[Passing is] such a frightfully easy thing to do. If one’s the type, all that’s needed is a little nerve. (Nella Larsen, *Passing* 25)

He hurried the phrase . . . or swallowed it, or choked on it, as though it had bothered him before. And with this doubt, his whole statement fell to pieces, and I wondered if there wasn’t something a little sinister about him, after all. (F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* 43)

The resemblances between F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925) and Nella Larsen’s *Passing* (1929) are remarkably extensive and largely unrecognized. These two short novels offer surprisingly similar portraits of an America whose bright notes of progress and prosperity were dampened by widespread racism and nativism, so it is no coincidence that novels about racial passing, such as Larsen’s, proliferated in the 1920s, nor is it altogether an anomaly when we encounter (in Fitzgerald’s story of a different sort of passer) Tom Buchanan’s lightly veiled reference to Lothrop Stoddard, arguably the most widely known race theorist in America at the time. Yet critics generally have not linked what is now one of America’s more widely studied novels about racial passing with our most familiar canonical emblem of American self-invention and social mobility, despite their historical proximity, thematic overlap, and formal similarity.

In each novel, the main character is a passer closely observed by another admiring but ambivalent character whose relationship with the passer is fraught with tension and ambiguity, whose own position in society similarly entails an element of passing, and whose perspective infuses the narrative with a highly charged mix of desire and dread. The plots of these novels feature the protagonists’ attempts to return to an earlier state of affairs that is itself folded into the narrative structure,
and their problems are prominently rendered in terms of marriages to similarly racist husbands. The presence of race in each novel is variously literal and figurative, a distinction that is itself both underscored and undermined by the position and practice of the passer. In each novel, then, the fictional rendering of passing is not only a dramatization of the social complexities of racial identity but also a trope for reading, whereby racial figuration links race to reading (as Ellison might have put it) on a broader frequency. Passing is, in this sense, not so much just \textit{what} we read as it is a trope for \textit{how} to read, for although race operates in these novels as what Henry Louis Gates has described as "the ultimate trope of difference" ("Writing 'Race'" 5), passing invites us to read race as something more like a final twist: a trope for the difference that is figuration itself. In this sense, the passer conducts us through a racialized territory marked with key questions about literary form, operation, meaning, and value. The passer, at least in literary fiction, is more than a person in society, serving as a textual trope for the "double-consciousness" of race whose "two-ness" of figurative play is conjoined not only in our segregated readings of this fiction, but also in the critical passage between—and beyond—their. Indeed, the ties forged here between these two novels are themselves bound in a kind of critical pass that invokes literal and figurative charges of plagiarism intended to prefigure the passer's own figurative play and interrogation of our reading practices. A character like Clare Kendry, who literally passes racially, therefore suggests important (and potentially disturbing) connections to one like Jay Gatsby, whose passing is figuratively rendered in terms of racial blackness.

While Clare's story in \textit{Passing} is a literal (or more conventional) instance of racial passing, her identity is nevertheless problematic; her father is white, she is raised by white relatives, and her appearance is taken for white, so the claim that she is black poses familiar questions about not only the legal definition and social construction of race but also its literary representation and figurative signification in fiction. Indeed, Clare's passing anticipates the critical reception of Larsen's
novel, which has been described as a narrative that is itself passing as a fiction of racial passing—and whose true identity can be interpreted more accurately in terms of modernist psychology, homosexual desire, or class conflict. In this sense, passing is a figurative trope by which readers have read beyond (or through) the literal depiction of race in order to take critical possession of Passing. Similarly, Fitzgerald’s many references in The Great Gatsby to race and breeding generally, as well as his figurative and dramatic depiction of blacks in particular, frame Tom Buchanan’s more pointed accusations about Gatsby in such a way as to blur the distinction between the literal presence and figurative representation of race. When Tom Buchanan insists that letting “Mr. Nobody from Nowhere” make love to his wife is the first step to “intermarriage between black and white,” we cannot really know whether he has just proposed that Gatsby represents a literal position on a gradated scale of racial Others (i.e., blacks, Jews, Slavs, Italians, and Irish as non-white), that race is here a metaphor for something else (e.g., class or region), or some uncertain combination of both.

Werner Sollors has addressed how, although parvenus, arrivistes, and other passers of various sorts have long been a staple of literature, racial passing has a particularly significant and peculiar place in American history and literature. In her introduction to Passing and the Fictions of Identity, Elaine K. Ginsberg similarly notes that the “genealogy of the term passing . . . associates it with the discourse of racial difference and especially with the assumption of a fraudulent ‘white’ identity by an individual culturally and legally defined as ‘Negro’ or black” (2–3). Ginsberg also addresses the more varied configurations and complexities of passing:

By extension [of its traditional meaning], “passing” has been applied discursively to disguises of other elements of an individual’s presumed “natural” or “essential” identity, including class, ethnicity, and sexuality. . . . And although the cultural logic of passing suggests that passing is usually motivated by a desire to shed the identity of an oppressed group to gain access
to social and economic opportunities, the rationale for passing may be more or less complex or ambiguous and motivated by other kinds of perceived rewards. (3)

Accordingly, Pamela Caughie has argued that “passing at once reinforces and disrupts the binary logic of identity that gives rise to the practice to begin with. . . . Thus, while the concept of passing is understood within a binary logic of identity, the practice actually functions in terms of a double logic: it is both the problem and the solution” (21–22). Gayle Wald has therefore suggested that “by approaching these [passing] narratives. . . . we begin to see how they. . . . articulate needs and interests that do not merely respond to or replicate the wishes of the dominant culture” (30). In this sense, we need to grasp how the “binary logic” of race is marked and then remarked by the “double logic” of the passer whose play in the dark and light of literal and figurative identities and relations can even implicate the needs and interests of the literary reader more generally. We can begin to explore these claims by examining more closely the racialized aspects of The Great Gatsby.

II

Fitzgerald’s novel is profoundly and variously concerned with race and ethnicity, social identity, and the possibilities of passing. Tom Buchanan commences the race talk just pages into the novel:

“Civilization’s going to pieces,” broke out Tom violently. “I’ve gotten to be a terrible pessimist about things. Have you read ‘The Rise of Colored Empires’ by this man Goddard?”

“Why, no,” I answered, rather surprised by his tone.

“Well, it’s a fine book, and everybody ought to read it. The idea is if we don’t look out the white race will be—will be utterly submerged. It’s all scientific stuff; it’s been proved. . . . This fellow has worked out the whole
thing. It's up to us, who are the dominant race, to watch out or these other races will have control of things... This idea is that we're Nordics... we've produced all the things that go to make civilization.” (9)

Later in Chapter 1, Daisy tells Nick that Jordan Baker is “[from Louisville. Our white girlhood was passed together there. Our beautiful white—”’ (13). When Tom interrupts with a question about her talk with Nick minutes before, she says, “I think we talked about the Nordic race”” (13). The theme of racial purity is developed further in Chapter 2 as Nick and Tom drive through the valley of ashes (landscape in blackface?) to visit Tom’s mistress, Myrtle Wilson. They go to New York, where they encounter a “gray old man who bore an absurd resemblance to John D. Rockefeller. In a basket swung from his neck cowered a dozen very recent puppies of an indeterminate breed” (18). Myrtle inquires, “What kind are they?” (18), and the man replies, “All kinds. What kind do you want, lady?” (18). What then ensues is the first overt instance of passing in the novel, in which the mongrel dog is to pass as the purebred “police dog” Myrtle desires:

“That’s no police dog,” said Tom.
“No, it’s not exactly a police dog,” said the man with disappointment in his voice. “It’s more of an Airedale.” (18)

Nick is also doubtful (“undoubtedly there was an Airedale concerned in it somewhere, though its feet were startlingly white” [18]), and the confusion about passing continues with regard to gender:

“Is that a boy or a girl?” she asked delicately.
“That dog? That dog’s a boy.”
“It’s a bitch,” said Tom decisively. (18)

The three of them and the dog go on to rendezvous with Myrtle’s sister Catherine and Mr. and Mrs. McKee, where the race talk continues.
Mrs. McKee announces to everyone, “I almost married a little kike who’d been after me for years. I knew he was below me” (23), whereupon Myrtle explains how she came to marry George: “I married him because I thought he was a gentleman. . . . I thought he knew something about breeding, but he wasn’t fit to lick my shoe” (23). Later, the Jewish gangster Meyer Wolfsheim makes a similar claim about Gatsby’s breeding to Nick: “I knew I had discovered a man of fine breeding after I talked with him an hour” (47).

Daisy alone unequivocally possesses the necessary credentials of good breeding and racial whiteness, as is apparent in all the proximate figurations of whiteness associated with her—a dress (5–6), a roadster (49), a string of pearls (50), and a white palace (80). But Gatsby will not be able to pass as Daisy’s shade of pale, and Tom challenges him directly in the next scene. But before he does, the narrative offers us a sort of dress-rehearsal of passing in the odd, almost surreal scene in which the characters discuss Biloxi, the mysterious guest at the Buchanans’ wedding, for he, too, is a passer whose familial, geographical, and social identity is neither quite believable or [sic] entirely implausible. As Susan Marren puts it, “Blocks Biloxi’ appears . . . apparently out of nowhere, and inserts himself smoothly into the social circle by presenting a narrative of identity. . . . Biloxi’s narrative is a suggestive backdrop for what follows it, Gatsby’s more radical rewriting of the same social framework” (95–96). For Nick’s and Tom’s suspicions about Biloxi’s claim to have attended Yale are virtually repeated when Tom challenges Gatsby’s claim to have gone to Oxford.

Just pages earlier, Nick has dismissed race as a source of meaningful difference between people: “it occurred to me that there was no difference between men, in intelligence or race, so profound as the difference between the sick and well” (82). However, in this next scene, the race discourse explicitly casts Gatsby as a racial Other threatening the purity of the Buchanans’ world:
"Self-control!" repeated Tom incredulously. "I suppose the latest thing is to sit back and let Mr. Nobody from Nowhere make love to your wife. . . . Nowadays people begin by sneering at family life and family institutions, and next they'll throw everything overboard and have intermarriage between black and white."

Flushed with his impassioned gibberish, he saw himself standing alone on the last barrier of civilization.

"We're all white here," murmured Jordan. (86)

Yet as Walter Benn Michaels has pointed out, "For Tom, as for Stoddard, Gatsby . . . isn't quite white, and Tom's identification of him as in some sense black suggests the power of the expanded notion of the alien. Gatsby's love for Daisy seems to Tom the expression of something like miscegenation" (25, my emphasis).

Note that Michaels's observation, not altogether unlike Tom's, is neither completely literal nor entirely figurative in nature, for it necessarily hedges on a critical claim in a way that articulates—and in some sense replicates—the ambiguity in the novel. Indeed, one might wonder if Fitzgerald would have had answers to these questions, given his struggles during the revision process to develop and clarify Gatsby's background (in part at the request of his editor, Max Perkins). Although Gatsby's identity as a passer suggests elements of both socio-economic class and a possibility of his Jewish background—Gatz is a version of a Jewish-German name—that echo Fitzgerald's own position as an Irish-American arriviste from the Midwest, a reading of race and passing in the novel requires giving closer attention to how they are figuratively linked to the trope of blackness and specifically inflected by Fitzgerald's literal depiction of blacks, although these characters appear only twice in the novel.

The first of two literal encounters with blacks is set up by another figurative one that marks the racial theme. On their way into New York with Gatsby at the wheel, Nick and Gatsby are pulled over by a policeman for speeding. Waving a "white card" before the policemen's eyes,
Gatsby is allowed to pass, as the policeman exclaims, "'Know you next time, Mr. Gatsby. Excuse me!'" (45). They ascend the "great bridge . . . with the city rising up across the river in white heaps and sugar lumps" and are passed by two different but not entirely dissimilar parties. First, Nick recalls how "[a] dead man passed us in a hearse heaped with blooms, followed by . . . carriages for friends . . . [who] looked out at us with the tragic eyes and short upper lips of southeastern Europe, and I was glad that the sight of Gatsby's splendid car was included in their somber holiday" (45). In the nativist 1920s, these mourners might very well be marked as nonwhite, and Nick is happy that Gatsby is able, as it were, to wave his own white card in contrast to the ethnic procession of the dead. This racialized spectacle gives way to another as they cross the suggestively named Blackwell's Island:

>a limousine passed us, driven by a white chauffeur, in which sat three mod- ish negroes, two bucks and a girl. I laughed aloud as the yolks of their eye- balls rolled toward us in haughty rivalry.

"Anything can happen now that we've slid over this bridge," I thought; "anything at all . . . ."

Even Gatsby could happen, without any particular wonder. (45)

This disturbing and complex scene, with its bridges and passes and reversals and mirrors, can be read in terms of Nick's (and Gatsby's) identification with and his insistence on difference from—these black characters. Indeed, it is a depiction of both racist and romantic readiness intricately conjoined around the conflated images of the parvenu and the passer.

The only black person who speaks in The Great Gatsby is a witness in the investigation of Myrtle's death when she is struck by Gatsby's car, which is driven by Daisy. If not the sole witness to a crime, he is at least the only one who can speak to the incident that is the catalyst for Gatsby's own death at the hands of Myrtle's husband, who, in turn, has been set on his course by Tom.
“What’s the name of this place here?” demanded the officer.

“Hasn’t got any name.”

A pale, well-dressed negro stepped near.

“It was a yellow car,” he said, “big yellow car. New.”

“See the accident?” asked the policeman.

“No, but the car passed me down the road, going faster’n forty. Going fifty, sixty.” (93–94)

Moments later, Nick says that when Tom explains to Wilson that the yellow car was not his, “Only the negro and I were near enough to hear what he said,” again suggesting some important place for the black stranger in this episode. The scene then ends with Tom and Nick driving away, and Tom, sobbing, exclaims, “‘The God damned coward!’” (95).

This episode possesses a number of aspects that can be linked to passing. The black man is “pale” and Gatsby’s car is itself yellow, two terms often associated with passing. Even the other colloquial usage of “yellow,” which is invoked by Tom when he calls Gatsby a coward, might be cast in relation to passing, at least in terms of Tom’s various challenges to Gatsby throughout the story. The theme of false or mistaken identity is also tied to Myrtle’s death since she runs out in the street believing Gatsby’s car is Tom’s; moreover, she earlier mistook Jordan for Tom’s wife. In spite of this trespass and resulting violence, Gatsby’s car passes, and the only one who sees him is a black man. Finally, Daisy is the driver, which gives her a responsibility for the entire episode not unlike the culpability Tom assigns to her for the threat of miscegenation in her affair with Gatsby in the first place.

It is clear that this canonical American novel, with all its attention to racial identity and social position, is indeed more than a portrait of “the pure American self divorced from specific social circumstances” (Baym 71). As Toni Morrison has said of American literature more generally, the novel’s achievement is realized in part by “playing in the dark.” Critics who address race in The Great Gatsby have usefully
tended to place it within the historical framework of immigration, ethnic diversity, assimilation, and class mobility in the 1920s, in which blackness signifies broader and more varied constructions of non-whiteness, as well as other sorts of social identity and difference. As noted earlier, Michaels explores how Tom Buchanan’s “expanded notion of the alien” suggests that while he somehow sees Jimmy Gatz as black, such a claim needs to be viewed in the broader context of nativism in the 1920s (25). Beth A. McCoy’s and Susan Marie Marren’s extensive discussions of race and passing in The Great Gatsby follow this pattern, as does Jeffory A. Clymer’s argument that “Fitzgerald’s text works out before the reader’s eyes . . . the inexorable process by which issues of class leach into constructions of race . . . Tom [Buchanan] can only conceptualize Gatsby’s lower-class background and affair with his wife in the terms of miscegenation, a transgression of racial boundaries” (185).

Insofar as these readings explore how the trope of blackness signifies a broader social dynamic, they are consistent with Gates’s notion of race as the “ultimate trope of difference.” Yet reading blackness as a trump trope for all difference everywhere can turn it into a critical metaphor without brakes that is prefigured by the practice of passing. This point can be developed by way of the resemblances between The Great Gatsby and Passing and exploring the question of how we might read that relation.

III

The importance of race and passing in The Great Gatsby is by no means the only link to Larsen’s novel. Their three-part plot structures, for example, both involve a reencounter between key characters that precipitates an attempt to return to an earlier state (of identities and relations), and this desire meets resistance and ends in violent death. The story is conveyed in each case by way of a participant-observer (Nick and Irene, respectively) whose attention is similarly given over
almost completely to the main character’s “romantic readiness” (as Nick describes Jay Gatsby) and “having way” (as Irene describes Clare Kendry). In both cases, the bond between characters is very strong, an attraction that can be seen, in turn, as variously reconfigured and rerouted through a series of complicated detours, displacements, and inversions, whereby their attraction also gives way intermittently to repulsion and condemnation. Nick and Irene are obsessed with passing in part because they also are passing in order to enjoy economic and social mobility, albeit in more attenuated configurations since both possess a sense of pedigree that makes them feel superior to the main characters. Also, Nick and Irene each contend with a companion—Jordan Baker and Brian Redfield, respectively—who is depicted as somewhat discontented, restless, and distant, which again suggests a kind of projective or mirroring relation between character pairs. Finally, both narrators are given to occasional lapses and odd ruptures in coherency that can be linked to altered states, such as alcoholic intoxication, surreal rumination, or neurotic or hysterical distortion.

Other characters and their relations present interesting connections. Perhaps most prominent are Tom Buchanan and John Bellew, both of whom have pronounced racist views, are depicted as variously powerful and clumsy, and are deceived in a way that exposes them to a kind of racial contamination, insofar as Clare is a black woman passing as white and Gatsby is perceived by Tom as a racial Other. Yet another parallel involving these men is their offspring; in each instance, the children play minor roles, but that marginality prefigures a key place in the stories insofar as they represent a bodily threat to desire and the promise of freedom. When Gatsby meets Daisy and Tom’s daughter, he realizes that Daisy’s life now presents some complication to his romantic longing and his desire to “repeat the past”: “Gatsby . . . kept looking at the child with surprise. I don’t think he had ever really believed in its existence before” (77). Daisy also displays regret regarding her child; she weeps upon learning her newborn’s gender, whose fate it will be to become “the best thing a girl can be in this world, a
beautiful little fool” (12). Clare’s concern, however, is that children present a threat to her desire to pass as white because her “true” identity might emerge by way of darker skin: “I nearly died of terror the whole nine months before Margery was born for fear that she might be dark. Thank goodness she turned out all right. But I’ll never risk it again. Never! The strain is simply too hellish”” (36). This threat of the body is suggested similarly when John Bellew jokingly explains to Irene why he calls Clare “Nig”: “Well, you see, it’s like this. When we were first married, she was as white as—well—as white as a lily. But I declare she’s gettin’ darker and darker. I tell her if she don’t look out, she’ll wake up one of these days and find she’s turned into a nigger”” (39).

Other similarities between the novels are worth inventorying briefly: a movement of characters from the Midwest to the East Coast that suggests a relation between regional and class identity; the depiction of fashionable parties for key thematic and dramatic purposes; the appearance of marginal characters whose darker skin color (Liza, Zulena, and Sadie in Passing), class status (the Wilsons, McKees, and Wolfsheim in The Great Gatsby), or religious-ethnic status (Claude Jones, the “black Jew” in Passing, and Wolfsheim in The Great Gatsby) complicate the passing binary (or serve to suppress the complications posed by attenuated passers such as Nick and Irene); key scenes in which women (Irene and Daisy) tear up letters from the main characters (Clare and Gatsby, respectively) into “white pieces” that end up dissolving in water; scenes involving fainting and heat exhaustion; the major characters’ deployment of the narrators to pursue a desired social position; the portrayal of highly sexualized women—Clare Kendry and Myrtle Wilson—whose bodies are mortally mutilated under ambiguous circumstances (both involving some configuration of mistaken or false identity in which another woman is most likely responsible for their death); some similarity in corresponding characters’ names (Jay Gatsby and Clare Kendry; Tom Buchanan and John Bellew); and finally, of course, the deaths of the two passers—a mortal
passing similarly linked to the broader seasonal depiction of summer’s brilliance, its oppressiveness, and its expiration.

The resemblances between these novels are extensive enough to warrant a consideration of sources and influences—and what these relations imply. Could Fitzgerald have borrowed from the African-American tradition of the “tragic mulatto” narrative? Has Fitzgerald committed a kind of literary plagiarism by taking possession of the trope of racial passing, or might we describe it instead as something more like a blackface forgery? The charge suggests a sort of textual passing that echoes critical discussions of racial passing that have likened it to the practice of plagiarism. In fact, the figuration of blackness and presence of racial trespass in The Great Gatsby has been linked in at least one instance not to black sources but to another white writer, in which the similarity between Daisy in The Great Gatsby and Mrs. Forrester in Willa Cather’s The Lost Lady raised the question of plagiarism. Walter Benn Michaels describes the connection as follows:

In The Great Gatsby, published two years after A Lost Lady, Gatsby’s relation to Daisy seems, at least to Tom, a kind of miscegenation, a threat to the difference between white men and “niggers.” Fitzgerald had read and admired A Lost Lady while working on Gatsby and subsequently wrote Cather a famous note, apologizing for what he described as an act of “apparent plagiarism,” an unintentional similarity between descriptions of Mrs. Forrester and Daisy. . . . [T]he connection—with respect to miscegenation—is real enough. (46)

Any claim about Fitzgerald’s literary originality or ownership ostensibly ought not to involve either pulling a figurative punch (did he or didn’t he?) or confusing a figurative claim with the distinctly literal proposition that he was in fact influenced by these tropes and traditions. Nevertheless, just as the passer challenges the ontological and epistemological status of racial difference by blurring the distinction between figurative and literal identities and relations, so, too, can the
plagiarist lead us to revisit how our figurations of textual originality, authorial ownership, and literary value become tangled and babbled in those “gray areas” where, as Howells once analogously located Chesnutt’s fiction, “the paler shades dwell.”

Clearly, these issues can be especially vexing when discussing the relationship between the works of black and white writers; this is particularly evident in the question of Larsen’s sources and influences, her own profoundly damaging experience with plagiarism, and the larger pattern of reading black literature as an imitation of—or as that which is assigned value in relation to—work by white writers. The story of Larsen’s plagiarism is well known. In January 1930, Larsen published a short story in *Forum* entitled “Sanctuary” that was almost immediately thought to be plagiarized—an occurrence that is generally viewed as crucial in her ensuing lifelong silence as a writer. Personal friends, as well as readers and the editors of *Forum*, began to speak out about the similarities between Larsen’s story and another by Sheila Kaye-Smith entitled “Mrs. Adis,” published in *Century* in 1922. The editors at *Forum* invited Larsen to publish an “Author’s Explanation” in the April issue, in which she made two key claims. First, she insisted that she heard the story from a black female patient with whom she worked as a nurse. Second, Larsen claims that the plot, which involves a woman’s harboring her own child’s killer and her silence with legal authorities in the name of racial solidarity, really belonged to the black community: “in talking it over with Negroes, I find that the tale is so old and so well known that it is almost folklore. . . . It has many variations. . . . A Negro sociologist tells me that there are literally hundreds of these stories. Anyone could have written it up at any time” (qtd. in Davis 352). In some sense, it is as if Larsen suggested that Kaye-Smith’s story was the act of plagiarism.

Any comprehensive and balanced assessment of influences on Larsen’s novel would have to locate *Passing* in relation to a number of sources and traditions: first, Larsen’s own life, since miscegenation and passing were so central to her own experience; second, a number
of longstanding African-American literary traditions, especially the "tragic mulatta" and passing narratives; and, of course, those aspects of American literary modernism within which *The Great Gatsby* would also have to be placed and over which Fitzgerald obviously possessed no proprietary claim, such as technical experimentation with narrative point of view, a psychoanalytical interest in consciousness and subjective perception, close documentation of the rapid social change experienced by the generation coming of age in the twenties, and a deep sense of restlessness or alienation with contemporary culture.9

In her biography on Larsen, Thadious Davis identifies key influences on *Passing* that locate the novel in relation to modernism generally. Citing Larsen's "reading in modern literature" and the broad influence of nonliterary thinkers such as Freud and Einstein, Davis suggests that

Clare Kendry . . . owes her passive nature in part to Gertrude Stein's *Melanctha* in *Three Lives*. . . . The treatment of the environment and its impact in shaping the lives of individuals owes much to Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* and Sinclair Lewis' *Main Street*. . . . Irene's narrated monologues and stream of consciousness reflect Larsen's reading of Joyce's *Ulysses*. . . . Larsen depended . . . on the modernist concept of the unreliable observer as represented by Joseph Conrad in *Heart of Darkness*. (310–311)

In her Introduction to *Passing*, Davis quotes from a letter in which Larsen refers to her "mind, warped . . . by the Europeans and the American moderns" (xxviii), and she also cites Gates's observation about passing as a modernist thematic:

[Clare's] death by going out an open window is so open to speculation and interpretation that it recalls the modernist implications of passing as a thematic. "The thematic elements of passing—fragmentation, alienation, liminality, self-fashioning—that echo the great themes of modernism," as Henry Louis Gates, Jr., has observed, are also central concerns in Larsen's text. (xxx)
Other critics have examined connections between Larsen's fiction and these and other important white American and European influences. One interesting reference to Fitzgerald in relation to the writers of the Harlem Renaissance is supplied in an interview with Dorothy West. Responding to a question about the relative influence of Carl Van Vechten and H. L. Mencken, West states, "I certainly heard Mencken's name tossed about at the time, but he was from a different generation. If we were influenced by anyone, it was F. Scott Fitzgerald" (McDowell, "Conversations" 294).

Neither the textual resemblances nor the circumstantial evidence noted here would lead a reader to accuse Larsen of literally plagiarizing Fitzgerald in the conventional sense, and it is perhaps unwise to place too much emphasis on his influence, even if we were to interpret this relation as an instance of some sort of "writing back" on Larsen's part. However, reading the resemblance in terms of plagiarism (in both directions) underscores how passing functions both as a literal theme in the novels and as a figurative trope for reading them not only independently but also in relation to one another, the implications of which are twofold. First, it reveals that we need to consider in more depth how reading race can tell us something about literary interpretation generally by exposing this slippage between literal and figurative formations in both literary works and critical practice. Moreover, this passing aspect of race invites us to examine more fully how the literal historical conventions about and social constructions of racial identity and difference have been and continue to be variously reinforced and undermined by what is arguably a literary question of figuration.

As something more like a coda than a conclusion, another recently rediscovered novel illustrates this point. In 2002, Gates discussed in a number of popular media outlets (e.g., The New Yorker, National Public Radio, and The New York Times) his acquisition and publication of Hannah Crafts's The Bondswoman's Narrative, which Gates believes is the first American novel written (in the 1850s) by a female fugitive slave. Suggesting that Crafts "sought to place her autobiographical..."
novel squarely within the republic of letters” (1), Gates locates the influence of other slave narratives, as well as Gothic and sentimental novels, in a broader practice of slaves literally and figuratively “reading from their masters’ libraries” and making use of this reading in their own writing (1). This tradition, in which slaves “read, echo, or borrow from” (1) other writers, provides a framework for Gates’s description of Crafts’s plagiarism and her master John Hill Wheeler’s “stealing a little learning from the slave” (2) by way of his library possession of a wide range of African-American works.

Noting that Crafts “closely revised—and sometimes lifted” (1) passages from Dickens’s *Bleak House*, Gates suggests, “Of the black writers published before 1865, none quoted more texts in her own work than did Hannah Crafts” (1, my emphasis). Crafts “audaciously . . . quilt[s] together . . . a remarkably impressive range of English and American literature” (1), a surprising “creative plundering” (2) matched reciprocally by the “presence of so many slave narratives in her master’s library” (2). Citing a long list of African-American authors in Wheeler’s library, Gates proposes, “It was as if he read the works of fugitive slaves to study the mind of the enemy, perhaps better to master and control his slaves, and to prevent them from escaping” (2). He concludes that “Crafts and Wheeler, slave and master, cloistered in the library, searching out each other’s secrets, enacted a mirror tableau: The slave woman furtively tracking down the letters of her master, the master surreptitiously decoding the language of the slave” (3).

Similarly, the passing resemblance between Larsen’s and Fitzgerald’s work underscores how the call of and the response to the passer, by anticipating the critical reader of both figurative tropes and literal truths, suggest how we might continue to navigate by losing our way. To ask how Gatsby was black can tell us much about what passes when we talk about race, just as that race talk is the twist in the turn we call reading.
Notes

1. Two dissertations (Marren and McCoy, both in 1995) explore passing in fiction by black and white writers. Both have separate chapters on *The Great Gatsby* and *Passing*, but neither really develops the links between the two novels. Beth A. McCoy closes her analysis of *The Great Gatsby* with the claim that “[o]ne of the most obvious candidates for . . . new and fruitful yoking [with *The Great Gatsby*] is Larsen’s *Passing*.” McCoy briefly inventories some links and then suggests that “the similarities are many, provocative, and seemingly, just waiting to be mined” (113). Although McCoy voices the concern that exploring these similarities might resemble earlier accusations of plagiarism, she concludes by calling for more textual analysis (114—117). More recently, in an NCTE collection on teaching American literature in high school and college, Rita Teague and Colleen Claudia O’Brien address the passing connection between these novels and suggest that a comparative approach is valuable in helping students understand race, class, and sexuality in this period.

2. I. A. Newby argues that the years “1900 to 1930 . . . were the years in which anti-Negro thought reached its zenith, the years which produced the greatest proliferation of anti-Negro literature, and the years in which that literature enjoyed its broadest appeal” (xi). See Christian for a discussion of passing literature in this period. Walter Benn Michaels addresses the links between nativism and modernism more broadly, including how the Immigration Acts of 1921 and 1924 reflect the anxiety over racial identity and difference during this period. Michaels also notes that Stoddard’s *The Rising Tide of Color Against White World Supremacy* was published in 1920 by Scribner’s, Fitzgerald’s own publisher (144 n. 12). Stoddard’s name actually appears elsewhere in *The Great Gatsby*: when Nick encounters “Owl Eyes” in Gatsby’s library, this drunken visitor marvels that the books “have real pages and everything” (30) and then rushes to the bookcase and pulls down “Volume One of the ‘Stoddard Lectures’” (30). James Ellis, however, claims this is a reference not to Lothrop Stoddard but to John Lawson Stoddard, a travel writer whose romantic depictions of the world would have been perfectly appropriate for Gatsby’s library. Other readers have suggested that Buchanan’s reference was to Henry H. Goddard, a psychologist and eugenacist.

3. See Brody, Tate, and Wald about other interpretive grounds for reading the novel.

4. See Thompson for an extended analysis of racial figuration in *The Great Gatsby*. Although Thompson addresses many of the elements of the novel I survey here, both his argument (about Gatsby being black) and some of the responses to it reflect the sort of slippage between literal and figurative aspects of race I wish to examine by way of the trope of passing. Also, see Goldsmith for a reading of the racialized configuration of passing in the novel.

5. While Daisy’s rather odd reference to the “‘white girlhood . . . passed’” (13) with Jordan Baker underscores Daisy’s white identity, it arguably complicates Jordan’s. Noting the relative critical inattention to Jordan, McCoy cites those passages in which Nick observes Jordan’s skin, which he repeatedly describes as both “dark” and “wan.” McCoy argues that the significance of Nick’s reference to “Jordan’s fingers, powdered white over their tan” (76) can only be grasped by locating in a “larger system
of racialized signifiers” (100). McCoy even speculates on the possibility that Jordan Baker might have been modeled in part on Josephine Baker (110 n. 45). At the very least, given Daisy’s reference at the opening of the book as well as Jordan’s tense insistence in Chapter 7 that “‘We’re all white here’” (86), she occupies an interesting place in the racial discourse of the novel.

6. *The Great Gatsby* is organized into nine chapters whereas *Passing* is divided into three parts, each of which contains four brief chapters. While Larsen’s tripartite structure is more apparent (the three parts are titled “Encounter,” “Reencounter,” and “Finale”), Fitzgerald’s nine chapters are discernibly organized into three sets of three: Chapters 1–3 introduce us to the key characters and plot lines (Buchanans, Wilsons, and Gatsby); Chapters 4–6 trace the entire arc of the relationship of Gatsby and Daisy, including background exposition of their initial romance, their reencounter at Gatsby’s mansion in West Egg, and Gatsby’s insistence to Nick that he can indeed repeat the past; finally, in Chapters 7–9 the characters shuttle back and forth between New York and Long Island as things come apart and the bodies start falling. In Larsen’s novel, Part 1 begins with Irene Redfield receiving a letter from Clare Kendry, which precipitates the recollection of their encounter two years earlier (which is itself a reencounter after many years since Clare “disappeared” in order to pass as white); Part 2 is an account of their reestablished relationship; and Part 3 follows the chain of events that result in Clare’s death.

7. Fitzgerald once drew a cartoon of himself as a minstrel figure among the Ivy Leaguers. The cartoon appeared in a postcard to a cousin (Correspondences 13). See McCoy 1.

8. See, for example, McDowell’s introduction to *Passing* and Haviland’s article on passing and plagiarism.

9. See Davis and Hutchinson for Larsen biographies. See Christian for a helpful overview of the mulatta tradition, especially 35–61. For an analysis of passing as a kind of trope for modernist/postmodernist identity and subjectivity, see Cutter. Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s theory of intertextual signification in *The Signifying Monkey* addresses the originality of black writers in relation to both black and white writers. For a psychoanalytical analysis of Larsen’s plagiarism of a white female writer, see Haviland.

10. See, for example, Fleming and Lay on Larsen’s connections to Sinclair Lewis and Henry James, respectively.

11. In a somewhat different triangulation of influence and resemblance, Charles Scruggs argues that both Fitzgerald and Larsen were influenced by Mencken’s literary criticism, suggesting that both Jay Gatsby and Clare Kendry are technically rendered as recommended by Mencken in a review of Somerset Maugham’s *The Moon and Sixpence* (16).
Works Cited


McCoy, Beth Ann. "‘Do I Look Like This?’: Race, Gender, Class, and Sexuality in the Novels of Jessie Fauset, Carl van Vechten, Nella Larsen, and F. Scott Fitzgerald." Diss. U of Delaware, 1995.


