

Border crossings and
their impact on the
surrounding society:
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Within any society, there are borders that separate all of the citizens of the populace into different classifications. Among those borders are race, class, and gender. Crossing any of these borders stands as a great accomplishment for the person undertaking the challenge. Unfortunately, however, any feat of crossing a border — whether in terms of race, as W. E. B. Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk*, class, as Dalton Conley in *Honky*, or gender, as Jenny Boylan in *She's Not There* — is viewed as a threat to the surrounding population. Passage over a racial boundary is generally perceived as the greatest threat to those in the vicinity of the crossing. Refuting the belief that anyone can “get ahead” in life by moving up to another class, Conley writes in his memoir, *Honky*, that only wealth can help someone move up in terms of class. Living among minorities while associating with the white population, Conley witnessed firsthand life in both the lower and upper-middle classes. As an adolescent, Conley's best friend, Michael Holt, and his family were affluent and able to live in the upper-middle class: “Honesty and household morality were such a given that the Holts could move on to a more ambitious agenda. They often went to, spoke at, and even organized political rallies, and not just in the P. S. 41 schoolyard” (Conley, 83). Because they were well off financially, the Holts were able to move into and bask in the upper-middle class. This showed that the only way someone would be able to move into another class was by being financially sound; because very few would ever earn enough to move up in terms of class, those already in the upper classes were less vulnerable to the threat of border crossing. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois states his belief that education would be the key for African Americans to join the same class as the white population. The

founding of universities would help the South to educate its citizens, “ but [the South] lacks that broad knowledge of what the world knows and knew of human living and doing, which [the South might] apply to the thousand problems of real life to-day confronting her” (Du Bois, 70). Du Bois argues that receiving an education from any of the colleges across the South would help to revive the distinct diversity of African Americans along with their history and culture. That education would also create a threat to the white class, however, because African Americans would have the same education and be in the same class as well. In her autobiography, *She’s Not There*, Jenny Boylan depicts how others felt somewhat threatened when she crossed the border from male to female. All of Jim Boylan’s life, he knew that he was a woman on the inside, but he always wondered if others around him felt threatened by his longing to be a woman: “ I thought I looked fine [dressed as a woman], if you didn’t look too close. Still, I stayed indoors. I did not want to jeopardize the program or my own professional integrity by risking intrigue” (Boylan, 115). After her surgery, he knew that Jenny would have to explain herself: “ The more we feel compelled to keep explaining ourselves, the less like others we become” (Boylan, 250). Jenny tried to tell others that they shouldn’t be threatened by her gender border crossing, and through this she became even more independent. Boylan’s crossing from male to female was a transformation of identity, however, not an example of integration with others; that was why it was not as threatening to those around Boylan as the crossing of class and race borders. As Du Bois depicts in *The Souls of Black Folk*, the crossing of a racial border poses a huge threat to those on the other side of it. Even after the slaves in America were freed,

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African Americans were still not treated fairly. They were free, but they still did not have the same rights as everyone else. The declared integration of these two races threatened white people everywhere with the prospect of equality. “ The Nation has not yet found peace from its sins; the freedman has not yet found in freedom his promised land. Whatever good may have come in these years of change, the shadow of a deep disappointment rests upon the Negro people—a disappointment all the more bitter because the unattained ideal was unbounded save by the simple ignorance of a lowly people” (Du Bois, 7). As freed slaves crossed the border from black to white, the white population was extremely threatened by their quest for equal rights. Similarly, Conley noted in his memoir how others seemed threatened because he was white in a minority-filled environment. As one of the only white children in a school of minorities, Conley learned that he was being treated differently because he was white: “ By the time I left the Mini School I had learned what the concept of race meant. I now knew that, based on the color of my skin, I would be treated a certain way, whether that entailed not getting rapped across the knuckles, not having a name like everyone else, or not having the same kind of hair as my best friend” (Conley, 51). Each teacher in the school gave him special treatment just because he was white. When Conley crossed the border from white to minority, others seemed threatened by his white status, giving him special treatment and handling him differently. Among the possible border crossings of race, class, and gender, the racial boundary stands as the most vulnerable and therefore is the most closely monitored by the surrounding population. Du Bois explained how the white population was threatened by freed slaves after the Civil War,

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and Conley witnessed firsthand how he was treated differently because he was white in a school full of minority students. Breaking the boundary of race is far more threatening to those surrounding the crossing than breaking boundaries of class or gender because of the perceived danger of racial integration; that crossing therefore remains the most challenging because it meets with the strongest opposition.