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## Cast into Racial Limbo: The Histories, Experiences, and Intricacies of Racial Passing in Twentieth-Century America

*Hersch Rothmel*

Racial passing as an art form, an identity, a survival tool, and a political stance evolved in the first part of the twentieth century. The history of black and white racial miscegenation bred an ambiguous black identity that put light-skinned black folk in a racial limbo in which they had the opportunity to pass as white. The “one drop” rule, which was recognized by the United States as a viable means to cast someone as black on the basis of having even the slightest bit of black ancestry, was limited due to the inability of white America to physically place passing black people into such a racial category. The ability for certain black people to pass as white posed a variety of complex hurdles that not only challenged the stability of whiteness as both a racial identity and category, but also challenged blackness as a monolithic, universal, and shared identity. Passing thus served as a catalyst for the formation of new perspectives on race that both deconstructed and reified dominant discourses of racial hierarchy in twentieth-century America.

In this paper I attempt to deconstruct the histories, processes, and experiences of passing in order to reveal the complex and often times contradictory elements of passing as both a survival tool and site of resistance to white supremacy. While my intent is not to reinforce the black/white binary that is so prevalent when looking at racial history in America, I do intend to focus on black to white passing in order to respect and preserve the different histories that different people of color have in relationship to a white supremacist America. I argue that passing in the twentieth century was not simply an attempt to ascend into whiteness, but was, for black people who were able to pass, an attempt to grapple with an ambiguous and fluid black identity. In addition, I wish to explore passing as both a personal journey and struggle that cannot be separated from the larger racial struggle black people had in a white supremacist twentieth-century America. I draw on Nella Larsen’s novel *Passing*, James Weldon Johnson’s fictional narrative *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, and Gregory Howard Williams’s autobiography *Life On the Color Line* in order to create a small sample of personal journeys in passing. These texts serve as a catalyst for a larger exploration into the complexity of passing as well as a critical analysis of what passing meant for black identities and black histories.

In the first decades of the twentieth century, there was a massive shift in the demographics of America. Many black Americans, who at the beginning of the twentieth century were still sharecroppers in the South, started to migrate into northern cities. By the 1920s the “Great Migration” had created both new and vital black communities as well as new and vital black identities. As Charles S. Johnson contends in his 1925 article “The City Negro,” “whether apparent or not, the newcomers [Southern black Americans] are forced to reorganize their lives, to enter a new status and adjust to it that eager restlessness which prompted them to leave home” (1). It is clear that a shift in location meant a shift in identity, both for the collective black identity and for the black individual. The switch from rural areas, where southern blacks had been for generations, to new and strange urban landscapes was not only frightening, but invited a sense of rebirth. Personal and historical ties were nonexistent or limited, and the possibility of drowning in a sea of people that had not been afforded in the South made it possible for black individuals to become unnoticed, as long as they did not stray from parts of the city that were designated to black people. These massive geographical and cultural shifts created in relationship with the Great Migration made passing much more complex and pervasive. While passing

existed throughout the United States' history, it was the Great Migration that transformed passing from a struggle against Jim Crow laws in the South, to a layered identity that necessitated false familial histories, new social identities, and shifts in institutional paradigms of race.

The shifts in racial paradigms that resulted from the Great Migration were created partly in response to the sudden threat to a white supremacist America and American modernity. Fears of losing a dominantly white nation to blacks and other racial and ethnic minorities were prevalent in both popular as well as academic discourses. In 1922, Lothrop Stoddard, a historian at Harvard University, wrote in *The Rising Tide of Colour Against White World Supremacy* that, as a result of being invaded by hordes of immigrants and migrants, "the Nordic native American has been crowded out with amazing rapidity by these swarming, prolific aliens, and after two short generations he has in many of our urban areas become almost extinct" (165). Stoddard's fear of Nordic whites being driven from urban areas was partly the result of a shift in an imagined white America that had been relatively uncontested to that point. Northeastern cities in the early twentieth century were experiencing massive migrations from a multitude of different racial and ethnic minorities, and this unprecedented shift destabilized accepted ideas about what constituted an American citizen, American culture, and America as a modern white supremacist nation. Not only did this instill fear in white America about its role as the dominant culture and dictator of what was necessary to be a citizen, but this racial and ethnic shift produced a backlash fueled by racist sentiment that, over time, normalized stereotypes that persist today.

How did light skinned black folk who could pass as Italian, Greek, or naturalized white citizens fit into this racial equation? What were the options for these new racial mysteries? And how did children who spent their childhood with the false perception of a white identity handle the earth shattering news that they were in fact colored? It is hard to imagine, especially from a white perspective, how difficult it was for black people migrating north in the beginning of the twentieth century to adapt to an unknown land and to integrate into a society that was both incapable and unwilling to meet their hopes of a liberating and free North. However, it is paramount to appreciate the sheer horridness, loneliness, and confusion that came with being a black migrant in early twentieth-century America in order to start to understand the intricate nuances of an emerging black identity in northeastern cities. Being a stranger in a new land held its own set of challenges, but being of an oppressed group in a strange land made it even harder for these individuals to acclimate to the new world that lay ahead of them. Having an appreciation for the mentality of the black migrant reveals why, if allowed the opportunity to do so, a self-identified black migrant might choose the option of passing. For the black migrant who was able to pass, there was much more to be gained if viewed as white, and even more to be lost if one did not take advantage of this opportunity. It was an especially attractive opportunity since popular white discourse categorized blackness based on stereotypical physical features that people who could pass did not possess. These discrepancies between the dominant white concept of race and the black reality of racial oppression are eloquently portrayed in Nella Larsen's novel *Passing*.

The novel *Passing* is centered on the lives of two black women, Clare Kendry and Irene Renfield, in 1920's Harlem. Clare and Irene have known each other from childhood, but do not communicate until they meet on the roof of the Drayton Hotel in Chicago, twelve years later. While both women are able to pass, Irene is the one who does, arguably unconsciously, when necessary or convenient, while Clare makes the conscious decision to identify as white in most aspects of her life. Although both women are well off, Clare is married to a white man who has

no clue Clare is black, while Irene is married to a black physician, placing them in the black bourgeoisie. The novel proceeds with Clare's successful attempts to enter Irene's life once back home in Harlem and with Irene's fixation on Clare's decision to pass.

According to Irene, "white people were so stupid about such things [race of a person] for all that they usually asserted that they were able to tell; and by the most ridiculous means, fingernails, palms of hands, shapes of ears, teeth, and other silly rot" (16). Irene's assertion of the inability of whites to correctly gauge a passing individual's racial identity reveals how easy it might have been for light-skinned blacks to pass into whiteness. For the black migrant, this was not a detachment from one's race, or even a conscious effort to benefit economically, but was most likely a tool for survival. Living in run-down tenements and being forced into separated parts of northern cities became a horrid truth for the majority of black migrants. As Richard Wright proclaims in *12 Million Black Voices*, "the kitchenette, with its filth and foul air, with its one toilet for thirty or more tenants, kills our black babies so fast that in many cities twice as many of them die as white babies" (106). Passing, for the black migrant, meant an escape from the treacheries of black life in the northern cities of America. It meant economic, but even more important, literal survival in a new and unfamiliar land. It also becomes evident, through Irene's thoughts on the white perception of race, that race was indeed not as stable a category as whites believed it to be, and that passing served as an invisible marker, amongst whites, of how unstable it really was. At the same time that racial passing provided new opportunities for blacks who were able to pass, it also perpetuated popular fears, like the ones expressed by Stoddard, that blacks and other ethnic minorities were destroying the white race and the purity of white America. It can then be argued that passing contributed to the dominant belief that white modernity was at war with new and more ambiguous racial and ethnic identities. Muddling racial lines on such a large scale effectively placed blacks who passed under harsh scrutiny from white America and under deep suspicion from black communities, ultimately leaving passing individuals with very little support for the constant internal struggles that came with the decision.

No matter how attractive passing may have seemed for blacks who were able to do it, it was not a matter of making a simple decision to do so. It is entirely too reductionist to explain passing as strictly a move towards personal freedom, and would do an injustice to the bitter internal and external battles that unavoidably attach themselves to the act of passing. Explicit examples of the internal struggles that come with passing are palpable in James Weldon Johnson's closing words of *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. After living under the cloak of whiteness for almost his entire life, the ex-colored man, looking back at his life of passing, maintains that, "I cannot repress the thought that, after all, I have chosen the lesser part [passing], that I have sold my birthright for a mess of pottage" (60). It is upsettingly clear the lifetime of internal battles that passing produces. Johnson's words expose the hardships of being held in a racial limbo where one is in a constant battle between one's roots and one's desire to live a less oppressed life. In the case of the ex-colored man, he grapples not only with his choice of whether to pass, but with the question of whether he was ever black at all. The ex-colored man states that "sometimes it seems to me that I have never really been a Negro, that I have been only the privileged spectator of their inner life; at other times I feel that I have been a coward, a deserter, and I am possessed by a strange longing for my mother's people" (59). Through an analysis of the ex-colored man's own self-reflection, it is painstakingly obvious how complex and contradictory passing as a racial practice is. Like the ex-colored man, Clare also sees herself as a deserter of blackness. It is her desertion that evokes her uneasiness about having more than one child and her realization that passing, like everything else, must eventually be paid for.

Clare proceeds to comment on the fact that living with a black identity is of little worry to black people who cannot or choose not to pass, and because she does choose to pass she must fear the possibility of giving birth to “freaks of nature” (37). Although on the surface Clare’s decision to pass seems lighthearted and even thoughtless, she is still grappling with feelings of desertion and a latent black identity. While earlier in the novel Clare asks Irene why she chooses not to pass, claiming that “it’s such a frightfully easy thing to do,” (25) Clare is still unable to complete the performance of passing. Despite her efforts, Clare is repeatedly confronted with her inability to let go of her black roots. Unable to give up her roots, yet at the same time refusing to come out as black, Clare dares to cross racial lines to the opposition of whites and blacks alike. It is Clare’s refusal to choose a spot on one side the racial line that makes the case that Irene is in fact the one who kills Clare. Because Clare represents a radical shift from achieving whiteness through actions and status to challenging whiteness through performance and identity, Clare poses as an immediate threat to the compartmentalization of race and therefore must be removed from the American imagination. Through a deconstruction of the ex-colored man’s and Clare’s relationship with their black identities, it becomes clear that passers are constantly torn between their yearning for their roots, their feelings of desertion, their decisions to pass, and their contemplations of whether they were ever really black at all.

To compound the ex-colored man’s struggle with his black identity throughout the novel, he goes beyond both the question of personal integrity and self-discovery, and, according to Walter Ben Michaels, he starts to regret “not that he has told a lie about himself or even that he has misunderstood himself but that he has missed his opportunity to be himself” (117). Passing, in this light, cannot be reduced to an either/or decision. There is no easy way to pass, even if on the surface it seems that it is strictly being done for economic and personal gain, as is Clare’s apparent motive in *Passing*. It is important to appreciate these subtle nuances when constructing histories of black identities. Without this type of lens, it is impossible to produce histories that accurately capture the multiplicity of black experiences in a white supremacist twentieth-century America. If these histories are not understood, appreciated, and discussed, we lose our ability to critically analyze a racial phenomenon that influences our society today. By recognizing the subtle intricacies of a phenomenon like passing, the tendency to make generalizations and form dichotomies is challenged, and a more in-depth analysis of other social, cultural, racial, and historical phenomena is made possible.

Irene believes that Clare is passing strictly for personal survival and economic freedom, but like the character portrayed in Johnson’s novel, in both similar and different ways, Clare’s reasons for passing are much deeper and complex than Irene is aware. Because of Clare’s childhood as the daughter of a janitor who gets taken in by her racist aunts who turn her into their galley slave, she remains determined to reach Irene’s station in life. This is complicated even further by Clare’s ambiguous sexuality throughout the novel. While Irene oversimplifies Clare’s reasons for passing and sees Clare at times as very cold-hearted, Thadious M. Davis, author of the introduction to the Penguin edition of *Passing*, gives a much more complex and thought-provoking analysis of why Clare chooses to pass. Davis suggests that Larsen represents passing as a practical and emancipatory option in portraying Clare, and goes even further to state that “passing, according to Clare, is a movement in gesture as well as in space: a psychological, social, cultural movement signaling both reconfiguration of the self and a consolidation of one’s cultural identity, but not a valuation of one’s physical body” (ix).

There is quite a bit of unpacking that needs to be done when deconstructing Davis’s analysis of Clare’s willingness to pass. Davis’s use of “emancipatory option” directly refers to

W.E.B Du Bois's term "the veil of color caste" (ix). The veil that Clare attempts to remove is the veil that hides black people from the sight of whites. It is the constant cover that allows whites the privilege of judging black people without ever having to see or hear them beyond their use as an object. By passing, Clare permeates the "veil of the color caste" and is able to disrupt the seemingly constant and stable boundaries of race. Clare, like all successful passers, is able to perform race and wear it like a commodity. Black people in 1920s New York, and similarly today, are aware of how beneficial whiteness is in a white supremacist consumer culture, and Clare is successful in coming out from under the veil and into the sight of whiteness. However, it is too simplistic to reduce Clare's choice to pass as just an attempt to evade notice as black by the white community. Clare is utilizing passing as movement. She is moving both psychologically as well as socially in order to experience American culture in a very complex and contradictory way, and even though Clare lives her life perceived as white by outsiders, she struggles with her own desire to be once again connected with her long lost black community, a desire that eventually leads to her death.

As bell hooks argues, it is undoubtedly reductionist to label passing as strictly the eagerness to ascend into whiteness. This view would not only rob passing of its complexities, but would do the more subtle disservice of perpetuating white supremacy. In a discussion with her students on *Passing*, bell hooks challenges her students to avoid interpreting Clare's decision to pass as a desire to ascend into whiteness and asks them to try and view it as stemming from her love for blackness: a love that is so forbidden that she is punished for it by death. As hooks suggests, "It is the black culture that came from segregation, whether state-sponsored or institutionally accepted, that made loving blackness possible" (10). It is Clare, who desires blackness, who moves through cultural and psychological space. She is moving back and forth through her known identity and her perceived identity, which, as bell hooks asserts, is the explicit complexity of passing, "yet, blacks who imitate whites (adopting their values, speech, habits of being, etc.) continue to regard whiteness with suspicion, fear, and even hatred" (165). It is not simply that black people who pass have an idealized fantasy of whiteness. On the contrary, it is usually a decision made with much regret and burden. It is the love for blackness that propels black individuals to pass, and it is passing that attempts to tear down "the veil of the color caste."

Unlike Clare, Irene has made the decision to identify as black even though she has the ability to pass. While throughout the novel Irene exerts extreme judgment over Clare's decision to pass, considering it irresponsible and dangerous, Irene too takes advantage of being able to pass with much less consciousness than Clare. It is important to examine Irene's personal struggle with blackness, and how her decision to identify as black is not necessarily a marker of her love of blackness. While Irene maintains her black identity, she does so with the constant desire to ascend into whiteness. Although Clare performs whiteness through her self-identification, she nonetheless desires to be reunited with her black roots. On the other hand, Irene is in a constant struggle to produce herself as a white body, while at the same time remaining black through identification. It is Irene's constant attempts at philanthropy, attending balls and other functions that are classified as productions of whiteness, that place her at an even greater disconnect with the black community. Irene is unable to appreciate that race goes beyond skin color, and it is Irene's desire to produce herself as a white body that places her in an uphill struggle to ascend into whiteness. Clare, on the other hand, grapples instead with her desire to reunite with her blackness, which makes her more of a threat to white supremacy.

Clare, according to hooks, continues to wrestle with her relationship to whiteness throughout her experience with passing. While Clare herself has little explicit fear of whiteness, and actually sees passing as an incredibly easy thing to do, she does, however, experience fear of whiteness when her first and only child is in her womb. While in conversation with Irene and their friend Gertrude, Clare states, “I nearly died of terror the whole nine months before Margery was born for fear she might be dark. Thank goodness, she turned out alright. But I’ll never risk it again” (36). It is out of fear of whiteness and the chance of her being put back under “the veil of the color caste” that she loses touch with her black roots.

However, it is when Clare starts to re-explore her blackness that she dies. The death of Clare serves as a metaphor for bell hooks’s contention that loving blackness is dangerous in a white supremacist America, an act that has led to actual death for many people throughout history who have dared to do so. While it is narrated that Gertrude could not be said to be truly passing, she, like Clare, marries a white man and shares the same fear for her children. When discussing it, Gertrude exclaims that “it’s awful the way it skips generations and then pops out...of course, nobody wants a dark child” (36). Although Gertrude and Clare both have white husbands, Gertrude’s husband is aware that she is black, and even though her husband constantly tries to settle her worries about their child being dark, Gertrude’s fears continue. In addition to Gertrude’s fear of her own children being dark, she is shocked when Irene admits that one of her boys is dark. Gertrude is so frightened by the thought that she is not able to speak. The conversation between these three women magnifies the very real danger of being black in America during the twentieth century, and portrays the internalized hatred that manifested in the black consciousness because of white supremacy.

It is also essential, when deconstructing passing, to examine how introducing blackness to young colored children with no prior knowledge of their racial identity affects their perception of reality. When the ex-colored man is told of his true racial identity, he is struck with an incredible wave of emotions that inevitably comes with radical change. For him, it was in fact an intrapersonal struggle in which his friends’ behavior at school did not change toward him as much as his did toward them. He was finally hit with the realization that he was in fact a black boy, and he was now forced to “take his outlook on all things, not from the viewpoint of a citizen, or a man, or even a human being, but from the viewpoint of a *colored* man” (7). It is this newfound identity that links him to other black people living in America. It is this black identity that forces him to live, like all black folk living in America, a life of performance, with a dual personality.

Acknowledging the life of performance that all people of color must live under a white supremacist America is of vast importance, especially when deconstructing racial passing. Not only does understanding this dual personality unearth the brutality of the white gaze on black people and other people of color, but it also reveals another layer to passing. Because passing involves such a myriad of different hurdles, opportunities, and identity crises, people who pass are forced to battle with their suspicions about whiteness while at the same time facing the question of whether they have any real claim to blackness. The double life that individuals who pass lead, whether it be internal or external, makes it close to impossible for them to come to terms with their identities and to truly know themselves. In this sense, the act of passing betrays the passer, by extending his or her life of performance beyond the white gaze and into a perceived gaze by the black Other, both within themselves, and by other people of color. Thus, as embodied by Clare, passing confers a death sentence on one’s struggle with identity.

The life of performance that people who pass must live is illustrated in Gregory Howard Williams's *Life on the Color Line*. Upon the discovery of his black identity, Williams was not only shunned by his white friends for being black, but considered a "cracker" by the colored boys in the projects (4). The experience of being shunned by both racial groups provides a tangible example of the double gaze a person who does not neatly fit within racial boundaries experiences. Being called a cracker by black children and being seen with revulsion by white children cast Williams into the racial limbo that many passing individuals experience. For Williams to proclaim his black identity was to be met with suspicion by his own race, but to be found out as having black blood after being assumed to be white gave way to complete shunning from the white community. Becoming abandoned in a racial desert forced Williams to undergo a horrific sense of not belonging to either of the identities provided for him. Williams's ambiguous racial features posed a real threat not to only white America, but to black communities as well. If Williams, like many others who could pass, could not be put into one category or another, then race as a social and biological marker fails to complete its role as an essential dictator of social order, and deteriorates the seemingly sound structural hierarchy on which America was based.

The deep, complex, and contradictory layers that manifest through the intricate and subtle art of passing provide a catalyst for a greater understanding of how black identities have been constructed over time. Understanding passing as a historical, cultural, political, and social marker is necessary in assessing racial histories of America, and this understanding makes it possible to cultivate new perspectives and deeper critical analyses of how race has evolved and survived U.S. history. Although there are several layers of passing, including that of gender and sexuality, not explored here, it is important to explore passing with an intersectional as well as an interdisciplinary lens. Utilizing these forms of critical analysis allows the experiences of individuals who pass to be viewed as tangible examples of race as both a social construct and as an unstable and refutable marker of social and cultural hierarchies. Deconstructing the instability of race created by individuals who pass makes it possible for racial boundaries to become more fluid and allows for a fuller discussion of the history of race in America.

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