparison.

[5] Bakhtin's argumentation is relevant for the question of cultural interactions: "Literature is an inseparable part of the totality of culture and cannot be studied outside the total cultural context. […] The literary process is a part of the cultural process and cannot be torn away from it" (Bakhtin 1986: 140).

The all-encompassing dialogism of language extends, as expected, on literary style as well, in other words, on literariness itself (Parpală 2012). By the same token, the dialogic-comparative approach to literature may help us reconceptualise the specificity of literature as *interliterariness* (Gálik 2000), which is produced at the intersection of various literary theories and cultural traditions.

Since identity is constituted in and through discourse, this collection of 15 chapters is structured into two intercommunicable parts: *Part I. Constructs of Fictional Selves* offers critical perspectives on literary representations that can be subsumed within image studies and comparativism, while *Part II. Discursive Practices* focuses on linguistic, cultural, spatial codes and their performativity. Instead of introducing each chapter based on the two-part division of the book, we will offer instead a unifying guide to its content grouped under seven themes. The following directions of research can be distinguished:

a. Diversity: Racial, ethnic and group / collective identity

According to Bianco (2015) our greatest cultural crisis may be the elevation of identity as a form of categorization that structures, and arguably stifles, our lives through the policing of individual identities. These identity categories which we believe make us more real, or even more authentic human beings, are actually weighing us down. They limit us, make us immobile, and prevent us from moving forward as a united human race. The goal, therefore, should be to find a way to move beyond identity without stemming the fight against racism, sexism, and the other forms of political, social, and economic injustices.

Identity as a "performative discourse" has become a powerful idea after 1990s, when it had become commonplace to assert that "an identity exists by virtue of the assertions of it people make" (Joseph 2004: 20); group identities (national, sexual, generational etc.), more abstract than personal ones, are made through performance. Karen Christian (1997) also argues for a theory of "performativity" to be melded with research into literature. The result is the creation of a framework for viewing identity as a continuous process that cannot be reduced to static categories. Through their narrative "performances," writers and their characters move among communities and identities in an ongoing challenge to the notion of "national" essence.

Chapter Six, *A Semiotic Reconstruction of South-Eastern Europe in German Migration Literature* by Milica Grujičić focuses on issues of a collective identity and combines cultural, sociological, political and

literary considerations. The author addresses literary representations of South Eastern Europe in contemporary German-speaking literature and the matters of the identity of the region using the semiotic approach of Yuri Lotman. In addition, she focuses on the subject of migration and analyses several works of authors with a South-East European background, firmly believing that those narrative worlds are presented without appropriation, constructedness or naivety. The novels of Florescu, Troyanov and Bodrožić depict stories of persons who experience the reality of the socialist regime, migrate to western countries and try to cope with a new life as immigrants. The novels deliver a range of cultural and socio-political depictions of South-Eastern and Western Europe and offer substantial material for examining practically every strata and type of identity. The study uncovers many manifestations of the South-East European identity and discusses the self-positioning of the protagonist in relation to the ascribed identities. Some aspects of the semiotic boundary have been highlighted as well as the notion of "cultural creolisation" and the possible existence of a general semiosphere.

The poetics of racial, ethnic and collective identity, spotlights some formal effects destined to emphasize "the distinctiveness of certain groups against a diffuse social landscape" (Kerkering 2003)**.** The dynamics of racial and ethnic boundaries that we identify in Hayder Naji Shanbooj Alolaiwi's essay *Passing for White: Mythical Journeys in Quest of Freedom*, is illustrative for the historical conditions of modernism and for the issue of authenticity. The author provides a pervasive analysis of the trope of "passing"[1] as a literary theme in the early 20th century African American literature, focusing on the social and historical background that initiated such a widespread phenomenon as that of "passing for white." The researcher offers a comprehensive review of sociological approaches to the passing figure and connects it to the concept of "race"–as developed by W.E.B. Du Bois in his classical text *The Souls of Black Folks*. The author then takes a step forward from the reality of "passing" to its fictional representation by analysing three African American novels that he considers to be representative of the genre: Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* and *Passing*, and George Schuyler's *Black No More* and demonstrates the extent to which racial belonging, as a sign of one's identity, is altered by the "twoness" of the mulatto's existence.

[1] "Passing, in my use, signifies the dynamics of identity and identification–the social, cultural, and psychological processes by which a subject comes to understand his or her identity in relation to others"; "the strategic adoption of a culturally empowered identity, as in passing as white or passing as a man" (Caughie 2005: 387).

b. Role / gender identity and corporality

Gender identities are both constituted and constructed. They are frequently plural in the contemporary multicultural world, as a result of geographical and social mobility. Women, in particular, are much more sensitive to subjectivity and belonging. Building on the work of Foucault, the contemporary gender theorists suppose that gender is a rhetorical and linguistic construction, making this theory compatible with literary studies. In *Edith Wharton and the Condition of the American Women*, Zainab Abdulkadhim Salman Al-Shammari identifies the turn-of-the-century "New Woman" symbols in Edith Wharton's novel *The Age of Innocence*, highlighting the female characters' reluctance to readily accept the norms of an already old-fashioned *Weltanschauung*, their unconventionality, and their attempts at assuming a new role in a changing world. The author deftly underlines Wharton's views on the hypocrisy of the New York society at the fin-de siècle, and her position in the women's struggle to achieve a "New Woman" status, without openly adhering to the Feminist movement. Wharton's characters, according to Zeinab Al-Shammari, have the courage to believe in their responsibilities and to oppose the old traditions, thus challenging the existing structures of femininity.

Connections between female body and the moral code are present in Oana Băluică's paper *Female Promiscuity: Between Mythology and Demystification*. The essay is based on the analysis of two novels (*The Scarlet Letter* and *Madame Bovary*) and intends to give a comprehensive view upon the double standards that lie at the core of society in regard to women's sexuality and its expression. Mainly, female promiscuity has been associated with the idea of adultery, and this paper emphasizes the fact that the former implies more psychological aspects than the ones involved in adultery; thus, the public image of the two characters (and implicitly the cultural image of real women) has been a direct result of their lack of freedom and the main tragedy of their lives.

c. Creative identity: Poets, writers, readers and critics

The idea of communication needs to be qualified "as a dialogue between writers and their public," considers R.D. Sell, the pioneer of communicational criticism (Sell 2011: 10).

The complexity of the problems faced by the diaspora writers, with a particular stress on the Arab Anglophone literature, is analysed by Maher Fawzi Taher in *Defining the Postcolonial Writer: a Framework for the Literature of a Diaspora*. The researcher provides an authoritative synthesis

of the concepts of "colonialism" *vs* "post-colonialism" as viewed by outstanding theoreticians of the field, such as Cora Kaplan, Albert Memmi, Abdul R. JanMohamed, John K, Noyes, Mary Louise Pratt, and Gina Wisker. He further develops on such notions as "hybridity" and "habitation" in postcolonial theory. As regards the Arab Anglophone literature, the author underlines its concern with displacement, place, and exile–as seen in Ameen Rihani's novel *The Book of Khalid*, Diana Abu-Jaber's novel *Crescent*, and Leila Aboulela's novel, *The Translator*–to underline its human dimension and unexpected perspectives of development and interpretation.

Exploring William Blake's romantic poetics, Adela Livia Catană (*"Songs of Innocence and Experience": A Neoplatonic Approach*) reveals the hermeneutic possibilities of the "avant-texte." Even if she does not literally apply Genetic Criticism (Deppman *et al* 2004), the author returns to the origin of literary creativity in order to explain the visions and the parallelisms of the hypertext / final text. Catană's reconstruction of Blake's poiesis is a gathering of its Neoplatonic traces that differentiate him from the European poets of his time: the idea of opposition between "Mind and Matter," between initial purity of the soul and its corruption or salvation through mystical ecstasy. A dramatic poetic sign emerged, combining the significance of Neoplatonic dichotomies with, at the level of the signifier, the romantic rhetoric of antitheses. As the author explains, the title of the volume synthesizes the co-presence of opposites: "*Innocence* is a technical word for the freedom from sin or moral wrong, while *experience* indicates the man's fate after the Fall. The two contrasting parts are cyclical and whenever one ends, the other begins."

The research perspective changes spectacularly in Mădălina Deaconu's *Metaphors in Modern Poetry: A Cognitive Approach*, centred on metaphoric mapping and discourse world theory. A corpus of four major modern Romanian poets is scanned through a cognitive module (inspired by the *Mental Space Theory*), composed of four levels: target, vehicle, focus space; source, tenor, base space; common features / generic space / ground; the blended space (the new emergent understanding). The author concludes that cognitive poetics, without excluding traditional methods, can be successfully used in analysing modern poetry.

d. Dialogic identity: Rewriting and difference

The poststructuralist re-evaluation of the context, reference, and subject changed the ontology of the literary text, which is no longer defined as autonomous and semantically closed, but as a work-in-

progress–a trace of cultural memory. The semantic difference (that is, the *newness*) brought about by rewriting is part of a multidimensional dialogue across world literature. The two tightly argued contributions in this section attempt to shed light on the various implications of this series of concepts.

The recycling of literary codes results in sign-texts whose referent is literature itself. In Ana-Maria Cornilă Norocea's chapter, *Re-Writing and Memory: The Art of Palimtext*, "palimtext" is in fact a metaphor of textual and temporal symbiosis in the space of cultural remembrance. Palimpsestic writing, which flourished after World War II, reconfigured the concepts of "author" and "reader," "memory" and "creativity." Of the numerous palimtexts beneath which the reader can discover previous pre-texts or hypotexts the author mentions: Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt's *When I Was a Work of Art,* (rephrasing of *The Picture of Dorian Gray)*, Bernhard Schlink's novel *Homecoming* (update of the *Odyssey*), Michel Tournier's *Friday, or, the Other Island* and J.M. Coetzee's *Foe* (reinterpretations of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe)* etc. These literary fictions are based on regression–transgression, memory–imagination play.

Carmen Popescu's chapter, *The Dialogic-Differential Palimpsest in Scott Cairns' Three Descents*, is concerned with the intertextual dialogism enacted by the juxtaposition of three cultural figures (Aeneas, Orpheus and Jesus Christ) in connection with the literary invariant called *katabasis, descensus ad inferos* or *descent into hell.* The American poet Scott Cairns contrasts the ancient mythical script of the heroic descent with the Christian "harrowing of hell"; in the latter scenario, humans are the recipients of a sacrificial gift with cosmic and ontological implications. Vergil's *Aeneid* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses* are the canonical hypotexts with which the post-postmodernist American poet enters into a polemical but respectful dialogue, thereby implicitly reinforcing his own religious and cultural identity. This comparative analysis also shows that the tenets of the Eastern Orthodox faith are not incompatible with literary ambiguity, subjectivity, multiplicity and polyphony.

e. Linguistic identity: Terminology and metadiscourse

Language could be assigned an identity function.[1] Chapters Eight and Twelve put forward a coherent view of identity as a (socio)linguistic

[1] "identity is at root a matter of language […] I am asserting that the entire phenomenon of identity can be understood as a linguistic one" (Joseph 2004: 12).

phenomenon, while Chapters Nine and Ten approach the linguistic sign from a comparative and functional angle.

Diana Anițescu's chapter, *The Concept of a "Light Verb",* addresses the issue of light verb constructions in English and Romanian. A common property in both languages is that LVCs represent a phenomenon of restructuring–"a form of clause union." Contrary to Wierzbicka (1982) and Catell (1984), who claimed that LVCs are completely devoid of meaning, the author argues that light verbs are "a subclass of lexical verbs" because they have semantic features of their own and the same syntax as their "non-light'' counterparts. Anițescu's future research will concentrate on finding crosslinguistic types of restructuring.

In a sociolinguistic diachronic frame, Iulia Drimala (*External Attribute as Illustrated by Medieval Clothing in England and France*) points out the relation between medieval social terms (*king*, *churl; roi*, *huissier*, *vavassour*) and clothing codes. The symbolic system prescribed by *Sumptuary Laws* (1463), for instance, ranked colours, textures, length, and accessories according to the Pyramid of Power. The medieval lifestyle accounts for the fact that, in England and France, "fashion system" consolidated the group identity and distinguished between social categories. Drimala does not discuss the subject in terms of fashion terminology, such as Barthes (1967), but in the referential field of social and cultural relevance.

The theory of terminology, as an interdiscipline, focuses on the significance of concepts. Chapter Nine, *From Modernity to Modernities. Comparative Methodology in the Study of Modernity*, is a subtle reflection on the conceptual transitions of the linguistic sign (*modernity*) that are directly dependent on the referential context (the pluralization–*modernities*). For a better understanding of modernity as a global cultural paradigm, Andreea Barbu adopts the critical perspective of Cultural Studies and uses a comparative methodology. The author affiliates to Eisenstadt's theory: the historical concept of "modernity" needs to be redefined in order to incorporate the experience of the non-Western societies; subsequently, we can no longer use a singular term, but a plural one, such as *liquid modernity* (Bauman 2000), *global modernity* (Schmidt 2014), *varieties of modernity* (Schmidt 2006), *multiple modernities* (Eisenstadt 2003), *alternative modernities* (Gaonkar 2001). This pluralization–"a cultural turn" in the study of non-Western modernity–is considered to be "a tendency in contemporary culture to over-estimate differences."

The tendency to multiply the metalinguistic terms, instead of standardizing them according to the generalized monosemantism, is also found in Chapter Ten, where it is found that *palimtext* and *rewriting* are

synonymous. In order to avoid the polysemy implied by the term *rewriting*,[1] Cornilă Norocea makes use of Michael Davidson's coined term *palimtext*, which indicates more clearly the textual product derived from a creative process of reinscribing. A mannerist practice consists in the frequent creation of suitcase terms such as: *palimtext* (a hybrid between *palimpsest* and *text*), *afterimage* (residual images or post-images), *wreaders (*a hybrid between a *reader* and a *writer*, more precisely the reader from the perspective of its interpretative and creative function).

f. Spatial identity: Discourse on places

Eleni Pilla's *Spatial Subjectivity: The Streets in Andrew Davies's 2001 Modern Re-Writing of Shakespeare's Othello* falls within the "spatial turn" in the humanities and provides an interdisciplinary analysis of the treatment of space in Davies's *Othello* with the aid of the theories of Gaston Bachelard, Michel de Certeau and Henri Lefebvre. Focusing on an analysis of the space of the Streets, which constitutes a key space of this televisual adaptation, this study highlights the multiple functions space serves in the adaptation, and demonstrates how the use and configuration of space creates a new vision of Shakespeare's play.

"Spaces Other": Dystopias and Heterotopias in Postmodern Fiction by Alina Ţenescu focuses on the analysis of dystopic and heterotopic literary representations of the urban space and microspace in the works of Vincent Engel, Jean-Philippe Toussaint, Gerri Leen and Yevgeny Zamyatin. Starting from a cognitive-semantic approach and using the comparatist method, this study reveals that the main conceptualizations of the city space and dwellings are built around unconventional images such as that of the city museum as mise-en-abyme or as hypertechnological setting, that of the micro-urban space as environment invaded by artificial intelligence and that of the city-nation as glass prison.

g. Food and identity

The metonymic reading of Shakespeare's gastronomy code, performed by Xenia Georgopoulou confirms Caplan's remark about "the complexity of concepts around food and the body" (1997: 17).

In her essay *Food and Identity in Shakespeare's Plays,* Xenia Georgopoulou explores Shakespeare's use of both literal and metaphorical

[1] According to Antoine Compagnon (1979: 32) "all writing is collage and gloss, citation and commentary." See also Deppman *et al.* (2004).

references to food to depict almost every single aspect of human identity, including age, sex, social class, religion, nationality and culture at large, but also particular character elements. The author draws on Shakespeare's allusions to food quality and quantity with relevance to social class; city and countryside diet; national cuisines and eating customs, European and exotic alike; religious or other dietary restrictions, but also discusses the "unbaked" nature of youth and the "ripeness" of maturity; the "rawness" of low-class people and the sophistication of the "seasoned" courtiers; the presentation of both men and women as "dishes," also revealing the cannibalistic nature of the supposedly civilized European culture.

Repositioning verbal communication and literary semiosis in the present image centric context, contributors from Germany, Greece, Iraq and Romania bring to this volume an interdisciplinary constellation which includes comparative and communicational, semiotic and anthropological, stylistic and performative perspectives. Above all, in spite of the methodological and thematic polyphony, this collection demonstrates unity and coherence with regard to our triple banner of comparativism, identity and communication.

Identity as a theme, a rich premise in literary texts, guides the construction of fictional characters, the narrative strategies, and the style. Sinusoidal or self-contained, stereotyped or multifaceted characters, subjectivization or perspectivism, linguistic and gestural performativity– here are some techniques that relativize the image of identity in the literary space. The indeterminacy of artistic signs and the creativity of their interpreters confirm once again the power of symbols and representations, often intersecting and antagonistic but multiply constructed in what Juri Lotman called *semiosphere*.

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PART I

CONSTRUCTS OF FICTIONAL SELVES

CHAPTER ONE

PASSING FOR WHITE: MYTHICAL JOURNEYS IN QUEST OF FREEDOM

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1. Introduction

In 1996, Australian writer Mudrooroo (Colin Thomas Johnson), who was passing for Aboriginal, was publicly denied the claimed Nyoongah ancestry. As a result, his books were removed from academic courses, and some publishers refused to publish his writings. More recently, on June 15, 2015, Rachel Anne Dolezal, president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Washington, resigned following allegations that she had lied about being African American. The issue was raised when her Caucasian parents stated publicly that Dolezal is a white woman passing as black.

Our aim is to discuss the concept of "passing," viewed as a metaphor of race that marks a step forward from the painful reality of the Middle Passage to "passing," as both physical reality and metaphor. Generally seen as the circumstance when a person belonging to a certain ethnic group is accepted as a member of another ethnic group, in the USA the concept is applied to denominate any person of a minority who willingly assimilates into the white majority to avoid attitudes of racial segregation and discrimination. However, the "passing" narratives cannot be associated with any single school, region, or race of the writers: there were blacks passing for white, or whites passing for Native Americans. In the 1927 movie *The Jazz Singer*, the protagonist, Jakie Rabinowitz, the son of a Jewish cantor, changes his name into Jack Robin, becomes a vaudeville actor and impersonates a black singer in his performances. His is a double passing: religious and racial.

The headline of a 1928 issue of *New York World* draw the attention of the readers to an alarming reality: "Crossing the Color Line: Social and

Economic Ambitions Lead Negroes to 'Pass' at Rate of 5,000 a Year to White Fold" (quoted in Durow 2010: np).

"There is nothing wrong in passing. The wrong is the world that makes it necessary" (Hurst 2004: 244). This quotation from Fanny Hurst's *Imitation of Life* suggests that the author assumed that her readers were somewhat familiar with the term *passing*. In the nineteenth century the same dynamic of light-skinned blacks dissembling whiteness, or simply allowing themselves to be taken for white, was always phrased as "passing for white." Not so during the period when Harlem was in vogue. But even Carl Van Vechten, in a book that attempted to introduce Harlem to white audiences, includes "passing" in his "Glossary of Negro Words and Phrases" at the end of his controversial novel *Nigger Heaven*. Somewhere between the definition of "kinkout" and "spagingy-spagade" is the following: "passing: i.e., passing for white" (Van Vechten 2000: 286). If the reader is from another country and unacquainted with American legalities and mores, this definition may seem less than clear. According to F. James Davis,

> "The phenomenon known as 'passing as white' is difficult to explain in other countries or to foreign students. Typical questions are: 'Shouldn't Americans say that a person who is passing as white is white, or nearly all white, and has previously been passing as black?' or 'To be consistent, shouldn't you say that someone who is one-eighth white is passing as black?' or 'Why is there so much concern, since the so-called blacks who pass take so little Negroid ancestry with them?'" (Davis 2001: 14)

2. The background–historical and social

It has been estimated that tens of thousands crossed the colour 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.

Between 1880 and 1925 thousands of light-skinned blacks crossed a line, the metaphorical line known in the nineteenth and twentieth century to both blacks and whites as "the color-line." Although the metaphor was as nonspecific as it was ubiquitous, a sociologist in 1903 claimed that across a map, through "nearly every Southern community," he could draw "a physical color-line." This sociologist, a Harvard-trained scholar, was W.E.B. Du Bois. In the wake of Reconstruction, Black Migration, and Jim Crow Laws, his *The Souls of Black Folk* examined the "radical and more uncompromising drawing of the color-line in recent years" (Du Bois 1965: 322, 334). Yet this great work of autobiography, philosophy, and sociology noticeably ignores the figure most associated with the transgression of geographical and metaphysical racial borders: the "passing" figure, referred to sometimes as a *mulatto*, *white Negro*, *quadroon*, *Creole*, or *octoroon*. These terms need not refer explicitly to a passing figure, but the additional meaning is sometimes implicit. *Mulatto*, a term used since the seventeenth century, comes from the Spanish for *mule*, a hybrid animal incapable of procreation; scholars have become apologetic and even embarrassed by the etymology of this term.

With this in mind, we might ask about the history and etymology of *passing*. Representations of the "passing figure" are inextricably connected to the more pervasive representations of the "mulatto." But should we, as many critics have done, collapse the two figures into one? A study of "passing" and the "passing figure" can find no better beginning than the insufficiency of terms.

3. On race and racism

The concept of "race" 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" (Luke and Carrington 2000: 5). 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. When a majority identity separates out a minority or marginalized identity, this creates the concept of the "Other."

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" (Du Bois 1978: 140). "American black people," he maintained, "must cultivate their racial gifts in order to deliver the full complete Negro message of the whole Negro race" (*ibidem*: 140) 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.

W.E.B. Du Bois's classical *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), with its pervasive metaphors concerning "twoness" and "doubleness," noticeably ignores the figure that most embodies these qualities, especially during the specific literary and cultural juncture which saw its publication. Nine years later, in 1912, James Weldon Johnson will use the passing figure to do much of the same work that Du Bois does: stepping behind the Veil in order to look at the "unvarnished truth," reflecting on the African American's "double consciousness," and, most telling, exploring a dialectics of music, black and white. Johnson's "ex-colored man," with his movements across the colour-line and his concern to integrate black and white music, can be read as a fictional vehicle for Du Bois's idea of double consciousness.

In Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), the narrator, after having discovered at school that he is coloured, rushes home to his mother, and asks her:

> 'Mother, mother, tell me, am I a nigger?' I could not see her face, but I knew the piece of work dropped to the floor, and I felt her hands on my head. I looked up into her face and repeated, 'Tell me, mother, am I a nigger?' There were tears in her eyes […] she hid her face in my hair, and said with difficulty, 'No, my darling, you are not a nigger.' She went on, 'You are as good as anybody; if anyone calls you a nigger don't notice them' (Johnson 2012: 16).

In Chapter 4, "Passing," of Langston Hughes's *The Ways of White Folk* (1934), Jack, a black boy, writes a moving letter to his mother. It is a disturbing picture of the mulatto boy unwillingly passing for white, and who suddenly discovers that his mulatto mother's "passing" has gone so far that she refuses to recognize her own son in the street. The hypocrisy

of American politics and the fallacy of the American Dream are unveiled by Jack's letter.

> I felt like a dog, passing you downtown last night and not speaking to you. You were great, though. Didn't give me a sign that you even knew me, let alone I was your son. If I hadn't had the girl with me, Ma, we might have talked. I'm not as scared as I used to be about somebody taking me for colored any more just because I'm seen talking on the street to a Negro. […] Since I've begun to pass for white, nobody has ever doubted that I am a white man. Where I work, the boss is a Southerner and is always cussing out Negroes in my presence, not dreaming I'm one (Hughes 1990: 51).

Whites were not ready to accept blacks as their equals, and even president Harry Truman expressed his belief in political equality but not in social equality; thus he contradicted himself. Nevertheless, when confronted with the problem of the lynching and of violence in the South, he decided to take action and issue an executive order stopping discrimination in federal employment and supporting equal treatment in the army; he also worked towards an end of military segregation. In the South, things seemed rather gloomy at the beginning of the 1950s because few blacks, if any, enjoyed civil and political rights. Generally speaking, they could not vote, and sometimes were kept from voting under the threat of beatings, loss of jobs or credit, eviction from their land. On top of this, Jim Crow laws segregated races in "streetcars, trains, hotels, restaurants, hospitals, recreational activities, and employment."[1] Later on, Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates Jr. (himself married to a white woman) openly admits his belonging to the black race:

> I want to be black, to know black, to luxuriate in whatever I might be calling blackness at any particular time–but to do so in order to come out the other side, to experience a humanity that is neither colorless nor reducible to color (Gates 1994: xv).

4. "Passing"–reality and fiction

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, as James F. Davis reminds us, is unique to the

[1] *Outline of United States History*. Bureau of International Information Programs: U.S. Department of State (2011: 258).

United States. For this reason the "phenomenon known as 'passing as white' is difficult to explain in other countries or to foreign students" (Davies 2001: 13). 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. Where do we locate the beginning of this history? Because it is an act more than a figure, "passing" is defined most effectively through narrative and is present less in expository writing. Nonetheless, the "passing" figure embodies the problem of the colour line, the war between black and white within a single body. For this reason, Du Bois's study of "the problem of the color-line" surprises us with its evasion of this figure.

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.

Several scholars and editors attack this problem from the outset. In 1991, Robert Stepto added two pages of reflection to his 1979 study, *From Behind the Veil*. In the brief section entitled *In Terms of Us*, he mentions the free use of *Black American, Afro-American, African-American*–terms he "lived under" and "lived in" within his lifetime (Stepto 1991: xii). Stepto may "freely use" all the terms he knows, his practice is pragmatic, and his goals–realistic:

> At certain turns in my work, I will use particular terms to return in time to an era or circumstance, hoping that a carefully chosen term–'Negro,' for example–will take my reader on the same journey (*ibidem*: xii).

We would like to focus on three novels that came soon after the Depression, and are included in the Harlem Renaissance pantheon: Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* and *Passing* (1928), and George Schuyler's *Black No More: Being an Account of the Strange and Wonderful Workings of Science in the Land of the Free, AD 1933–1940* (1931). In contrast to

other "passing" narratives,[1] Schuyler's characters pass with no trauma, angst, or dilemma.

Larsen's story, like most "passing" stories, not only explores the strain of "black" passing for "white" but "primitive" passing for "civilized." These ambiguities defined the modern sensibility, which felt itself enriched and unsteadied by the existence of other worlds. *Black No More* struggles with neither the primitive / civilized dichotomy nor with the white / black dichotomy: there are no characters caught in between or in conflict with themselves or their communities. Still, Schuyler's satire manages to ask the crucial question implicit in all "passing" dramas. Irene nearly asks it directly, but her husband makes the real issue explicit: "But why?" Irene wanted to know [why did Irene need to return to her people]. "Why?" "If I knew that, I'd know what race is" (Larsen 1988: 115).

4.1. *Quicksand* and *Passing*

More typical of the "passing" genre, Nella Larsen's characters argue what remains implicit in satire. Using twin characters who can both pass, Larsen creates a dialectic between the racial transgressor and the racial conservator. Irene, a "voluntary Negro," haunts Clare with her rectitude; while conversely Clare teases Irene with her transgressions into white privilege. In their dialectical relationship–the push and pull of their twin desires–civilization alternately supersedes and submits to "race."

All "passing" stories question the meaning of *race*, but Clare–that symbol of ambiguity and instability–has this question riddle her entire existence. She dies, like most passing figures, because she is unsolvable.

Judith Berzon provides a detailed analysis of the novel of "passing" in her seminal study, *Neither White nor Black: The Mulatto Character in American Fiction* (1978); she differentiates more between black and white authors than older or more recent texts. Although "there is much similarity in the approach of authors of both races," she argues that the "primary

[1] William Wells Brown, *Clotel* (1852); Herman Melville, *Benito Cereno* (1855); William and Ellen Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom* (1860); William Dean Howells, *An Imperative Duty* (1892); Mark Twain, *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894); Charles Chesnutt, *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900); James Weldon Johnson, *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912); Claude McKay, *Home to Harlem* (1928); Jessie Fauset, *Plum Bun* (1929); William Faulkner, *Light in August* (1932); Fanny Hurst, *Imitation of Life* (2004); Norman Podhoretz, *My Negro Problem–and Ours* (1963); Gregory Howard Williams, *Life on the Color Line: The True Story of a White Boy Who Discovered He Was Black* (1995).