and brilliance of a band of courageous people but also exposes whose human rights were valued and, frankly, whose were expendable.

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Sinéad Moynihan, *Passing into the Present: Contemporary American Fiction of Racial and Gender Passing* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010, £50.00). Pp. viii + 181. ISBN 978 0 7190 8229 0.

In January 2008, during the South Carolina Democratic debate, candidate Barack Obama was asked whether he agreed with Toni Morrison that Bill Clinton was, skin colour notwithstanding, America's first black President. After expressing his admiration for how Clinton embodied some of the advances made in the South since desegregation, Obama explains that he would need to see Clinton dance before he could accurately judge whether Bill was in fact a brother.

A moment like this, calling up as it does the entire history of American racism, is a sharp reminder of how much is at stake in US identity politics and how much rides on the correct response to questions of authenticity. Four years later, after the sustained and dogged interrogation of his national, racial, religious – not to mention political – identity, as well as the inevitable disappointments of nearly a full term in office during the worst economic depression since the 1930s, Obama's answer to this sly question – invocation of the Civil Rights era followed by ironic racial stereotyping – looks both shrewd and thin. It is the kind of self-deprecation that made Obama electable and took some of the glare off the Harvard Law School polish. At the same time, Obama's response is such an obvious maneuver that it adds weight to the charge that he is somehow too calculated, knowing, disengaged, inauthentic.

A full and thorough exploration of the implications of Morrison's original remark and Obama's reaction to it would tell a revealing story about contemporary racial politics in the US. It would be a story where the practice of "passing" did not end with the late twentieth-century embrace of cultural hybridity but instead mutated and multiplied to encompass a dizzying proliferation of subject positions, evasions, performances, anxieties and humiliations. It would be a narrative where no one was quite what they seemed, where sexuality, gender, class, race, age, and geographical location folded and intersected in kaleidoscopic permutations that never adequately settled or provided the promised egalitarian opportunities of a properly committed multicultural society. It would be the tale of an extreme individualism that insisted on carving up and splicing together collective identities and histories into ever-finer and more nuanced combinations yet still failed to make a "self" that stays stuck together.

In fact, as Sinéad Moynihan shows in her fascinating study of contemporary fiction of racial and gender passing, the American novel appears determined to tell precisely this story over and over again. Contextualizing recent fiction within the longer history of passing in American literature, notably during the period from post-Reconstruction to the Civil Rights era, Moynihan persuasively shows how the long history of performance and deceit with regard to identity in the US continues to preoccupy writers as diverse as Louise Erdrich, Jeffrey Eugenides, and Philip Roth. In a series of compelling and detailed readings of novels mostly published or written during the 1990s (Erdrich's *Tracks* is the earliest book examined here, published in 1988), Moynihan follows the contortions of protagonists who are either too black or not

black enough (Percival Everett's *Erasure* (2001), Paul Beatty's *The White Boy Shuffle* (1996)), African American characters who pass as Jewish (Danzy Senna's *Caucasia* (1998), Roth's *The Human Stain* (2000)), and Native Americans working through a complexly Catholic sex/gender/spirituality matrix (Erdrich's *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* (2001)); not to mention the dilemmas of intersexed, interracial adolescents (Eugenides's *Middlesex* (2002)).

Linking these complicated narratives with the emergence of the memoir as a popular literary form, Moynihan argues that the novels mess not only with the stable identities of fictional characters but with the form of the novel itself, as well as with the position of the author. The distinction between fact and fiction has been erased by both memoirs and novels, according to Moynihan, in ways that recall at times the complex negotiation of position between writer, publisher, and reader seen in nineteenth-century slave narratives. The collapse of authority in the memoir as a truth-telling form is most vividly demonstrated in Moynihan's conclusion, where she discusses scandals of inauthenticity like the memoirs of Margaret B. Jones (a white middle-class Angeleno who published her "true" story as a mixed-blood LA gang member) and James Frey, whose narrative of addiction and incarceration *A Million Little Pieces* was exposed and publically demolished by Oprah Winfrey in 2005 as a tissue of exaggerations and make-believe. From the novelist's point of view, one would assume that the identity of the author would be less important – theses narratives are made up, after all. Yet, as Moynihan shows, the status of contemporary fiction is as much bound up with the authenticity wars as so-called nonfiction.

While Moynihan's attempt to draw this collapse of faith in stable identities and narratives into a discussion of postmodernism is undeveloped and not especially revealing, what her extended textual probing does expose is a profound absence of belief and purpose at the heart of many of these texts. The embrace of plurality, contingency, and self-determination sounds fine but these are books about people pushed around inside histories and identities they struggle, at best, to manage. The sense of intrusive and endless external scrutiny of skin colour, facial features, body shape, accent, dialect, movement, habits, values, beliefs, sexual preferences, family history, country of origin, and the rest is frightening and oppressive. *Passing into the Present* could have pushed harder at the broader issues of social control and domination hinted at in these novels and in contemporary American identity politics more generally, but the persistence of passing as a necessary and almost compulsive trope in American fiction is revealed with an insightful and troubling acuity.

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