
Julie A. Cary  
*University of Kentucky*

DOI: https://doi.org/10.13023/DISCLOSURE.07.18
chosen essays as they appeared when first printed. Thus, the book is a compendium of photostats of the essays from their original publications. Gates’s decision seems to come from an unwillingness to tamper with what he sees as cultural documents. In a book that seeks to “explore and critique the continuing hold of racial tropes and metaphors,” Gates chooses to approach his text metonymically; the texts are reproduced, not translated in any way.

The sole critique of the volume is that it focuses on black-white relations to the exclusion of other categories; Latino, Native American, and Asian “races” are not represented well. His choice of essays, however, allows for a clear view of the multiple critiques made against “whiteness,” a move which indirectly involves all minority races as the others against which whiteness is matched. Furthermore, by including the various critiques of whiteness, Gates continues the work done to expose whiteness as a cultural construct. E. Nathaniel Gates has produced an exceptional collection of essays, representing an array of approaches to the cultural construction of race. His book is important reading for anyone wishing to enter this dynamic field.

Julie A. Cary

Book Review


This collection of essays aims to expand the current discourse on the phenomenon of “passing” from one which has largely focused on (black/white) race passing, into one which understands “passing” as a means of both fixing and resisting various categories of identity. As a group, the essays investigate ways in which designations of race, gender, sex, and nationality are historically—and inextricably—linked to and in the formation of both individual and cultural identity. Ginsberg notes that “the assumption underlying this volume is that critical to the American cultural imaginary are the status and privileges associated with being white and being male” (5). Indeed, as “passing” is recognized as a means to social and political empowerment through resistance to and appropriation of a status of power, it becomes a threat to the current white, male hegemony that generates and sustains category boundaries. In addition to investigating how “passing” enables potentially subversive acts, the essays also skillfully investigate the psychological impact of such boundary crossings on the fictional and historical individuals examined. In addition to those essays discussed in more detail below, the collection includes analyses of the autobiographical The Life of Olaudah Equiano, James Weldon Johnson’s The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man, the fiction of Nella Larsen, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin, E. D. E. N. Southworth’s The Hidden Hand, John Howard Griffin’s Black Like Me, and James Baldwin’s Giovanni’s Room.

Of the essays in the collection, perhaps the most serviceable are those which emphasize the interdependency of race, gender, sex, and nationality in the construction of identity. For example, in “A Most Respectable Looking Gentleman: Passing, Possession, and Transgression in Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom,” Ellen M. Weinauer discusses William Craft’s 1860 narrative which details how he and his wife, Ellen Craft, escape from slavery in the South to freedom in the North. The couple affect their escape by having Ellen Craft pose as a feeble white, male aristocrat traveling with her black manservant. Ellen’s performance allows her to transgress simultaneously and successfully several identity boundaries—she moves from black to white, from female to male, from property to citizen—and thus to reveal those identities as performative rather than constitutive. According to Weinauer, in order to negotiate and control her (threatening) performance and reinstate the dichotomies of male/female and property owner/owned (realized here through a husband/wife relationship), however, William Craft must in his own narrative insist on Ellen’s fundamental “femaleness” and stress her abhorrence to the role(s) she must assume. In other words, he must insist that the transgression of those boundaries was only tenuously achieved and the restitution of he and his wife into their “natural” roles is fundamentally necessary. Weinauer recognizes that “in the context of America that equates proprietorship with selfhood, selfhood with masculinity, and masculinity with whiteness, this black slave narrator stakes the only claim available to him” (52). Thus, Weinauer illustrates how Craft both destabilizes and reinstates identity categories and how those categories are inextricably raced, sexual, and gendered in America.

In “Confederate Counterfeit: The Case of the Cross-Dressed Civil War Soldier,” Elizabeth Young uses a 1991-93 sexual discrimination lawsuit to reexamine constructions of race, gender, sex, and nation since the Civil War. The lawsuit, brought by Lauren Cook Burgess against the National Park Service for its refusal to allow Burgess to perform the role of a white, male soldier in a Civil War Reenactment, al-
allows Young to investigate specific ways in which gender identity historically has and continues to interact with a sense of national identity. Young reads Burgess's story in relation to Loreta Velazquez, a woman who served in the Army of the Confederacy, an "emasculated" and racist national body. Young argues that, in order to sustain her role as a white, American male soldier, Velazquez must define herself against—and thus distance herself from—women, other races, and other nationalities (she represents herself as an "adopted" American); thus, by claiming for herself the power of a white, American male, Velazquez reinserts the categories of race, gender, sex, and nationality that can bestow that power upon her. However, the identification of Velazquez as a woman threatens those very categories as it reveals them to be constructed rather than "natural." In Burgess's case, even the threat of acting as a man (with its implications for cross-dressing in general and male homoeroticism) in a "re-masculating" ritual continues to provoke defensiveness in the white, male power structure.

The collection closes with a more biographical (re-printed) essay by Adrian Piper, "Passing for White, Passing for Black," in which Piper investigates the complexities of contemporary race relations and their impact on and realization through the individual. As a black woman who is often mistaken as white and whose personal history is replete with black/white intermixing, Piper explores the cultural, economic, and psychological stakes of race identification in both black and white communities and the way those stakes contribute to maintaining racial designations and socio-economic dichotomy. Piper argues that, ultimately, "the racial categories that purport to designate any of us are too rigid and oversimplified to fit anyone accurately" (268) and it is our attempt to identity with and label individuals through such limited categories that restricts our ability to recognize the prodigality of racial commingling and thus to ameliorate race relations in America. Piper's essay adeptly closes this collection by bringing a theoretical discussion of "passing" into the practical realm of lived experience.

As a whole, the essays effectively argue that understanding "passing" as a vehicle for change will allow us—as Ginsberg hopes—"to construct new identities, to experiment with multiple subject positions, and to cross social and economic boundaries that exclude or oppress" (16). However, as importantly, the collection is useful for its investigation into how "passing," while revealing the constructedness of identity categories, also sustains those categories by appropriating power through the dichotomy itself, or, in other words, how "passing" simultaneously challenges and reinforces our reliance on fixed identity categories. As a whole, the collection is an important and insightful contribution to current scholarship on both "passing" and identity formation through designations of race, gender, sex, and nationality.