

**UNDOING RACIAL IDENTIFICATION AND REDOING ETHICAL
CULTIVATION:
PASSING AS A PERFORMANCE OF IDENTITY AND AN ETHICS
OF SELF-MAKING**

by

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The Black Woman's very life depends on her being able to decipher the various sounds in the larger world, to hold in check the nightmare figures of terror, to fight for basic freedoms against the sadistic law enforcement agencies in her community, to resist the temptation to capitulate the demands of the status quo, to find meaning in the most despotic circumstances and to create something where nothing was before.

Katie Cannon, Black Womanist Ethics

INTRODUCTION: THEORIES OF MELANCHOLY, PERFORMANCE AND POSSIBILITY

In *The Female Complaint*, Lauren Berlant defines normativity as a “felt condition of general belonging and an aspirational site of rest and recognition in and by a social world”(5). Her work raises intriguing questions regarding how subjects outside of the mainstream culture can negotiate their existence and find happiness in a cultural landscape that doesn't offer them the terms for it. How do these minority subjects manage such an ambivalent, but necessary, attachment to a social world simply incapable of providing them the means to thrive?

Berlant in *Cruel Optimism* uses the phrase *cruel optimism* to discuss this compromising bind. Cruel optimism is “a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered to be impossible, sheer fantasy, or too possible, and toxic”(24). The subjects under consideration here are attached to creating a life for themselves in a terrain that makes it impossible. “Cruel optimism is the condition of maintaining an attachment to a significantly problematic object”(24). The optimistic attachment must be maintained to preserve the desire to keep on living; its cruelty, however, resides in the fact that the possibility of thriving in their cultural climate is severely limited.

José Muñoz describes a process he names *disidentification* as a way that a minority subject can work within the dominant culture while simultaneously critiquing it. In his work, *Disidentifications*, he refers to disidentification as “a hermeneutic, a process of production, a mode of performance”(25). To further outline what this process is, he writes: “Disidentification is, at its core, an ambivalent modality that cannot be conceptualized as a restrictive or “masterfully” fixed mode of identification”(28). In spaces where bodies and identifications are ungrounded and become scripts, the possibility emerges of discovering new ways of working with, inhabiting, or potentially abandoning the stunted cultural climate where identities serve more as a prison than a means to provide an affirming space for the self. Disidentification is “descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship”(4). In reading his work, I want to further explore the potential of performance spaces as ways a minority subject can work with the broken pieces society offers them as terms of existence. It is crucial to find these spaces that can perhaps provide an alternative way to negotiate and interact with a social system that tends to foreclose possibility.

A way that people of color have historically attempted to manage a society that brutally represses them and eliminates all possible avenues for a palatable existence, is racial passing, the process in which a person of one race adopts the mask of another race. As I will demonstrate throughout this analysis, racial passing is one of these potential performance spaces that enables these subjects to work

with the dominant culture that suppresses them in new and different ways. In her introduction of *Passing and the Fictions of Identity*, Elaine K. Ginsberg writes: “passing is about identities: their creation or imposition, their adoption or rejection, their accompanying rewards or penalties. Passing is also about the boundaries established between identity categories and about the individual and cultural anxieties induced by boundary crossing.” She posits that the act of passing “interrogates the ontology of identity categories and their construction”(4). If passing treats race as a performance, then categories of race are destabilized and become an insufficient way to signify identity. Ginsberg questions: “when “race is no longer visible, it is no longer intelligible: if “white” can be “black”, what is white?”(8) These instances that destabilize identity demand different ways of understanding the category. I see passing as a site rich with possibilities that calls for further examination of its complexity and of its new potentialities.

For the minority subject, queer, black, or otherwise, melancholia often seems to be a condition of existence, and as Munoz argues, “an integral part of everyday lives”(74). Munoz states that “individual subjects and different communities in crisis can use [melancholia] to map the ambivalences of identification and the conditions of (im)possibility that shape the minority identities under consideration here”(74). Freud’s definition of melancholia, in his work *Mourning and Melancholia*, extends it beyond mourning, denoting it a pathology in that it is inconsolable and doesn’t know when to stop. In contrast, Muñoz evokes Michael Moon’s work “Memorial Rags, Memorial Rages” to conceptualize mourning as “dominantly privatized, heterosexualized, teleogized and “task-oriented”. For Moon, melancholia’s

departure from mourning, extending beyond the heteronormative, teleological end, pathologizes melancholy because it isn't an efficient, "task-oriented" condition. While Freud associated melancholy with self-destructiveness, understanding it as potentially self-affirming for these subjects is what enables melancholy's contribution to these performance spaces. Muñoz suggests a depathologizing of melancholia and posits an understanding of it as a "'structure of feeling' that is necessary and not always counterproductive and negative"(74). Not only can melancholia be used to map, it also can and necessarily needs to be used to author new forms of living.

Ann Cvetkovich discusses the widespread use of melancholy in *Depression: A Public Feeling*. She describes melancholy as a central category for cultural theorists studying trauma and loss, but also within humanist discourses in the historical understanding of it as a site of creative genius. She offers the ambivalence of critics on the subject, that for some it is "associated with an irredeemable negative affect or with a dwelling in the past that remains stuck or refuses to move," and for others is a "sentimental embrace of the past that turns away from the real concerns of the present"(Cvetkovich, 106). She traces the varied history of melancholy, seeing in it a bounty of possible alternatives for current understandings of grief and loss. "It offers a return to a time when sadness could be viewed in other ways"(Cvetkovich, 107). One of these possible sites of grief to revisit, that I will focus on throughout this paper, is melancholy. Melancholy comes to play a pivotal role in the performance of passing. I want to draw on these authors to suggest melancholy is a

circumstance, a condition, a history, a substance, and also potentially becomes a source and a site that shapes the minority subject's ethical activity.

In doing so, I will draw on the framework of ethical activity devised by Michel Foucault. Foucault insists on ethical activity concerned with self-making, rather than shaping morals. His interview, "On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress," frames four elements that constitute this ethical framework: **(1)** the ethical substance, **(2)** the mode of subjection or mode of subjectivation, **(3)** the ethical work, and the **(4)** telos. These four aspects determine how the individual is supposed to constitute himself/herself as a moral subject of his/her own actions. The first element, the *ethical substance*, is that "part of myself or my behavior which is concerned with moral conduct which ethical activity is attempting to transform"(263). It is the primary substance behind how a subject inhabits its ethical space and is ultimately seeking to transform as a result of their ethical activity.

The second element, the *mode of subjection*, is "the way in which people are invited or incited to recognize their moral obligations"(Foucault, 264). Foucault suggests this invitation could be a natural law, a rational rule, or an attempt to give one's existence the most beautiful form possible. The mode of subjection is the way the self transforms upon itself to transform the ethical substance.

The third aspect, the *ethical work* or ethical practice is "the means by which we change ourselves in order to become ethical subjects"(Foucault, 265). These are the things the subject actually does to work on their ethical substance in order to become a subject of their ethical behavior.

The final element, the *telos*, Foucault writes, is “the kind of being to which we aspire when we behave in a moral way”(Foucault, 265). The *telos* is the final goal of a subject’s ethical activity.

Utilizing these four elements to examine passing as an ethical framework enables me to make an argument for the necessity of understanding this practice in a different way. Passing exposes several essential insights by which the passing subject can ultimately utilize this performance/ethical framework as a creative site. Passing reveals the idealized form that whiteness and industrial capitalism promises is a fantasy. Second, passing reveals the failure of blackness and whiteness as the available identifications. Through the work of passing, the individual uncovers these failures.

While it may seem strange to suggest passing as an ethics, the practice is about trying to establish oneself as an individual in a cultural system. Passing involves the question of identity and how it is constructed. This is what attracted me to the practice, because passing is an interesting way to look at how identity is performed, complicated by the oppressive racist system in which the practice arose. Judith Butler, in her work on gender, demanded a new way to think about identity and totally destabilized ideas about gender being understood as a fixed category and as an interior substance. For Butler gender is performative, not something we are, but what we do. She sees performativity as the “reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains”(1993,2) This concept of performativity informs the way I am looking at passing, as such an instance that points to the falsity of seemingly fixed categories, in this case race. The discourse of

a cultural system tries to maintain these categories as fixed, inherent, and stable. As such, I was drawn to passing as an instance that I feel demands a rethinking of identity and as a practice that exposes the necessity of different ways of thinking about the category.

I am not going to look at passing through a lens of morality, despite a standard approach to the practice that would attract the question of whether it is right or wrong, as the act is implicated in deceiving the system it is operating within. This different lens will perhaps provide new ways of understanding this historical occurrence and will also attempt to demonstrate different insights about identity and the way ethics are constructed and pursue what that possibly unfolds. I suggest that a more productive and less oppressive lens would strive to see passing as an instance of self-fashioning. As such, passing needs to be read as an ethics of self-making, rather than being understood as an ethics concerned with right or wrong. Reading the practice in this way accounts for the position of the minority subject, working within a racist, non-moral system.

In what follows, I will develop a reading of three early works by American authors in a specific genre of African American fiction, the passing novel: Walter White's *Flight*, Charles W. Chestnut's *The House Behind the Cedars*, and Jessie Faucet's *Plum Bun; A Novel Without A Moral*. Foucault's four elements will provide the lens to examine these novels and analyze how the works suggest ethics are fashioned in the performance of passing.

White's novel *Flight*, published in 1926, follows Mimi Daquin's journey through the different communities in New York in which she tries to find a home,

happiness continuing to elude her in each. Chestnut's *The House Behind the Cedars*, published in 1900, tells the story of Rena Warwick and her attempt to carve out what she believes will be a better life by following her brother's example and passing into the white community in South Carolina. Fauset's *Plum Bun*, published in 1928, focuses on Angela Murray's struggle, after feeling like she is doing herself an injustice remaining in the colored community because her light skin enables her to pass, she decides to leave her home and black community behind to enter white society in New York.¹

I will divide my analysis into four sections, each focusing on one of Foucault's elements and how they function in application to the novels I am exploring. I will pursue these four aspects out of order, starting with ethical work because it suits the needs of my topic to first establish that despite the probable inclination to attach a moral to passing, the practice is poorly understood when examined through a moralistic lens.

In the first section I will discuss the necessity of reading and understanding passing as an ethics of self-making. Using Katie Cannon's work in *Black Womanist Ethics*, on how a standard moral lens cannot be applied to an experience that falls

¹ The work for this thesis began reading queer affect theory. The decision to focus on passing came after reading much of the theory I have utilized in this work, thinking it was an interesting instance of identity performance to examine. When I was searching for novels to analyze, the others I encountered did not serve the purpose of what I was wanting to look at, a colored person's experience when they decide to pass. Some of the other "passing works" illustrated gender passing, or a white man passing for black, neither instance the experience I was seeking to examine. Therefore, the three novels I have chosen are not a result of beginning the work I have done with passing in mind. Hoping to use this work as a beginning for graduate research at a later point, I will at that point undertake looking at a much wider corpus of literature about passing with passing as my starting focus.

between the normative cracks, I will insist that it is more productive to not read passing as an ethics of morality. With that frame in mind, I will highlight how each novel deals with the question of passing as being concerned with morality.

The second section will discuss melancholy as an ethical substance. After discussing racial melancholy theorized by David Eng, Shinhee Han, and Anne Cheng, I will then proceed to focus my attention primarily on the novel *Flight* and how this work illuminates melancholy as an ethical substance. This section will also discuss how melancholy can become a self-affirmative affect.

Section three will employ Berlant and her conceptions of fantasy and optimism to help understand how passing becomes the mode of subjection for the passing subject. Again looking mainly at *Flight*, I will examine the protagonists' attachment to these fantasies and how she negotiates her existence when they fail her.

The final section, on telos, will look at the wake of the failure of the fantasies and identification. Firstly raising questions about the author of *Flight*, Walter White's relationship to his own complicated racial identity and linking it to his protagonist Mimi's experience to help illuminate what she is undergoing at the close of the novel. I will then use Foucault's definition of spirituality in *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* to look at how transformation enables access to truth. Then, turning to Carolyn Dinshaw and Elizabeth Freeman, I will explore the possibility of forming different kinds of communities and how that becomes crucial for envisioning new possibilities and modes of living.

SECTION I: ETHICAL WORK

PASSING AS AN ETHICS OF SELF-MAKING, NOT MORALITY

All three novels depict protagonists faced with a dilemma: both remaining in their communities and passing out of them is problematic. I want to insist that by presenting each choice as equally unfavorable for the protagonists, this suggests that passing is not a matter of mere moral concern. None of these three novels trouble themselves with viewing passing through a moral lens. The novels argue instead that it is reductive and even unethical to diminish passing to a matter of morality. Katie Cannon writes that “Black women in their development, analysis and appraisal of various coping mechanisms against the white-oriented, male structured society do not appeal to fixed rules or absolute principles of what is right or wrong and good or bad, but instead embrace values related to the causal conditions of their cultural circumstances”(75). Cannon is asserting that fixed, absolute conceptions of right and wrong cannot be applied to black women and the way they live out their oppressed experience because of the conditions and circumstances they are forced to negotiate. For subjects who pass the traumatic nature of their daily existence renders dominant ethics and absolute principles inapplicable to their experience.

In the beginning of the 19th century (when the novels take place) in America lynching was yet to be outlawed and segregation was still backed by the law, making passing a dangerous venture. Being forced to live in an unethical and immoral system of racism, moral positions are not applicable or available to these oppressed subjects. A moral position “takes for granted freedom and a wide range of choices”(Cannon, 6). One cannot apply the same moral judgment and binary

categories of right or wrong to an experience that is denied the freedom and the range of choices that are a necessary part of the structure in which those fixed principles arose. This is why it is important to look at passing as a practice without trying to impose a moral frame on it, because it is an experience entirely within the context of a racist and immoral system and looking at it in a moral context neglects the position these subjects are put in. I want to unfold new understandings of passing through an ethical framework whose telos isn't morality. I suggest instead that a more productive and less oppressive lens would see passing as an instance of self-fashioning. As such, passing can be read as an ethics of self-making, rather than being understood as an ethics concerned with right or wrong. As I will later address, passing is a tool for working with melancholy and is how the two protagonists do the work of fashioning themselves as ethical subjects in a world that offers dead-end choices.

The House Behind the Cedars

In Charles Chestnutt's, *The House Behind the Cedars*, John Warwick returns to visit his hometown of Patesville, North Carolina after having moved to South Carolina and deciding to pass. He comes back to take his sister Rena with him. He argues that it is in her best interest to return with him to South Carolina and follow his own chosen path, being that she is also light skinned enough to pass for white. Their mother finally concedes and Rena leaves with John and adopts the name Rowena Warwick for her new passing lifestyle. Passing seems to be providing success for Rena, in the form of George Tyron, a well-off young man who is a client

of her brother. Rena and George fall deeply in love and are set to marry when by chance the two end up in Patesville on different errands and George finds out that Rena is actually colored.

George decides he can no longer marry Rena and writes her brother to that effect, while assuring him he will keep their secret. Rena, heartbroken, forsakes her life with her passing brother and returns to Patesville. After some time, at the encouragement of her mother, Rena leaves with Jeff Wain, another potential suitor, to teach at the colored school in his town. Although she has no interest in Wain, he has agreed to let her live with him while she is teaching. However, Wain aggressively courts Rena, forcing her to move out of his house. George Tyron happens to also reside in this town, eventually learning of Rena's presence, and after much internal debate, decides he loves her too much to let her race get in the way of their relationship. It is at this point, with both John and George in pursuit of her, that the plot comes to a head. Rena encounters them simultaneously in the woods, both literally in pursuit of her. Chestnutt writes:

Glancing around for her missing escort, she became aware that a man was approaching her from each of the two paths. In one she recognized the eager and excited face of George Tyron, flushed with anticipation of their meeting, and yet grave with uncertainty of his reception. Advancing confidently along the other path she saw the face of Jeff Wain, drawn, as she imagined in her anguish, with evil passions which would stop at nothing. (183)

When confronted with the question of passing or not passing, embodied in the two men approaching her in the forest, Rena flees from the scene, rejecting both lives and identifications available to her, colored and white.

In her flight from the scene, Rena gets lost in the forest and when she is

finally located she is no longer coherent, having dissolved into a state of emotional devastation. She has become very physically ill and the sickness proves fatal, the novel quickly thereafter ending in her death. Rena is confronted with the deficiency of both identities and ultimately her death speaks to the failure of blackness and whiteness as stable identifications for her. Choosing to pass resulted in heartbreak and returning to live as colored also failed her. The end of the narrative demonstrates quite clearly the collapse of both paths.

Chestnutt presents both identifications as equally problematic for Rena. The structure of the text suggests that deciding not to pass is not necessarily the better or 'right' decision, as the non-passing choice is represented in Jeff Wain. Wain's character is not presented positively. Frank, a family friend of Rena's, says of his character that his "style and skill were affectation, his good-nature mere hypocrisy, and his glance at Rena the eye of the hawk upon his quarry"(147). Rena learns later that Wain was married once before and was abusive to his former wife. While George was initially presented in a flattering light and is himself emotionally devastated when he loses Rena, he does decide to dismiss her when he finds out she is colored. In not clearly labeling either of these characters as right or wrong, the novel presents passing as a matter that is beyond the scope of morality. Not only does presenting both identifications as problematic point again to the hollowness of identifications, it also addresses the importance of not examining passing as an ethical construction attached to moral concern. Chestnutt is not diminishing his story about passing by implicating it with questions of right or wrong. Framing the novel in this way enables me to use Rena's experience to argue how passing is not a

matter of morality.

Plum Bun

Of the three novels I will discuss, Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bun* presents the most ambivalent representation of the ethical dimension of passing. The sub-title of the novel reads; *A Novel Without A Moral*. Fauset could be implying that the practice of passing is ethically unsound. She could also be stating that the novel is not trying to push a moral agenda in regards to the practice of passing by presenting it without a moral lens. The novel frequently raises the question of passing as a moral concern. From the onset of the novel, passing is not presented in a way that suggests it is violating any absolute notions of morality. As a child, Angela Murray is taken out on excursions by her mother Mattie where the two pass. The two go and do things that knowledge of their color wouldn't permit them access to, such as dining out, shopping, and seeing shows. Angela relates that "her mother had never seemed to consider it as anything but a lark"(73). Mattie doesn't view passing as a serious endeavor. "Angela's mother employed her colour very much as she practiced certain winning usages of smile and voice to obtain indulgences which meant much to her and which took nothing from anyone else"(15). On one of these escapades, Mattie sees her husband and other daughter passing by in the throng of the crowd. She doesn't reach out to them, but is ashamed of her behavior and later brings up her guilt to her husband. He responds: "My dear girl, I told you long ago that where no principle was involved, your passing means nothing to me. It's just a little joke; I don't think you'd be ashamed to acknowledge your old husband anywhere if it were

necessary”(19). For Mattie, there is no principle involved in passing. She even describes her excursions as “my old game of play-acting.” The way her passing is related suggests passing is not a moral issue. However, Angela has a different understanding of passing. She has several experiences where her color is discovered and is met with shock and backlash, losing friends and employment. On each occasion, she is questioned as to why she didn’t reveal she was colored, implicating her with deception. On the first occasion, where she loses her best adolescent friend as a result, Angela wonders- “which was more important, a patent insistence on the fact of colour or an acceptance of the good things of life which could come to you in America if either you were not coloured or the fact of your racial connections was not made known”(46). For Angela, passing becomes much more than a “little joke,” she understand it to be the way she can obtain happiness. These events depart from the conception of passing presented by Angela and her mother’s “harmless” outings and implicate the practice with morality. Later in the novel after Angela has moved to New York to keep studying art, she reflects on the very question of whether or not passing is wrong. She concludes: “In ‘passing’ from one race to another she had done no harm to anyone. Indeed she had been forced to take this action”(308). The novel presents mixed feelings on the ethical dimension of passing. Angela’s declaration that she has not harmed anyone in passing and that she had no other option reinforces Cannon’s argument that this instance cannot be read through a lens of right or wrong. Angela doesn’t have a choice; in the position she is put in she has no other option but to start passing.

Flight

Walter White's novel *Flight* focuses on the journey Mimi Daquin takes through the different communities in which she attempts to find a place. Mimi, a Creole, is born in New Orleans and when her father remarries his new wife urges the family to move to Atlanta. After graduating from school and then later after mourning her father's death, Mimi finds herself pregnant. Her lover, Carl Hunter, immediately insists that Mimi must abort the baby, and this reaction causes Mimi to lose all feeling for him. Despite the pleading of both his family and her widowed stepmother, she refuses to marry him and chooses instead to flee to Philadelphia. There Mimi passes as white in order to find a place to live because her chances of finding accommodations as colored are severely limited. Mimi also passes as a widow to avoid being shamed for her pregnancy as an unmarried woman. After birthing her child and living in desperate poverty for several years, Mimi realizes that she could better provide for her child, Petit Jean, if she went to New York and lived with her Aunt Sophie. When her aunt suggests she must leave Petit Jean to give herself the best opportunity to make money, Mimi leaves Jean in a Catholic orphanage, presenting both him and herself as white to ensure him the best treatment possible. But when Mimi stays with her aunt in Harlem, she soon faces rejection from the black community because of her sexual history. "Mimi found herself being avoided at church, the street, at the few affairs she attended" (204). As the whispers and rumors continue, Mimi can no longer stand it: "She could withstand poverty, physical pain. But the averted glances of those who had been her friends, the ostentious turning of heads when she passed on the street those with

whom she had been on terms of intimate acquaintance...all these and a thousand other little cruelties were the things which hurt”(205). Despite her aunt’s pleading for her to stay in Harlem, Mimi can’t handle the judgments from her own community so she decides to move to Manhattan and start passing again. “I never thought I’d want to leave my own people. I wouldn’t leave them now but they’ve driven me away” (208). Choosing not to pass is being presented here as problematic and even impossible. Remaining in her colored community is not an option for Mimi, so she attempts the alternative. Moving to the city and deciding to pass offers her the opportunity to further her career and she ultimately becomes very successful, managing a high-end gown boutique. Yet the success that Mimi encounters does not continue to afford her happiness. “Time and time again she had gone almost to the edge of the abyss and gazed fascinatedly down into the alluring depths below”(237). In her passing life, despite the monetary success it brings, happiness still continues to elude Mimi. Not passing is not an option for Mimi, but passing also ultimately fails her. White, like Chestnutt, is presenting both identifications as equally precarious.

The passing subject in each of the novels is attempting to work with other available identifications towards an ideal, however, I find that passing exposes that the idealized form that whiteness and industrial capitalism promises is a fantasy. Second, passing reveals the failure of blackness and whiteness as available identifications. Through the work of passing, the individual uncovers these multiple failures.

All three novels address the ethical dimension of passing. The authors present both passing and not passing as futile for Mimi, Angela, and Rena. The way

these novelists choose to address passing insists that passing needs to be examined and understood as an ethics of self-making rather than caging it with moral chains that are inapplicable to these alternative, oppressed experiences. The three are trying to establish themselves and their identity in the immoral system that they must negotiate.

SECTION II: ETHICAL SUBSTANCE MELANCHOLY AS SELF-AFFIRMING

Racial Melancholy Theorized by Eng, Han, and Cheng

In her essay, "The Melancholy of Race," Anne Cheng suggests "the melancholic is so persistent and excessive in the remembrance of loss that *that* remembrance becomes part of the self" (Cheng, Kenyon Review, 50). She is suggesting melancholia is internalized by the minority subject because of their history of trauma and oppression and becomes an inherent characteristic of their experience. There is "an inarticulable loss that comes to form the individual's sense of his or her own subjectivity" (Cheng, xi). In, "A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia," David Eng and Shinhee Han establish that, for minority subjects, the process of assimilating into mainstream culture requires adapting to and adopting the dominant norms and ideals of society: the ideal of whiteness. They argue that since these ideals are already foreclosed to them, a framework of melancholy is established, calling the failure to assimilate "a series of failed and unresolved integrations" (670). The two argue that the ceaseless mourning wages on because

the subjects are still confronted with the inability to meet the demands of the ideals of whiteness.

Returning to Flight

In order to look at melancholy as a self-affirming affect, there are several scenes we must turn to in *Flight*. The first of these scenes features the singing Mimi hears out the window in Atlanta. The lyrics read:

I'm jes' as misabul as I can be,
I'm unhappy even if I am free,
I'm feelin' down, I'm feelin' blue:
I wander round, don't know what to do. (17)

The voice of the singer is characterized with “nostalgic longing” and Mimi and her father are straining their ears to catch every note of the “melancholy wail”(17). This song can be read in conversation with Cheng, Eng, and Han’s conceptions of racial melancholia. The lyrics are suggestive of the fact that the melancholy of the minority subject cannot necessarily be remedied by freedom from slavery and continues to inform their sense of self despite it.

Later in the novel, Mimi encounters more singing by a group of colored convicts doing work on the street outside. Although they are being forced into hard labor and under constant surveillance by the guards, “they worked and sang, apparently in blissful ignorance of guards or toil or any external thing”(92). Bearing witness to this, Mimi reflects on what Carl had once said to her: “Look at some of those colored folks around you,” he had said to her, “most of them poor, having to work like dogs for a meager living, deprived of practically every ordinary outlet in

the way of amusement. Are they depressed, morbid, bitter? Not on your life! They can find amusement where nobody else can”(93).

This scene can be read in light of Ann Cvetkovich’s arguments for a positive conception of melancholy. In *Flight*, melancholy is a self-affirming affect. Melancholy does not drag these men down further into despair. These men are transforming their melancholy into happiness and out of it comes song that “carried the toilers far above their miserable lot”(93). Mimi reflects to herself that she doesn’t think she would have had their optimism in the same situation: “she doubted she could have used the song even as an opiate”(94). Her comment on this scene reflects that she understands the men are doing more than just using the song as “an opiate.” The singing isn’t merely to “forget hard circumstance”(94); it is a transformation of their melancholy into a happiness articulated in their songs and a self-affirming “toughness of fibre”(94) which preserves them in the midst of these impossible circumstances. “In slavery it had kept them from being crushed and exterminated as oppression had done to the Indian. In freedom it had kept them from becoming mere cogs in an elaborately organized machine”(94).

These scenes are much more than several instances of colored men singing as a way to sugar-coat their hardship; instead, they demonstrate how melancholy is capable of being transformed for the means of not only negotiating difficult circumstances, but in order to persist in the face of them. As Mimi describes it, it is a “racial characteristic”(94) that enables these subjects not be rendered immovable in their melancholy but rather convert it into a self-affirming means for survival. These men possess the ability to work with their melancholy and reclaim it as self-

affirmative. This “racial characteristic,” evidenced in these men, endows these subjects with the potential to reclaim their ethical space. “This quality allows one to stand over against critical dilution of their personhood”(Cannon, 143). Cannon names this characteristic “unshouted courage,” which she describes as:

the quality of steadfastness, in the face of formidable oppression. The communal attitude is far more than “grin and bear it.” Rather, it involves the ability to “hold on to life” against major oppositions. It is the incentive to facilitate change, to chip away at the oppressive structures bit by bit, to celebrate and rename their experiences in empowering ways. (144)

Irreducible to the stereotype of “the contented slave,”(77) there is much more at work here with these men than simply grinning and bearing it. They are reclaiming their melancholic burden as self-affirmative, renaming their melancholy in an empowering way.

Scene II

To understand the way melancholy functions as an ethical substance for Mimi, it is first necessary to examine her father’s melancholy because he provides a foil to Mimi as someone who does not attempt to find other ways to work with his melancholy. Stuck in the “old ways,” Jean doesn’t get caught up in the promises of the new age, refusing to stop mourning for his old home. In contrast to Jean, whose relationship with his melancholy remains stagnant, Mimi is attempting to find other ways to work with her melancholy.

Jean Daquin moves to Atlanta at his wife’s bidding not out of his own desire to do so, but because he recognizes the old way of living that he was accustomed to

in New Orleans is dying out. “I can’t stand to see the changes any longer—it’s too much like watching at the bedside of a dearly loved one who rapidly wastes away from a loathsome disease”(33). Although he knows New Orleans as he knew it no longer exists, he is unhappy in Atlanta, and mourns for the old ways. “I miss the old houses, the old ways. I’d give anything almost to walk once more down the Basin, to sit in the St. Louis cemetery”(53). There is no place for Jean, he is unable to work with his melancholy, too stuck in the failure of both places to provide him peace and contentment. “I feel as if some power has pulled me out of a quiet pool where I was lying on my back floating on the water and thrown me head first into a deadly revolving whirlpool”(53). Jean is unable to recognize the potential of his melancholy as a creative site and use it to find and create new spaces where he could find a sense of contentment and belonging. Instead, he finds himself overcome by the inadequacy of his present landscape, which leads to his early death. There is no place for him, therefore, his death is inevitable.

In contrast to the way that Jean’s melancholy renders him unable to persist in the face of a cultural landscape that has no place for him, Mimi tries to create a space for herself. Her focus shifts to her racial identity as part of her experience of her melancholy. When she moves from New Orleans, Mimi begins to understand what racial identity means. Before, “she had thought all people were hers—that only individuals mattered”(54). In Atlanta, she realizes “there were sharp, unchanging lines which seemed to matter with extraordinary power”(54). Her own understanding of herself as colored comes after she witnesses a riot with her father when she is young, seeing a colored man be chased down and murdered. “For her

the old order had passed, she was now definitely of a race set apart”(77). Through seeing a man be killed for his skin color, she understands her own position and how deeply the color lines are drawn. “She found herself in time thinking of practically all things, it mattered not what their nature now how remotely connected with race or colour problems they were, in terms of race or colour”(77).

Her race consciousness leads her to look at the different ways the colored community works with the growing mechanization of society. In Mr. Hunter (Carl’s father), an industrious minded businessman, she “doubted seriously the wisdom of the Negro’s doing anything other than acquire wealth, forge ahead in business and commerce and manufacture as many of them were doing”(94). In contrast, when she converses with Mr. Hunter’s non-business oriented son, or “when she heard Negroes sing or laugh, she wondered which road would lead to greater happiness”(94). As she looks anew at the colored community in which she lives, she is confronted with the question of what “she would rather have them be”(94). The happy, laughing men who are able to resist mechanization, or the progressive businessmen like Mr. Hunter? Mimi is working on her racial identity to discover which identity results in the most happiness. This is where she departs from her father and the colored men singing at the work sites whose work with their melancholy remains at a basic level. In Mimi’s pursuit of finding new ways to work with her melancholy, racial identity becomes her primary concern. Racial identity shapes how she attempts to fashion herself in the passing framework. She is trying to transform her racial identity in order to fulfill the obligation passing incites in her to attempt to give her life the best form possible.

SECTION III: MODE OF SUBJECTION PASSING AS THE MEANS

To illuminate how passing operates as mode of subjection, consider Angela, Fauset's protagonist in *Plum Bun*. Angela and her mother's weekend passing excursions shape Angela's perceptions of what it means to be white and what it means to be colored. The pair would go into town, passing as white, and experience the luxuries that darker color would have denied them. Angela's sister Virginia and her father Junius are both much darker skinned, barring them from participating in these outings. What Angela takes from these experiences is: "First, that the great rewards of life—riches, glamour, pleasure,—are for white-skinned people only. Second, that Junius and Virginia were denied these privileges because they were dark"(17). Angela is shaped by these notions, which are further reinforced by "the slights, real and fancied, which her colour had engendered throughout her lifetime"(77). She comes to believe that whiteness is the means to happiness, success, and pleasure. After a number of experiences where, when her color is revealed, she loses friends, employment, and opportunities, she decides she cannot handle the injustice any longer. When Angela questions "why should I shut myself off from all the things I want most?"(79), she is declaring the obligation she sees to herself to pass. Passing invites Angela to fulfill what she has decided is her moral obligation to herself, to offer her life the happiness she sees only whiteness as capable of allowing. She commits to providing her life with the pleasures that she sees as only available to white-skinned people. "Why shouldn't I declare for the one [path of life] that will bring me the greatest happiness, prosperity, and

respect?”(80).

When Mimi first came to Atlanta “she had hated the obsession of the men on the making of money, the vying of women with woman in dress, in grandeur and entertainment and of homes. But with the passing of years and particularly after the scene she had witnessed in the rioting, she began to take these as a matter of course”(78). She is drawn to the notion that these luxuries she had once found superfluous are what provides people contentment. As a result, she begins to believe that the capitalist system will provide her happiness as well. This is how passing becomes Mimi’s mode of subjection, which Foucault defines as: “the way in which people are invited or incited to recognize their moral obligations”(264). She believes that by passing she will be able to achieve these ideals, and therefore sees passing as her obligation to herself to give herself that opportunity. When she moves north, Mimi believes passing will provide her life a more desirable form in a way that living as colored cannot. Passing is how Mimi tries to cultivate the identity that she thinks will give her life the most happiness. In the work of trying to transform her racial identity, however, she comes to discover the fallacy of such identities. As we will see, Mimi learns that the promise of a good life that passing seemed to offer was a false one.

How Fantasy Operates

The optimistic ideals that make Mimi feel she owes it to herself to pass are the promises of industrial capitalism. Throughout the novel, the author continuously critiques these ideals, referring to industrialization as “the Machine.” Mimi’s father

Jean lectures her against her understanding that one “must either make money or else perish”(54). He explains to her:

The whole world's gone mad over power and wealth. The strongest man wins, not the most decent or the most intelligent or the best. All the old virtues of comradeship and art and literature and philosophy, in short, all the refinements of life are being swallowed up in this monster, the Machine, we are creating which is slowly but surely making us mere automatons, dancing like marionettes when the machine pulls the string and bids us prance. (54)

In addition to his critique, he argues throughout the novel that colored people are the only ones capable of resisting the machine. Mimi comes to this conclusion after she sees the group of convicts singing. Yet despite her recognition of the ability of colored people not to fall victim to the machine, she herself surrenders to it. She believes that passing will permit her the most ideal form possible; however, this notion is attached to fantasy.

Berlant addresses this kind of fantasy in *The Female Complaint*: “Fantasy here operates not as a desire for a thing, but as a desire for a kind of life”(75). She discusses how these fantasies rescue African American women who “bear the impact of political history”(75). Such fantasies cannot be underestimated. They become vital in the preservation of life for women who bear suffering as a part of their everyday experience. The fantasies enable them to continue living despite the history and current presence of trauma as a condition of existence that holds the very palpable ability to swallow their desire to go on. Mimi believes passing will allot her the way of life that she aspires to, believing in the promise of ideals of whiteness and industrial capitalism that claim to generate success plots. This optimism is “a scene of negotiated sustenance that makes life bearable as it presents

itself ambivalently, unevenly, incoherently”(Berlant, 14). Cruel optimism is “a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered to be impossible, sheer fantasy, or too possible, and toxic”(Berlant, 2011,24). This optimism allows Mimi to believe in the fantasy of a better life. The cruelty of it is that it is “sheer fantasy”, but her attachment to the fantasy “provides something of the continuity of the subject’s sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world”(Berlant, 2011,14). Without the fantasy she would not have been able to see the point of attempting to find a space for herself that could possibly offer her fulfillment. Fantasy gives her a reason and means to go on living. “Any object of optimism promises to guarantee the endurance of something, the survival of something, the flourishing of something”(Berlant, 2011,48).

Passing promises Mimi that she will flourish, which is how it comes to operate as her mode of subjection. Mimi’s moral obligation to herself is to create a space for herself and improve the quality of her life. “I’m leaving Harlem, leaving coloured people for good. I’ll live my own life, make more money than I can here, I’ll be able sooner to have Jean with me, and—well, there’s no other way out”(208).

Mimi reaches great heights of success, becoming very successful in her career and ultimately marrying a very wealthy man with whom she seems (at least initially) to be very much in love. However, despite fulfilling the ideal of industrial capitalism, there is still a “vague unrest which had been troubling her”(283). After being blissfully and necessarily engrossed in the fantasy that this ideal provides contentment and success, she starts to notice “the strained, unhappy expression on

the countenances of these people who, like scurrying insects, rushed madly here and there, each as though upon his efforts depended the future of civilization and life and everything else”(267). She finally recognizes these people are all “cogs in a machine”(267). Mimi’s developing understanding demonstrates that the ideal of capitalism is a fantasy and she exposes the promise that it will endow her life with happiness and contentment is a fallacy.

Berlant writes that when these relations of attachment and exchange fall short of providing what the fantasy had envisioned they would, the hope is that disappointment will not be too great as to endanger the ability to continue living, but instead the individual will be able to persist with a kind “compromised endurance”(2011, 48). However, Mimi’s recognition of the disappointments does directly threaten the shape she is attempting to give her life. In her realization that passing will not provide what she envisioned it would, she reconfigures her ethical framework. When Mimi sees that passing will not provide her happiness, she recognizes in that collapse the failure of identifications. In that wake, she relates to these failures in a different way. She works with her melancholy in a new way so that melancholy itself becomes what offers the potential for new forms that will afford her life the fulfillment she has been seeking. This new, more complex relationship to her melancholy is what ultimately facilitates providing her existence the contentment she had envisioned passing would.

When Identifications Fail

In “*The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man: (Passing for) Black Passing for*

White”, Samira Kawasha argues that “the passing narrative is not about the *representation* of blackness or whiteness; it is about the failure of blackness or whiteness to provide the grounds for a stable, coherent identity”(63). One night, Mimi attends a high society dinner party with her husband. The party is being put on by the Crosbys, a very wealthy couple that Mimi and her husband conduct business with. Mimi speaks to Mr. Chuan, a Chinese foreigner who the dinner is in honor of. The two end up conversing in depth and she questions him about his opinion on where Western civilization is headed. He responds:

The great nation of people or civilization is not that one which has the greatest brute strength but the one who can serve mankind best. The machine has been created—and it in turn is mastering its creators. I have been in your country many times and I feel that only your Negroes have successfully resisted mechanization—they yet can laugh and they yet can enjoy the benefits of the machine without being crushed by it. (282)

Mr. Chuan is not only critiquing the machine, he is illuminating the failure of the entirety of Western civilization. Later in the night, after speaking to Mr. Chuan, Mimi reflects on the “vague unrest which had been troubling her”(283). Western civilization in its obsession with power fails to serve its people. It fails to provide the means for finding a coherent identity, relying on a system that only comprehends absolute and fixed categories to identify with. Mimi recognizes the failure of these identifications and acknowledges that none of the identifications she has tried provide her fulfillment: “I don’t know what I can do about it all, I’m sure, but there’s emptiness, emptiness, everywhere” (283). Blackness does not provide a stable identity for Mimi in that the people in Harlem rejected her from their community. Whiteness, also, does not provide this stability; while it provides her some wealth

and security, it does not provide her the ideal form she had believed whiteness would. Through her experience, both living in her community and passing out of it, she sees that her present cultural landscape only offers her fixed identifications that are ultimately hollow and does not provide the categories for a less pre-determined identity that is negotiable.

SECTION IV: TELOS NEW (TEMPORAL) COMMUNITIES MUST BE FORGED

Mimi is seeking and working to construct her ethics in the terms of self-fashioning and finds that the identities available to her fail to provide her liberation. No longer being maintained by the romantic fantasy of the good life in identifying with whiteness, she must therefore find and create other forms by which to be fulfilled. She accomplishes this through working with her melancholy in a new way at the close of the novel. In the final chapter, Mimi and Jimmie are attending the performance of a colored pianist at Carnegie Hall. Drawing from his writings in *The Negro's Contribution to American Culture*, White seems to modeling the performer after Roland Hayes and Paul Robeson. When “the pianist leaned low over his instrument, long brown fingers light touched ivory keys, prodding them gently in light, gentle touches”(296), Mimi is drawn into an elaborate spiritual vision:

Ghostly figures moved shadowily across the room—figures with eyes sad with the tragedies of a thousand years, eyes bright with the faith which is born of strength in trial. Figures which by some strange legerdemain began as she watched them to lose their unearthly diaphanousness and, like Galatea, to become flesh and blood. The transformation did not startle nor alarm her—instead, held fast in the spell woven

by the black singer, the re-creation of life in the figure before her seemed the most natural thing in the world. (297)

This vision seems to complicate my arguments that the novel presents both identifications as problematic, because Mimi appears to be reconnecting with the black community here in a very powerful way. However, to fully understand what this moment means for Mimi, for identifications, and for passing, we must turn to the life of the author himself.

Walter White opens his autobiography, *A Man Called White*, with the statement: "I am a Negro. My skin is white, my eyes are blue, my hair is blond. The traits of my race are nowhere visible upon me"(3). His appearance, like his protagonist Mimi's, made him able to pass for white. Throughout his life, White was deeply committed to the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), succeeding James Weldon Johnson as executive secretary and leading the organization for over twenty years. He was vital in the passing of the anti-lynching bill, from his undercover work to his public connections with politicians in D.C. White also provided a lot of the energy behind the Harlem Renaissance, his biographer Kenneth Janken relaying that "White surveyed the cultural-political topography, helped to plot the direction of the movement, and assisted an array of black artists in their ascent"(89). Why is White's name so unfamiliar? He worked alongside W.E.B. Du Bois and other prominent names in the civil rights struggle. Why has White's contribution been all but written out of the civil rights movement?

Much of the writing done on White is conflicted, questioning his actual level

of commitment to the black community that he always identified with. The evidence for their ambivalence came in several forms. White was very much an advocate for complete integration, he and Du Bois parted ways on this principle. While Du Bois was fighting for voluntary segregation, White found any kind of segregation, even voluntary, counterproductive to his vision of equality. This belief, as well as how White conducted himself in society, rubbing shoulders with many high society white figures, made the black community question whose interests he was actually keeping in mind.

Probably the most damaging to his relationship with the colored community was an article White published in a 1949 issue of *Look* magazine entitled: "Has Science Conquered the Color Line?" In the article he discusses a skin-bleaching chemical that he believed would "bring a new era"(95). Throughout the article, White is contending that the scientific discovery will eradicate the color line. He writes: "No longer will skin color be a criterion of human ability and acceptance"(95). His main claim in the article is that biologically everyone is the same and if the difference of skin color is abolished, race differences would no longer exist. White quotes himself in an earlier article he wrote, stating: "Suppose the skin of every Negro were suddenly to turn white. What would happen to all notions about negroes, the idols on which are built race prejudice and race hatred? Would not negroes be judged individually on their ability, energy, honesty, cleanliness as are whites? How else would they be judged"(95). This article made White the target of violent criticism, and seemed to confirm suspicions about his desire to be white. Although White later defended the article as satire, it did

irreparable damage to his position in the colored community.

In his autobiography White dates his consciousness of himself as colored to an experience that he writes a fictionalized account of in *Flight*. Like Mimi, White understood himself as colored after witnessing a black man being chased down and murdered by a mob. “In that instant there opened up in me a great awareness; I knew then who I was. I was a Negro, a human being with an invisible pigmentation which marked me a person to be hunted, hanged, abused, discriminated against, kept in poverty and ignorance”(11). White used his “invisible pigmentation” to work for the advancement of the colored community. Upon joining the NAACP, he went undercover as white and investigated countless lynchings and infiltrated Klux Klan meetings to gain information, putting his life severely at risk on countless occasions.

In *The Dilemma of Black identity in America: Walter White*, Thomas Dyja writes that White:

learned to navigate his complicated racial identity through expedience. Instead of hiding behind the veil Du Bois described in *The Souls of Black Folk*, a haunted, divided soul, White had wrapped himself in the veil, becoming at once black, white, neither, and both, depending on what he needed to be at the time but always telling himself that whatever he did, he did for his race. (59)

White’s experiences throughout his life determined how he understood his racial identity: as a “chameleon”(82). This fluid racial identity is the reason why White faced so much skepticism and has been mostly excluded in the history of the civil rights movement. Society does not have a category for White to fit in to. Fixed identifications dominate our understanding of our culture landscape, therefore, White was unintelligible to people. The copious work he did for the black

community was demeaned because he did not fit into a fixed colored identity. White recognized the shortcomings and failures of fixed identifications, defining himself as both, neither, and beyond the singularity of one.

Clearly White was very committed to the colored community and his activism in the civil rights movement. But it is also easy to understand how his objection to nationalism, a social life spent in the company of many high society white people, and his article on skin-bleaching could raise question about where his loyalty lay. To begin to look at how White's racial identity and why he was received the way he was, which will lead to an understanding of Mimi's experience at the end of the novel, we must turn to the last page of White's autobiography. He closes the work with the statement: "I am white and I am black, and know there is no difference. Each casts a shadow, and all shadows are dark"(366). White's light skin color very much shaped his experience of his identity and how he understood himself as beyond race.

White did not ever fully find a home in either the white or black community, but he did identify deeply with his colored blood. He also was a powerful force in helping the Harlem Renaissance come to life, networking a number of artists and musicians. In, *The Negro's Contribution to American Culture*, White writes: "No artist ever achieves greatness until he transcends all lines of race or sex or nationality"(9). He described that an artist must draw from their personal and cultural ethos, but ultimately transcend all those categories. I see these two positions of White's as shaping what Mimi is experiencing when she hears the pianist: "Before them fled all worries, all cares, all lines of sex and class and race melting the heterogeneous

through into perfect unity" (*Flight*, 297).

Similar to White, fixed identifications fail for Mimi. As such, what is occurring during the closing scene in the novel at Carnegie Hall? If both blackness and whiteness as fixed categories have failed her, what is this moment of transformation and connection she is experiencing?

Unable to forge one in either of the available present communities, Mimi is experiencing a spiritual transformation and finding truth in a connection with a community of a different temporality. The music is allowing her to transcend the binary categories of race and fixed identifications and finally find peace with the colored community in a different span of time. There is no category that Mimi's or White's fluid racial identity can fit in to, making it necessary for Mimi to find a space for herself elsewhere.

What Mimi is experiencing as a result of the music echoes queer theorist Elizabeth Freeman's melancholy theory that insists that "subjectivity itself is a record of partings and foreclosures" (11). Mimi is working with her melancholy in a new way that facilitates the connections with a different kind of community across history. In this moment, Mimi "knew she had found the answer to the riddle which had puzzled her" (300).

Spirituality as Gaining Access to Truth

In *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, Foucault defines spirituality as "the search, practice, and experience through which the subject carries out the necessary transformations on himself in order to have access to the truth" (15). He then goes

on to write:

Spirituality postulates that the truth is never given to the subject by right. That the subject as such does not have right access to truth and is not capable of having access to truth. That the truth is not given to the subject by a simply act of knowledge. That for the subject to have right of access to truth he must be changed, transformed, shifted, and become, to some extent and up to a certain point, other than himself. The truth is only given to the subject at a price that brings the subject's being into play. (15)

Mimi is experiencing a spiritual transformation that allows her to have access to truth. "Upon Mimi the music served as magic metal keys which opened before her eyes mystic rooms, some of them long closed, some of them never opened before her, all of them musty through long dark days and longer nights of disuse"(297). What enables Mimi to finally come to this truth is that she is being transformed by the music she is hearing. In the wake of the failure of fixed identifications, she is becoming other than herself in this moment. "These songs were of peace and hope and faith, and in them she felt and knew the peace which had so long eluded her grasp"(299).

The truth she discovers as a result of this transformation is that she can find a space and community beyond her present landscape that offers her a sense of peace and belonging. This community is provided by the new way she is relating to her melancholy and how it facilitates non-normative connections in other temporal stretches. Mimi has recognized that working with her melancholy in a new way allows her find the space for herself she has been seeking. Mimi finds a sense of peace and belonging not in the present colored or white communities, but in other stretches of time. This supports Carolyn Dinshaw's and Elizabeth Freeman's

arguments for the possible temporal aspect of community present in their work on queer subjectivity located in other periods of time. Dinshaw calls for us to “imagine a process that engages all kinds of differences, though not all in the same ways: racial, ethnic, national, sexual, gender, class, even historical/temporal”(21). In this imagination, she suggests that other “stretches of time, becomes itself a resource for subject and community formation”(21).

The vital importance of this queer historical impulse to seek connections and communities across and through history emerges in the wake of the failure of the cultural landscape to provide such sites for connection. The project becomes necessary to engender the ability to imagine new ways of forming and inhabiting communities and sustain the desire to continue living in a stunted cultural climate that does not provide a space for those who do not conform to the normative identity categories. Imagining new ways of forging connections by reaching across different spans of time creates a space for the more fluid subjectivity of queer, non-conforming bodies.

Concluding

As a form of Munoz’s idea of disidentification, passing enables the protagonists in all three novels to work within the dominant culture in ways that further exposes its shortcomings. Passing exposes these failures to Mimi, who arrives at this realization at the end of *Flight* in a moment of spiritual transformation after she finds liberation in none of the present identifications available to her. Her truth becomes finding belonging in her relation to a community

of a different temporality. Angela ultimately outs herself as colored, finally recognizing that white society is as flawed as the black community she needed to escape. The novel ends with her getting together with a man who had also been passing for white, the two taking off for Paris, seeming to be trying to escape the rigid categories they were confronted with in New York, and live in a space with more fluid racial identity. Rena, in *The House Behind the Cedars*, is completely overcome with the lack of success of her attempted identities and is unable to negotiate that devastation. Being that *The House Behind the Cedars* is the earliest of the three novels, published in 1900, 26 years before *Flight*, envisioning other alternatives for Rena wasn't possible, therefore, her death at the end of the novel is inevitable. Her death demonstrates how important it is for the minority subject to recognize these failings but then in turn to envision in them opportunities for new self and community formations that are not restricted to their present temporality.

Passing demonstrates to the passing subject that the racial hierarchy in that time period is a hollow distinction, because whiteness provides no better terms for happiness for Mimi, Angela, and Rena than blackness does, stripping whiteness of its status as an ideal form. Fixed identifications are revealed as inadequate as negotiable terms for existence.

Examining Mimi, Angela, and Rena's journeys of passing and analyzing them as ethical frameworks suggests that passing is a way a minority subject can work within the dominant culture that illuminates shortcomings and in that exposure create a space of ungrounded bodies where it is clear no available identification will provide fulfillment. Anne Cheng speculates that "to be free of illusion and lies is

viscerally brutalizing, but it also imagines that freedom might occur in the very place of that rupture”(59). Berlant’s conception of trauma can be read in conversation with this claim. She posits that “the subject of the traumatizing event can be opened to a new habitation of history”(81). In the face of the traumatizing event, in this case, realizing that dominant identifications and the promise of the good life under whiteness and capitalism are a fantasy, the pressure to survive becomes pivotal. “Under the pressure of survival they improvise, they realize that their habits of personality can be unlearned and reconfigured”(92). Mimi comes to this realization when she becomes free of the illusions and lies that passing and identifications encompassed her in.

Cheng asserts that “throughout the various periods of their history in the United States, Black women have used their creativity to carve out “living space” within the intricate web of multilayered oppression”(76). In this ruptured space, melancholy is the crucial element that facilitates this creativity. If the subject is able to work with their melancholy differently and see the potential it holds, melancholy provides the means for transformation. At the close of *Flight*, Mimi reveals in her moment of transformation that working with melancholy in a new way that facilitates the formation of new spaces of belonging. In her moment of discovery, becoming ungrounded and porous, her melancholic reaching back to dwell in the history and touch other queered subjects allows Mimi to finally find a community that offers her a sense of reciprocity and fulfillment.

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