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Contributors


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Introduction: passing, imitations, crossings

MONIQUE ROONEY

When it was revealed that Anglo-Australian writer Helen Darville had passed as Ukrainian to publish a novel about the Holocaust, there was much public and scholarly debate about the nature of identity and the meaning of multiculturalism. Such ‘passing’ controversies have the capacity to unsettle everyday perceptions about personhood and about social classifications and identifications. The essays collected in this special issue of Humanities Research, ‘Passing, Imitations, Crossings’, explore the theme and act of ‘passing’ in a range of social, historical and cultural contexts. Put simply, passing is a type of border crossing, one that normally involves a movement from social disadvantage to advantage or from a socially stigmatised position to one that grants some privilege, or at least allows avoidance or evasion of group classification. Passing is distinct from other identity performances in that it generally refers to a surreptitious transgression of widely accepted social practices. That is, the passer normally masks the fact of his or her ‘true’ identity—he or she might rely on subterfuge or might remove him or herself from a telling context or simply suppress information that might lead to disclosure of his or her identity—in order to cross social boundaries. In the case of African-Americans, passing for white historically entailed crossing the social divide that separated black and white according to changing cultural, scientific and legal measurements of what constituted racial identity. As St Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton observed in their study of African-American social life in Chicago’s South Side in the 1930s, ‘there are thousands of Negroes whom neither colored nor white people can distinguish from full-blooded whites, it is understandable that in the anonymity of the city many Negroes “pass for white” daily, both intentionally

and unintentionally’.2 The prospect of passing multiplies in societies in which the often anonymous flow of people sets the scene for opportunism, masquerade and other forms of role-playing. There are women who have cross-dressed as male to publish books or participate in war and gays and lesbians who have passed as straight to avoid homophobia. There are those who pass out of necessity, to escape war or life-threatening discrimination, and those who pass for greater gain or simply for the thrill of experiencing life on the ‘other side’, as passing provides the opportunity to temporarily or permanently depart from a designated identity.

The transport and communications revolution that took place in the United States at the end of the nineteenth and in the early decades of the twentieth centuries—a time also of great movement and mixing of diverse social groups in American cities, as well as a period of new strictures and the terrors of lynching—created a fertile context for passing. The many fictional and sociological recordings of African-Americans who ‘passed as white’ to cross the colour line, from the middle of the nineteenth century through to the 1950s and 1960s—when African-Americans began to win civil rights—suggests how prevalent the act was in a US context. In his encyclopedic study of ‘inter-racial’ themes in US history, Werner Sollors differentiates the passer from the parvenu (the social climber or upstart). While the act of passing potentially encompasses ‘the crossing of any line that divides social groups’3—and Everett V. Stonequist argues that ‘passing is found in every race situation where the subordinate race is held in disesteem’4—Sollors’ study locates the phenomenon firmly in US social history. In particular, Sollors connects passing with the burden of racial ancestry for the descendents of slaves. While the general expectation is that newly arrived immigrants will gradually assimilate, the descendents of slaves—in what Sollors calls America’s ‘hypodescent’ system—have been treated as members of a caste. African-Americans have been subject to a form of ‘ancestor-counting’ that reduces personhood to a racial part.5

It is for these reasons that Sollors labels passing an ‘Americanism’. And this classification accords with the Websters Dictionary (Third edition) definition of passing as ‘the act of identifying oneself or accepting identification as a white person—used of a person having some Negro ancestry’. That such classifications are, however, partial and anachronistic is exemplified when Sollors notes that a definition of passing as a border crossing does not appear in the first edition

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5 Sollors, ‘Passing; or sacrificing a parvenu’, p. 249.
of the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Although the *OED*’s definition of passing as ‘the fact of being accepted, or representing oneself as, a member of a different ethnic, religious, or sexual group’ is more general, there are three etymological uses of the term cited, only one of which is British. The other three examples are drawn from American sources, the first of which is Carl Van Vechten’s novel *Nigger Heaven* (1926). Passing operates, in Van Vechten’s popular 1920s ‘novel of negro life’, as shorthand for ‘passing for white’. Recently, the popular Internet resource *Wikipedia* also defines passing largely in terms of US cultural history, suggesting the extent to which US global imperialism inflects everyday cultural understandings, as well as the power of information technologies to shape everyday definitions and the ways in which we understand our own identities and interactions.

To classify passing purely in terms of a US socio-historical context, however, belies the mobile, metaphorical implications of a term that itself signifies evasion of classification or authoritative naming practices. Passing refers not only to the social or lived phenomenon of border crossings. Like more generalised definitions of the word passing—that is, that ‘which passes away or elapses; transient, fleeting’ (*OED*)—the definition of passing as a lived performance speaks to and is enabled by a transient context. New technologies of vision and of sound enabled speedy communication across time and space and transformed how people saw themselves and each other. While such technologies assisted in the identification and regulation of individual behaviour as well as the classification of individuals according to knowable groups (race, ethnicity, gender, age, and so on), passing was one strategy that could be used, especially by those disadvantaged by race or ethnicity, to avoid such classifications. In this volume, Pamela Caughie refers to a modern *dynamic*, a process that relied on the identificatory structures that came with late modernity. For Caughie, passing narratives published at the turn of the twentieth century complicated the role race played in an American modernity characterised by technological transformation.

As I have argued elsewhere, passing not only comes into being through individual awareness and uses of forms of communication; it also enacts transport itself—and the term passing articulates this elusive movement. Figurations of passing—that is, attempts to *name* or *narrate* passing as a transient phenomena—are, not surprisingly, characterised by gaps, erasures and other explanatory failures. If

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6 Ibid., p. 247.
7 *Wikipedia* lists two definitions of ‘passing’ in terms of the usage explored here. While the first is a more general category that refers to passing in terms of movement across a wider variety of social groups and begins with the example of a suicide bomber passing as a Jew in order to enter a Jewish hotel, nearly all of its other references are drawn from a US context (see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Passing_(sociology>), viewed 11 March 2010). The other *Wikipedia* reference is to passing as a racial identity in US history (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Passing_(racial_identity>), viewed 11 March 2010).
the act of passing is about avoiding the categorisation made possible by modern systems of surveillance, stories about passing—that is, the representation of passing—refer to a necessarily unstable act. To attempt to name the passer is to pinpoint something that eludes or resists classification. Passing can, in this sense, be compared with the role of metaphor in language. As early modern scholar Patricia Parker argues, metaphor is a rhetorical term that speaks to a human desire to gain authority, through naming, over something that is necessarily elusive or free floating. Referring to Dr Johnson’s definition of metaphor as ‘the application of a word to an use to which, in its original use, it cannot be put’, Parker argues that metaphor troubles the proper order and meaning of things:

Metaphor in these discussions is always on the margins of discourse (Barbara H. Smith), outside the city walls, and its potential incivility generates concern for its ‘mastery’ (Aristotle), moderation (Quintilian), or ‘proper management’ (Blair). But the rule of metaphor contains, as an ambiguous genitive, that mastery’s threatened opposite, the rule of metaphor as a Lord of Misrule. As Derrida suggests, the ‘master’ of metaphor may himself be transported.

This description of metaphor via tropes of exclusion and inclusion, order and disorder is applicable to the passing act. Langston Hughes’ eponymous poem *Passing* (1950) evokes a city that contains visible and invisible walls among literal and metaphorical lines of communications. While the poem refers to passing as the crossing of the ‘color line’ that separates racially marked Harlem from other parts of New York City, the waves of sound that come through the radio seem to engender transgression:

On sunny summer Sunday afternoons in Harlem  
when the air is one interminable ball game  
and grandma cannot get her gospel hymns  
from the Saints of God in Christ  
on account of the Dodgers on the radio,  
on sunny Sunday afternoonst  
when the kids look all new  
and far too clean to stay that way  
and Harlem has its  
washed-and-ironed-and-cleaned-best out  
the ones who’ve crossed the line  
when they moved downtown  
miss you,

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Harlem of the bitter dream,
since their dream
has come true.

That a Harlem ‘grandma’ listens to Christian preachings on the radio, her
grandchild listens to Jackie Robinson’s heroic exploits in Dodger Stadium,
while others have moved to Manhattan’s white side suggests that cross-racial
identifications are already imagined and engendered through technological
communications that are not completely contained through racial segregation.
Hughes was an African-American poet who lived in New York and began
writing during the early 1920s, a time when the rise of an educated (including
African-American) middle class, as well as the development of mainstream and
specialised publishing houses, enabled the publication of African-American-
authored passing-for-white stories. His specialised or in-group understanding
of the phenomenon is tacitly communicated when passing is referenced in
the plural (‘the ones who have crossed’) rather than identified as a random,
individual act. While passing is a ‘dream come true’, an escape from racially
segregated Harlem, it is also a social transgression that takes place among other,
less stigmatised or fraudulent crossings.

That Hughes’ poem associates passing-for-white with other more diffuse
crossings suggests that passing can be understood as a term with a specific
etymology and social history and as a metaphor that transports and can be
transported to other contexts. In recent years, and especially within an academic
context, scholarship about passing has diversified and proliferated to include a
broad array of ethnic, gendered and sexual border crossings. Such scholarship
has, however, largely been generated from and focused on a US context. As a
topic that draws attention to identities in flux, passing can also be identified
in broader, cultural contexts. In recent years—especially as discussed in the
work of prominent Anglo-American theorists Judith Butler, Eve Sedgwick
and Barbara Johnson—passing has played an important part in intellectual
discussions about deconstruction, post-structuralism, queer and other minority
group politics and has had an effect beyond the American academy. Discussions
of passing have also featured in more populist debates about multiculturalism,
border control and challenges to traditional gender and sex roles. These more

10 See, for example: Ginsberg, Elaine K. (ed.) 1996, Passing and the Fictions of Identity, Duke University
Press, Durham, NC, and London, UK; Kroeger, Brooke 2003, Passing: When people can’t be who they are, Public
Affairs, New York; Sánchez, Maria Carla and Schlossberg, Linda 2001, Passing: Identity and interpretation
in sexuality, race, and religion, New York University Press; Nakamura, Lisa 1995, ‘Race in/for cyberspace:
11 See Johnson, Barbara 1993, ‘Lesbian spectacles: reading Sula, passing, Thelma and Louise, and The
Accused’, in Marjorie Garber, Jann Matlock and Rebecca Walkowitz (eds), Media Spectacles, Routledge, New
recent controversies highlight passing’s continued topicality but they wrest the theme from a racial and specifically national (especially US) context. Given this development, how can the concept of passing provide fresh understandings of contemporary culture and identity?

From historical cases of passing and fictional depictions of the act to theoretical and populist preoccupations with the passer as a border crosser, engagements with ‘passing’ consistently explore identity not as an *a priori*, a ‘to-be-given’, but as a generative topic that enables debate. It is this conception of passing that is central to the essays collected here. In exploring the many facets and faces of passing, the contributors explore the topic’s continued relevance. By engaging with passing as a lived, social phenomenon, this collection draws attention to social inclusions and exclusions that generate questions about the authenticity and inauthenticity, the visibility and invisibility of modern identities and provide ways to think about the role of authorship and narrative in modernity, within and outside the West. In order to reproduce the contingent and the metaphorical implications of passing—a theme that has a discursive as well as a lived history—this collection begins with essays that frame passing in terms of US history. It then moves forward to essays that engage with passing outside this socio-historical context.

The first two essays read examples of passing in the context of a complex, present-day United States. In her essay, ‘Passing Strange and post-civil rights blackness’, Gayle Wald compares a recent Broadway musical, which explores American race relations through a protagonist who travels outside US borders, with early twentieth-century passing-for-white narratives. Her analysis of *Passing Strange*—a musical that cannily references passing as an identity performance in a range of texts ranging from Shakespeare’s *Othello* to James Baldwin’s ‘Giovanni’s Room’—looks at the self-conscious representation of black identity and the way in which race is inextricably tied to gender and sexuality for a ‘post civil-rights’ generation. *Passing Strange* engages with how educated, middle-class members of this generation have inherited political and material gains that are experienced as inauthentic in relation to continued identifications of race as a category understood to be performative. Wald explores the significance of ‘passing for black’ as performed through *Passing Strange*’s lead character, the ‘Youth’. The nature of the Youth’s performance—one that raises questions about sex and gender, as well as race—becomes most obvious once he leaves Los Angeles to travel to Amsterdam, where he finds that white-European views of African-Americans are based on images gleaned from hip-hop and other popular-culture exports.

In the case of *Passing Strange*, the act of ‘passing for black’ inverts the idea that passing entails a movement from disadvantage to social privilege and speaks to the marketability of victimhood in contemporary US culture. Likewise, Caroline
Hamilton’s analysis of the passing performance of Laura Albert—an aspiring author who created a fake identity in the form of a trans-gender ex-prostitute and recovering heroin addict, J. T. Leroy, in order to market and publish a book—speaks to the dynamic and performative possibilities of authorship. ‘Passing for an author: the strange case of J. T. Leroy’ draws on theories of Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes to argue that Albert created Leroy in order to pass as an author ‘she could not otherwise be’. In her deft analysis of this literary hoax, Hamilton elucidates a case that exemplifies how perceptions of the author are based on a false view of her singularity and authenticity in a way that distorts the multiple and shifting role of the author in the digital age. In doing so, Hamilton reinforces the connections, rather than differences, between Laura Albert and her fictional creation, J. T. Leroy.

Wald’s and Hamilton’s essays draw attention to the relevance of passing in a contemporary US context in which the proliferation of simulated images—through multimedia and other platforms—continues to generate anxieties about authority and authenticity. The role of the simulated image—the imitation—is also central to my contribution, ‘What passes in Imitation of Life (1959)?’, in which I revisit the significance of a racial-passing plot in a Hollywood melodrama that has been the discussion of much scholarly debate. Drawing on Director Douglas Sirk’s understanding of melodrama as an ancient form in which the visual body is essential to the communication of meaning, I analyse his melodrama, Imitation of Life, for connections it makes between passing, acting and film-making. I focus on the intersection of Imitation of Life’s race and sexual passing plots through analysis of its Oedipal family romance in which a mixed-race child imitates the performance of her white, surrogate mother. My essay investigates the tension between what Sirk says about his film and what the film presents, including the under-acknowledged role of Sirk’s producer, Ross Hunter, particularly the part he played in screening the film’s more tacit passing plots. Through a two-pronged approach—which explores the film’s passing plots via the onscreen and off-screen performances of the film’s actors, director and producer—I look at the importance of the visual as a medium that needs to be understood in terms of its productive gaps and expressive failures.

Kate Lilley’s ‘Mary Carleton’s false additions: the case of the “German Princess”’ looks at an identity performance outside a twentieth-century, American context and engages with the generative effects of passing as a metaphor for social and textual mobility in Restoration London. The case of Mary Carleton, as Lilley elucidates it, reveals the passer as an ingenious shape-shifter, a trickster figure, whose success is enabled partly through her ability to mirror the trickery of others. Suggesting the centrality of imitation to the passer’s modus operandi, Lilley’s reading of Carleton’s ‘false’ presentation of herself as an aristocrat, a ‘German Princess’, shows how Carleton’s performance doubled itself through the
literature that proliferated about her. That Carleton eventually gained notoriety, and in some circles became a celebrity, demonstrates Carleton’s ingenuity and talent; while Carleton passes as a ‘German Princess’, she also performs a version of that which she already is: ‘quality without an estate.’ The case of Mary Carleton, as rendered in Lilley’s essay, thus speaks to a contradictory logic still at play in recent passing narratives. That is, the passer’s ostensibly ingenuous passing act is successful because it dissembles—it falsely mirrors and takes duplicitous advantage of—social assumptions and expectations. Carleton’s ‘passing for quality’ operates through her talent for self-styling in a society in which such self-invention, and the opportunities it creates for upward mobility, is a source of fascination and anxiety. For a woman, as Lilley argues, however, such opportunism is associated with (masculine) agency. In this respect, Carleton’s performance constituted her as a ‘hermaphrodite’, a master–mistress of her own fated destiny.

Pamela L. Caughie discusses passing in relation to modern anxieties about imitation and, more particularly, questions about the meaning of subjectivity in the era of early and mid-twentieth-century mass production. In doing so, Caughie challenges popular and scholarly assumptions that equate knowing with seeing. Drawing on the work of Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno and Georg Simmel for her essay, ‘Audible identities: passing and sound technologies’, Caughie asks what it means to ‘conceive identities as audible rather than visual’. In doing so, and building on her theory of passing as a wave or ‘a transfer of energy from point to point’, Caughie looks at the way modern forms of communication (the radio, the phonograph and the telephone) divorced voice from sight, and the recorded from the live body, to produce not just a new, technologically mediated sound but an embodied voice that is distinctive to the modern technologies that produce it. Proposing this argument as one that offers ‘possibilities for re-imagining “passing” as other than erasure, invisibility, appropriation or blackface’, Caughie turns to a discussion of how race and class distinctions figure in technologies of voice production. Caughie argues that from the use of racial voices for Hollywood to the BBC’s production of a ‘classless’ English accent, the ‘new aurality’ of the early twentieth century produced its own sound and, in doing so, troubled the boundary between original and copy, live and recorded representation.

The final section of the issue takes notions of passing, crossing and imitation beyond the framework of US and European culture and history. Vera Mackie’s ‘Necktie nightmare: narrating gender in contemporary Japan’ uses an autobiographical narrative of gender transitioning, Nômachi Mineko’s O-kama dakedo OL yattemasu (I’m Queer but I’m an Office Lady), which explores how identifying passing’s ‘local context can teach us about the particular fault lines and tensions concerning identity and difference in that site’. A Japanese office-
worker’s gender crossing from male to female entails not only changes in dress and deportment but choosing between personal pronouns that depend on ‘the gender of the speaker, the formality of the utterance, and the relationship between speaker and hearer’. In Japan, the nation-state’s racialised concerns about the reproduction of the population have put greater weight on traditional expectations of heterosexual marriage at the same time that legal and medical prohibitions of gender transitioning have relaxed. And the implications of shifting gender have particular implications in a culture in which masculinity and birth order remain cultural capital to have and lose. However fraught, Nômachi’s autobiography remains a story of liberation.

The issue ends with an interview with Anna Broinowski, director of the critically acclaimed film Forbidden Lies (2007). Its subject is Norma Khouri, an American citizen who passed herself off for several years as a refugee with a story to tell about honour killing in Jordan. My interview with Broinowski explores the importance of passing to understandings of illegal border crossings, contemporary attitudes to the Middle East and the role of the celebrity author and the film-maker in fabrications of identity. The interview explores the film’s reading of Norma as a ‘consummate performer’ … ‘a Scheherazade of the digital age’ as Broinowski articulates what it means to capture Norma’s spin-making and shape-shifting on screen. Here, Broinowski’s discussion of her failure to find a ‘real’ or ‘authentic’ Norma enables a discussion of the limits and possibilities of film-making. Like others represented in this volume, Norma is a passer whose failure and success cannot simply be attributed to her single-minded opportunism and transgression. As Broinowski reminds us, we ‘have all been complicit in constructing the environment which had enabled her to thrive’.
The American in Europe is everywhere confronted with the question of his identity.\(^2\)

In her groundbreaking 2000 article ‘Black like this: race, generation, and rock in the post-civil rights era’, anthropologist Maureen Mahon describes the ‘contemporary condition of double-consciousness’ that shapes the experiences of African-Americans growing up in the decades after the black freedom struggle of the 1950s and 1960s.\(^3\) Focusing on members of the Black Rock Coalition (BRC), a group of musician-activists working to reclaim the blackness of rock-and-roll, Mahon finds that these predominantly middle-class young African-Americans—most born after 1960—inherit a historically specific set of challenges regarding race and racial self-definition. Whereas earlier generations struggled against de jure segregation and second-class citizenship, this ‘post-civil rights’ generation, as Mahon and others dub it, inherits a world in which important legislative and juridical victories have already been achieved. As middle-class Americans, they have been the beneficiaries of civil rights victories in school desegregation, affirmative action and equal employment. On the other hand, this generation must negotiate new challenges that emerge from new expressions of racism and changes in racial discourse. As Mahon discovers through detailed interviews with BRC members, even economic privilege does not mitigate this younger generation’s struggles against exclusion, discrimination and racial definition. It is simply that these struggles take place amid a new set of social and political challenges.

Post-civil rights double-consciousness is the thematic, aesthetic and political terrain of the critically acclaimed musical *Passing Strange*, which had its most visible run at the Belasco Theatre on Broadway in 2008, and appeared in 2009 as a film by the director Spike Lee.\(^4\) In *Passing Strange*—the title is simultaneously...
a riff on *Othello*, a meditation on the ‘strangeness’ of identity, a commentary on expatriate/étranger experience and a reference to racial passing—we find a lively and robust engagement with the contradictions of post-civil rights racial discourse, in which blackness is represented as multiple and shifting and in which identity is assumed to be performative rather than natural. Indeed, in taking blackness for granted as a complex and dynamic experience rather than a determinate state of belonging or being, *Passing Strange* is a passing narrative for the post-passing era: hip to anti-essentialist critiques of race as a social construct, tuned in to the ways that blackness is lived through class, gender, embodiment, sexuality and geography, and self-conscious about the histories of black American cosmopolitanism and the contemporary social and political minefields delineated in phrases such as ‘acting black’ or ‘acting white’.5

Like other passing narratives in the twentieth-century American canon—including James Weldon Johnson’s *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, Jessie Fauset’s *Plum Bun* and Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand*—*Passing Strange* sends its protagonist across national borders, to Northern Europe, where he experiences a welcome reprieve from US racial definition.6 As a post-civil rights passing narrative, however, *Passing Strange* is also acutely aware of the mutableness of black experience in the diaspora and of the ways that black Americanness, in particular, circulates as a fetishised and desired cultural commodity for white Europeans. This is, in other words, a tale of black bohemian cosmopolitanism in which the middle-class black protagonist is already schooled in the twentieth-century history of black bohemian cosmopolitanism. And while the ending of *Passing Strange* returns the protagonist home—to mother love and to ‘mother’ country—the musical is reluctant to find resolution in the protagonist’s embrace rather, the forms of these representations render them radically different. Spectators of the Broadway version of *Passing Strange* witnessed a very particular kind of ‘Broadway-sized’ spectacle in the Belasco Theatre. Lee’s excellent cinematic adaptation uses multiple cameras, film and video technologies and superb editing to create a more intimate text, with access to a point of view otherwise unavailable to theatre audiences (for example, extreme close-ups of actors’ faces). By the same token, theatre spectators are privy to a more ‘holistic’ *Passing Strange*, in which the gaze can rest momentarily on different aspects of the spectacle (for example, a set of actors, a particular piece of scenery), but in which no camera mediates this gaze. In the Broadway version, the enormity of the wall of lights that acts as stage scenery is quite palpable; in Lee’s film version, the feeling of this enormity is sacrificed for the spectator’s ability—via the presence of cameras—to be ‘onstage’ with the performers. See Lee, Spike (dir) 2008, *Passing Strange*, US Narrative Feature Films, 135 minutes.

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5 For more on the notion of ‘post-passing’ narratives—that is, narratives about passing produced in a historical era in which the economic and social incentives to pass have lessened—see Wald, Gayle 2000, *Crossing the Line: Racial passing in US literature and culture*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC. For an example of a recent, excellent essay that considers passing narratives beyond the black/white paradigm, see Harrison-Kahan, Lori 2005, ‘Passing for white, passing for Jewish: mixed race identity in Danzy Senna and Rebecca Walker’, *MEtUS*, vol. 30, no. 1 [Spring], pp. 19–48. On ideas of ‘acting black’ or ‘acting white’, particularly as they relate to African-American schoolchildren, see Fordam, Signithia 1996, *Blacked Out: Dilemmas of race, identity, and success at Capital High*, University of Chicago Press.

of what Michelle Stephens, in her article ‘What is this black in black diaspora?’, calls ‘color’ or ‘race’ consciousness. Indeed, the successes and struggles of generations of African-Americans who laboured under conditions of segregation, poverty and second-class citizenship have afforded the protagonist both geographical mobility and the freedom to experiment with identity, but the multiplication of his choices is, in the end, an object of continuing negotiation. At worst, the musical suggests, the freedom to experiment with identity in the contemporary era can turn to an exercise in narcissism and self-delusion; at best, however, it can be a rich source of creative and artistic energy.

What I am calling *Passing Strange*’s engagement with the contradictions of post-civil rights racial discourse is made manifest in its dual focus on ‘the Youth’, a middle-class black male teenager who cannot seem to ‘correctly’ appreciate the comforts afforded by his nationality and class, and ‘the Narrator’, the Youth’s present-day alter ego, who invites us to join him in recalling his greener days. For the Youth, an aspiring musician growing up in the palm tree-studded ‘colored paradise’ of South Central Los Angeles circa 1980, what his peers, church and family deem ideal seems shallow and ‘phoney’. Despite the echo of *The Catcher in the Rye*, here, we are not exactly in the territory of Holden Caulfield; for the Youth, ‘phoniness’ is the distinct quality of his black bourgeois community, where the peak of educational attainment is a ‘B.A. in communications from a prestigious black college’ and Sunday-morning church has been reduced to a ‘Baptist fashion show’. As the Youth sees it, this is the phoniness of black people who have ‘made it’ in Reagan-era America and who are more concerned with outward shows of ‘American’ success than with inward quests for meaning. Racism persists; indeed, *Passing Strange* abounds with references to the ways the Youth is profiled and feared, stereotyped and pigeonholed. Yet racism, per se, is not the Youth’s or the musical’s primary concern. Rather, it is the struggle to discover an authentic way of being—and of being an artist in particular—that drives the character and the narrative. For the Youth, this struggle entails the rejection of his community’s seeming parochialism and the embrace of a multiracial, multinational, pan-sexual bohemianism, in which he is able to pursue different modalities of ‘blackness’. In the course of the musical, he comes to re-examine this initial and youthful rejection of what he once saw as impediments.

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7 Stephens, Michelle 2009, ‘What is this black in black diaspora?’, *Small Axe: A Caribbean journal of criticism*, vol. 13, no. 2, p. 27. For Stephens, ‘color consciousness suggests an epidermal, physiognomic, and visual understanding of race’, whereas ‘race consciousness implies both an understanding of the shared conditions and cultural bonds that might unite a racial group…and the collective impact of their combined struggles against oppression and for freedom’ (p. 27). Stephens’ title is an allusion to Stuart Hall’s 1993 essay ‘What is this black in black popular culture?’ I thank Constance Woodard Green, a PhD student in English at George Washington University, for bringing this article to my attention.

8 Stew 2009, *Passing Strange: The complete book and lyrics of the Broadway musical*, Book and Lyrics by Stew, Music by Stew and Heidi Rodewald, Created in collaboration with Annie Dorsen, Applause, New York. Subsequent citations will be from this text.

9 Ibid., pp. 19, 4.
to his discovery of authenticity. To get to a place where he can reconcile the desire for alternatives and his appreciation for ‘home’, however, he pursues a path of downward mobility, away from his community’s stale dreams of college and professional achievement and instead towards something simultaneously more elusive and, in the end, more liberating.

Defining the ‘post’, defining passing

Passing Strange’s concern with depicting a specifically middle-class black post-civil rights experience dovetails with the biography of Stew, the multi-talented African-American musician who wrote and composed Passing Strange along with his long-time musical collaborator Heidi Rodewald, a white singer-bassist.¹⁰ Like the Youth of Passing Strange, Stew (born Mark Stewart in 1961) grew up around Los Angeles, was influenced by the Los Angeles punk-rock scene that flourished in the late 1970s and early 1980s and spent time in Berlin pursuing avant-garde music and performance.¹¹ Although Stew was not formally affiliated with the BRC when he and Rodewald formed their rock band, The Negro Problem, in 1995, according to Mahon, he had an ‘integrated school experience and an early and perceived-as-problematic engagement with rock’.¹²

In pointing out these similarities, I do not mean to conflate Stew’s biography with those of the BRC members Mahon studies; rather, I am interested in marshalling ideas about post-civil rights society and culture as a means of understanding the genesis, meaning and reception of Passing Strange.¹³ The discourse of this ‘generation’ is of course heuristic; as Tera Hunter and Eric

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¹⁰ This essay is, admittedly, complicit with a wider marginalisation of Rodewald as a creator of and performer in Passing Strange. Partly, the autobiographical elements of the musical seemingly demand a focus on Stew—the Youth—the Narrator as aligned characters or personae. I also have found, however, that in publicity for the musical and the Spike Lee film, Stew has dominated discussion and the visual imagery connected with Passing Strange. Rodewald has nowhere near his web presence, for example, and does not appear to have her own web page separate from her various musical collaborations. The ascription of authorship of Passing Strange to Stew alone might reasonably follow from the web site <www.stewsongs.com>, which is described simultaneously as ‘The Official STEW site’ and ‘Also the official site for Heidi Rodewald and The Negro Problem’.

¹¹ I call The Negro Problem a ‘rock’ band, although of course even this label is restricting, given the range of musical styles, modes and genres Stew and Rodewald pursue. Sean Westergaard’s biography of the band at AllMusic.com is helpful (<http://allmusic.com/cg/amg.dll?p=amg&sql=11:gnfuxqbld6e~T1>).

¹² From personal correspondence with Maureen Mahon, 3 February 2010. For documentation of demographic changes among African-Americans since the 1950s and 1960s and the rise of the black middle class, see, for example: Landry, Bart 1987, The New Black Middle Class, University of California Press, Berkeley; Pattillo-McCoy, Mary 1999, Black Picket Fences: Privilege and peril among the black middle class, University of Chicago Press.

Lott argue in trenchant responses to Trey Ellis’s groundbreaking 1989 essay ‘The new black aesthetic’, the persistence of class, gender and geographical distinctions among African-Americans nullifies any notion of a monolithic post-civil rights ‘generational’ experience.\textsuperscript{14} That said, the notion of the ‘post’ does provide a useful starting point for an analysis of cultural texts such as \textit{Passing Strange}, which represents African-American experience in the wake of 1960s and 1970s-era liberation struggles (including civil rights, black power, feminism and gay liberation) and amid a continuing, ever-changing backlash or pushback against the achievements of these struggles. Since the 1978 Bakke decision (in which the US Supreme Court ruled against the use of racial ‘quotas’ in college admissions), for example, the United States has witnessed de-industrialisation, the growth and suburbanisation of the black middle-class, demands for visibility and political power brought by black queer subjects, the decline of public support for affirmative action, rising rates of incarceration of black men and women (and the subsequent disenfranchisement of black felons), devastating urban epidemics of crack cocaine use, increasing numbers of Americans choosing to define themselves as biracial or multiracial and the rise of hip-hop from a local expression of New York City youth to a globally dominant form of youth cultural expression. Defining events in the era of the ‘post’ encompass everything from the crossover success of the Sugarhill Gang’s \textit{Rapper’s Delight} (1977) to the emergence of the HIV/AIDS epidemic (early 1980s); from Jesse Jackson’s presidential candidacy and the rise of the Rainbow Coalition (1984) to the confirmation hearing of US Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas (1991); from the Los Angeles riots (1992) to the Million Man March (1995); from the 2001 US invasion of Iraq to the devastation—wrought disproportionately on the black and the poor—in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina (2005). In the light of this complex history, the election of America’s first black president in 2008 is but one, albeit a significant, milestone—another boundary marker between ‘then’ and ‘now’.

Although post-civil rights theorists and critics approach the question of the ‘post’ differently—disagreeing in particular about the significance of class divisions among African-Americans—all engage in one way or another with a significant contradiction in US racial discourse since the 1970s. This post-civil rights contradiction can be summarised as follows: whereas racism and racialisation (that is, the manner in which subjects are socially defined as ‘black’) persist in the post-civil rights era, they do so alongside a widely

shared perception—perhaps even a growing national consensus—that race no longer matters, especially for those ‘post-soul babies’, as Mark Anthony Neal dubs them, who grow up in more racially integrated social milieux. Whereas Mahon et al. go to great pains to explore young African-Americans’ complex engagements—at the level of identity and identification—with continuing racial discrimination and marginalisation, what I am calling the ‘post-civil rights racial contradiction’ sweeps aside these complexities under the liberal sign of ‘color blindness’ or, more perniciously, under the reactionary sign of ‘reverse discrimination’, ironically paving the way for new modes of racial marginalisation.

The election of Barack Obama has, if anything, only brought this post-civil rights contradiction to a boiling point, in the meantime making it more obvious as a contradiction. Although it was patently absurd at the time, in retrospect, the intense media coverage of the ‘precise’ racial identity of Obama-the-candidate circa 2007 and 2008 now appears to have been misguided and arguably racist. Similarly, the time and energy spent in heated media debates about whether African-Americans would see Obama as one of ‘them’—even, it was simultaneously suggested (often without much evidence), that whites, Latinos and Asian Americans would be reluctant to cast their votes for a ‘black’ person—appear as little more than a deflection of consideration of the future of progressive politics in the twenty-first century. In short, these contradictory speculations that swirled about concerning Obama’s ‘race’ and whether it ‘made a difference’—indeed, the very presumption on the part of many US news media that such speculations were valid and newsworthy—emblemise a variety of post-civil rights anxieties about race. In particular, they point to a broad confusion about the significance of race in American life, where ‘black’ racial identities are subject to continuing and intense policing (discursive and ‘real’), even as their social existence and significance are publicly questioned. Clearly—and as Obama has himself said—we need to be wary of declaring ours a ‘post-race’ society.

15 See Neal, Soul Babies. Neal’s use of ‘soul’ and ‘post-soul’ as markers springs from his particular concern with black musical expression and with ‘soul’ as a wide-ranging umbrella term for various modes of black musical creativity in the 1960s, 1970s and beyond.


17 Two significant assumptions buttress this question. The first is that African-American class privilege is now normative, or at least normative enough that the experiences of the middle class can substitute for the experiences of the group as a whole. The second, equally insidious assumption is that middle-class experience is racially transcendent. According to this assumption, the life experiences of middle-class black and white Americans are essentially identical, if only because both groups would seem to have access to the same institutions that confer cultural, economic and political power.
That does not mean, however, that these new contradictions are not meaningful within discussions of race, colour blindness and racial passing. Just the opposite: new notions of racial passing find their way into contemporary discourse of race through these contradictions. Where Obama-the-presidential-candidate was concerned, these references to racial passing were occasionally quite explicit and were often invoked when conservative commentators voiced resentment at the supposed advantages enjoyed by racial or ethnic ‘minorities’ in a post-civil rights society. ‘It’s just a question, but in the “color-blind” America of today, is Barack Hussein Obama, Jr. passing for black? Is he using his father’s side of the family to advance his presidential candidacy and denying his white American middle class heritage? Is he denying his Islamic heritage?’ asked the blogger Conservative Beach Girl in an April 2007 post. Several aspects of this blog post are noteworthy: its ersatz ingenuousness (‘It’s just a question…’), its pointed use of Obama’s middle name and the suffix ‘Jr’, its casting of the spectre of ‘Islamic heritage’ as inherently suspect and its notion that in the “color-blind” America of today Obama enjoys privilege for having a black Kenyan father, even as this father is the source of anxiety about race, nationality and religion.

Most germane for my purposes here is the blogger’s use of the phrase ‘passing for black’ in her rhetorical question about Obama, a man of presumably ‘mixed’ background who uses his ‘father’s side of the family’ to ‘advance’ his chances for the presidency. This blog post is only one instance, of course, but it illustrates what I will call a post-civil rights turn in the discourse of racial passing, one whose condition of possibility is the notion that black or even ‘mixed-race’ people can and will deploy ‘blackness’ as a mode of social and economic advantage. To understand the meaning of the blogger’s use of the phrase ‘passing for black’, then, is to understand struggles over racial identity staged in the context of post-civil rights developments, including the backlash against the late twentieth-century US struggle for civil rights.

Of course, in using the phrase ‘passing for black’ in association with Obama, the blogger implicitly calls on the history and cultural memory of African-Americans ‘passing for white’. While passing, as a social practice, had a long history, in the last decades of the twentieth century, scholars began looking closely at the rich cultural repository of passing narratives, exemplified in literary texts such as Charles Chesnutt’s serialised novel The House Behind the Cedars (1900), Nella Larsen’s novella Passing (1929) and George Schuyler’s modernist satire Black No More (1931). In my own 2000 study, Crossing the Line: Racial passing in twentieth-century US literature and culture, for example, I argued that for racially defined subjects, passing (usually but not always ‘for white’) was a complex mode of racial re-signification and appropriation whose condition of possibility was in

the ‘one-drop rule’ that prevailed in the United States well into the twentieth century. In a somewhat different vein, cultural theorist Amy Robinson examined the performativity of passing, wherein ‘passing for white’ was best understood not as an ontological claim on the part of racially defined subjects but as social theatre most successfully performed when its audience did not realise, let alone acknowledge, its theatricality. And in works such as Our America: Nativism, modernism, and pluralism, as well as his influential essay ‘Autobiography of an ex-white man’, the literary scholar Walter Benn Michaels cunningly used literary passing narratives, including James Weldon Johnson’s fictional 1912 autobiography, to explore and critique theories of ‘social constructionism’, which had gained currency in the US academy since the publication of Henry Louis Gates junior’s influential anthology ‘Race’, Writing, and Difference.19

Although they arrived at disparate conclusions and used disparate methodologies, these studies all began with the premise that race was a ‘fiction of identity’ (to recall the title of Elaine K. Ginsberg’s seminal 1996 collection of essays) and that racial passing was an exceptionally useful site for theorising about the social production and deployment of racial difference.20 Narratives of racial passing revealed complex dynamics of pleasure and desire, shame and self-doubt, ambition and longing—all of which cohered around the discourses of racial definition. More recent representations of ‘passing for black’ are similarly useful for theorising about race in the context of post-civil rights developments. For example, even in Conservative Blogger Girl’s blog post about Obama, in which racial difference is essentialised and somaticised (as something produced by ‘heritage’), it is also imagined as flexible, usable and unmoored from biology or the visual ‘evidence’ of the body.

Yet while both might depend on certain contradictions in US racial discourse, ‘passing for black’—particularly as it has been evoked in post-civil rights contexts—is not the equivalent (or the reversal—that is, the equivalent in negative terms) of ‘passing for white’. To equate the two, to suggest that they are simply interchangeable, is to confuse the utopian discourse of colour blindness with current social conditions, in which racial identities continue to matter,


20 Ginsberg, Elaine K. (ed.) 1996, Passing and the Fictions of Identity, Duke University Press, Durham, NC. Benn Michaels, in particular, used cultural representations of passing to insist on what he saw as the fallacy of the social-constructionist argument—namely, its re-inscription of race in the face of its demonstrated status as a fiction. ‘Either race is an essence, or there is no such thing as race,’ he wrote in ‘Autobiography of an ex-white man’, p. 125.
albeit not in isolation from other social markers. It is also to overlook how the
discourse of ‘blackness’ has subtly shifted in the post-civil rights era and how
black subjects (particularly middle-class subjects) deploy ‘passing for black’
as a means of negotiating continuing racialisation, including racialisation that
ostensibly reverses the racist logic of the one-drop rule to code black identity
as socially or culturally desirable. What I am suggesting here is that passing is
deeply embedded in the social and historical conditions that also enable it.

**Passing Strange: in search of the real**

How do we untangle this confusion around post-civil rights racial identities? How
does ‘passing for black’ emerge as a trope of post-civil rights racial
discourse? In the rest of this essay, I turn to *Passing Strange* for some answers,
finding them primarily in the musical’s clever exploration of the idea of ‘the
Real’. 21 The Real is many things in *Passing Strange* and its elusiveness as a
concept (to define it is not unlike trying to define truth or beauty) is part of
the point of the musical. Whatever the Real might be, however, the play-text
is clear that for the Youth, it is not to be found in black middle-class success
stories—at one point dismissively referred to as ‘black folks passing for black’. 22
It is also not to be found in the United States, with its stultifying social rituals
around race and policing of racialised bodies. Indeed, following in the footsteps
of James Baldwin—only the most obvious influence—the Youth seeks to realise
the Real outside the confining spaces of US racial logic. Whereas Baldwin sought
to find an alternative to racial segregation and discrimination, the Youth—who
lives in a post-civil rights society that has apparently legislated such nuisances
away—ironically wants to leave America for similar reasons. The Youth might
enjoy middle-class privilege, yet in Los Angeles he is nevertheless a target of
fear, suspicion and racial profiling. The expressions of racial oppression might
have changed since Baldwin’s day, but ‘race’ remains a hurdle and a challenge to
be worked out at the level of identity and identification.

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21 *Passing Strange* opened in Broadway’s Belasco Theatre on 28 February 2008 and closed in late July. Directed by and created in collaboration with Annie Dorsen, the show was nominated for seven Tony Awards (which honour work staged in Broadway theatres), including Best Musical. In addition to winning (for Stew) the Tony Award for Best Book, *Passing Strange* won the Drama Desk Award and the New York Drama Critics’ Circle Award for Best Musical. In its incarnation as an off-Broadway show at New York’s Public Theater, it won the 2008 Obie Award for Best New American Theater Piece. Previous to its run on Broadway, *Passing Strange* was an award-winning show at Berkeley Rep in California (where it opened in October 2006) and the Public Theater, an Off-Broadway venue in New York (where it opened in May 2007). I saw the show in the middle of its Broadway run, in April 2008. Although it is no longer a Broadway musical, *Passing Strange* exists in other media: in musical form as *Passing Strange, the Original Broadway Cast Recording* (2008); in literary form as *Passing Strange: The complete book and lyrics of the Broadway musical* (2009); and in cinematic form as a documentary, *Passing Strange*, directed by Spike Lee. The last premiered at the 2009 Sundance Film Festival.

If there is an impulse to ‘pass’ in *Passing Strange* then it is initially an impulse to be unburdened of social expectations and restrictions associated with the Youth’s class, gender and race. As the Youth travels, however, ostensibly leaving his ‘American’ self, his family and his past behind him, he discovers, not unsurprisingly, that forms of social expectation continue to adhere to him and that they do so under the sign of his status as a ‘black American’, especially a black American from ‘the street’. (The white Europeans are so shaped by the discourses of authenticity in black popular culture of the 1980s that they fail to imagine that the Youth does not come from ‘the hood’.) Because he knows the history of African-American artist-expatriates of earlier generations—that Paris and London have already been ‘done’ by such illustrious writers as Baldwin, Richard Wright and Chester Himes, for example—the Youth sets himself a slightly different course, travelling first to socially permissive Amsterdam, where sex and hashish are readily available, and later to culturally riotous Berlin, then in the throes of pre-post-communist revolutionary fervour. Yet neither of these European locations offers a reprieve from racial definition. Indeed, the end of the musical finds the Youth back in Los Angeles, mourning his mother, who died while he was in Berlin, and yet strengthened by the realisation—enabled and transformed by his grief—that the Real, like race and categories of identity, is a ‘construct’, an elusive and ever-moving target.23

In updating twentieth-century narratives of African-American expatriation and racial passing, *Passing Strange* advances a complex representation of the operations of blackness outside the geographical borders of the United States. In Europe, the Youth immediately encounters the global incorporation of African-American cultural expression as a purchasable commodity. By the time he arrives in Amsterdam and Berlin, that is, the black American protest cultures and identities of the 1960s—particularly those associated with black power—have been fully appropriated by European youth culture. At the same time, the social relationship of white European youth to black youth—including, presumably, Europeans of African descent—remains relatively untransformed.

Such commodification of blackness at the level of culture is not, per se, new—certainly, Josephine Baker in 1920s Paris and Jimi Hendrix in 1960s London were, at different moments, consumed as black exotics—and yet the Society of the Spectacle has only intensified global fantasies of blackness, particularly the fantasy of a blackness opposed to capitalism and nationalism.24 For the Youth, who has grown up in a community that embraced, rather than rejected, the American Dream, the Europe of the late twentieth century is thus at times

23 Ibid., p. 101.
24 I would like to also say imperialism, but the participation of African-Americans in the twenty-first-century US-led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the presence of Obama as Commander-in-Chief, perhaps undermines the image of the black American as a non-participant in the US imperialist/expansionist/interventionist project. This is a matter of speculation, however, and outside the purview of this essay.
highly confounding, a place that forces him to reconcile with his personal history—embodied and voiced in the play through the character of his mother. By mining such rich veins of social and cultural contradiction, *Passing Strange* refuses to romanticise expatriation as ‘escape’—from race, from identity, from history—instead concluding, with Baldwin, that leaving America entangles the black American expatriate in a continuing confrontation with ‘the question of identity’.

Hence, while the musical shows the Youth enjoying various freedoms in Europe—much of the pleasure of spectators comes from witnessing and identifying with the youth’s happiness abroad—*Passing Strange* also goes to great pains to demonstrate how the Youth is bound by post-civil rights challenges, especially around blackness and black racial identity. His story is a variation on the familiar passing narrative, if only because among European comrades he finds his ‘blackness’—specifically, his African-Americanness—to be an object of appreciation and desire rather than revulsion. He confronts the usual array of racial stereotypes, but he also enjoys transgressively revelling in the (white) Europeans’ misconceptions of African-American masculinity. At his lowest point, he ‘eaters to Europeans’ worst stereotypes of black Americans as he creates a style he calls “Afro-Industrial-Post-Minstrelismus”’.25 If he passes for black, it is not because he is free of racial definition (that is, according to the social-constructionist logic), but because he is racially defined in a context in which the discourses of colour blindness and racial romanticisation coexist and mutually inform one another. This is a story that asks audiences to invest in the Youth’s dreams of ‘freedom’, even as it proffers an inevitably more ‘real’ critique of the Narrator’s youthful naivety.

A number of formal innovations enable *Passing Strange* to approach the Youth’s search for the Real with critical self-consciousness and differentiate *Passing Strange* from other recent deservedly acclaimed Broadway musicals, such as Tony Kushner’s semi-autobiographical *Caroline, Or Change*, which centres on a Jewish boy’s burgeoning self-consciousness about race, class and gender in relation to his African-American maid, and which had a run at the Eugene O’Neill Theatre in 2004. Most importantly, whereas the story of the Youth is set in the 1980s, the narration of this story (the play-narrative itself) takes place in the present,

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25 Grode, Eric 2007, ‘A long, strange trip’, [Review of *Passing Strange*], *New York Sun*, 15 May 2007. A note here about reviews of the play: although the majority are warm in their praise for Stew and his collaborators, they also repeatedly misread the musical in telling ways. For example, in my survey of the published reviews, it was common for the reviewer to conflate Stew, who acted the part of the Narrator, with the Youth, who played the Narrator’s younger self. Although the musical is clearly autobiographical, this equation of Stew—Youth is problematic in minimising the imaginative labours of the musical. As well, not a few reviews read the play’s ending quite differently than I do here, interpreting the Youth’s return home (to California) at the end of the play as confirmation, along with Dorothy, that ‘there’s no place like home’. What such reviews fail to take into account is how the Youth’s travels, like Dorothy’s travels, have been transformative, such that ‘home’—however much it is embraced—can never look or be the same again.
giving the musical a sort of temporal double-consciousness. Adding to this complexity is the fact that Stew plays the Narrator, which is tantamount, given the audience’s awareness of the musical’s autobiographical elements, to playing himself. At no moment in Passing Strange is the Youth (played on Broadway by Daniel Breaker) alone on stage; the Narrator is ever-present, prodding and questioning him—part conscience, part oracle. Through rich spoken and sung dialogue between the Narrator and the Youth, the play thus constantly shuttles between the ‘then’ of the Youth’s artistic coming of age and the ‘now’ of the Narrator’s wary affection for his naive younger self, imbuing Passing Strange with a rich sense of history and a genuine satirical consciousness.

A second important formal innovation of Passing Strange concerns the play’s presentation of music as visual spectacle. Unlike in most other Broadway musicals—in which an orchestra occupies the pit (the hollowed-out area in front of the stage) and thus is all but hidden from the audience—in Passing Strange, the five-piece band (bass, guitars, drums, keyboards) is on stage at all times. The visual presence of the musicians resonates, in turn, with African-American musical aesthetics—in which music is realised as a call-and-response ‘conversation’ between players and audience—and with the play’s narrative concern with the Youth’s realisation of the spectacularisation of his black male performing body. It is in its canny enactment of the ‘problem’ of ‘Negro’ stage performance that Passing Strange can be understood as a ‘rock musical’—not, as many of the play’s reviewers have argued, because it invokes the sonic signatures of rock-and-roll. Indeed, musically speaking, Passing Strange is a glorious hybrid, drawing on a historically rich palette of sound, from minstrel-stage melodies to appropriations of American songbook/Kurt Weill-inspired idioms, to gospel, punk, Euro-pop and industrial rock. The show’s brilliant lighting design, by Kevin Adams, who gained notoriety in 2007 for his lighting of the Tony Award-winning Broadway play Spring Awakening, is also noteworthy for its break from Broadway convention. In the play’s most visually breathtaking moment, just before intermission, the Youth’s arrival in Amsterdam is signified by the unveiling of an enormous wall of abstract shining tubes of neon lights. Their colourful, otherworldly glare symbolises new possibilities, if not an entirely new world.

Finally, and no less germane to this conversation, is the fact that all of the musicians onstage, barring Stew, appear to be white and that all of the characters in Passing Strange—from the members of the Youth’s church choir to the habitués of the Amsterdam bar where he happily notices hashish on the menu—are played by actors who appear to be black or biracial. Thus, in the scenes that take place in Amsterdam and Berlin, the audience must juggle its consciousness of colour with the various ‘white’ roles the ‘black’ actors play. This strategy retroactively throws into relief the fact that in earlier scenes set in
Los Angeles the ‘black’ actors are playing a variety of ‘black’ roles and that the Youth, in different locations and at different moments, is also playing different versions of ‘himself’. The play revels in the fun of mixing it up visually, all the while making Dutch and German-accented English—performed brilliantly by the cast—a running joke.

As the preceding observations suggest, *Passing Strange* engages with the contradictions and challenges of ‘post-civil rights’ by playing loose and fast with the formal and aesthetic conventions of the Broadway musical. Unlike traditional Broadway fare, for example, *Passing Strange* does not find a happy resolution to the Youth’s dilemma in marriage or romance. The play has plenty of sexual adventure—one of several crowd-pleasing songs in Act I, *We Just Had Sex*, is about the multiple erotic possibilities of liberated Amsterdam—but, like the Youth himself, *Passing Strange* has little use for conventional romance or even Oedipal narratives. More importantly, perhaps, *Passing Strange* confronts its audience with its difference from the Broadway norm through its musical prelude—a blast of thumping bass, pounding drums and catchy rock-guitar hooks—and its opening moments, which draw attention in a comic fashion to the musical’s self-consciousness. Initially, the Youth’s mother, who is trying to persuade her son to accompany her to church, addresses him in ‘Negro dialect’ (as the Narrator describes it). When she realises that her tactic of ‘talking black’ is not working to get her son into his Sunday clothes, the Mother ‘reverts’ to her ‘natural’ (again, the Narrator’s description) voice, which has a ‘crisp, middle-class tone’. In the performance I saw, the dialogue between mother and son, punctuated by wry commentary from the Narrator, earned appreciative laughter from the audience, as we recognised in the mother’s linguistic code the switching that was the play’s send-up of classed and raced notions of ‘proper’ English. In drawing our attention to the performativity of speech, the scene also established racial authenticity as a central question not just of this single scene, but of the play as a whole.

Here is where *Passing Strange* speaks most powerfully to post-civil rights contradictions, realities and possibilities. Although the Youth distances himself from American racial norms, in his overseas travels, he continues to confront issues of racial hyper-visibility and invisibility. Although he leaves the United States circa 1980, the Youth finds himself in much the same structural position as the author of *Notes of a Native Son*, who famously flees the nightmare of US racial apartheid to find himself the lone black person in a provincial Swiss village whose residents find perpetual novelty in his skin tone and hair texture.

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26 It is relevant in regard to Broadway ‘tradition’ that neither Stew nor Rodewald had ever written or composed a musical before *Passing Strange*. For more on the process of developing and workshopping the musical, see the brief essays by Bill Bragin, Heidi Rodewald and Stew in Stew, *Passing Strange*, pp. ix–xix.

27 Ibid., p. 2.

28 In Spike Lee’s film version, too, the moment is punctuated by audible and sustained laughter.
On the other hand, as a subject formed in the aftermath of civil rights struggles, the Youth is far more self-assured about his status as an American citizen than Baldwin in the 1950s ever could have dared to be; indeed, because of his class privilege, the Youth, although racially defined, is also the beneficiary of a certain American nationalist presumption of geographical mobility as a mode of self-realisation, in which other countries are a ‘backdrop’ for his discovery of Americanness. (In this sense, the Youth’s pursuit of the Real in Europe has much in common with the seemingly requisite European ‘year abroad’ of many white upper-class US subjects.)

The parallels between the Youth of *Passing Strange* and the autobiographical subject of Baldwin’s early writings extend to their social and cultural formation in the black church. Baldwin, a gifted child-preacher, famously argued with the Pentecostal Church of his youth in his debut novel, *Go Tell It On the Mountain* (1953), and in his first play, *The Amen Corner* (1954), which examined the dynamics within a church community. When he returned to the United States in the late 1950s, it was to join in the work of the burgeoning civil rights movement, which drew much of its organisational and ideological strength from black Christian institutions and later, with the rise of black power, from Muslim institutions such as the Nation of Islam. The heterosexual Youth of *Passing Strange* also finds that he must leave the church to find himself, but, interestingly, it is a gay man in the church, Mr Franklin, a closeted queen who leads the youth choir, who plants the idea of Europe in the Youth’s mind. A pivotal scene in the first act of the play juxtaposes the Narrator’s (Stew’s) singing of the hauntingly beautiful song *Arlington Hill*—a paean to the mind-expanding possibilities of recreational drugs—with dialogue between Mr Franklin and the Youth, who have been sharing a joint. As the choir director tells his protégé:

> And as for this philistine fish bowl [of black bourgeois Los Angeles] we’re swimmin’ around in? Shoot! If you wanna deal with Le Real, I’m talking Stockholm, baby. ‘Persona’, yenno? I’m talking ‘bout Rome and one of them ‘La Dolce Vita’ parties, yenno? I’m talking ‘bout Godard’s Paris, baby, I mean cuz we a ‘Band of Outsiders’ too, yenno? I mean I’m talking ‘bout brother Al Calmus…‘The Stranger’. Brother said, ‘Algeria? See ya! Wouldn’t wanna be ya!’ OK? I’m talkin’ little Jimmy Baldwin, baby—you gotta go to Another Country if you wanna get to Giovanni’s Room! HA! That’s what I’m talking ‘bout!29

And even before the Youth can respond, the Narrator explicates his reaction for the audience: ‘Half the time he didn’t know what the fuck Mr Franklin was talking about. But that was cool.’30

30 Ibid., p. 23.
In this richly allusive speech, Mr Franklin names Baldwin—in familiar terms, no less, as the ‘Jimmy’ by which his friends knew him—and, perhaps more importantly, foregrounds Baldwin’s and his own queerness. The references to ‘Another Country’ and ‘Giovanni’s Room’ have particular significance for thinking about the Youth’s search for ‘Le Real’, especially insofar as they remind us that Baldwin’s exile from the country of his birth was impelled by homophobia as well as racism. There is a poignancy here, too: as Mr Franklin, a character who embodies the legions of closeted (invisible and yet visible) black gay men in the black church, peppers his speech with references to existentialist philosophy, French New Wave cinema and the Italian film *auteur* Federico Fellini, we are meant to understand that these cultural productions mediate Mr Franklin’s own relation to a Real that is predicated on his willingness to ‘perform’ heterosexuality for church elders. Like the protagonist of *Go Tell It On the Mountain*, Mr Franklin has a ‘home’ in the church, but only at the expense of sexual desire and the visibility of his queer identity. At the same time, the scene begs the issue of class difference within the Youth’s church. Mr Franklin, no longer so young, has more knowledge than the Youth, but it is understood that the Europe he knows so well from books and films is beyond his means, whether those means are ‘merely’ monetary or means of the imagination.

**‘Amsterdam, spring sunshine’**

Whereas leaving the United States entails a reprieve from the repressive Baptist Church, a baptism into new pleasures awaits the Youth on his arrival at the Headquarters Café in Amsterdam. There, he finds middle-class puritanical US social mores turned on their head, such that sexuality and the leisurely pursuit of the creative life (that is, hanging out in coffee shops) are elevated as worthwhile activities. Amsterdam is also the site of the healing of the Youth’s masculinity, which has been wounded by repeated encounters with ‘LA ladies in their Mercedes’, who regard his youthful black male body as threatening. As the Youth says his goodbyes to sterile Los Angeles, he expresses special glee at the process of moving to a place where ‘no-one is afraid of me’—that is, a place where women do not grab their purses as he walks by and where he is not regarded, *a priori*, as a criminal.

Amsterdam, however, is not a racial utopia. The Youth’s initial encounter with the Dutch habitués of the Headquarters Café is shaped, as it was in Los Angeles, by others’ racialised assumptions. ‘So, do you play jazz?’ one of the café’s patron’s asks on meeting him. ‘Do you play duh blues?’ inquires another, in Dutch-

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31 I refer here to the lyric that opens the section of the musical set in Amsterdam’s Headquarters Café.
accepted English. (The Youth’s definitive, conversation-stopping response: ‘Do you live in a fucking windmill? Do you wear clog shoes?’)\(^{33}\) These initial, awkward encounters, however, quickly give way to a more congenial sociality. Marianna, an attractive white Dutch waitress played by de’Adre Aziza, the same actor who portrays Edwina, the unattainable black ‘teenage goddess’, in the Los Angeles section of the play, asks him where he is staying in Amsterdam and, hearing that he does not have a hotel room, instinctively offers him the key to her flat. The gesture is significant because it is made unconsciously, without the hesitation of the ‘LA ladies’, who see the Youth through the distorting lens of what W. E. B. DuBois famously called the ‘veil’ of race. ‘We’re your new family, man!’ Marianna declares, her syntax itself disrupting the peculiarly American logic of the racial binary in which a telltale ‘drop’ of blood determines who can be socially perceived as kin, even in the face of biological connection.\(^{34}\)

The song *Keys*, the musical highlight of the Amsterdam section of *Passing Strange*, follows this conversation between Marianna and the Youth—as always, punctuated by occasional interjections by the Narrator. *Keys* begins as a duet—a form that in the Broadway canon traditionally signifies romantic possibility or, at very least, ‘harmonious’ feeling between the singers. It therefore anticipates the relationship between Marianna and the Youth, which blossoms during his Amsterdam sojourn. In this first section of the song, the Youth sings touchingly (at the ‘vulnerable’ upper end of the actor Daniel Breaker’s register) of the healing effects of Marianna’s ‘gift’ of the key. ‘No more saying “uncle” to Uncle Sam,’ he sings, ‘I’m telling LA just where I am/Color me Amsterdam.’\(^{35}\) At this point, the tempo and mood of the song shift, as the Narrator takes the vocal lead, and *Keys* is transformed from a lyrical recitative with minimal instrumental accompaniment into a celebratory rock-gospel call-and-response, featuring vocals in Stew’s deeper register and the full-on sounds of the band playing loud:

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\begin{align*}
\text{Band:} & \quad \text{Yeah, it’s alright.} \\
\text{Narrator:} & \quad \text{Cuz she said it’s alright.} \\
\text{Band/all:} & \quad \text{Yeah, it’s alright.} \\
\text{Narrator:} & \quad \text{She said, ‘Yeah, it [Amsterdam] might look like Sodom} \\
\text{From top to bottom,} & \quad \text{A shopping mall of vice…’} \\
\text{But it was all right with me now.} & \quad \text{Band/all: Yeah, it’s alright.}
\end{align*}
\]

\(^{33}\) Ibid., p. 44. 
\(^{35}\) Stew, *Passing Strange*, p. 46.
Passing Strange and post-civil rights blackness

Narrator: Cuz she said it’s alright.
Band/all: Yeah, it’s alright.
(Narrator does that crazy adlib thing, which goes on for a while.)

Here, improvised lyrical repetition (‘that crazy adlib thing’) joins force with high-volume ensemble singing (‘Band/all’) to produce a musical and narrative epiphany. After years of being relegated to ‘the deep freeze’ of sunny Southern California—socially chilly despite its desert warmth—the Youth’s soul is thawed by the sunshine of socially enlightened Amsterdam. Marianna’s key is both a ‘way in’ to the Youth’s realisation of self-confidence and, less metaphorically, a means of access to her body. If Paris is where Baldwin’s David goes to fall in love with Giovanni, Amsterdam is where the Youth of Passing Strange goes to fall in love with Marianna, and to experience the pleasures of various improvised couplings with her and other white women—couplings unthinkable (the play suggests that for the Youth they are also unprecedented) in sexually prurient and racially stratified California.

The scene of the key is thus also a key to the Youth’s psychological and artistic journey, since such sexual experience infuses him with sexual and creative potency. (Here it helps that the scene is set in an age before the fear of HIV infection injected the experience of casual sex with morbid possibility.) The Youth experiences Marianna’s key as the key as well to a newly masculinised mode of embodiment, in which he can experience his heterosexuality outside the distorting mirror of the white racist gaze. ‘Did I say,’ the Youth writes in an excited letter back home to Mr Franklin, ‘that today in Amsterdam they taught me how to wear my body?’ This is romantic and even beautiful language, which clashes with the scene’s celebration of access to white women’s bodies as a kind of initiation, both into carnal pleasure itself and into a transgressive sexuality. Indeed, the fact that the Youth’s forays signify as transgressive could be one reason why he chooses to confide his sexual adventures to the obviously closeted Mr Franklin.

To be sure, Passing Strange does not fail to bring to the audience’s attention the ironies of such a statement. As the Youth writes in the very next sentence of his letter, ‘Today in Amsterdam I sat before [Marianna] as she explained the history of Dutch colonialism without her shirt on.’ For the Youth, it would seem, sexual pleasure (defined here as gazing openly at Marianna’s body, without fear of punishment) is inextricably interwoven with historical recollection of Amsterdam as the seat of the Dutch East India Company, the powerhouse of the Atlantic slave trade. Memory of the chained, brutalised and objectified black

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36 Ibid., pp. 47–8.
37 Ibid., p. 51.
38 Ibid., p. 51.
male body—in Hortense Spillers’ terms, the ‘de-gendered’ black male body—would seem to cast its shadow even over moments of climatic satisfaction. Indeed, the Youth’s casual, unselfconscious mention of the Dutch colonial enterprise in his letter home draws attention to how his racial/sexual ‘healing’ is mediated by the histories of wounded black masculinity in the post-slavery diaspora. Although it never explicitly cites it as a source for its title, here is where Passing Strange alludes most powerfully to Othello, Shakespeare’s play about sexuality across social lines of colour, rank and nationality, in which the Moor rashly imagines the infidelity of his white European wife, Desdemona. ’Twas strange, Twas passing strange” are Othello’s lines. Earlier, Othello gives an account to the Venetian Senate of how his stories of life caused Desdemona to fall in love with him. Here, too, Shakespeare’s text, like Stew and Rodewald’s text, draws attention to the power of performance.

The play’s citation of Othello, in which Desdemona dies because the very presumption of her infidelity undermines her husband’s identity, strongly suggests how the narrative equation of sexuality with freedom in Passing Strange is also highly gendered. For clarification of this point, it is helpful to compare Passing Strange with two other contemporary representations of middle-class African-American youths abroad, both of them searching for some version of ‘the Real’. In Andrea Lee’s short story ’In France’, from the book Sarah Phillips, the titular protagonist, a product of the Philadelphia black bourgeoisie, confronts the Baldwinian dilemma of ‘trying to discard my portion of America’ by going to live abroad in Paris. Like the Youth in Passing Strange, Lee’s Sarah belongs to a generation of African-Americans ‘educated in newly integrated schools and impatient to escape the outworn rituals of their parents’. Sarah’s confessed ‘lively appetite for white boys’—a reflection, according to Valerie Smith, of her deep ambivalence about family and community—cannot, however, be sated outside the context of the physical and rhetorical violations of the black female body. When they make love, Sarah’s white French boyfriend, Henri, calls her ’Reine d’Afrique, petite Indienne’. Later, in a moment of anger brought on by class resentment (his background is working class), Henri calls Sarah ’notre Negresse pasteurisée’, contracting the objectification of her sexuality with reference to her light skin tone. Whereas the Youth of Passing Strange experiences sex with Marianna as the revitalisation of masculinity, Sarah in ‘In France’ realises in her sexual relationship with Henri the objectification of her

41 Ibid., p. 4.
42 Ibid., p. xiii.
43 Ibid., p. 5.
racialised, gendered body. She cannot write home to celebrate Paris; rather, the city makes her embarrassedly conscious of her ‘hopeless presumption of trying to discard my portion of America’.44

Similarly, in Z. Z. Packer’s short story ‘Geese’, from her collection *Drinking Coffee Elsewhere*, Dina, the black American female protagonist, goes to Japan, looking for the ‘loveliness’ she finds in Japanese teacups. 45 Her reception in Tokyo is, however, decidedly different to the Youth’s in Amsterdam—and the reasons for this disparity are not to be explained merely by reference to Japanese social insularity. Whereas Japanese women ignore Dina, Japanese businessmen continually proposition her: ‘Verry chah-ming daaark-ku skin,’ they say.46 Dina has trouble getting a job not only because she is black, but because the men expect her to sleep with them in exchange for employment. At the end of Packer’s melancholy story, Dina, who shares a flat with a motley group of expatriates, resorts to selling sex as a way of earning money for food and a ticket home.

The implication of such a comparison between *Passing Strange* and two contemporary texts featuring black American female protagonists in Europe is that one of the Youth’s dominant modes of self-discovery and self-assertion is enabled by, and inseparable from, the privileges he takes for granted as a man. These are also racialised privileges, in the sense that the Youth gains in conventionally defined ‘black manhood’ as he succeeds in bedding white women. The musical also works against this reading, in its rejection of a notion of black manhood contingent on desiring white women; for the narrator, that is, these are *women* and his nerdy reputation in the United States has got in the way of his sex life. In either case, the Youth’s experience is clearly different to those of the black American women in Lee’s and Packer’s short works. There, sex with white men undermines their performance of conventional femininity. While this could be precisely the point, especially for Lee’s protagonist, the stakes of such cross-racial sexual encounters for black women are clear.

‘*Paradise*’ lost

The Youth of *Passing Strange* eventually tires of Amsterdam as well, although not because of racial or sexual exploitation. Quite the contrary: he finds life in Amsterdam so ‘all right’ that it kills his creativity. As he tells Marianna, ‘It’s

44 ‘*Notre Negresse pasteurisée*’ is from ibid., p. 11; the ‘hopeless presumption of trying to discard my portion of America’ is from p. 12.
46 Ibid., p. 192.
hard to write songs when you’re already in paradise’—the ‘paradise’ for him consisting of access to sex, drugs and plenty of time to contemplate the role of struggling artist, which he is desperate to play. ‘Real’ art, he suggests, requires a certain social dis-ease that he lacks in Amsterdam, with its pleasurable but anaesthetising combination of heady sex and mind-altering drugs. Back home, in his punk-rock band, The Scaryotypes, the Youth revelled in playing the Angry Young Black Man, at war simultaneously with ‘Negro mores’ and ‘ghetto norms’, his anthem ‘I’m the sole [soul] brother—up in this motherfucker’. In contrast, the Youth’s comfort with the social norms of Amsterdam is discomfiting.

The Youth’s next destination is West Berlin, which is on the brink of social and cultural revolution. The antithesis of faux-paradisiacal Amsterdam, where everyone is too stoned to worry about social ills, Berlin is seething with anger and twitching (the movements of the German cast of characters are literally jagged and abrupt) with nervous discontent. The Youth falls in with the Nowhaus Collective, a group of young artists committed to Destruction—to the overthrow of capitalism, the annihilation of social conventions and the obliteration of interiority itself. After a period of heady collaboration with the Nowhausians, however, the Youth is flabbergasted to find them accusing him of being a counter-revolutionary artist. Desperate for a means to prove his worthiness to the group, the Youth entices his German comrades with the one thing he knows they cannot resist: blackness steeped in the romance of the ghetto. In the face of this offering up of a romanticised ‘blackness’—in a performance that is disarmingly and knowingly reminiscent of the traditions of US blackface minstrelsy—his Nowhaus comrades concede defeat. ‘[Your] ghetto angst,’ the character Hugo tells the Youth, ‘is far superior to ours.’ As ever, laughter leavens this moment of seriousness, including one that raises the spectre of post-Nazi-era ‘angst’ about Germany’s role in the Holocaust.

As this quick synopsis of its plot suggests, the German section of Passing Strange is also the height of its satire, insofar as the Youth’s claims to ghetto authenticity bring the play full circle, back to the Mother’s speaking in ‘Negro dialect’ in the opening scene. ‘Do you know what it’s like to hustle for dimes on the mean streets of South Central?’ he asks; and of course, they have no clue. Passing Strange conveys a contagious pleasure in the send-up of authenticity here: in the Youth’s knowingly inauthentic performance of ‘realness’, in the Germans’ inability to resist romanticised images of racialised oppression and in the fact that its own satire of ‘passing for black’ should take a detour through such absurdist terrain, with self-exoticisation its ugly and yet strategic destination.

47 Stew, Passing Strange, p. 52.
48 Ibid., p. 27.
The differences between Amsterdam and Berlin are signified musically as well. Whereas the songs in the Amsterdam section of the play are emotionally tender, lyrical and played at a comfortable volume, the sounds of Berlin are loud. The exception is *The Black One*, the Berlin section’s most hilarious number, which sonically sends up the quintessential Broadway musical ensemble piece. In this relentlessly upbeat song, the Youth and his German artist-anarchist friends celebrate the ‘realness’ of the spectacle of blackness performed for white consumption. The funny–sad punchline of the song is delivered by the dour Sudabey, who announces her envy of the Youth in imperfect English. In the next life, she says, ‘I want to be re-incarcerated [sic] as a black man!!’

The over-the-top racial burlesque of the Berlin section of the play, particularly in the song *The Black One*, links *Passing Strange* with other post-civil rights cultural productions that use satire, rather than social realism, as a formal means by which to make visible the contradictions of twenty-first-century racial discourse. In their eager embrace of the Youth as an authentic Voice of the Oppressed, the members of the Nowhaus Collective exemplify this contradiction: although they reject notions of interiority (‘What’s inside is just a lie,’ they tell a startled Youth), they are almost magically seduced by his claims of African-American ‘realness’. While they profess to care deeply about social oppression, they are comically detached from social activism—that is, less interested in ‘real’ black people than in narratives of blackness they can use to enhance their radical credentials. Likewise, as the Youth discovers at Christmas, while the Nowhausians shun the bourgeois family, they look forward to returning for the holiday to the hamlets of their birth, where they can revert to simple childhood pleasures.

The laughter produced by Stew’s satire of German radical chic is, to be sure, wickedly double-edged, a simultaneous send-up of white colour blindness—which is in fact exquisitely aware of racial categories and their attendant social meanings—and of black strategies of appropriating this discourse of colour blindness. The Youth’s willingness to play the role of the ‘Black One’ is tragicomic, a sign of his entrapment within racial discourse as well as his sophisticated understanding of how ‘race’ can be used to entrap others. Paul Beatty’s 1996 novel, *The White Boy Shuffle*, which tells the story of a middle-class black boy who takes up the various guises of authenticity thrust on him (‘the cool black one’, the spokesman for black experience, the prophet of blackness), similarly sends up US notions of colour blindness and multiculturalism with comic relish. While Beatty’s novel embraces nihilism in its absurdist ending, in which the protagonist convinces African-Americans to commit collective

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49 Ibid., p. 82. The pun earns the actor a big laugh.
50 In ‘The new black aesthetic’, Ellis argues that satire and parody are important aspects of the ‘postliberated aesthetic’ (p. 236) of contemporary black artists.
suicide, *Passing Strange*, however, dares to examine the ‘tears’ behind the superficial merriment of the neo-minstrel mask. Wearing the mask ‘that grins and lies’, as Paul Laurence Dunbar writes in his 1896 poem, can serve as a means of African-American survival, but it works at the expense of African-American collective self-expression.51 Whereas Beatty’s protagonist becomes a bard of black collective self-annihilation, the Youth in *Passing Strange* instead probes the possibility of the meaning of the ‘Real’ beyond racial impersonation.

The Youth’s quest and the narrative of *Passing Strange* come to a head in *Work the Wound*, the song that bridges the Berlin section of the play and the ending, in which the Youth returns home for his mother’s funeral. Here the figures of the Youth and the Narrator are joined, as the Narrator sings (in the first person) about the masking potential of art and the discovery that songs of personal pain can also be sources of entertainment for others. Like satire, performance is double-edged. ‘And I’m blessed to entertain,/The crowd laughs and swoons,’ the Narrator sings in the first version of the chorus. ‘See, I’m cursed to entertain,/The crowd laughs too soon,’ he sings in the second version. Either way, the song implicates the audience in the dualism of performance as blessing and curse. What does it mean, the song asks us, that we are capable of being diverted by spectacles of suffering; that the development of American musical and performing arts has depended on white Americans’ fetishisation of the black performing body; that black subjects have long been imagined as possessing an inherent (racialised) gift of jollity and entertainment?52

*Passing Strange* ends with the Youth’s/the Narrator’s return home to Los Angeles, but, significantly, it celebrates maternal love and homecoming without reifying either as the salve that can heal the wounds described in *Work the Wound*. Indeed, the reunion of mother and son is infinitely deferred by her death, although the play allows the audience the pleasure of imagining them together in real time by presenting both actors on stage. Such refusal to conflate ‘motherland’ with mother love constitutes yet another means by which *Passing Strange* swerves away from conventional racial narratives. For even as he sings about idealised mother love as a kind of ‘Real’, so the Narrator affirms what the play has known all along: that the Real is ‘a personal sunset…/You drive off into alone’.53 The line as such is not ironic—or didn’t seem so to me when I heard it performed—even as it invokes multiple images of ‘American’ road narratives, from John Wayne and Jack Kerouac to *Thelma and Louise*. The impossibility of ever returning to the innocence of youth/the Youth is the paradoxical condition of homecoming.

All the same, in the end, *Passing Strange* refuses nostalgic allegiance to a (racialised) past that might be embodied in mother or motherland. It also represents black male self-definition as a project that can take place outside what Mark Anthony Neal, in his discussion of the post-civil rights, terms the ‘kill-the-father’ narratives of black expressive culture. (As an example, one might think of the way Baldwin staged his own literary ‘birth’ in a scathing assessment of the limitations of the work of his mentor, Richard Wright.)\(^{54}\) Perhaps most importantly for this discussion, *Passing Strange* affirms the ‘strangeness’ of identity itself. ‘Black is...[and] black ain’t,’ as the film-maker Marlon Riggs put it. Or, as the Mother sings to her son, in a life-affirming intergenerational lullaby from beyond the grave:

Don’t be sad about your chosen path,
And where it’s taken you thus far
Cuz this is what you did,
And that is who you are.
And it’s alright.\(^{55}\)

Like the musical’s earlier reference to ‘a personal sunset…/You drive off into alone’, this closing lullaby, while delivered tenderly and without apparent irony, must be read through the complexities of *Passing Strange*. Rather than an essentialist assertion, this is an ontological statement rendered ironic through the ‘strange’ theatricality of identity in post-civil rights America.

\(^{54}\) I am referring to Baldwin’s 1949 essay ‘Everybody’s protest novel’, which accuses American literary works from Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* to Wright’s *Native Son* of being incapable of representing African-American humanity. The essay was republished in *Notes of a Native Son*, 1964, Bantam Books, New York.

\(^{55}\) Stew, *Passing Strange*, p. 100.
Passing for an author: the strange case of J. T. LeRoy

CAROLINE HAMILTON

The photograph depicts a child—perhaps nine or ten years old—with bushy brown hair and bright, dark eyes that reveal a certain strong-willed ambition. In a portrait from the mid-1970s, the child wears a T-shirt emblazoned with the words ‘I want to be me!’ (Figure 1). It is a nice sentiment and one that reflects our modern interest in authenticity and the search for self. It would be unremarkable, except to a doting parent, were it not for the fact that the child depicted here grew up to be involved in one of the most convoluted cases of impersonation in recent history. In that light, ‘I want to be me!’ begins to take on a less inspiring, more desperate tone. How startling that a message on a T-shirt—the very de rigueur location for ironic sloganeering—should be not only such a prescient indicator of future events but almost too painfully appropriate in its irony.

Jeremiah ‘Terminator’ LeRoy was the son of a truck-stop prostitute. He was pimped out by his mother, lived rough on the streets of San Francisco, recovered from heroin addiction, contracted AIDS and was in the process of transitioning from male to female. LeRoy was remarkable not only for having lived through so much while so young; more remarkably, he had overcome this adversity to become an enfant terrible, admired by the literary and entertainment industries and a legion of readers. In 1999, his first novel, Sarah, the story of a child prostitute, was published to critical acclaim; within a year, LeRoy was the darling of a hip celebrity crowd. Madonna sent him books on kabbala; Winona Ryder, Courtney Love, Billy Corgan, Shirley Manson, Liv Tyler, Carrie Fisher and Gus Van Sant all counted him as a close friend. By 2003, LeRoy had graced the cover of Vanity Fair and had been compared with some of the twentieth century’s most important cultural icons—among them Andy Warhol, William Burroughs, Jack Kerouac and Truman Capote. He not only befriended rock stars, he lived like one: LeRoy wrote lyrics for his own band; he travelled with an entourage; he had a standing rider for every gig; and he always appeared in public heavily disguised.

1 This photograph is the front cover of the Paris Review (Autumn 2006).
Figure 1
That was LeRoy’s life, but his fiction was no less sensational: his stories were a commercially savvy blend of trauma, exploitation, dysfunctional family life, sex, drugs and mysticism—all set before the background of West Virginian truck-stops, flea-pit motels and white-trash dives. Although classified as fiction, the connections between the life of the author and the content of his stories gave his work the feel of memoir. There was little doubt that his own life experiences had a major impact on his writing.

Except that LeRoy never existed. The books were written by Laura Albert, the young child wearing the T-shirt in the photograph. Albert, a forty-something woman, had spent several decades drifting around the fringes of San Francisco’s counterculture, writing stories and articles and performing music under a number of different names. The product of Albert’s imagination, ‘J. T. LeRoy’ was a literary device that, she later explained, gave her the freedom to be the real her. Writing as LeRoy, Albert drew on her experiences with sexual abuse, the punk underground, sex work and life on the streets. When, during the civil fraud trial relating to the hoax in 2007, Albert was asked to explain her actions, she testified: ‘he [LeRoy] was my channel for air. To me, if you take my JT, my Jeremy, my other, I die.’

How do we account for the identity known as J. T. LeRoy? Was it simply a case, as the civil courts found, of fraud? Is this another chapter in the long history of literary hoaxes? And what of his creator: how do we match the girl in the picture who wanted ‘to be me’ with the woman who explained LeRoy as her life source, a ‘channel for air’? This essay will argue that the J. T. LeRoy hoax demonstrates the author as a collective identity, formed by writers, readers and the publishing industry acting in concert towards a common aim. Authors are made, not born, and their construction is an attempt to make over the messy consciousness of the individual into a fixed, productive (lucrative) ideal.

The twenty-first century has been an outstanding period for hoaxes, forgeries and heists. In 2006, James Frey was exposed as having invented parts of his memoir, A Million Little Pieces. In 2009, it transpired that Love and Consequences, Margaret B. Jones’s memoir of growing up as a mixed-race, drug-running foster child in South Central Los Angeles, was the fabricated work of private school-educated, all-white Margaret Seltzer. Norma Khouri’s story of the honour killing of her best friend, as recounted in the book Forbidden Love, was a bestseller until Khouri was outed as a con by Australian journalists. The public appetite for first-person stories of suffering, torment and grief is evidenced not only by the popularity of the memoir in publishing; it can be traced to the steady

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growth of other forms of eye-witness media in our popular culture: reality television, blogs, YouTube, social networking services and even the use of newspaper headlines as inspiration for countless police procedural television shows such as *Law & Order* or *CSI*. Modern media and communications systems not only give us access to greater information about other people, they provide access to wider networks and communities with whom we might identify. This, combined with the accompanying boom in the representations of life and self in literature, media and popular culture, offers considerable freedom to live out alternative identities. In the case of the Internet, instances of online fraud are prolific. Brooke Kroeger describes cyberspace as ‘a borderless godsend for fabulists and fakers and not-so-harmless hoaxers, hustlers, and predators of every description’.⁴ Digital communication networks allow individuals to exploit the possibilities of a disembodied presence. Thomas Foster has referred to this state as a ‘tele-presence’: an existence that ‘disrupt[s] the distinction between inner and outer worlds. Virtual personae or body images become relatively more detached from any “internal fixity” or “locale”—specifically, bodies as materially bounded spaces.’⁵ Such personalities are thus able to host web sites, write blogs and communicate with online friends via instant messages and email but cannot make any claims to existence incarnate. In ‘What is an author?’, Foucault maintains that the author and the writer are different functions of the ‘plurality of self’. The author does not ‘refer purely and simply to a real individual, since it can give rise simultaneously to several selves’.⁶ The complexities of literary identity (predicated as they are on the role of the medium in conferring a new self) might be understood as a precursor to the complex identity performance made possible in the digital age. Indeed, it was the Internet that not only made the LeRoy hoax possible, but played a key role in the eventual unravelling of the mystery: the *New York Times* journalist Warren St John used images found online to verify that an impersonator was employed to play the role of LeRoy in public appearances.⁷

We are often made aware that one can pose as anyone online—‘on the internet no one knows you’re a dog’, as the famous *New Yorker* cartoon goes—and yet, there is an almost instinctive human tendency to reconstruct a tele-presence in terms of a ‘default’ physical existence. As Laura Gurak notes, ‘[d]espite a growing understanding about online communication, people still seem to have a greater expectation that on the Internet, they are communicating with a real persona of

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⁴ Kroeger, Brooke 2003, *Passing: When people can’t be who they are*, Public Affairs, New York, p. 5.
⁵ Foster, Thomas 1997, ‘“Trapped by the body”? Telepresence technologies and transgendered performance in feminist and lesbian rewritings of cyberpunk fiction’, *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 43, pp. 708–42, at p. 710.
that name’. So, while we might be more adept at identity reformation, we are also, as a consequence, more susceptible to deception. The virtual space of the Internet offers the freedom to become something other than but it also invites us to fix others in terms of our own expectations of a specific, authentic, essential identity existing somewhere out there. This was certainly the case with J. T. LeRoy.

The virtual space makes the separation of a public persona from the physical body possible and, as such, virtual presences can be understood in performative terms. Judith Butler writes in Gender Trouble of the dislocation of the public persona from the physical body, which is dramatised by gay performance styles such as drag and butch. These activities can reveal that sex and gender are not related as cause and effect and that sex and gender do not exist in one-to-one relation to each other. The LeRoy case offers a similar dramatisation: it demonstrates the performative possibilities of the identity known as ‘author’ or, following Foucault, what is known as the ‘author function’.

Despite LeRoy’s popularity and celebrity status, no-one had ever seen him out of his disguise. With her talents for improvisation and charisma, Albert handled the interest of the press and celebrities by insisting on phone, fax and email correspondence only. In this regard, she excelled—perhaps more so than with her writing. Since recluses were by no means unexpected in literary circles, LeRoy’s initial reluctance to be seen in public was not unusual. Later, the elaborate disguises were just as easily accepted on the basis of LeRoy’s floating gender identity: LeRoy talked of fear for his safety as he underwent a transformation from male to female and a more existential fear of losing himself to a hungry public. LeRoy’s revelation of his transition from man to woman, and his insistence on protecting his identity throughout the process by presenting an androgynous public front, demonstrates a very knowing ‘performative consciousness’ not unlike the enthusiastic Internet users for whom Foster coins the term tele-presence. I would argue that this obvious performative aspect of...

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9 The expectation of a real young man behind the work attributed to LeRoy was certainly reasonable although the therapists, supporters, publishers and journalists who were captivated by his story seemed remarkably complicit in the dupe. In this way, these supporters were deeply involved and invested in continuing the existence of LeRoy, even when Albert began to realise the impracticality of her creation. This scenario is given a sensitive exploration in Armistead Maupin’s novel The Night Listener, which details a case of literary hoax strikingly similar to the LeRoy case. Anthony Godby Johnson was supposedly a teenager with AIDS who endured years of childhood abuse until he was adopted by a social worker named Vicki Johnson. In the 1990s, he contacted the author Paul Monette, who was also dying from AIDS, and Monette put him in touch with editors. Maupin himself became personally involved via Monette and struck up a telephone friendship with Johnson. Eventually, after many thwarted attempts to meet Johnson, Maupin publicly voiced his suspicions that Vicki and Anthony were the same person. See Maupin, Armistead 2000, The Night Listener, Harper Collins, New York.
11 St John, ‘The unmasking of JT Leroy’.
LeRoy’s persona was designed to be ‘read’ as a cue to the greater performance taking place behind the disguise (that is, the performance of authorship). This was a reading that slipped through the cracks as LeRoy’s fame grew. Fittingly, when Barthes begins his essay on the ‘Death of the author’, he uses the motif of the cross-dresser to make his point. Examining a moment from Balzac’s *Sarrasine* in which a castrato disguises himself as a woman, Barthes demonstrates that there are multiple interpretative possibilities for the voice of this figure. How are readers to know who is speaking? Is it the character of the castrato, or the character of the woman the castrato has assumed? What of Balzac? In this example, Barthes draws a parallel between passing and writing. Both acts rely on a reader to interpret the action (the narrative) and the actor (that is, the author). The LeRoy case demonstrates how we have abdicated our work as readers/interpreters on both counts. The presumed one-to-one correspondence of sex and gender that is disturbed by cross-dressing performance is similarly troubled by LeRoy’s authorial presentation. There is a text, but the author’s gender is left floating. LeRoy in public and LeRoy in print present us with a conundrum: who speaks? Though seemingly irrelevant to the enjoyment of the work, this question is central to audiences who wish to project a physical form on to the identity of the author. Despite the confusion of one-to-one sex/gender correspondence within the figure of LeRoy as author (the woman writing as a man), there is a strong one-to-one correspondence between LeRoy’s purported real life and the content of his fiction: LeRoy’s stories feature trans-gendered boys who turn tricks to make the money that will allow them the realisation of a full female body. This was also LeRoy’s stated goal. The work of fiction and the life of the author can therefore be read as being in perfect agreement. LeRoy’s art had imitated life and now with his supposed transition from boy to girl life would imitate art.

In reality, the long blonde wig, hat and dark glasses were all part of an attempt to cloud the fact that behind the costume was a real female body, although it was not Albert’s; Savannah Knoop (Albert’s sister-in-law) took on the physical representation of the mysterious author (Figure 2). This incarnation of LeRoy was a shy, near-silent mannequin who resembled no-one so much as a hyper-white parody of late-era Michael Jackson. This embodied performance of LeRoy dramatises the breakdown of the direct relationship between authorial identity and physical writer. While Albert writes and corresponds as LeRoy, Knoop attends public readings as LeRoy (a man who wishes to appear in public disguised as a woman). *She* who writes is not *(s)he* who reads. Indeed, the physical LeRoy (Knoop) became so terrified of speaking in public as LeRoy that Albert arranged to have celebrities read from the work instead. As such, there

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never was a public he or a she, only a ‘we’. In interviews, Albert, pretending to be LeRoy’s caretaker (known by the alias Speedie), promoted this idea of LeRoy as a collective:

The whole thing for all of us is hard, cos they want everyone to say ‘Yes, it’s all a hoax, I’m terribly sorry’…Our point is it’s all useful conversation that’s about gender, identity. It’s about giving people a voice. It’s about the JT community. I’ve answered emails as JT—we’ve all answered emails as JT—if it needs to be answered…Sometimes I’ll take a photo and we’ll credit someone who’s trying to get into the industry. It’s like a big family—if you recognise an artist with a purity of intent it’s a sin if you don’t try to help them.13

Figure. 2

To another interviewer, Albert as LeRoy explained that LeRoy was intended to baffle: ‘it’s easier if people decide it’s not me, then I won’t be held down. So many people have claimed me as their own, so I guess the best thing is to confuse them all.’14

Foucault writes of the advent of authorship as ‘the privileged moment of individualization in the history of ideas’.15 Even before Albert hatched the plan to have a girl (pretending to be a boy who claimed to identify as a girl) stand

up in public and answer to the name J. T. LeRoy, readers assumed this authorial identity belonged to a real individual who had really been through many of the things about which he wrote. And yet, it was apparent from Albert’s conversations with the press and her management of LeRoy’s media appearances that she was ambivalent about keeping the complexity of LeRoy’s identity secret. While she rejected in principle the literary industry’s preoccupation with singular, fixed authorship and enjoyed confusing these expectations (‘I won’t be held down’), Albert was not ignorant of the advantages of the individualisation of the author function—not least the advantages of publicity and celebrity that came with a stable, visible identity.

**Passing for an author**

I want to argue for a consideration of J. T. LeRoy not as an elaborate hoax so much as Laura Albert’s attempt to pass as an author. Passing has enjoyed a resurgence in academic studies and, like the proliferation of identity frauds and hoaxes, interest in the individual’s negotiation of identity has broadened the field of activities that can be classified as ‘passing’.\(^\text{16}\) Passing is about the act of creating, imposing, adopting or rejecting a given identity and the way society rewards people when they do. Although often associated with performances of hegemonic race and gender identities, the phenomenon of passing has broadened in recent years to move beyond instances of racial and gender passes into less explicitly political but still socially significant cases of identity reformation. For example, plastic surgery, clothes or hairstyles might allow one to pass as younger; in the current financial climate, one might wish to pass as ‘redundant’, ‘freelance’ or ‘self-employed’ rather than simply ‘out of work’; there are also situations in which the able bodied and the healthy wish to pass as disabled or unwell.

At its most straightforward, passing is used to describe cultural performances in which individuals categorised by others as belonging to one group present themselves as belonging to another. Passing is a deception, predicated on a power imbalance that drives an individual to attempt to claim status and privilege falsely. Studies of passing have focused particularly on the political implications of pretending to be part of a privileged social subset—most often white and male. As Elaine K. Ginsberg notes in her study, passing is a movement from ‘a category of subordination and oppression to one of freedom and privilege’.\(^\text{17}\)


The most famous instances of passing have involved those who have successfully managed to convince the outside world that they are other than themselves, and in doing so are able to pass through life (at least for a time) with greater ease.

In suggesting that Albert’s inhabiting of the LeRoy persona is an attempt to pass as an author, I am conscious of the politics inherent in the term. I want to make a case for ‘authorship’ as an identity that, while not charged with the same historical legacy of oppression and abuse, can be usefully understood as a category that affords privilege and status to those who are able to use them. Ginsberg observes that ‘critical to the process and discourse of “passing” in American history and in the American cultural imaginary are the status and privileges associated with being white and male’ and, in light of the fact that whiteness and maleness remain integral to the composition of the Western canon, authorship can be understood as an identity for which one might hope to pass.

Albert’s description of LeRoy as her ‘channel for air’ suggested that the identity was not merely part of an elaborate ruse to dupe the public but rather a personal strategy for dealing with the complexities of life as Laura Albert. Albert defended her actions during the fraud trial by explaining that, with a history of sexual abuse since the age of three and a childhood of schoolyard taunts (‘Fat Albert’ had been particularly stinging), she did not want her own name. Since then Albert had adopted other names and told stories in character in an attempt to manage her distress. While she earned a living as a phone-sex operator, she occupied her spare time by calling phone help-lines for troubled youth. Incapable of speaking as herself, she used the personas of troubled teenage boys, transposing her experiences and emotions on to these characters. According to Albert, being on the phone was about being in ‘service mode’ and, whether on the sex lines or on the help-lines, she found it advantageous not only to be something other than herself, but to give people what they wanted. Through character improvisation on the phone, she told stories people wanted to hear. Clearly, identity play and performance were strong elements in Albert’s life. The other strong compulsion she had was writing. For many years, she wrote professionally under a number of pseudonyms, one of which was J. T. LeRoy.

Pseudonymous authorship is one very obvious way to make ‘a new name’ for oneself and storytelling allows an individual to create or remake a world—

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18 Ibid., p. 5.
19 Feuer, ‘At trial, writer recalls an alter ego that took over’.
20 Rich, ‘Being JT LeRoy’, p. 157. It was through phone lines too that Albert had her first experiences with writing. An aspiring punk musician, Albert found that by posing as a male music journalist she could talk to her heroes and have them treat her seriously in an environment that was often ‘hostile to girls’. Being a boy made her feel in control of the situation.
hence its popularity as part of a therapeutic process of recovery. During her phone-based therapy sessions with Dr Terrence Owens of the McAuley Adolescent Unit at St Mary’s Medical Center in San Francisco, Albert (as LeRoy) discussed writing stories. Owens encouraged LeRoy’s writing and when it became clear LeRoy had ambitions to be published, Owens offered to pass the manuscripts along to a neighbour involved in the industry. While the therapeutic dimension to Albert’s passing deserves serious consideration, the focus of this essay is the cultural boundary Albert crossed in posing as LeRoy: her unlawful entry into the category ‘author’. Bolstered by the success of the initial networking opportunities facilitated by Owens, Albert wrote as LeRoy to her heroes, the novelist Dennis Cooper and the poet Sharon Olds. Both were supportive and encouraging, offering advice and instruction. LeRoy maintained the correspondence and began to establish contact with other writers.

Like many stories of literary success, LeRoy’s big break came as a result of word of mouth, industry networking and coterie favours. Passing as LeRoy gave Albert the opportunity to inhabit an idealised authorial identity. Although she had literary ambitions, Albert feared that her real identity would be unpalatable to the literary industry and to readers. According to her estranged husband, Garry Knoop, after having made contact with author Dennis Cooper, Albert became ‘afraid he wouldn’t be interested in talking to a 30-something woman’, so she ‘decided to approach him as a teenage boy’. The LeRoy persona was constructed by Albert in an attempt to ‘pass’ as the author she was fearful she could not otherwise be. By presenting herself as LeRoy, Albert gained access to the circle of authorship that might otherwise have eluded her. Inspired by the dark, often sadistic and sexual writings of authors such as Cooper and Olds, Albert was keenly conscious that these figures would be drawn to a kindred spirit. She realised too that to be a good writer she would need to learn as much as possible from those she admired. Using LeRoy, Albert was able to develop her identity as an author, nurtured by a collection of talented professionals already well established within the literary and entertainment industries. In this respect, Albert’s passing as LeRoy gave her access to a privileged group among whom she was able to take advantage of a new-found status that provided contacts, diverse professional opportunities and eventually the trappings of celebrity. Had Albert presented herself to her literary heroes as herself, it was uncertain how many would have been interested in the work of a woman entering mid-life supposedly fantasising the grim life of a truck-stop hooker.

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Life, writing and life-writing

Of particular interest in this case—and distinct from many literary hoaxes—is Albert’s decision to create a completely alternative identity rather than claim a fabricated life story as her own; Albert created a fictional author with a fictional ‘real life’ on which the fiction produced under this name would be based. In this regard, Albert might be linked to earlier literary experiments with identity and authorship more commonly found in meta-fiction. Unlike recent high-profile cases of memoir fraud such as Frey’s or Seltzer’s, Albert did not present a series of embellished events as her own real, first-person experience—nor did she invent LeRoy to be the author of a salacious memoir. Instead, LeRoy was established from the beginning in the minds of his early champions in the publishing industry, and later in public, as a young boy with serious ambitions to write fiction. Significantly, although being recognised as ‘an author’ was very important to the Albert/LeRoy identities, it was the promise of the autobiographical within LeRoy’s stories that gave him credibility and popularity in the public eye.

The results of literary fame, and indeed all kinds of known literary classifications such as ‘the author’, are to limit multiplicity in favour of certain legitimated knowledge that adheres neatly to classifications. The public expression of being a writer is a way to simplify one’s being in order to be part of the system. The author is, according to Foucault, ‘a certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes, and chooses; in short, by which one impedes the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition, and recomposition of fiction’.23 This is one of the cruel ironies for the writer since writing might be thought of as part of the valuable work of mapping out alternative ways of understanding the self: exploring the possibilities of the drive that leads us to assert, in whatever way we choose, ‘I want to be me!’ The writer’s work offers us a way to think about our complex selves outside the usual social frameworks to which everyday life adheres. The author function reinscribes these boundaries on the work.

In her book Crimes of Writing, Susan Stewart observed that legal and technological developments in the eighteenth century brought about the notion of literature as property (belonging to an individual) and commodity (available for ownership by many individuals). One consequence of this, Stewart notes, has been an innovation in literary forms such as ‘description, compendium, fragment, and dialogue’, all of which ‘emphasize the secondary or staged quality of literary discourse’.24 Literature and, by extension, authorship must reckon

23 Foucault, ‘What is an author?’, p. 274.
with accountability along with the narrative task of ‘providing an account’. Stewart offers Hobbes’ discussion of authorship in Chapter 16 of *Leviathan* as an example of the change in thinking about the role of the author and the nature of his or her work:

A person is he, whose words or actions are considered, either as his own, or as representing the words or actions of an other man, or of any other thing to whom they are attributed, whether Truly or by Fiction…When they are considered as his own, then is he called a *Naturall Person*: And when they are considered as representing the words and actions of an other, then he is a *Feigned or Artificiall person.*

Most significant for my purposes is Hobbes’ acknowledgment of the author of fiction as a distinct type (‘representing the words and actions of an other’) and, moreover, his characterisation of the fiction author as the ‘Artificiall person’.

This was undoubtedly Albert’s preoccupation as a writer: the stories she composed under the name J. T. LeRoy engaged with the idea that classifications by gender, age, race and class were always likely ultimately to unravel, revealing the instability of such concepts. Yet, if LeRoy is to be understood as a creative experiment with authority, authorship and performativity, it must be acknowledged that it has been far from successful. In the media and publishing industries, LeRoy was marketed in reference to his autobiographical back story. Countless interviews, magazine profiles and newspaper articles asked questions about LeRoy’s gender identity, his status as white-trash southerner, as a drug addict and as a prostitute; it was only in the final months before Albert’s unveiling that LeRoy’s authorship came under any interrogation. For almost a decade, his existence as an author was taken ‘as read’. This situation demonstrates the extent to which authorship is an *assumed* identity. The meaning here is twofold: readers *assume* that when one is published and authenticated as the producer of a work one has, inevitably, classified the self—‘I wrote this, thus I am the author’. In taking on this second identity, ‘author’, the writer has *assumed* a new name. The LeRoy case simply makes these assumptions apparent. Albert’s invention of the persona of LeRoy allowed her to continue to pursue her own identity (‘I want to be me!’) while still submitting to the ‘functions’ of the industry.

Such functions are undeniably motivated by commercial imperatives. Crucial to this story is Albert’s anxiety regarding her identity as a middle-aged woman interested in a literary career. Demographically speaking, white middle-aged women are the *readers* of literary fiction and memoir *par excellence.*

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is often said that the marketable aspects of the author’s identity shape book publicity, it is perhaps truer to say, as Kate Douglas does, that it is book publicity that plays a significant role in the formation of authorship. The creation of LeRoy was influenced by Albert’s recognition of the literary networks and the requirements of a successful publishing deal: an obviously autobiographically inspired story would sell better than one that was purely imagined. Making LeRoy a street kid who knew the vernacular of that life made him more credible as a fiction writer.

While Jannah Loontjens has argued that Albert’s adoption of the LeRoy persona can be understood as an act of resistance to the literary industry’s fetishisation of memoirs about women’s trauma, I would propose that Albert’s actions are not intended to confront the literary industry so much as to capitulate. Although Albert refused to attach her own identity to her stories, her reasons were a complex mix of insecurity and calculation. Subsequent to the revelation of her authorship, Albert spoke at some length about the freedoms she enjoyed while writing as a young man: publishers and writers were interested in LeRoy because of promise of masculine authority and, she suggested, the promise of youthful sexual favours. Sensing the inferiority of her position as a woman writer and the inevitable attention her own status as a (female) victim of abuse would attract, Albert believed that the LeRoy persona was a way of giving people what they wanted. As she explained after the revelation of the hoax:

Everything you need to know about me is in my books, in ways that I don’t even understand. I think some people take it for granted to be acknowledged and not overlooked. My experience was to be completely ignored and disregarded and disdained. That’s what I write about. [And yet in my writing and in my life] something gave me hope. This hope is in the books too and of course the ultimate hope is that I can reveal myself and you won’t go away.

Ironically, it was this insecurity that accounted for LeRoy’s popularity with his champions in the media industry. In her phone and email correspondence as LeRoy, Albert placed considerable emotional demands on her interlocutors. The writer Ayelet Waldman told of LeRoy playing back taped therapy sessions over the phone. Others reported fits of crying and impassioned threats of self-harm. Carrie Fisher hosted LeRoy’s entourage while on tour in Los Angeles and Gus

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30 Ibid., p. 167; my emphasis.
Van Sant took him for an expensive business lunch. These events demonstrated the degree to which LeRoy’s celebrity supporters suspended disbelief. Paul Maliszewski, author of *Fakers: Hoaxers, con artists, counterfeitters, and other great pretenders*, posits that this degree of investment in LeRoy can be attributed to the celebrity’s benevolent wish to pass on their own good fortune and help those whose talent is belied by circumstance. LeRoy demonstrated first hand the trauma ideal: a recuperation of hard luck via celebrity and its trappings. Stephen Beachy, the journalist who first began the work of uncovering the LeRoy hoax, similarly observed:

> For all its abuse and kinky sex, the JT story is really just another heartwarming rags-to-riches tale for the punk generation. But what if America isn’t really the story of a place where a street urchin can charm his way to the top, through diligence and talent; what if instead it’s the sort of place where heartwarming stories of abused children who triumph through adversity are made up and marketed?

Interestingly, given their familiarity with spin and hype, celebrities—particularly those who had battled their own demons—were drawn to LeRoy, empathising with his attempt to transform trauma via the continual public affirmation offered by the entertainment industry. Similarly, publishers and journalists were appreciative of LeRoy’s ability to play to public tastes. LeRoy was a cardboard cut-out of southern white trash; his stories were furnished with truckers, hotel lots, Wonderbread and homemade hooch. In this regard, LeRoy was too good to be true and the publishing and media industries’ unquestioning acceptance of such stereotypes demonstrated the existence of prejudices regarding race, class and sexuality in circles that usually prided themselves on their liberal identity politics. What Chris Lehmann, reviewer at the *Nation*, observed of Seltzer’s faked memoir might just as easily be said of Albert-as-LeRoy: ‘she trafficked skilfully in lies the literary establishment desperately wants to be told.’

‘Skilful trafficking’ is itself a useful way of understanding the act of identity passing. Deft concealment ultimately ends up with the revelation not just of ‘the secret’, but of the unstable ground on which all other identities are predicated. When passers are revealed and demonised, so too anxieties about status and hierarchy are revealed within the privileged cohort. Marjorie Garber

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32 Knoop’s memoir of her time impersonating J. T. LeRoy documents her many encounters with celebrities but also covers the intensely close relationship she forged with Albert as they travelled and worked together to make up the ‘complete’ LeRoy. See, Knoop, S. 2008, *Girl Boy Girl*, Seven Stories Press, New York, p. 86.


34 Beachy, ‘Who is the real JT LeRoy?’.

has described this in terms of the ‘hegemonic cultural imaginary’ by which we ‘guard against a difference that might otherwise put the identity of one’s own position in question’.36 As with other instances of passing, Albert’s case illustrates the fragility of our common tropes of identity: if whiteness or maleness or victimhood can be performed then these identities are obviously unstable classifications. In the case of authorship, status and hierarchy are particularly delicate since the literary industry is preoccupied with its own fragility and near obsolescence. Authorship is one of the very few strategies remaining for the literary industry to guarantee its continued existence in its present mode.

In ‘Writers, teachers, intellectuals’, Barthes writes of the tension between the writer’s own sense of self and the public’s desire for a corporeal presence on which to focus their interest:

Imagine…I speak, endlessly, in front of and for someone who remains silent. I am the person who says I…I am the person who, under cover of setting out a body of knowledge, puts out a discourse, never knowing how that discourse is being received and thus forever forbidden the reassurance of a definitive image—even if offensive—which would constitute me.37

The writer occupies dual identities—personal and professional—simultaneously, placing them in a necessarily insecure space governed by acts of disclosure, secrecy or duplicity (echoing Hobbes’ ‘Artificial person’). To live this identity is to exist in a permanent state of exposure. Indeed, one might argue that all writers are passing for authors. Barthes imagines the writer’s exposure as a tragicomic slapstick scene: the writer stands at the podium pontificating while wearing a large false beard; as the lecture goes on, the beard starts to fall away; the writer presses on as if nothing is happening. By the lecture’s end, he has become nothing more than a clown, a joke, a con. This scenario, with its disguises and exposures, has shades of the whole LeRoy affair and ably demonstrates the instability of the writer’s performance as ‘the author’ and the inevitability of his disguise being caught out. This is the anxiety of the pass. It is a state of constant insecurity. To pass is to risk a slip. Just as a disguise makes an inscription on the otherwise recognisable face, so too, the reader inscribes their own impression of the author on an otherwise disembodied text. The desire to read the personal into the professional might be thought of as the inevitable slip of the reader—a corollary to the writer’s embarrassingly slipping disguise. The reader’s slip in mistaking the author for a character—or simply conflating their own experience

of the text with that of the writer’s—is a case of mistaken identity that not only complicates the question of authorship, it has the secondary effect of creating an (imagined) intimacy between reader and writer.

Barthes’ point is that writing is a complex system formulated around disclosure. Authorship is a professional requirement—a performative state, akin to acting. Little wonder then that Albert was drawn to it, or that celebrities were attracted to LeRoy. In interview, LeRoy regularly complained that the literary world seemed to be simply a different form of prostitution: everyone wanted a piece. When Barthes writes of the author’s performance, he colours his language with phrases such as ‘putting out’ and ‘exposure’. Such language signals the writer’s metaphorical relationship with social transgression: all writers are wantonly putting out and exposing themselves. The persona of LeRoy very clearly makes this case: thematically, all the stories are preoccupied with wish fulfillment for self and other, duping and performing. In Sarah, for instance, Cherry Vanilla is a truck-stop prostitute who not only passes from boy to girl, in the process s/he becomes a celebrated messiah-like figure. S/he no longer needs to turn tricks to make money, instead presiding over the truck-stop as a born-again virgin queen, revered as a truckers’ talis(wo)man. The free-floating identity and all-round adulation achieved by Cherry Vanilla are presented as a fantasy ideal that cannot last. With a prescient foreshadowing of Albert’s fate, Sarah concludes with the revelation of the boy’s true identity and his punishment at the hands of his coterie of pimps, johns and fellow working girls.

Transgression, punishment and value

When the LeRoy hoax was exposed in 2006, media coverage focused on Albert as a scheming self-promoter who cannily recognised that the persona of LeRoy would titillate readers and pave the way for unfettered access to the high life. The media particularly seized on the case, stating that hoaxes such as Albert’s and Frey’s only further demonstrated the disintegration of the publishing industry and eroded public faith in literature and authorship. Such a response neatly illustrates the reasons for Albert’s resistance to using her own name to pen the works attributed to LeRoy. The outcome of the LeRoy/Albert revelation also confirmed Foucault’s assertion that authorship served a primarily litigious function. Authorship—coming into existence at the same time as the historical construction of individuality and property rights (constructions that do not
allow for any indeterminacy of citation, origin and ownership)—Foucault writes, is required so that an identifiable subject (an author) can be punished for their transgressions.\(^\text{38}\)

Albert’s punishments were symbolic and material. In 2007, Antidote International Films, which had signed a contract with Albert’s company, Underdogs Incorporated, to transform *Sarah* into a movie, sued Albert for fraud. A jury found Albert guilty and ordered her to pay US$116,000 in damages and US$350,000 in legal fees.\(^\text{39}\) In addition, many of her original champions expressed their fury that Albert had traded on sympathy by exploiting the issues of AIDS, homelessness, drug addiction and trans-genderism. Albert’s creation of a victim identity in order to achieve fame and fortune was immoral, demeaning the experience of those who had really endured trauma. Allotting blame and questioning gullibility right up the publishing chain were the primary motivations for media reporting on the LeRoy case, yet a more profitable line of inquiry concerned the cultural attitudes that facilitated such an act of impersonation. At its most basic, Albert’s story is a strangely wrenching tale of a woman wanting to occupy the role of the author but fearful that she will not be capable of holding the interest of the industry as herself—‘the ultimate hope is that I can reveal myself and you won’t go away’.

Sadly for Albert, many of her supporters have gone away. In her 2008 interview with Albert, Nancy Rommelmann observes that if LeRoy was indeed Albert’s respirator (her ‘channel for air’), she survives today only ‘on thin air. *W* and *Vanity Fair* no longer come to call; it’s the *New York Post*.’\(^\text{40}\) Since Albert’s ‘outing’, she has been largely ignored by the literary industry. The offers to write travel stories, review albums and collaborate on film and television scripts have all dried up. Although Albert’s writing remains, her history is different. What the LeRoy case demonstrates most forcefully is that we find it extremely hard to separate a work of art from what we know, or think we know, or want to know, about its creator. What people wanted was not forty-something Laura Albert, but twenty-something Jeremy ‘Terminator’ LeRoy: street kid made good. More specifically, what they wanted was the ‘imprimatur of authenticity’ that LeRoy’s life story gave to his fiction.\(^\text{41}\) Had Albert written about her own real-life trauma she might have found commensurate success but it was her inability to bear her own pain on the page, her perception that the experiences that had inspired a middle-aged woman to dedicate her life to writing and self-expression were not

\(^{38}\) Foucault, ‘What is an author?’, p. 108.

\(^{39}\) Feuer, ‘At trial, writer recalls an alter ego that took over’.


\(^{41}\) Waldman, ‘I was conned by JT LeRoy’.
good enough for a public interested in the trauma and suffering of the young and her need to use LeRoy as a proxy that were her undoing. As Laura Barton explains:

[If JT LeRoy is not a drug-addled hobo hooker made good, we feel embarrassed because we’ve been conned, as if we paid full price for a Louis Vuitton purse only to find it was a fake? But nothing has been taken from us. The books remain: as startling and disturbingly beautiful as they ever were.42

Beachy, the investigative journalist, explains that he was prompted to think seriously about the possibility of a hoax when he reflected on how ‘stories of suffering might be used to mask other, less marketable stories of suffering’,43 and it is here that the murky complexities of human nature are exposed, and indeed illuminated, by contemporary acts of passing. Where once passing connoted the movement from the vilified to the liberated, the popularity of ‘real-life’ stories told in memoirs, homemade videos, talk-show appearances, blogs and message boards all demonstrate a revaluing of the Other. Albert herself suggests this when she explains her reliance on the LeRoy persona: ‘if you take my JT, my Jeremy, my other, I die.’44 Where once studies of passing examined those who moved from the disadvantaged to the privileged (from black to white, from female to male, from gay to straight), we now see studies of passing that reflect the new social value of being Other: passing as Native American or African American or Jewish Holocaust survivor. These instances of passing as Other are further complicated by online frauds involving support groups for the seriously ill, traumatised or grief-stricken, which dupe compassionate individuals into identification with other sufferers (or suffering Others).45

Earlier work on passing assumes that the practice allows individuals to overcome obstacles or simply have fun with their identities.46 Passing, however, is not inherently resistant to the complex systems of power that shape larger society. While individuals claim freedom to play with their identities, social forces shape these instances of everyday passing. Passing does not subvert systems of oppression but instead provides an alternative means for navigating them. Passing practices respond to the values of a given society: one passes to blend in, rather than stand out, to feel safe, to be ‘part of’ something bigger or something better. Passing is an act of intended social cohesion and it is this communal aspect

42 Barton, ‘Who’s that boy/girl?’.
43 Beachy, ‘Who is the real JT LeRoy?’.
44 Feuer, ‘At trial, writer recalls an alter ego that took over’; my emphasis.
to passing that is often overlooked as we focus our attentions on the intentions and ethics of the individual. Writing of Nella Larsen's ruinous involvement in a plagiarism scandal, Barbara Haviland observes a certain pathology in the authorial identity by which authors seek out their own likeness in others, and in so doing look to build solidarity:

Freud often claimed that there was a correlation between narcissism and a benevolent interest in the well-being of humankind (see ‘On Narcissism’). A desire for a closer connection with those like one’s (complex) self (such as Larsen felt for same-sex and same-text objects) might, under other laws and conventions, lead to community instead of catastrophe.47

I would suggest that it was this community that Albert hoped to achieve. The LeRoy persona not only gave Albert the opportunity to enter the literary circles she admired, it offered her a space in which to present her strengths and vulnerabilities among kin. So too, in Albert’s personal life, the LeRoy persona brought her into union with her sister-in-law as they shared the emotional and intellectual labour of being J. T. LeRoy. Albert told the court during her trial that the experience of being LeRoy was ‘like a trinity. We experienced it. It was as if he would leave me and enter her.’48 Albert’s description of authorship as a mystic multiplicity of selves is reminiscent of Barthes’ call for the death of the author, for the reinstatement of ‘that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing’.49 Barthes chides the modern society in which ‘[t]he explanation of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always in the end, through the more or less transparent allegory of the fiction, the voice of a single person, the author “confiding” in us’.50 His words remind readers of their own role in the formation of the author; although it would seem to follow that new practices of writing, forms of self-expression and new concepts of performative identity are likely to correlate with or perhaps even to foster a different conception of subjectivity and subject/object relations than that which sustains the classical conception of the author, recent experience shows how this has not been the case. Authors are expected to be fixed physical entities who take responsibility for the texts that are attributed to them. Both Foucault and Barthes propose that authorship ought to be understood as a ‘tool’ for the writer, consequently having little reference to reality and even less to the meaning of the literary work; yet that is rarely the way in which books are read. In the same way that the body is taken as evidence for gender identity, the named existence of an author is taken as evidence for the origin of the work. Ultimately, it is not authors but readers who must take a

48 Feuer, ‘At trial, writer recalls an alter ego that took over’.
50 Ibid., p. 148.
more active position, acknowledging their role in the formation of the author. Albert wanted attention, certainly, but she felt she had to attain it via LeRoy because LeRoy was what was wanted (by the doctors, by the publishers, by the writers).

By the time that childhood photograph was taken, Laura Albert had already decided she would rather have been anyone but herself; Albert attempted to pass for an author and in so doing erased herself. Evidently, however, she never stopped hoping that some day ‘I want to be me!’ might just be good enough: ‘the ultimate hope is that I can reveal myself and you won’t go away.’ The final sting in this whole affair is that Albert’s erasure of her own identity has been too successful: even today, after the unveiling of the hoax, it is not the writer but the author who endures. The identity of J. T. LeRoy persists more strongly than that of Laura Albert. Film-maker Gus Van Sant, who worked closely with LeRoy on the script of his 2003 film *Elephant*, told a magazine that ‘JT was a superclose friend…I would talk to him three hours a day…He became one of my anchors. [Even after the revelation of the hoax] I think I could still talk to JT, because I think he still exists.’

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51 Van Sant quoted in Rommelmann, ‘The lies and follies of Laura Albert, a.k.a. JT LeRoy’.
What passes in *Imitation of Life* (1959)?

MONIQUE ROONEY

You can’t escape what you are.¹

The above epigraph comes from Jon Halliday’s well-known interview with Douglas Sirk, the director of *Imitation of Life* (1959), and is made in reference to the condition of the racial passer in Sirk’s film. It could be said that Sirk’s line encapsulates the conservative and essentialist nature of passing-for-white stories in which the mixed-race character’s transgressive desire to escape her origins typically ends in the death of her ‘false’ (because passing) identity. Typically, in such stories, the passer either returns to her authentic identity (her pre-passing life) or is killed off in a melodramatic story that ultimately upholds social or ideological conventions. Undercutting the didacticism of Sirk’s remark, however, is the visual veracity of *Imitation of Life*’s passer, Sarah Jane. Played by the Mexican-American actor Susan Kohner, Sarah Jane looks like the white girl who, throughout the film, she repeatedly says she wants and believes herself to be. The implication of Sirk’s statement, if understood in the light of Sarah Jane’s white-looking appearance, is that who we are is not necessarily how we look.

In other parts of the interview—in which he discusses his theatre-directing and film-making career—Sirk both reinforces and challenges ontological assumptions that equate seeing with being. This is especially the case when he states that the camera sees things that the human eye cannot. Sirk’s reasoning about who and what Sarah Jane is, what she passes as, can be understood not simply in terms of the director’s philosophical understanding of the visual field but in terms of the mechanical, non-human, non-subjective view of the camera lens. As I will show in what follows, the performances of key actors/characters also exceed Sirk’s prescriptive statement given that what his film points to is the primacy of the body as visual spectacle.² In considering ‘what passes in *Imitation of Life*’, this essay highlights the ways in which *Imitation of Life*, on the one hand, knowingly replays melodramatic conventions and orthodoxies. On the other hand, it is a film that draws attention to the visual presentation of the expressive body. This body is axiomatic to melodrama, to

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passing narratives and to understandings of subjectivity itself. *Imitation of Life*, I argue, is a film in which the complexity of the body—especially when viewed through the mechanical lens of the camera—has the capacity to pass unnoticed. In this way, *Imitation of Life* can be understood as a Hollywood narrative that reminds spectators of the primary importance of the ‘seen’ at the same time as it dramatises the productive failure or expressive gaps in the medium.

In what follows, therefore, I analyse what the melodramatic passing plot conceals as much as what it exposes. The passing-for-white story is—as Sirk claims in no uncertain terms—essential to the film’s overall meaning. In the first section, drawing on Sirk’s commentary about film-making and production, I connect the racial-passing theme with what the film communicates about cinema as a primarily visual narrative form. Sirk’s discussion of the technological apparatus of film-making and his self-reflexive views on what it means to direct, especially his awareness of the difference between what he says about film-making and what his films present, suggest that what passes on screen falls outside the limits of his own, directorial vision. That is—in tension with Sirk’s statement that there is a Sarah Jane who exists prior to her passing self, that is before she attempts to escape who she is—her cinematic subjectivity is constituted *through* the mechanical lens that presents her as white. Recognition of what passes in *Imitation* therefore demands a consideration of how the camera presents bodies on screen. In *Imitation of Life*, the subjectivity of these bodies is rendered visible through categorical determinants (sex as well as race) that can only partially account for human presence. The role of the film’s under-acknowledged producer, Ross Hunter, becomes significant here, especially the part he played in casting actors who were passing for straight (most notably, Rock Hudson).³ Sirk makes two enigmatic references to Ross Hunter in the 1997 reprint of *Sirk on Sirk: Conversation with Jon Halliday*. For the original publication of this interview (1971), Sirk had asked that Halliday refrain from publishing comments he made about Ross Hunter’s homosexuality until after Hunter’s death. In the republished interview (1997), Sirk effectively outed Ross Hunter’s, and his protégé Rock Hudson’s, homosexuality. In this first section, I show how Sirk’s stated ambivalence about his producer—especially Hunter’s relationship to Hollywood actors—is doubled through the film’s representation of Lana Turner as, what Sirk calls, the film’s ‘cheap commodity’, its ‘false creation’.

In the second section, I connect Sirk’s reading of Hunter’s influence on Hudson—which can be understood as a queer-passing-for-straight plot—with uncanny parallels in *Imitation*’s (racial) passing story. The film stages racial passing as an oedipal family romance when Sarah Jane betrays her mother and follows in her surrogate mother’s footsteps to become a ‘white’ actress. In attending to the gap between the stated views of *Imitation*’s director and what the film screens—what passes in *Imitation of Life*—the third section of this essay analyses the film’s more obvious, passing-for-white drama in terms of its less spectacular plot about the intimate relationship between a black and a white woman. In this third section, I connect the spectacle of Sarah Jane’s passing with the ambivalent desires of Lora Meredith (her surrogate mother) and her conflicted love for her maid (Annie). The charged, interracial intimacy between these two women, who share a home and parent one another’s children, is integral to Sarah Jane’s desire to pass and can also be understood as a passing narrative. The passing of this female–female bond—as Sirk suggests in interview—is partly to do with Lora’s blindness to the limitations of her ambitious dreams. Repeating Lora’s ambition, and wanting to escape a black identity that feels more like a stereotype than a proper, or at least empowered, subjective position, Sarah Jane passes and, again mirroring Lora, does not herself recognise her love for Annie until the point of her death.

*Imitation’s director and producer*

*Imitation*’s director, Douglas Sirk—a German émigré whose most famous films were made with producer Ross Hunter for Universal Studios between 1950 and 1959—speaks eloquently about the role of *Imitation*’s racial passer, Sarah Jane, and makes connections between her and the ‘restless’ or ‘split’ character that he insists is so central to his cinematic oeuvre. *Imitation of Life* intertwines the lives of two different sets of characters that, placed in the same house, would normally be separated by race. Sarah Jane and her mother, Annie Johnson (Juanita Moore), live with a budding stage and screen actress who has taken the destitute pair in to her home. Lana Turner stars as the white mother (Lora Meredith) in a parallel story about mother/daughter conflict in which Lora’s only child, Susie (Sandra Dee), resents her mother’s narcissistic ambition. In the interview with Jon Halliday in which he discusses *Imitation*’s twin plots, Sirk disparages the ‘white’ storyline, the one that features the film’s star:

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The only interesting thing is the Negro angle: the Negro girl trying to escape her condition, sacrificing to her status in society her bonds of friendship, family etc., and rather trying to vanish into the imitation world of vaudeville. The imitation of life is not the real life. Lana Turner’s life is a very cheap imitation. The girl [Susan Kohner] is choosing the imitation of life instead of being a Negro. The picture is a piece of social criticism—of both black and white. You can’t escape what you are…

I tried to make it into a picture of social consciousness—not only of a white social consciousness, but of a Negro one, too. Both white and black are leading imitated lives…There is a wonderful expression: seeing through a glass darkly. Everything, even life, is inevitably removed from you. You can’t reach, or touch, the real. You just see reflections. If you try to grasp happiness itself your fingers only meet glass. It’s hopeless.5

Elsewhere, Sirk insists it is only this ‘split’ character type that interests him.6 Sirk enigmatically states that it is the ‘restless, moving energy’ of this figure that captures his attention and is central to his cinema dramas. As Sirk himself stated in interview,7 and as Elizabeth Bronfen recently argued in her Freudian reading of the film,8 this character played out a drama of irrecoverable loss that haunted Sirk throughout his career. A German Jew, who anglicised his original name, Dietlef Sierk, Sirk was separated from his son after his ex-wife—turned-Nazi banned Sirk from having any contact with him. Several years after his move to the United States, Sirk returned to Germany but failed in his attempt to find his son. His only contact with the boy, who was for a time a child actor, was by viewing him onscreen.

In other parts of the interview, however, Sirk argued that what drove his repeated melodramas that featured this character type was also his interest in narrative. He draws attention to a classic narrative structure—the deus ex machina—in order to emphasise the tensions between his directorial interest in crossing (the restless movement of the ‘split’ character or passer) as a form of ‘social criticism’ and the necessity that he comply with Hollywood genres and conventions. The following is worth quoting at length for it articulates a dramatic structure that forms the basis of many of his films and, in particular relation to Imitation of Life, facilitates his screening of a multilayered, passing, story. Elaborating on his interest in the French term échec (literally meaning blocked, no exit), Sirk draws attention to how melodrama can simultaneously expose and conceal its own intentions:

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5 Halliday, Sirk on Sirk, pp. 148–51.
6 Ibid., pp. 112, 133.
7 Ibid., p. 156.
I’m not interested in failure in the sense given it by the neo-romantics who advocate the beauty of failure. It is rather the kind of failure which invades you without rhyme or reason—not the kind of failure you can find in a writer like Hofmannsthal. In both *Written on the Wind* and *The Tarnished Angels* it is an ugly kind of failure, a completely hopeless one. And this, again, is why the concept of *échec* is so good: there is no exit. All the Euripidean plays have this no exit—there is only one way out, the irony of the ‘happy ending’. Compare them with the American melodrama. There, in Athens, you feel an audience that is just as happy-go-lucky as the American audience, an audience that doesn’t want to know that they could fail. There’s always an exit. So you have to paste on a happy ending. The other Greek tragedians have it, but with them it is combined with religion. In Euripides you see his cunning smile and his ironic twinkle.

That is where the flashback comes in. In *Written on the Wind*, as in *Summer Storm*, you start with an end situation. The spectator is supposed to know what is waiting for him. It is a different type of suspense, or anti-suspense. The audience is forced to turn its attention to the how instead of the what—to structure instead of plot, to variations of a theme, to deviations from it, instead of the theme itself. This is what I call the Euripidean manner. And at the end there is no solution of the antitheses, just the *deus ex machina*, which today is called the ‘happy ending’.

Sirk’s linking of the populist Hollywood form to a classic tradition reaching back to Euripides was telling in relation to the films he made for Universal Pictures—an oeuvre that he himself stated was part melodrama, part ironic ‘social criticism’. Sirk’s reading of melodrama here is of a form with a rich, intellectual history that, he also insists, is necessarily formulaic (that is, it is a genre driven towards the ‘happy ending’) and open to multiple readings (that is, Sirk’s comment that the audience is expected to turn attention to the hidden meaning—the how instead of the what—implies that the director deliberately plays with audience expectation and sets up an open-ended conclusion). Ironically, however, in other parts of the Halliday interview, Sirk dismisses some of the most formulaic elements of his melodramas, as well as his use of Hollywood stars such as Lana Turner and Rock Hudson who, unlike the restless passer, are described as cheap imitations or frozen caricatures. As if undercutting his reading of melodrama as Euripidean, and his association of American with Athenian audiences, Sirk states that his compliance with Hollywood forms—including casting stars—is just an act of empty commodification. Compromise with the Hollywood dream machine was a necessary evil, Sirk implied, that enabled him to smuggle in

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more controversial content. The double meaning of his film *All That Heaven Allows* (1954) speaks directly to Sirk’s love of both cliché and its failure—that is, cliché’s opposite. ‘The studio loved this title,’ Sirk told Halliday, ‘they thought it meant you could have everything you wanted. I meant it exactly the other way round. As far as I am concerned, heaven is stingy.’

The narrative logic that Sirk here uncovers—one that allows for different kinds of reading and that contains but also conceals its more radical elements—is also a feature of passing narratives. Passing stories, as I have argued elsewhere, articulate socio-cultural conditions but also the possibilities and limits (the *échec*) of narrating or representing a socially transgressive identity. The passing narrative’s dramatisation and punishment of a potentially dangerous social crossing point to the contingent, and necessarily unstable, nature of all narrative or meaning-making processes. In this way, I argue, stories of passing articulate how narrative is conditioned by the lived reality on which it is based. At the same time, the passing story draws attention to the artificiality of its own narrative formula as one that raises the possibility of social transgression but ultimately capitulates to the set of ideologies or social rules that shape it. It has often been argued that stories of passing, while potentially transgressive in that they enable questioning of the ‘status quo’, are ultimately conservative in their conformity to social and aesthetic scripts. The subversive possibilities of passing are numerous—as a crossing of too-rigid borders, such as the ‘color line’ in the pre-civil rights United States; passing can provide relief from oppression, can enable greater opportunity or it can simply evoke the thrill of movement itself. Like the act, the story of passing contains radical, even revolutionary elements, as it can draw attention to the experience of oppression, to discrimination or to the desire to live as your own opposite. As Sirk observes in relation to melodrama, however, popular narrative must follow a conventional (ostensibly safe) formula.

Likewise, the passing story might be said to fail as a revolutionary or subversive plot in that it ultimately eliminates he or she whose crossing threatens the status quo. On the other hand—as in Sirk’s indication that there is more than one way of reading a formulaic structure—passing stories also contain structural elements that can be too easily ignored or passed over. For instance, while the passing story ultimately eliminates transgression with a ‘happy’ (ideologically safe or predictable) ending, it also often includes the spectre of other, often minor, passers whose trajectories are not always fully narrated or explained.

10 Ibid., p. 140.
This is the case in Nella Larsen's canonical novella *Passing* (1929), in which the racial passer, Clare Kendry, returns to the black community from which she has crossed over to live as a white woman. Clare's return poses a threat. Having crossed the colour line, she has been living in virtual exile from friends and family. Her return therefore flirts with exposure itself (the narration or representation of passing) and this poses a particular danger to Irene Redfield, her friend who enjoys the thrill of occasional passing (the novel opens with Irene drinking tea in Chicago's exclusive Drayton Hotel—a place restricted to whites only). Following the formula of passing narratives, Clare is killed off in the denouement. While there has been much commentary on what Clare's death means vis-a-vis race politics, readers have been less interested in Irene's unexplained fate and the importance of her survival. To notice Irene's passing survival is to attend to the how of the narrative. It is to remember that Irene plays an essential role as a temporary passer and, importantly, it is to see the essence of her structural role as the narrative focaliser whose recognition of Clare facilitates the story.

This narrative structure—which elucidates the role of the double (the reader and the writer) in storytelling—forms the basis of Sirk's *Imitation of Life*. Sirk's 1959 film is based on a 1933 novel of the same name, written by Fannie Hurst, whose subsequent screenplay was directed by John Stahl for the original, 1934 film. It was producer, Ross Hunter's, idea to remake the original film, one that Sirk found overly sentimental and out of step with the changing race politics of the 1950s. While he retains the original story of an African-American girl who attempts to pass for white, Sirk changes some plot details for a 1950s context and undercuts the melodramatic story with ironic humour and self-conscious filmic twists that can be read as a commentary on 1950s race and cinema culture. Sirk's version was released only two years after a racist code was overturned that banned interracial romance on screen. Here the relation between the passer as onscreen character and passer as off-screen actor speaks to a history of racial appropriation in Hollywood history (white actors presenting as blacks).13

Susan Kohner—the daughter of Mexican actress Lupita Tovar and Hollywood producer Paul Kohner—plays the mixed-race daughter (Sarah Jane Johnson). In performing this part, Kohner effectively passes as an African American who passes for white. Of course, the audience does not necessarily know that Kohner is not black. The question of whether or not audiences recognise this extra-diegetic passing narrative is partly the point. Cast as a white-looking passer who is cast as the daughter of an inescapably black-looking mother (Juanita

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Moore as Annie Johnson), Kohner performs a masquerade of a masquerade. To unmask her passing performance, in other words, is to find another mask, another passing role.

In these ways, Sirk’s film draws attention to the industrial processes of filmmaking—particularly the way in which images simulate and reproduce but can also distort real life—and one of the ways it does this is through its reflection on the role of actors. For instance, when Sirk says that ‘Susan Kohner, a complete beginner in pictures, steps forward putting Turner and [John] Gavin in the shade’, he is deliberately subverting the Hollywood star system and its maintenance of power and race hierarchies. His argument, quoted earlier, that Sarah Jane’s role is the only ‘real’ aspect of the film also speaks to this. As Imitation’s restless shape-shifter, who travels further (metaphorically and literally) than any other member of her mixed-race family, Sarah Jane plays a crucial role in articulating the film’s unresolved tensions (racial, sexual, familial, generic, cinematic). As already stated, Sirk identified strongly with this figure and she could also be understood as a key figure in his subversion of accepted ideologies—the raison d’être of his melodramatic oeuvre. What then is to be made of his dismissal of Lana Turner’s role as Lora Meredith? Stating that the film ‘could not have been sold without Lana Turner’,14 Sirk argued that she had only one good line in the film—

when she says ‘No!’ , when the negro woman [her maid] dies. This is the best thing Lana Turner does, saying that ‘No!’—because she is nothing. She was very good in Imitation of Life, because she wasn’t supposed to be a successful actress, or a particularly good one, and so she comes out rather well, plain minded. All her life is tied up with this negro woman, about whom she really knows nothing; and so when the negro woman dies, Lana is left completely empty.15

It is worth remembering that this view of Turner is placed in the context of Sirk’s stated views about the necessarily formulaic, melodramatic form. Given his love of the playful, Euripidean dramatist who is watching on with a twinkle in his eye, it seems foolhardy to take Sirk’s dismissive words here at face value. In other parts of the interview, Sirk also states that through film-making he has learned to trust images rather than words. ‘The camera sees with its own eye,’ he says to Halliday, ‘it sees things the human eye does not detect.’16 Sirk’s belief in the veracity of images—and the mechanics of production—also undercut

14 Halliday, Sirk on Sirk, p. 153.
15 Ibid., p. 153.
16 Ibid., p. 99.
pejorative remarks he made about his producer, Ross Hunter, to suggest that both the ironic and the melodramatic (the imitative) aspects of the film were essential to its overall meaning.

‘I was hampered by Ross Hunter,’ Sirk claims in the Halliday interview.17 Likewise, the cultish focus on Sirk (interest in Sirk has grown since the 1970s, alongside the rise of film studies as a discipline)18 has tended to overshadow Hunter’s importance as producer of Sirk’s most famous films. This is despite the fact that, at the peak of Hunter’s career, journalists wrote about him as if he were the director of his own films.19 A producer who ‘had his finger on a certain pulse in America’,20 Hunter introduced Sirk to Rock Hudson, who starred in two of Sirk’s most celebrated films, Magnificent Obsession and Written on the Wind. It was also Hunter who wanted Lana Turner for the role of Lora Meredith and who insisted on the ‘weepie’ angle: ‘He was always coming to me and saying, “Doug, Doug, make them weep!”’.21 Sirk’s attribution of the film’s most melodramatic elements to Hunter is significant given that, in the Hollywood milieu, Hunter developed, as William J. Mann has written, a reputation as a producer of ‘old-style’ sentimental films and light comedy. ‘Critics said he was to movies,’ Mann writes, ‘what Liberace was to music: overblown, artificial, playing to sentiment.’22 David Ehrenstein discussed Hunter’s reputation in terms of his cloistered homosexuality, which circulated in Hollywood as a ‘singular’ identity—for instance, he once publicised his intention to marry Nancy Sinatra, an ‘intention that never reached fruition’.23 Hunter was making films at a time when the studios were competing with television and adapting to other cultural shifts and Mann read his living out of a closeted, gay sensibility in terms of this yearning for a bygone era. ‘I don’t want to hold up a mirror to life as it is,’ said Hunter to an interviewer, ‘I just want to show the part which is attractive.’24 In the 1997 reprint of Sirk on Sirk, however, the director makes the following, candid remark about the producer:

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17 Ibid., p. 106.
18 The groundswell of critical and experimental interest in Sirk is said to begin with Jon Halliday's original published interview with the director, published in 1971. This was soon followed by a film festival and a collection of influential essays on the director: Mulvey, Laura and Willemen, Paul (eds) 1972, Douglas Sirk, Edinburgh Film Festival, Edinburgh. The latter includes an essay by Rainer Werner Fassbinder, the avant-garde director whose style is strongly influenced by Sirk. For Sirk's impact on critical film scholarship and institutionalised readings of Hollywood melodrama, see also Laura Mulvey's more recent essay, 'Social hieroglyphics: reflections on two films by Douglas Sirk' (Fetishism and Curiosity, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1996, pp. 29–39).
20 Halliday, Sirk on Sirk, p. 106.
21 Ibid., p. 106.
22 Mann, Behind the Screen, p. 350.
24 Ibid., p. 129.
I sometimes think Ross Hunter played a part in pushing Rock towards being homosexual. At first, Rock seemed to me to lie near the middle of the sexual spectrum, but when he met up with Ross, that was it. The studio had a heck of a time trying to hide Rock’s sexuality.\(^\text{25}\)

Sirk’s outing of a homosexual passing narrative here—one that implicates Hunter and Hudson—is in tension with the director’s stated views about the way Hunter’s production methods hindered his own approach. It also shed a different light on his view of Rock Hudson (and, by association, Lana Turner) as an actor who was such a Hollywood caricature that he was unable to play one of the ‘split’ characters that so interested Sirk.\(^\text{26}\) More importantly, it suggests that Sirk follows the antithetical method he evokes in his discussion of melodrama—that is, the gap between Sirk’s stated and his real meaning is also conveyed through the gap between his comments about film-making and what there is to be read in his most important film, *Imitation of Life*.

‘What is love?’: *Imitation* as a family romance

Recognition of Sirk’s playful, double meaning thus informs my reading of *Imitation’s* dual plot and its hybrid, generic structure. The opening credits of *Imitation* stage the film’s marriage of sentimental ‘weepie’ with ironic distance. Accompanying the credits is the *Imitation of Life* song, which—like a Greek chorus—didactically rehearses the melodramatic plot before it has even begun:

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\begin{align*}
\text{What is love without the giving?} \\
\text{Without love you’re only living} \\
\text{An imitation, an imitation of life} \\
\text{Skies above in flaming color,} \\
\text{Without love, they’re so much duller} \\
\text{A false creation, an imitation of life.}\text{27}
\end{align*}
\]

The words of this song introduce Sarah Jane’s plight as passer—the character who, as Sirk says, chooses the artificial life when she abandons her mother to pass for white. This imitation life—a life lived without love—is presented not only through the song but through an image on screen that is ‘falsely created’. As the credits roll, the audience views an image of diamonds slowly dropping to form a cluster, creating a simulation of a cellular structure (Figure 1); the image is similar to that seen when looking at a blood sample through a microscope. This reference to the microscopic, which is invisible except through a certain

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\(^{26}\) Ibid., p. 112.

\(^{27}\) Film quotes are taken from the complete film script reprinted in Fischer, *Imitation of Life*, p. 43.
kind of lens, could be said to be ‘false’ in that it uncovers a world not otherwise visible to the human eye. The diamonds also look like falling drops of water—an image that perhaps pays homage to the ‘weepie’, the melodramatic genre in which the expensive jewel represents the commodity of female display (and Ross Hunter allegedly spent more than $1 million on real diamonds for Lana Turner’s costuming).28 Through this opening—and remembering Sirk’s comments about how the camera sees what the human eye cannot—the film-makers seem to point to the inadequate function that words and images play as supplements that pass for the presence of real actors in real time.

Figure 1

The disjunction between word and image—‘the false creation’, the ‘imitation of life’—in the opening credits thus carries with it a sense of melancholic loss. This loss can be understood—not only in the light of Sirk’s tragic experience or of Hunter’s nostalgia for the past—in terms of the antithetical structure, that uneasy union of opposites, that is essential to melodrama. This antithesis is also evident in the first scene of the film, a scene that again presents the human form as a spectacle able to be distorted. After the credit sequence, there is an extreme long-shot that pans over a seascape, at the end of which is Coney Island (where a carousel turns) and a mass of anonymous bodies is viewed in the distance. The out-of-focus bodies blur against the backdrop of sand and water, like distant

shapes in an impressionist painting (Figure 2) as the mise en scène again draws attention to the effect of the camera on its filmed object. The next shot is a close-up of movement on the boardwalk. At this point, Lana Turner enters as Lora Meredith, a woman whose ambition to be a stage actress separates her from her role as mother. The first shot of Lora is not of her face but of her legs, pictured hurrying along the boardwalk. Dissociated from the face—the site *par excellence* of emotional melodrama—the legs stand in for both sexuality and everyday domesticity: two shopping baskets brush up against sheer stockings as the camera again fragments the human subject through representation of the bodily part.

This inverse sequence of legs before face is also appropriate for the introduction of Lana Turner as Lora Meredith who, as Richard Dyer writes, is celebrated not so much for her face as for her ‘sexy-ordinary’ persona as the 1950s ‘sweater girl’. When the first piece of dialogue is heard, it is also dissociated from the part that speaks it, as the camera remains focused on the legs and a frantic voice is heard calling out ‘Susie, Susie’. Panicking in her search for her lost child, who has disappeared among the swarming crowd on the beach, Lora (as many critics have noted) is pictured here as castrated mother who is separated from her loved one.

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30 For an exemplary reading of the film as an examination of the costs of motherhood, see Marina Heung’s ‘“What’s the matter with Sarah Jane”: daughters and mothers in Douglas Sirk’s *Imitation of Life*’ in Fischer, *Imitation of Life*, pp 302–24.
The next scene stages the reconciliation between white mother and child as Lora meets Annie Johnson, who has found the child, on the crowded beach pictured in the opening. It is in this scene that Lora first meets Sarah Jane and is the first to (mis)read her white appearance. Lora not only assumes Sarah Jane is a white child, she assumes Annie is her nanny rather than her mother. In this primal scene, Lora is like the blinded father of the Oedipal drama. She stereotypes the black woman as only supplementary mother who rears children for the white woman (and by extension for the white race) only. At the same time, Lora sets in chain a repetition of the Oedipal drama—in which she plays a symbolic role—when she agrees to take Annie and Sarah Jane into her home.

This primal drama continues into the next sequence. While Lora and Annie talk—sharing their brief, personal histories—Sarah Jane and Susie race recklessly around the beach in joyful play. They overturn umbrellas and disclose private moments (including a pair of lovers entwined in one another's arms) to the glare of the public and cinematic gaze. Here, the audience is reminded of the liminality of objects—the umbrella, like the passer's skin, which keeps distinctions between private and public, interior and exterior in place. When the children place a beer can on a sleeping man's bloated stomach, they laugh as the can floats up and down in comical synchronisation with the man's breathing (Figure 3). The violence the man unleashes when he wakes to find he is the object of a joke seems suddenly out of place in the leisurely beach setting: 'I oughta knock your blocks off.' Meanwhile, Steve Archer (a photographer and Lora's love interest, played by John Gavin), who has been trailing and taking snaps of the glamorous mother since she first appeared on the boardwalk, captures the moment (the man with the beer can). In another moment of misrecognition, the woken man assumes Steve is the children's father and abuses him for not keeping 'these brats in line'. Embracing the moment as an opportunity to become romantically involved, Steve immediately falls into a conventional role by blaming the mother for her lack of attention: 'No use talking to her—she not only spoils them, she goes around losing them.' If Sarah Jane's desire to pass is—as Sirk claims in the interview with Halliday—an imitation of life then it is one that is inaugurated by Lora Meredith. Like the symbolic white father who is blind to his part in the plot, Lora misrecognises the black child as white and the photographer (arguably a stand-in for the director, Sirk, himself) blames the white woman for this misreading.
The film’s representation of passing via the Oedipal family romance also occurs in a scene in which Annie witnesses her daughter passing for white. When she discovers that Sarah Jane has been lying—she is not doing her job of reclassifying books at the public library—Annie tracks her down at ‘Harry’s club’, where she is performing as a burlesque dancer. Here, the parallel between library reclassification and Sarah Jane’s reinvention of herself as white relays the film’s own generic inventiveness. In this scene, Annie not only sees her daughter barely clad and dancing in front of old, white men, she sees her betraying her race by passing as white. As Sarah Jane dances, she sings a song that articulates the film’s Oedipal (incest) plot. The song Sarah Jane sings is about her identification with white culture as the lost father:

> The loneliest word I’ve heard of is ‘empty’
> Anything empty is sad
> An empty purse can make a good girl bad
> You hear me dad?\(^{31}\)

As she mimes these words, Sarah Jane performs the ritualistic moves of the striptease. The stylised performance, combined with the directness of the message, proclaims prostitution as a lack (an ‘empty purse’). At the same time, the dance re-envelops the threatened exposure (Figure 6).

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\(^{31}\) Fischer, *Imitation of Life*, p. 130.
In his essay on the striptease, Roland Barthes argues that the act of undressing (exposure) is invested with the fear of death. Describing the way the stripper rarely stands fully naked as she surrounds herself with props and performs a ritual, which detracts from her lack of ‘hidden depth’, Barthes finds that the stripper transports herself from the present into a world of romance, whether that be the ‘Chinese woman equipped with an opium pipe’ or ‘an undulating vamp with a gigantic cigarette holder’.32 Dressed in a brief black costume, wearing fishnets and a rich-green feather skirt, Sarah Jane’s routine similarly covers the threatened exposure. Her sexuality is here in marked contrast with Lora’s, who, at this stage in the drama, has succeeded in becoming a stage actress and has been shown, in the previous sequence, on a pastoral stage in a Little Bo Peep outfit. In both scenes, Sarah Jane’s and Lora’s theatrical roles are triangulated through Annie, who is pictured on the sidelines, watching Lora as well as Sarah Jane on stage. In the scene in which Annie watches Sarah Jane’s passing act, the exotic costume of lurid green feathers and black sequins makes a shiny contrast with Sarah Jane’s white skin and black hair, as the camera moves in a triangular direction from Sarah Jane to the laughing men to the image of Annie, who is screened from Sarah Jane’s view.

While the men leer at Sarah Jane’s ‘empty’ performance, Annie is reading Sarah Jane’s disavowal of race, which is also her daughter’s betrayal of her. The dispossessed black mother of American slave history has, as Hortense Spillers argues, been both marked and hidden, representing ‘a locus of confounded identities’, a ‘meeting ground of investments and privations’.33 In this scene, therefore, it is also Annie who is the ‘empty purse’ and whose illegitimate desire for possession—her claiming of a daughter she ultimately loses—is negated through her attempt to become a spectator of her daughter’s newly found identity. The ‘empty purse’ not only suggests the absent father who has stolen Sarah Jane—through that inaugurating misrecognition—it evokes Annie’s role as unpaid servant to her mistress, Lora, the substitute mother who not only grows more wealthy and famous as Annie sickens and grows old but who re-mothers Sarah Jane after Annie’s death.

In tension with this drama of dispossession—in which Annie’s only subject position is as the ‘real’ or authentic but disempowered mother—is another sequence that suggests her bond with Lora. The sequence begins with Sarah Jane waiting for her white boyfriend, Frankie, as she attempts to pass in a potentially transgressive scene of miscegenation. As stated earlier, Hollywood had only recently changed a code that banned any screening of sexual contact between black and white. In the scene opening, Sarah Jane waits outside a shop, where the sign ‘For rent’, clearly posted in the window, aligns her passing act with prostitution. When Frankie arrives, he aggressively confronts her about

her ‘black’ mother. The mirroring of Sarah Jane’s desperate face—it is shown in the reflection of the shop window—connects her transgressive passing act with the filmic theme of imitation (Figure 4). The closing image of Sarah Jane is of her lying deserted in a pool of water, having been beaten by Frankie. This is accompanied by the loud, chaotic sounds of jazz music to suggest that miscegenation—a tragic meeting between black and white—exposes only primal violence.

This scene of heterosexual miscegenation as violence, which is punctuated by Sarah Jane’s guttural screams, is immediately followed by a scene in which Lora expresses pleasure in a moment of physical indulgence with Annie. Richard Dyer observes that, as Lora’s success and wealth increase, she is costumed in a way that accentuates her hardness (remembering, too, that Sirk refers to her in interview as one of a number of ‘immovable’ characters/actors).34 Dyer argues that, in contrast with an actor such as Judy Garland, ‘who hangs on her acting partner’s every word’, ‘Turner’s beautifully made up face moves very little and she does not even always look at her partner’. The ‘clear cut edges’ and ‘geometrical patterns’ of her costuming in the second half of the film reinforce this mannequin-like quality.35 As she reclines on a sofa and chats to Annie, however, she becomes for a moment a tactile body (‘Mm, that felt so good!’). This scene—in which the bond between Annie and Lora passes as non-threatening sentimentality and maternal concern—seems to partially recover the brutal violence of the previous scene in which Sarah Jane’s masquerade is exposed. Here, Lora and Annie talk to one another knowingly about their children but they also stumble unconsciously over their misread needs. The conversation ends, however, with Lora again misunderstanding Annie’s needs. Like the scene between Sarah Jane and Frankie, the exchange between Annie and Lora involves commodification as Lora tells Annie she will be looked after:

Annie: The years are flyin’. I’m getting’ old.
Lora: You never sounded so solemn before. Don’t you feel well, Annie?
Annie: Oh, just a little tired.
Lora: Do you need anything? Any money?
Annie: No, Miss Lora. Thanks to you, I’m well fixed…I’ve plenty to send Sarah Jane to college, and something to set aside for her, and enough for my funeral.
Lora: Oh Annie, that funeral again.36

34 Halliday, *Sirk on Sirk*, p. 112.
36 Fischer, *Imitation of Life*, p. 120.
Annie’s death is, of course, the one factor of her life that ‘Miss Lora’ cannot own or control. As Annie mentions her impending death—and in a direct parallel with the previous mirroring of Sarah Jane as she is exposed by her lover—Lora’s image is shown in the mirror. This image of Lora, which replaces a direct image of her response to Annie, seems to perform Lora’s inability to recognise one of Annie’s few stated desires. Annie’s desire, in turn, is directed not towards Lora but to the ‘judgment day’ and an ostentatious funeral. The mirror image of Lora that ends this scene matches Annie’s death drive as Lora’s own narcissistic drive—the pursuit of her own image—is revealed to be as deathly as the prospect of losing Annie (Figure 5).

Going up and up and up…

Lora’s artificial performance, and her synthetic costuming, displays the distance between her role as successful actor and Annie’s role as domestic labourer. As she becomes more successful and wealthy, Lora’s expensive costuming constrains her body. Through this imaging of Lora as a tightly packaged commodity, the film self-consciously refers to its own complicity in the marketing and dehumanising of the human body; it reinstates the ‘imitation of life’ it also wants to critique. This is evident in an early scene in which Lora models for an advertising agency selling flea powder. Lora’s involuntary sneezing upsets the shoot and irritates
the photographers who want her in a statuesque pose. The photographers frame the shot against a blank wall, screening out a nearby window through which can be seen an industrial landscape of trains and skyscrapers.

As Judith Butler argues, the film draws attention to its own industrial history through such references to photography in both the plot structure and the mise on scène. This self-referential attention to cinema’s own production processes also enables an exploration of the movement of the commodity (including the star as marketable object) in late industrial society. A good example of this is in another early scene when Lora rejects Steve (the photographer on the beach) and his marriage proposal. When Steve accuses her of selfishly following an unreal dream, Lora responds by attacking his career as a photographer, characterising it as unambitious and mechanical. She refers back to the earlier scene on the beach:

What’s a snapshot of a disgusting old man with a beer can on his belly? Is that your idea of achieving something? Is a beer can real? Going up and down up and down! Well I’m going up and up and up and nobody’s going to pull me down!

If the photograph is a snapshot—a frozen moment of real life—it is described here as if the subject is still breathing and moving within the frame: ‘going up and down up and down.’ Of course, the irony here is that Lora is herself a filmed object and subject to the mechanical, sequential passage of the movement-image. Lora is blind to her place in the contiguous flow of frozen images that enables her own succession to fame. Obsessed with her mirror image, Lora cannot see how her performance on stage and screen commodifies, mechanises and constrains her life. When Lora insists on her own ascension (‘I’m going up and up and up’), she repeats the symbolic role of the father in the Oedipal romance—a figure whose symbolic power allows his detachment from the scene of familial construction. Yet, even this star actor—*Imitation of Life* seems to suggest—is no more than a passing object.

In contrast with Lora’s blindness to her own image production, Sarah Jane and Annie come together in a final scene of momentary recognition. This moment is, however, as deathly for Annie as her funeral is for Sarah Jane. After Sarah Jane leaves Annie for the final time, telling her mother that she must not stand in the way of her dream of becoming white, Annie tracks her daughter down at the Moulin Rouge in Hollywood where she is passing for white and performing as a showgirl. Filmed in the real location, the shot shows Sarah Jane as a chorus girl in a burlesque routine. Although she has imitated Lora’s career path, Sarah

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Jane’s is low down in the entertainment world hierarchy. She is shown reclining on a chair that moves up and down in a chain of chairs that circulates the stage—carousel-like—on a conveyor belt. As she rocks up and down in time with the other dancers, Sarah Jane manipulates a bottle in a mock pouring of champagne—an act that again imitates Lora and her hours of cocktail parties with industry associates. The carousel movement and the champagne bottle are reminders of the opening beach scene. Like the image of the man with the beer can, Sarah Jane submits herself to ritualised commodification (Figure 7).

![Image](image-url.com)

Figure 7

Annie finds Sarah Jane in her motel room, after briefly viewing this passing act (Figure 8). Spotted watching her daughter, Annie is made to leave the auditorium as the black woman’s illegitimate spectator’s desire is policed in the whites-only club. In this context, Annie’s final words to a protesting Sarah Jane—who again requests that she leave and never try to find her again—are disarming: ‘I’ll only stay a minute. I just want to look at you. That’s why I came.’39

The desire ‘to look’ at Sarah Jane is almost illicit here. It articulates the older woman’s narcissistic desire to see her own reproduction. This is, however, the scene in which Annie also must recognise her daughter’s betrayal of her and her race. Courageously, however, Annie refuses to concede that race is her truth when she herself puts on a performance for her daughter’s sake.

When Sarah Jane’s white friend interrupts their last, intimate moment, Annie puts on her most servile voice and tells her that she is ‘Miss Linda’s’ mammy. It is Annie’s sacrificial moment that makes Sarah Jane most cognisant of her loss.

39 Ibid., p. 139.
*Imitation of Life* contains an implicit critique of Lora/Lana as the commodity-object who disavows her ‘cheap’ objectification. As imitator of this figure, however, the passer, Sarah Jane—whose masquerade is necessarily exposed—ultimately faces this truth as well as the mechanics of her own crossing from life to celluloid. That is, she faces the falsity of her own self-production. Sirk’s dismissal of Lana Turner as merely a ‘cheap imitation’ thus speaks to the mechanisms of the passing narrative as a storyline that narrates the costs of crossing over or of taking up a powerful, social position—the ‘success’ that Sirk believes is underpinned by *échec*, or failure. Through this narrative, the film contains a subversive critique of the Hollywood star system and its complicity in maintaining social hierarchies and racial distinctions.

All the same, it is hard not to read Sirk’s criticism of Lana Turner as a cheap shot and in tension with his comments about the classic structure of melodrama, a form that he argues is based on the *combination* of opposites—that is, *both* the ‘imitative’ and the ‘real’, the formulaic and the subversive. Sirk talks in interviews about his suspicion of authoritarian or totalitarian systems as a legacy of his experience of Nazism. In the following quote, Sirk pays homage to the director’s vision at the same time as he deconstructs it:

> The angles are the director’s thoughts. The lighting is his philosophy. Even to this extent: long before Wittgenstein, I and some of my
contemporaries learned to distrust language as a true medium and interpreter of reality. So I learned to trust my eyes rather more than the windiness of words.40

When Sirk states that he has ‘learned to trust’ his eyes, he is perhaps pointing to one of the governing structures of melodrama whereby the audience believes the words of the chorus rather than what they have seen unfold on screen. In the case of *Imitation*, audience expectation of a happy ending is partly met when Sarah Jane renounces passing and returns to her mother, albeit too late. The final scene—a long-distance view of a funeral procession through the clouded window of an antique shop—suggests that all vision is partial, we can see only through a ‘glass darkly’. Elsewhere, in interview, Sirk downplays his words and refers to the partial nature of his own vision when he states that ‘the camera sees with its own eye. It sees things the human eye does not detect. And ultimately you learn to trust your camera.’41 Such a comment contradicts the idea that Ross Hunter, the figure responsible for the film’s production and assemblage, hindered his vision. Or, rather, it suggests that the limitation or ‘blocking’ of a vision—one that is too wrapped up in its own singularity or autonomy—is, literally, Sirk’s *échec* and that this is essential to *Imitation of Life*’s ‘real’ meaning.

![Image](image_url)

**Figure. 9**

The words of *Imitation*’s chorus (‘What is love without the giving/Without love you’re only living’) prefigure the final scene of the film. This scene stages Sarah Jane’s dramatic return and renunciation of passing when she breaks through the funeral crowd and throws herself on her mother’s coffin. Inconsolable, Sarah Jane grasps the coffin and cries for a black mother she has found too late: ‘I wanted to come home. Now she’ll never know how much I wanted to come home.’ As she is pulled away by Lora, Sarah Jane joins a

41 Ibid., p. 99.
now reconfigured heterosexual family (made up of herself, Lora, Steve and Susie) as ‘I wanted to come home’ inverts the passer’s earlier desire to escape her mother (Figure 9). The passer’s ‘happy ending’ is, in this case, an escape from race, as it entails her reconciliation with a ‘white’ family. On the other hand, this ending stages the passer’s surrender to a narrative formula—the sentimental ‘coming home’ of melodrama—which she had previously been intent on crossing. In doing so, she perhaps momentarily recognises her objectified role on the cinema screen. In this passing moment, it is the director’s words, ‘you can’t escape who you are’, that appear to lie, for they renounce the veracity of Sarah Jane’s whiteness as her image, her ‘false creation’.
Mary Carleton’s false additions: the case of the ‘German Princess’

KATE LILLEY

Mary Moders Carleton aka Henrietta Maria de Wolway, the ‘German Princess’ (1635–73), was the subject of a sensational trial at the Old Bailey in 1663 in which she successfully defended herself against charges of bigamy and imposture brought by her new husband, John Carleton, an eighteen-year-old lawyer’s clerk. Even before the trial began, the incarcerated ‘German Princess’ was the talk of London; her acquittal confirmed her as a figure of scandalous celebrity with a reputation for formidable arts of persuasion and argument under duress. By all accounts, Mary played the part of a distressed and victimised foreign aristocrat—alienated from her just position and possessions—very well indeed. The prosecution, on the other hand, bungled their case. They managed
to furnish a witness to Mary’s first marriage in Kent but failed to deliver the husband, a shoemaker by whom she was said to have borne two children who died in infancy. Claims that Mary had already been tried for bigamy in Kent and that she was well known for her fraudulent adventures there as ‘quality in disguise’ were dismissed as hearsay by the judge.

There was luck in it, and legal nicety, but if Mary had not performed impressively, the verdict might well have gone against her. It was her talent for passing as a wronged gentlewoman and a ‘stranger’ newly arrived in London that allowed Mary to cut such a compelling and mysterious public figure. Indeed, Mary went so far as to claim that it was John Carleton, her young husband, and his family who had tricked her into marriage and then prosecuted her under false pretences:

[I]f any be deceived, I am. My lord, If that they could have been insured that I had been the person as to Estate, that they imagined me to be, your Lordship should not have been troubled...they would have been contented to have practised concealment, in case I had had more than one husband. Instead of this defamation that I am loaded with, my Lord, my crime is, that I have not an Estate, or at least such a one as they imagined it to be.1

Mary presented herself to the court as what she was—from a meritocratic standpoint and in terms of the romance plot she had adopted: quality without an estate. She refuted the charge of bigamy with a series of double entendres and aperçus like something spoken by an actress in one of the modish city comedies playing at London theatres:2

My Lord, they brand me for marrying of a Shoo-make, and another sad piece of Mortality, a Brick-layer. My lord, My Soul abhorreth such a thought, and never was accomodated with such Condiscention, to move in so low an Orb. My Lord, by all that I can observe of the Persons that appear against me, they may be divided into two sorts; the one of them come against me for want of Wit, the other for want of Money.3

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1 Anonymous 1663, *The Arraignment, Tryal and Examination of Mary Moders, Otherwise Stedman, Now Carleton,* (Stiled, the German Princess), London, p. 13.
2 Restoration theatre is associated with the rise of the actress on the London stage and of female playwrights such as Aphra Behn. The epilogue to Behn’s play *The Dutch Lover* (1673) explicitly references Mary Carleton: ‘Whilst sad experience our eyes convinces,/That damn’d their Playes which hang’d the German Princess;/And we with ornament set off a Play/Like her drest fine for Execution-day./And faith I think with as small hopes to live/Unless kind Gallants the same grace you’d give/Our Comedie as Her; beg a Reprieve.’ Jacqueline Pearson comments that *The Dutch Lover* derives ‘comic and disturbing energy from a sense that identity is essentially fluid, contingent, dependent upon how it is situated and how it is named’ (Pearson, Jacqueline 1996, ‘Slave princes and lady monsters: gender and ethnic difference in the work of Aphra Behn’, in Janet Todd [ed.], *Aphra Behn Studies*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, p. 230).
Mary Carleton’s false additions: the case of the ‘German Princess’

That this daughter of a Kentish musician called Moders, probably raised in the immigrant Dutch community in Canterbury, was able to pass ‘en Princesse’, as she later put it, owed much to her own talents and industry. At a time when the unsettled relation of merit and commerce to social value and prestige was a matter of constant, everyday debate, Mary was a case in point. Well-spoken, charming, highly literate and plausibly accoutred, she had taken advantage of the unusual opportunities for education and ‘finishing’ that seemed to have come her way through her musician father’s genteel connections. The character of ‘the German Princess’, which Mary was able to flesh out in great detail in person and in print, was probably based in part on a woman Mary encountered at Dover and in whose service she travelled to Cologne; in part on her knowledge of romance conventions; and in part on the ubiquity of similar stories of dispossessed, exiled and often impoverished aristocrats returning from exile in the early years of post-Restoration London.4

Mary’s scandalous celebrity began with her imprisonment in London on charges of bigamy but, interestingly, it was news of her previous scams outside the capital, delivered in the form of a letter to her new husband’s family, that precipitated Mary’s arrest. Written and spoken accusations travelled but the witnesses themselves did not: it was hearsay that caused Mary to be brought to trial and its legal inadmissibility that saved her. Far from putting an end to speculation, Mary’s acquittal fanned the flames. She had not so much been proved innocent as (not) found to be (not) legally married to John Carleton, scrivener and pretended gentleman. In stark contrast, Mary was able to use the uncertainty surrounding her identity and the opportunistic trickery to which her notoriety had exposed her, even while she was incarcerated, to her own benefit. Accused as a ‘trepanner’, she showed herself to be a trickster as adept at exposing the tricks of others as she was at passing for quality. On the other hand, as Mary Jo Keitzman remarks:

Had her performance not been extremely persuasive, we might reasonably conclude that the prevalence of theatricals in which ‘con women’ duped men into marriage by pretending to have fortunes ought to have given John Carleton a very specific social framework with which to have read skeptically Mary’s performance.5

Immediately before, during and after the 1663 trial, Mary became the focus of a wave of bestselling broadsides and pamphlets that took up positions for

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4 Margaret and William Cavendish, for instance, were among the tide of banished royalists returning to England in the 1660s hoping to reclaim property and preferment at the new court of Charles II. In a twist on this narrative, Mary claimed, on her arrival in London, that she had powerful connections at court but did not want to make her appearance there until her money and property had been conveyed from Germany.

and against her. Generally anonymous, the most substantial of these pamphlets were offered as the work (in whole or part) of Mary herself and her aggrieved husband: *The Case of Madam Mary Carleton, Lately Stiled the German Princess, truely stated, with an historical relation of her birth, education, and fortunes* (1663) by ‘M. Carleton’ and *The Ultimum Vale* by John Carleton. The Case and its heroine’s transgressive life have aroused considerable interest among contemporary scholars of early modern women and it is now generally accepted as partly or wholly Mary’s own work. It formed the basis for the history of the ‘German Princess’ that was quickly incorporated into successive collections of popular true crime narratives that eventually came to be known as the *Newgate Calendar* and influenced other ambivalently admiring representations of female rogues, often combining fictional and true elements, such as *The German Princess Revived; or the London Jilt, Being a True Account of the Life and Death of Jenney Voss* (1684) and Daniel Defoe’s *Moll Flanders* (1722). The year after the trial, Mary played herself in a dramatisation of the case on the London stage but the play was not a success and closed after one night. By then, the first wave of public interest might have run its course. After that Mary vanished from the public eye and record for some years, until she resurfaced in court documents, indicted for theft under a series of different names—Maria Darnton, Mary Blacke, Mary Kirton, Maria Lyon and Mary Carlston—from 1669 until her transportation to Jamaica in 1671.

Transportation served as a commutation (pardon) of a death sentence. By 1673, Mary had violated the conditions of her pardon by returning to London, where she captured the attention of the metropolis again in a second celebrity trial. This time it was the turnkey who recognised the ‘German Princess’ when she was brought into prison—proof of her continuing celebrity, at least in that restricted milieu, and of the unpredictable recognitions, ironies and intimacies passing engenders. Mary’s conviction and public hanging inspired another wave of publications, chief among them *The Counterfeit Lady Unveiled* (1673), a substantial criminal biography written by Francis Kirkman, a well-known


London publisher, bookseller and bibliophile, already associated with the picaresque genres of romance, memoir and rogue literature, particularly through his role as publisher of Richard Head’s *The English Rogue* (1665).8

Mary Carleton passed for quality and also as an unmarried virgin in an attempt to use (and abuse) the institution of marriage to her advantage. Occasionally, Mary was also reported as cross-dressing, generally associated with being deprived temporarily of the essential tools of her trade: fine clothes and jewels.9 This little remarked aspect of the discursive *copia* generated by Mary’s life deserves more critical attention than it has received if only because it can be seen as an attempt to render Mary’s passing in more conventional and familiar terms: as a literalisation of Mary’s masculinised agency. Mary Frith, the model for the character of the notorious cross-dressed thief ‘Moll Cutpurse’, of Middleton and Dekker’s city comedy, *The Roaring Girl* (1611), died in 1659. A memoir attributed to her, *The Life of Mrs Mary Frith*, was published posthumously in 1662, the year before Mary Carleton’s first London trial. Mary Carleton could have read *The Life*; she would certainly have known of it. With interest in Mary Frith still current, it was not surprising that this second Mary’s story should be received partly through the mediation of the first’s narrative, with its emphasis on cross-dressing and disorderly female conduct. In a sense, Mary Carleton’s literally deceptive finery—her aristocratic costume and ornament (the authenticity or otherwise of these jewels was much debated)—amounted to a kind of cross-dressing. It signalled Mary’s actress-like conduct as a form of total theatre: her taking up of an extravagant, self-authored role that ostensibly denied any form of acting on her part while alluding to social conduct as thoroughly performative and winking at her own talent for deception. This specifically visual deception, which went beyond dress alone to include styling, deportment and *mien*, was the necessary but not sufficient condition for Mary’s successful passing.10

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8 For an excellent recent discussion of Kirkman, see Greene, Jody 2006, ‘Francis Kirkman’s counterfeit authority: autobiography, subjectivity, print’, *PMLA*, vol. 121, pp. 17–32.
9 See, in particular, *The Female Hector, or, The Germane Lady Turn’d Mounsieur. With the manner of her comming to the White-Hart Tavern in Smithfield like a young lord in mans apparel, with a periwig down to her shoulders, a rich belt, and a rapier by her side. How she deceiv’d the gentry at Amsterdam under the notion of the distressed lady of a banished lord, and being after discovered by a gentleman that came thither from London, was by order of the governour stript of her rich apparrel, and banish’d the city in her own old weeds. How she deceiv’d an inn-keeper at Sandwitch in Kent, who pawn’d all his plate, debursed his mony, and pass’d his word for her, till that he was forc’d to fly beyond sea, not daring to go home after she had given him the slip at Billingsgate, where she promis’d to pay him all out of a great treasure she told him she had there. How she made her escape from the Kings-bench, to the cost of the turn-key 100 pound thick, with all the rest of her notable pranks and cunning deceits from her birth to this present, that have not been yet publish’d* (1663, N. Dorrington, London). I give the full title here because this obscure short pamphlet survives in a unique copy in the Beinecke Library and is not included thus far in *Early English Books Online*.
this context, the many accounts of Mary’s clothing being violently rent and removed not only constitute sexual assault but figure the impossibly literal desire to expose Mary’s truth by stripping her naked.

Whereas Mary’s accomplishments and seductive charms were coded as hyperfeminine, her drive, intelligence and independence opened her to charges of unwomanliness, which led, in turn, to occasional accounts of cross-dressing, not as a goal in itself, but as a contingent strategy. The role assigned to cross-dressing in the ‘German Princess’ texts, albeit minor, was a symptom of anxieties about, and interest in, the kinds of passing that Mary actively pursued (and those she did not). Episodes of cross-dressing in the ‘German Princess’ texts allegorise Mary’s figural ‘additions’ and hermaphroditic adaptability, enhancing the multi-generic potential of her life—as romance, play or broadside—while underlining the sense in which any form of passing exposes the instability of genre, taxonomy, hierarchy and authority. The diverse forms of passing variously attributed to Mary in different texts suggested her essential undecidability: she was simultaneously credible and incredible, masculine and feminine, high and low, English and alien, victor and victim. At first, Mary’s example seemed to offer a daring model for other lowborn women of talent and accomplishment (and perhaps men as well) to advance in a treacherous but opportunistic world. Over time, however, her example seemed to give the lie to such a possibility, at least in any continuing sense, since over the course of her life Mary’s status declined even as she became more infamous. If anything, Mary lost her life not because her performance as a gentlewoman became any less convincing but because she was too well known, too exceptional and public a character, to pass as someone else. No wonder, then, that the more admiring redactions of the case of the German Princess concentrate on Mary’s acquittal in 1663, omitting or otherwise minimising her execution a decade later.

The first pamphlet denouncing Mary Carleton, *The Lawyer’s Clerk Trapanned by the Crafty Whore of Canterbury* (1663), itemises its accusations as its title page:

> A true Relation of the whole Life of Mary Mauders the Daughter of Thomas Mauders a Fidler in Canterbury. Wherein is discovered, 1. How she married a Fidler at Dover, and a Shoe-maker at the City of Canterbury. 2. How she cheated a Vintner of 60 pound, and was committed to Newgate. 3. How she cheated a French Marshant of Rings, Jewels and other Rich Commodities last March. 4. How she picks a Kentish Lords Pocket, at Graves-end, of his watch and money. 5. How she made her escape, when sold and ship’d for the Barbadoes. 6. How she came to London to the Exchange Tavern, naming her self Henrietta Maria de Vulva the Daughter of a great Prince in Germany, and married a Lawyers Clark on Easter-day last.
Mary Carleton’s false additions: the case of the ‘German Princess’

The anonymous author of the pamphlet, which was issued while Mary was awaiting trial for bigamy, depicted its scandalous subject as a lowborn whore, fraud and thief, already a veteran of Newgate, who worked, alone or in concert with a partner, to ‘trapan’ credulous men. The pornographic name assigned to her in this pamphlet, ‘Henrietta Maria de Vulva’, announces her as, simultaneously, a type of the wandering/foreign whore and a burlesque of Charles I’s French Catholic consort, Henrietta Maria, who had only very recently returned to England, to the Restoration court of her son, Charles II.

The meaning of ‘trapan’ combines entrapment, fraud and extortion in a literally or figuratively sexualised context. Thus, Edward Phillips’ *New World of English Words* (1658) glosses ‘Trepan, or Trapan’: ‘to intrap, or insnare, but more especially in that manner, which is used by Whores and Ruffians.’ In Thomas Blount’s *Glossographia or a Dictionary* (1656):

To Trepan, or rather trappan (from the Ital. Trappare or trappolare id est to entrap, ensnare, or catch in a gin) in the modern acception of the word, it signifies to cheat, or entrap in this manner; a whore admits a man to be naught with her, and in the very instant, rings a Bell or gives a watch word, and in comes a Pander who pretends to be her husband, and with vapouring and threats, upon the act of adultery, forces money or bond from the deluded third person. Some take this word to be derived from a Pander that does entrap, or a trapping Pander.

Here, a ‘pander’ (presumed to be male) conspires with a ‘whore’ (presumed to be female) to dupe another man, with the dissolute couple passing as husband and wife. As *The Lawyer’s Clerk Trapanned* makes plain, Mary’s crimes against property, rank and propriety depend on her ‘crafty’ ability, as a woman on the market, to ‘entrap, ensnare, and beguile’ (*Oxford English Dictionary*: ‘trepan, trapan’). Her marks are usually men in search of an advantageous association with a woman superior in wealth or status or both. Combining pretended wealth, gentility and virtue with strategic seduction, false evidence and theft, Mary’s *modus vivendi* is more subtle and independent than Blount’s rudimentary example. She acts on her own account, with no need of a pander, though she does make use of maids and pages as occasional functionaries in her schemes. What she must have, however, is fresh territory to exploit and that becomes increasingly difficult, not only because her notoriety pursues her, but because she desires to be known and celebrated.

An equally brief and anonymous pro-Mary pamphlet immediately countered, claiming to be ‘an Exact Accompt from her own Mouth’. A *Vindication Of a

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Distressed Lady In Answer to a pernicious, scandalous, libellous Pamphlet; Intituled, The Lawyers Clarke Trappan’d by the Crafty Whore of Canterbury (1663) turns the accusation of falsehood back on the author of the first pamphlet. It argues that Mary cannot be lowborn since ‘Her Accomplishments do demonstrate the contrary’; she is ‘adorned with apt and ready Faculties of her Mind’\(^{13}\) as well as the signs of good breeding. Crediting Mary with ‘French, Dutch, Latine, Greek, Hebrew, and all manner of other Education; as Musick, Singing, Dancing, and the like’,\(^{14}\) A Vindication repeats and refutes each charge in turn, claiming that it is Mary who has been ‘trappan’d’, with her husband’s father, ‘old Mr Carleton’, acting the part of pander.

These answering pamphlets with their antithetical representations of Mary as ‘crafty whore’ and ‘distressed lady’ set the pattern from the start: the hyperbolic enormity of Mary’s crimes and ambitions, on the one hand, countered by the greatness of her accomplishments and the magnitude of her ‘distress’ on the other. According to The Lawyer’s Clerk Trappanned, “To tell you all the pranks performed by this piece of impudence, were too much to be contained in one sheet.”\(^{15}\) Instead, the anonymous author will cut its scandalous subject down to size by giving no more than ‘an epitome of her Life and actions’.\(^{16}\) The same tropes were still in play at the end of Mary’s life and, indeed, long after her death. In the wake of Mary’s execution, Memories of the Life of the Famous Madam Charlton (1673) claimed that ‘her towering spirit was too large for her narrow fortunes’\(^{17}\) and that even London, the great metropolis, was not sufficient to contain her. She is represented as larger than life, always on the move and in disguise, evading capture and generating texts, a producer and receiver of fraudulent letters and faked documents. Even when temporarily immobilised, held in confinement, Mary engenders activity: crowds flock to see her, pamphlets are issued, accounts multiply.

In Francis Kirkman’s Jonsonian phrase, Mary is a ‘counterfeit lady’ in multiple senses: she does not just traffic in stolen or counterfeit goods (like Mary Frith); as a femme covert and bigamist acting on her own account, she is herself a piece of stolen property and a counterfeit jewel. Mary even has her own heroic versions of this trope in The Case: she styles herself as an ‘errant Lady’, an aristocratic exception, modelled on the resolutely unmarried Queen Christina.\(^{18}\) In the pamphlets written against her, Mary is ambiguously presented as a femme covert.

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14 Ibid., p. 4.
16 Ibid., p. A2.
18 On Queen Christina, Garbo and passing, see Lilley, Kate 2006, ‘Early modern Garbo: the two bodies of Queen Christina’, in E. McMahon and B. Olubas (eds), Women Making Time, University of Western Australia Press, Perth, pp. 16–35.
fatale, an unfeeling ‘fair jilt’ in the language of Restoration and early eighteenth-century fiction and drama, who fools and fleeces men who should know better.\(^{19}\) As John Carleton complains in *The Ultimum Vale…A true Description of the Passages of that Grand Impostor, Late a Pretended Germane-Lady* (1663), Mary is figuratively ‘hermaphrodite’, a master–mistress of false ‘additions’ and ‘crocodile teares’;\(^{20}\) ‘every ingenious Reader may suppose what additions she made, and how politickly she enlarged herself in every action.’\(^{21}\) Mary uses her wardrobe and her sophisticated literacy to style herself as an aristocrat—performatively and discursively—so that she might chance to become what she deserves and aspires to be. When that fails, and as she passes transversally into the criminal class, Mary turns (or returns) to theft to survive, first casually and then in a more organised and even exuberant fashion. She becomes another kind of princess in exile or in waiting—‘Henrietta Maria de Wolway’ (or ‘Vulva’)—a reminder *en travesti* of the executed king’s foreign consort, Henrietta Maria.

Authorship and criminality, posterity and passing work hand in glove in the ‘German Princess’ texts. As John Carleton puts it, though he wishes she had ‘been dissolved into atoms for her just desserts’, ‘I truly think, that if she should live till she speaks and writes nothing but truth, she would never dye’.\(^{22}\) He realises that even his own entry into print to attempt to vindicate himself, no matter how abridged he protests it is, draws him into a labyrinth that threatens to engulf him: ‘I am forced to be my own historiographer.’\(^{23}\) The discursive dilation he deplores in Mary as an affront to ‘the Micro-cosme or little World of many a Gentleman’\(^{24}\) is both replicated and thematised in his abusive catalogue of her as ‘a common and confident Curtizan, a cursed apostate, a storehouse of untruths, an armory of falsehoods, a castle of impudency, a treasury of vice, an enemy to all good, a receit and exchequer of all rogeury’.\(^{25}\)

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19 On the jilt, see Blackwell, Bonnie 2004, ‘How the jilt triumphed over the slut: the evolution of an epithet, 1660–1780’, *Women’s Writing*, vol. 11, no. 2, pp. 141–61. Mowry refers to *The Case* as a ‘whore’s biography’. McKeon stresses Mary’s insistence on her chastity and virtue. Mary’s own account in *The Case* not only explicitly rejects the characterisation of her career as a whore’s progress but positions her text as mandated by the need to defend herself against this charge. See: McKeon, Michael 1987, *The Origins of the English Novel 1600–1740*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, Md; Mowry, Melissa 2005, ‘Thieves, bawds, and counterrevolutionary fantasies: the life and death of Mrs Mary Frith’, *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies*, vol. 5, no. 1 (Spring/Summer); Carleton, Mary 1663, *The Case of the German Princess*, London.
21 Ibid., p. 3.
22 Ibid., p. 11.
23 Ibid., p. 29.
24 Ibid., p. 30.
25 Ibid., p. 33.
Arriving in the New World more in the character of a celebrity than an indentured slave, Mary (or someone posing as her) wrote a *Letter from Jamaica* in which she represented her passing in terms of dramatic irony, a shared joke between friends, part of the commons:

I came to the desired haven with a prosperous gale. Where I no sooner arrived, but I was, contrary to expectation, treated en Princesse, and accommodated like my self. But one thing I have omitted; when I first set sail from England I was...despised as the base brat of a country fiddler...I fled to my old Asylum, the never failing refuge of a charming tongue and ready wit, and so had both my lodging better’d and my commons amended...At my landing, instead of a barbarous slavery...I was immediately environed with a crowd of admirers. And no sooner was my name heard, but it echo’d into the remotest parts of the island and drew a wonderful confluence of the more vile and dissolute people to my habitation.26

Unlike Defoe’s Moll Flanders, Mary Carleton was not rehabilitated by her sojourn in Jamaica and she did not serve out her time there; but, like Moll, and that other famous libertine, the Earl of Rochester (who engineered his own ‘German’ scam in the 1680s), Mary died a confessed penitent.27

In its bantering equivocations, the broadsheet *An Elegie on the Famous and Renowned Lady* captured the spirit in which Mary made shift to ‘act Nature’s part, preserve her life’ and ‘Improv’d, till she was Metropolitan’: ‘Who can ill language on her Craft bestow,/In seeking to have two strings to her Bow?’28 According to Kirkman, Mary’s last words at Tyburn, having laid aside her book of devotions and placed her husband’s likeness on her breast, were ‘pious ejaculations’. Kirkman ends his book in similar fashion, reiterating the need ‘incessantly to practise piety’ and emphasising the moral:

[I]f we give our selves over to ill Company or our own wicked inclinations, we are infallibly led to the Practice of those Crimes, which although they may be pleasing at the present, yet they have a sting behind, and we shall be sensible thereof when we shall be hurried to an untimely end, as you have seen in the vicious life and untimely death of this our Counterfeit Lady.29

27 On Rochester’s scam, see Loveman, Kate 2008, *Reading Fictions 1660–1740: Deception in English literary and political culture*, Ashgate, Aldershot, UK. Curiously, Loveman makes no mention of Mary Carleton.
By writing and publishing *The Counterfeit Lady*, Kirkman would seem to have ignored his own advice, willingly giving himself to the ‘ill company’ of his notorious subject. Implicitly, Kirkman suggests that textual intimacies—reading, writing and publishing—could be exempt from the ‘sting behind’; or, on the contrary, such activities could be distinctly behind-hand. They allow, and indeed promote, a pleasurable, ‘sensible’ proximity and even identification—a kind of imaginative passing or doubling—while preserving or seeming to preserve virtue. Here Kirkman enters into debates current, then and now, about textual affects and effects, coming out on the side of the pleasure and profit of vicarious experience in a (properly or improperly) contained form. Moving from collecting, selling and translating romances and drama to writing and publishing criminal biography and memoir, Kirkman enlarged his sphere of action in the book trade by playing the part of Mary’s literary pander. It is true, as McKeon argues, that Kirkman’s pieties recuperate Mary for a conservative account of transgressive genre, framing her as ‘the very epitome of fraud and imposture’ and reserving the part of the gentleman author-bookseller for himself.\(^{30}\) It is also clear, however, that Kirkman’s editorial framing is, at least potentially, as double coded and disingenuous as his heroine. It is difficult—perhaps impossible—not to regard Mary’s final scene as another ironic, ‘hermaphrodite’ performance under duress. By the same token, Kirkman must have expected that knowing readers (then and now) would take the hint not to take him, or his counterfeit lady, at face value.

Audible identities: passing and sound technologies

PAMELA L. CAUGHIE

At the March 2008 conference of the Association for Recorded Sound Collections held at Stanford University, audio historians played what they claim is the first recording of the human voice. It is a presumably female voice singing *Au clair de la lune*, though the distorted quality of the 10-second recording renders the words no more decipherable than the singer’s gender to an untutored ear.¹ The recording was made in Paris in April 1860 on a ‘phonautograph’ invented by Édouard-Léon Scott de Martinville (aka Leon Scott), nearly 20 years before Thomas Edison patented the phonograph in 1877. Sound waves captured by a horn attached to a diaphragm vibrated a stiff brush that inscribed the pattern of waves on blackened paper. Scott wanted to produce a visual inscription of human speech but had not yet conceptualised sound as something that could be audibly reproduced; that would be Edison’s contribution when he replaced Scott’s paper with a more pliable and durable substance: tin foil and later wax cylinders.² The recent recovery of Scott’s early inscription foregrounds the historicity of listening itself. As many scholars have pointed out, audition is organised differently by sound technology so that how we hear, not just what we hear, changes. Hearing becomes historical not just physiological; listening becomes technique. A new form of listening entails a new concept of sound itself. ‘Phonautograph’ means, literally, sound writing itself (which is the subtitle of Scott’s 1878 book); thus the term ignores the very machine that is reproducing the voice. ‘Phonautograph’ suggests that the sound is literally there, textually inscribed on the blackened paper, and thus, technically, is not a re-production.

Embedded in Scott’s nomenclature is the germ of the debates that sound technology has aroused in the modernist era over the relative value of—and indeed, the very distinction between—original and copy, live and recorded, authentic and mechanically produced, sincerity and fakery, reproduction and representation. The confusion of those borderlines is graphically presented in

¹ At the time of writing, the recording was available from <http://www.firstsounds.org/sounds/1860-Scott-Au-Clair-de-la-Lune.mp3>
the image of the dog with his ear to the horn of the gramophone listening to ‘his master’s voice’ (a trademark first acquired by the London Gramophone Company in 1898 and used by Emile Berliner from 1900), as well as in anecdotes, cartoons, photographs and advertisements from the time in which people mistake the talking machine for a person talking, the mimetic representation for the ‘real thing’. That slippage between the live and the recorded, the original and the copy, is precisely the achievement of sound technology; it is not a mistake but what makes it work. In that slippage lies the key to a new, modernist understanding not just of art in the age of mechanical reproduction, but of subjectivity itself. That kind of slippage is one that I have explored elsewhere in terms of ‘passing’.

Passing has conventionally been understood, especially in the United States, as a social practice whereby an individual assumes an identity that does not by rights belong to him or her. Most commonly, it refers to light-skinned African Americans living, or at least socialising, as white, which is how modernists would have understood the term. More contemporary usage expands the concept to include many different kinds of identifications across apparently distinct identity boundaries. The term is often deployed in a pejorative sense, as passing is likely to be associated with impersonation, appropriation or deception. Metaphorical uses of the term (for example, as in ‘he’s passing as a feminist’) might seem to elide the particular historical conditions that motivated passing in its first cultural sense, such as laws against miscegenation, segregated public spaces and community-sanctioned violence. Even in its original historical meaning, however, passing was far more complicated than the notion of adopting a fraudulent identity would suggest. Passing was not just a response to rigidly imposed racial boundaries; it exposed those boundaries—social, legal, corporeal—as cultural, discursive and permeable.

In my recent work, I use ‘passing’ in its figurative sense to name and conceptualise the experience of subjectivity in late modernity. Certain social, cultural and technological changes in the early twentieth century produced profound shifts in the understanding and the experience of identity boundaries. That is, both conceptual knowledge and sensory experience eroded the discrete borders of national and personal space on which passing—in its more common understanding as a fraudulent act—depends. The crossing of borders, literally

4 Although the identity issues that I address in terms of ‘passing’ are not specifically American or limited to race, ‘passing’ as a central figure for the complex formation and contestation of identity in modernity is rooted in the racial history and politics of the United States.
5 See Caughie, Pamela L. 2005, ‘Passing as modernism’, *Modernism/Modernity*, vol. 12, no. 3 (September), pp. 385–406. I use ‘subjectivity’ to refer to the concept of what it means to be a subject and ‘identity’ to denote those cultural categories (for example, race, gender, sexuality, class) through which a subject comes to be seen as an individual.
and imaginatively, that was at once enabled by and expressed in new technologies, such as radio and film, automobiles and aeroplanes, was not just a means of reducing distances and levelling differences between people; rather, new aural as well as ocular experiences produced by technological reproduction provided evidence—perhaps for the first time, at least on such a large scale—of the production of cultural identity, the way identity is mediated by various cultural forms. Indeed, the very notion of a coherent identity itself becomes fraudulent in the face of literal and virtual border crossings in the early twentieth century. Sound technologies in particular, insofar as the disembodied voice exists in a ‘temporal succession’, as Georg Simmel puts it, undermine the very premise of identity, the imperative that a person be self-identical across time.

Passing as a social practice was not a new phenomenon in the modernist era. Not just African Americans but Jews, homosexuals and immigrants had long passed for social, political and economic reasons, as well as for personal safety. What made passing capture the public imagination in the modernist era as it never had before was not simply a barrage of passing narratives published in the 1920s—including Jessie Fauset’s *Plum Bun* (1929), Nella Larsen’s *Passing* (1929), Walter White’s *Flight* (1926) and James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (first published in 1912 but which only found an audience in the 1920s). More importantly, the dissemination of cultural products (for example, music, fashion, film) worldwide by new technologies and the forces of mass culture made it increasingly necessary to think of identity in other than nationalist terms. Gender, racial and class identities, structured by and as global commodities, eroded spatial and territorial models of identity. In my use, then, ‘passing’ signifies the dynamics of identity and identification in the modernist era as a time in which identities—national, personal, cultural—are no longer conceived as bounded territories to be raided or protected but rather as open terrain to be crossed and passed through without fear of trespassing. Or, a more apt metaphor for the topic of this chapter is a wave: a transfer of energy from point to point. Whether by aeroplanes or airwaves, borders of national and personal space were virtually dissolving in late modernity.

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7 The quoted phrase from Simmel is cited in Halliday, Sam 2001, ‘Deceit, desire, and technology: a media history of secrets and lies’, *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, vol. 37, no. 2 (April), pp. 141–54, at p. 145. I will return to Halliday’s article later in this chapter.

8 In her contribution to Nancy Cunard’s *Negro anthology* (1933), Heba Jannath writes: ‘It must be borne in mind that passing for something which one is not is a very common practice in America. Jews and Mexicans often pass for Spaniards…Jews, Russians, Germans, Italians and Irish frequently change their names into “acceptable” Anglo-Saxon…But because of America’s particularly fierce taboo on the Negro, we have come to think that “passing” pertains only to him’ (quoted in Scott, Bonnie Kime [ed.] 2007, *Gender in Modernism: New geographies, complex intersections*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, p. 389).
In this chapter, I want to argue that the experience of ‘voice divorced from sight’—an experience made possible in the modernist era by the telephone, the phonograph and the radio—serves to destabilise class, racial and gender identities far more radically than the visual imagination usually associated with passing. The mechanically produced voice gives rise to a new kind of subjectivity in the modernist era when subjectivity becomes ‘mediated through mass-produced sounds and technologies’ such that the subject acquires an ironic distance from itself. The space opened up by the mediation of subjectivity, creating a slippage between the embodied subject and the disembodied voice, is the site of ‘passing’. It is not, however, so much that new sound technologies, especially broadcasting, have disembodied voices; rather, the mechanically produced voice comes to stand in for bodies, or, put differently, subjectivity becomes envoiced. If the scratchy, high-pitched, modulating hum resurrected from Scott’s blackened paper can be dubbed ‘female’ then clearly the demarcation of gender no longer depends on physical evidence or even resemblance.

Walter Benjamin said that ‘a different nature opens itself to the camera than opens to the naked eye’. What kind of ‘nature’ opens itself to the ear by way of gramophone and radio? What would it mean to conceive identities as audible rather than visual? Just what does identity sound like—a question that returns us again, and anew, to Michel Foucault’s resounding question, ‘What difference does it make who is speaking?’

Sounding out modernists

In his 1931 ‘sketch’, as he calls it, of the withering of manhood in the age of modern technology, Sherwood Anderson singles out the radio as especially alienating in its effects: ‘Listen to the voices coming over the radio. There is no reality to the voices. Who can speak naturally over the radio…Something creeps into the voices coming over the radio. They sound false.’ Anderson’s comment on the lack of substance and sincerity in the radio voice evokes the phenomenon

11 On this definition of ‘passing’, see Caughie, Passing and Pedagogy, Chapter 1, especially pp. 24–5. As I write there, ‘“Passing” in my use…names a practice in which an original…presence can be neither presumed nor assumed’ (p. 25).
13 Foucault, Michel 1984, ‘What is an author?’, in Paul Rabinow (ed.), The Foucault Reader, Pantheon Books, New York, pp. 101–20, at p. 120.
that I term ‘passing’ and that was analysed and debated by cultural critics of the 1920s and 1930s—from Benjamin to the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). If the radio voice sounded false, it was because notions of truth and authenticity were bound up at that time with presence. As Benjamin writes in his 1936 essay, ‘The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction’: ‘The presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity…The whole sphere of authenticity is outside technical…reproducibility.’

Authenticity itself cannot be reproduced, Benjamin insists, which is why the aura, dependent on presence, ‘withers in the age of mechanical reproduction’. Mechanical reproduction itself, however, produces authenticity insofar as the original must be reproduced in order to have any authentic, or unique, existence. ‘Authenticity is not reproducible’, but at the same time, authenticity depends on ‘a plurality of copies’. The ‘decay of the aura’, Benjamin continues, is fuelled by the public’s desire ‘to bring things “closer” spatially and humanly’ by accepting reproductions in place of the uniqueness of things. The opera singer, for example, now performs in one’s living room by means of the gramophone or radio. Although Benjamin uses visual technologies to exemplify the effect of this loss of uniqueness and authenticity—the actor performing before the camera, for example, feels ‘exiled…from himself’, he writes, quoting Pirandello: ‘his body loses its corporeality’—that experience was all the more powerful in sound technologies, where the body was literally elided in the performance.

It was in sound Technologies in particular that this anxiety of loss was most deeply felt—by performer and listener alike. In a 1931 BBC broadcast ‘Myself and the microphone’, Harold Nicholson, addressing the question of sincerity in broadcasting, commented on what Michael North terms ‘an entirely new kind of estrangement’ produced by mass media: ‘this broadcasting business creates a strange semblance, an unhealthy eidolon of oneself.’ Nicholson’s avowal launched a barrage of letters to The Listener, the journal of the BBC, anxiously refuting the kind of insincerity that Nicholson attributed not to the

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16 Ibid., p. 221.
17 Ibid., p. 243, n. 2.
18 Ibid., p. 221. This is the logic of the supplementary, as Jacques Derrida has defined it. Lisa Gitelman points out that at the same time as new technologies were substituting multiple copies for ‘original’ handmade ones, American culture came to promote and value products as ‘real’ or ‘genuine’. The ‘real thing’, then, becomes distinct from the (merely) ‘realistic’ in modern culture, as in modernist aesthetics (Gitelman, Lisa 1999, Scripts, Grooves, and Writing Machines: Representing technology in the Edison era, Stanford University Press, Calif., pp. 153–4). ‘If duplicates are really exact duplicates,’ she writes, ‘then originality becomes unlocatable and irrelevant, as Walter Benjamin realized’ (p. 169).
20 Ibid., p. 229.
21 North, Reading 1922.
22 Nicholson, Harold 1931, ‘Myself and the microphone’, The Listener, vol. V, no. 120 (29 April 1931), pp. 721–2, at p. 722. North makes this comment in discussing Charlie Chaplin’s world tour. Fans demanded to see the ‘real thing’, which was, for them, a ‘manufactured image’ (North, Reading 1922, pp. 17–18).
individual broadcaster but to the very nature of broadcasting—the ‘microphone personality’—which was being produced at the very moment of its mass dissemination. Indeed, The Listener is replete with editorials, reviews, letters and broadcasts on that ‘strange semblance’. A recurring debate turned on the question of whether personality was lost when the speaker was unseen, or to what extent the ‘purely acoustic clue’ was an accurate indication of the personality at the microphone. The worry listeners and producers alike expressed over the possibility of being duped by the radio voice was, however, misplaced; for insofar as gramophone and radio began to break down the distinction between the aural identity and the actual person, the broadcasting voice became literally (to paraphrase Judith Butler) an imitation without an original.23

A 1929 editorial in The Listener, ‘Voices from the past’,24 for example, draws the distinction Benjamin later does between representation and reproduction in discussing its new project of recording orators from the past. Rather than rescuing recordings from the past that are not yet audible, as do the audio historians I began by mentioning, the BBC wants to record voices from the past that were never preserved by audio technology—a trickier project to say the least. The BBC, however, that ardent promoter of all things aural, insists that voice suffers on the printed page and, for this reason, re-presenting the voices of the past through broadcasts is a worthwhile endeavour. And while it is not possible to literally capture the voices of the now departed, that does not mean the project is doomed because, the editorial continues, ‘re-presentation…is better than reproduction; the one is art, the other imitation’.25 Here the BBC nearly puts down its own medium in admitting that dramatic re-enactment is superior to mechanical reproduction, even though its motive for producing this series is the preservation of ‘voice’, and even though the BBC and radio manufacturers at this time insist on broadcasting’s fidelity to the real.26 And yet that slippage between voice as ethos and voice as real sound—and between representation and re-presentation—is precisely the special niche of broadcasting in the panoply of

24 The Listener, vol. 1, no. 17 (May 1929).
25 Ibid., p. 634.
26 Advertisements throughout The Listener for Mullard speakers claim that they give the listener ‘truth in radio—every note is lifelike’. Grace Wyndham Goldie, radio drama critic for The Listener, praised reality programs that sounded ‘absolutely authentic’, immersing the listener in ‘the experience of reality itself’ (The Listener, vol. 20, no. 511 [27 October 1938], p. 914, and vol. 15, no. 385 [27 May 1936], p. 1022). At the same time, however, the BBC expressed displeasure at Nicholson’s suggestion that the broadcasting voice might not be sincere; it also insisted that broadcasting was about ‘voice production’, not fidelity to the real. And, ironically, the broadcaster was expected to project an authentic personality by mastery of the microphone technique meant to produce the illusion of natural speech. Drawing on Emily Thompson’s point that modern sound was ‘modern’ insofar as it ‘exemplified an aesthetic of efficiency in its resultant signal-like clarity’ (Thompson, Emily 2002, The Soundscape of Modernity: Architectural acoustics and the culture of listening in America, 1900–1933, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., and London, UK, pp. 3–4), James Donald (‘A complex kind
Audible identities: passing and sound technologies

Sound technologies. Voice is not so much reproduced (captured) as produced (created) on radio. If the slippage between the original and the recording, the real and the reproduction is the very achievement of sound technology, as I have suggested, identifying the individual behind the voice is no longer a worthwhile task. That identity is in the voice—envoiced—and thus inseparable from the technologies that produce it. This notion of identity is what gives the impression that we are dealing with a new kind of subjectivity.

It was Theodor Adorno, curiously enough, the cultural critic most strongly identified with an anti-technology stance, who intimated this new understanding of subjectivity in his 1928 essay on the gramophone, ‘The curves of the needle’. Far from being nostalgic for the ‘real thing’, Adorno understood acoustic mediation as a thing itself.27 ‘The technologically mediated [sound],’ writes Adorno, ‘gains a corporeal proximity which the immediacy of the live performance often denies to those whose goal is a concentrated reception.’28 Such ‘corporeal proximity’ (what Benjamin discusses in terms of the desire ‘to bring things closer’) comes, paradoxically, with the removal of the body of the performer from the audience, the listener. The disembodied but also intimately rendered voice, understood in this way, opens the door to what I have termed ‘passing’.

Sounding modern

Being heard but not seen offers possibilities for re-imagining ‘passing’ as other than erasure, invisibility, appropriation or blackface. For insofar as becoming a subject takes place through the assumption of identity categories, what happens when those categories—long dependent on presence and sight—are now dependent on voice? One of the works I first turned to in considering aural passing was Julie Dash’s 1983 film Illusions. Set in 1940s Hollywood, Illusions takes as its subject matter the common practice of having black women dub the voices of white singers performing jazz or blues songs. In the film, Esther Jeeters (Rosanne Katon), a black woman, is hired to fix the faulty soundtrack when the words sung by the white film star do not synchronise with her mouth movements. Sequestered in the recording studio, Jeeters is never seen

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28 Quoted in Levin, ‘For the record’, p. 44.
on screen (though the film audience does see the actor, Katon, who, ironically, is not singing herself but lip-synching Ella Fitzgerald). In her essay on *Illusions*, Patricia Mellencamp writes that ‘the work of the sound track has historically been subservient to the image track’, yet *Illusions*, she continues, ‘provides an advanced modeling of representation and reception—critically revising theories of vision through…sound’, making ‘intellectual arguments through the sound track’.29 This comment is promising for opening up the possibility of a theory of aural identity. Mellencamp, however, quickly closes off the possibility of reconceiving theories of vision through sound. ‘Black performers were in [film] history,’ she argues, ‘but they were not remembered, there and simultaneously erased’,30 because they were heard but not seen (as was Jeeters in the diegetic film and Fitzgerald in the film itself). Mellencamp’s remark is symptomatic of the privileging she begins by disclaiming: representation, it seems, depends on being seen. Even in discussing a film about dubbing, or vocal passing, critics tend to privilege the visual. To be heard but not seen is to be seen as not there.

But what about voice as a representation? Voice is hardly disembodied. Indeed, voice is a muscle, one that can be trained and thus changed as or more readily than many visible markers of identity. As Douglas Kahn writes in *Wireless Imagination*, sound transmission fuses ‘the spatial features of vibration with the…corporeality of inscription’31—that is, ‘transmission was basically the return and reinvigoration of…bodies’. Lisa Gitelman elaborates on Kahn’s argument: recorded and transmitted sound ‘brought pressure to bear on visual habits, including associations between racial difference and skin color. By removing the performer from view, the technology of recorded sound also removed the most keenly felt representation of the performer’s race.’32 As Dash’s film and Mellencamp’s essay on it reveal, however, both explicitly and inadvertently, image seems always to triumph over sound when it comes to issues of representation, especially racial. What Dash’s film exposes, however, is not only the exploitation of black women by Hollywood producers who would have them do the service work of cleaning up the soundtrack while preserving the whiteness of the projected image. It also exposes the possibility of dissociating racial identity from visual markers that have long defined passing in its first cultural sense.33

30 Ibid., p. 80.
32 Gitelman, *Scripts, Grooves, and Writing Machines*, p. 120.
33 In a paper presented at the 2009 Modernist Studies Association Conference called ‘Race, records, and American literary modernism’, Erich Nunn argues that shifting our focus from the circulation of images and its impact on modernist subjectivity to the circulation of sound ‘breaks new conceptual ground by potentially dissociating the meaning of media representations from the visual logic of racial signification in which they are so deeply embedded’.
If blackness can be disembodied and forgotten in the sound issuing from a lip-synching white star, as critics of *Illusions* argue, what about another identity: class? In an essay on class passing, Eric Schocket, writing on progressive-era investigators who would go undercover to report on the deplorable living and working conditions of the labouring class, calls such writers ‘class transvestites’. These writers, he argues, attempted to bridge the epistemological gap between the classes by ‘identifying’ with the working classes through ‘class impersonation’,34 appropriating somatic signs of class, such as dress styles. In the course of the essay, however, Schocket shifts from the more common visual and sartorial metaphors to describe passing—such as transvestism, disguise, ‘vestigial simulation’—to auditory ones: ‘verbal minstrelsy’,35 ‘ventriloquism’36 and the writer as ‘mouthpiece’ for the lower class. Class, it seems, has a distinct voice that must be represented, as in ‘given voice’.37 ‘Voice’ in this formulation, however, has been appropriated, turned into a figure for identity, a virtual representation, thereby forgetting that voice actually has a sound. In his effort to ‘give voice’ to the working class, Schocket elides the very physicality of voice as evident in a later and related essay in which he focuses on racial markers of class identity—a connection already implicit in his phrase ‘verbal minstrelsy’. Writing that in the nineteenth century signifiers of blackness figured the white bodies of the working class as a way of bringing out their condition of dependency and servitude, Schocket concludes that blackness, ‘unhinged from any fixed referent’, came to signify white labour.38 What, however, contributed to this unhinging of blackness from real bodies more than sound technologies, which rendered blackness *as skin tone* no longer meaningful? What goes begging in Schocket’s essay is any analysis of what that shift from vestigial to verbal markers signifies. As in Mellencamp’s essay, here, voice is once again subsumed in a theory of representation based on the visual.

For many modernists writing on class, however, voice was literal. In *The Road to Wigan Pier*, George Orwell writes that when he decided to pass as a tramp, he could disguise his appearance but not his accent.39 In *Working with the Working Woman*, Cornelia Stratton Parker remarks that the speech of working-class women was a key distinguishing feature, so that she had to adopt a different sound, not just a different dress, in order to pass as a factory worker. Their talk, Parker writes of the working women, was ‘one of the phases of life which set

35 Ibid., p. 117.
36 Ibid., p. 121.
37 ‘They must be represented’ is the title phrase in Peter Hitchcock’s contribution to the January 2000 *PMLA* issue on ‘Rereading Class’.
39 Orwell, George 1937 [1958], *The Road to Wigan Pier*, Harcourt, San Diego, Calif., p. 150.
the stamp of difference on it’. And in her essay ‘Middlebrow’, Virginia Woolf begins to represent the viewpoint of the lowbrow, but then breaks off: ‘To all this the lowbrows reply—but I cannot imitate their style of talking.’

Perhaps the most distinctive voice of the lower class, at least according to T. S. Eliot, was music hall performer Marie Lloyd. In his essay on Lloyd, Eliot remarks that to her credit, ‘there are no cinema records of her’, for she never ‘descended to this form of money-making’. There were phonograph records, however, though Eliot does not mention that. Although Eliot praises ‘the perfect expressiveness of her smallest gestures’, he also claims the art of Marie Lloyd lies in capturing ‘exactly the tone of voice’ of her class—something film was not yet able to do in 1923 when Eliot wrote this essay. If Marie Lloyd is an ‘expressive figure for the lower classes’, as Eliot says, we could say that Lloyd provides an audible identity for that class. In his 1934 essay, ‘The form of the phonograph record’, Adorno writes:

There is no doubt that, as music is removed by the phonograph record from the realm of live production and...becomes petrified, it absorbs into itself, in this process of petrification, the very life that would otherwise vanish. The dead art rescues the ephemeral and perishing art as the only one alive. Therein may lie the phonograph record’s most profound justification.

It is, one might argue, the recorded sound even more than the stage performance of Marie Lloyd that (pace Eliot) is crucial to preserving her identity and that of the class she represents.

Woolf wrote in 1927 that in the age of the airwaves, ‘all divisions are now rubbed out, or about to be’, insofar as the wireless, the talkies and the phonograph

40 Parker, Cornelia Stratton 1922, Working with the Working Woman, Harper & Brothers, New York and London, p. 12. Parker wonders whether some day, after her class-passing days are over, she will find herself dining ‘with the head of the university philosophy department and his academic guests’ and will slip and say ‘she ain’t livin’ at that address no more’, evoking an uncomfortable silence (pp. 11–12).
43 It is the decline of the music hall and the rise of cinema that leads, according to Eliot, to the decline of the lower classes and perhaps to the demise of a culture. ‘When every theatre has been replaced by 100 cinemas, when every musical instrument has been replaced by 100 gramophones...when electrical ingenuity has made it possible for every child to hear its bedtime stories from a loudspeaker...it will not be surprising if the population of the entire civilized world rapidly follows the fate of the Melanesians’ (ibid., p. 174)—who, Eliot reminds us, are dying of pure boredom. Eliot, like Orwell, worried that mass culture would erase class differences.
Audible identities: passing and sound technologies
crossed national, racial and class boundaries. Todd Avery echoes Woolf when he writes of radio’s ‘novel ability to perforate social borders, mix social classes, and effect a general democratization of moral valuation’. While a black sound was heard, if not always credited, in talkies of the era, a classed sound was rendered inaudible by the likes of Hollywood diction coaches and BBC pronunciation committees. While there were modest attempts to include working-class voices in BBC broadcasts, their ‘accents’ were considered to lack authority, so the BBC cultivated a ‘classless’ English that entailed ‘correct pronunciation’ and the right accent—which provided another reading of what Woolf might have meant by ‘all divisions are now rubbed out’.

From Leon Scott, who conceived listening as a new form of literacy, to Thomas Edison, who promoted the phonograph as a means of bringing opera to poor and rural populations, to the BBC, which saw the formation of a mass public as the very achievement of broadcasting, sound technology was understood as effecting a class revolution. ‘A modern mass public,’ proclaims The Listener, ‘dates from the inception of broadcasting.’ ‘The barriers, you see, are down,’ declares another editorial, ‘the barriers of class and of outward convention and…that vile attitude of mind…that regarded knowledge as the prerogative of the few.’ As with Schocket, for the BBC, giving voice to the working classes meant giving them representation on the air. To foster a common and culturally literate public, the BBC produced programs that involved and addressed diverse social groups. Men and women, workers and the unemployed, politicians and artists, scientists and clergymen—all took their turn at the microphone, were published in The Listener and listened in from home. A 1929 series, for example, My Day’s Work, featured broadcasts by miners, dock workers, sewer workers and telephone operators; a 1933 series broadcast the ‘Memoirs of the unemployed’; and in a 1937 broadcast a taxi driver gave advice on his favourite books. None

48 Levin, ‘For the record’, p. 36.
49 Gitelman, Scripts, Grooves, and Writing Machines, p. 137.
50 Johnson remarks that just as print technologies made literacy ‘a new marker of class’, so sound technologies ‘democratise[d] access to information’ and ‘re-audialised society’, thus transforming configurations of class and of power relations in the modern era (Johnson, Bruce 2007, ‘Voice, power and modernity’, in Damousi and Deacon, Talking and Listening in the Age of Modernity, pp. 117–18).
52 The Listener, vol. 3, no. 52 (2 January 1930), p. 84.
53 Despite such catholicity among broadcasters, most announcers at the time were men of the middle or professional classes. Still, during Hilda Matheson’s term as Director of Talks (1927–32), not only did women broadcast regularly but Matheson promoted a style of talk that David Cardiff describes as ‘domesticating the public utterance’—an effort to ‘soften and naturalize’ the voices of national figures and to make broadcasts more informal and conversational and ‘intimate rather than intimidating’ (Cardiff quoted in Avery, Radio Modernism, p. 45).
of these broadcasts survives in the BBC Sound Archives, but publications in The Listener and manuscripts in the BBC written archives suggest that the BBC staff, which reviewed and rewrote the manuscripts of all broadcasts in the 1930s, literally gave voice to the working class, giving them the supposedly classless style that was known as BBC English.\(^{54}\)

In other words, however much the BBC saw itself as a democratising force insofar as it aired the voices of the working class, it was far less cognisant of the fact that it produced the very voice, or class identity, it represented. The voice of the working class was an imitation without an original. Nowhere was the creation of an audible identity more apparent than in Geoffry Bridson’s brainchild. In 1935, Bridson, in an effort to wrest the BBC style from the ‘boil-shirt patronage’ of its announcers, created a new voice, an ‘ordinary voice’, that of Harry Hopeful, an unemployed glassblower played by Frank Nicholls with, Bridson said, ‘total sincerity’.\(^{55}\) One of the most popular working-class shows, presented as a series of interviews with ordinary people, in fact featured scripted broadcasts and a fictional character. Ordinary people, as Bridson discovered, could not be trusted at the microphone. In one attempt at a live broadcast by miners, their use of ‘bloody’ and ‘bugger’ on air caused such an uproar that Bridson sent Olive Shapely into the recording studio with a sign telling them not to use those words. The miners fell silent. The BBC might have sought to incorporate class as a subject matter in its broadcasts, to give it voice in the sense of representing it, but it elided class distinctions in the actual production of voice. Or rather, through the performance of working-class authenticity, the BBC troubled the distinction between representation and re-presentation, opening up a new space for identity formation.

Class accents were an issue in Hollywood films as well as in BBC broadcasts. In Stanley Donen’s Singin’ in the Rain (1952), set in the late 1920s, when sound films emerged, Kathy Selden (Debbie Reynolds), like Ester Jeeters in Illusions, sang for the silent film star Lina Lamont (Jean Hagen). Initially, when Kathy agrees to dub for Lamont, Don Lockwood (Gene Kelly) objects: ‘I couldn’t let you do that, Kathy…You wouldn’t be seen’—subordinating the soundtrack to the image track. Lamont needs a vocal double not only because her voice is unpleasant but because her grammar and pronunciation are distinctly lower class, clashing with the visual image of her as a glamorous screen star. This is

\(^{54}\) For example, while proclaiming he is not qualified to judge great literature, the taxi driver makes comments such as ‘[O’Duffy] may not have the subtlety of Anatole France. Or the incisiveness of Shaw’ (The Listener, vol. 18, no. 455 [29 September 1937], p. 686).

the reversal of recent Britain’s Got Talent celebrity Susan Boyle’s performance. Boyle’s body, signifying lower-class status, is belied by her voice—a ‘class act’ that was registered in the shocked reaction of the panel of judges.56

Criticism of this film, however, tends to ignore voice as a representation. In her article ‘Dancin’ in the rain’, for example, Carol Clover argues that the film’s morality tale of stolen talent restored is driven by anxiously about the opposite, stolen talent unrestored and uncredited.57 Clover says, unlike The Jazz Singer (explicitly referred to in Singin’), which acknowledges, however ambivalently, the blackness of the Hollywood musical, Singin’ renders that blackness not just invisible but inaudible58—except, I hasten to point out, for that dropped ‘g’. Focusing on the dancing in the film—which is ‘stolen’ from African Americans—Clover says that the film’s concern with ‘miscredit’ has ‘a racial underside’.59 Lina Lamont, in Clover’s analysis, is the scapegoat for those who not only could not make the shift to talkies but who, like the screen star in Illusions, performed the art of unseen others.60

Clover’s symptomatic reading, however, elides class differences—the audible difference in the film. There is another irony here. Although in the film Kathy gets credit in the end for her singing talent, no credit is given to Betty Noyes, who sings one of the songs (Would You) Kathy dubs for Lamont, dubbing in turn for Debbie Reynolds. The logic of Clover’s argument would seem to make Betty Noyes figuratively black since she received no credit. Noyes, however, was white. Get it? White Noyes/noise—a difference rendered inaudible by the homophone. ‘White noise’ is, according to John Cage, ‘that which we hear but do not apprehend, sounds that exceed or elude our abilities to detect or measure them’.61 The white noise that is given no credit—heard but not seen—destabilises our ways of making distinctions, bringing us back to that resounding question, ‘What difference does it make who is speaking’, or singin’? Here I would like to word play further and coin the term ‘homophonobia’ to name a new anxiety that emerges with sound technology: the fear of not being able to hear the difference.

It was not simply that radio, films and recordings appropriated a black or class sound. Rather, the new aurality of the early twentieth century produced a sound that troubled the very fixed boundaries that notions of appropriation depend on. In an article on torch singer Libby Holman, Jeanne Scheper similarly argues that Holman’s aural passing ‘destabilize[d] culturally fixated notions of black

56 ‘Class Acts’ is the title of my book-in-progress on passing and class identity.
58 Ibid., p. 730.
59 Ibid., p. 737.
60 Ibid., p. 744.
and white'. Holman, a Jew, helped to create a sound that came to be identified with black female blues singers. The fact that Alberta Hunter and Billy Holiday both recorded Holman’s signature song, *Moanin’ Low*, suggests how effectively she destabilised audible racial identities. Holman’s singing was, Scheper says, ‘a complicated staging of racial and sexual identity through sound’, reproducing ‘new notions of race and sexuality’. The dominance of visual metaphors for racial and class identities, however—and indeed, our own worry over the loss of identity boundaries—has prevented contemporary scholars from recognising audible identities as a powerful means of collapsing those boundaries, even as scholarship on the history of sound has proliferated. Once identity is detached from visual clues, passing across identity boundaries becomes all the more likely.

Recent sound scholarship

What is known as the ‘aural turn’ in modernist studies—the torrent of scholarship on sound technologies produced in the past decade or so—has not yet provided an adequate and fully theorised account of the impact of sound on the representation and felt experience of identity. For this reason, it might be useful to correlate some efforts in this direction to adumbrate, in the configurations of these scholars’ arguments, a theory of audible identities and its implications for the concept, and practice, of passing.

Much recent sound scholarship comments on the effect of this technology on social relations and on the spatial and temporal dimensions of subjectivity. In his essay in *Talking and Listening in the Age of Modernity*, for example, James Donald remarks that the new technologies have done more than ‘disrupt old habits of perception and selfhood…they reconfigured ways of relating to oneself, to others and to the world’. Donald goes on to discuss ‘a key feature of this modern experience’—namely, ‘a new dynamic of time, space and presence, the transcendence of distance’. As do Paddy Scannell and David Cardiff, Todd Avery and others, Donald focuses on the new community formed through the ear, the audience, and a new cultural persona, the listener, as examples of this ‘transcendence of distance’, and, I would add, ‘difference’. The formation of the listener and the listening community crossed social and national boundaries, producing what Donald refers to as ‘a sense of placelessness of everyday

63 Amy Winehouse, who is British and Jewish, replicates that sound today, especially in her hit song *Rehab*. Scheper’s excellent article is the most explicit treatment of aural identities that I have found, although it is limited to Holman’s experience.
64 Scheper, “‘Take black or white’”, p. 97.
66 Ibid., p. 24.
experience’—a point reiterated by Desley Deacon in her essay in the same volume. Donald remarks that the voice experienced as ‘pure signal’— ‘subjectivity mediated through mass-produced sounds and technologies’ presents a reality ‘no longer conceivable in terms of individual human qualities’. My research on the BBC suggests, though, that it is not necessarily that individual qualities are lost but that listeners question the extent to which the acoustic signal can be conceived in terms of such personal qualities. Thus, the very meaning of what it meant to be human changed in response to what Emily Thompson calls ‘the soundscape of modernity’—an argument other scholars make as well.

Many commentators, however, raise the issue of identity only to sidestep it. ‘Of all sounds, none projected and constructed identities more intensely than the voice,’ writes Bruce Johnson, noting in particular the revolution in class configurations effected by sound technologies. Like Thompson, however, Johnson is interested mainly in the dissemination of information, in power relations not in identities. Most social histories of broadcasting focus, as do Adorno and Horkheimer, on the formation of a new audience and on the ‘levelling’ process of sound technologies—‘the liquidation of autonomous individuality’, as Scannell and Cardiff put it, ‘by impressing the stamp of sameness on…everybody’. Johnson’s quotation from a 1897 poem on the recorded voice, however, ‘the sound of the voice can never lie’—a conclusion at odds with the notion that human qualities have been lost with the disembodied voice and one countered by Sherwood Anderson’s experience of listening cited earlier—returns us to the notion of identity. The quoted claim reinforces Lisa Gitelman’s point that hearing is historical, as are concepts of authenticity and realness bound up with new aural experiences. Gitelman points out, for instance, that early scratchy recordings were heard as ‘just like’ the sounds they recorded; in fact, people were said not to be able to tell the difference between the live and the recorded, even though today one cannot imagine how they could fail to detect the noise of the recording devices. (Memorex capitalised

67 Ibid., p. 24.
68 Deacon in ibid., p. 80.
70 Ibid., p. 27.
71 Ibid., p. 27.
73 Johnson, ‘Voice, power and modernity’, p. 118.
74 Thompson’s definition of a soundscape includes the listener’s relationship to the environment—physical and social—including circumstances that dictate ‘who gets to hear what’ (The Soundscape of Modernity, pp. 2–3).
76 Quoted in Johnson, ‘Voice, power and modernity’, p. 118.
on this confusion in its highly successful 1970s ad campaign, ‘Is it live or is it Memorex?’). Similarly, listeners praised the BBC talks in the 1920s and 1930s as sounding intimate and informal, even though they were scripted and read—and sound scripted and read to contemporary ears. Notions of what is ‘real’, in other words, change with new forms of representation.77

Gitelman’s 1999 book was among the earliest efforts to connect identity formation with sound technologies in particular. Discussing the highly popular ‘coon songs’ in turn-of-the-century American culture, which ‘displaced [the] visuality of racial identity’,78 Gitelman remarks that in phonograph recordings, as later in radio, one could ‘sound black’ though ‘be’ white, as the 1896 Supreme Court ruling Plessy vs Ferguson determined that one could look white but ‘be’ black.79 Concerned with the commodification of race, class, ethnic and national differences, Gitelman argues that demarcating boundaries of identity is as much a matter of patent and copyright laws as it is of the listener’s experience of voice—as in the production of ‘coon songs’, for example, which function to commodify authenticity.80 Minstrelsy ‘played off a contrived sense of authenticity’81 and thus the phonograph record came to market, she writes, loaded with assumptions about ‘sameness and difference, about cultural appropriation and assimilation while it also relied upon counterfeiting’,82 such that changes in laws and in technologies could not be isolated from ‘reciprocally changeable parameters of identity’.83 Whereas Gitelman is concerned with white listeners’ consumption of this sound, I am concerned with the subversion of racial authenticity and the permeability of borders that ensue when voice is divorced from sight in the sensory experience of identity.84

That slippage between the authentic and the counterfeit is, as I have argued, the special province of sound technology. ‘Minstrelsy subverted the questions of racial essentialism on which it fed,’ Gitelman remarks.85 Yet not just blackness but any audible identity is caught in this contradiction, thus verbal minstrelsy, or racial passing, becomes the paradigm for a reconfiguration of notions of identity, representation, authenticity and realness—hence, subjectivity—in sound technologies. If, as noted earlier, the ‘real thing’ is now distinct from

77 Gitelman, Scripts, Grooves, and Writing Machines, p. 18.
78 Ibid., p. 17.
79 Ibid., p. 17.
80 Ibid., p. 120.
81 Ibid., p. 133.
82 Ibid., p. 124.
83 Ibid., p. 125.
84 Like Eric Lott—on whom she draws in this section of her argument—Gitelman acknowledges that this racial sound was not solely a white construction but was also dependent on recordings of Negro spirituals, on black musical theatre and on the work of black composers and songwriters, for example (ibid., p. 135). It is the miscegenetic history of the production of that sound that I emphasise in my reading of Michelle Shocked’s album Arkansas Traveler [see Caughie, Passing and Pedagogy, pp. 15–19].
85 Gitelman, Scripts, Grooves, and Writing Machines, p. 133.
the merely realistic, as Gitelman says, that difference itself is less important than ‘the cultural operation of that distinction in the location and experience of representation’. 86

This is precisely what Sarah Wilson explores in her essay on Gertrude Stein and radio. Wilson comments that audiences were resistant to ‘actual black voices’ on American radio, 87 as the BBC audience was to women’s voices and class accents. Wilson, however, goes on to argue, as Gitelman has shown, that radio ‘had the capacity to problematize the idea of “actual black voices”’ so that the alignment of the vocal with the visual becomes ‘dangerously slippery’. 88 Speakers such as Langston Hughes and Richard Wright could identify black without sounding like Amos’n’ Andy. 89 Thus, she writes, ‘radio’s gift to the mid-century formation of race was aural confusion’. 90 Although dialect was a marker of race as well as class in American culture long before the advent of radio, it was the aural production of identity that created anxiety over—and eventually rendered irrelevant—the fidelity or fakery of that voice in relation to the speaker. Wilson’s point is that radio contributed to the instability of ‘racial positionings’, the ‘confusion of voices and identities supposedly signified by these voices’. 91 Poised to pursue this insight in order to revise visual theories of representation through sound, Wilson focuses instead on the parallels between this ‘confusion of voices and identities’ in radio and in Stein’s writings. Still, the ‘dangerously slippery’ slope that Wilson’s essay takes us down leads to a theory of aural passing.

Sound technology raises the possibility of a discrepancy, not a correspondence, between the individual and its vocal embodiment—a discrepancy central to my theory of ‘passing’. 92 The implications of the history of sound technology for class and racial identities in particular would position performers and listeners alike complexly, and uncomfortably, in relation to those we identify as, or with, in aural productions. As Sam Halliday notes in ‘Deceit, desire, and technology’, if sound technologies are used by ‘sincere’ people to generate representations of themselves, there exists the possibility that they could generate misrepresentations of themselves—a possibility that worried Harold Nicholson. 93 Halliday focuses on the connection between vocality and (mis) representation of the self (what I call ‘aural passing’), cases in which the voice

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88 Ibid., p. 274.
89 Ibid., p. 274.
90 Ibid., p. 275.
91 Ibid., p. 275.
92 Passing is ‘marked by a discrepancy between what one professes to be…and how one is actually positioned’ in society or by others (Caughie, Passing and Pedagogy, p. 25).
93 Halliday, ‘Deceit, desire, and technology’.
creates an ‘internal nonequivalence’—that is, one’s ability to dissemble oneself.94 The ‘imperative of resembling oneself’, Halliday writes, is undermined by communicative technologies and thus we face the possibility that we could resemble no-one, not even oneself: ‘Personhood passes over into its opposite, as technologies once used to fabricate identities now dissolve their very principle.’95

Halliday comes closest to articulating a theory of audible identities that has implications for passing. Yet he too hedges. Like Donald, Halliday suggests that the ‘liquidation of the person’ is the necessary consequence of ‘the imitative potential of technologies’96 and thus, citing Georg Simmel, Halliday remarks that it is easier ‘to lie to the ear than to the eye’.97 If, however, the ‘very principle’ of self-resemblance no longer pertains, if authenticity is itself a historical and technologically mediated concept, then lying, or passing in its originary usage, might no longer be the appropriate paradigm for audible identities. I draw a different lesson from Halliday’s insight. If the principle of self-resemblance no longer pertains then, as J. L. Austin writes of the performative utterance, the copula in ‘our word is our bond’ breaks down. By introducing the possibility of misfiring into our speech acts, Austin’s performative breaks the covenant between word and bond, opening a space between the ‘I’ who speaks and the ‘I’ who is the subject of that discourse. Passing becomes not just possible but inevitable in the wake of the decoupling of that copula.98 The lack of sincerity that Anderson hears in the radio voice, that Nicholson feels in his experience of broadcasting and that Simmel thinks the ear is more vulnerable to is not an attribute of the ‘I’ who speaks but is part of the ‘technological substance’ of that identity.99 Audible identities bring out into strong relief the insight that no identity is integral to itself, that gender, race, class and other cultural markers of identity are always mediated, that they are the performative effects of social practices, cultural institutions and communicative technologies that we come to embody.

The history of sound production, its raison d’être, calls into question the belief that we can get behind the voice to the real personality, the ‘real thing’—a belief that has always entailed a disavowal of the performance itself, the audible identity. ‘If it is true that through radio we hear what we are,’ writes David Hendy, ‘it is also true that to some extent we are what we hear.’100 Here Hendy brings out the reciprocal relation between sound technologies and notions of identity that Gitelman and others also emphasise but too often forget in their

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94 Ibid., p. 145.
95 Ibid., p. 151.
96 Ibid., p. 151.
97 Ibid., p. 146.
98 For a fuller discussion of this point, see Caughie, Passing and Pedagogy, pp. 4–5.
99 The phrase is Michael Taussig’s, cited in Caughie, ‘Passing as modernism’, p. 404.
100 Hendy, Radio in the Global Age, p. 214; italics in original.
own anxious efforts to hold onto the ‘real thing’ even while acknowledging that the real is historical and, as mediated by sound technologies, inseparable from its performance. It is precisely the inseparability of the identity and the performance that ‘passing’, in my use, signifies. Responding to Adorno’s argument that listening to the radio or gramophone allows for ‘greater intimacy’ and ‘a corporeal proximity’, Katie Schaag asks whether the aural experience of the human agent can then be conceived as the ‘real thing’: aural presence supplanting corporeal presence so that sound itself has its own life (as suggested by Scott’s term *phonograph*). What Schaag’s prescient question gets at is precisely the singular role of audible identities in the theory and practice of passing.

It is scholarship on passing, I propose, that opens up possibilities for an aural theory of identity (a theory passed over in so much sound scholarship) insofar as the social practice and theoretical articulations of passing introduce a rift between the embodied subject and the performance of identity—the very disjuncture that sound historians theorise in terms of social relations. In turn, cultural histories of sound provide a means for re-conceiving passing in audible rather than visual terms. Exploring the audibility and reproducibility of identity through sound technologies, as I have suggested, could be a more productive way to discuss class as well as racial identity than the visual associations of passing. Indeed, voice could be the most appropriate representation of the performative insofar as voice is more malleable than skin tone or physical form. It also has ethical implications. One can close one’s eyes—literally—and that possibility has come to figure closing one’s mind, refusing one’s attention, turning away from responsibility; but one cannot close one’s ears—at least not instantaneously or voluntarily. Perhaps aurality requires or entails a greater responsibility than visual representation because it cannot readily close off response.

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101 Katie Schaag, Email to the author, 15 March 2009.
102 After making this claim in a paper at the 2007 Modernist Studies Association, I found, on further research in *The Listener* (vol. 15, no. 376 [25 March 1936]) an article by H. Stafford Hatfield that draws this same comparison—‘we cannot shut our ears as we can our eyes’ (p. 637)—but without drawing the moral implications from this physiological difference that I do here.
Necktie nightmare: narrating gender in contemporary Japan

VERA MACKIE

Introduction

…the thing I hated most of all was the necktie.

When I wore a necktie, there was just no doubt that I was a man.

The image was of a salaryman! The mainstay of the house! The symbol of manhood!

These are the words of Nômachi Mineko in the autobiographical account of her transition from male to female. The book (adapted from a blog) appeared in late 2006 under the title O-kama dakedo OL yattemasu (I’m Queer But I’m An Office Lady). The book’s publication coincided with a range of mainstream representations of trans-gendered lives—in television dramas, documentaries, memoirs and autobiographies. The year 2006 was roughly 10 years after the prohibition of gender-reassignment surgery was lifted in Japan and this decade saw greater visibility of gender-variant individuals in the mainstream media.

Most descriptions of trans-gendered lives in Japan had, until then, placed them

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1 Research for this article was conducted as part of an Australian Research Council-funded project on ‘The Cultural History of the Body in Modern Japan’. An earlier version of this work was presented as a paper at the Symposium on ‘Passing’ at the Centre for Cross-Cultural Research, The Australian National University, Canberra, in February 2008. I am indebted to Monique Rooney and Carolyn Strange for comments on earlier drafts of this article, and to Aren Z. Aizura for continuing conversations.

2 Nômachi, Mineko 2006, O-kama dakedo OL yattemasu [I’m Queer, But I’m An Office Lady], Take Shobô, Tokyo, p. 56.

3 Ibid. I will generally refer to Nômachi as ‘she’/’her’ out of respect for her chosen gender identity. In situations where I wish to emphasise the gap between the sexed body and gendered identity, however, or where the narrative refers to different gendered identities at different times of an individual’s life, I will shift between ‘she’/’her’ and ‘he’/’him’.

4 The significance of the terms ‘o-kama’ and ‘office lady’ will be discussed in more detail below.

firmly in the entertainment industry. Nômachi’s book is unusual in presenting a performance of femininity that takes place in the least glamorous site of contemporary life—the office—in one of the least glamorous occupations: clerical work.\(^6\) By portraying a trans-gendered life in a mainstream workplace rather than contained in the entertainment industry, Nômachi provided a challenge to existing ways of representing gender variance. The tone is conversational and the text is complemented by cute, comical illustrations. With text and illustrations, there are often several parallel narratives in progress on any one page.

One might expect that the most difficult part of gendered transitioning would be the process of learning to ‘pass’ in the new gender. Brooke Kroeger has defined passing as happening when people ‘effectively present themselves as other than who they understand themselves to be’.\(^7\) This definition (embedded in her introduction) sidesteps the essentialism of her book title, *Passing: When people can’t be who they are*. Nevertheless, in my analysis of Nômachi’s text, I would like to posit an even more complex understanding of passing. On the evidence of this text, for someone who feels a gap between their sexed body and their gendered identity, passing is not a simple, unidirectional process of moving from one gender to the other. Rather, there is a series of stages of passing. First, there is the feeling of passing when one’s body does not match one’s psychic identity.\(^8\) For Nômachi, this was manifest in a hatred of the necktie, the business suit and business shoes, as seen in the epigraph to this essay. There is then a further period of passing as one assumes a new gendered identity and tries to conceal the gap between the new identity and the body. Finally, there is an element of passing involved in performing—or not—the expected rituals of heterosexual romance. As we shall see, however, passing is about narrative, discourse and shared memory as much as it is about the modification and presentation of the body.

### Situating passing

Much of the scholarly literature on passing has focused on anglophone texts, particularly those from the United States. Nella Larsen’s 1929 novel *Passing* has been subjected to several waves of scholarly interest, with recent critics focusing on the mutual imbrication of raced, classed and gendered identities and sexual orientations in the novel. The forms of passing found in such texts as this are

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\(^6\) See Masuda Eri’s cartoon portrayal of office life, in which the office worker laments that magazines run profiles of stylists and illustrators, but never the office worker in a medium-sized company. Masuda, Eri 2006, *OL wa Era* [Hooray for OLs], Bungei Shunju, Tokyo, p. 148.


intimately bound up with the particular dynamics of the relationships between the descendants of white colonisers, the descendants of slaves, indigenous people and newer immigrant groups in the United States.\(^9\) These forms of passing are also based on the logic that racialised difference can be identified through visual cues. Skin is the privileged signifier for racialised difference in the anglophone world. Similarly, it is assumed that sexed difference can be identified through visual cues, with genitalia the main focus for identifying male and female. Because genitalia are concealed in most social situations, however, secondary sexual characteristics—along with deportment, dress, hairstyle and voice production—play an important role.

These dynamics cannot simply be translated into other national contexts,\(^{10}\) but we can learn from the strategies of reading developed for these specific contexts. Identifying the particular forms of passing found in a specific local context can teach us about the fault lines and tensions concerning identity and difference in that site. Although much of the discussion of passing has focused on visual clues, recent scholarship has also identified the importance of narrative in constructing the boundaries between ‘in-groups’ and ‘out-groups’ and facilitating or hindering the possibility of ‘passing’.\(^{11}\)

There is a mutual imbrication of the concepts of passing and coming out. The act of coming out is meaningless without a prior period of concealment. This concealment, in turn, is necessitated by societal unease with ambiguities of sex and gender.\(^{12}\) The narrative of how one individual born in a male body acquired a feminine gender identity can also shed light on more mainstream performances of femininity and masculinity, where possible disjunctions between sexed body and gendered identity are not so easily perceived. This is

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\(^{11}\) See Butler’s (‘Passing, queering’, pp. 171, 176) comments on the choice not to narrate in Nella Larsen’s \textit{Passing}.

\(^{12}\) In some places, of course, unease about ambiguities of sex, gender and sexuality can lead to violence—in cases of ‘gay bashing’ or in the real-life case of the murder of Teena Brandon/Brandon Teena (dramatised in the movie \textit{Boys Don’t Cry}). See Rooney, ‘Grave endings’. See also Siri Hustvedt’s anecdote of having been mistaken for a cross-dresser: ‘In a red jumpsuit and heels, which added several inches to my already towering frame, I passed a man who began spewing insults at me. I kept walking. It took several seconds for me to digest what was happening. The man had mistaken me for a transvestite. The experience, both comic and sad, gave me a sudden insight into the venon that appearances can produce, not to speak of the often hazy line between femininity and its parodic double’ (Hustvedt, Siri 2006, ‘Eight days in a corset’, \textit{A Plea for Eros}, Hodder & Stoughton, London, p. 92).
not to say that the acquisition of gendered identity is simple for anyone. For many adults, however, gender identity seems natural. The work that has gone into the development of one’s identity as ‘man’ or ‘woman’ over a lifetime is not always easily accessible to conscious reflection. By writing about transitioning between male and female as an adult, Nômachi is able to reflect on processes that are often forgotten by the time one reaches adulthood. Nômachi’s reflections also shed light on the different gendered cultures inhabited by working men and working women in contemporary Japan—even when they ostensibly share the ‘same’ workplace.

Brooke Kroeger writes about particular forms of passing that are ‘specifically about people who pass in order to bypass being excluded unjustly in their attempts to achieve ordinary, honorable aims and ambitions’. It might seem, then, that passing is largely about an attempt to gain privileges that would otherwise be less easily accessible. This would be the case for non-whites passing as white and, in many times and places, for females passing as male. This is less clearly the case, however, for male-to-female passing. Regardless of the directionality of passing, it is, however, often racial or gendered indeterminacy that is the source of anxiety and that fuels the desire to pass.

In the case of Japan, it has often been assumed that there is a simple equation between Japanese nationality, culture, ethnicity, language and racialised identity. The use of the jus sanguinis (bloodline principle) for determining nationality reinforces the apparent ‘naturalness’ of the assumption that most people born within the boundaries of the Japanese nation-state will have Japanese nationality, speak the Japanese language, have cultural competence in

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13 Once again, Hustvedt’s reflections are instructive. Here, she is reflecting on the fact that, although she has a stable identity as a woman with no disjunction between body and gender identity, she has dreams of sexual ambiguity and in her fictional writing often adopts the persona of a male narrator. I am particularly interested in her insight that moments of uncertainty prompt the desire to resolve gender ambiguity: ‘In my waking life I’m a woman, but sometimes in my dreams I’m a man. My masculinity is rarely a question of simple anatomy. I don’t discover that I’ve sprouted a penis and am growing a beard, but rather I realize that I’m a man in the same moment I am troubled by the vague memory that I was once a woman. My sex becomes important in the dream only when it’s called into doubt. It is doubt, not certainty, that produces first the question of my sexual identity and second the need to be one thing or the other, man or woman. Although it is now fashionable to dismiss dreams as meaningless neurological chatter, I’ve discovered too much in my own sleep to believe that. It is obvious that my dreams of manliness, which turn on a moment of confusion, illuminate recesses of my own muddled psyche, but I also think that they can be used as a key to understanding the larger cultural terrain where the boundary between femininity and masculinity is articulated’ (Hustvedt, ‘Eight days in a corset’, p. 95). On different models for understanding the acquisition of gendered identities, see Connell, R. W. 2002, Gender, Polity, Cambridge, pp. 76–96.

14 Kroeger, Passing, p. 2.

15 As Aren Aizura explains, this is the reason for the common advice for those undergoing gendered transition to travel or take a holiday so that they can reappear having supposedly fully transitioned. Undertaking a gradual transition under the eyes of others would reveal the indeterminacy of gender. Aizura, Aren Z. 2009, ‘Travellers across the boundaries of sex’: travel, transnationality and trans subjectivations, Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Melbourne, pp. 41–3.
Japanese culture and will ‘look’ Japanese.16 Such assumptions of homogeneity might suggest that the concept of ‘passing’ would be redundant. Nevertheless, there are marginalised groups within Japan whose difference depends on lineage that is not discernible visually.17 The descendants of the former outcaste groups are visually indistinguishable from other Japanese, but their lineage can be revealed through probing into their family history.18 Similarly, a second or third-generation member of the Korean or Taiwanese communities who has Japanese linguistic and cultural competence might be indistinguishable from someone of Japanese lineage. Until recently, some members of these immigrant communities used Japanese-sounding names in mainstream society, in effect ‘passing’ until some inquiry into their family background or some necessity to show their identity documents revealed their different citizenship status.19 There are myriad stories of potential marriages being derailed when someone’s ancestry in the former outcaste group or in one of these immigrant communities is revealed. There are illegal underground publications that allow employers to trace whether a potential employee comes from a disadvantaged caste group. The revelation of outcaste group membership might make it difficult to gain employment, thus providing an incentive to ‘pass’.

The idea of crossing racialised boundaries has less cultural resonance in the Japanese context. Although it is possible to translate the phrase ‘to pass’ (~tôru) in Japanese, it has less currency than the equivalent phrase in English.20 The translation of Larsen’s Passing into Japanese in 2006 bears the title Shiroi Kokujin (‘White Negro’, or literally, ‘White Black Person’), suggesting that the particular

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17 See Fowler’s discussion of this issue with reference to literature about descendants of the former outcaste class in Japan. This is not to deny that there have, at times, been attempts to attribute separate racial origins to the outcaste groups; in addition, sumptuary regulations concerning dress in early modern Japan functioned to make differences of lineage visible. Fowler, Edward 2008, ‘Making up race: notes on Buraku literature in Japan’, PMLA, vol. 123, no. 5 (October), pp. 1703–6. See also Takezawa, Yasuko 2005, ‘Transcending the Western paradigm of the idea of race’, Japanese Journal of American Studies, vol. 16, pp. 10–12.
18 Indeed, the titles of several of the English-language texts on the former outcastes focus on questions of visibility and invisibility: de Vos, George and Wagatsuma, Hiroshi 1967, Japan’s Invisible Race: Caste in culture and personality, University of California Press, Berkeley; Yoshino, I. Roger 1977, The Invisible Visible Minority: Japan’s Burakumin, Buraku Kaihô Kenkyûshô, Osaka.
19 The question of the use of ‘Japanese’ or ‘Korean’ names among Korean residents in Japan is the subject of intense emotion due to the Japanese colonial policy of forcing colonial subjects to adopt Japanese names. Until recently, those who naturalised as Japanese were pressured to adopt Japanese-sounding names. Nevertheless, some members of the current generation are adopting hybrid names that provide clues to their complex heritage—a theme that is beyond the scope of this essay. On the intellectual debates among members of the Korean resident community in Japan, see Chapman, David 2008, Zainichi Korean Ethnicity and Identity, Routledge, London. In Japanese, see, in particular, the works of Kang Sang-jun, including his autobiographical reflection, Zainichi, 2008, Shûeisha, Tokyo.
20 Kroeger (Passing, p. 4) suggested that the term was probably first used in the United States to denote African Americans who ‘passed’ for white.
form of passing described in the novel needs some explanation to an audience relatively unfamiliar with US cultural history. (The word ‘passing’ appears in Roman text on the cover under the Japanese-language title.)

With respect to the crossing of gendered boundaries, there are several Japanese cultural forms where men play women or women play men, such as the kabuki theatre or the Takarazuka musical theatre. There are also specialised bars where the service staff are trans-gendered or cross-dressed. This is, however, largely a feature of the entertainment sector, and there is less toleration of gender ambiguity in the everyday spheres of the home or the office, as evidenced by the focus on passing in recent autobiographical and fictional texts on the trans-gendered experience. Indeed, the dynamics of gendered masquerade in the entertainment industry are quite specific. Part of the pleasure in the spectacle is the knowledge of the gap between sexed body and gendered performance. In everyday passing, this gap between sexed body and gendered performance is precisely the source of anxiety for the passer. There could also, of course, be pleasures involved in successful passing. It is gendered passing that is the focus of Nômachi’s book.

Passing as male

In high school and university, Nômachi lived as an ‘effeminate man’, with very little apparent trouble. Fellow students appear to have accepted the rather ambiguous personal presentation of a young man in jeans, T-shirt, sneakers and with long hair, a slim body and soft features. Nômachi had created the persona of ‘a man with a feminine persona, but not a queer’. Gradually, however, Nômachi starts to want to experiment with a more feminised self-presentation and moves out of home, away from the gaze of the family.

Once the process of transitioning is under way, Nômachi starts to remember incidents that prefigured the ultimate decision to undertake a gendered transition. An early sign of unease with masculine gender identity was a
reluctance to use first-person pronouns. In the Japanese language, there are several alternative first-person pronouns, depending on the gender of the speaker, the formality of the utterance and the relationship between speaker and hearer. In each conversation, individuals will choose between alternative pronouns depending on these factors.27 Once boys reach a certain age, they start to adopt the most clearly masculine of these pronouns in informal situations. The pronouns in question in Nômachi’s narrative are ‘ore’ (informal first-person pronoun, generally used by males), ‘boku’ (first-person pronoun, generally used by males) and ‘watashi’ (first-person pronoun, which can be used by either males or females). For Nômachi, however, the need to choose between these pronouns was traumatic—a trauma that could be explained only retrospectively in the context of a narrative about gender transition.

You know, when you get to about second grade of primary school, all your friends start to pose and say ‘ore’? I also thought I’d better start to call myself ‘ore’. Because I didn’t like my weak and skinny self, I thought I had to act more manly.

But I just could not say it. Somehow I was just too embarrassed. I continued to call myself ‘boku’.

It’s as if I was held back by the intense feeling that the word ‘ore’ was a word that someone like me, who wasn’t very masculine, had no right to use.

When I went into junior high school, and was in a different environment, I decided that now was the time to refer to myself as ‘ore’, but when I tried to say it I became really tense and the word just wouldn’t come out. I could only get as far as saying ‘o–’, became even more embarrassed, my face went red, and I couldn’t take in my surroundings.

In a way, you could say that this was a sort of experience of trauma. But maybe it’s not really serious enough to use the word trauma.

Anyway, I never did manage to call myself ‘ore’, and for some reason I even became embarrassed to refer to myself as ‘boku’. So, from middle school till the time I became a woman, I couldn’t use first person pronouns.

It’s actually quite inconvenient when you can’t use first person pronouns.28


28 Nômachi, O-kama dakedo OL yattemasu, p. 44.
On graduation from university, Nômachi entered a company where it was necessary to commute to work in suit and tie, with a short, masculine haircut. In other words, Nômachi had to perform masculinity. We have seen above Nômachi’s extreme reaction to the experience of living as someone with a male sexed body who also has to ‘pass’ as someone with a masculine gender identity. On having to wear a business suit and a necktie—symbols of mainstream masculinity—Nômachi suffers an almost physical reaction. These times are described as the ‘dark days of the necktie’ and the workplace is the ‘necktie nightmare company’. The necktie is a particularly potent symbol of masculinity. For Nômachi, however, the necktie might just as well have been a noose. The hated necktie could be seen as a metaphor for the male body that Nômachi is in the process of rejecting: ‘I really hated the necktie. When I went to work I would have my necktie in my briefcase and would put it on when I got to work. When I went home I would take off my necktie the moment I left the building.’

The unease caused by wearing masculine dress is highlighted on the cover of the book, which shows a figure morphing from masculine to feminine, tearing off the necktie, kicking off the business shoes and finally appearing with long hair, wearing a sleeveless shirt and skirt and casual slip-on sandals. The figure in feminine dress has arms outstretched in an expression of joy, grinning from ear to ear.

Eventually, Nômachi decides to leave the company and go to design school, where it will be possible to pursue creative activities and also to experiment with new forms of identity and self-presentation. It becomes necessary to find an acceptable way of communicating this decision to others. In rejecting the necktie and the ‘salaryman’ (sarariman) model of masculinity, Nômachi was, in effect, rejecting the hegemonic form of masculinity in postwar Japan.

The problem was how to respond when I was asked ‘why are you leaving?’ and ‘what are you going to do?’

Of course I couldn’t say ‘because I hate wearing a tie’. And I hadn’t really thought about what I would do next…

I said ‘I’m thinking of going back to school and studying design’.

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29 Ibid., p. 59.
30 Ibid., p. 62.
31 ‘Neckties, which hang down and are not worn by women, are a definitely male symbol’ (Freud, Sigmund 1973 [1916], ‘Symbolism in dreams’, Introductory Lectures in Psychoanalysis, Translated by James Strachey, Pelican, Harmondsworth, p. 191).
32 Nômachi, O-kama dakedo OL yattemasu, p. 59.
Actually that was the truth. But the reason wasn't so much that 'I want to study design; that's what I'm interested in', but rather 'In the design field I wouldn't need to wear a tie'. At that time, the basic criterion was whether I had to wear a tie or not...

When I think about it now it was quite reckless, but at that time I was just delighted at escaping from wearing a tie.34

Nômachi returns to student life and makes the decision to live as a woman, rather than as a man of ambiguous gender. In order for Nômachi to gain employment in her feminine persona, some tactics are necessary. Nômachi applies to the court to change her given name to one that is androgynous. Because Nômachi had attended coeducational schools and colleges, there was little necessity to fudge the details of her curriculum vitae. She uses her driver’s licence as proof of identity, as this, unlike most other identity documents in Japan, does not specify the gender of the individual. By applying for casual work, rather than permanent full-time work, she can be employed with less stringent identity checks. Eventually, she gains employment as a female clerical worker, known colloquially and stereotypically in the Japanese language as an ‘office lady’ (OL).35

She is transformed from a ‘salaryman’—the archetypal form of masculinity in postwar Japan—to an ‘office lady’, one of the salary man’s feminised others.36 In transitioning to a feminine identity, Nômachi takes on some of the insecurities of women in the contemporary labour market. This insecurity is compounded when she takes on non-regular, non-permanent employment because of the need to conceal some aspects of her personal history.37 In other words, she can ‘pass’ more effectively, but at some cost.

34 Nômachi, O-kama dakedo OL yattemasu, p. 62.
36 This parallelism is apparent in the illustrations on the back cover of the book. The ‘before’ illustration shows a suited man with a briefcase walking towards a nondescript building labelled ‘Office’. The ‘after’ illustration shows a skirted woman with a handbag walking towards the same nondescript building labelled ‘Office’.
37 This is one of the reasons why trans-gendered people are often found in the entertainment and hospitality sectors rather than more mainstream occupations. Nômachi also explores the possibility of working in a bar as a hostess, but discovers that for all but a few ‘stars’ the pay is even less than that of a clerical worker. Nômachi, O-kama dakedo OL yattemasu, pp. 94–9.
Transitioning

Nômachi’s modification of her dress, deportment and hairstyle and her use of cosmetics reveal the constructedness of masculinity and femininity. In a double-page spread with the English-language title ‘How to be a lady’ (in Japanese, ‘Sutekinarendi ni naru tameni’), she outlines the steps she needs to undergo in order to be transformed into a woman. Step one is to remove the beard through electrolysis. Step two concerns language and gestures; Nômachi advises against the overuse of ‘feminine’ styles of speech. Step three advises on wearing skirts: they conceal the shape of the body more effectively than trousers, but it becomes necessary to deal with leg hair; it is also advisable to wear a style and length of skirt suitable to one’s age. Step four involves make-up, with advice on not wearing too much make-up. Step five concerns sweets: forget that there are some women who do not like sweets; it is advisable to profess a liking for sweets, to share them with workmates and to keep up to date with the latest sweet products.\footnote{Popular cultural representations of so-called ‘office ladies’ reinforce Nômachi’s understanding of gendered behaviour. Such comic texts as Masuda Eri’s OL wa erai (Hooray for OLs) include scenes of the purchase, consumption and exchange of sweets. Here, however, sweets have the purpose of forging relationships through exchange and sharing.} Step six involves changing spectacles to a more feminine style. Step seven involves joining in gossip about other women.\footnote{Nômachi, O-kama dakedo OL yattemasu, pp. 64–6.} The process thus concerns the modification of the body, the training of the body and the adoption of behaviour gendered as feminine. Except perhaps for the removal of facial hair, most of the advice would also be applicable to women born as female but who nevertheless wish to emphasise their femininity.\footnote{Aren Z. Aizura demonstrates that there is no clear dividing line between, for example, cosmetic surgery and some of the surgical modification of secondary sexual characteristics carried out in association with sex/gender-reassignment surgery. Aizura, Aren Z. 2009, ‘Where health and beauty meet: femininity, cosmetic surgery and racialisation in Thailand’, Asian Studies Review, pp. 305–6.} In other parts of the text, Nômachi provides an introduction to the argot of the trans-gendered world, introducing such phrases as ‘full-time’ or ‘part-time’ for those who live as the opposite gender for all or part of their lives.\footnote{Nômachi, O-kama dakedo OL yattemasu, pp. 40–1.}

Nômachi’s ‘baritone’ voice is at first a problem but much can be achieved by the modulation of pitch and intonation. She is pleased when she can ‘pass’ as female on the telephone, without the cues of her feminised visual presentation. Nevertheless, there are some limits to social and cultural construction. Most individuals learn to modulate the pitch of their voice quite effectively and much of the difference in pitch between masculine and feminine speech styles is due to voice production rather than vocal chords. Hiccupping and sneezing, however, apparently reveal the limits of conscious control and Nômachi must
learn to suppress these involuntary eruptions. Nômachi’s book thus traces the steps to be undertaken in order to live convincingly as a woman or, in other words, to pass.

**Passing as female**

The narrative of Nômachi Mineko’s life as a female clerical worker is shaped by the fear of being unmasked as a trans-gendered individual. The frontispiece of the book shows a cartoon of a woman with an accusatory expression and the word *mitsukatta*! (‘gotcha!’). That is, Nômachi is afraid that her workmates will discern the gap between his sexed body and her performance of feminine gendered identity. The book opens with Nômachi’s self-introduction, accompanied by cartoon illustrations. The self-introduction is a patterned ritual in Japanese society, but Nômachi’s self-introduction has a surprising twist. Of course, this is for the purposes of the blog and the book. In the real office, the imperative to pass was much stronger than the desire to be witty. The reader of the autobiographical text is placed in the position of someone who shares access to privileged knowledge, which is denied to Nômachi’s workmates. This is a common feature of passing narratives, as Monique Rooney notes. While the act of passing can be revealed in the textual space, there is a gap between the knowledge available to the spectators of passing within the text and the knowledge available to the readers of the text:

> Pleased to meet you. I am Nômachi Mineko.
> I work as an OL [office lady] in the city, but actually, I have a dick.
> Nobody in the company knows this.
> I spend every day as an ordinary female employee.

Nômachi’s anxiety is clearly spatialised. At home, she can lounge around naked or semi-naked, free from the inquiring eyes that might focus on the ambiguities of her body. The office is the space where she experiences the threat of disclosure and thus she can allow no lapse in control of her clothing, deportment or the modulation of her voice: ‘When I first entered [the company], my heart was pounding from worrying that the fact that I had a dick would be revealed somehow. Well, I’m still uneasy even now.’

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42 Ibid., pp. 16–19, 92–3.
43 ‘The narrative of passing is in this sense very different from the practice of passing itself, which if successful, never acknowledges or looks back upon a prepassing identity. By contrast, passing narratives anatomise the body and become hyper-aware of its constitutive parts. They *draw attention* to the fractured and disempowered but fetishised role of the marginalised subject’ (Rooney, ‘Grave endings’).
45 Ibid., p. 16.
In the office, the threat of the revelation of the gap between body and gender identity does not focus primarily on the body itself, but rather on discourse and memory. Nômachi is anxious when she is unable to join in on discussions of schoolgirl memories—about experiences of adjusting school uniforms to the current fashion or the wearing of particular fashions such as loose, long socks. The mention of swimsuits also causes anxiety, for Nômachi’s experiences are of wearing bathing trunks rather than feminine swimsuits. Nômachi also worries that the women in the office will discuss menstruation in her presence—something of which she has had and will have no experience. Should she pretend to share the experience or should she claim some menstrual irregularity? She buys the relevant products to satisfy her curiosity, although she will surely have no need to use them. Despite her fears, this discussion rarely eventuates. The only occasion is when a female workmate uses a conventional euphemism to explain her absence the previous day. Because of Nômachi’s unfamiliarity with the relevant euphemisms, there is an awkward moment until Nômachi can decode the comment.

These scenes reveal that gender identity relies on the narration of shared experiences. A person who is unable to share in the exchange of stories will not be interpellated as belonging to that group and will not recognise him or herself in these narrative exchanges. This is also likely to be true of those who have a relatively stable gender identity throughout their lives, but is brought into relief by Nômachi’s account of someone who cannot take these shared memories for granted. The question of shared narratives has also been shown to be important in other discussions of passing. In Nômachi’s case, it is the need to join in on particular narratives that is emphasised. At other times, however, the choice not to contribute to conversations about shared experiences is equally important. That is, someone passing as female might choose not to join in on men’s conversations, even if they have had similar experiences in their former identity. In Nômachi’s text, the choice not to narrate becomes apparent when she attends a drag show with workmates and suppresses her ‘insider’ knowledge about the trans-gendered world.

**Straightening and queering**

Nômachi’s narrative is also one of emerging sexual orientation. She moves from being someone who has a masculine gender identity and an apparent attraction to females (the so-called ‘opposite sex’) to being someone who has a feminine gender identity and an attraction to males (once again, the so-called ‘opposite’

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46 Ibid., pp. 30–1.
48 Ibid., pp. 122–3. See Judith Butler’s (‘Passing, queering’, pp. 171, 176) comments on the choice not to narrate in Nella Larsen’s *Passing*. 
sex). For Nômachi, however, the ‘truth’ of her sexual orientation is in the body. As a young man, he enjoyed spending time with certain women—a pleasure that he understood as a romantic attachment. He never, however, felt any physical manifestations of desire and later reinterpreted these attachments as friendships rather than romantic relationships. Indeed, the young Nômachi had an extreme physical revulsion when he attempted to sleep with one woman. At this stage of his life, he also rejected a sexual approach from a man. Later, when living as a woman, Nômachi embarks on romantic relationships with men. The ‘truth’ of her attraction to men is once again revealed by her bodily reactions, when she feels a ‘tingle’ (kyu~n) at the touch of an attractive male.\(^{49}\) Before the decision to transition, Nômachi wondered if he might be gay, as there was no other culturally intelligible way to interpret his reluctance to become physically intimate with a woman and the positive feelings that went along with romantic attention from a man.\(^{50}\)

Nômachi’s retrospective reflections on sexual attraction reveal the extent to which the categories deployed in everyday taxonomies of ‘sex’, ‘sexuality’ and ‘sexual orientation’/’sexual preference’ are mutually dependent. The category of ‘heterosexual’, for example, is meaningless unless there is an individual of stable female sex and feminine gender identity who is attracted to an individual of stable male sex and masculine gender identity, and vice versa. Similarly, the category of ‘homosexual’ is meaningless unless there is an individual of stable male sex and masculine gender identity who is attracted to an individual of similarly stable male sex and masculine gender identity. Furthermore, the category of ‘lesbian’ is meaningless unless there is an individual of stable female sex and feminine gender identity who is attracted to an individual of similarly stable female sex and feminine gender identity.\(^{51}\) In everyday discourse about sexuality, which assumes a neat categorisation of ‘homosexual’ and ‘heterosexual’, the destabilisation of any one of these categories will cause the others to fall apart.

In mainstream narratives of trans-gender identity, the patterns of normative gender identity and heteronormativity are largely preserved.\(^{52}\) Those with the condition known as ‘gender dysphoria’ are encouraged to perform normative


\(^{50}\) Ibid., p. 54.


\(^{52}\) Here I am referring to the presentation of gender variance in medical discourse and in media and popular culture genres, which largely follow the medicalised discourse. As mentioned above, there are rich genres of alternative culture that challenge binary models of sex and gender. There are also ‘queer’ and post-structuralist schools of gender and sexuality studies that take a critical approach to binary models. See, for example, Ishida, Hitoshi (ed.) 2008, Sei Dōitsu Shōgai: Jendā, Iryō, Tokurei Hô [Gender Identity Disorder: Gender, medicine
femininity (in the case of male to female) to adjust their body to that of a normative female (once again, in the case of male to female) and to follow the patterns of hetero-normativity. Nômachi’s story follows this pattern. In order to be rendered intelligible and thus marketable to mainstream audiences, there are generic constraints on how much ‘queering’ can take place. By ‘queering’, I mean the deconstructive and activist technique of resisting binary classificatory systems.

Narrative is also an important artefact of the clinical treatment of individuals who wish to obtain gender-reassignment surgery. They must construct a coherent narrative that meets the requirements of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) definition of Gender Identity Disorder (GID) and convince conservative medical practitioners of their desire to meet the requirements of heteronormativity once they have transitioned. The text provides little challenge to heteronormativity as Nômachi, in her feminine identity, seeks romantic attachments with men, who are now the ‘opposite’ sex. The narrative is of a progression towards the decision to modify her body so that it will match her imagined gender identity. The real surgical procedures are not portrayed in this volume, although the narrator is preparing herself for such procedures in the future.

**Coming out**

The text under consideration here is a narrative of ‘passing’—indeed, as shown above, of multiple forms of ‘passing’. The readers of the text are provided with a narrative of successful passing. Readers are also treated to the revelation of Nômachi’s anxieties about passing—anxieties that cannot be revealed to Nômachi’s workmates. The text describes a constant fear of unmasking, although Nômachi’s performance as a female office worker is largely successful. It is only in the privacy of Nômachi’s own room that the gap between identity and body can be confronted. There are, however, some confidants who are trusted with the truth of Nômachi’s situation. Nômachi comes out to her family, to a close female friend and to potential male romantic partners. She also has to

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54 Aizura, ‘Travellers across the boundaries of sex’.

discuss her situation with medical practitioners in order to obtain the diagnosis of Gender Identity Disorder, which is the first step towards receiving approval for surgical intervention.

Nômachi comes out to her mother in the family home, in front of the television. They had been watching a Korean serial, a genre of television program that was highly popular in Japan at that time. Bae Yon-jun, the star of the series *Winter Sonata*, was the focus of the heterosexual fantasies of many female viewers. He was popularly known as Yon-sama. ‘Yon-sama’ makes a cameo appearance in Nômachi’s coming out story:

Just then, the drama had got to the point where ‘Yon-sama’ (I think) was going to his fiancée’s parent’s house to pay his respects. My mother just said in passing, ‘Well, in the future when you find a bride you’ll have to go and do the same.’

Maybe this was my chance. ‘No way.’

‘What are you talking about? That’s what will happen in the future.’

‘No. No way.’

‘Well, you might think that now, but…’

‘Really, it won’t happen.’ I must have said this in quite a determined tone of voice, for my mother seemed shocked and there was silence for some time. I broke the silence and said, ‘I’m seeing a psychiatrist.’ I wasn’t brave enough to broach the topic directly, so this was how I embarked on my coming out. I just wasn’t brave enough to open with the punch of naming the illness.

But coming out as seeing a psychiatrist had its effect. There was a feeling of tension in the room, and my mother said ‘What? What’s the matter?’ She pressed the remote control and turned off the ‘Yon-sama drama’.

Yon-jun. Thanks for your help. You played your role.

It is significant that it is a scene of heterosexual courtship that prompts the important discussion between Nômachi and his mother. The breaking point for Nômachi is when his mother expresses the expectation that Nômachi will one day act out the roles of boyfriend, fiancé and eventually husband and father. It is at this point that questions of individual identity come into conflict with

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56 The fact that there is a special category of ‘Korean’ serial highlights the assumptions of cultural homogeneity in the Japanese broadcasting system and in the culture at large. Nômachi and his mother occupy the unmarked category of ‘Japanese’ while watching the drama that is marked as being of ‘Korean’ origin, and Bae Yong-jun (‘Yon-sama’) is marked as being a ‘Korean’ actor. On the so-called ‘Korean wave’, see Chua, Beng Huat and Iwabuchi, Kôichi (eds) 2008, *East Asian Popular Culture: Analysing the Korean wave*, Hong Kong University Press.

societal expectations concerning marriage and family life. Trans-gendered lives challenge current societal expectations that all adult citizens will enter into heterosexual marriages and create reproductive family units. Indeed, as noted above, trans-gendered lives challenge the very categories of heterosexual and homosexual. Operations that modify the sexual organs are seen to be problematic because they affect the individual’s reproductive capacity. Participating in family life and contributing to the reproduction of the next generation are also assumed to be part of the citizen’s contribution to the Japanese national community. To wilfully modify one’s reproductive capacity and to refuse to participate in reproductive activity can seem to be a renunciation of the duties of citizenship in a nation-state where there are concerns about the reproduction of the population.58

Naming

Nômachi’s book provides readers with insight into the trans-gendered world through providing a double-page spread of definitions of words that are in use in the trans-gender subculture but need explanation for ‘mainstream’ audiences—some rather tongue-in-cheek. There are various degrees of passing, described in Japanese adaptations of English loan words, which are given further refinement in the production of compound phrases that mix the loan words with Japanese vocabulary and grammatical endings: pasu suru (to pass), kanpasu (to pass perfectly), obapasu (to pass convincingly as a middle-aged woman), busupasu (to pass as an ugly woman—with a disclaimer about what an unpleasant word this is), koepasu (to pass as having a feminine voice). The obverse of passing is riido sareru (to be ‘read’ or, in other words, to be found out). Other glosses are on coming out or not (non kamu).59

There is one way, however, in which Nômachi’s book challenges mainstream discourses. This is in the choice to refer to her non-normative identity as ‘o-kama’. In the Japanese language, the word ‘o-kama’ is a sometimes-derogatory term used for a so-called effeminate man. In popular discourses of gender and sexuality, there is a collapsing of various non-normative behaviours, such as a man who ‘fails’ to present a suitably masculine demeanour, a man who cross-dresses and a man who is attracted to other men. This term has become controversial, with some refusing its use as derogatory and confusing because of its collapsing of the categories of sex, gender and sexual orientation, and some trying to claim new meanings for the term.60

Nômachi bravely refers to herself as ‘o-kama’ because of an intense dislike of the Japanese-language term for ‘gender dysphoria’ (sei dōitsu sei shōgai; literally, ‘gender identity handicap’) — a term that not only medicalises the condition, but renders it as a disability. Nômachi apologises to those who dislike the term ‘o-kama’, but explains why this is a less problematic term for her, at least in self-reference. She does not like others to call her ‘o-kama’, however, perhaps because of their likely negative tone.61

In Nômachi’s book, there is little discussion of the term ‘OL’ (office lady), perhaps reflecting Nômachi’s implicit aim to live as a woman with a conventional feminine gender identity. She pursues one of the most highly gendered occupations, with little reflection on the gendered discourses and structures that channel some women into such an occupation. Perhaps these contradictions are inseparable from the trans-gendered condition, which provides some challenge to the heteronormative sex–gender system, but at the same time can be reclaimed and recuperated into conventional gender norms. Similarly, the act of narrating multiple forms of passing between masculine and feminine identities challenges mainstream understandings of sex, gender and sexuality; but the successful act of passing provides no challenge to these mainstream understandings.

Conclusions

Bringing trans-gendered narratives into the mainstream spheres of the mass-market book publication industry has an important function in contributing to the recognition of the belonging of such individuals in contemporary Japanese society and culture. These narratives are, however, subject to the generic constraints of the various media. In mainstream media, there is often an assimilative and recuperative impulse, with a focus on those individuals who successfully ‘pass’ and who thus uphold the conventions of the binary sex–gender system and heteronormativity. Such representations of successful transitioning and passing work to banish uneasiness about sexual and gender ambiguity.62 The framing of narratives of trans-gendered experiences according to medicalised discourses provides further generic constraints, pushing the narratives into a pattern of the overcoming of ‘barriers’.63


62 There are other cultural spheres where such ambiguities are rather celebrated and revelled in. There is a huge body of work in graphic novels, including ‘slash’ (yaoi) texts, in which sexual and gender ambiguity are celebrated. See also Longinotto, Kim and Jano Williams (dirs) 1997, Shinjuku Boys, Twentieth Century Vixen for the BBC, London.

63 The national broadcaster, NHK, devotes significant time to documentary programs on ‘living with disability’, includes lessons on sign language alongside other language programs, and provides news bulletins
Narratives of trans-gendered experiences also provide new understandings of the creation of gendered identities. They reveal that gendered identity is not only a matter of performance and performativity, it is a matter of narrative and of shared memories, a matter of ‘reading’ and being ‘read’. Thus, such narratives can also shed light on the acquisition of more conventional gendered identities and the overlapping of discourses of sex, gender, sexuality and embodiment with discourses of citizenship and belonging. Nômachi’s autobiographical narrative reveals the complexities of ‘passing’ and ‘coming out’ and demonstrates that all identities can involve forms of ‘passing’.64

Finally, by placing this analysis alongside the discussion of ‘passing’ narratives from other national contexts, we can demonstrate that each text has to be considered in its specific local context. While we can develop strategies of reading with reference to these other localised readings, we can also see that the dynamics of gender, sex, sexuality, class, ethnicity and racialised identity are played out in distinctive ways in each local context. Nômachi’s text is produced in the context of a stratified labour market and embedded in gendered forms of national identification. The forms of ‘passing’ to be found in specific sites also provide insight into the forms of identity that are marginalised, the dimensions of difference that are the source of anxiety and the forms of indeterminacy that are the focus of concealment and that give rise to the practices of passing. Nômachi’s narrative of transitioning, multiple forms of passing and coming out can be read for insights into trans-gendered lives in contemporary Japan—and also for insights into the production of more mainstream forms of gender identification in that society.


Monique Rooney: Let’s start by talking about how we might think of Forbidden Lies as a film about ‘passing’. Your film interests me because it explores passing in a very contemporary socio-cultural context. If we think about the black person who passed for white in the pre-civil rights United States, or the Jew who passed as a gentile during the Nazi regime, then the passer in those cultural contexts is someone who escapes persecution or racial prejudice or prosecution. In your film, passing is not so much about escaping as it is about claiming an identity that turns out to be (at least partly) fraudulent. Norma Khouri/Bagain Toliopoulos presents herself as a Jordanian refugee in order to market and lend authenticity to her book about honour killings. There have been other similar cases—Helen Darville, for instance, who presented herself as Ukrainian to sell her book about the Holocaust; there’s also J. T. LeRoy/Laura Albert, the subject of an essay in this journal issue.

Anna Broinowski: We have a couple in Australia too.

MR: Yes, Helen Darville/Demidenko…

AB: Paul R. Radley, Leon Carmen, who passed himself off as Aboriginal woman Wanda Koolmatrie—and, of course, Ern Malley.

MR: So what do you make of Norma’s role in this context? Do you see her as a passer? Why is her identity fraud successful and marketable? How can presenting yourself as a ‘refugee’ who has been victimised be an empowering thing?

AB: She is the classic misery memoirist, in that it was her victim status that gave her the glamour and the fame, and to understand Norma you need to understand the environment that allowed her to flourish, and it was…two things: one was that she is of the Jerry Springer generation, so this is a generation that cashes in on public misery. The importance of what you have suffered increases with the number of people who know about it. So the more famously you can declare

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1 Interview conducted 15 May 2009.
your suffering, the more of a celebrity you become. It’s a badge. And she’s very much an American in that way—she sees nothing wrong in telling as many people as possible what she went through.

MR: And her story is in many ways a rags-to-riches tale.

AB: And of course it’s all a lie—we’ll get on to that. So there’s that environment—a telegenic kind of culture that was totally geared up for exposing people like Norma, and shedding tears and making money out of the story. Then there is the environment of the build-up towards the Iraq invasion. So the Norma Khouri identity that Norma Bagain Toliopoulos constructed for herself was constructed in that period just before 9/11 and just before the Iraq war.

MR: She had impeccable timing.

AB: And it was a time in which there was an absolute explosion of Western interest in the Middle East. And the publishers were very much at the forefront of people trying to cash in on that. So there were a slew of misery memoirs featuring repressed-looking burqa-clad women on the covers—a kind of Middle Eastern kitsch Mills and Boon culture. And it wasn’t so much the real Middle East, as ‘Middle East Inc.’, which is like a Western commodified, packageable, saleable image of the Middle East that Western readers were hungry to know about. Why? Because George Bush, one of the lines he was pushing at the time was, ‘We will go in there to liberate their women.’ And because there were a whole lot of middle-class readers in the West—America and Australia and elsewhere—who were feeling guilty about the idea that we should go and kill people and throw bombs on them, it assuaged their guilt to feel that somehow there was a feminist motivation behind this invasion, to free these repressed women from these tyrannical, misogynistic, barbaric, backwards Arab males.

MR: Yes, and it’s a rhetoric that can also be deployed to justify the ‘liberation’ process. That is, in the logic of a George W. Bush, the freeing of Jordanian women can be represented as the ultimate goal of a liberal democracy.

AB: Exactly. So Norma’s book *Forbidden Love* completely cashed in on that. The characters in *Forbidden Love* are not realistic. They are archetypes. Dalia is the beautiful, repressed woman who can’t even leave the house without being accompanied by her brother, and of course gets stabbed 12 times by her father and brothers when it is discovered she is having an illicit love affair with a Christian man. Yes, Dalia was Muslim, he was Christian. The men are uniformly—apart from the lover Michael, the Christian, who is a cheesy kind of hero, an upstanding fine soldier and good Christian, who loves Dalia and all they did is kiss, they didn't even fuck—apart from him, all the men are brutal, tyrannical, two-dimensional and exactly what the West had come to believe was the truth about Arab men. Now it was a complete construct and Norma cashed
in on it by then passing herself off as the victim of this tale, who was running to the West to tell the world, to avenge her best friend’s death by telling the world about this awful thing that was happening in the Middle East—as if only in the Middle East are there honour killings against women. And Norma the thirty-five-year-old, cheesecloth-wearing, make-up-free Jordanian virgin went on a five-star junket tour courtesy of Random House and Transworld and Simon & Schuster—three huge names in publishing—through the UK, America and Australia, who become complicit in promoting this vision of the Middle East. And all you have to do is look at the cover of Forbidden Love—that’s what she was passing herself off as.

**MR:** That’s interesting—that is, that Norma was passing as a victim given that what your film exposes, to me anyway, is not a victim but Norma as this manipulative, conniving opportunist; and she’s also a performer in the film, she manages to keep her act up right through to the end. It’s almost as if what we are faced with in the film is a Norma who can’t be honest and she keeps the lying up in a way that is quite skilful and in a way that keeps the viewer guessing, keeps you wanting to know. It seemed to me, too, that she knows how to play a part through a kind of mirroring process; it’s as if she’s holding up a mirror to her viewer/reader, constructing an image that she knows we want to see, such as the West’s image of Jordan. What really impressed me about the film was how forthright you as the director were; I loved the scenes for instance when you said, ‘Come on, Norma, I know you’re lying.’ I wonder then if you could talk about your role as a film-maker here and how you see your own professional boundaries in relation to your filmed subject. At what point do you decide to push and where do you pull back? Is there a kind of a dance going on?
AB: There is—and it’s very much the female version of the Frank Abegnale bio-pic *Catch Me If You Can*, which, incidentally, is Norma’s favourite movie. It’s a mental chess game, which I made literal in one scene and had us actually playing a game of chess, because that was really the metaphor for our relationship. We like each other—we still like each other—but we don’t trust each other at all, and that’s actually one of the reasons we like each other because it’s scintillating to be in each other’s company, it’s a fascinating game that we play. It is all about not trusting each other but it’s also a battle of wits.

MR: Did you find her threatening at times?

AB: No, because I realised early on that Norma’s style, while it’s dissembling and mellifluous, it’s not violent. I only feared for my safety with Norma once and after that I realised I was safe with her. But what you’ve unearthed is a minefield of ethical theory in documentary, which is the relationship between subject and film-maker.

MR: Which in some ways doubles the relationship between author and reader.

AB: Janet Malcolm’s book *The Journalist and the Murderer* is a touchstone for me, because really what she says at the very beginning is that if any journalist is honest with themselves they’ll admit that they are lying to their subject, that they make the subject think that they are going to recreate the subject’s true story, but in fact all writers are using the subject as material, or fodder, for their own take on the frailty of human life. And there’s another saying I’m very fond of which is ‘The art of a good documentary portrait is to gain your subject’s trust, and then betray them’. And in Norma’s case it was doubly twisted because I had to gain her trust and then allow her to betray me. I realised that the key to Norma was the fact that she would betray me. So when I say that to audiences, I mean this in a facetious way; it’s like an Oscar Wildean thing, it’s meant to be a bit of a joke, a provocative statement. In San Francisco, there was a whole bunch of old-guard documentary film-makers who still subscribe to the ‘direct cinema’ approach to film-making, who didn’t like me talking in this way at all. Direct cinema is basically the idea that the film-maker must be completely invisible, that they must hide their presence, they must have no ego, they must not intrude on the narrative, they must just use the camera as a recorder, as a notebook, just to objectively capture reality. And there’s a kind of moral superiority that goes with that attitude, which is ‘how dare we intrude on reality with our egos, we are bigger than that’. Of course, it’s a complete conceit.

MR: Because it assumes an impossibly neutral or supremely detached position?

AB: It’s impossible. If you look at any of the films by the practitioners of direct cinema—such as Maysles, Coppel, Wiseman—it’s completely constructed, because in order to create the semblance of truth, the technical tricks involved
are quite complex. You have to have cutaways that you shoot later, you have to deliberately make sure the sound is crappy to convey a sense of authenticity. It’s just as constructed as what I did. So anyway, I offended a lot of people with my approach in *Forbidden Lies*, because what I decided to do was just fly in the face of all that and say, listen, we are now post-*Big Brother*, post-reality TV, YouTube. All audiences understand whenever they see a piece of footage that the person in that footage—unless it’s a hidden camera—is aware of the camera. Therefore, why not use all the tricks that we use, but let the audience be aware of them? They are sophisticated enough now to appreciate that if you’re going to trick them, and then show them how you did it, they like that, that’s refreshing. So from the very beginning the presence of the camera was always acknowledged. And you can see it from the very opening shot—it begins with a film crew—and Norma’s awareness of the camera was always acknowledged, it had to be, because she’s a performer.

*MR:* And you’ve got those great scenes where she’s lying on the bed playing with the digital camera, performing her own role as a performer, self-mythologiser and self-dramatiser. This is interesting to think about vis-a-vis the passer—a figure who (to a greater or lesser degree) wants to play around with but also evade her own public visibility. The passer is, in this sense, a shape-shifter, a trickster figure.
AB: Norma is a consummate performer, she is a Scheherazade of the digital age, she constantly spins stories to stave off her own execution. And yes, in one sense, in Forbidden Lies the roles of con artist and film-maker are one and the same. I have to finally lie to her to get her to tell the truth; and all the way through while I was filming her, as you can see in several shots, she’s directing her own little film.

MR: A film within a film.

AB: A film within a film, which becomes part of the film when halfway through the edit there I was with 200 hours of footage, scratching my head in despair with the editor saying, ‘We’ve got parallel Normas; we’ve got the likeable, believable pleasant Norma, who’s basically 90 per cent of the time presented herself to my camera. And then we’ve got the scheming, evil, manipulative, confabulist, who the FBI has talked about, the journalists have talked about, and the Chicago prosecutor has talked about. And that Norma has cleverly avoided being captured by my camera. What are we going to do, because we know that these are the two sides to her, but we don’t have footage of her evil twin.’ And then halfway through the edit this tiny little digital tape arrives from Chicago, from Norma, and it says ‘For Anna—not for the film’. And it’s that wonderful moment in the film where she’s actually filming herself, she’s with her so-called bodyguard and she’s drunk, and she’s gloating about how she lied to me and got away with it. After I watched it, I rang her and said, ‘Listen, Norma, you’ve got to let me use it’, because I always tried to be honest with her in the hope it would rub off on her. And she giggled and said ‘just take out the bits where I call you ugly and you can use it’. So I did, but the thing about that tape that’s really interesting is that it’s got jump cuts all the way through it—now they’re not my jump cuts, they’re hers. They’re her jump cuts, right down to the moment where she repeats like this. In other words, this is a wonderful moment where the film-maker becomes the con artist and the con artist becomes the film-maker. So for me those roles you talk about, these roles we were playing—I was playing the role of victim and film-maker, she was playing the role of con artist and star—were interchangeable. Toward the end, who was directing who and who was conning who? Because I did end up conning Norma. And she did end up directing me.

MR: I find that fascinating, particularly in terms of the role of Malcolm Knox, the Australian journalist who originally exposed Norma. In an interview on ABC radio’s Bookshow with Ramona Koval [see <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/bookshow/stories/2009/2553257.htm>], he talked about his involvement in the Norma Khouri case and what it meant for him not just as an exposure of a fraud. In fact, Knox now seems to see this hoax as having some kind of ethical outcome in that it exposed sexual violence in Jordan, albeit Norma’s very partial version of that. Knox discussed the relationship between fabrication and truth.
An interview with Anna Broinowski, director of Forbidden Lie$ (2007)

telling and suggested that *Forbidden Love* can be credited for making the debate more visible in the media. What interested me about Knox’s interview is the way in which it provoked his own questioning of what truth is and even his own confession. At one stage, he confessed to being a liar. I guess what all this suggests to me is a cultural fascination with the passer, as a trickster figure, as someone who we look *at* because we want *to know*, we want to find out, we want to solve a riddle. But we also want to know something about ourselves. What the case of someone like Norma does is get us to confess or get us to explore some fear that we have. The passer, in other words, can be understood as someone who incites further discourse, someone who sets off a series of other confessions related to the ubiquity of lies/dissemblances/fabrications, whatever you want to call it.

*AB:* When you deal with a pathological liar like Norma you’re tainted simply by association, you feel dirty, it does rub off. And you find yourself second-guessing everyone, not just Norma, but everyone; what is their ulterior motive? You end up not trusting anyone. And it was quite a disturbing experience, it sent me half-mad. I recorded a director’s diary, which is in the DVD extras… [interruption].

*MR:* We were talking about the relationship between passing, truth telling and confession.

*AB:* Yes, the camera is a wonderful confessional tool. There’s a fabulous film-maker called Jean Rouche who was flying in direct opposition to the practitioners of direct cinema in the Seventies and Sixties, who actually said that the camera was a catalyst and the director should embrace rather than try to hide its presence because it gets things out of people that they wouldn’t normally ever say in real life. You get extraordinary versions of people, things they don’t normally present to the world, when you point a camera at them. And Errol Morris talks about the same thing. He has this three-minute rule; he says if you let anyone talk to a camera for three minutes just about themselves, uninterrupted, you will discover that everyone is mad. And with Norma, similarly, there was this wonderful organic effortless relationship between me and her whenever I had the camera on her. She has a performer’s instinct; it’s intricate and beautifully developed. She is as good as any actress. And that sort of ability to perform can only come from someone who’s been doing it for a very, very long time. Which would indicate that perhaps there was some kind of abuse that happened to her when she was much younger that forced her to practise being someone she wasn’t, or to hide a secret by acting. My DOP [director of photography], Kathryn Millis, picked up on just how brilliant she is in front of the camera. We were filming that scene where she’s listening to the FBI tape and we were filming a close-up and we had her hand and the tape recorder on a window sill, and without even needing to be told, Norma knew somehow that the camera was
in a close up on her hand, rather than a wide shot of her whole body, and she just did this, she just stroked the machine with one finger, without being told. And Kathryn couldn’t believe it; she said, ‘This is the sort of bravura touch that Meryl Streep would give you.’

MR: Yes, it’s precisely her ‘performer’s instinct’ as you say. This is key to what’s fascinating about her in the film. There is an interesting construction in the film of Norma as a consummate performer but also as someone who is alert, constantly reading, aware of your responses and reacting to that. There’s something very instinctive going on there.

AB: But when you say ‘passing’, she’s not a schemer, not a cold, Machiavellian long-term analytical planner at all. She’s an instinctive, improvising animal, which is why she gets caught out—because she improvises on the fly. She doesn’t plan her lies years in advance; she tends to make them up on the spot, massaging them according to the situation. The only way I was able to catch her out was because I was armed with 12 months of rushes, so this made me a lot better protected than any of her other victims because I could actually go back and see her lying to me 12 months earlier; I could see her contradicting stories she’d subsequently told me. She wasn’t bargaining [on] that. And so when I say she’s instinctive, she just does it naturally, like any great actress, she believes it as she does it. There’s not a third eye operating with Norma, which is sitting above her looking at herself and thinking, ‘how am I doing and is that person getting it?’ It’s far more organic than that. In the DVD extras, Miranda Otto, the actress, analysed Norma on camera and said her performance was subtle enough to win an Oscar. As Miranda says, ‘all acting is bluffing’, but Norma seems to feel her bluffs, which is what makes her so good.

MR: What about the moments, then, in the film when she almost confesses to having lied?

AB: There’s an amazing moment…I tried and tried to get her to break down and confess on camera. I gave her so many opportunities. And the closest we ever got—and you really can’t tell from the words but you can tell from the body language—is the very last interview I ever filmed with her. In the movie, it’s about 10 minutes before the end. She’s sitting in a dark hotel room just staring at the camera, she’s saying, ‘No-one was listening, no-one was listening.’ She’s talking about how she went in and said to the FBI, ‘Here I am, you want me—here I am.’ She had sent them a letter saying ‘I ripped off Mary’. And I said, ‘Why the hell did you do that?’, and she said, ‘No-one was listening.’ And it’s this amazing pause and she actually, literally holds her hand up to her ear. And I’m convinced that that was the closest Norma ever came to sharing with us what’s really in her soul. She’s not a psychopath in that she does know how to have empathy and she does know how to relate to people. She is a sociopath, in
that she will opportunistically cash in on her charm to get what she wants from people, which isn’t just money—it’s attention, approval, and even love. And sure, maybe she’ll feel a little bit of remorse for the people that are hurt in the process—I sometimes wonder if she does actually; I don’t know, but she’s not psychopathic. She’s not that evil.

MR: To go back to the point I was making earlier, the fascination with that kind of sociopathic behaviour perhaps suggests something in us, so that Norma does enact that mirroring role.

AB: Like any good dissembler, she feeds back to us the stories we want to hear. I was also trying to trust her as a film-maker, because I had to...at the beginning, I really believed her, but then she turned the tables on me. I turned up for our first interview not believing her, telling the crew to hide their equipment, that she was not to be trusted and within eight hours of interviewing her, the sound recordist had fallen in love with her, the DOP wanted to buy her book and she’d convinced me that she was telling the truth and that if I took her to Jordan she would prove that the Western media had conducted this merciless witch-hunt, they were out to get her, and she wasn’t a hoax author, but they’d buried her because they liked the idea of the conniving femme fatale. And I believed that because that turned on all my feminist buttons. At the beginning I believed her because I thought what person in their right mind would promise to go all the way to Jordan to prove their story on camera if they couldn’t deliver? But then halfway through when I realised that she was probably going to con me too, I had to hide my frustration behind the film-maker’s facade. I had to ‘pass’ as a film-maker: remain objective, shelve my resentment and my personal disappointment (although I didn’t do it very successfully) and keep asking her questions.

MR: When you say you’re passing as a film-maker, do you mean passing as one who can take up a neutral position?

AB: Yes—I was pretending to be neutral.

MR: So there is a point at which that kind of film-making is useful, even though your feminist instincts or your experimental drives as a director might warn you against that?

AB: Sure. But then it gets much more complex than that, because I did end up being very honest with her and saying, ‘Look, you haven’t told us the truth in Jordan, you’ve just led us on a goose chase’, and she giggled and said, ‘Yeah, I made it pretty hard for you, didn’t I?’ And I said, ‘Why did you do that?’ And there’s a long scene that’s not in the film—part of it’s in the DVD extras—where she said, ‘Because I didn’t trust you. You can’t expect me to trust you if you don’t trust me. And why would I tell you the truth if I don’t trust you;
you’re just going to hurt these people.’ And that was very clever of her, because that went straight to my Achilles heel. I hate as a film-maker to feel like I’m exploiting people or treating them badly or trying to cash in on their story to make a name for myself. This is like anathema to me—and she knew that. And any great con artist can do that. They will read you, they will find out where you’re most vulnerable and they’ll play that for all it’s worth. I’ve seen her do that with people. And she did it with me. I made her watch the Truman Capote film—the one with Phillip Seymour Hoffman—and in there there’s this wonderful scene where Capote won’t tell Perry Smith, the murderer subject of his book, that the book is called *In Cold Blood*, because if he does that Perry will realise that Capote doesn’t think he is innocent. And I made her watch that movie before we went to Jordan and said, ‘I don’t want to be Capote with you, I want to tell you what I’m doing. By the way, the title of the film is *Forbidden Lies*—what do you think?’ She twisted that on me, she said ‘and then you made me watch Capote and you wouldn’t even tell me the title of the film’. It was a complete lie—both confusing and hurtful.

*MR:* From memory, one of the things that film foregrounds is Capote’s adept interviewing technique. For instance, he allegedly did not need to use a tape recorder. He claimed to have something like 99 per cent memory retention, so he could remember everything and write it later, and he argued that that’s how he won the trust of his subjects.

*AB:* Norma told me things off camera that she didn’t tell me on camera, at the very beginning. But looking back on it she was doing that deliberately, so that I would then see those as the truffles that I had to dig up on film. And sure enough, by the end of the filming process, I had managed to get her to confess things on camera. She planted the seed at the very beginning about her father abusing her and told me not to use it. By the end of the shoot, with her full cooperation, it was in the film.

*MR:* I saw those moments as part of the film’s compassion for Norma. Compassion? Is that the right word to use?

*AB:* We needed a redemptive ending. After Jordan, it was clear that she’d conned us too, but I didn’t want to bury her the way the media had already. I just thought that would be the same old story, and also I liked her. So I rang her up—and this is where the Jerry Springer thing comes in, but it’s also where the symbiotic interchangeability of the roles of film-maker and con artist comes in. Because I rang her up and said, ‘Norma, we need a redemptive ending. We need something to send the audience the message that we care about you, because right now they’re not going to. You’ve just completely spun me bullshit from whoa to go. What do I do with this? Have a think about talking about your father. Have a think about it. And please let us film you again, because otherwise
I just have no choice, I’m going to have to end on a rather bleak note—you’re just an out-and-out liar.’ And she, amazingly, agreed to let us come to Chicago and film her again. And that’s when that stuff all came out. The father, the white room, the moment where I confront her with her own lie. And I’m happy to go on the record. This is the one time I lied to her. At the time, she trotted out that article that said that ‘Dalia is Ghada Ahbed. This is the real Dalia.’ I already knew that that couldn’t be the real Dalia because I’d triple-checked with Rana Husseini and she said ‘that woman, yes she was killed, but she was killed eight months after Norma had written two-thirds of the book, so how could she be Dalia?’ I knew that and the only time that I stopped being honest with Norma and became a con artist myself—in other words, lied to her—was when we came back to Chicago to do that last shoot and we were in the white room; I made her believe that I believed that Ghada was Dalia, so that I could finally confront her on camera, on the spot, and say, ‘Norma, I know this isn’t true.’ Now I’m not proud of that, but I couldn’t get her to reveal that she was a liar any other way. So there you go. Is that ethical? I don’t know. And then at the very end, when we finally showed her the film when it was finished in Chicago and recorded the DVD commentary together, Norma and I sat on the couch like this and chain smoked and drank wine and watched the film and talked about it. When that moment came up and I said, ‘There Norma, I tricked you there. You thought I believed in Ghada, but I didn’t. I tricked you.’ She said, ‘Oh no you didn’t. I already knew. I just wanted you to have your little moment.’ So, the web continues to spin. It’s a möbius strip of deceit. And I kind of felt better when she said that, I felt better about lying to her. She knew anyway, so maybe I wasn’t as evil as I thought. I loved her for that.

MR: To return to the father and the way in which the film brings in the story of Norma’s possible childhood abuse. Is this about audience compassion? Or is it a narrative that gives the viewer a framework for understanding Norma?

AB: Certainly it’s about giving the audience a chance to at least understand Norma on some level even if they don’t condone what she’s done. But it’s also dangerously close to couch psychology.

MR: So it is just another storyline? But you said earlier that you’re sure that there was something there.

AB: I’m sure that there is. I’ve met her mother, who wouldn’t agree to be in the film, and I strongly feel that it’s the mother not the father who was abusive. I don’t even know in retrospect if that really was her father. It could have been her uncle; I have no idea.

MR: Smoke and mirrors.
AB: Yeah, more smoke and mirrors. Some friendly relative who agreed to play a part. The body language of both Norma and [her supposed] father is very disturbing in that sequence. OK. Sure, I’m writing it off in a way, because every documentary maker when they’re doing a bio, they tend to sneak in a bit of amateur psychology. It’s a Hollywood thing too—the flashback, ‘when I was a little girl’. And suddenly everything makes sense.

MR: This is what I loved about the film—not only its self-consciousness about the role of film technology in producing narrative and identity fabrications or hoaxes, but the way it drew on Hollywood melodrama. It seemed to me the film had an awareness of the formulas, the plots that we watch on screen but that we also use in everyday life.

AB: Audiences are ready for this. They have been fed so many genres now, they are so savvy, they are more visually fluent than they ever have been, because we’re dealing more and more in images. You might as well play, because they understand it now. The fourth wall is bullshit; no-one suspends their disbelief anymore, whether it’s drama or doco. Unfortunately, people still trust the veracity of documentary more than they do drama; I don’t think they should. Documentary is just as deceitful and constructed. And I’m deeply suspicious of documentary film-makers that still try to pretend that they’re not there, because the minute you point a camera at something you’re putting your point of view across. And to me it’s the ultimate lie to the audience. It’s saying, ‘Hey, you’re watching real life here, and there’s no camera crew 5 metres from the character’s face. This is really happening.’ Of course, someone’s crying, but they know the camera’s there. Let’s just acknowledge it for God’s sake. It makes it far more interesting, unless you want to just shoot everything with hidden cameras, which is ethically very suspect.

MR: This is a good point at which to talk about the film you’ve started working on.

AB: It’s probably a bit dangerous to write about that now, until we have the budget. Let’s put it this way. Drama and documentary more and more are borrowing from each other and the nature of what truth is for an audience is continuing to change and…ever since 9/11 we have a new Zeitgeist that embraces the art of dissembling and spin, simply because the politicians have made it legitimate.

MR: Former Australian Prime Minister John Howard certainly did.

AB: And Bush. So audiences are more sophisticated than ever before and, as a result, film-makers are forced to find far more interesting and knowing takes on truth and integrity. And you know the drama thing is now often produced for the stars. Stars are now celebrities in magazines, so people don’t go and
see an Angelina Jolie movie to really believe that she’s this repressed Jewish wife or 1920s mother or whatever; they go to see what she looks like in that hat compared to how she looked in Who magazine last weekend. No-one is suspending their disbelief.

MR: You said that as a film-maker you’re interested in women and female subjects. I found the film compelling for that reason as well—given that you’re a female director who is trying to unlock the mystery of this evasive woman. One of the characters that intrigued me is that of Rachel Richardson, Norma’s friend, who takes her in and looks after her children while Norma is hopping about and evading the law. Some time after your film was released, Rachel Richardson was exposed as a welfare cheat. So, she is another example of a woman who is there on camera, there for us to believe in as someone who can expose Norma, but then later, it becomes evident that Rachel is herself passing, she’s not simply an innocent bystander who has fallen into Norma’s trap. It suggests that Rachel’s relationship to Norma was more complicated than it appears. Would you say that your fascination is with the female subject on film, with the woman as performer? I could take us back to some feminist theory here, to the idea that women are expected to perform, to enact a masquerade, in a way that men are not.

AB: There’s this old saying in Hollywood that ‘there are no new stories, just new ways of telling them’. And to me that is absolute rubbish. That comes from a long-held, 104-year-old history of patriarchal storytelling about men as heroes and women as adjuncts or lovers or whores—very much a male-driven plot. And they’re right there are no new ‘straight’ male stories anymore. There aren’t; they’ve all been done. What haven’t been done are the female stories. And so that’s why I make films about women. I do it selfishly. I believe that that is what makes audiences excited because they see new stories on screen. And yes, in the male-driven narrative tradition of film, women have had to pass as male versions of what women should be, so that the wife is the cheesy, cheesecake, cardboard cut-out good wife and the mistress is always the vixen. And you know these archetypes; they’re there in every film and every TV series you’ve ever seen. That’s breaking down now, because more and more women are coming in and now we are finally discovering roles in which women are not passing for what men feel they should be, but being themselves in their own right. Now my fascination with Norma is that she is still very much a woman in a man’s world, in that she was passing herself off as an archetype that men would understand and want to protect. That is, the poor oppressed Jordanian woman on the run from bloodthirsty Muslim extremists. But then the other Norma, the one that she revealed to me, was very much the woman herself. I mean, I’m a female director, so she…did try to play victim with me, and brought out all my protective instincts and I felt like the bloke sometimes and wanted to look after
her. But that fell apart very quickly and she ended up having to be much more honest about herself. Which is ‘yes, I’m going to lie, and I’m going to have fun with it’, and it was a much more provocative game, a duel, that we then played. And Rachel, similarly, you get something more honest from these women when they become the main characters in your film, as opposed to people who have to relate to men who drive the narrative.

MR: What’s at the heart of the film—but also perhaps the book—for me, is not a woman passing herself off as a male version of what women are, but a woman looking for another woman, even if that woman is a fiction. So Dalia may not exist, but she also does exist, because Norma spent all this time creating her.

AB: I made a list the other day; there were actually four different Dalias during the course of the shoot that she presented us with. They’re not all in the film, but there’s Chicago Dalia. So for a while she had me convinced that D. was based on a woman who was in Chicago, an Arab woman, burnt to death while making coffee by her Muslim father in a basement. Then there was cousin Dalia, Norma’s cousin, who she reveals at the end of the film—you know, ‘this woman was abused’. Then there’s Ghada Ahbed, who really was honour killed in Jordan, and then there’s Dalia in the book. And in fact there’re five Dalias, because the fifth Dalia, which is entirely possible, is actually Norma. So what’s she writing in that woman? What version of herself is she treating as a cipher that she has to idolise and then let go of? Interestingly, in the language of flowers, the dahlia signifies treachery—although that’s a different spelling. And I said that to Norma and she just giggled and said, ‘Oh really, that’s amazing.’

MR: But there’s the instinctive performer again. It’s a Norma who is being hidden from you, in a way.

AB: Look, she’s a human being, and it’s all too easy to write her off as some of the psychiatrists did that I spoke to—as a narcissistic sociopath with psychopathic tendencies. No, she’s damaged. There’s something deeply human and to this day I do feel that she wasn’t lying about everything. If there’s one thing she’s absolutely genuine about, she really did want to try and do something about honour crimes. She genuinely did. But because she was who she was, she couldn’t help but do it the wrong way. As she said herself, ‘I did the right book the wrong way for the right reasons.’

MR: Or the right way?

AB: I don’t know about that. I think it’s outrageous the number of lies she told about Jordan and the way she wrote about that country was reprehensible.

MR: Perhaps not the right way in a moral sense, but if she had told it another way, would she have got the readership and the film-maker and the exposure?
AB: No, of course not, but has the film really helped her? I doubt it. She keeps sending me snippy little emails: ‘So, what’s this you’ve said in this interview?’ We’re constantly emailing each other about it. I don’t think she’s that happy that it’s come out in America. But it’s good she’s known as Norma Khouri in the film, because that’s not how she passes herself off in real life in America. She’s Norma Bagain. So she’s protected and that makes me feel better. Because I don’t care what she’s done if she’s alive and trying to survive and raise her kids, that doesn’t justify, that doesn’t give me an excuse to bury her further. I hope ultimately I’ve made a film that makes audiences not so much judge Norma, as recognise that the media, the publishers and even me the film-maker have all been complicit in constructing the environment which had enabled her to thrive.