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DESIRING TO BE COSMOPOLITAN:
PASSING AND THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF AN EX-COLOURED MAN

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Abstract

This thesis examines Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929) and James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* (1912) through the lens of cosmopolitanism. It examines each character's desire to achieve a more cosmopolitan lifestyle that allows them more freedom of movement. However, all three of the novels' main characters are limited both by societal constraints and by their own personal limitations. Although no character achieves a perfect cosmopolitan lifestyle, they achieve imperialist and bourgeois forms of cosmopolitanism, examples of what Scott L. Malcomson has called "actually existing cosmopolitanisms."

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Introduction

This thesis examines two African American novels—Nella Larsen’s *Passing* (1929) and James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* (1912)—through a cosmopolitan lens that seeks to understand the nature of the protagonists’ desire. The three main characters of these novels—Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry of *Passing* and the unnamed narrator of *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*—are all, of course, genetically cosmopolitan: they are the products of miscegenation between European and African predecessors. Physically, these three characters are racially ambiguous and can easily pass for white, but legally, they are classified as black by the “one-drop rule,” a law in place in many states during the first half of the twentieth century that classified as black any person with as little as one drop of black blood. Culturally, as well, these characters feel torn between two races. It is no surprise, then, that they all express a desire to, in some way, come to terms with their own racial identities. Though Irene Redfield, Clare Kendry, and the Ex-Coloured Man all serve as proof that it is impossible to draw clear racial distinctions, they must still learn to navigate in a world that believes the opposite; they desire to deal effectively with the constraints placed on them by a society that believes it is imperative to assign them to a specific racial category. These constraints limit the characters’ opportunities for physical, economic, and social mobility, and thus, all three characters express a desire for what is, essentially, a more cosmopolitan lifestyle that allows for greater mobility and a wider choice of options in their pursuit of happiness. In the case of all three characters, their private desires for this more cosmopolitan lifestyle often conflict with both their public and private responsibilities.

The word “cosmopolitan,” which comes from the Greek, meaning “citizen of the universe” or “citizen of the cosmos,” was coined in the fourth century BCE by the Cynics, who

meant the term as a rejection of the idea that allegiance to a local community precluded allegiance to a much larger, more diverse community. The history of the term since the fourth century BCE is a long one, and its definition has not always been easily agreed upon by scholars. Contemporary scholars generally agree, however, that cosmopolitanism is based on the idea that the identity of one's birth, whether imposed legally, in the case of the one-drop rule, or by less official means, is not sufficient to define a person. Instead, it is possible to have loyalties to groups to which one does not belong. Tania Friedel has defined a cosmopolitan perspective as one that "understands that subject positions and identities do not neatly fit into categorical distinctions" (Friedel 7). More specifically, cosmopolitanism, according to Friedel, is "the impossibility of fixed or 'hard' categorical distinctions between ethnic groups" (Friedel 11). Similarly, Ifeoma Kiddoe Nwankwo defines cosmopolitanism as "the definition of oneself through the world beyond one's own origins" (Nwankwo 9).

In order to be a cosmopolitan, a person must first fulfill several requirements. First of all, the cosmopolitan must have freedom of movement; he or she is able to physically move from one geographic location to another. Second, the cosmopolitan must be able to communicate across cultural boundaries and fit in among groups of people that he or she does not belong to. A cosmopolitan can move or communicate across national, racial, ethnic, sexual, and class boundaries. I include class boundaries in this definition because the true cosmopolitan should be able to move up or down the social ladder, so to speak, without the fear of being looked down upon for making such a move. The ability to make such moves across oftentimes firmly established cultural boundaries necessarily requires a high level of fearlessness and self-confidence, personal qualities that are necessary for the cosmopolitan.

Despite the academic assertion that it is impossible to accurately define a person based

only on his or her race, the common knowledge in the United States of the early twentieth century, and to a lesser extent, in the United States of today, is that there are indeed fundamental and irreconcilable differences between people of European descent and people of African descent. This popular belief has very real consequences on the black characters of *Passing*, and it has also had very real consequences on the lives of real black Americans.

I begin by examining cosmopolitan desire through Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry, and later, through the unnamed protagonist of *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*. Irene Redfield is a middle-class black woman living in Harlem who has decided to maintain her black identity despite her ability to pass as white. Harlem in the early twentieth-century was the vibrant center of black culture in the United States, but Irene's decision to live her life as a black woman, rather than being based on self-confidence, or a pride of being black, is instead based on Irene's fear of disrupting her comfortable, middle-class life. But Irene nevertheless harbors strong desires for what I've decided to call a more cosmopolitan lifestyle, desires which are complicated by the reappearance in her life of a former acquaintance, Clare Kendry, who is arguably the antagonist to Irene Redfield's protagonist. Unlike Irene, Clare has decided to permanently pass as white, living with her white husband, with whom she has a white-looking daughter. Her extremely racist husband, John Bellew, is unaware of her true racial heritage, but after her encounter with Irene, her desire to return to her previous life is so strong that she risks discovery. Despite her privileged white lifestyle, she is not truly living the cosmopolitan life that she desires. Clare Kendry serves as proof that passing for white is not without its own form of limitations. Whether one's public identity is black or white, society still requires that a choice be made, that the passer be placed in one racial box or another. The Ex-Coloured Man, like Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry, is also able to pass for white. He uses his appearance to move freely

around both the United States and Europe. He claims his African American heritage when it is convenient for him and denies it both when it is merely inconvenient and when it poses a serious danger to him, as when he witnesses a lynching. Unlike Irene and Clare, the Ex-Coloured Man is a man, and he enjoys more freedom of movement as a result of his gender. Not only are the characters of *Passing* and *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* searching for a lifestyle that can only be described as cosmopolitan, but so are the novels themselves expressions of cosmopolitan sentiment, and Larsen's and Johnson's publication of these novels were cosmopolitan acts.

Nella Larsen's *Passing*

Much has been written about the nature and role of desire in *Passing*.¹ The novel is not only about “the color-line,” the term coined by W. E. B. Du Bois to describe the lamentable, boundary-like state of race relations in the United States. *Passing* is also, clearly, a novel about longing. Irene Redfield longs to maintain her privileged, black middle-class life. Clare Kendry longs to be reunited with the heritage she abandoned when she chose to permanently pass for white. Perhaps most importantly, Irene and Clare both long for economic security.

Much scholarship on *Passing* has focused on the suppressed homoerotic or homosexual desire that Irene Redfield expresses for Clare Kendry. The portrayal of homosexual desire in *Passing* was first addressed by Deborah McDowell in her introduction to the 1986 reprinting of the novel. McDowell argues that “though, superficially, Irene’s is an account of Clare’s passing for white and related issues of racial identity and loyalty, underneath the safety of that surface is the more dangerous story—though not named explicitly—of Irene’s awakening sexual desire for Clare” (xxvi). David L. Blackmore has also argued in favor of a homosexual reading of *Passing*. In his analysis of the novel, he expands McDowell’s interpretation, which is limited to only Irene’s desire for Clare, to also include the homosexual desire expressed by Irene Redfield’s husband Brian. Brian being a relatively minor character in the novel, Blackmore’s argument that he is struggling with repressed homosexual desire remains unconvincing. And although there are several weak points in McDowell’s argument, it is plausible that Irene harbors some homoerotic feelings for Clare. As McDowell points out, the marriages of both Irene and Clare are sexless,

1. For a more in depth look at various interpretations of desire in *Passing*, see Brian Carr, “Paranoid Interpretation, Desire’s Nonobject, and Nella Larsen’s *Passing*,” *PMLA* 119, no. 2 (March 2000): 282-95; Carla Kaplan, “Undesirable Desire: Citizenship and Romance in Modern American Fiction,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 43, no. 1 (1997): 144-69; and Catherine Rottenberg, “*Passing*: Race, Identification, and Desire,” *Criticism* 45, no. 4 (Fall 2003): 435-52.

and this situation allows Larsen to “flirt, if only by suggestion, with the idea of a lesbian relationship between them” (McDowell xxiii). It is also true that all of Irene’s physical descriptions of Clare suggest that she finds Clare attractive. But while it may be true that Irene finds herself somewhat attracted, physically, to Clare, the more likely possibility is that both Irene and Clare are attracted to what each woman thinks the other one has. Though neither character ever uses the word cosmopolitanism, each woman is attracted to what is, essentially, the cosmopolitan nature of the other’s lifestyle.

Throughout *Passing*, Irene Redfield’s and Clare Kendry’s personal desire for a greater level of freedom of movement is constantly seen through the lens of their public and private responsibilities. The phenomenon of passing is, of course, intimately related to the conflict between desire and responsibility. By deciding to pass, whether it is out of a desire for greater mobility, a desire for more opportunities to acquire wealth, or a desire to increase one’s personal safety, the passer must necessarily deny his or her family and friends who either cannot pass or choose not to pass. More generally, in order to pass successfully, a person must also either actively deny his or her race or passively refuse to acknowledge it. If the passer lived in a society where race was a nonissue, then the idea of denying one’s race would be a nonissue, as well, and there would, of course, be no reason to pass in the first place. But Irene and Clare live in a society where race is an extremely important issue: one’s race determines the level of personal freedom one has. It is for this reason that there exist such racial uplift organizations as Larsen’s fictional Negro Welfare League and the real National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).² It is impossible to fully participate in such organizations if one is

2. According to Larsen’s biographer, Thadious M. Davis, when Larsen left her teaching position at the Tuskegee Institute in 1916, she was “so disillusioned that for the rest of her life she was cynical and contemptuous of all programs for racial uplift and suspicious and condemning of anyone espousing such programs” (Davis 90). As Davis points out, in her first novel *Quicksand* (1928), Larsen compares her fictional school Naxos, which was modeled

passing for white. Thus, in such a society, the passer must make the choice between increasing the level of his or her own personal freedom and working to increase the level of freedom of every member of what society defines as the race. What's more, there are those who believe that a cosmopolitan predisposition does not and should not prevent the maintenance of ties to the culture of one's birth. Kwame Anthony Appiah, for example, advocates for a sort of "partial cosmopolitanism" (Appiah xvii). Appiah chides both the "nationalist who abandons all foreigners" and the "hard-core cosmopolitan who regards friends and fellow citizens with icy impartiality" (xvi-xvii). Though this "partial cosmopolitanism" is the ideal, both Irene and Clare must publicly forego this ideal. Privately, they may maintain loyalties to other cultures: Irene, though living as black, identifies more with white culture, and Clare, though living as white, identifies more with black culture. Publicly, however, they are forced into constraining racial boxes that limit their potential for cosmopolitanism.

The contentious relationship between personal desire and public responsibility in *Passing* is first subtly addressed by Nella Larsen's choice of an epigraph for the novel. Larsen chooses as her epigraph four lines that are repeated twice in Countée Cullen's poem "Heritage."

One three centuries removed
 From the scenes his fathers loved,
 Spicy grove, cinnamon tree,
 What is Africa to me? (lines 7-10, 59-62)

First and foremost, this epigraph foreshadows the struggle that Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry go through as they attempt to come to terms with their cosmopolitan heritage. Like the speaker of the poem, who is attempting to reconcile his African heritage with his presumed American

after the Tuskegee Institute, to "a big knife with cruelly sharp edges cutting all to a pattern, the white man's pattern" (Larsen, *Quicksand* 8). Larsen's distrust of racial uplift organizations was not limited to those modeled after the Tuskegee Institute, which was founded by Booker T. Washington on belief that the way to equality was through vocational training. She also distrusted the NAACP, which was co-founded by Washington's ideological rival, W. E. B. Du Bois, and whose leadership consisted mostly of white Americans.

citizenship and lifestyle, so are Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry trying to reconcile their African heritage with their European heritage and their American citizenship and lifestyle.

Peter Powers has suggested that Cullen's poem "Heritage" is also about Cullen's own conflicted desires, between his personal homosexual desires and his desires to fulfill his role as a poet and public figure of the Harlem Renaissance, a role which left little, if any, room for his homosexuality. If one accepts Powers' interpretation of "Heritage" as a psychological battle between personal desire and public responsibility, then Larsen's use of the poem as her epigraph hints at the disconnect between Irene's and Clare's personal desires for cosmopolitanism and their private and public responsibilities. Even if one does not accept Powers' reading of "Heritage," the conflict between personal desire and public responsibility in *Passing* is still clear.

Irene Redfield

From the very beginning of the novel, Irene Redfield is intensely jealous of Clare Kendry's seeming success and happiness, and this jealousy affects Irene's opinion of Clare's lifestyle. Clare's life seems to Irene to be the embodiment of personal freedom: she is permanently passing for white and she fearlessly and self-confidently travels the world, turning a blind eye to the many dangers that such a lifestyle presents to her as a black woman passing for white. Though the word "cosmopolitanism" is never used in the novel, it is essentially the cosmopolitanism of Clare's lifestyle that Irene Redfield feels threatened by. Whether Clare really has achieved what she desires is a matter I will discuss shortly; what is important here is that Irene believes Clare has achieved her goals in life, and this is extremely upsetting to Irene, who does not share Clare's courageousness.

The first letter that Irene receives from Clare, which prompts Irene's recollection of the pair's first encounter in Chicago, is extremely threatening to Irene. The letter, which is enclosed in a "long envelope of thin Italian paper," and which is written in an "almost illegible scrawl," seems "'out of place and alien" to her (9). This aversion to things foreign has not always been Irene's reality. In the flashback that makes up the majority of the novel's first section, one can see that before Irene and Clare run into each other in Chicago, Irene is attempting to embrace foreignness.

When Irene and Clare meet coincidentally in the Drayton's all-white rooftop café, Irene does not initially recognize Clare. When Clare reveals to Irene that they have met on a previous occasion, Irene searches her memory unsuccessfully for a time and place when they might have met. "And that voice. Surely she'd heard those husky tones somewhere before. Perhaps before time, contact, or something had been at them, making them into a voice remotely suggesting

England. Ah! Could it have been in Europe that they had met?" (17). Irene says these words hopefully, as if she would like nothing more than to run into an old friend from Europe on the rooftop of the Drayton, to meet someone who would affirm Irene's own sense of cosmopolitanism. She is disappointed to learn that Clare is not actually an old friend from Europe: she remembers that the yet unknown woman called her 'Rene, a name she had never gone by in Europe. This scene contrasts sharply with the opening scene involving the "out of place and alien" letter from Clare (9). Where initially Irene is drawn to the cosmopolitanism of having a friend from Europe, she is later terrified of Europe's foreignness. The difference between these two scenes is Irene's developing association of Europe with Clare. Irene's jealousy of Clare's lifestyle creates in her an intense xenophobia that entirely contradicts her previous desire for a cosmopolitan lifestyle.

At the Drayton, Irene rides the elevator to the rooftop café, and she thinks of this ride in terms that can be considered very cosmopolitan. She is both literally and figuratively moving up in the world. The elevator ride is, to her, "like being wafted upward on a magic carpet to another world, pleasant, quiet, and strangely remote from the sizzling one that she had left below" (13). In Irene's mind, dining at the Drayton is the equivalent of traveling to a far and distant land, something that Irene would never, in fact, do, as the next paragraph describes. In the next paragraph, Irene orders an iced tea, and this simple action is used to reveal Irene's true feelings about attaining a worldly, cosmopolitan lifestyle: "The tea, when it came, was all that she had desired and expected. In fact, so much was it what she had desired and expected that after the first deep cooling drink she was able to forget it, only now and then sipping, a little absently, from the tall green glass" (13). On the surface, this short passage describes merely the iced tea. It is just as refreshing and delicious as Irene had expected it to be. But this passage also serves as

the perfect metaphor for Irene's attitude toward Clare Kendry's cosmopolitan lifestyle. This scene is perhaps Irene's most cosmopolitan moment in the novel. She fearlessly and naturally passes into an all-white environment that would be closed to her, not only if she could not pass for white, but also if she were not as confident in herself as she is. When Irene notices the yet unrecognized Clare watching her from across the room, her first reaction is not, as might be expected, to fear that she has been recognized as a black woman. Instead, she worries that she has "put her hat on backwards" or that she has "a streak of powder on her face" (15). When she finally considers the possibility that she's been discovered passing, she dismisses the possibility immediately. She is completely at home in this environment. But despite being so comfortable in this cosmopolitan action, and despite imagining her trip to the Drayton as a "magic carpet" ride, the level of cosmopolitanism that she achieves in this scene is still limited: though she's crossing racial boundaries, she is not crossing any class boundaries. But as her reaction to the iced tea indicates, Irene, ultimately, is comfortable with this limited level of cosmopolitanism. Even before she encounters Clare in Chicago, Irene's desire for a cosmopolitan lifestyle, like her craving for a refreshing iced tea, seems to be little more than a passing fancy.

For someone to want anything more than a figurative iced tea is, to Irene, very frustrating, if not highly offensive. Sipping her iced tea, Irene recalls her day shopping. She had found all of the items she needed to purchase, except for her son Ted's desired book. "Why was it that almost invariably he wanted something that was difficult or impossible to get? Like his father. For ever wanting something that he couldn't have," Irene says to herself (14). This complaint, that Irene's husband, Brian, always wants something unattainable, is a reference to Brian's desire to move to Brazil. Irene Redfield has had several opportunities in her life to leave the extremely racist United States and move to the still racist, though much less violently racist,

Brazil.³ Abandoning her life in the United States and moving her family to Brazil would fulfill her private responsibility to give her two sons a chance at a better life, and it would also fulfill her personal desire to achieve a lifestyle that allows her more personal freedoms. Instead, she prefers to stay in the United States and continue to unsuccessfully imitate the highly mobile, worldly lifestyle that she sees in Clare Kendry. Moving to Brazil would increase Irene Redfield's level of cosmopolitanism, but she is too afraid of leaving the comforts of the world she knows to make the move.

Aside from making Irene Redfield more cosmopolitan, moving to Brazil would also bring her closer to her African heritage, of which she seems to be so proud. But here is where the Countée Cullen epigraph, already discussed above, becomes important yet again: Irene really has very few ties to her African heritage. She is "One three centuries removed / From the scenes [her] fathers loved" (Cullen 7-8, 59-60). As if she were asking herself, "What is Africa to me?" she is much more attracted to the culture of the bourgeois white society that she tries to imitate. When Irene is introduced to Clare's racist husband, John Bellew, and hears him use the slur "Nig" to refer to Clare, Irene is naturally shocked and indignant. But her shock and indignation fade quickly, and referring to John Bellew, the narrator tells us, "The man chuckled, crinkling up his eyes, not, Irene was compelled to acknowledge, unpleasantly" (39). Irene admits that "under other conditions she might have liked him. A fairly good-looking man of amiable disposition, evidently, and in easy circumstances. Plain and with no nonsense about him" (42). In spite of John Bellew's extreme racism, Irene still cannot help but find herself somewhat attracted to him,

3. Among blacks in the United States, Brazil has often been seen, to quote Leslie B. Rout, Jr., as a sort of racial "Shangri-la" (Rout 368). Though the country is certainly not free of racial problems, Brazil has remained free of much of the racial strife that has plagued the United States. As José Clarana wrote in an open letter to *Crisis* in 1918, "In a word, in Brazil the mere possession of a white skin does not entitle a man to superior civil rights and opportunities, nor does an increased pigmentation condemn its owner to the status of a pariah" (Clarana 355).

just as she is attracted to white culture.

Though Irene lacks the courage—or perhaps the recklessness—that Clare has, this does not necessarily mean that Irene should be faulted. As a black woman living in the United States in the early part of the twentieth century, Irene’s achievement of a comfortable middle-class lifestyle is a tremendous accomplishment. She is living in an era defined by the system of Jim Crow segregation—indeed, Apartheid—that was the law of the land until the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 made such laws illegal. She is living in a time when being black meant being subject to violent oppression in the form of lynchings, a horrifying and humiliating way to die, and a death that was the fate of thousands of black Americans between the end of Reconstruction and the middle part of the twentieth century. Compared to black Americans with fewer financial resources, she has a relatively cosmopolitan life already, and she avoids anything that might threaten that. But despite her privileged lifestyle, Irene is not isolated from the problems facing black Americans. No matter how trivial her trip to the Drayton may seem, it is a trip she could never take if she were not passing as white. It is a trip her husband, who has a darker complexion than Irene, could never even dream of taking. And despite Irene’s attempts to prevent her sons from learning the word “nigger” and hearing about lynchings, she is unsuccessful. Irene’s son, Junior, is called a “dirty nigger” by somebody, and the boys hear from their father about a lynching that has occurred recently (102-103). Their economic privilege is not enough to protect them from the realities of race relations in the United States.

Irene Redfield’s circle of friends seems quite diverse, and perhaps even cosmopolitan. The party she attends, which is a benefit for the Negro Welfare League, is attended by men and women of all kinds and races (though they are presumably all middle- or upper-middle-class). Observing this mix of people at the party, she recites a line of a nursery rhyme to her friend,

Hugh Wentworth:

Rich man, poor man,
 Beggar, thief,
 Doctor, lawyer,
 Indian chief. (75)

To this Wentworth responds that, indeed, “everybody seems to be here and a few more” (75).

But what really concerns Wentworth is the “name, status, and race of the blonde beauty out of the fairytale” (75). Though Wentworth does not know it, this “blonde beauty” is Clare Kendry.

Despite the wide variety of people at the party, the primary thing on Wentworth’s mind, and likely on every attendee’s mind, is everybody else’s “name, status, and race.” Conspicuously absent from the party are, of course, the people who will benefit from the party’s proceeds and the Negro Welfare League’s activities. Irene goes to the party not because it is for a good cause, but because she wants to be seen. And while she may be comfortable crossing racial boundaries, she is still reluctant to cross any class boundaries.

Despite her participation in racial uplift organizations, the reader can see, through Irene’s relationship with her black servants, Zulena and Sadie, that Irene has little concern for the welfare of the black, urban poor. The narrator of the novel, describing Zulena through Irene’s eyes, describes her as “a small mahogany-coloured creature” (54). Though the use of the word “mahogany” suggests a positive trait, the word “creature” is certainly negative. While Irene may profess of pride of being black, and while she may look upon blackness positively, in Irene’s mind, Zulena and Sadie are not of the same status as the middle-class Redfields. Irene cannot understand why Clare chooses to socialize with Zulena. When Clare visits the Redfield home, Irene is annoyed with Clare, who “would descend to the kitchen and, with—to Irene—an exasperating childlike lack of perception, spend her visit in talk and merriment with Zulena and Sadie” (79). Irene, “for some obscure reason which she [shies] away from putting into words,”

does not approve of these visits to the kitchen (75). The reason, one can assume, is that she does not understand that one might gain or learn something from talking to the servants about anything more than one's breakfast order. Put more bluntly, Irene Redfield is a class snob. Even the word "descend," which stands in sharp contrast to Irene's upward movement at the Drayton, suggests not just that Clare is going downstairs to talk to the servants, but that she is also moving several rungs down the social ladder by doing so. Irene is unwilling to make such a move, and given the definition of cosmopolitanism that we are working with, one that includes class, as well as race and ethnicity, this necessarily limits the extent to which Irene can achieve a cosmopolitan lifestyle. Though she is able to cross racial boundaries, she is unable or unwilling to cross class boundaries.

Clare Kendry

An objective analysis of Clare Kendry is a much more difficult thing to achieve than an objective analysis of Irene Redfield. Everything the reader knows about Clare Kendry is filtered through Irene, whose account of what happens in the novel is notoriously unreliable. Despite the difficulty, however, it is possible to objectively analyze Clare Kendry.

Just as Clare Kendry kindles in Irene an extreme sense of jealousy for Clare's apparent freedom and success, Irene Redfield also kindles in Clare a similarly extreme sense of longing. After receiving an unwanted letter from Clare and determining to throw away any future letters of Clare's she might receive, Irene muses, "Actually they were strangers. Strangers in their ways and means of living. Strangers in their desires and ambitions. Strangers even in their racial consciousness" (62-63). Irene's assessment of their two personalities is partially correct. On one level, Clare Kendry and Irene Redfield both long to achieve a greater level of personal freedom in their lives—a level of personal freedom that I've deemed cosmopolitanism. But the two characters depart from each other in the ways they respond to and act on this common desire. They are, indeed, "strangers in their ways and means of living" (62).

The sense of longing that is rekindled in Clare after her reunion with Irene is, of course, a longing, first, to learn more about and, second, to return to the life and culture that she has abandoned with her decision to permanently pass for white. The first of these two desires to express itself is Clare's desire for knowledge. Clare Kendry is extremely curious about the life that she left behind, the life that she has been isolated from for twelve years. When Clare runs into Irene at the Drayton, she listens intently to stories of Irene's life since their separation. Says the narrator, "Clare drank it all in, these things which for so long she had *wanted* to know and *hadn't been able* to learn. She sat motionless, her bright lips partly parted, her whole face lit by

the radiance of her happy eyes. Now and then she put a question, but for the most part she was silent” (22, emphasis mine). This passage suggests an important issue in Clare’s desire for increased personal freedom and happiness—for a cosmopolitan lifestyle. By choosing to live her life as a white woman, she is isolating herself from the influence of her native black culture. One of the major problems with traditional ideas about cosmopolitanism is that they tend to preference European culture and ideals over non-European culture and ideals. According to this flawed definition of cosmopolitanism, Clare has become a cosmopolitan by becoming white. She has successfully crossed over from one world to another. But if one uses a much less imperialist definition of cosmopolitanism, as is certainly preferable, Clare’s reintroduction to black culture allows her to achieve a level of cosmopolitanism that is impossible to her in her life with John Bellew.

Though she makes frequent trips to Harlem to socialize with the Redfields and their circle of friends, Clare Kendry does not have true freedom of movement in her white life, an essential component of the cosmopolitanism that she is searching for. She can usually only go to Harlem when her husband is away on a business trip, and only without his knowledge. Though she becomes less and less wary of his discovering her secret as the story progresses, the possibility of discovery still looms over her, bringing with it the danger of physical harm at the hands of her husband and the loss of her daughter, Margery. She cannot possibly achieve true cosmopolitanism with this danger accompanying her on her trips to Harlem.

Where Irene is constantly trying to hide her true opinions and emotions, Clare is much more forthright. She is honest with herself and with others about her true desires and motivations. When Irene and Clare are discussing the merits and demerits of passing, Clare remarks to Irene that “that’s what everybody wants, just a little more money, even the people

who have it. And I must say I don't blame them. Money's awfully nice to have. In fact, all things considered, I think, 'Rene, that it's even worth the price" (28). Having lived a much more cosmopolitan life than Irene Redfield has, Clare is in a much better position to make this kind of statement than Irene is. Clare has lived in both worlds, both black and white. She has lived with and without money. She is aware that while the social constraints of the two worlds may be different, social constraints exist in both worlds, just the same. To use a metaphor from above, Clare Kendry knows better than Irene does that her iced tea tastes the same in the white world as it does in the black world.

Clare's reaction to hearing of Claude Jones's conversion to Judaism is very telling about her opinion of crossing cultural boundaries, or, in other words, her opinion of cosmopolitanism. At Clare's home in Chicago, when Irene Redfield and a friend of theirs, Gertrude Martin, are over for tea, talk turns to a mutual acquaintance of the three of them, a black man named Claude Jones who has converted to Judaism. This conversion is a very cosmopolitan action. Claude Jones is "no longer a Negro" (37); he has rejected his racial identity in favor of a raceless identity, a relationship with God. Though Clare is slightly amused to hear that Claude Jones has converted to Judaism, her primary reaction to his conversion is one of acceptance. But despite accepting the conversion, she misunderstands his motivations. Clare does not initially consider the possibility that Claude Jones was "sincere" in his decision to convert. "Yes," Clare says to the group, "I admit that might be possible—his being sincere, I mean. It just didn't occur to me, that's all" (37). With this statement, Clare reveals her true motivations for deciding to "convert," as it were, to a white lifestyle. Her loyalties remain in the black world she left behind. The cosmopolitan move she has made from a white lifestyle to a black lifestyle is not necessarily a demonstration of her racial consciousness. Though she publicly appears to fit in in the white

world she has moved to, privately, her only real reasons for staying in that world seem to be economical.

As I've said above, Irene Redfield believes that Clare has achieved all of her goals in life. Irene admits that "judging from her appearance and manner, Clare seemed certainly to have succeeded in having a few of the things that she wanted" (20). In fact, Clare is not nearly as happy as her care-free demeanor might suggest, and she succinctly describes the unhappiness in her life in a letter she writes to Irene:

. . . For I am lonely, so lonely . . . cannot help longing to be with you again, as I have never longed for anything before; and I have wanted many things in my life. . . . You can't know how in this pale life of mine I am all the time seeing the bright pictures of that other that I once thought I was glad to be free of. . . . It's like an ache, a pain that never ceases. . . . and it's your fault, 'Rene dear. At least partly. For I wouldn't now, perhaps, have this terrible, this wild desire if I hadn't seen you that time in Chicago. . . . (11)

The life that she has with John Bellew is not the life that she had hoped for. She describes the life as "pale," which is not only a slightly negative reference to the skin color of the people in her life, but also to the lack of emotion in her life. Meanwhile, she remembers the life that she left as "bright," and she has a "terrible" and "wild" desire to return to it. Clare is an extremely emotional, passionate person, and she is stuck in a marriage that is, at least for her, loveless. She has married John Bellew for the benefits it would allow her, only to find that the benefits were largely imagined. Though she enjoys economic security, Clare is still lacking most of the other freedoms that should accompany that economic freedom. Her lifestyle, while somewhat cosmopolitan, is a very imperialist and bourgeois cosmopolitan lifestyle.

This letter of Clare's can also be read as what Toni Morrison calls "eruptions of funk" in her novel *The Bluest Eye* (qtd. in Willis 35). According to Susan Willis, in *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison is "[d]ismayed by the tremendous influence of bourgeois society on young black women" who have recently moved north from the deep South (Morrison 83). Morrison writes

that these young women learn “how to behave. The careful development of thrift, patience, high morals, and good manners. In short, how to get rid of the funkiness. The dreadful funkiness of passion, the funkiness of nature, the funkiness of the wide range of human emotions” (Morrison 68, qtd. in Willis 35). Though Clare has tried to assimilate into her new, adopted white world, she finds that she is not entirely suited to that world. Her letter to Irene is brimming with pain and loneliness. It is written with such emotion that segments of it are illegible to Irene. This letter presents one of the great ironies of *Passing*: Clare Kendry, culturally, is blacker than Irene Redfield could hope to be. When Irene says that the two are “strangers even in their racial consciousness” (63), one might expect that Irene, who lives her life as a black woman, is the blacker of the two, and that Clare, who lives her life as a white woman, is the whiter of the two. But, in fact, the opposite is the case. Despite Clare’s choice to live permanently in the white world, she does her best to maintain her ties to the black culture of her birth.

Where Irene’s relationship with her black heritage can be most easily and accurately summarized by Countée Cullen’s poem “Heritage,” Clare’s relationship with her black heritage is quite different from Irene’s. A better poem to use to describe Clare would be Gwendolyn Bennett’s poem, also called “Heritage”:

I want to see the slim palm trees,
 Pulling at the clouds
 With little pointed fingers. . . .

I want to see lithe Negro girls,
 Etched dark against the sky
 While sunset lingers.

I want to hear the silent sands,
 Singing to the moon
 Before the Sphinx-still face. . . .

I want to hear the chanting
 Around a heathen fire

Of a strange black race.

I want to breathe the Lotus flow'r,
Sighing to the stars
With tendrils drinking at the Nile. . . .

I want to feel the surging
Of my sad people's soul
Hidden by a minstrel-smile.

The speaker of Bennett's poem has a complex relationship with his or her African heritage. The images of the poem are quite romantic and exotic, even primitive. The speaker longs to "see lithe Negro girls, / Etched dark against the sky"; he or she longs to "hear the chanting / Around a heathen fire / Of a strange black race" (lines 4-5, 10-12). The speaker's desire in this poem closely parallels Clare Kendry's "terrible" and "wild" desire to return to the black world. Her desire is overwhelming: "You don't know," she tells Irene, "you can't realize how I want to see Negroes, to be with them again, to talk with them, to hear them laugh" (71). Clare Kendry's memories of the black world she left behind have become exoticized during her time away. At the Negro Welfare League dance, Clare, like the white women who are attending the party, dances mostly with black men. It is unclear whether or not the speaker of Bennett's poem recognizes the dangers that exoticizing her people can cause. The last stanza of the poem is ambiguous in this regard. When the speaker expresses a desire to "feel the surging / Of my sad people's soul" (16-17), it may be interpreted that the speaker understands that this sadness is a result of the "minstrel-smile" (18). But the last stanza could also be interpreted to mean that it is actually the "minstrel-smile" obscuring the soul that the speaker wants to feel. A similar ambiguity of motive exists for Clare Kendry, as well. It is unclear whether Clare wants to "see Negroes" (71) for the same reason the white guests want to see them—to see them perform—or if she genuinely wants to "feel the surging / Of [her] sad people's soul."

James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*

Where much of the scholarship on Nella Larsen's *Passing* has focused on the desire expressed by the two main characters, the scholarship on James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* has focused much more often on the novel's depictions of race and "the color-line." This trend in the scholarship seems only natural: words like "desire" and "longing" are used frequently in *Passing*, while such words are used much less frequently in *The Autobiography*. But the Ex-Coloured Man still expresses desire through much less overt channels, and his desire, like that of Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry, can most accurately be described as a desire for a cosmopolitan lifestyle.

The Ex-Coloured Man, like Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry, has a complexion that allows him to pass as white. Unlike Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry, however, the Ex-Coloured Man spends the first several years of his life believing he is no different from his white peers. It is not that he is unaware of race: he attends school with black children, and he recognizes, first, that the black children he attends school with are different in appearance from the white children, and second, that the black children are treated quite differently from their white peers. But he does not know that he himself is black until his teacher asks the white children in the class to stand and informs the narrator in a very brusque and matter-of-fact manner that he should wait to rise with the black students. Later that day, gazing at himself in the mirror, he notices his "beauty" for the first time (17). "I noticed the ivory whiteness of my skin . . . I noticed the softness and glossiness of my dark hair that fell in waves over my temples, making my forehead appear whiter than it really was" (17). He's fascinated by what he sees in the mirror, a feeling that contrasts sharply with his newfound impression of his mother: "I looked at her searching for defects. I could see that her skin was almost brown, that her hair was not so soft as mine . . ."

(18). He no longer finds her “the most beautiful woman in the world” (18). These early childhood experiences undoubtedly color every experience he has for the rest of his life. As he says, the negative experience of discovering he is black has been “stamped [on his memory] with a die” (20). Unlike Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry, he can remember a time in his life before he learned that he was, in fact, black, when his peers considered him white, and when he did not yet suffer the prejudices that early-twentieth-century U.S. society reserved only for black people. He does not see himself as different until he becomes black, and he does not see his mother’s difference as a negative until he realizes that she is black.

In this defining childhood experience, the narrator undergoes a sort of involuntary change that is at once both cosmopolitan and anti-cosmopolitan. He says of the moment: “And so I have often lived through that hour, that day, that week, in which was wrought the miracle of my transition from one world into another; for I did indeed pass into another world” (20-21). The Ex-Coloured Man has had his racial consciousness forcibly changed by the discovery that he is black. In one sense, this change is cosmopolitan. He has gone from being a member of what he once presumed to be one race, to what he now knows is two races. He has become both black and white; he now belongs to two races. He is genetically cosmopolitan. But although this is the case, society’s definition of the Ex-Coloured Man’s race is anti-cosmopolitan. Though it is impossible to determine his race from his appearance, society automatically views him as black; he now belongs to only one race. He has moved from a state of undefined racelessness—a cosmopolitan state—to a state in which he is defined by a single, restricting racial label. Society’s definition of him has denied him his cosmopolitan birthright.

The narrator’s movement from one racial category to another is not the only movement that occurs during the novel. As Samira Kawash points out, the Ex-Coloured Man “lays out two

trajectories of travel: a psychological journey through whiteness and blackness and a physical journey through the United States and Europe” (Kawash 63). In terms of freedom of movement, the unnamed narrator of *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* undoubtedly lives a cosmopolitan lifestyle. He begins his life in a small, unnamed town in Georgia, and over the course of the novel, he spends time in Connecticut, Atlanta, Jacksonville, New York, Paris, London, Amsterdam, Berlin, Boston, Washington, D.C., Richmond, Nashville, and Macon. This tremendous amount of physical movement, crossing both domestic and international borders, is a direct result of his ability to pass for white. During one of his trips, on a train headed from Nashville to Atlanta, he goes into the smoking compartment of a Pullman car in order to smoke a cigar. He relates in great detail the conversation that takes place among the other men in the car, which touches on everything from weather to politics to “the Negro question” (158), but he fails to mention that he is passing for white during this exchange. The reader knows, however, that the narrator must be passing. At this point in U.S. history, it would have been illegal for a black man to ride in the same train car as a white man, and it would be impossible for the Ex-Coloured Man, or any black man, to ride in a whites-only car, if he were forthright about his racial identity. Yet the Ex-Coloured Man leaves this important bit of information unsaid.

There are two possible reasons for the Ex-Coloured Man failing to mention to the reader the fact that he often passes for white when it is convenient for him to do so. First, the Ex-Coloured Man fits in quite naturally in situations like that which takes place in the smoking compartment. The quintessential cosmopolitan, he moves seemingly effortlessly between various cultural groups. He does not mention the fact that he is passing because he is almost not conscious of it. On an entirely different note, it is also possible that he fails to mention his passing for white because he feels ashamed of his passing. Passing is a common theme in

African American literature, and there is a long tradition of treating as noble the man or woman who has the ability to pass, but instead chooses to identify as black. Frances Harper's *Iola Leroy* (1892) serves as a good example of this tradition. The Ex-Coloured Man certainly has the desire to become a successful representative of the black race, and he feels a sense of responsibility to his race. As a child, he first recognizes this sense of responsibility in his black classmate, Shiny. Though he doesn't yet feel the responsibility himself, he imagines that Shiny, giving the graduation speech, "felt that for the particular time and place he bore the weight and responsibility of his race; that for him to fail meant general defeat; but he won, and nobly" (44). Shiny's speech inspires the narrator, and he writes of how he begins to "form wild dreams of bringing glory and honour to the Negro race" (46). He develops a desire "to be a great man, a great coloured man, to reflect credit on the race and gain fame for [himself]" (46). Ultimately, however, the Ex-Coloured Man's desire to become a successful representative of his race is outweighed by overwhelming fear, as well as overwhelming "humiliation and shame" (187).

The Ex-Coloured Man's fear is only natural. Recently returned from Europe and "stirred" by what he calls his "unselfish desire to voice all the joys and sorrows, the hopes and ambitions, of the American Negro, in classical music form" (147-48), he witnesses a black man burned alive by an angry lynch mob. Though he never uses the word "fear," it must be assumed that he is terrified by what he sees. Having witnessed this horrific, traumatizing scene, the Ex-Coloured Man makes the decision to permanently pass as white. He marries a white woman who knows he is black, and he has two white-looking children with her. Even after his wife dies, he decides to remain in the white world for the sake of his children. "[T]here is nothing I would not suffer to keep the brand from being placed on them," he says (210). By making this decision, he is choosing to live an imperialist cosmopolitan lifestyle rather than become a race man. The Ex-

Coloured Man is aware that this is the consequence of his decision; this is the pain that he is determined to “suffer” for the sake of his children (210). But he worries that he has made the wrong decision. “I cannot repress the thought that, after all, I have chosen the lesser part, that I have sold my birthright for a mess of pottage,” he writes (211).

Though he never explicitly mentions the fear that he feels after witnessing the lynching, he does write that he feels “humiliation and shame” (187). The shame that he feels is a “shame that [he] belonged to a race that could be so dealt with” (187-88). His first instinct is to lay blame on what he sees as the shortcomings of the black race rather than on the racist society that bred such violence. This very telling moment is a sort of culmination of what is, for the Ex-Coloured Man, a long-standing pattern of thinking that is influenced by the white supremacy of mainstream society.

The Ex-Coloured Man is in many ways extremely cosmopolitan. Aside from his nonstop movement around the country and around Europe, he crosses many cultural boundaries throughout his life. In Jacksonville, Florida, he immerses himself in the culture of Cuban expatriots. The Cubans he meets are working-class cigar makers, and the narrator crosses national, ethnic, and class boundaries during his time there. He learns he has a talent for learning foreign languages and boasts that he is able “in less than a year to speak [Spanish] like a native” (73). In New York, the Ex-Coloured Man immerses himself in the gambling culture of Harlem. Though he crosses no racial boundaries in doing this, he certainly crosses class boundaries. The Ex-Coloured Man is a musician, and he believes in the cosmopolitan nature of music: “Music is a universal art,” he says, “anybody’s music belongs to everybody; you can’t limit it to race or country” (144).

Despite these demonstrations of cosmopolitanism, the Ex-Coloured Man highly favors

European and bourgeois culture over all others. The cosmopolitan philosophy that he embraces is an imperialist one, as he demonstrates over and over again throughout the novel. Dining at a restaurant in Atlanta on his first trip to the South since he left as a small child, he describes the black woman who serves him his food using stereotypical mammy-like imagery: “Scrupulously clean, in a spotless white apron and coloured head-handkerchief, her round face beaming with motherly kindness, she was picturesquely beautiful. She impressed me as one broad expanse of happiness and good-nature” (59). Writing of his travels in the South, he says, “All this while I was gathering material for work, jotting down in my note-book themes and melodies, and trying to catch the spirit of the Negro in his relatively primitive state” (173). These statements sound not as if they were said by a black man, but rather by a white, racist anthropologist. The Ex-Coloured Man has been heavily influenced by the racist society in which he lives.

In the very first paragraph of the novel, the Ex-Coloured Man addresses his desire explicitly, and like his first several years as a white child, which set the tone for the rest of his life, this statement sets the tone for the rest of the novel. Discussing his choice to pass as white, the Ex-Coloured Man says, “I know that I am playing with fire, and I feel the thrill which accompanies that most fascinating pastime; and, back of it all, I think I find a sort of savage and diabolical desire to gather up all the little tragedies of my life, and turn them into a practical joke on society” (3). By describing the act of passing as a “practical joke” and a “pastime,” the narrator is trivializing his choice to pass. By describing the “pastime” as “fascinating,” the Ex-Coloured Man suggests that his choice to pass is nothing more than an academic interest; he sounds as if, by passing, he is merely conducting an intriguing sociological experiment on society. But he also describes his desire as “savage,” a word which contrasts drastically with the other words in the passage. Although the Ex-Coloured Man in many ways fancies himself an

academic, his use of the word “savage” to describe his desire hints at other, less conscious, more instinctive motivations for his choice to pass.

Beginning in his childhood, the Ex-Coloured Man shows a penchant for academia. He describes the yard of his home in Georgia, which features a bed of flowers enclosed by a fence of glass bottles. The narrator recalls how, as a very young child, he once “became curious to know whether or not the bottles grew as the flowers did” and how he “proceeded to dig them up to find out” (4). This activity, for him, is not merely a childhood game, but an “investigation” (4). The narrator also describes in detail the books that he found in his mother’s house as a child. He reads most of these books with much pleasure, but he also ridicules some of the books in the house as “books of no particular name and merit, such as agents sell to people who know nothing of buying books” (25). This description reveals elitist prejudices that he has against things that he considers not academic. His tendency toward academia can be interpreted as a type of cosmopolitanism: he has a curiosity about the world, and his curiosity can take him places, literally and figuratively, that are far removed from himself. But like Irene Redfield, who holds very elitist, anti-cosmopolitan views against the working class, the Ex-Coloured Man reveals a similar bias here.

Conclusion

Both Nella Larsen's *Passing* and James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* feature cosmopolitan characters and cosmopolitan storylines. The characters' desires for greater freedom of movement and more options in their natural and legal right to the pursuit of happiness are what I've decided to call their search for cosmopolitanism. If society did not feel the need to relegate these characters and real people to limiting racial boxes, this longing for a more cosmopolitan lifestyle would not exist. It is deprivation that fuels the characters' desire. The type and quality of cosmopolitanism desired and achieved by each of the characters is, of course, different, and the barriers that limit cosmopolitanism are also different for each character.

Larsen's Irene Redfield, as the middle-class wife of a prominent Harlem doctor, lives a relatively cosmopolitan life compared to black women who are less economically well-off than she is. Passing for white, she is able to move freely about the city and the country, and she is able to patronize wealthy, white businesses like the Drayton that would not be open to her if she were openly identifying as black. She is able to fit in effortlessly wherever she goes. She is well read, and she has been abroad to Europe. But while she can easily cross racial boundaries, everything she does suggests a predilection for white or European culture. While her lifestyle is cosmopolitan, it is a very imperialist brand of cosmopolitanism, one that values all things European over all things non-European. It is also a very bourgeois form of cosmopolitanism. Her unwillingness to cross class boundaries and her unwillingness to disrupt the comfortable life that she is familiar with limit her potential to achieve a greater level of freedom in her a life and a greater level of cosmopolitanism.

Clare Kendry, like Irene Redfield, has the confidence necessary to cross racial boundaries

and patronize businesses like the Drayton that would be closed to her if she were not able to pass for white. For the most part, Clare moves freely about the country, and she is well traveled in Europe, but the violent racism of her husband limits her ability to move freely in black communities. So although she does not believe European culture to be superior to black culture, and although she is able to accept all classes of people as equals—in other words, although she embraces a non-imperialist and non-bourgeois cosmopolitan lifestyle—her potential for cosmopolitanism is still limited by the outside forces that are imposed on her when she decides to marry a man who is unaware of her true racial identity.

Johnson's unnamed protagonist, *The Ex-Coloured Man*, like Irene and Clare, has the confidence necessary to cross racial and ethnic boundaries, and he does so often. He moves easily around the country and Europe, aided not only by the fact that he can pass for white, but also by the fact that he is a man who is economically well off. Like Clare, he also has the ability to cross class boundaries, but the cosmopolitanism that he achieves with his lifestyle is tainted by his low opinions of non-European and non-bourgeois cultures; the Ex-Coloured Man embraces imperialist and bourgeois cosmopolitanisms.

Both *Passing* and *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* are, as novels, also cosmopolitan. They were written in a time when publishers and readers—both black and white—had very specific and very limiting expectations about what an African American novel was. White readers and publishers expected primitivist stories that affirmed their stereotypes about black people, and white audiences got what they wanted with novels like Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem* (1928), Arna Bontemps's *God Sends Sunday* (1931), and Carl Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven* (1926). Black readers and publishers, on the other hand, were looking for depictions of racial uplift, which were well-established in the African American literary tradition. Novels like

Harper's *Iola Leroy*, among many others, fit this common pattern.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the stereotype of the licentious black woman was ubiquitous in the popular culture of the United States. It was a stereotype that titillated white audiences and repulsed black writers. Sexuality, therefore, became a taboo subject in black women's literature. As Deborah McDowell explains, black women writers "responded to the myth of the black woman's licentiousness by insisting fiercely on her chastity" (xiii). In this literary environment, Nella Larsen's *Passing* manages to break away from both of these groups' expectations. According to McDowell, "Larsen wanted to tell the story of the black woman with sexual desires, but was constrained by a competing desire to establish black women as respectable in black middle-class terms" (xvi). In this Larsen succeeds. Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry hardly fit the primitive, exotic stereotype that white audiences expected to see, but at the same time, they are not devoid of sexuality. Although *Passing* is free of the racial stereotypes that white audiences looked for in African American literature, Larsen solidifies her novel as one accepted by white audiences by dedicating the novel to Carl Van Vechten, the white author of the controversial novel *Nigger Heaven* and Larsen's sponsor and mentor. She also fulfills the requirements of the very demanding black literary establishment by hiding sexual innuendo behind the mask of a novel about racial identity. Her characters are complex, emotional beings, different from each other rather than cut to a standard pattern.

In *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*, Johnson also manages to break away from both groups' expectations. By first publishing the novel anonymously, under the title *The Autobiography*, the book was initially mistaken for a real autobiography. Though Johnson eventually came to regret his decision to publish anonymously (Johnson, *Along* 238), this decision allowed readers—particularly white readers—to read a story that did not fit their

primitivist stereotypes. When the book was republished fifteen years later, with Johnson given credit for the work and with an introduction by Carl van Vechten explaining that it was actually a work of fiction, Johnson was able to also break away from the expectations of black readers and publishers. As Ross Posnock writes, “Johnson parodies previous African American fictional tropes that were an integral part of nineteenth-century black culture, such as the race hero and heroine and the ideal of uplift” (Posnock 92).

With the publication of their respective novels, Nella Larsen and James Weldon Johnson both struggled against racial categorization. They wanted to be taken seriously as writers by both black and white audiences, and in order to do so they had to cross the firmly established boundaries of the conventional African American novel. Taking these literary border crossings into consideration, Larsen’s and Johnson’s novels become cosmopolitan. The characters of their novels experience a similar struggle. Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry of *Passing* and the unnamed narrator of *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* all struggle against racial categorization. They are living what Scott L. Malcomson has called “actually existing cosmopolitanism” (Malcomson 238). “[A]ctually existing cosmopolitanisms,” according to Malcomson, “involve individuals with limited choices deciding to enter into something larger than their immediate cultures” (240). Though society deems categorization necessary, the three characters attempt to exist uncategorized, and in order to achieve this goal, they must cross geographic, racial, ethnic, and class boundaries. Through their actions and beliefs, the three characters embrace different kinds of cosmopolitanism with varying levels of success, but each, ultimately, is an “actually existing” cosmopolitan, crossing borders as their circumstances allow, attempting to live freely in a society defined by borders.

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