PASSING AND THE AMERICAN IDENTITY MACHINE: RACE, CLASS, AND SEXUALITY IN U.S.A.

by

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In the tarpaper morgue at Châlons-sur-Marne in the reek of chloride of lime and the dead, they picked out the pine box that held all that was left of eenie menie minie moe plenty other pine boxes stacked up there containing what they’d scraped up of Richard Roe and other persons unknown. Only one can go.

How did they pick John Doe?

Make sure he ain’t a dinge, boys.
make sure he ain’t a guinea or a kike,
how can you tell a guy’s a hundredpercent when all you’ve got’s a gunnysack full of bones, bronze buttons stamped with the screaming eagle and a pair of roll put-
tees?1

With these words, John Dos Passos launches one of the most poetically and critically powerful biographies of his entire U.S.A. trilogy. It is a subversive biography in the very fact that it appears as a biography of a nobody who is everybody, and yet one who can not be everybody within the strictures of what I wish to call the American Identity Machine. The Unknown Soldier memorial may be said to embody another national fantasy (following Lauren Berlant’s use of the term), by which national identity can somehow simultaneously pass as many and one, E Pluribus Unum.2 Passing thus becomes the national master trope par excellence in a society based on the fantasy of classless-ness and liberty for all. It is a particular social masquerade that pertains to an activity whereby an identity legally or socially subordinate or disreputable (non-white, poor, homosexual, woman, etc.) is deliberately masked by the performance of an identity more socially acceptable and lucrative. The nation must constantly pass for something in the abstract, which it will not permit in the particular. And in the particular it demands certain citizen-subjects to refashion themselves according to widely known but simultaneously unutterable hegemonic identity standards, so that they may include themselves in the abstract identity.

Melvin Landsberg’s essay “Homosexuality and Black-White Relations in U.S.A.” has opened a space for discussion of the topic of passing in Dos Passos’ trilogy, a monumental work whose fricative, poetic conscience for American democracy is of enduring value.3 While Landsberg’s reflections in that essay are a welcome initiation of dialogue, I find the topic worthy of still further attention. Thus, I would like to take this opportunity to give it an even fuller discussion by opening the scope of the metaphor “passing” to include one more social category, class. In the following pages, I want to explore the way Dos Passos, through his formal synergy of the narratives, Newsreels, biographies and Camera Eyes, depicts and critiques a regime of white corporate capitalist identity-formation.4 It is my claim that race, sex, and class-passing are dictated by that identity regime. To begin with, I want to consult the work of the prominent cultural historian George Chauncey, who provides an important historical framework for understanding what is at stake for Dick Savage and Tony Garrido as homo-to-hetero-sexual passers in early ‘teens and 1920s New York.5 From there I will explore how homosexual passing relates to race and class-passing in view of a hegemonic national identity formation.

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**Codes, Spaces, and the Risky Business of Gay USA**

What does it take to be an American? “How can you tell a guy’s a hundredpercent?” This is one question that Dos Passos’ trilogy can’t help but answer sardonically. As the “Body of an American” biography suggests, “he” cannot be many things. Among those many illegitimate identities is a homosexual one. The character Richard Ellsworth Savage provides us with a good place to begin an inquiry on homosexual passing. Interestingly, Savage bears many of the distinguishing features of a Freudian theory of homosexuality. He is raised by his mother and Aunt Beatrice, and like Dos Passos’ father, Dick’s father was largely missing throughout his childhood. When Dick does remember his father, the memories include abuse. Moreover, throughout Dick’s adolescence and later life, the narrator describes him in alternately homosexual and bi-sexual terms. At his summer job as bellboy at the Bayview hotel, Dick is not attracted to the waitresses in the room next door. On the contrary, “Through the thin partition they [he and his friend] could hear the waitresses in the next room rustling about and giggling as they went to bed.” Dick hated that sound and the smell of girls and cheap facepowder that drifted in through the cracks in the wall” (though his disgust here is perhaps part of his class identification/passing signaled by “cheap”). At the boys’ prep school Dick “had dreams about girls and thought a lot about sin and had a secret crush on Spike Culbertson, the yellowhaired captain of his school ballteam.” Further, “all kinds of things got him terribly agitated” at that age, the yellowhaired captain of his school ballteam. But alas, Dick does not behave according to popular or medical norms of 1920s homophobia and thus cannot neatly be explained by Freud. There is significant evidence that Dick deliberately represses his homosexuality in order to pass in (white) corporate capitalist culture (with whatever unconscious assistance). But to better understand that societally encouraged self-disguising, it is important to spatialize (see it geographically) and historicize it.

First, it is necessary to distinguish among the codes, activities (power currents) that traverse and partly govern different social spaces. A person’s identity in one space is not the same identity in another space, to the person him/herself or to those who are observing and labeling him/her. To claim otherwise is to flatten out space and difference, to assume that a person’s perception of him/herself is that which the rest of the town, or group, or state, or world holds as well. It is to deny the social base of identity and social knowledge, human relations stretched across space and time. Second, if we do not historicize homosexuality in U.S.A., we are surely more likely to project our own current assumptions and codes onto it, possibly even conjuring up what is otherwise not there or, alternately, blinding ourselves to what is. By taking account of the work of leading cultural historians, my analysis sees Dos Passos in conversation with certain historical and spatial regimes of homosexuality.

Homosexuals in the early 1920s and before led double lives that corresponded to multiple social spaces and the norms/behavior they sanctioned. As George Chauncey has written in his cultural history Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World 1890-1940, “The complexity of [New York’s] social and spatial organization made it possible for gay men to construct the multiple public identities necessary for them to participate in the gay world without losing the privileges of the straight: assuming one identity at work, another in leisure; one identity before biological kin, another with gay friends.” Chauncey discusses “double lives” mainly in terms of gay men who reveal a homosexual identity in one space or social circle and conceal it in yet another. Of course, Dick Savage would be an extreme version of the “double life,” for he does not betray a homosexual identity to others until the Harlem episode. On the contrary, his is a case of very successful repression, revealed to us through the narrator’s window into Dick’s thoughts and dreams.

Take for example his dream while on the train to Rome, during the war. Dick’s dream on the train almost perfectly foreshadows the Harlem debacle at the end of The Big Money. In it Dos Passos demonstrates why the Newsreels and Camera Eyes must not be seen as mere context for or formally distinct from the narratives. The headlines, songs, etc., are exactly what fill his characters’ heads and give them “equipment for living,” in Kenneth Burke’s phrase. This and only this formal complexity can give the reader a window onto Dick’s double life as well as onto the discursive tentacles of the American Identity Machine. Headlines of newspapers slide into desires of a bisexual nature: “Dick was asleep dreaming of a girl rubbing her breasts against...
him purring like a kitten, of a popeyed man making a speech, of William Jennings Wilson speaking before the Baltimore conflagration, of industrial democracy in a bathhouse on the Marne in striped trunks, with a young Texas boy with pink cheeks who wanted to . . . like a string bean . . . with a twitching adamsapple.” Here we see Dick’s dream hybridizing a woman and a man he finds attractive. Two paragraphs earlier, Anne Elizabeth Trent was described as “a pinkcheeked girl,” and Mr. Barrow “was shaped like a string bean and had a prominent Adam’s apple and popeyes.” But, interestingly, the dream sequence culminates in a homosexual space (a bathhouse on the Marne) where Dick is being propositioned by the Anne Elizabeth-Mr. Barrow hybrid who apparently in that place is more male homosexual than female heterosexual. Most importantly for the purposes of foreshadowing is how Dick awakens from it: “He woke up in a nightmarish feeling that somebody was choking him.” Dick’s mental state in the scene is similar to that when he wakes up with a splitting headache and realizes he was attacked and possibly raped by the Harlem duo he brought home. The choking may represent social scandal and the death of white corporate social status for any man outed as homosexual in that culture—precisely what terrifies him to the point of suicide after the Harlem outing.

His crush on Spike Culbertson (“captain of the school ballteam”); his jealousy over Ned at Harvard; his choice not to stay (or inability to stay) with a woman; and his homoerotic dreams—if Dick is not a fully repressed homosexual, he is at least a fully repressed bi-sexual. Chauncey’s history of gay culture in early 20th century New York City suggests that many homosexuals regularly participated in a gay culture, in gay spaces, while concealing their identity in other spaces such as the family and work. Why, one might ask, does Dick Savage behave homosexually only once, according to popular stereotypes of his day, in Harlem? And why doesn’t Margo Dowling suspect anything homosexual about Tony Garrido before she runs away to Cuba with him?

Chauncey’s history is very helpful in describing the risk factors that faced Savage with being outed. According to Chauncey, “Most men regarded the double life as a reasonable tactical response to the dangers posed by the revelation of their homosexuality to straight people.” However, Chauncey does hint at the reality of many men like Savage who tell no one of their homosexual feelings. “The most salient division between gay men in the prewar years,” Chauncey writes, “tended to be between men who covertly acknowledged their homosexuality to other gay men and those who refused to do even that. Most middle-class men believed for good reason that their survival depended on hiding their homosexuality from hostile straight outsiders, and they respected the decision of other men to do so as well.” Savage’s class- and mother-identification, then, seem to provide a strong mechanism of repression.

There were also strong codes for identifying and disdaining male homosexuality, which one would expect Margo Dowling, young as she is (she marries Tony at age 16), to have known. These widespread ways of talking and thinking about homosexuals are encapsulated in a major controversy between 1919 and 1921, which Dos Passos probably heard about. In the spring of 1919 officers at the Newport (Rhode Island) Naval Training Station sent a number of enlisted men into the Station’s community to investigate the alleged “immoral” activity rumored to exist there.

The decoys sought out and associated with suspected “sexual pervers,” had sex with them, and learned all they could about homosexual activity in Newport. On the basis of the evidence they gathered, naval and municipal authorities arrested more than twenty sailors in April and sixteen civilians in July, and the decoys testified against them at a naval court inquiry and several civilian trials.

As Chauncey has suggested, contemporary readers can get an idea of at least some of the then dominant perceptions of what a homosexual looked and acted like from reading about this scandal. The most certain identity test was female impersonation. This of course gives us an idea of the limits for what counts as female as well: “A straight investigator explained that ‘it was common knowledge that if a man was walking along the street in an effeminate manner, with his lips rouged, his face powdered, and his eye-brows pencilled, that in the majority of cases you could form a pretty good opinion of what kind of a man he was . . . a ‘fairy.’” On the other hand, a gay witness had further criteria from his perspective: “He [any gay man] acted sort of peculiar; walking around with his hands on his hips . . . His manner was not masculine . . . The expression with the eyes and the gestures . . . ” Chauncey tells us that among those impersonating women and playing the woman’s role in sexual activities, there were terms for the different roles. Such distinctions Chauncey describes as ubiquitous.

If these codes for identifying homosexuality and policing “pure” American identity are indeed ubiquitous then Tony Garrido was a highly skilled passer, Margo was naïve, or she saw what she wanted to see to fulfill a fantasy. The text is somewhat ambivalent about this. For example, as a child (not yet fully inculcated with the racial logic of a purist national identity) Margo liked to go to the beach and play a game that a “Jap” hosted. She liked to admire the little prizes winners received, particularly “the prettiest Japanese dolls with real eyelashes some of them.” She then seems to associate the dolls with the real Japanese man who gave the prizes. “Margie thought he was lovely, his face was so smooth and he had such a funny little voice and his lips and eyelids were so clearly marked just like the dolls’ and he had long black eyelashes too.” Of Margo’s feelings about this man-doll, the narrator says, “Margie used to think she’d like to have him to take to bed with her
like a doll.” This sentence is laden with foreshadowing, for Margo develops a crush on Tony Garrido, who is first described (like the “Jap”) as having a “smooth oval face a very light coffee color.” Also like the man and dolls, Tony is recognized for his black eyelashes: “She kidded and asked him what he put on his eyelashes to make them so black.” After a few ice cream soda dates, Margie decides “the thing for her to do was to marry Tony and run away with him.” But Tony “didn’t seem to like the idea of getting married much.”

In addition to Tony’s curious identification as the surrogate for a beloved childhood object, the Japanese man-doll, he also bears some of the most important traits of a successful heterosexual passer—he makes advances toward her. The narrator tells us that “he’d want to make love to her but she wouldn’t let him.” Certainly not macho, Tony “broke down and cried” the first time she fought off his advances. Tony tells her that she has insulted him, and that in Cuba men do not permit women to act as she does. “It’s the first time in my life a woman has refused my love,” Tony says with no little retrospective irony, for she may well be the only woman he has ever tried to seduce. Even at the end of the first narrative sequence his mainstream masculine passing is compromised in a few major ways: by his crying when his advances are rebuffed; by his description on the way to get married: “pale and trembling with his guitar case and his suitcase beside him”; and by Margo’s having to play the stereotypical male role of carrying the baggage: “Margie had to carry both bags up the steps because Tony said he had a headache and was afraid of dropping his guitar case.”

And still, Margo is mesmerized by his class promises, which combined with his different cultural status (Cuban), permit her to ignore middle-class masculine codes. His unmasculine crying at being rebuffed is re-coded as culturally different when he claims that “in Cuba men didn’t allow women . . . .” Moreover, his accented English is read by Margo as “distinguished.” And why not? He, class-lying with a vigor only she can match later in the narrative, entices her with tales of rich “La ‘Avana.”

He kept telling her what a rich city La ‘Avana was and how the artists were really appreciated there and rich men would pay him fifty, one hundred dollars a night to play at their parties, “And with you, darling Margo, it will be two three six time that much . . . . And we shall rent a fine house in the Vedado, very exclusive section, and servants very cheap there, and you will be like a queen. You will see I have many friends there, many rich men like me very much.”

At the sound of such promises, Margo is spellbound: “Her heart started beating hard.”

Given Margo Dowling’s desire to class-pass and how Tony successfully passes as heterosexual with her in New York, another aspect of Chauncey’s study of the Navy scandal makes Margo’s character more understandable. Particularly interesting is that the Naval investigation incriminated the Bishop of Rhode Island for his alleged role in the “degenerate” naval sexual culture. The Navy’s claims to authoritative knowledge on homosexuality (competent recognition) threatened norms thought to be justified for “men of the cloth” or for the upper class “that would have been perceived as effeminate in other men.” These norms included addressing men with great affection, holding men’s hands, “devotion to young men,” and generally being comforting. The Navy repeatedly claimed it could detect “perverts” (homosexual men and straights that engaged with them as “husbands” or “trades”) “by their looks and action.” Here Chauncey’s work on the Newport scandal gives us an importantly nuanced perspective on passing in USA: “As the ministers’ consternation indicated, there was no single norm for masculine behavior at Newport; many forms of behavior considered effeminate on the part of working class men were regarded as appropriate to the status of upper-class men or to the ministerial duties of the clergy. In the Newport scandal we see the tension between codes of perception (for homosexuality) and a kind of cultural power that is at stake in who employs them for certain ends.”

From this perspective Margo appears more likely to accept as legitimate (or be less suspicious of) behavior in Sam Margolies and Tony Garrido that she might consider homosexual in the white working class. For their behavior may be consistent with her class desires and fantasies of mobility into the upper-class of Spanish noblemen and Yale students with yachts. After Margo awakens from the dream that she can live out an upper-class fantasy in Cuba and returns to the United States, seeking to reconstruct her class fantasy, she sees Tony differently. Thus, at the speak-easy in Miami, the first thing Margo thinks when she sees Tony (who significantly “wiggled his hips like a woman as he talked”) is “how on earth she could ever have liked that fagot.” In this sense, the American dream inherently opens on to a horizon of countless psychopathologies. Dos Passos’ characters thoroughly dramatize this tragedy of American identity.

The class desires that explain Margo’s curious blindnesses to homosexuality and passing are the same ones that help Dick Savage justify his passing to himself. Dick faces great risks of being outed in corporate culture. What began in moral-reform societies aimed at the “Americanization” of immigrants in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was a surveillance that began to focus more squarely on sexual “perversion” during and after World War I. Working with local government and police, New York groups like the Society for the Suppression of Vice and the Committee of Fourteen “devoted unprecedented resources to monitoring homosexual activity during the war. These groups sent agents to the major cruising streets . . . in search of gay men.” Gay culture was under heavy surveillance in the early 1920s and arrests were not infrequent. Some of the risk to those men wishing to pass in
middle-class corporate culture can be understood in the example of a draftsman caught in a 1903 police raid on the Ariston baths in New York City, “where men gathered for sexual encounters.” This man was convicted and sentenced to over seven years in the state penitentiary. Perhaps even more interesting and pertinent to the case of Dick Savage are the comments that the prosecuting district attorney made about passers such as the draftsman. According to Chauncey, “the district attorney used the jury’s presumption that a respectable man would—and could—hide his homosexual involvements from his everyday associates to undermine the character witnesses’ testimony. ‘A man’s friends,’ he reminded the jury, ‘would be the very last persons on earth who would know of a tendency of this kind entertained by anybody . . . he would be very careful to conceal his perverted appetite from them.’” The risks were quite real for a character such as Savage.

Dick Savage is always aware of the risk of scandal in being outed as gay. For example, in addition to having a likely homosexual jealousy, Dick is sore at Ned for “picking up a sailor in Scollay Square” and ending up in a Turkish bath, seemingly not because he is repulsed by homosexuality but because it’s “so damn risky.” Likewise, after he awakens from the night in Harlem, Dick thinks, “Of all the damn fools. Never never never take a risk like that again.” Such social explorations are threatened by the “fear of falling” from an empowered social status in white corporate capitalist American culture. And the norms of that status, which engender fear in those whose identities deviate from it, are mainstream public knowledge. The biography of Rudolph Valentino demonstrates that knowledge while it simultaneously serves as a context for Savage’s homosexual repression and his risky fiasco with the perceived homosexuals he brings back to his apartment from the Harlem bar.

Dos Passos’ biography of Valentino focuses on Valentino’s apprehension over a Chicago Tribune article that “called him a pink powderpuff.” The article, combined with rumors about testimony in his divorce case that “he and his first wife had never slept together,” “broke his heart.” Dos Passos makes it clear that there were dominant discourses, expectations, norms for masculinity in the U.S.A. he is writing about. In all of its diversity, public knowledge in the U.S. can be treated in terms of dominant discourses. Dos Passos’ popular media archive (newspaper and magazine headlines, as well as lyrics from popular songs) reproduces these dominant discourses and shows how, through revolutions in technology (e.g. phonograph, cinema, automobile), they usher in a national culture, an imagined community, an identity hitherto unknown and unrealizable. Thus, they show how subjects are invited to think of themselves and others, and act as “Americans.”

The Valentino biography makes use of the new media to suggest exactly what expectations of masculinity were “in heman twofisted broncobusting pokerplaying stock-juggling America.” In this adjectively amplified figure of “America,” Dos Passos beautifully brings together the dictum that ruling class male identity (“stockjuggling”) and its upwardly mobile dream-adeer “pokerplaying” constitute “hemen.” Valentino is alarmed at the public accusations for the same reason Savage cares to pass as heterosexual: “he wanted to make good.” He wanted to be among the people with too many bank accounts (the “stockjugglers”). He wanted to be a “success.” And “success” was not imaginable with a homosexual identity. The corporate space of national celebrity was not a homosexual space. Thus, Valentino attempts to offset these charges of passing by trying to perform masculinity by being a “fair boxer,” and is partly redeemed by “Exchamp Jim Jeffries” testifying that “the boy was fond of boxing.” Dos Passos’ tone in the Valentino biography turns ambiguously on satire, possibly suggesting that the “exchamp’s” testimony that Valentino was “a great admirer of the champion” raised more suspicions than it buried. In fact, the strategic inclusion of a Newsreel headline about Valentino’s funeral which directly follows the biography may be a subtle suggestion that Valentino’s robust-male reputation—which for him is the only one that can count—never was fully recovered. The headline reads: “‘PHYSICIAN’ WHO TOOK PROMINENT PART IN VALENTINO FUNERAL EXPOSED AS FORMER CONVICT.” Even the man assumed to have the role of restoring a man’s health (a doctor) is exposed as having been morally unhealthy, precisely the identity that Valentino was trying to escape.

Sam Margolies also may well be a homosexual passer, which would explain his marrying Margo. Similarly, passing may be the reason Tony does not finally resist Margo’s desire to get married (and does, later, resist her desires for a divorce). Margolies is described as leaving Margo in a moment of sexual suspense to go with a Filipino butler. His would-be masculinity charms, such as a taxidermized lion bust, on his walls were not hunted by him (“bliker shot it in a zoo”). Moreover, Margolies seems to set up Rodney Cathcart with Margo as if she is a business deal between friends. He is rarely alone with Margo, always opting to bring Rodney Cathcart along or leave Margo with him. Likewise, Tony Garrido may be seen as regarding Margo’s desire for marriage as a perfect opportunity for him to pass in Cuba and then the U.S. The point may be made that it is Margo who pursues Tony and proposes to him. But we must not forget that never in the early narrative of their courtship does Tony admit that he is gay or that marriage would at least sexually be a bad idea. Why not? In terms of the cost-benefit of passing, we should ask why should Tony resist Margo? The fuzzy dream Tony chases (if Valentino can do it, I can do it) is not friendly to a gay alien, as the Valentino biography emphasizes. He must appear married and thus somewhat respectable to the upholders of that dream. This is clear in Cuba as well as Miami and Hollywood.
Racing

An assessment of Richard Savage’s homosexual characteristics benefits from Chauncey’s nuanced perspective on class and perceptions of homosexuality in the 1920s. But it needs supplementary knowledge to incorporate Dos Passos’ treatment of race in the Harlem episode. Here, I would like to bring to bear on this topic Eric Garber’s important essay “A Spectacle in Color: The Lesbian and Gay Subculture of Jazz Age Harlem.”

According to Garber, Greenwich Village white leftists, writers, artists, and bohemians—gay and straight—of the 1920s frequented a thriving Harlem gay culture of costume balls, “rent parties,” “buffet flats,” speakeasies and clubs. It is possible that Dos Passos himself made forays into this Harlem culture, but living in Greenwich Village sporadically at this time he certainly must have known people who did. What then was the socio-historical context for Dick Savage’s character when the “new woman” Pat Doolittle entreats him, “Oh, Dick, do take me someplace low . . . nobody’ll ever take me any place really low.” Garber writes that “with its sexually tolerant population and its quasi-legal nightlife, Harlem offered an oasis to white homosexuals. For some, a trip to Harlem was part of a larger rebellion against the Prohibition era’s conservative moral and political climate.” Richard Savage thus can submit to several contradictory desires by visiting the Harlem “low” dive. Repressed by the rigid white corporate culture’s dictums against homosexuality, Savage becomes rebellious and “risky” in one of Harlem’s “low” spots. While having just defended the supremely “American” principles of rugged individualism and market “morality” in defense of J. Ward Moorehouse (against Reggie’s broadsides), he can retreat to some of his earlier less-conventional identities (which he assumes at times, as pacifist contra the war, or as a “ruined minor poet,” etc.). Such a retreat may provide release from his stressful identity as passer in the hegemonic corporate culture, just as his compulsive drinking does day in day out. The rebelliousness that corporate culture assigned to such a foray also explains why Dick sends Pat away in a taxi before he returns, now anonymously, to the Harlem dive (though the Freudian fear of infidelity to mother is equally readable here).

As for race and Margo Dowling’s class-passing, her fantasy of Tony as a “Castilian grandee” is shattered in Havana, along with her fantasy of class mobility. Without class, Tony starts to turn blacker, certainly unfavorably darker and ethnic. At the same time as her fascination with and her classist dream of Tony dissipate, Margo’s thoughts and words are saturated with figures that suture darkness to simian-ness, filth, grease, insalubriety and bad mixing (blood, color). One might say her performance of class-passing is marked by a process of racialization, her becoming white (i.e., American). For example, at the dock, upon their landing in Cuba, Margo constantly asks Tony which woman his mother is, and “she was very much relieved it wasn’t the colored one.” Tony has told her his family is from the Vedado, a “fine residential section,” but Margo quickly begins to doubt Tony’s words: “If this is the fine residential section, Margo said to herself when they all piled out of the streetcar, after a long ride through yammering streets of stone houses full of dust and oily smells and wagons and mule carts, into the blistering hot sun of a cobbled lane, I’m a million dollar heiress.” As she passes Tony’s neighbors she describes them as “staring at her with monkeyeyes.” She cries after seeing the Garrido family’s house and cries again upon viewing her room, in which her bed is covered with a quilt that she describes unfavorably in figures that may represent Tony’s color: “a yellow quilt . . . that was spotted with a big brown stain.” Furthermore, Margo hated the market in Havana, which was “so filthy and rancid smelling and jammed with sweaty jostling negroes and chinamen. . . .” The market is a “dark space,” against which Margo can define herself as white, classed, better. Contrary to Margo’s feelings about the market, “la mamá and Tia Feliciana and Carná the old niggerwoman seemed to love it.” At the same time, Margo is willing to permit color to recede as a dominant identity marker when it passes into the symbols of white moneymed classes. For instance, she loves to go to confession regularly and sees church as a “better” space, not because she is ever understood there (she is not) but because “at least people wore better clothes there and the tinsel altars were often full of flowers.”

Class-Passing

Class-passing drives Margo Dowling, Dick Savage, and Tony Garrido and inflects their relationships to race and sexuality. Such passing refers to language, dress, possessions, values, interests, and so on. It is clearly based on social knowledge and is a hot commodity in U.S.A. Margo is sometimes very confident of her social knowledge that will maintain her performance of passing, while at other times she is learning. At Jerry Herman’s Connecticut farmhouse, in the company of “a couple of funny-looking women in Paris clothes with Park Avenue voices who turned out to be in the decorating business. . . . Margo didn’t quite know how to behave.” When Margo asks Queenie, her chorus girl companion, to accompany her on Tad’s father’s yacht, Queenie “said she’d never been on a yacht before and was scared she wouldn’t act right.” Margo is constantly learning and assimilating new class/race knowledge into her fantasy. Stuck in Agnes’ New York apartment when her suitor Tad is gone in Canada, Margo “spent her days reading magazines and monkeying with her hair and mucking her fingernails and dreaming about how she could get out of this miserable sordid life.” “Sordid” was a word she’d just picked up. “Picking up” new social knowledge (what the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu calls “social capital” or “symbolic capital”) is something at which Margo is fairly skilled. Among the vultures circling around Charley Anderson’s posthumous estate, Margo is the recipient of stares and hisses, but “Margo felt well-dressed and didn’t
care.” By the time she arrives, practically penniless, in California, her knowledge allows her to sustain her passing performance through dress. After registering for an acting role, “she got taken on in society scenes as an extra right away on account of her good clothes and a kind of a way of wearing them she had that she’d picked up at Old Piquot’s,” the French designer-dress seller. Margo’s class fantasies also demonstrate the gendered aspect of the American Identity Machine. Even for an attractive woman of Margo’s class position, there are few options for class climbing. Two well-known ones in the popular imagination are being grabbed as a trophy by a rich man (an option she heavily cultivates with Jerry Herman, Tad, Charley Anderson, and Sam Margolies and mistakenly cultivates with Tony Garrido) and becoming a movie star. Margo tries both. A further quality of Margo’s class-passing bordering on delusion is her compulsive lying (the latter not unlike Dick Savage’s duplicity and certainly a mirror of Tony’s own blustering mendacity). She lies to Jerry Herman, the casting director, telling him she grew up on a Cuban sugar plantation in “father’s great townhouse,” and that she had an “early, unfortunate marriage to a Spanish nobleman.” She also lies to Tad about her father having had a yacht. When she is passing as upper class, she is “having the time of her life” on Tad’s dad’s yacht and on the ship back to the U.S. from Cuba. When she is aware of her real social class position, she is miserable (in Cuba and New York). She even lies to Agnes about Tony’s class position. “His people are pretty well off and prominent and all that, but it’s hard to get on to their ways,” she tells Agnes; and—despite having attempted suicide, lost a baby, and contracted syphilis—she goes on to add, “I wouldn’t have missed it.” She tells Sam Margolies: “Well, I was married to a Spaniard once. . . . That was enough of Spanish grandees and all that kind of thing to last me a lifetime. . . . You don’t know what it’s like to be married to one . . . and live in a house full of noble spick relatives.” In this latter instance Margo’s passing is logically strained; noble and spick are clearly oxymoronic.

Tony robs Margo and returns recrudescently in the narrative. Each time Margo uncomfortably accepts him and then tries to refashion his identity into some sort of prop (guitar-playing vaudeville prospect for a Cuban musical in Miami, for example) or servant. She gets the idea to have him as her chauffeur, and even has him wear a uniform. Tony picks up “simpering young men” until Margot “put her foot down and said it was her car and nobody else’s and not to bring his fagots around the house, either.” She refers to him in this servant mode as “that greaser.” How ironic that Margo’s narrative of class-passing concludes with her marriage to a man who is very likely another homosexual passer, and whose last name speaks to her compulsive lying disorder: Margo-lies. It appears that Margo’s second marriage, though permitting her to live out her class fantasy, is like her first marriage to Tony, as prop for a homosexual passer. Thus her future seems to bear all the tragic possiblities of her past.

But as I have labored to demonstrate, what may be most interesting in Dos Passos’ artistry is his complica-
tion of an identity regime in which class status is highly racialized, sexualized and gendered. Margo’s performance of class-passing seems to be a process of racialization, almost a rite of passage for her “becoming” white. I have noted how she, after seeing Tony’s low class status in Cuba, begins to see him as darker at the same time that she must recycle him as “Spanish,” which is a more socially lucrative identity than Cuban. Margolies and Tony, like Savage, must maintain appearances of heterosexuality in order to maintain or aspire to a class status.

There is significant textual evidence to suggest that Tony is further related to her class-passing fantasy. While she may constantly be passing, trying to perform a class identity she in fact does not inhabit in schooling, manners, or financial status, with Tony she is the dominant one. This is especially true after their reunion in the United States but also on occasion in Cuba (when she gives him a black eye, for example; or through the very fact that she is able to recycle the failed fantasy of Cuban nobility into one in which she is “better” than Tony, his family, and the racialized others around her). On the boat to Cuba, Margo dresses Tony “like a baby.” A considerable part of her class fantasy is to rule over, to exploit, subordinates. Tony imperfectly slides into this identity role for her when she cajoles him into wearing a chauffeur’s uniform (“as a joke”). She seems at her most blissful when she can complain pretentiously of her maid (cast off by the Charley Anderson estate), “I’ve told that damn girl a hundred times not to do anything to the soup but take it out of the can and heat it.” Her entire life seems governed by a constant calculation of appearances of social power in would-be love and leisure. There is nothing but rational calculation left, followed by fleeting moments of inarticulate happiness (such as when Margo listens to Tony lying about the rich life they will have in Havana or when she is masquerading as a member of the leisure class on Tad’s Dad’s yacht; these moments always “seemed the only happy day she’d ever had in her life.”). A decade before Horkheimer and Adorno’s German version of Dialectic of Enlightenment, Dos Passos was dramatizing an iron cage called the American dream. But for Dos Passos the iron cage of corporate and consumer capitalist culture is racialized and sexualized. Subjects try to fashion themselves according to the dictates of this Identity Machine and fail. Margo’s fantasies, like those of Arthur Miller’s Willy Loman, have a tragic nature to them. She can not live up to them; they trap her and encourage her to perform imagined identities for which she has imperfect social knowledge, always to rudely return her to her social class identity as a little less than wealthy and a wee bit short of country club refinement.

Race, class, homosexuality and national identity are also powerfully interrogated in the Joe Williams narrative, while they are further complicated by an international setting. The black Senegalese officer dancing with a white
French relations in France (whether or not it is historically accurate), a place which in Joe Williams’ mono-cultural eyes is nonetheless a white American space. Ironically, his racial violence is met with indignant violence, almost certainly from a white Frenchman in the cabaret who delivers his deathblow in a presentation of competing racial moralities.

Joe Williams is less outraged and socially threatened by a wealthy white homosexual from whom he “escapes” in Trinidad than he is by a black, heterosexual Senegalese officer. Instead of attacking the first, he escapes. Instead of escaping or leaving the second, he attacks. Why?

When compared with the Margo Dowling-Tony Garrido, and Richard Savage developments of race, class, and sexuality, the Joe Williams segment suggests a kind of racial logic or systematization in U.S.A. The dominant white mentality Dos Passos chooses to display is one where a heterosexual is less threatened by black supposedly less virile homosexuals than by black, supposedly macho, hypersexualized heterosexuals (Joe Williams’ case). The answer to the question “When can black men be acceptable for equitable social interaction with white men?” on the surface appears to be “When the black man is homosexualized, and thus presumably more physically safe” (the terrible image of a virile, no doubt sexually rapacious, Nat Turner tearing through the South like General Sherman is apparently hard to repress in the white imagination).

As Landsberg suggests, all of the passing themes are ultimately assembled in the Dick Savage Harlem scene. But what does one make of Dos Passos’ choice to make the two Harlem homosexuals into criminals guilty of assault and robbery? Does one, after all, view this narrative move as somehow a mistake, allowing Dos Passos’ portrayal of blacks to slide disappointingly into discourses of the black-as-criminal and the black-as-hypersexual? If so, this move would be inconsistent with Dos Passos’ highly ironic and thus critical attention toward color, cultural value, and oppression in the passages I have been discussing, not to mention in other ones such as “The Body of an American.” If one resists the temptation to read it in a discourse of black criminality, this narrative conclusion seems to cast doubt on ostensibly stable categories of white and black space, codes of perception, and identity. It thereby gestures toward a highly perspectival and undependable knowledge of social space and the identities that may be associated with it. By the time “the brown boy” Florence Swanson and the “strapping black buck” Florence rob Savage, his entire grid of social perception is brought into doubt. Were these in fact homosexuals, or were they passing as homosexuals in order to overpower and rob a rich white slummer, and exact revenge in a race/class war? Dos Passos’ conclusion also then troubles the notion of homosexuality as a stable or dominant self/identity. Is sexuality to be thought of as something more fluid and not easily read from cultural place to place and from the expectations such places encourage for those who consider themselves white or black or Cuban or Senegalese? The stability of sexual perception is troubled by the categories of race and class—and vice-versa. As Joe Williams and Tony Garrido suggest, the same might be said of the categories of “nation” and place.

**Conclusion**

While the Dick Savage Harlem scene may suggest that the hegemonic, white, corporate identity requires a tireless vigilance to protect its dream and purity and maintain optimum levels of repression, it is by no means an endorsement of that identity regime. What if one resists the temptation to read this narrative segment as distinct from the rest of the novel? What if, alternately, one reads it seeking the formal synergy that I have argued constructs the main object of cultural critique in U.S.A.? If one follows this alternate temptation, one must ask what are the textual constraints on reception of this narrative fragment when it is put into conversation with Margo Dowling’s Havana harbor hopes that Tony’s mother is not the black one; with Anne Elizabeth’s relief that she has a white man to escort her around Rome; with Newsreel XIX’s “PLAN LEGISLATION TO KEEP COLORED PEOPLE FROM WHITE AREAS”;

with Joe Williams’ death scene; with the “Body of an American” biography’s “Make sure he ain’t a dinge . . . how can you tell a guy’s a hundredpercent?” Within the hermeneutic logic that this formal synergy produces, the outcome of the Harlem scene must be read as counter to the stereotype of black criminality. In fact, it might be read more towards class. At this point in the trilogy, there is no reason to sympathize with the slumming Savage who is robbed by the triply-colonized (race, class, sexuality) two blacks, any more than there is reason to sympathize with Joe Williams at his death. The Harlem scene is the culmination of a trilogy-long presentation of the American Identity Machine’s clear racial, class, and sexual prerogatives. Indeed, it is a presentation of the Nation as a passer. 

After all, Richard Ellsworth Savage is able to slug because he is one of the (white) bigmouthed officials with too many bank accounts and an uptown bungalow. Joe Williams must demonstrate that important distinctions remain between the bigmouthed businessmen, whites like himself, and blacks, even in cross-cultural St. Nazaire, France. The white racist mind apparently refuses to accept the validity of but one culture, and in a racial perversion of John Donne, makes each different room an everywhere. Tony Garrido returns to and then leaves a home (with its own oppressive identity machine) that the bigmouthed businessmen, in their dual thirst for imperial power and new markets have, with the help of a few trustworthy roughriders, purloined from a failing imperial power in the name of freedom and self-rule. Gloria Swanson and Florence are, like the Unknown Soldier, still waiting for equality, recognition, twenty acres and a mule. Until then, also like the Unknown Soldier, they must assume anonymous identities in the Identity Machine. American-ness rises into full view as a grotesque rhetorical device for rationalizing
unequal, undemocratic power relations, on the one hand; and on the other, for demanding life-sacrifice for those very abstractions that are in practice actively unrealized. The irony of “The Body of an American” is, as the cultural criticism of U.S.A. suggests, that many Americans can only receive that national identity when they are depersonalized, dead bodies. They can not be “guineas,” “kikes,” “niggers,” “new women,” “fairies,” “wops,” “faps,” “greasers,” or “reds” and still count. As I have demonstrated in discussing the enduring value of U.S.A.’s devastating critique of the American Identity Machine, there were very real ways of telling “if a guy’s a hundredpercent”; and there were equally real things that happened to him if he was found to be shy of a hundred. Two generations after the completion of U.S.A., the Identity Machine, with a new part here and there, clamors on.

However complex a skein race, class, and sexuality are in U.S.A., there is no question, in the end, of who has too many bank accounts and what color he is. In fact, like the trilogy U.S.A. as a whole, the Richard Ellsworth Savage episode is a culminating interruption and a laying bare of that merciless juggernaut-like Identity Machine. It is a way of rebuilding “the ruined words worn slimy in the mouths of lawyers districtattorneys collegepresidents judges.” “Without the old words the immigrants haters of the mouths of lawyers districtattorneys collegepresidents judges.” “The old words the immigrants haters of the mouths of lawyers districtattorneys collegepresidents judges.”

Notes

2. Lauren Berlant, An Anatomy of a National Fantasy: Hawthorne, Utopia, and Everyday Life (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1991), 4. Also see Jacques Derrida, “Declarations of Independence.” New Political Science 15 (summer 1986): 7-15. Identities are not sprouted from the earth; they are not essential. They are made by people, culture, and societies in conjunction with nature. Thus, I prefer to look at identity as the product of a machine-like social power.
5. I focus on these two because they are the only important characters that appear consistently homosexual in the trilogy.
7. 1919, 64.
8. Ibid., 69, 71.
11. George Chauncey, Gay New York (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 133-34. It should be noted, however, that Chauncey wants to emphasize that the label “homosexual” only came to refer to “same-sex” partner choice in mid-century; before that a man who had sex with another man was not necessarily seen as “homosexual.” But regardless of whether or not a man was called “homosexual” for same-sex sexual activity, he was nevertheless morally suspect in mainstream America. See Chauncey, Gay New York, 13.
12. One might wonder if Dick “knows” his own urges, or if they are completely unconscious though manifest to a reader/observer. But the narrator reports Dick’s homosexual thoughts on so many occasions (many of which I have catalogued above) and is labeled by interlocutors on occasion (see note 17) that it seems at least plausible that he is aware of them and consciously hides and represses them.
13. 1919, 314.
14. The word “bathhouse” in the 1920s was a popular symbol or metaphor for homosexual space. See George Chauncey, Gay New York, especially chapter 8, “The Social World of Baths.” 15. 1919, 314.
16. The possibility that he was raped is raised by the montage film technique Dos Passos employs to suggest sexual intercourse when Dick wakes up with the headache. The three enter Savage’s apartment. Then, “something very soft tapped him across the back of the head. He woke up undressed in his own bed” (The Big Money [henceforth referred to as BM]), 458.
17. In addition to those references I have already made, there are numerous (ironic?) others to Dick’s effeminateness and possible homosexuality in 1919 and BM. Here are a few examples. In Paris during World War I Don Stevens calls Dick “a goddam fairy” (1919, 405). Of Reggie, Dick asks, “Who could help being sweet to Reggie? Look at him.” Reggie gets red as a beet. “The lad’s got looks,” says Jo (BM, 428). When Jo and Reggie ask why Dick didn’t get married, he responds “confusely” and says his life is a shambles” (ibid. 429). Dick is pinched from behind by an archamandrite who gives him “a vigorous wink” (433). J.W. Moorehouse asks why Dick doesn’t get married (440).
19. Ibid., 276.
a homosexual subculture during this period, how its participants understood their behavior, and how they were viewed by the larger community.”


Interestingly, the Navy had trouble defining homosexuality, because some of the men who participated in the activities “conformed to masculine gender norms,” were heterosexually married, and did not behave “effeminately” or take “the woman’s part” in sex.

22. BM, 149.
23. BM, 164.
24. BM, 166-67.
25. BM, 167.
26. BM, 165.
27. George Chauncey, “Christian Brotherhood or Sexual Perversion?” 307-08. (Chauncey appears to be referring to the Episcopal Bishop.) According to Chauncey, “Because the controversy brought so many groups of people together—working-and middle-class gay and straight-identified enlisted men, middle-class naval officers, ministers, and town officials—into conflict, it revealed how differently those groups interpreted sexuality,” 303.

28. For more philosophically rigorous discussions of the politics of naming and constructing sexuality, gender, and race, see Judith Butler, Gender Trouble (New York: Routledge, 1989); Bodies That Matter (New York: Routledge, 1993); and Excitable Speech (New York: Routledge, 1997). For a discussion of these topics with specific reference to American cultural politics/power, see Walter Benn Michaels, Our America (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997). In addition, Etienne Balibar has discussed race as the “missing supplement” to capitalism in “late” stages of capitalist societies. However, as my discussion here indicates, that model seems too simple and mechanical for power relations in the United States. What I call the “American Identity Machine” assembles power through various social categories and material practices which Dos Passos painstakingly documents, critiques and explores in U.S.A. See Etienne Balibar, “Racial Universalism,” in Masses, Classes, Ideas (New York: Routledge, 1994).

29. BM, 244.
31. Ibid., 134.
32. Ibid.
33. 1919, 81. Alternately, Dick’s admonishment about “risk” could be read as a passive-aggressive expression of homosexual jealousy. In a manuscript version that was finally excised, Dos Passos has Dick crawl into bed with a drunk Ned, after weeping over his beauty and trying to write a poem about it “in sapphics”: “Dick was thinking that as long as he had a friend he loved like he did Ned he didn’t care about headaches or nineoclock classes or anything in the world.” John Dos Passos, manuscript versions of 1919, in the Special Collections Department of Alderman Library, University of Virginia.

34. BM, 458.
35. Other examples of this fear and social knowledge of the codes of homosexuality in U.S.A. would have to include Tad’s reaction to Margo’s story about the “bitch’s curse”: “The story about how the chorusmen, who were most of them fairies, had put the bitch’s curse on a young fellow who was Maisie De Mar’s boyfriend, so that he’d turned into a fairy too, scared Tad half to death.” BM, 230.

36. BM, 169-72. The social power of new media and mass culture are at the heart of the Valentino biography. Vaudeville tours, motion pictures, boxing, ballroom dancing, the Chicago Tribune, and the New York Times (and “women gorgy with headlines”) are all packed into it.

37. BM, 174.
38. BM, 370-71. When Rodney Cathcart grabs Margo and bites her ear, the narrator tells us, “Margolies was standing in front of them with some papers in his hand. Margo wondered how long he’d be there. Rodney Cathcart let himself drop back on the couch and closed his eyes” (370). Margolies does not behave with any suspicion of Cathcart, yet he must know how he is with women. A few pages later, “Margo was dizzygiggly drunk when she found that the Filipino and Sam Margolies had disappeared and that she and Si were sitting together on the couch that had the lionsskin on it” (378). What does one make of Margolies’s gesture of abandoning his drunk future wife, alone on the couch with the lecherous Rodney Cathcart, and going off with the Filipino butler?

39. On pre-revolutionary Cuba and homosexuality, see Lourdes Arregués and B. Ruby Rich, “Homosexuality, Homophobia, and Revolution: Notes Toward an Understanding of the Cuban Lesbian and Gay Male Experience,” in Chauncey et al., Hidden From History. The sexual politics of Cuban society are clear in Tony’s commitment to passing there, having sex with Margo occasionally, and keeping her under family house arrest.

40. In Chauncey, Hidden From History.
42. BM, 454.
43. Garber, 328.
44. See note 6.
45. BM, 215.
46. BM, 215-17.
47. BM, 217.
48. BM, 218.
49. The fact that I have been unable to avoid talking about class-passing so far should indicate the impossibility or analytic danger of separating it from race and sexuality in the current analysis.

50. BM, 234.
51. BM, 238.
52. BM, 237.
53. BM, 341.
54. BM, 352.
55. See BM, 223 and 242.
56. BM, 225.
57. BM, 298.
58. As Barbara Foley has indicated, the lack of other Latin American and black representations in U.S.A.—a W.E.B. Dubois, Booker T. Washington, Ida B. Wells, etc.—is disappointing. (Barbara Foley, Radical Representations [Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1993], 193-94, 435.) Where is the Harlem Renaissance, for example, in this supposedly totalizing view of the nation?
59. And Tony is often willing to assist with alacrity. When they drive west to California, Tony says with no little homosexual irony, “If Valentino can do it, it will be easy for me” (BM, 350).

60. BM, 378.
61. BM, 347.
62. BM, 167.
63. Chauncey notes that attacks on homosexuals were often racially, ethnically, and class-motivated. Gay New York, 58-60.
64. Here I would respectfully disagree with Barbara Foley, who noticing the problem I have raised, writes: “Dos Passos’s few black and Latin charcters are portrayed through a mutually
reinforcing racist and homophobic discourse that presupposes the reader’s assent. Margo Dowling’s Cuban husband Tony whines, steals, and turns out to be homosexual; the black male prostitutes who solicit Richard Ellsworth Savage in the Harlem scene in The Big Money flash their yellow teeth and take all his money” (194). Foley’s attributing this racial blindspot to Dos Passos seems due to her viewing the form of the novel as composed of distinct generic parts, as opposed to the synergic form I have proposed. Further, it assumes Dos Passos is writing in a naïve realist mode instead of the ironic and sardonic one I have suggested above. To the examples of a critical race consciousness I have cited above, one might also add what the narrator says about Frank, Margo’s stepfather, who raped her, when he finds Tony Garrido is seducing Margo: “Frank lashed himself up into a passion and said he’d punch the damn greaser’s head in if he so much as laid a finger on a pretty, pure American girl” (BM, 164). “Pure” speaks to Dos Passos’ strategy of laying bare the purist American Identity Machine, criminally contradicted in the voice of a man who has recently violated his stepchild and disgustingly claims to want to protect her from a predatory racial aggressor.

I would argue that Dos Passos is representing the Identity Machine at the same time that he interrupts or counters it with biographies such as those on Rudolph Valentino, Eugene Debs, Wesley Everest, John Reed, and Randolph Bourne. See Barbara Foley, Radical Representations, 194.

65. This is not to say, however, that Dos Passos’ complete lack of black counterheroes in the counter-historical or alternative-historical biographies and narratives is not a serious inadequacy of the work, from the perspective of the critique of the identity machine I have been sketching. The absence of even one Paul Robeson, Zora Neale Hurston, Lucy Parsons, Ida B. Wells, W.E.B. DuBois, Booker T. Washington, or Langston Hughes is hardly other than a tip of the hat to the hegemonic identity machine itself.

66. See Dos Passos’ comments on Cuba in “The Happy Warrior,” his biography on Theodore Roosevelt, in 1919.

67. Gloria Swanson is a metaphor for anonymity. George Chauncey explains that gay men simultaneously announced their gay identity and abstracted or de-individualized it by assuming a stock actress’s name. Gloria Swanson was one of those names: “In the succeeding two decades Gloria Swanson, an actress known for both her numerous marriages and her wardrobe, was perhaps the most popular of drag personas, and was taken as the nom de drag by the best-known African-American drag queen of the 1930s . . .” Chauncey, Gay New York, 50.

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A NOVELIST AND HIS BIOGRAPHER

by

Melvin Landsberg

Future biographers of John Dos Passos will be indebted to his correspondence with Charles W. Bernardin, which recently became available at the University of Virginia’s Alderman Library. A scholar of French Canadian background, Bernardin (1917-1996) was born in Lawrence, Massachusetts, got his college education and his first year of graduate work at Roman Catholic institutions and his doctorate at the University of Wisconsin, and then went on to teach at two Catholic universities, Fordham (1948-1953) and Villanova. He served as Chairman of Villanova’s English department between 1954 and 1976, becoming a full professor in 1960. His ambitious Dos Passos scholarship did not preclude a broader life; he was the father of nine children, and in his later years wrote a detailed multivolume work on his family’s genealogy.

Bernardin’s doctoral studies at Wisconsin began in 1942, but were interrupted by service in the U.S. Army (Guam, 1943-1946). Prior to Wisconsin he had gotten a B.A. degree (1939) from Assumption College, in Worcester, Massachusetts, and an M.A. degree (1942) from Boston College Graduate School. He received his Ph.D. degree in 1949 after writing a dissertation “The Development of John Dos Passos,” but his interest in the novelist antedated attendance at Wisconsin: Bernardin’s M.A. thesis bore the title “A Perilous Passage: John Dos Passos.”

His correspondence with Dos Passos, which seems to have started in late 1941, continued at least to 1966. Of the approximately 157 letters, questionnaires, and miscellaneous items in the Alderman Library collection, one was placed on deposit by Elizabeth Dos Passos, the novelist’s widow, after his death in 1970, and some 156 more were donated by the Bernardin family in 1999.

The collection begins with a letter Dos Passos wrote on January 3, 1942, seeking to correct the “misconception” in Bernardin’s thesis (presumably his M.A. thesis) that social and political protest in America between 1919 and 1933 could be equated with communism. (For the text of the letter, please see p. 15 below.)

By mid-1943 Bernardin must have wanted to write Dos Passos’ biography, as on June 15 of that year Dos Passos wrote him a letter beginning with the advice: “The biography of a novelist is to be found in his books, it seems to me, rather more than that of any other kind of a writer.” Still, Dos Passos did not squelch the project. “I wish you’d wait fifty years—but anyway, good luck,” he told Bernardin, saying too that he would be glad to aid him with dates, etc., and give him some names of people who could help.

After receiving a manuscript from Bernardin, Dos Passos wrote him on May 26, 1950, “Don’t you think your chapters are pretty detailed? Anyway that’s your business. They seem tolerably accurate.” But he could not keep himself from remonstrating: “Lord if you put in so much biography when are you going to get room for the critical study?”

Bernardin must have been encouraged by Dos Passos’ letter of May 22, 1951, which said: “I . . . have to repeat how much I admire your industry” (though Dos Passos added in the margin: “I only wish it were being applied to some other victim.”) “The only way to do is to dig out every damn deceitful speck of information if you want to find out something.”

A college friend of Dos Passos, Arthur McComb, wrote him from Boston on October 1, 1951:

. . . I’ve been in touch with Bernardin in connection with the book he is writing about you—A year or so ago I gave him some anecdotes, opinions etc. for his Spanish chapter, and answered various questions. He has now shewn me his chapter (or rather sent it, I’ve never seen him actually) He seems polite & appreciative. But I did not know he was going to quote me in those few pages—and a good deal, too. He will send you the chapter of course.

Dos Passos replied on Thanksgiving Day, 1951:

I hope Bernardin hasn’t made himself a nuisance. He’s a distressingly thorough young man. I did my best to explain to him that his function was to follow and not precede the undertaker—but since he insists on continuing with his rash enterprise I’ve sent him what data I could remember. . . . Write your memoir of that period in Spain. It will be worth a great more than poor B’s straining of comprehension—though as you say he’s polite, appreciative and (I add) industrious. Its his industry I find disarming.

From Edmund Wilson’s house in Wellfleet, Massachusetts (which the critic had lent Dos Passos for a month) Dos Passos, on August 1, 1952, wrote Bernardin about material the latter had sent:

I wasnt able to read through this very carefully but did catch a couple of things which I have noted on separate sheets.
You’ve certainly gone to great pains; that’s the first requisite, and the rarest, in the production of a good book—

Bernardin was reaching the end of his career at Fordham, as Dos Passos’ letter to him in early 1953 shows:

I certainly hope you find yourself a teaching job in a more congenial atmosphere. Maybe you’d better do some work on Jacques Maritain or Bernanos [Bernanos] or somebody like that for a change, or a study of somebody a hundred years back. I’m afraid your present task hasn’t been very rewarding. Anyway it’s finished and you can always use it as an obituary. . . . Better luck next time

When Bernardin asked him about literary agents, Dos Passos referred him to Bernice Baumgarter, at his agency Brandt and Brandt (letter of August 20, 1953), adding: “I doubt very much whether she would want to take it on right now. My stock is rather low on the literary exchanges at present.” He suggested that Bernardin might turn to Joel Barlow or John Wilkes as a subject for a study.

Bernardin’s article “John Dos Passos’ Harvard Years” appeared in the New England Quarterly in March 1954. A well-written, almost entirely biographical, and occasionally anecdotal piece, it cited a letter from Dos Passos to the author as a source, but said nothing about the novelist’s extensive help with a biography. Besides crediting the novelist’s letter, the article cited letters from three of Dos Passos’ fellow students at Harvard: S. Foster Damon, Kenneth Murdock, and Stewart Mitchell. (The latter two were among the current editors of the New England Quarterly.) For biographical materials, Bernardin drew upon some of Dos Passos’ fictional writings at Harvard and on his Richard Ellsworth Savage story in Nineteen-Nineteen; and for some of the background he used Malcolm Cowley’s discussion of Harvard aesthetes in his After the Genteel Tradition.

Over six years later, probably in fall 1961, Bernardin wrote Dos Passos about the possibility of the University of Oklahoma Press’ publishing his biography. He also asked Dos Passos to support him for a Guggenheim Fellowship.

Dos Passos’ reply on November 2 imposed a barrier:

I have had a few lines from Bernardin whom I last heard from 10 or more years ago. The Oklahoma Univ. Press is going to do his book in 2 vols. He asks to examine yr letters to me (having seen Aron’s book) I have replied that I have all y’ letters of the last 20 years and all post-cards since 1916—but have not encouraged him. He can consult the letters which Aron saw.— This is to keep you au courant.

Dos Passos’ answer on October 14:

It was nice to hear from you and to hear that things are going well with you. The U. of Oklahoma has seemed to me to be one of the best of the college presses. I should think they would be good people to work with. Go ahead with Guggenheim etc: it’s a little embarrassing to appear as a sponsor of someone who is writing about my own work, but I guess I can stand it.

There followed more queries from Bernardin—for help with bibliography, for specific information, and for comment on his text.

In March 1962 Bernardin wrote that he planned to submit his entire manuscript to Dos Passos before it was printed, in about September. He asked for comments on his chapter “Juvenilia,” and for pictures to illustrate the biography. The novelist, in a letter of October 12, 1962—written after his return from a journey to South America—told him: “Congratulations on finally pinning down the U. of Okla.”

Alas, there were further delays, attributable to Bernardin’s scholarly conscience. Arthur McComb wrote Dos Passos on October 20, 1962:

2 vols is really appalling—yet he who says “a” must say “b”. I foolishly encouraged Bernardin years ago. I don’t know that I want him reading all my letters. Suppose I wanted to print them myself? If you can satisfy him with the ones Aron saw it might be sufficient—one or two others maybe—but not too many.

Bernardin sent Dos Passos further queries and lengthy questionnaires in 1962 and 1963, and Dos Passos continued responding. On January 22, 1964, Bernardin wrote that yesterday he had mailed him the third revision of the first volume; he had not intended to revise the volume after the press accepted the second revision, he said, but had found it necessary. Once again he invited comments.

On February 11, 1964, Dos Passos wrote him: “I think on the whole you have produced an accurate picture.” But he had an objection regarding a major character in Manhattan Transfer:

Incidentally, I don’t think you are right to connect Elaine Oglethorpe with Elaine Orr. She’s much more like another girl I knew at the same time. Maybe
you push these analogies between fiction characters and living people too hard.

He sent Bernardin letters containing additional corrections or information on February 14, 1964, and November 18, 1965. On January 25, 1966 he returned a questionnaire to Bernardin, and on June 24, 1966, sent him another letter with information.

According to Ann Southwell, Manuscript Cataloger at Alderman Library’s Special Collections Department, the Bernardin papers there include an unpublished two-volume biography of Dos Passos: the first, covering the novelist’s life through *Three Soldiers*’ publication, was completed; the second, taking it through *Manhattan Transfer*, is unfinished. Besides these, she says, Alderman has an earlier version of the second volume, called *The Prime Years: John Dos Passos.*

Why was the work never finished? Yvonne Evans, secretary to the director of Oklahoma University Press, very kindly researched some of the matter. The 1962 contract (which she had retrieved from storage) was for a work titled *John Dos Passos, a Work in Two Volumes.* It stated merely that the author would furnish, within a reasonable time, a manuscript to the publisher’s satisfaction.

Bernardin’s sister Jacqueline says that Bernardin’s wife told her that he was always revising, and his editor at Oklahoma University Press gave him extensions of dates to deliver the final manuscript. When this editor died, the people who succeeded him did not have the same interest. Bernardin’s son Paul says that his father must have had the impression that Oklahoma University Press would publish one volume at a time. But at some point it told him that it would not publish the first volume unless it had the second. It wanted to do the two together.

Bernardin seems to have become discouraged, and as a result to have changed his priorities. With Dos Passos’ death in September 1970, and the consequent release of new source materials, Bernardin’s task became more difficult. But he did not give up entirely, not even after younger biographers preempted him. Probably in 1981 he submitted a manuscript to Gambit, Inc., which had published Dos Passos’ posthumous novel *Century’s Ebb* and a posthumous volume of his letters. The publisher, Lovell Thompson, replied on January 29, 1982, that the projected biography was too long for Gambit; but he quoted his associate, Mark Saxton, as saying that it got “inside” the novelist more than did two other biographies, those of Melvin Landsberg and Townsend Ludington.

Dos Passos’ patience with Bernardin, despite his initial misgivings and subsequent weariness with the enterprise, speaks much for his friendliness towards and respect for fellow humans. Though Bernardin did not impress Dos Passos with his critical acumen, the novelist appreciated his industry and lack of pretentiousness, traits antipodal to those of writers whom Dos Passos once characterized as “inkshitters.” Dos Passos also believed that some good

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**Notes**

1. A chapter on the stays in Spain (1919-1920) of Dos Passos, McComb, and Dudley Poore, another of the novelist’s college friends. For the letters between Dos Passos and McComb quoted in this article, see *John Dos Passos’ Correspondence with Arthur K. McComb*, ed. by Melvin Landsberg (Niwot, Colorado: Colorado Associated University Press, 1991).


3. This information appeared in a letter to the editor published in the January 2000 number of the Newsletter.


7. Ms. Jacqueline Bernardin sent the present writer a copy of Lovell Thompson’s letter.
Dear Mr. Bernardin,

Your suggested thesis is unfortunately based on a misconception, which is so current that I am taking a few minutes off to explain it a little. There has been current a tendency for many years to lump all forms of protest against our ways of doing things in this country (or better against our ways of doing things in the period 1919-1933) as communism. No discription [sic] could be further from the truth, though there have been times when liberals and communists have worked together for certain specific aims, which they desired for very different reasons. Probably the only time I accepted, in my own mind, any large part of the Communist thesis (a class war, salvation by revolution, the destiny of the working class etc.) was in 1919-21 or thereabouts. The terrific events at Kronstadt woke me up—as they did some other American liberals who were confusing the Russian revolution with the spirit of 1776. From then on until the advent of Stalin to power I had a sympathetic interest in the Soviet Union—where I felt that it was possible that something very useful to the world might be being created. In this country I cooperated with Communists in various enterprises such as the New Playwrights' Theatre, their campaign for the coal miners in Kentucky and even once cast a “protest vote” for the communist candidates (192[8?]?), but by 1930 or '31 I felt that Marxism was a very dangerous pseudo-religion with a fake scientific base (a little like Mohammedanism say—if you substitute Marx's real historical ability for Mohammed's peculiar statebuilding ability) and that from the point of view of the principles of 1776—the whole business was a dead end.²

The Sacco-Vanzetti case is an excellent example. The liberals were trying to protect our historic tradition by demanding a fair trial; the bulk of the agitation was carried on by anarchists or trade union workers, in the last month before the execution of the two men, the Communists horned in on the business and carried off two victims for their martyrology. The peculiar complications of this period, during which the totalitarian parties were developing, are of great historical interest, so if you are writing about it, let me beg you not to take any current phraseology for granted and to examine very carefully all preconceptions.

For my points of view towards communism at various times see

Journeys Between Wars, In all Countries. Harlan Miners Speak—testimony in Kentucky cases.

my pamphlet on the Sacco Vanzetti case.

To tell the truth my point of view towards politics has always been that of a reporter more than that of the addict of any particular philosophy, though I have considered it my duty to put in a word whenever I could for the underdog. The introduction to the Ground We Stand On is the only carefully thought out working up of a political creed I ever attempted.

Please don't write asking me where to get hold of books because I don't know—Best of luck with your thesis—

Sincerely yours

John Dos Passos

Notes

1. For a full identification of Bernardin, please see the accompanying article "A Novelist and his Biographer," on pp. 12-14 above.


Palisades, N.Y.
April 20 1949

Dear Bernardin,

It ought to be fairly obvious that my enthusiasm politically is for individual liberty rather than for any particular forms in the organization of production. Naturally I have sympathetic feelings towards the people who are trying to produce socialism through democratic means but my enthusiasm is for the democratic means rather than for the socialism. A good social aphorism would be that the means are more important than the end.

About religion there isn't very much to tell. The Quakers are the sect I most admire, though I have always been very much moved by the basic Christian story as dramatized among peoples of Spanish and Portuguese culture. Ask me about this ten or twenty years from now, if either of us lives that long. I'm answering your letters in a somewhat summary way, because I'm just about to pack up to catch a train. I'll be away for about a month off and
Dear Bernardin,

I saw part of Mme Magny’s piece in some French paper and thought it was one of the best critical things I’d seen on the subject. Read like a German and write like a Frenchman’s a hell of a good motto. I was just feebly kidding about your researches. Let’s skip it.

Possibly the aunts and uncles in the early works you speak of come from the attitude of my aunts & uncles towards my mother and the irregular situation in which she found herself and my resulting maverick relationship to her family. It seems to me now that a good deal of that “early revolt” business is pretty much a rubber stamp and almost an automatic part of the mechanism of puberty. Gesell and Ilg’s “The Child from Five To Ten” gives you an excellent picture of the standardization of children’s reactions and behavior. Incidentally it’s a very useful work if you have kids of your own. If such a work were written about the adolescent from fifteen to twentyfive I think the “revolt” mechanism would turn out to be as standardized. There was a good deal of sullen resentment about my childhood—a pretty unhappy one on the whole—but it was certainly not directed towards my mother, who was ill, as the result of a series of light strokes and a high bloodpressure situation that doctors had at that time no means of coping with. From the time I was ten or eleven I had to attend to many household details and make decisions during the periods when my father was away. When we travelled I had to attend to tickets etc. and in periods when there wasn’t a nurse, do all the nurse’s chores. That all possibly made for a certain independence which has stood me in good stead in later life.

On the subject of my father’s being a capitalist etc. you mustn’t forget that when they were being formed trusts were considered as progressive and had social approval, except for the populist reactionaries who clung to the good old days of the corner grocer. Thus unions are now considered progressive etc except by those who cling to the good old days of unrestricted power to the business man, and independence for the working people. To think clearly or historically you have to rid your mind of popular stereotypes. I’ve gnawed hard and long on this problem in The Prospect Before Us. My father like so many Americans of his generation always had a radical streak (Not using that adjective in its Greenwich Village sense). Even when he was profiting from trustifications and manipulations he was highly critical of them, as of all our institutions. As I [sic] child it was his unconventionality of mind that shocked and frightened me. His last years were spent working on a scheme for law reform in the interest of fairness and equality which he gave all his spare time to. He never could get the Bar Ass’n to endorse it and got to be considered rather a crank for his pains. I suppose I was so restless down here in Virginia partly because it wasn’t the conventional summer resort life my schoolfriends and cousins were leading.¹ A boy in his teens worth his salt will be restless anywhere. Hell I was ambitious and wanted to see the world. It was only in my last years in college that I began to value my father’s conversation and society. By the time I got really to appreciate him he was dead. These reactions are all standard in most men’s growing up.

Cordially,

J.D.P.

Notes

1. In the left-hand margin, Dos Passos wrote here: “There’s nothing so conventional as children, except possibly adolescents.”
the American Gorki but ended by only emulating Gorki’s vices and weaknesses.

My mother was a sincere Episcopalian of the low church Maryland and Virginian brand, though she wasn’t much of a churchgoer. Popery was much dreaded in her family. Her Aunt Netty, an old lady of whom I was very fond, walked out of her church in Georgetown never to return when a new parson lit two candles on the altar. My father was always proud of the fact that his mother came of Quaker stock (though I believe that personally she was a Methodist). In the moral atmosphere in which I was brought up it was held as a truism that only a Protestant could possibly have any ethics: I can see that you were brought up thinking exactly the reverse. My father’s beliefs were those of an eighteenth century Deist, though he was tolerant of religious forms and had several (I fear somewhat Epicurean) Catholic priests among his friends and drinking companions. He liked them for their tolerance and humanity. He also had a great respect for some of the narrow old Quakers he’d known as a boy in Philadelphia. That’s all I have time for now.

Sincerely,
J.D.P.

Abstract of Ph.D. Dissertation

We attempt to publish abstracts of recent dissertations on Dos Passos that may be of interest to our readers. Such publication depends, however, on receiving the author’s permission.


John Dos Passos attracts much explicitly political criticism. I examine six instances of judgment according to politically demanding criteria, explore the thought underlying them, and assess their claims. Paul Elmer More’s curt dismissal of Manhattan Transfer, in context, reveals contradictions in typical conservative ideology, especially when analyzed in terms of its inherent image schemata. More’s writings on Freud and Nietzsche repeat the misrepresentational pattern. A similar analysis suits Marshall McLuhan’s characterization of Dos Passos as weak on modernist technique. The schemata associated with conservative dismissals also crop up in works that are not expressly political, however, as with Kathleen Komar’s Pattern in Chaos. Reading Manhattan Transfer, I recast some features these critics attribute to authorial weakness as arguably valuable aesthetic choices.

Leftist critics judge Dos Passos more variously, though Michael Gold disapproves in terms markedly similar to More’s. The question shifts with Barbara Foley’s assessment, however: I no longer ask why the critic is unduly dismissive; what needs explaining is how such perceptive commentary issues from the Marxist-Leninist theory she applies. Apposite readings from U.S.A. belie many of her theoretical statements but not many of her literary judgments. Such theory is more flexible than its critics suppose, largely due to its expectation of contradiction. Reading Nausea and Jean-Paul Sartre’s other early works in order to interpret and assess his reasons for overestimating Dos Passos, I try to gauge his and other Marxists’ romanticism (in a pejorative sense, excessive negativity or exaggeration of difficulty). Drawing on Iris Murdoch and Marjorie Grene, I find fault mainly in Sartre’s depiction of human nature.

Dos Passos merits mixed response: overromantic in Sartre’s way, he also uses conflicting aesthetic means for his partly political ends, but his literary value and pedagogical usefulness endure. I end with suggestions for reconstructive criticism, arguing for greater tolerance of ambivalence and uncertainty.

State University of New York at Buffalo, 2000
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