

We Are All “Passing” (for Better or for Worse?) Outing Ourselves, Ending the Masquerade

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Abstract

Harlem Renaissance literature by black, predominantly female authors has evoked deep resonances with this essay’s author in the area of passing, the hiding of one’s identity in order to gain acceptance by another. Of course, the Harlem authors wrote primarily about racial passing, so how did their stories strike such a chord with the author, a white male? Answering that question, this essay employs autocritography—an academic yet intimate social critique of literature that uses the personal (autobiographical) to approach the scholarly (critical) —to perform an intersectional interrogation of the social, political, and personal implications of passing that go beyond race, simply using the concept of racial masquerade as a starting point. The author deconstructs how his graduate Harlem Renaissance readings revolutionized his understanding not only of the politics of skin tone but of the consequences, both negative and positive, of all types of passing.

Keywords: Harlem, Renaissance, passing, masking, feminism, autocritography

We are all ‘passing’ as something else, something better. Masquerade is a part of that. (Beloff, 2001, p.56)
Some are born white, others achieve whiteness, still others have whiteness thrust upon them.

-Eric Liu, *The Accidental Asian: Notes of a Native Speaker*

As a pro-feminist/womanist white male, I continue to be amazed at how my interactions with literature and critical theory by women of color change my life. The most transformative encounters, personally and academically, have been my studies of and writing about the works by authors from the Harlem Renaissance—that period of explosive black artistic growth mainly during the 1920s. I can attribute these metamorphoses solely to my commitment to writing *autocritography* for the bulk of my academic career, a writing methodology which I have used to explore these works in both my courses and my professional scholarship. Autocritography is a term originally coined by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., but Michael Awkward employed it more provocatively in the way that I have learned and used it—an academic yet intimate social critique of literature that uses the personal (autobiographical) to approach the scholarly (critical) along lines of race, class, gender, sexuality, and other areas of oppression. Rooted in black feminism, autocritography allows me to examine intersectionally the play of hegemony in the literary, merged with a memoir component that exposes my own internalized agreement with or victimization by these power structures. This combination of intersectional critique united with self-reflection and empathetic imagination produces the dynamism of autocritography. Without it, I would never have begun my journey toward “conscientization,” as Paulo Freire terms it.

My readings of Harlem Renaissance literature have evoked deep resonances with me in the area of passing, the hiding of one’s identity in order to gain acceptance by another. Of course, the Harlem authors wrote primarily about racial passing, so how did their stories strike a chord with me, a white man? By autocritographically examining their various works over several years, I have succeeded in a deeper interrogation of the social, political, and personal implications of passing that go beyond race, simply using the concept of racial passing as a starting point. I intend in this essay to deconstruct the (mostly female) black writers of the Harlem Renaissance who opened and expanded their world and the phenomenon of racial passing to me, as well as to narrate how my reflections on the past and my actions in the present benefitted from my inner-directed examinations of passing.

First, I will consider how works by several Harlem Renaissance authors addressing issues of racial passing revolutionized my understanding not only of the politics of skin tone but of the consequences, both negative and positive, of racial passing. Moreover, I will speak about how my use of empathetic imagination allowed me to understand how I, and perhaps many others, perform the masquerade of passing in one form or another, and how the work of autocritography can effect an alchemical-like transmutation to help all who pass to out themselves.

Black Becomes White: From Stereotype to Archetype?

I feel that from the outset I must deal with the much-maligned stereotype of the “tragic mulatto,” the mixed race character who meets with unfortunate circumstances. Intense scholarly attention has focused on this simplified role, and the critiques of its usage have many valid points. Beginning with Sterling Brown’s 1933 article on Negro stereotyping, critics have attacked the appearance of the tragic mulatto in literature for everything from being used to evoke anti-slavery sentiments to reinforcing the notion that mulattos’ real tragedy is that they are not white and can never ascend to greatness due to inferior blood. My intention in this essay is not to attempt detecting any “exaggeration and omission” (p. 180) relating to stereotyping in the works I analyze. My focus will remain on issues surrounding racial passing, which so happens to be a major theme of much literature about mixed raced people. Juda Bennett observes insightfully that in *The Oxford Dictionary of African American Literature*, “three of the six novels used as examples for the entry on ‘mulatto,’ and the single work used to exemplify ‘the tragic mulatto,’ are novels of passing, suggesting that passing is not only associated with the mulatto, but perhaps with the quintessential mulatto” (2000, p. 690). Even if the pieces I have chosen overlap with a controversial stereotype, my desire is to read past the trope and, at the risk of sounding essentialist, delve into archetypal issues of psychology and human experience.

My first literary encounter with this social phenomenon came in a Harlem Renaissance literature course I took in 2012. A major novel in the syllabus was Nella Larsen’s *Passing*, in which Clare Kendry, passing for white with her racist husband during years of marriage, reunites with Irene, a dark-skinned friend from her past. My professor, Gary Lemons, briefly explained in class the definition and implications of passing early in the course before we began any readings. I had neither heard the term nor pondered the deeper implications of race identification through skin color before this course. Although the novel ostensibly uses the protagonist’s ability to pass as a pretext for the plot action and as part of its tragic ending, I found that Larsen did not heavily focus on the politics of skin tone or the internal struggles it might cause as much as I would find in later pieces I would read. Indeed, Claudia Tate, in her article on *Passing*, notes that “race...is not the novel’s foremost concern, but is merely a mechanism for setting the story in motion, sustaining the suspense, and bringing about the external circumstances for the story’s conclusion” (1980, p. 143). Nevertheless, *Passing* served as my introduction to the phenomenon, acquainting me with the dynamics of identity constructions as they intertwine with social acceptance and hierarchy.

As part of Lemons’s pedagogical approach to teaching literature, each week I would write autocritographically, engaging the texts with my personal memoir alongside of critical theory. The weekly self-reflective search for myself or for personally relatable topics in the texts I was reading led to deep introspection and awareness along intersectional lines. The largest insight I received from reading *Passing* was that I—as not just a white person, but a male, middle class, heterosexual, abled person—had privilege, and that these qualities gave me advantages in society that others might have to pass to obtain. Up to that point, I had never thought deeply about white privilege. Those words rarely paired up in my mind. As Michael Kimmel phrased this phenomenon, “The privilege of privilege is that the terms of privilege are rendered invisible” (2009, p. 363). Yet even a story in which I couldn’t find myself (I *certainly* wasn’t Clare’s racist husband, so I reasoned) implicated me as a white man enough to elicit a liberatory revelation about my hegemonic privilege(s). Jackson Katz, anti-sexist activist and pro-feminist speaker, highlights the nature of hegemonies to avoid self-reflection, and thus he affirms the efficacy of self-examination fused with critical ideological in breaking oppressive power structures down as follows: “This is one of the ways that dominant systems maintain and reproduce themselves...the dominant group is rarely challenged to even think about its dominance, because that’s one of the key characteristics of power and privilege: the ability to go unexamined, lacking introspection” (2013). Autocritography, as I hope to demonstrate here, effectively led me to challenge my internalized dominant system beliefs...and change them.

Reading Regina M. Andrews's "The Man Who Passed: A Play in One Act" the same week as Mary Church Terrell's essay "Why, How, When and Where Black Becomes White" acquainted me more fully with the implications of passing. In the play, Fred Carrington, a light-skinned black man who has left family, friends, and community in Harlem to pass as white, comes back for a hair smoothing treatment to help him continue his pretense. Some of his cronies from the past arrive and discuss the personal and political ramifications of "de black sheep what done turned white" (1996, p. 55). While his old friends relive some past glory moments with Fred and chide him about his choice to pass as white, the tension concerning Fred's abandoning them racially and geographically bubbles under the surface. The play posits that, in order to pass, one has to relinquish many social ties and often one's physical location. Reemphasizing this fact, Terrell states that one who decides to abandon her/his racial identity "ceases to frequent his old resorts...his old friends see him no more...he isolates himself completely" (1996, p. 57). Fred's physical departure from his old location in Harlem pairs with his social forsaking of the inner circle he once kept. However, the deepest anguish of the play arises when Fred discovers that his father, who had disowned him for marrying a white woman, has died while Fred has been in self-imposed exile, as has his mother. Fred, dejected and self-recriminating, leaves the assembly of his cronies, and his friend Joe speaks the final line of the play about him: "Poor debbil" (1996, p. 55). The passing of his father and mother galvanize Fred's awareness of the emotional costs of social abandonment.

Just this semester, I read "Passing," a short story by Langston Hughes in his collection *The Ways of White Folks*. Although Hughes deviates from the line of exclusively female Harlem Renaissance writers I have been and will be tracing, his positionality as what Joyce A. Joyce calls "the first black male feminist writer" allows him to dovetail smoothly with the others (2004, p. 120). Hughes formats the piece as a letter from Jack, a light-skinned black man, to his mother, a darker-skinned woman. Jack writes his mother to both thank her for not speaking to him on the street when he is with his white girlfriend, an act which would have publicly outed him as black, as well as to apologize for the scenario. While giving his appreciation, Jack notes in contrast that his siblings would not have kept the conspiratorial silence, "because they don't seem to be very happy about my passing for white" (Hughes, 1990, p. 54). I find striking similarities between Fred's story in "The Man Who Passed" and Jack's in "Passing." Like Jack, Fred risks much by being in the same location with anyone who could, through association with him, expose and ruin his racial passing. In Andrews' play, Fred laments about an almost identical situation of ignoring an old friend named Roy so as not to risk detection:

I met him on the street downtown, about two years ago—and well—I couldn't speak to him. I was with old man Fitzgerald and—well I've told you before, Fitz hates the sight of a "Nigger." Roy met us face to face as we were getting in the car. You know, Van, if I had so much looked at him, it would have cost me my job. I've always known that he hated me for it though. (1994, p. 49)

Moreover, both Jack and Fred enjoy a relationship with a white woman and find economic gains, yet both also experience a mix of understanding and hostility among the black community. Jack thanks his mother for actually encouraging him to pass when he writes, "it was mighty generous of you to urge me to go ahead and make use of my light skin and good hair" (Hughes, 1990, p. 52). The "Poor debbil" pronouncement after Fred leaves indicates pity among his friends more than anger. These examples of ambivalent attitudes can be best summarized by Irene's words in Larsen's *Passing*, as she observes concerning Clare, "It's a funny thing about 'passing.' We disapprove of it and at the same time condone it...We shy away from it with and odd kind of revulsion, but we protect it" (2004, p. 42). Passing causes widely varying collateral effects.

Even more notable than the similarities, however, the differences between Fred and Jack indicate much about their self-reflection on passing. Throughout the play, Fred unapologetically exhibits hostility toward blacks as a way to cover his guilt, e.g. "I haven't heard anything and don't want to hear anything about the colored brother" (1996, p. 48). In Jack's letter, however, he does not mask his feelings of shame, for example ruing, "Ma, I feel mighty bad about last night" (1990, p. 52). Although Jack's mother remains quiet upon seeing her son in public, indicating her *external* complicity with that particular moment of strategic importance, he knows that hidden under his mother's silence lies the pain of rejection, and he calls himself out for worsening it. In the end, though Andrews buries Fred's regret and Hughes writes Jack's out, both authors emphasize the heartbreaking consequences of passing, spoken and unspoken, in terms of what is lost versus what is gained—in addition to the inner turmoil (feelings of guilt, rejection, self-loathing, displacement, etc.) that accompany the strategies of passing.

Evolution and Revolution

During the same time I was exploring several of these Harlem Renaissance writers, I was teaching seventh grade English at a private, majority white middle school in Tampa. Concurrently with reading *Passing* and “The Man Who Passed,” I was in the process of revamping my summer “choice reading book list” (novels from which students could select to read). My assistant principal had just implemented a middle school-wide common reading book—R. J. Palacio’s bestseller *Wonder*—intending to spark dialogue and thematic focus throughout the coming year. The story is about a white boy named August Pullman with a facial congenital disability who enters middle school after years of being taught at home. Little did I know that *Wonder* would also touch on the topic of passing’s close cousin, *masking*, but I will address this corollary later. With the mandate to teach *Wonder*, I found myself looking for choice books that not only addressed the issue of appearance but also incorporated race, class, and gender issues. In doing my research, I happened upon Sherri L. Smith’s *Flygirl*, a novel about a young black woman named Ida Mae Jones who hides her true racial identity to be able to fly with a woman’s air corps in World War II.

So deeply had *Passing* and “The Man Who Passed” worked as epiphanies to me that when I read the book summary for *Flygirl*, I felt immediately that it resonated with the themes in Larsen and Andrews, as well as the masking/passing motif. After completing the book, I found its treatment appropriate for the intended target audience, and I knew that I must offer it as a book choice for my students. This influence of my college classroom (as a student) on my middle school classroom (as a teacher) bespeaks one of the ways in which autocritographical writing effected real change in my life. Moreover, I appreciated that *Flygirl* offers no simple answer to the racial and social issues it raises, making it ideal for in-class discussion that did not focus on a facile solution. In fact, the novel exhibited much more emotional heat about the passing theme than either Larsen’s or Andrew’s pieces. Ida Mae knows that her passing will anger her mother, but she does it anyway. When her mother catches her, the anger flares: “Don’t you ‘mama’ me, Ida Mae Jones. One look and I can tell what you’ve been doing. Playing at that same mess as your daddy’s [a light-skinned Creole] people. Do you think white folks don’t know? Do you think they can’t tell what you are? A high yellow putting on airs and a borrowed hat... You take back that hat and those stockings and whatever ideas have gotten in your head, girl. You are part of *this* family” (Smith, 2008, pp. 51-52). Just like Fred in “The Man Who Passed,” Ida Mae becomes keenly aware of the social cost (and not just the benefit) of passing. When Ida Mae finally ventures into the non-black WASP air corps, she must do like Fred, who in Mary Church Terrell’s words “scrapes up acquaintances with some white people, who do not suspect that he has the fatal drop [of non-white blood]. Finally, he gets a job, which pays him well, and which it would be impossible for him either to have or to hold, if his employer knew the truth” (1996, p. 57). Since confirmation of her black heritage would mean social death and especially the loss of a job for her, dodging suspicion of the “fatal drop” applies to Ida Mae as the plot progresses and even intensifies when a white, “non-suspecting” flying instructor shows romantic interest in her. Attempting to avoid being outed, she shuns involvement with him based on her fear of rejection and expulsion if she outs herself. Thus, *Flygirl* not only worked for my middle schoolers as informative about some of the history of passing, but it also allowed me to help them create an empathetic stance with Ida Mae along lines of appearance, identity, and acceptance.

Passing as Performance: Complicity and Self-Implication

When the school year began in which I was discussing *Flygirl* and *Wonder* with my seventh graders, I was also in the midst of writing my autocritographical master’s thesis. In the thesis titled “Circling Back Home: A Lifelong Odyssey into Feminism,” I explore in depth the adolescent origins of my indoctrination into the masculine, middle class, racist, heteronormative cultural values. In particular, I speak about the ways in which I learned the “guy code” from both my peers as well as literature and media. During this time of writing, however, the Harlem Renaissance texts, as well as the young adult ones I was teaching, were dialoguing in my head, particularly along the lines of passing. Framing my experience using the themes of these works brought even more understanding to what was happening during my own middle and high school years—I was learning how to pass, in my own way. Whereas only those genetically imparted with certain traits can pass as white, other factors can enhance the broader senses of passing. In particular, qualities that theorist Judith Butler would call *performative* can be learned and mimicked, and other factors (such as Fred’s hair treatment or Ida Mae’s “borrowed hat” and stockings) can be acquired. Moreover, upon deeper introspection, I realized that my passing, while primarily focused in the area of gender, had intersectional qualities, and that in every aspect of the above-mentioned cultural norms, I did something to enhance my ability to pass.

Why did a person such as myself, who ostensibly has all the privileges in society, need to pass? Because, just as Terrell discusses the “fatal drop” as a potential job killer, any misstep in the halls of privilege I and many others tread could have deadly social consequences. I endeavored in those teenage years to meet my peers’ standards, particularly in my gender performance. Jackson Katz, in his documentary of the same name, speaks about the “tough guise,” the external complicity with masculine standards, in which a male exhibits “only certain parts of [himself] that the dominant culture has defined as manly” (2006). I adopted this guise. I discovered how to accentuate my low voice and learned to speak louder. I learned to clench my fist or hit my hands together when trying to get a point across. I educated myself in the ways of “guy stuff,” from football to dirty jokes. And I *never* revealed certain aspects of my character, such as tender-heartedness for animals or a penchant for pop music instead of rock. I remember one time slipping and admitting to enjoying the male music duo Hall and Oates, and this confession was immediately met with, “They’re homos! Two guys singing together? How gay! Only fags like them.” So, while I construed this experience as letting me gain more information on how to pass as a “real man,” I also learned the hidden lesson—reinscribed many more times than just this once—about the intersection of gender and sexuality, in which normative masculinity only equaled heterosexuality. The two things I strove to *not* be were feminine and gay, and thus I always scrutinized my physical and verbal performance for actions or words that my peers might assess as such (a “fatal drop”). Any limp wrist, any lifted pinky finger while drinking, any admission of weakness could bring about suspicion, similar to what Fred, Jack, and Clare feared in their Harlem-based contexts.

I furthermore learned to pass class-wise, particularly in my secondary school years. I began at Tampa Preparatory School, a vastly majority white high school, in 1980. The same year I started at “Prep,” *The Official Preppy Handbook* was published. Although the book is satirical in nature, to my fifteen-year-old mind it read like a veritable survival manual for the particular prep environment (read here upper-middle class) which I was beginning to navigate. Thus, the fashion recommendations, including such preppy staples as Izod and corduroy, guided my purchases. I am reminded of the power of clothes to aid passing not only in *Flygirl* (Ida Mae’s hat and stockings) but also in another Harlem short story, written by Caroline Bond Day. Called “The Pink Hat,” it narrates the tale of Sarah, a black woman who after embracing a “becoming hat, careful grooming, and satisfactory clothes” finds that “the world was reversed” (1996, p. 79). Beyond making adjustments in the fashion world, I also learned the correct lingo, much like Fred does in Andrews’ play, as Joe comments: “Fifteen years of serbitudewid old man Fitzgerald has sho taught you...de King Edward English!” (Andrews, 1996, p. 54). Even a preppy term like T.T.F.W., short for “too tacky for words,” reveals the mores of the social class. Just like a male avoiding femininity and homosexuality, a “prep” will do anything to prevent tackiness, i.e. exhibiting a lack of *class*, an intentional word choice here. Via the influences of *The Official Preppy Handbook*, as well as my peers, television shows such as *Family Ties*, and films such as John Hughes’ *Sixteen Candles*, I had examples aplenty of how to pass in the arena of class to which I aspired.

Finally, and perhaps most controversially, I learned to pass as white. Why does a white person need to pass racially? Simply because whiteness is not just an external appearance; it is equally as performative as the other areas I have mentioned. Unfortunately, at its most heinous, performing whiteness can entail portraying racism, and in the incident I will now relate, I did just that. In my senior year at Tampa Prep, our volleyball team made the state championship finals, and the school provided bus transportation to take students to the game in Orlando. Being the privileged white boy that I was, I had never consistently ridden on a yellow school bus. As I boarded this one, however, I noted that the driver was an older black woman named Queen, as visible on her nametag. The friend with whom I was travelling and I seated ourselves in the back of the bus, and the trip began. Something in the atmosphere of that almost totally white bus began a spark of racial bigotry, and several of my fellow students began (amid the general noise and conversation of the bus) to subtly, then overtly, ridicule Queen. I gladly joined in, saying things like, “Sho’ ’nuff, Queen. You gonna drive this bus t’Orlando” and “We gonna get stop fo’ some Church’s chicken, right, Queen?” I will never forget the look in Queen’s eyes as she gazed in pain into the large rear view mirror that bus drivers employ to see their passengers.

Recalling this memory brings me feelings of guilt and shame. Maybe I was Clare’s racist husband from *Passing!* I ask myself, point blank, “How could I?” How was I able to heap contempt and stereotype on such a humble person as she? What other person was driving my privileged white ass to Orlando without charge to me? The answer is simple; I was trying to pass as white among my peers. I also notice, in my memory and the crude reproduction above, the signification of language as a racial identifier.

I could not turn my skin black to perform my horrible parody, but I could speak in a way to mock blacks—step out of my “King Edward English” to emphasize my horrible point. Mixed in with my denigration (word used intentionally) of Queen as a black in color and speech was also that of her as a woman and of an apparent lower class, for I additionally mocked that fact that a “Queen” would be a bus driver with no redeeming external beauty (she was older). In this one ignominiously hegemonic moment, I was sexist, racist, classist, and ageist/lookist, all combined, but all in the name of fitting in, passing as the dominant I was expected to be.

Having said the above, I in no way think that the discomfort of gender, sexual orientation, class, or any other *performable* type of passing could equal the pain of the kind of racial passing in these stories. Because society so closely ties race (a social construction) to genetics or “blood” (a scientific concept), the notion of denying *who you are* runs deepest with racial passing. While debate continues over whether homosexuality’s roots lie in nurture or nature, few question the link of appearance with DNA. Thus, no other type of passing manifests so overtly as self-loathing. The line that captures so clearly this idea comes near the end of “The Man Who Passed” when Fred exclaims, “God! I hate it! I hate every drop of black blood that’s in me” (Andrews, 1996, p. 53). Fred’s words fully embody the concept of “I wish I were something I’m not,” internalizing white supremacy and denying who he is.

Masks to Hide Behind

After my empathetic experience of relating the Harlem characters’ passing with my own, I began to feel that denying parts of ourselves in order to gain social acceptance borders on a universal experience and might serve as a link whereby readers can put themselves in the shoes of the protagonists of these stories. Reading all of these female (and one feminist male) Harlem Renaissance authors allowed me to reflect on the power structure inherent in physical markers, as well as “behavioral” or “lifestyle” ones. Here, I wish to connect my experience reading *Wonder* as another opportunity for critical examination of marginalization based primarily on appearance. In the book, August holds keen awareness of how others fear, abhor, or simply tolerate him for his facial “deformities.” He, like Fred, has internalized this lack of acceptance, as noted in his autobiographical opening of the story: “If I found a magic lamp and could have one wish, I would wish that I had a normal face that no one ever noticed at all. I would wish that I could walk down the street without people seeing me and then doing that look-away thing. Here’s what I think: the only reason I’m not ordinary is that no one else sees me that way” (Palacio, 2012, p. 3). This last sentence both summarizes the essence of social construction and also indicates another of autographing’s powers—finding commonalities *across difference*, which makes *difference* be an *ordinary* and *acceptable* trait.

As part of a Halloween celebration at his school later in the book, August dresses in a mask and costume that conceals his identity and his facial “abnormalities.” He eavesdrops on a conversation between Jack, a boy who has genuinely befriended him, and Julian, a rich and popular (but cruel) older boy. When Julian declares about August, “If I looked like that...I’d put a hood over my face every day,” Jack, unaware of August’s presence due to the mask, answers, “I can’t imagine looking in the mirror every day and seeing myself like that. It would be too awful” (p. 77). August has unwittingly stumbled upon Jack’s trying to gain acceptance with Julian (and thus his crowd) by passing as a lookist. August, however, does not have the emotional skillset to understand the real situation, and he immediately abandons Jack as a friend. Thus, just as in all the fictional works I’ve discussed, passing has led to a disrupted relationship.

August solemnly proclaims at one point in *Wonder*, “I wish every day could be Halloween. We could all wear masks all the time. Then we could walk around and get to know each other before we got to see what we looked like under the masks” (p. 73). August’s longing for masking to prevent prejudice again points me back to the Harlem Renaissance, to a piece by Eloise Bibb Thompson called “Masks, A Story.” Aristile, a Haitian quadroon living in New Orleans, develops an insane obsession with masks, rooted in the exact notion as August’s statement above. By constructing a mask of perfect, life-like whiteness, Aristile thinks that he can solve the problems of racial and facial prejudice, nobly declaring that “There shall be no more distinct and unmistakable signs that will determine whether a man shall be master or slave. All men in the future shall have the privilege of being what they will” (1996, p. 41). In other words, such a mask will allow anyone to racially pass. Aristile’s monomaniacal effort to construct this item has direct consequences for his granddaughter, Julie. On the one hand, his time commitment to his work excludes the closeness Julie desires with her grandfather.

On the other hand, and more insidiously, Julie assimilates Aristile's internalized self-loathing and attempts her own biological version of creating a white mask—she marries and has a child with a white man, thinking their offspring will bear his racial likeness. Upon seeing her newborn's face, "She screamed. With horror she saw that it...was the image of her chocolate-covered mother" (p. 44). Far exceeding August Pullman's lack of emotional stability to deal with a powerful blow, her grief ultimately kills her, and upon her tombstone her widower writes, "Because she saw with the eyes of her grandfather, she died at the sight of her babe's face" (p. 38). So ultimately the masquerade of passing not only bespeaks psychic wounding about genuine identity but also indicates an urgent need for inner healing before the self-loathing intensifies into social or even physical death.

Autocritography: Examining the Past and the Passed

I wish now to explore all the denotations and connotations of the word *passing* as it relates to the multiple styles and subtleties of meaning in the literary and personal examples I have proffered in this essay. As I have deeply examined across the works of people of color, the word primarily means to appear and act (in denial of self) as something accepted, most often meaning as racially passing *as* or *for* white, but often with intersectional implications as well. In this sense, the word can mean "to get by" or "offer a reasonable approximation." *Pass* can also signify meeting an accepted standard, as in "passing a test." Undoubtedly, this posits whiteness (or whatever quality is supposedly normative) as the standard, and not meeting it as *failing*. Thus, for Clare Kendry, Fred Carrington, and others in these stories, *passing* equals *succeeding*, economically, socially, or the like. The term can also mean changing, as in the concept of "passing from childhood to adulthood," and this notion of metamorphosis (in order to gain advantage) suffuses all of the works and personal examples I have mentioned, whether through bodily adaptation like hair straightening, obtaining physical items like objects or clothes, or altering performative acts like speech, body language, or other social signifiers. The word has the meaning of "dying" as well, and in each of the above examples, social death among the passer's home community remains a constant repercussion of doing so. Physical death may also come as a consequence of a failed passing, as in Thompson and potentially in Larsen, or as a reminder of the possibly permanent social disconnection it can cause, as in Andrews.

Finally, and most recently discovered for me, Hughes's short story opens another denotation/connotation to the word I had never imagined, as Jack physically passes by his mother and Fred walks by Roy on the street without connection. Passers may have to go by and beyond, i.e. go *past* someone or something they love to do so. Lemons has described the process of autocritographical writing as an act of *self-recovery*, a term which implies going back to get something left behind, something ignored as part of one's identity. *Revisiting* past experiences, *re-*remembering them in terms of *rearticulating* them with a critically conscious eye, *self-reflection* and *reflexivity*—the *re-* in all of these words means "again," a turning around to what is p-a-s-t and that perhaps we have p-a-s-s-e-d while we were trying to meet some standard that is not who we really are. My autocritographical work, despite the overt reason of difference suggesting that the writing of women of color would *not* resonate with me, has advanced my own self-recovery in a positionality *across* difference. Masquerading in one form or another might be as close to a universal experience as can occur, and the work of healing needed to deal with its wounding results can be effected most profoundly in this joining of literature, memoir, and conscientization.

Seeing with the Soul

I have thus far explored how the female and feminist Harlem Renaissance authors allowed me to explore the social phenomenon of racial passing and to use empathetic imagination to realize my solidarity across difference with these artists. I have spoken about how this pathway, starting with my resonance with black writers and going to the understanding of the costs of passing and masking, led me to a desire to reproduce this same process in my middle school students via *Wonder* and *Flygirl*. In closing, I wish to touch on another healing and liberatory aspect I gained my Harlem Renaissance readings. A few influential pieces do *not* share the tragic tone of the several I have discussed already, and I find in these optimistic ones hope for my own and others' ideological reframing of difference. My initial encounter with feminism led me to a basic understanding of not only our equality as humans who must face substantially the same struggles in life and death but also of the lack of our ability to marginalize a person's soul. I have come to the realization of the non-gendered, -classed, -raced, -abled, -preferred status of the human spirit. When Lemons and I co-wrote a dialogic article titled "Brothers of the Soul: Men Teaching and Learning in the Spirit of Feminism" in 2013, I directed the following statement to my "brother."

I have started calling you “Brother of the Soul” ... as a reference to the fact that at the soul level, you are not bald and I do not have hair; you are not a professor and I am not a master’s student; you are not a “black male outsider” and I am not a “white male insider”; and so on. Although the word *brother* really does a disservice by ascribing a gender which our souls don’t have, it does describe a kinship that the physical world would deny to us. This kinship feeling, this opening of the “table” to be truly inclusive, has revolutionized my worldview. (p. 529)

A few key Harlem Renaissance writers allowed me to further explore this perspective, to apprehend that for both the victims *and* the reinscribers of the world’s biases, an inner transformation can occur that can help erase hegemony, expediency, and common illusion.

Two characters in particular are able to turn the privilege granted by passing into a perspective that doesn’t need to pretend. The first is Sarah from the previously-mentioned “The Pink Hat.” A teacher by profession, Sarah initially complains that her life is “wont to become periodically flat” for her, that she is “going stale on the job,” being “more or less drab figure” (Day, 1996, p.79). The reader soon discovers, however, that her ennui originates in the racism she has internalized from around her. She experiences “the world reversed” (p. 79) initially by adding her hat, which she describes as “my magic-carpet, my enchanted cloak, my Aladdin’s lamp,” as well as new clothes. Thus travelling with impunity in white society, she continues into her masquerade via all the performative qualities I have mentioned previously: “I deliberately set out to deceive...I would add a bit of rouge and the frizzy hair...could be crimped into smoothness...a well-modulated voice and assurance of manner would be assets” (p. 81). She, too, must avoid detection by and recrimination of fellow blacks by “avoiding only the white restaurants—I could not have borne the questioning eyes of the colored waiters” (p. 81). Unfortunately, the agency of the hat and all the other fabrications comes from a source she finds problematic: white people. Only whites can grant the privileges Sarah seeks, so she must play everything within her ability to pass their (primarily) visual inspection. Her social acceptability lies completely within the power of the dominant group, which sets the rules for it and enforces them as it sees fit. Thus, to paraphrase Eric Liu from the epigraph of this essay, those born white (or what qualifies as white given contemporary levels of interrogation) set the dominant standard by which others must abide to gain acceptance as white, and they then overlay the white template upon the rest of society.

Notwithstanding my despair over this fact that once again reinforces white supremacy, this story ends on a self-affirming note—Sarah experiences *inner* transformation that precludes her need for future passing. After injuring her ankle and spending time “in the colored section of town,” Sarah’s need for the hat (symbolizing racial passing) has disappeared, and her slavish reliance on the approval by the white standard has diminished. Whereas in her longing for whiteness she saw life as a dreary struggle, her inner change has created an appreciation for the world she has, without the need for masquerade. She now grasps the intrinsic value of what she has, “health, a job, young minds and souls to touch...” and so on (p. 82). By her own strength of character, her introspection about her situation, and her devotion to what one might term a ministry of teaching, mentoring, and friendship, the liberatory power now lies within her to exert influence the stable world she touches, rather than within a shallow disguise that only can influence via reliance on the fickle whims of the hegemonic powers-that-be. So, rather than “achieving whiteness” on any permanent basis, Sarah, though still appreciating whiteness via a love of Euro-centric art like Chaucer and Greek plays, has used her experience to work passionately across difference with inner peace.

The second story, though brief and largely metaphorical, which displays a “magical” bestowal of privilege that brings to pass an inner conversion is “Little Cornish, the ‘Blue Boy’” by Effie Lee Newsome. In this piece, a case of mistaken racial identity (again, a form of passing) allows a black boy named Cornish to avoid angry expulsion after his intrusion into a church. Bathed in the blue light from a stained glass window, Cornish is not seen as the “pretty brown face” by the church sexton’s daughter. In the symbolic, spiritual light, anyone would be recast as blue, and when the (presumably white) girl gives him a flower as an act of compassion, the scene connecting two blue beings emblemizes a vision of life beyond the physical, a scene where humanity links us instead of color dividing us. When Cornish takes the flower home to cheer his dying mother, he “pays forward” the act of compassion. At the story’s end, Cornish has grown up into a physician who still repeats that flower-giving act for the sick that he attends. Thus, like Sarah, racial passing has given Cornish a glimpse of a spirit that catalyzes his liberation and saves him from simply being the victim of his motherless (and possibly orphaned) childhood into one whose passion for healing and giving brings joy to “the weary and weak and wasting away” (1996, p.96).

From Lead to Leadership

I see these last two stories as having a mystical, I would say alchemical, quality to them in which passing, though it plays a part, is not ultimately responsible for changing the lead to gold. The inner changes that the magical hat and the metaphysical blue light facilitate occur in the soul, not in the body. I find it amazing that inner change can even happen at all, given the many safeguards and tactics that dominant groups have in place to reproduce their dominance (as in Katz's comments above). I came to the epiphany, however, that real change can occur when a) the oppressed group can maintain a confident, self-loving, and hopeful perspective despite the horrors and injustices inflicted upon it, and b) members of the dominant group, in dialogue with the oppressed, freely and willingly give up their dominance in order to create balance and harmony. Day's Sarah and Newsome's Cornish maintain a resilience of spirit that allows them to eventually navigate the world from a loving and giving stance. To me, the work of many people in the Civil Rights Movement, from Rosa Parks to Martin Luther King, Jr., embody the first set of qualities. On a global perspective, people like Gandhi, the Dalai Lama, and Nelson Mandela also strike me as exemplars of these traits. Yet, none of the change that they strove for could have happened without alchemical changes in the oppressor groups. King needed his Kennedys and Mandela needed his deKlerk. Personally, the work of feminism, and in particular black feminism, has changed and inspired me, as a white man, to be that "traitor to the patriarchy" type of insider that works with and for the oppressed. In my own way and on some unknown level, I wish to be a kind of Kennedy or a deKlerk, operating from within the privilege I have in order to give it away. Change of the heart and mind within dominant groups allows more people to "pass," or more correctly, allows more people to be their genuine selves *without* having to pass. My work as a scholar, whether in writing or as a conference presenter, my work as a teacher, and my interactions in daily life will reflect my ongoing pro-feminist/womanist journey that deconstructs all the -isms that oppress and works not to erase difference but to form alliances across difference(s). My ultimate goal would be, going back one last time to the Liu epigraph, that no one would hold whiteness (or any other socially constructed marker) as a characteristic sought to be born into, achieved, or magically given, because the construction of who passes and who fails can never be liberatory. I wish to end the masquerade, to work for liberation for all, not privilege for some, and to achieve it through, as bell hooks subtitles her book *Teaching to Transgress*, "education as the practice of freedom."

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