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PASSING TRANSGRESSIONS AND AUTHENTIC IDENTITY
IN JESSIE FAUSET’S PLUM BUN AND NELLA LARSEN’S PASSING

Writing on African American drama, Sandra Richards notes that “thanks to feminism, we have apparently come to understand that gender is performative. However, race – or, more properly stated, visible difference in skin color – remains tied to a metaphysics of substance” (47). Currently, race theory speaks of race as power-effect, a metaphor or construct naturalized or grounded through appeals to the body and bodily differences. Just as black British cultural studies theorists like Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy, and Kobena Mercer call for “de-essentializing” blackness, several African American critics and theorists likewise maintain that “blackness must now be defined as a mediated, socially constructed, and gendered practice” (Wall, “Response” 188). Yet there remains a certain resistance to conceiving of race as performative, as an accretion of behaviors and stylizations on the body’s surface that, to quote Judith Butler theorizing gender as performative, produces “the effect of an internal core or substance . . . . or identity” (GT 136). That resistance arises from contested and politicized notions of identity in which people are deeply invested. African American performance artist Adrian Piper, in an essay relating her personal experiences of being repeatedly taken for white, maintains that being black in America is “a social condition, more than an identity. . . . Racial classification in this country functions to restrict the distribution of goods, entitlements and status as narrowly as possible, to those whose power is already entrenched” (232). However, while Piper argues that racial categories are too “rigid and oversimplified to fit anyone accurately” (246), she also acknowledges the importance of what Karla Holloway calls “privately authored” identities that invoke race as grounding and binding African American communities together while driving a variety of politics. African Americans, Piper observes, have taken a “social condition” of rupture and dispossession and made of it “privately authored” identities of self- and
communal-affirmation, yet this is also an identity politics that can disavow what are perceived to be diminutions and dilutions of “blackness”:

For others, it is the mere idea of blackness as an essentialized source of self-worth and self-affirmation that forecloses the acknowledgement of mixed ancestry. . . . Having struggled so long and hard to carve a sense of wholeness and value for ourselves out of our ancient connections with Africa after having been actively denied any in America, many of us are extremely resistant to once again casting ourselves into the same chaos of ethnic and psychological ambiguity our diaspora to this country originally inflicted on us. (234)

Piper speaks here of acknowledging biracial and mixed ancestry, but I also read her insights as applicable to the idea of race as a performative and the possible limits to conceiving of it as such. While identity as performance may be rooted in communal and cultural traditions that inform that performance, it may also be perceived by some to be a profoundly rootless instability that does not adequately address the lived experience or serve the interests of a good many people. Its very chaotic ambiguity, to borrow Piper’s phrasing, may be liberating for some and lacking in historical and material specificity for others, thereby proving its very failing. I would contend, then, that a politics of identity rooted in the affirmation of African American “community” and shared historical experiences motivates the continued unease with reading racial passing as anything more than an individual’s attempt to better his or her material position. Rather than reading narratives of passing as making a political intervention in conceptions of race at a time when racial difference was obsessively policed and violently asserted, critics have continued to regard them as limited in subversive potential and impotent in political strategy. Whether guarded on one side of the color line or the other, “blackness” continues to go carefully policed in American culture and elsewhere in the West, as Stuart Hall argues: “[A]s always happens when we naturalize historical categories, we fix that signifier [‘black’] outside of history, outside of change, outside of political intervention. . . . We are tempted to display that signifier as a device which can purify the impure, bring the straying brothers and sisters . . . into line, and police the boundaries – which are of course political, symbolic, and positional boundaries – as if they were genetic” (30).

This kind of border patrol and identity politics has made for one rather