Paranoid Interpretation, Desire's Nonobject, and Nella Larsen's *Passing*

BRIAN CARR

NELLA LARSEN'S *PASSING* (1929) HAS OCCASIONED A GREAT deal of paranoid interpretation, in large part because the novel is about nothing. I use *nothing* in the sense of no thing or a nonobject, both of which are irreducible to the familiar meaning of *nothing* as inconsequential or strictly nonexistent.[1] In the framework of paranoid interpretation, desire and knowledge imaginarily coincide with an object such that everything, imagined to include nothing, becomes something. Paranoid interpretation is less a property of *Passing* than a transactional dynamic between the novel and the critical work on it, a dynamic activated in large part by many critics' "hateloving" attachment to *Passing*'s central character, Irene Redfield.[2] Reading Irene's interpretations of her life as paranoid delusions, many critics have an inverted and corrective investment in her. As if to resolve yet sustain Irene's wild interpretations, the contemporary scholarly archive on *Passing* is virtually unified in its belief that her paranoid apprehensions can be submitted to a proper reading that will furnish the positive knowledge Irene systematically misses.

Critics are not strictly wrong in their characterization of Irene as, in Deborah E. McDowell's words, "clearly deluded" (xxvi). And yet, the fact that many critics work to procure for themselves the clarity they need to assign paranoid delusion to Irene leads one to wonder, how "deluded" are the critics? If paranoia, through delusion, converts nothing into something, the bulk of the critical work on *Passing* is in reach of paranoia, since the work, too, impulsively confounds something with nothing, truth with what at best can be only half told, desire with what Kaja Silverman aptly calls its "impossible nonobject" (39).[3] Critics often find that Irene's delusional mentality and Larsen's manifest text of racial passing and heterosexual jealousy collaborate to occlude a latent homosexuality, which neither Larsen nor

BRIAN CARR is a PhD candidate in the Program in Literature at Duke University. He is writing a dissertation on race, sexuality, and interpretation under and following United States slavery. His work on various topics has appeared in *Cultural Critique*, *GLQ*, *Angelaki*, *Modern Fiction Studies*, and *Camera Obscura*.

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Irene can avow. While keeping the problematic of racial passing in view, I follow the critical turn toward reading homosexuality in *Passing* to the extent that this turn itself is beset by paranoia. It would be difficult not to arrive at homosexuality when thinking about paranoia and vice versa, since, as we will see, homosexuality and paranoia have long been conceptual bedfellows.

There is doubtless an interpretive fit between the critical disclosure of latent homosexuality and manifest racial and heterosexual delusion, but this fit is too tight for desire—or what Joan Copjec calls "realtight." Understanding desire as coextensive with—but secreted in—language leads one to positivize and obliterate all externality (in Copjec, the Lacanian real), to "*construct a reality that is realtight*, that is no longer self-external" (*Read* 14). In such a latent-manifest reading of *Passing*, where everything is present but some things are veiled, we perform realtight closure (the refusal of externality) in the style of interpretive disclosure. Annulling externality by relying on an analogical model of meaning, such as the one implied by the pair latent/manifest, we find ourselves obliged to decode secret correspondences.

Contrary to standard logics of racial passing, which practically always rely on a latent-manifest reductionism, Larsen's *Passing* obliquely approaches the closure-disclosure duo. Less preoccupied with how something passes for something else, *Passing* doggedly pursues how nothing "passes" for something. The novel allows us to focus on the ways knowledge and desire are sustained by their lack of a nonobject that would complete or satisfy them, on how routine understandings of race and sexuality tend toward paranoid interpretive closure, and on why we want to substantialize everything as if there were no nothing. Instead of making something out of nothing or disavowing the factor of nothing—this being paranoid reading's method—we might read this nothing-something dyad more actively, paying attention to the function of nothing and to the procedures by which it becomes incarnated as something in *Passing*, for the novel's characters and readers.

There Is Paranoia, and Then There Is Paranoia

Unhinging interpretation from paranoia is no easy work. In his study of Daniel Paul Schreber, Freud famously questions the extent to which his own, admittedly preformed theory of paranoia and delusion might itself be delusional and, conversely, whether Schreber's delusions might be true ("Psycho-analytic Notes" 465–66). Lacan advances Freud's query, hypothesizing a "paranoiac principle of human knowledge" and stating flatly that there are "paranoid affinities between all knowledge of objects as such" ("Freudian Thing" 130, *Seminar III* 39). I want to address a set of connections Freud draws among paranoia, homosexuality, and interpretation, since his account, directly or indirectly, has supplied critics with the armature for understanding Irene's (repressed) homosexuality and (manifest) delusion. I work to a large degree from Lacan's theorization of desire and paranoia, since both concepts are salient preoccupations in *Passing* and its scholarly archive and because through Lacan we can foreground the central problem: what is the relation of desire to paranoid interpretation?

In my usage, paranoid interpretation is an almost imperceptible hermeneutic reflex that disavows the fact that knowledge and desire are at once enabled and limited by their support: a nonobject. Silverman offers a serviceable explanation of the relations among desire, its nonobject, and signification. She argues that the loss in being that language induces in the subject, being's *aphanisis* or fading, "gives rise to an unsatisfiable urge to symbolize what we have lost. The *je ne sais quoi* which each of us thereafter lacks, *to which all of our acts of signification will never be adequate*, represents less an object than a nonobject: the impossible nonobject of desire" (39; emphasis added). In my definition of the phenomenon, paranoid interpretation

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vitiates desire by operating with the belief that signification can capture adequately this nonobject and by rigidly regarding it as a substantial object available to be had and known.

Literary scholars are perhaps most familiar with the description of "paranoid reading" offered by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's pathbreaking essay "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading; or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Introduction Is about You." Sedgwick tracks the genesis of a myopic paranoia in politicized hermeneutics, which has come to "seem entirely coextensive with critical theoretical inquiry, rather than being viewed as one kind of cognitive/affective theoretical practice among other, alternative kinds" (6). For Sedgwick, a "seeming faith in exposure" is one of the most unyielding features of the "paranoid impulse" (17). She suggests that this interpretive "faith in exposure"—which is actually a redecorated faith in ideological "demystification"—is crippled by two of its main presumptions: that what the critic exposes is not already known and that exposing what may be inevident has a clear political purchase.

Taking Sedgwick as my point of departure, I argue that *Passing* and its scholarship require us to push the connection between faith and paranoia further. If by definition faith necessitates a gap between itself and an inevident object, then paranoid interpretation spoils faith by filling this gap with a positive object. Paranoid interpretation aims at exposure, but, by magically pushing beyond signification to the real thing or nonobject, it inevitably violates faith.[4] Paranoid interpretative procedures do not just overreveal, discover what is already evident or known, or ride too high on the political utility of their exposures. They want to reveal what cannot be revealed, what by definition persists in its opacity, but instead they unwittingly expose the fact that the nonobject is inimical to critical exposure.

Paranoid interpretation of the sort increasingly grabbing the attention of literary critics is not reducible to other, more clinically defined forms of paranoia. To put it schematically, paranoid interpretation is marked principally by the effort to expose the nonobject in its radiant actuality. A second form of paranoia, which is more squarely positioned as a psychosis, entails less the subject's striving toward an object beyond signification than by this object's lack of differentiation from the subject.[5] We might read these two paranoias alongside Lacan's maxim that the word is the murder of the thing.[6] Paranoid interpretation is a hermeneutic effort to preserve meaning against loss—to imagine that the thing is accessible despite its murder—and could be understood, in another idiom, as the denial of the nature of translation. In the second paranoia, the word is not murderous enough, so that the thing erupts in the domain of the word. While these paranoias are different—at times they are inverted forms of each other—they share a crucial feature. Whether the word's murder of the thing is denied, disavowed, refused, or forestalled, both paranoias threaten to vitrify knowledge and desire, since the subject's desire and knowledge persist only if the thing is killed.

Irene's and her critics' reading practices are typically on the side of the first paranoia, where paranoid interpretation is more formative than deformative of meaning and desire. But the critics of Irene's delusional mentality anxiously take refuge in the formative paranoia as a way of staving off its maddening, senseless counterpart: the other paranoia, more deformative, which especially threatens the subject's distance from the thing. One might resolve this problem by declaring that paranoid interpretation is a redundancy and that interpreting paranoid interpretation only augments the paranoia in question. While there can be no unconditional distinction between paranoid delusion and interpretation, I submit that to attend to the factor of nothing—which paranoid interpretation cannot avow—is to introduce an internal difference in paranoid interpretation's method. Delusion and the interpretation of it arrive on the scene together and are at times indistinguishable, but the degree to which they are identical depends on what we are reading for.

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From Historicism to the Nonobject

At the opening of *Passing*, Irene Redfield has been going through her mail and finally arrives at the last letter in her "little pile." "After her other ordinary and clearly directed letters," this one "seemed out of place and alien"; it has "something mysterious and slightly furtive about it." More than this, the letter is a "sly thing which bore no return address to betray the sender." It is not Irene's lack of knowledge about the sender that makes the letter "out of place and alien," since the narrator abruptly states Irene knew "immediately . . . who its sender was"—her childhood friend Clare Kendry. The letter seems perturbing, even before it is opened, because of the "attitude towards danger" Irene is "sure the letter's contents would reveal." Clare's attitude toward danger takes its epistemological toll on Irene, for she is "wholly unable to comprehend" it (143).

Between coming across the letter and opening it, Irene remembers an occasion when, as a young girl, Clare stole money for a dress, knowing "well enough that it was unsafe" to do so. Irene recalls that "even in those days," there was "nothing sacrificial in Clare Kendry's idea of life, no allegiance beyond her own immediate desire." Although on reading the letter Irene "saw at once . . . what she expected," the content of the letter does not seem to warrant the prior description of the letter's alien quality or Irene's daydream that supposedly confirms just how "selfish, and cold, and hard" Clare is (144). All we get in the letter is the articulation of Clare's desire, her "extravagantly phrased wish to see [Irene] again" (145).

Clare's letter reminds Irene of the last time they accidentally met in Chicago. In the twelve years before that meeting, Clare and Irene were out of touch, in part because Clare had been permanently passing for white. Clare's invocation of "that time in Chicago" incites feelings of "humiliation, resentment, and rage" in Irene, feelings that set *Passing*'s narrative in motion (145). Chapter 2, which moves back in time, begins with their chance encounter. Irene has been shopping, and to escape the heat she takes a taxi to the white-only Drayton hotel café. After Irene is seated, she begins staring at Clare, although Irene does not yet know at whom she is looking. Suddenly, she finds Clare is staring back. Clare's return stare prompts Irene's paranoia, which continues to escalate: "Feeling her colour heighten under the continued inspection, she slid her eyes down. What, she wondered, could be the reason for such persistent attention?" (149).

Irene suspects she has broken some social code: "Had she, in her haste in the taxi, put her hat on backwards? Guardedly she felt at it. No. . . . Something wrong with her dress? She shot a glance over it. Perfectly all right. *What* was it?" (149). In paranoia's mentality, the answer is definitely *something*. After she surveys possible reasons for the stare and still finds it unjustified, "there [rises] in Irene a small inner disturbance, odious and hatefully familiar" (150). This familiar inner disturbance concerns the possibility of racial detection, since Irene is passing for white in the Drayton rooftop café. At this point Irene does not know that the staring woman, Clare, is neither entirely white nor unfamiliar. As the scene is progressively overwritten by Irene's paranoid response, Clare comes over to Irene's table, announces she knows Irene, and appears to break this paranoid circuitry. Irene scans her memories and Clare's features and finally realizes it is Clare.

While Irene seems at last to discern who was looking and why, the scene makes palpable the impossibility of adequate recognition: What is really going on? Why and at what is Clare looking? Even our interpretive effort to read Irene's struggle with the what of "*What* was it?" as decreasingly paranoid—where Irene first thinks of social improprieties and then comes to the real issue, that she is passing—is undercut when we learn that Clare stares for another reason. Irene's inability to superintend the operative forms of misrecognition in this scene leads her to turn inward and recollect the events of the day. During

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the staring, Irene's "mind returned to her own affairs. She had settled, definitely, the problem of the proper one of two frocks for the bridge party that night" (149). "Settled," "definitely," "problem," and "proper" betray how much Irene is committed to orderliness and propriety, especially since all such terms are telescoped into "the bridge party that night," an indication of Irene's status among the black bourgeoisie.

Yet even in Irene's inward turn, an element cannot be settled. She recalls with frustration her failure to find and purchase a book her son Ted wants: "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" (148). *Passing* at once foregrounds an equivalency between consumption and desire and intimates that they both aim at an impossible nonobject. Readers will remember that Brian, Ted's father and Irene's husband, longs to move to Brazil. For Irene, the character and the object of Ted's and Brian's wants are the same. The boy and his father "invariably" want "something" that is not only difficult but "impossible to get." It is not that the characters want nothing (in every sense) but that the things they want, which may be impossible to acquire, are secondary incarnations of desire's nonobject—what they really cannot get.

Although we get a certain kind of satisfaction in objects, we still tend to believe in what Bruce Fink calls "a better satisfaction, a satisfaction that would never fail us, never come up short, never disappoint us" (35). *Jouissance* is one name for this supposedly better, consistent satisfaction. But desire and *jouissance* are antagonistic, since desire is founded on the loss of *jouissance* as absolute pleasure.[7] While we believe in *jouissance*, we feel we lack it and sometimes think others have special access to it. For Irene, Clare has the privilege of *jouissance*, enjoys more, has not "sacrificed" anything. Clare is even said to have a "having way with her," and she often "tease[s]" Irene away from sober and directed intentions (153, 201). Irene's increasingly persecutory paranoia takes shape by disproportionately locating *jouissance* on the side of Clare.[8]

Irene is unable to resist Clare's "having way," despite often feeling repelled by it. For example, she regularly vows not to read Clare's letters, only to do so eventually. Irene repeatedly wonders why she promises to meet Clare: "Why in the world had she made such a promise?" (163). Her frustration building, Irene, the narrator says, "was through with Clare Kendry" (165). Later, Irene plans to reject Clare "definitely": "She meant to tell Clare Kendry at once, and definitely, that it was no use . . ." (193). Breaking into the sentence, the narrator states, "But that was as far as she got in her rehearsal" (194).

Irene is plagued by the gap between rehearsal and execution, desire and the impossible nonobject, or *jouissance*. Much of the criticism on *Passing* avoids this gap, as does Irene, and prefers instead to speak of Irene's conflicted social positioning in the relatively new northern black middle class. While this gap surely takes on particular contextual and historical aspects, it is hardly determined or exhausted by them. Racial passing is indeed a practice with regional and historical variations, as much as it is a thematic in a long literary tradition, but it also stands, in *Passing*, as a figure for the action of desire. In the novel, passing is at once transhistorical and historical, as Clare's "having way," a name for desire, is both a kind of transhistorical principle and a requisite feature of her racial passing in a determinate social order.

Irene tends toward a jealous hatred of Clare, stemming from her belief that Clare gets to have it both ways, that passing enables Clare to close the gap between desire and *jouissance* (the nonobject). Irene insistently wants to strip Clare of this "having way," and she first proceeds by rendering passing a bounded, contextual, historical, and even impossible phenomenon. She seems to believe that "environment," "background," and the "familiar" might severely constrain passing and Clare:

> She wished to find out about this hazardous business of "passing," this breaking away from all

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> that was familiar and friendly to take one's chances in another environment. . . . What, for example, one did about background, how one accounted for oneself. And how one felt when one came into contact with other Negroes. (157)

Clare jettisons this understanding altogether, pronouncing that passing is "such a frightfully easy thing to do. If one's the type, all that's needed is a little *nerve*" (emphasis added). "Nerve" is not a determinate set of descriptions about how Clare passes but is rather a decontextualized, unverifiable principle. Irene insists, "What about background? Family I mean. Surely you can't just drop down on people from nowhere and expect them to receive you with open arms, can you?" Clare returns with "Almost. . . . You'd be surprised, 'Rene" (158).

In espousing the notion that people are bound to context, to tradition, to their race, and to their family as race, Irene seems to hold an anachronistic view of such terms that is unduly continuous with slavery. But Irene is perhaps less naive on this topic than she appears. Her convictions attach less to her anachronistic perspective than to why she invokes them: because she believes all too much in Clare's exemption from contextual constraint. The questions of history and context are crucial to *Passing*'s narrative, since in many ways the novel registers a new relative mobility for some African Americans that departs significantly from United States slavery, wherein "blackness" was almost entirely synonymous with a subclass position. The (postemancipation) urban milieu, which is often associated with anomic subjectivities and new kinship arrangements, is fundamental to Clare's ability to "drop down on people."

As Angela Davis explains, in the 1920s and 1930s, "[f]or the first time in the history of the African presence in North America, masses of black women and men were in a position to make autonomous decisions regarding the sexual partnerships into which they entered" (4). Of obvious import to racial passing was the rush of postemancipation northern migration that followed the end of the "proscription on free individual travel" (8). *Passing* negotiates the pleasures and dangers of this new sexual-racial order, and the deviations from convention that haunt the novel are partially explicable through the reframing of long-standing questions of race, family, sexuality, and mobility that were operative under slavery.

Passing's narrative is thus unquestionably conditioned by history, but this is different from saying the novel simply expresses or reflects its historical moment or context. Irene's struggle with desire and interpretation, for instance, so thoroughly subtends the narrative that it is impossible to draw any sharp distinction between her context and her mentality. Discussing Helga Crane in Larsen's *Quicksand*, Hazel Carby cautions against reducing Helga's alienation to her mentality, since her alienation "was not just in her head but was produced by existing forms of social relations and therefore subject to elimination only by a change in those social relations" (169). Carby's anti-idealism seems indubitable enough, but it would be unsatisfactory to believe that some determinate context could eradicate antagonism or alienation. History is no mere "act of thought" (170), but neither is it a bounded externality: the subject is *of* history but is not reducible to or determined by it. Historicism—while not alone in this—usually holds "social relations" and history responsible for the subject's alienation, but too often it finds a character, like Irene, on whom it pins interpretive problems that exceed historicism's conceptual reach.

Paranoid Interpretation and Homosexuality

Now we can begin to track the ways in which much contemporary critical work on *Passing* aims to supplement Irene's misreading and Larsen's coded but decipherable text with the critic's claim to radical social critique. This position has been fueled by Deborah E. McDowell's landmark analysis, which finds that Irene represses a desire for Clare and that *Passing*, homologically,

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"passes" itself off as a novel of heterosexuality and racial passing when it is really about protolesbian longing. In her definitive introduction to the one-volume collection of Larsen's *Passing* and *Quicksand*, McDowell argues, "Irene is clearly deluded about her motives, her racial loyalty, her class, and her distinctness from Clare," but the "narrative suggests that her most glaring delusion concerns her feelings for Clare." *Passing* is only "superficially . . . an account of Clare's passing for white," while "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 reiterates the point about Irene: "Irene has disguised her anxieties about sexuality by concentrating on issues of race" (482). He too extends this logic to the novel at large: "Focusing ostensibly on Clare's racial duplicity, the novel can 'pass' as a text exclusively about racial identity when in fact it is just as fundamentally concerned with same-sex desire" (476). McDowell and Blackmore believe, relative to *Passing* at least, that race screens sexuality—race "mask[s] . . . the deeper, more unsettling issues of sexuality" (McDowell xxviii).

The scholarly attention to sexuality in *Passing* tends toward this functionalist depth-and-surface model, allowing the critic to uncover *Passing*'s "double burial" and the "radical implications" of the "erotic subplot . . . hidden beneath [*Passing*'s] safe and orderly cover" (xxx). For Blackmore, "Irene misinterprets both the [novel's] events themselves and her own reactions to them" (475). Were Irene to escape her deluded mentality and live her "lesbian relationship," she would perform the truly "radical act," in turn "throwing to the wind the patriarchal system which both protects her position and demands her sexual and emotional repression" (480). Ultimately, *Passing* "destroys the radical alternatives it seems to advocate" by killing Clare in the final scene and preventing a homosexual union (482).

On this model, the novel destroys and buries various elements, which then live on as potentialities, available only to the critic's capacity for resurrection and actualization—a pervasive critical position indeed. But even if one accepts the textual evidence for this homosexuality, does its critical disclosure actually reveal something (or some thing)? Particularly when the argument hangs on race as a cryptogram for homosexuality, the critic's discovery here presupposes that sexuality is some repressed thing over and against which various displacements operate in the novel (Irene's jealousy, the narrative of racial passing, and so on). But what if this sexuality is permanently opaque, such that to find it is to see only its figural production or refraction and not its beaming and unmediated literality? In our readiness to discover that *Passing* is "about" sexuality, we do not queer the novel. In fact, we just keep trying to set it straight.

Much of this critical predicament is built into queer literary scholarship's love affair with a special form of paranoid interpretation: symptomatic reading. Queer literary work has been remarkably adroit at reading symptomatically, yet the superior marksmanship of such interpretations too often relies on the critic's capacity to see homosexuality "come out" as a symptom in the text under investigation. In this way, the analytic for understanding homosexuality is so wedded to the cultural operation and logic of homosexuality that the dazzle of some queer hermeneutics is the effect of their procedural use of a theory that finds not only what the theory already knows but also the morphology of the theory itself. When a queer hermeneutic is nearly indistinguishable in structure from the cultural logic of homosexuality, the queer project finds itself complicit with the homophobic imperative to read for homosexuality. Homophobia and the critical reading of homosexuality often share an interpretive impulse to identify homosexuality's flare-up, the betraying gesture, outbreak, or textual symptom.

Despite Freud's many useful insights into paranoia, especially his questioning of the distinction between interpretation and delusion, his and our critics' symptomatic reading of paranoia

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is itself structurally paranoid. Freud defines paranoia as a response to one's latent homosexuality and thus understands various delusions as so many defenses against homosexuality.[9] Freud claims that repressed homosexuality is especially pronounced in "delusional jealousy," a form of paranoia wherein the subject transfers a same-sex desire onto a member of the opposite sex, usually the paranoiac's heterosexual partner, who becomes less the object and more the bearer of the paranoiac's desire. The delusional paranoiac (here, male) invests in the negating formulation "Indeed I do not love him, *she* loves him!" ("Certain Neurotic Mechanisms" 152). Paranoia is the symptomatic form that repressed homosexuality takes, and, correlatively, a symptomatic reading of paranoia reveals this homosexuality.[10]

Judith Butler directly engages paranoia and *Passing* in terms of Freud's analysis, which is notionally more useful than some critics' conjectural tagging of Irene as paranoid. Butler rewrites Freud's formula to suit *Passing*: "I, Irene, do not love her, Clare: he, Brian, does!" (180). While Irene's "jealousy may well be routed along a conventional heterosexual narrative," Butler claims one should not "foreclose the interpretation that a lesbian passion runs that course." Following Freud, Butler shows that "Irene passes her desire for Clare through Brian" (179). Butler's analysis, even with its more developed theorization of paranoia, still relies too heavily on a conventional tropology of apparent heterosexual delusional jealousy and of less evident, but now exposed, "lesbian passion." The above readings of Irene's paranoia are paranoid insofar as the analysis of homosexuality and delusional jealousy is no less closed or conventional than Irene's heterosexual love-and-jealousy plot. Reading symptomatically, indeed normatively, these theoretical analyses arrive at homosexuality by taking in reverse the same paranoid route Irene is said to take.

The possibility of a reading practice that is not strictly paranoid requires, as Copjec puts it in a different context, that we "become literate in desire, learn[ing] how to read what is inarticulable in cultural statements" (*Read* 14). Reading what is inarticulable is not customary symptomatology, since to be literate in desire is to recognize that the reading of the textual symptom does not reveal a thing or a substance. The symptom is its own kind of substance, not the cover for a substance or the sum objectification of a meaning. In its most ubiquitous form, symptomatic reading holds dear to a vulgar latent-manifest, analogical model of meaning in which the critic's vocation is to reestablish the lost correspondences between the superstructural symptom and its meaning-granting base. The problem we encounter in interpreting paranoia is that paranoid phenomena (not symptoms, exactly) are interpreted according to a preformed theory stating that paranoia is always caused by or evidence of repressed homosexuality. The singularity of psychoanalysis consists in not making this move, in not reading the symptom according to a guidebook that purports to know in advance the meaning of every symptom. Just as there can never be a book of dream "symbols," there can never be a symptom template outlining the meaning of symptoms under all—or even most—conditions.

It is not clear, either, that the symptom should be approached as a message. In later work, Lacan introduces the term *sinthome* to designate his conceptual shift away from the symptom as a signifier or metaphor to the *sinthome* as pure *jouissance*, unanalyzable and absolutely constitutive of subjectivity. The *sinthome* points to the crucial fact that psychoanalysis does not endeavor to obliterate symptoms per se. Because the subject is structurally reliant on (neurotic) symptoms, the dissolution of all symptoms risks the subject's decomposition. Reading desire involves reading for that which supports both the subject and the symptom: desire's nonobject or *jouissance*, which prevents the absolute realization of desire in language and yet opens the possibility of desire by generating its metonymic movement. This is not to say that people do not, in any sense, want objects or that we should not read for these

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objects. It is simply to say that these objects and our ability to read for them are predicated on the intervallic relation between desire and language.

If paranoia involves a special relation to desire's nonobject—if it is, among other things, an effort to make of this nonobject an object—*Passing* insistently foregrounds the impossibility of objects (be they things, object choices, or commodities). In one scene, Irene, explaining why she has no desire to pass for white, cuts right to this issue: "You see, Clare, I've everything I want. Except, perhaps, a little more money" (160). Wanting nothing but perhaps some money, Irene again betrays the way desire outstrips any empirical object. As Slavoj Žižek claims, "[M]oney's original role is to function as the impossible equivalent for that which has NO PRICE, for desire itself" (17). Desire has no price because the subject comes at a cost, paying what Lacan calls the "price of a castration" to accede (within a limit) to meaning, knowledge, and desire (*Seminar XX* 115). Desire is priceless, since it is "based on no being" (126), and the lack in being required for the operation of desire cannot be bought back.

Irene's desire for wealth has no end in sight, given that it is not simply a need but a desire. Thorstein Veblen claimed, "[T]he desire for wealth can scarcely be satiated in any individual instance," and, furthermore, the "satiation of the . . . general desire for wealth is [also] out of the question." Since this desire is founded not on a "want of subsistence or of physical comfort" but on a "race for reputability on the basis of an invidious comparison," Veblen decides that "no approach to a definitive attainment is possible" (21). Veblen knew that to conceptualize desire only in terms of what it is "for" is to miss the fact that desire will never stop there. Desire's object cannot be made fully positive, nor can desire be distilled into something it is really after, since it is after an impossible nonobject.[11] As Irene reveals, she does not want anything, except that she wants something (money) that is in itself nothing. For enough to be enough, *Passing* demonstrates there must be more.

Paranoia beyond Understanding

The realtight connection between paranoia and homosexuality consists in the narcissism that Freud believes structures both of them. It is no surprise that he should say that paranoiacs "love their delusion *as they love themselves*" ("Draft H" 113); loving oneself or another on the model of oneself is a classic understanding of homosexuality. While paranoia is fundamentally tied to narcissism in the work of Lacan, he came to disband any a priori connection between homosexuality and paranoia.[12] Paranoia, for Lacan, conditions the structure of knowledge in general. It issues from the ego's imaginary formation and is structurally integral to the ego's rivalry, jealousy, and identificatory alienation. Ultimately, Lacan locates a "paranoiac principle of human knowledge" in the field of egoic aggressivity ("The Freudian Thing" 130).

In introducing paranoia at the root of the ego, Lacan transvalues paranoia: from its constitutive form "develops the triad of other people, ego, and object" ("Aggressiveness" 21). This paranoia is generative, a "primordial manifestation of communication" (*Seminar III* 39), which grants one the provisional ability to make distinctions. Paranoia is sometimes discussed in Lacanian theory as a purely imaginary phenomenon proper to the ego and vision and not, for example, to the subject and language.[13] Lacan seems to describe speech as the overcoming of imaginary (paranoid) knowledge, jealousy, and aggressivity, since speech is "always a pact, an agreement, people get on with one another, they agree—this is yours, this is mine, this is this, that is that" (39–40). But this is not the final word, since paranoid knowledge traverses the imaginary-symbolic distinction: "the aggressive character of primitive competition leaves its mark on every type of discourse about the small other, about the Other as third party, about the object" (40). The onset of language, and hence the emergence of the subject, introduces desire and an alienation all its own, which does not squelch the paranoid structure of the ego as

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much as it introduces a new relation: that of paranoia to the subject of desire.

Because Lacan avows the paranoid principle of all knowledge, he can offer some guideposts for interpreting paranoia in ways that do not simply duplicate it. He is acutely critical of analysts' pride in "understanding" the paranoiac's delusions. As he says, when paranoia is submitted to a supposedly nonparanoid understanding, "we ourselves feel that we are within reach of understanding. This is where the illusion starts to emerge—since it's a question of understanding, we understand. Well, no, precisely not" (21). When analysts "rush in to fill the case with understanding," they "miss the interpretation that it's appropriate to make or not to make." This overzealous understanding is "generally naively expressed in the expression—*This is what the subject meant*." To this statement Lacan asks, "How do you know? What is certain is that he didn't say it" (22).

The crucial distinction here is between understanding and interpreting paranoid delusion. Understanding is the self-aggrandizing, no-less-paranoid version of approaching the delusion through an intuited relation between the phenomena and a preformed theory; it is, at base, a failure to listen or, in our case, read. Lacan counsels that to interpret, one does well to understand less (20). Interpretation, while never absolutely free of understanding, does not aspire to depth, comprehensiveness, or exactitude. When critics understand Irene's belief that Brian and Clare are (romantically or sexually) involved as a clear instance of Irene's repressed homosexuality, they never contend with the fundamental problem of paranoia: delusional knowledge is not necessarily empirically verifiable even for the paranoiac. As the narrator says, Irene not only "knew" her belief to be true, she even "knew that she knew it" (234); and yet Irene knows that "nothing" substantiates her belief:

> For, she reasoned, what was there, what had there been, to show that she was even half correct in her tormenting notion? *Nothing. She had seen nothing, heard nothing*. She had no facts or proofs. She was only making herself unutterably wretched by an unfounded suspicion. It had been a case of looking for trouble and finding it in good measure. Merely that.
>
> (223; emphasis added)

"Nothing," thrice repeated, was or is "there" to prove to Irene that she is "even half correct" in her delusion. This is why Freud said that it is of no use to argue "facts" with paranoiacs; they will believe all the same. Even though Irene "wanted to feel nothing, to think nothing" and to "believe that it was all a silly invention on her part," the narrator notes at the close of this section: "Yet she could not. Not quite" (224).

Irene's paranoid interpretation of the situation with Clare and Brian is not based exclusively on an empirical, evidentiary claim. She knows at some level that her knowledge is founded on nothing, but this does not render it meaningless. To the contrary, as I have tried to show, interpretation, desire, and knowledge have significance only when predicated on a lack in being. If we come to *Passing* and Irene to read for what they do not know about themselves, then we have missed the point: we all partake of a bit of paranoia, confusing appearance and being, something and nothing, the things we demand and the thing we desire. Reading with this in mind, knowing that understanding does not move beyond delusion but aspires to the same rigidity as delusion, allows one to interpret paranoia without strictly doubling its logic. While all paranoia is interpretive in some sense, not all interpretation is exactly paranoid. Nonparanoid interpretation will not, however, be more faithful to the facts. Rather, the import of any interpretation consists in its production of symbolic effects beyond prior correspondences and smooth, realtight understandings.

The Racial Gap, Enjoyment, and Killing Desire

Of course, the scholarship that has turned to homosexuality in *Passing* claims a certain interpretive

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interruption. It has wanted to show how this supposedly generic racial passing narrative is actually a more troubling narrative of homoerotic desire. But if this turn from race to homosexuality is conducted through a set of paranoid reading practices propped on a prescripted understanding of delusional jealousy, the question remains as to the status of race and racial passing in the novel. In assuming that sexuality is a more volatile category than race in *Passing*, many critics have missed that the novel's presentation of *desire* cuts through race.

Passing persistently overhauls the usual passing narrative in which either color temporarily loses its referential relation to bodies or the problem of passing never moves beyond the indeterminate figure of the "mulatto."[14] In a passage to which I have not seen any significant critical attention given, Brian and Irene discuss whether or not it is appropriate for Clare and Irene to continue seeing each other. Irene says it is not, since Clare's white husband, John Bellew, who does not know Clare's racial past, has expressed his hatred for African Americans. Irene queries Brian, "Curious, isn't it, that knowing, as she does, his unqualified attitude, she still—," and Brian interrupts:

> "It's always that way. Never known it to fail. Remember Albert Hammond, how he used to be for ever haunting Seventh Avenue, and Lenox Avenue, and the dancing-places, until some 'shine' took a shot at him for casting an eye towards his 'sheba'? They always come back. I've seen it happen time and time again."
>
> "But why?" Irene wanted to know. "Why?"
>
> "*If I knew that, I'd know what race is*."
>
> "But wouldn't you think that having got the thing, or things, they were after, and at such risk, they'd be satisfied? Or afraid?"
>
> "Yes," Brian agreed, "you certainly would think so. But, the fact remains, they aren't. Not satisfied, I mean." (185; emphasis added)

Before we turn to related discussions of race in *Passing*, consider Brian's peculiar way of defining—or failing to define—what race is. The question of Clare conjures up the example of Albert Hammond, since they are both likened to dangerous desire. After Brian asserts how intractable this desire is, Irene asks him why people return obsessively to dangerous scenes of their desire. He admits he cannot answer the why of this desire that he claims is so recalcitrant, and then, in a spectacularly disorienting gesture, he simply states that if he knew why, he would "know what race is."

The reference to not knowing what race is appears to be a senseless twitch in an otherwise perfectly intelligible passage. Without some appreciation of the negative relation of desire to the social and to identitarian understandings of "sexuality," could we follow the eruption of race in this dialogue? In claiming that if he could answer the question of desire he would be able to define race, Brian suggests that race is in principle an ontological category founded on a paranoid closure of the gap between desire (or knowledge) and the nonobject. Race does not present the question of the nonobject, it does not ask why, and its ontological effects are achieved on the condition of eradicating this question. If Brian suggests he does not know what race is, this is because race is founded not on being but on the paranoid conflation of being and appearance. Paranoid reading generally aims to disclose an object or meaning behind appearance, but race is already a paranoid positivization of being. Race has in advance achieved the satisfaction Clare and Albert perpetually seek, where satisfaction is the obliteration of desire. In effect, racialism moves to bleed desire from the racialized subject.

Passing proceeds to disintegrate racialism's logic by revealing the so-called color line, the external difference between white and black, to be the domestication of a greater rub: the gap in color, the split within race, for which the "line" between races is a paranoid, substantializing shorthand. Should we think Irene and Clare are united, even tenuously, by their race, we are told they are "[a]ctually . . . strangers. Strangers in

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their ways and means of living. Strangers in their desires and ambitions. Strangers even in their racial consciousness. *Between them the barrier was just as high, just as broad, and just as firm as if Clare did not run that strain of black blood*" (192; emphasis added). Long before geneticists thought they had to illustrate that gene frequencies differed more within a race than between races, *Passing* foregrounds the fact that (a) race is limited by an internal foreignness, a stranger, an exception, that race cannot factor in.

When Clare asks Irene why white urbanites are drawn to Harlem's nightlife—"What do they come for?"—Irene likens her to them: "Same reason you're here, to see Negroes" (198). The narrator, seizing on a distinction between identification with and formal membership in a race, claims, "Clare Kendry cared nothing for the race. She only belonged to it" (182). Although Irene hazards an answer to the why of desire, Clare again asks, just as Irene did of Brian, "But why?" Irene responds by saying that such people have "[v]arious motives. . . . A few purely and frankly to enjoy themselves" (198). This exchange comes just after Clare is presented as the "barrier" internal to the race, which shows up the ways in which race is the positivization of a gap, the imaginary overcoming of an internal limit. Not only does Irene inadvertently register this gap, noting Clare's *extimate* relation to the race, her answer to the why of desire is less an answer than a tautology. Enjoyment does not answer why, it only continues to deflect Irene's question to Brian and Clare's to Irene: why enjoy?

Irene feels the other's, especially Clare's, enjoyment as an obscene encroachment. Even though Irene provisionally decides that Clare and Brian are not having an affair, Clare's "having way" is too taxing for Irene: "Though she had come almost to believe that there was nothing but generous friendship between [Brian and Clare], she was very tired of Clare Kendry. She wanted to be free of her, and of her furtive comings and goings. If something would only happen, something that . . . would remove Clare" (224–25). The wish that something "would remove Clare" signals Irene's transformation from taking pained enjoyment in Clare's "having way" to experiencing the insufferable sense that Clare is the agent of Irene's psychic bondage. From this vantage, it is clear why Clare, with her "furtive comings and goings" and her apparent monopolizing of *jouissance*, should become the target of Irene's murderous wish.

It is impossible to know for sure the circumstances of Clare's death. Does she fall from the window? Does she jump? Is she pushed? Who pushes her? Clearly Irene wished for Clare's removal and "wasn't sorry" after Clare's death (239). Also certain is that Irene continually strives to kill desire, first through paranoid interpretive procedures and then through her wish for Clare's exit. On the one hand, Irene's protomurderous wish might imply that she kills Clare, as critics often assume. On the other, Irene's fantasy of Clare's removal suffuses the narration of the events to such a degree that one is hard-pressed to assign any such culpability to Irene. We are deprived of something here; indeed, the narrator claims both that Irene "never afterwards allowed herself to remember" the events and that "[s]he had *thought of nothing* in that sudden moment of action" (239–40; emphasis added).

This is the first time in the novel that Irene thinks "of nothing." It is not wholly unprecedented, though, since it is a stronger form of Irene's recognition that her knowledge of Brian and Clare is based on nothing. What is singular about this occasion is that Irene comes to think of "nothing" as a factor—a factor that cannot be included in any social set. The thought of the murdered thing, of nothing, suggests itself to her in this moment. To Irene, Clare's death appears as a flash of nothing, a disappearance, which is partly why this scene seems hurried to many critics.

Perhaps no one can—and there is no imperative to—think of nothing's factor for too long. It is appropriate, then, that nothing again becomes something for Irene. Even though we are led to believe that Clare is dead, Irene, alone

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upstairs while everyone has run down to see Clare's "glorious body mutilated," is overcome by a question "so terrifying, so horrible, that she had had to grasp hold of the banister": "What if Clare was not dead?" (240). Clare is both dead and not dead, since she has turned to nothing, to death, but nothing insists from the dead—the thing, in a sense *undead*, is not irrelevant simply because it is murdered. Thankfully, the problem that Clare represents for Irene and for readers never quite dies, which is why neither killing Clare nor correcting Irene will solve the problem of desire. Interpretation—good or bad, tame or wild—drives on. In its exploration of the problem of desire's nonobject, *Passing* comes to know something we frequently refuse to know: because knowledge is tethered to desire, we cannot kill knowledge or possess it all, since there is no all—no full knowledge or permanently satisfiable desire. This means more and less for us.

Notes

I wish to thank Robyn Wiegman, Rachel Price, Jennifer Rhee, and especially Janice Radway for their astute readings of earlier drafts of this article.

[1] This nothing stands outside existence but insists in existence from this outside position. It has *ex-sistence*, a concept I take primarily from Jacques Lacan's *Seminar XX*.

[2] Lacan introduces his neologism, *hainamoration*, or hateloving, to "overhaul the function of knowledge" and put "hatred . . . in its proper place," since "one knows nothing of love without hate" (*Seminar XX* 91).

[3] In Freud, paranoia, not delusion proper, is the illness. Paranoia involves a withdrawal of libidinal object cathexis, whereas delusion is a form of self-stabilization, however limited, a way back to the world where there was a withdrawal from it.

[4] Paranoid interpretation goes astray when it conceives of the real as beyond or fully external to signification. The real is best understood not as externally beyond signification but as signification's internal limitation. On the relation of faith to paranoia, see Lacan, *Seminar VII* 54.

[5] As a psychosis, paranoia operates primarily by foreclosure. Foreclosure produces an elementary failure whereby the subject does not experience the nagging lack that founds the desiring subject; rather, foreclosure preps the psychotic for invasion by too much being and for the return, from without, of psychotic phenomena like hallucinations. As Lacan puts it in terms of language, "If the neurotic inhabits language, the psychotic is inhabited, possessed, by language" (*Seminar III* 250). Although paranoia is understood as a psychosis, it is to be distinguished from schizophrenia or dementia praecox (Freud, "Psycho-analytic Notes" 461–66; Lacan, *Seminar III* 17, 77).

[6] Lacan states that "the symbol first manifests itself as the killing of the thing, and this death results in the endless perpetuation of the subject's desire" ("Function" 101). I use *thing* in the sense Lacan describes in *Seminar VII*, in which he makes much use of the German *das Ding*. In this context, he says, "the Thing only presents itself to the extent that it becomes word" (54). *Das Ding*, which partakes of a Kantian problematic (the thing in itself), is the "beyond-of-the-signified" (54). The thing is distinguished from things, and I sometimes use *nothing* to designate this thing's peculiar status. Nothing, the nonobject or thing forever lost, insists in its loss.

[7] The absolute pleasure of *jouissance* is also painful; hence, in Lacan's words, "*jouissance* is . . . suffering" (*Seminar VII* 184).

[8] There are internal differentiations in the psychoses regarding *jouissance*. As Dylan Evans notes, in paranoia *jouissance* "is located not in the subject's own body [as in schizophrenia] but in the Other" (17). While the Other generally designates the symbolic order, the paranoiac tends to imagine the Other as some agency or person who lacks nothing and hence enjoys everything, including the paranoiac, who is thereby persecuted by or made a plaything of the Other.

[9] For Freud, paranoia is virtually unthinkable without homosexuality: "homosexual impulses," he says, are "frequently (perhaps *invariably*) to be found in paranoia" ("Psychoanalytic Notes" 464; emphasis added).

[10] In Lacan at least, all symptoms are, in principle, neurotic forms and are not associated with paranoia (as one of the psychoses). I am arguing as if paranoia is a symptomatic form because Freud often treats paranoia symptomatically. This is partly because Freud sometimes understands paranoia and psychosis through repression and not foreclosure. See Grigg on Lacan's divergence from Freud here.

[11] *Objet a*, that part object between desire and *jouissance*, is the name for the partial positivization of desire's nonobject. *Objet a* is the object-cause of desire and largely takes the conceptual place of *das Ding* in Lacan's later work. On the relation between desire and capitalist consumption, Alenka Zupančič states, "[I]n participating in 'consumerist society,' in accumulating more and more new objects of desire, we hide from the lack of the One true object which would satisfy us completely" (240). Zupančič rightly goes on to argue, however, that the lost enjoyment ("the One") is the constitutive precondition for desire, so it is not as if one should renounce all pleasure in things in the name of honoring some lost real thing.

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[12] Lacan says the pathogenic connection between homosexuality and paranoia was, when Freud made it, "surely fundamentally new," but "as for knowing what this homosexuality is, at which point of subjective economy it acts, how it occasions the psychosis—I believe I can testify that . . . all the outlines we have contain the most imprecise, even the most contradictory approaches" (*Seminar III* 29–30).

[13] See Copjec, "Anxiety," for an early critique of this problem.

[14] See Kawash for an interesting, more optimistic account of the political efficacy of passing narratives.

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