

RACE TRAVEL: REVISTING THE COLOR LINE IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY. GIULIA FABI, *M. Passing and the Rise of the African American Novel*. Urbana and Chicago: U of Illinois P, 2001.

Giulia Fabi's sophisticated re-reading of nineteenth century African American novels is an attempt to redress the consistent neglect of a body of work which she considers fundamental to the understanding of this literary tradition. The authors Fabi includes in her analyses have often been disparaged as lacking in artistic skills, catering to white conceptions of superiority, insecure in or unhappy with their own racial categorization; in a word, hankering to be "white." Fabi, however, probes well beneath this facile surface, combining New Historicism with African American feminist critique to locate each of these novels firmly within the socio-historical context in which they were written and published. The result is an often fascinating re-evaluation of the texts and authors on their own terms, rather than in comparison with an aesthetic which clearly corresponds to another age. Her most unifying motif is the trope of passing, employed by early authors as a subtle but persistent mode of probing the tenuous, often treacherous, color-line that divided the "races" during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

With "Subversive Mulattas and Mulattos" the book is launched with a sympathetic reappraisal of William Wells Brown's three versions of *Clotel*, attributing the modifications in the novel not to the author's struggle to achieve artistic coherence, but to the changes both in Well's life, as the author moves from England to the United States, and in the dates of publication, a reflection of the dramatic changes in the fortunes of African Americans from antebellum to post-Civil War years. I can think of no better example of the effects of mediation on black writing than this first chapter; both students new to the field and specialists have much to learn from this type of evaluation which argues that, contrary to the general critical consensus, Wells was wholly conscious of his artistic aims and attempted to craft his novel to fit the times and his reading public

The emphasis on the characters who pass in *Clotel* and later in Frank J. Webb's *The Garies and Their Friends*, raises expectations that the trope will be used to apply to "almost-white" characters who pass into the "white" race looking either for freedom or for other gain. That is, a form of black "tricksteration" from which the passer reaps some benefit. (And Fabi effectively points out that the trope is strikingly different from the "tragic mulatta" of white-authored literature and as such the two strains "constitute profoundly different literary traditions.") Rather unexpectedly, and unapologetically, Chapter 2, "Race Travel in Turn-of-the-Century African American Utopian Fiction" modifies the terms of the argument. The two episodes that involve "passing" in *Imperium en Imperio* actually concern a black man's masquerading as a domestic worker in order to "analyze the unprotected status of the black woman" and this same character's dismay on finding that his wife gives birth to a son who "looks white" (but will later darken). And while Fabi's analysis of *Iola Leroy* as a utopian text is thoroughly convincing, does the fact that the protagonist, who is brought up to be white and only discovers her "race" on the death of her father, and willingly chooses to identify herself as "black" in order to dedicate her life to the "uplifting of the shadows", qualify her as a "passer"? Moreover, Edward A. Johnson's *Light Ahead for the Negro* is included because it constitutes a case for "generic passing." "Race travel" is indeed an expression that more aptly reflects the concerns of this chapter than the traditional use of the passing motif.

As a devoted fan of Charles Chesnut's, I was easily enticed by the author's close reading of his *The House Behind the Cedars* in Chapter 3, and its comparison with Chesnut's previous attempts at the "same" story in "Rena Walden" and *Mandy Oxendine*. Locating the texts within Chesnut's struggle for acceptance by the publishing world, and signaling the intertextual calls to works which would have been quite familiar to his contemporary reading public, Fabi provides a fresh approach which has much to add to the on-going debate about Chesnut's supposed "preference" for mulattos, fictional or otherwise.

Moving into the early twentieth century (Chapter 4), James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* is shown to be pivotal in the development of the passing motif as it turns the century, and at the same time serves to validate Fabi's stance that the passing motif was a basic component in an on-going subversive critique of the *status quo*. Contending that the confusion generated as to the veracity of the story was a product of much the same type of misreading as had occurred with the earlier texts, Fabi reviews the novel's publishing history, and its "mistaken identity" as an autobiography (another instance of "generic passing"). Yet full appreciation of the irony this novel can only come from reading *The Autobiography* "against the previous literary tradition of committed novels of passing." Moreover, in Fabi's words, "*The Autobiography* ... proves to be a precursor not only of the themes and concerns but also of the tensions and omissions that characterized the New Negro movement."¹ Johnson, then, becomes the crucial "missing link" in what some critics have thus far contended was a rather "disjointed" tradition for African American literature.

Chapter 5 could conceivably stand alone though it effectively constitutes the *raison d'être* for the four previous chapters. Thoroughly researched, the chapter is an exhaustive work of twentieth century critical archeology in which Fabi examines (mostly) male critics' stubborn refusal to look seriously at nineteenth century novels of passing on their own terms. The approach is once again New Historicist in that the author very much locates each critic within his (less often, her) historical context. Though perhaps less engrossing than the analyses of the early

fiction, it nevertheless provides a perceptive evaluation of the evolution of African American criticism and its tortuous search for a definition of itself. Sparks do fly, however, when Fabi's critical survey starts to take issue with positions held all too often by the current powers-that-be in African American studies in the United States. Perhaps only an "outsider" (neither American, nor black) could venture such a sharp critique, immeasurably valuable for the insights and alternative viewpoints it provides.

It is an unfortunate quirk of chronology that Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s edition of Hannah Crafts' *The Bondswoman's Tale* has been published just after *Passing and the Rise of the African American Novel*, for here indeed is a novel that lends itself readily to Fabi's thesis with its inclusion of various "passers" (at times in both race and gender) and is, of itself, a rich study in "generic passing" (or "textual amalgamation"). Nevertheless, Fabi's study will be instrumental for a greater appreciation of Craft's controversial "novel" for, as Karen Sanchez-Eppler's critical evaluation demonstrates,² the tropes of passing, miscegenation, "tres-passing" and the instability of *genre* all seem to come to bear on the novel as we and the author herself struggle with the definition of "race" and the implications of the early African American literary response to it.

For a comprehensive understanding of Crafts' novel and many other works, Fabi's book is an essential contribution to students of this literary tradition, and an excellent example of the strategies necessary for reading texts published in the nineteenth century.

JUSTINE TALLY

¹ See also, María del Mar GALLEGO DURÁN, *Novels of Passing in the Harlem Renaissance* (forthcoming in the FORECAAST series published by Lit Verlag, Hamburg).

² "Gothic liberties and Fugitive Novels: Hannah Crafts's *The Bondswoman's Narrative* and the Fiction of Race", forthcoming in Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s, book of essays on Crafts' novel.