

Dressed in Whiteface: [Re]Fashioning Passing in the Harlem Renaissance Novel

American literature makes countless references to African Americans, whether enslaved or free, using dress in order to pass for white, or as both white and the opposite gender, as Harriet Jacobs, writing as Linda Brent, does when she passes as a white sailor in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. The performative function of sartorial signifiers like clothes, which both enable and assist racial passing, are explored in even more complex ways by Harlem Renaissance novelists who took passing as their subject. Long before Judith Butler wrote about the performativity and constructedness of gender in *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies That Matter*, authors of Harlem Renaissance passing novels referenced the importance of sartorial display to show how whiteness is a sartorial and social construct that is continuously being performed. When passing subjects in their novels purchased clothing or beauty products that enabled or assisted their transgressive acts of passing, they were purchasing and performing whiteness, and inadvertently contributing to the commodification of whiteness. However, acts of successful sartorially mediated passing were more complex than that, as they also simultaneously undermined the essentialist absolutes of black and white.

While this presentation will gesture broadly to the novels of such Harlem Renaissance writers as Jessie Redmon Fauset, Walter White, James Weldon Johnson, and Nella Larsen, it will offer more specific close readings of James Weldon Johnson's use of genre-bending, irony, and reverse minstrelsy in *Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*, and Nella Larsen's sartorial coding of sexual desire, degrees of consciousness represented by an unreliable internal monologue, and use of irony in *Passing*. Ironical narrative stances, much like Weldon Johnson's in *Autobiography*, offer fictionalized historical exempla to demonstrate how the passing subject critiques the sartorially performative practices that commodify whiteness in the first place. Ultimately, Harlem Renaissance authors who wrote about passing transformed the conventional novel form into a subversive, experimental critique of both racism and racial essentialism. It will be the work of this paper to show how the passing subject's use of dress becomes a form of sartorial re-appropriation in which sartorial signifiers critique simplistic binary understandings of racial identity and expose the fetishizing of whiteness in the early twentieth-century—a process that includes what I refer to as the “mannequinization of whiteness”—in American commodity culture by both “black” and “white” consumer subjects.

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