In her wide-ranging and ambitious work *Passing Novels in the Harlem Renaissance: Identity Politics and Textual Strategies*, Mar Gallego refers to W. E. B. Du Bois’ theory of double consciousness as “influential.” The reference is, at the very least, an understatement. Du Bois’ articulation of the African American experience, famously declared in the opening pages of *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), as straddling, or simultaneously occupying, both sides of the perceptual divide—the unremitting sense of “twoness . . . two warring ideals in one dark body (11)”—is arguably the theoretical paradigm against which twentieth-century African American expressive culture, particularly written culture, has been interpreted. Robert Stepto, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Paul Gilroy, all prominent late twentieth-century theorists of the experience of New World Africans, explicitly acknowledge an indebtedness to Du Bois. Without the Duboisian precedent, these writers would possibly not have elaborated their respective theories of call-and-response (Stepto 1979), signifying (Gates 1988) and the black Atlantic (Gilroy 1993)—all theories which are predicated on notions and strategies of doubleness; one may assume they would have formulated them differently.

William Edward Burghardt Du Bois was born in 1868, one year after the First Reconstruction Act granting, among others, the right to vote to black males in Confederate States. His formative years, then, coincided with this initial period of postbellum optimism and progressive legislation, as well as post-Reconstruction reaction, culminating in such Supreme Court rulings as the notorious “separate but equal” *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision of 1896. Where *Plessy* and other court decisions erected a *de jure* wall of containment between black and white Americans and encoded the segregationist principle, Du Bois countered with double consciousness, taking the reader as it were beyond the veil—or at least lifting it to reveal what lay on the other side. That a potential white readership be invited to partake of African American consciousness is in and of itself a radically subversive gesture. If we are given the wherewithal to experience reality as an African American (“an American, a Negro”), then Du Bois is making a brazenly transgressive proposition: an invitation to engage in a sort of literary miscegenation.

Miscegenation or, in nineteenth-century terms, amalgamation, is the transgression at the heart of a rich body of writing that coincided with the first third of Du Bois’ life and the period—Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction—that preceded the publication of *The Souls of Black Folk*. This fiction was coincidentally organized around the literary embodiment—the mulatto—of Duboisian double consciousness, while it similarly subverted the artificial binarism encoded in *Plessy*. The mulatto genre can be said to date back at least to Louisiana-born Victor Séjour’s short story “Le Mulâtre” (1837), considered the earliest known work of African American fiction. William Wells Brown’s *Clotel, or the President’s Daughter: A Narrative of Slave Life in the United States* (1853) is held to initiate the genre by an African American writer in English. *Clotel* is representative of a further, related tradition, that of the passing novel, with its eponymous heroine crossing racial as
well as gender lines (gender and racial passing is a frequent trope in antebellum slave narrative; see, for example, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom* [1860] and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* [1861]).

The passing genre is particularly well-represented in the Harlem Renaissance, the period on which Mar Gallego centres her study. She conjoins the mulatto/passing genre and its theoretical buttress, Duboisian double consciousness, and contributes significantly in the process to the critical corpus surrounding both. She draws on canonical texts – James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand* and *Passing*—and texts that are perhaps less so—George Schuyler’s *Black No More* and Jessie Redmon Fauset’s *Plum Bun*—further grouping them into “Male Perspectives” and “Female Approaches.”

Gallego provides a thorough exposition of the cultural and intellectual precedents, Western and African (the Yoruba tradition of Esu-Elegbara, Transcendentalism, William James) to Duboisian double consciousness, its significance and repercussions, and an equally well-documented account of the passing genre (Gallego’s study is exceptionally well researched, a strong point). For this reader, however, the most persuasive aspect of *Passing Novels in the Harlem Renaissance* is its exploration of the subversive intentionality at the heart of double consciousness and passing fiction, expressed at the level both of plot and—most interesting of all—textual strategies. Thus Gallego foregrounds the parodic reach of double consciousness: “The two cultural systems to which it adheres—Western and African—create a twofold set of possibilities within the discursive universe of the term, either as a valid alternative to racism, or as a parodic and rhetorical instrument . . . even within literary texts” (14).

Gallego proceeds to deconstruct double consciousness itself within the context of James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912, republished 1927 with acknowledged authorship) which, in her reading “manifests the impossibility of integrating both identities in one body, and hence, the impracticability of the Duboisian third self” (64). Drawing on the recent work of such critics as Neil Brooks, Valerie Smith and Kenneth Warren, *Passing Novels in the Harlem Renaissance* supports a more nuanced and enlightened interpretation of *The Autobiography*, distancing itself from traditional (or reductive) readings of Johnson’s work as the expression of a reactionary capitulation to white racial standards. Instead, Gallego proposes that *The Autobiography* may be read as a work which, through rhetorical strategies of doubleness such as parody and irony, challenges “Duboisian representation of African American reality . . . the very myth of neatly distinct and unrelated races, and ultimately the notion of race itself” (72).

The articulation in *The Autobiography* of “an ambiguous and incomplete cultural project” (73) is linked by Gallego to George Schuyler’s satiric discourse in *Black No More* (1931) and the three female-authored texts in her study, Larsen’s *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929), and Fauset’s *Plum Bun* (1929). Doubleness or multiplicity of discourse, a given in the narratives Gallego presents, is pursued to radical lengths in female-authored passing novels, in which writers such as Nella Larsen manifest a “double double consciousness,” Gallego’s term. Larsen’s mulatto heroines, accordingly, “move beyond the stereotype [of the tragic mulatto],” and, according to critics Sharon Dean and Erlene Stetson, “become ‘Du Bois’ ‘double consciousness’ made feminine,” in other words, “a psychological embodiment of ‘double double consciousness’ in their search for self-definition and self-expression” (123).
Overall, and without overlooking or minimizing the gender-specific issues and related strategies of the five texts analyzed, Gallego persuasively identifies discursive doubleness, indeed multiplicity, as the textual strategy which drives and pervades passing novels. Passing novels are not merely “about” a black protagonist who passes for white: the texts themselves “pass,” posing alternately as autobiography, sentimental fiction, fairy-tale or science fiction, among others. These “covers,” then, enable the texts to perform the act of passing itself and endow them with an unusual degree of self-referentiality: “the narratives ultimately turn into metaphors of themselves” (191).

Gallego ultimately postulates a “passing discourse” that “radical[ly] critique[s] . . . European ideology and provide[s] the necessary basis for the reconfiguration of an alternative concept of the African American self, whose importance pervades even contemporary rewritings of the topic” (191). A cursory survey of late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century textual production by black, white and mixed race authors supports Gallego’s claim. Works such as Caryl Phillips’ *The Nature of Blood* (1997), Philip Roth’s *The Human Stain* (2000), David Anthony Durham’s *Walk through Darkness* (2002), not to mention the vast field of confessional literature by Americans of mixed race, attest to the enduring preoccupation with and central relevance of relations between the races in America. For a closer understanding of that dynamic, one could do worse than pick up Gallego’s excellent study.

**Works Cited**


