

# Identity Issues: The Passing Mulatto and the Politics of Representations

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## Abstract

The transformation of the American nation into a multicultural society could result in a nation that voluntarily and openly accepts the benefits of contributing traditions, values, philosophies and behaviors. This trend, though, is struggling against a social structure that has been perceived to be grounded upon a dominant culture and value system. According to John A. Garcia, multiculturalism and difference are challenging cultural and ideological supremacy upsetting the sense of naturalness and neutrality that infused most peoples' sense of modern society. The U.S. American ethos was characterized by individualism, egalitarianism, equality of opportunity and emphasis on Western cultures, among other things. All these characteristics have historically been turned into the perfect ingredients of a pervasive American tradition that serves as a cultural core that all members of society learnt to share and internalize ensuring societal stability and gradual change.

**Keywords:** Negro; Passing; Mullatto; African American.

## 1. Introduction

### The background – historical and social

The myth of the American melting pot has been scrutinized and dismantled as group social identities do persist and the actions toward them help to emphasize the differences. The first serious opponent of America's great melting pot was Horace Kallen, an early twentieth-century multiculturalist. He advocated, and coined the term, cultural pluralism, meaning: "damn the melting pot".

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Many of today's multiculturalists, who detest America's cultural assimilation, sound like they tore a page out of Kallen's writings. Similar to multiculturalists of today, Kallen harbored a strong dislike for the assimilated culture of the United States. He believed the immigrant left one type of oppression behind only to be subjected to another: American expectation to assimilate. Contemptuously, he called this expectation "the Americanization hysteria," or the "Americanization psychosis [1]. On the other hand, Robert Park and Herbert Miller, two renowned sociologists at the University of Chicago, wrote: "Assimilation is as inevitable as it is desirable". Theirs was a pragmatic assessment rather than one prompted by alienation, as in the case of Kallen [2].

Moreover, this has proved not to be an easy procedure as it gave birth to a strong debate over the costs and negative consequences of a multicultural society. The main argument is that racial and ethnic groups are seen as weakening core values and the cultural system by refusing to blend in and accept the dominant ideology and culture.

## 2. "Passing" the Black Identity

What is passing? Does it exist outside of a specific occurrence? Is it something that we can talk about abstractly? Does it ever acquire mass recognition or is it always an exotic or an occluded event? Even the forthrightly titled *Passing*, by Nella Larsen, introduces the first mention of its subject safely encased in quotation marks. Are the quotation marks necessary? Do they place the concept itself into question? Does passing always require this orthographical accentuation? Will any discussion of "passing" (here specifically defined as that phenomenon of light-skinned blacks allowing and even encouraging people to mistake them for white) always need to first differentiate itself from other passings? The passing of time? Space? Finally, why has the phenomenon acquired so little clarity in its terminology, despite countless biographical, fictional, and philosophical writings that deal with it? At the most intuitive level, passing evokes a sense of inertia, unsettledness, and expectation. One of the most obvious denotations of "pass" is as a verb that gauges a subject's ability to adopt and function under the guise of another racial, class, gender, or sexual identity. The first category, racial passing, plays a foundational role within the African American canon, given its emergence and frequency in such pivotal works as Frank J. Webb's *The Garies and Their Friends* (published in 1857, one of the earliest products of the novelistic tradition alongside William Wells Brown's *Clotel*, Frederick Douglass's *The Heroic Slave*, and Harriet E. Wilson's *Our Nig*), Charles W. Chesnut's *The House Behind the Cedars* (an effort that combines a template of chivalric romance with the "tragic mulatta" motif), James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (a landmark installment from the transitional era that Chesnut coined "Post-bellum – Pre-Harlem"), and Nella Larsen's *Passing* (a novel lately revitalized by strategic interventions into the cruces of sexualized race and racialized sexuality) [3].

As these texts, among others, demonstrate, choosing to pass required more than just mimetic or mechanical maneuvering and clever equivocation. A state of ontological suspension, passing demanded the subject's immersion in an environment of precarious self-censorship, continuous surveillance, and highly asymmetrical relations of power. One instance of carelessness could easily cause the already insecure base of racial and class identification to buckle and collapse. In a nutshell, this discourse of extremity and extremes complicated

everyday life for many Americans, free or enslaved, who chose to toe the color line's ideology of racial hierarchy, and yet flaunt its inherently flawed operative premise of transparent black/white racial differentiation at the same time. The ritual of passing existed as a passive-aggressive refusal to accept one's predetermined collocation on this color line, the carefully (but not infallibly) calibrated site of inter- and intra-racial hierarchy and consolidation. Freighted with prejudice against darker complexions, the intricate social stratifications of the line produced such unblinkingly eugenic slogans as "Whiter and whiter, every generation", with this particular example being the Blue Vein Society's motto quoted in Wallace Thurman's *The Blacker the Berry* (1929). At a macrocosmic level, to believe in the efficacy of passing was to endorse the assumption that mobility and ameliorative (as well as destructive) potential were racially contingent. In other words, given one's circumstances, success or failure was predicated upon one's ability, melanin levels permitting, to "cross over" and "get away" with the elaborate charade. What was a given thus became a chosen [4].

These last offset phrases – "cross over" and "get away" – invoke the largely negative image of the passer as thief, criminal, or fugitive alongside the more morally ambiguous stances of double agent, trickster, and clever opportunist. However situated these versions are on a moral continuum, they typify the desire of the subject for advancement (or, to continue the metaphor of the journey, to "go somewhere"), which in turn motions to a more general human inclination (or oppressive drive, depending on one's perspective) towards self-improvement and the fulfillment of ambitions.

### 3. The Biblical Cain

To Whom It May Concern," [...] "Keep This Nigger-Boy Running."

Obviously, we are speaking of the passing figure, who has been referred to sometimes as a "mulatto," "white Negro," "quadroon," "Creole," and "octoroon." Although these terms need not refer explicitly to a passing figure, the additional meaning is sometimes implicit. The "passing figure" is a subset of "mulatto," a term used since the seventeenth century. Because "mulatto" comes from the Spanish for mule, a hybrid animal incapable of procreation, scholars have become apologetic and even embarrassed by the etymology of this term. With this in mind, we might ask about the history and etymology of "passing." Representations of the "passing figure" are inextricably connected to the more pervasive representations of the "mulatto." But should we, as many critics have done, collapse the two figures into one? Through these questions and problems of nomenclature, larger problems of race and racism might be uncovered, and so a study of "passing" and the "passing figure" can find no better beginning than the insufficiency of terms [5].

Seen in mythic terms as an outcast, a wanderer and vagabond, the hero of African American fiction is depicted as the biblical Cain. The pun in the title of Toomer's *Cane* points to this biblical analogy on which the book's thematic structure is based, an analogy which is strongly rooted in Southern culture, if indeed it does not have its origins there. Kabnis, who sees God as exacting punishment on him because of his racial identity, internalizes the myth that mainstream American (specifically Southern) society has used to justify its oppression of Blacks. Unlike many of the protagonists in mainstream (White) American fiction, the black American, uprooted from his native Africa, bastardized by miscegenation, is forced to flee from the South to Northern cities, as far as

Canada, to seek release from racial oppression. The mainstream society sees him as the embodiment of the curse and mark of Cain – much as it sees its own fictional heroes as the New World Adam. In Genesis, God cursed Cain for killing his brother, Abel, by decreeing that henceforth Cain should be a vagabond and a wanderer. But to protect Cain from those who would do him harm as a result of the curse, God placed a mark on Cain so that all those who came into contact with him should not slay him. Though the Bible does not state exactly what the mark was or its color, those in America who used the Bible to justify slavery identified it as a black mark and consequently identified Blacks as the descendants of Cain, heirs to his supposed curse and mark. It is probably of this perversion of biblical lore that Father John speaks when in *Cane* he utters his haunting only sentence: “Th sin whats fixed... upon the white folks – f telling Jesus – lies. O th sin th white folks ’mitted when they made the Bible lie”[6].

The ex-colored man, the central intelligence in *Cane* (usually considered to be Kabnis), invisible man, and Jane Pittman each undergo a physical journey that historically parallels (with slight thematic variations) the migration of African Americans from the South in search of the “Promised Land” of the North, and in this sense each character’s odyssey conforms to the journey motif in picaresque literature. In all four works the protagonist’s physical journey evolves into a spiritual quest. The wanderings of Jane Pittman are closely connected with her quest for identity, her desire to shake off the shackles of her Southern slave past, to rid herself of an identity imposed upon her, and to seek self-knowledge and identity in a land of freedom. Corporal Brown, who gives her the name Jane to substitute for her slave name Ticy, sets her on her physical journey that soon becomes one with her spiritual quest. But like Mark Twain’s Jim and Huck, Jane’s and Ned’s physical attempts to get North only entangle them more deeply in the South. And it is, consequently, in the South that both Jane and Ned eventually affirm their identity.

#### **4. The Passing Mullaatto/a**

Jane Pittman’s physical journey never takes her to the North, but the protagonists in *Ex-Colored Man*, *Cane*, and *Invisible Man* do get there, only to discover that this relative physical freedom in the North is symbolic or superficial, that it negates too much of their affinity for things black and Southern. Each then is drawn back to the spirituality of his black roots, back to the South. Folk art becomes in all three works indicative of the luring powers of Southern black life, a life that may brutalize the body but one that nourishes the soul. Foremost among these arts is music, the African American affinity for song and rhythm (in both music and dance) that is a distinct aspect of the Southern black experience. Toomer iterates the theme in *Cane* when in “Song of the Sun” and elsewhere he praises the spiritual art of the slave songs (in the culture appropriately designated as spirituals) created by “some genius of the south” who makes “folk songs from soul sounds” (in “Georgia Dusk”).

The journey-quest motif of the outcast protagonists is congruent with the picaresque convention of a loose, episodic structure, which is applicable to these works. Such an episodic structure brings the protagonists into contact with various levels of society and, as in the picaresque novel, allows the authors to comment on various levels of American society and thus emphasizes the social import of Southern black fiction.

Of the four works treated in this discussion, Ellison’s *Invisible Man* is the one that uses most fully in the

technique of the novel the mask device – various disguises slaves used to deceive their masters and Whites in general. Central to the novel's thematic structure is the statement of the protagonist's grandfather that comes at the end of chapter one:

That night I dreamed I was at a circus with him and that he refused to laugh at the clowns no matter what they did. Then later he told me to open my briefcase and read what was inside and I did, finding an official envelope stamped with the state seal: and inside the envelope I found another and another, endlessly, and I thought I would fall of weariness. "Them's years," he said. "Now open that one."

And I did and in it I found an engraved stamp containing a short message in letters of gold. "Read it," my grandfather said. "Out loud."

"To Whom It May Concern," I intoned. "Keep This Nigger-Boy Running."

I awoke with the old man's laughter ringing in my ears.

The grandfather's words allude to Br'er Rabbit, the African American folk tale character who constantly had to flee or outwit his more physically powerful components, and who often was the persona through which the slave commented on his own predicament in his struggle to survive in the South. The line thematically suggests through the dream motif the nightmare quality of invisible man's attempts to be included in the great American Dream. Each of the novel's episodes is a thematic variation on this statement, for in each invisible man, alternately Jack-the-Rabbit and Jack-the-Bear, is kept running until he learns, or thinks he learns, exactly how to cope with and survive in the system of whiteness. The method for coping and surviving is given in his grandfather's death-bed "curse" which comes at the beginning of chapter one and combines with his statement at the end of the chapter to emphasize further the Br'er Rabbit analogy: as a Black, invisible man must learn to play the games of his opponents but must never believe in those games:

"Son, after I'm gone I want you to keep up the good fight. I never told you, but our life is a war and I have been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy's country ever since I give up my gun back in the Reconstruction. Live with your head in the lion's mouth. I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open"[5].

The protagonist's declaration in chapter 24 of his intention to undermine the Brotherhood by grinning and yessing them to death and destruction emanates from his grandfather's curse, a device that was originated in the South as an effective means for African Americans to survive in a system controlled by the white majority. Putting on the mask equals passing.

We might recall that the first two novels written by African-Americans, which Du Bois may have read, both made substantial use of the passing theme: William Wells Brown's *Clotel; or The President's Daughter* (1853) and Frank Webb's *The Garies and Their Friends* (1857). In addition, many of the African-American fiction writers who were contemporaries of Du Bois explored the passing figure in their novels: Frances E. Harper, *Iola Leroy; or Shadows Uplifted* (1892); Charles Chestnutt, *The Wife and His Youth and Other Stories of the Color*

*Line* (1899), and *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900); Pauline Hopkins, *Contending Forces: A Romance Illustrative of Negro Life North and South* (1900). Though written a few years after *The Souls of Black Folk*, James Weldon Johnson's already discussed *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), which some consider to be the first in depth, psychological study of passing, was not only written by a contemporary but a personal friend of W. E. B. Du Bois. Amidst all this creative interest in the passing figure (who was, after all, caught between two worlds and two bloods), Du Bois's idea of "twoness" reverberates nervously.

Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* gathers cohesiveness through the recurring and related tropes of "the Veil," "double consciousness," and "twoness." Du Bois not only claims to be able to map the color-line, as quoted above, but also offers to take the reader, who is assumed to be outside of the veil of blackness, into its "deeper recesses."

"... I have sketched in swift outline the two worlds within and without the Veil, and thus have come to the central problem of training men for life. Venturing now into deeper detail, I have in two chapters studied the struggles of the massed millions of the black peasantry, and in another have sought to make clear the present relations of the sons of master and man. Leaving, then, the white world, I have stepped within the Veil, raising it that you may view faintly its deeper recesses..."

Here and elsewhere, Du Bois directly addresses a white reader who does not know "How it feels to be a problem," or what it is like to feel a sense of "twoness." Du Bois studiously avoids the conventional symbol of the mulatto, when his own metaphors threaten to overlap: "One ever feels his twoness, – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder"[7]. (emphasis added)

The familiar dichotomy of white and black is not only replaced by American and Negro, but Du Bois is careful to distinguish this inner-war from that experienced by the light-skinned mulatto. The "merging" of American and Negro, which is dangerously close to a merging, or miscegenation, between white and black, is clearly distanced from the mulatto figure: the American Negro, after all, "would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world". Du Bois's project not only requires that "American" be associated with blackness, but he also stresses that "twoness" takes place "in one dark body" and not in the light-skinned, mulatto body. This emphasis on darkness recurs throughout the essays, which it should be remembered are collected under the title, *The Souls of Black Folk*. Du Bois, despite his devaluing of the "names of things" (see chapter 2), clearly sets out to revalue, not only the idea of blackness, but its many names. To appreciate the force of the mulatto, or more specifically the passing figure, as a symbol that negatively shaped Du Bois's metaphorical strategies, let us first begin with the unclear beginnings of representations of the passing figure [7].

*Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom, or The Escape* (1860) is the story of the dramatic escape) of Ellen and William Craft. This short book, written by William Craft with possible assistance from others, heads no one's list of the most representative slave narratives in the genre. There is no effort to authenticate the authorship nor is the greater wealth of supporting materials used to validate the author's scholarship or sincerity. Craft recounts

no significant event that shows him or his wife leaning to read or write. Although he provides some extra material, quotes from books and newspapers, his narrative would not provide Robert Stepto with a compelling model for what he calls “authenticating machinery”. To prepare us for “the escape,” Craft recounts the stories of white slaves [8].

The first event involves the case of a young German girl, who, upon being orphaned while emigrating to this country, mysteriously disappears. After twenty-five years of bondage, Salome is discovered by relatives and regains her freedom. The story ends with Salome’s legal release from bondage, but one wonders how the white slave girl adjusted to her new found freedom and family. One wonders how she adjusted to her newly found race and place in the white world.

Craft borrows this account from the Law Reporter, which he quotes from liberally, focusing on “the case” which was “elaborately argued on both sides”. Following this provocative story, Craft then borrows from Reverend George Bourne’s *Picture of Slavery*, which “relates the case of a white boy who, at the age of seven, was stolen from his home in Ohio, tanned and stained in such a way that he could not be distinguished from a person of color, and then sold as a slave in Virginia”. Although these borrowed stories should be familiar to readers of slave narratives, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom* does more than present exempla of the atrocities of slavery: it provides a series of “passing narratives.” Before beginning his own personal story of escape, Craft tells yet another story of “a very humane and wealthy gentleman that bought a woman, with whom he lived as his wife. They brought up a family of children, among whom were three nearly white, well educated, and beautiful girls”. Craft provides great detail of the father’s death and the cruel march to the slave block of the rest of the family. After many details and dramatic events, particularly those of Mary and Frank who escape enslavement, Craft ends this third and seemingly impersonal tale by briefly and unaffectedly stating that: “Frank and Mary’s mother was my wife’s own dear aunt” [9].

Like many passing narratives, this one delights in surprising the reader. The impersonal tale modulates into personal account, and we must adjust. “I saw Frank myself,” Craft tells us, “when he came for the little twins. Though I was then quite a lad, I well remember being highly delighted by hearing him tell how nicely he and Mary had made their escape.” Onto those two, borrowed stories which involve what we might call a reverse passing (the disguising of white for black), Craft attaches his two personal accounts of the passing from black to white. But this is not simply progression without rhetorical sophistication. By delaying information about the personal significance of the Frank and Mary story, Craft disrupts the reader’s apathy with the realization that all histories are finally attached to some real and specific human beings. What we thought would be a third borrowed tale creates more than a thematic connection and more than a simple history that leads to the story of William and Ellen Craft’s escape. This third story, half-borrowed tale and half-personal account, provides the idea and inspiration for what is to come. Craft carefully reintroduces the risks and dangers involved with an escape, for the Frank and Mary escape seems almost too easy in this condensed account. Interestingly, much of the danger involves acquiring a “pass” in order to travel freely for the first few miles until the general “pass” of Ellen’s disguise as a white man is effected:

...the lowest villain in the country should he be a white man, has the legal power to arrest, and question, in the

most inquisitorial and insulting manner, any colored person, male or female, that he may find at large, particularly at night and on Sundays, without a written pass, signed by the master or some one in authority....[9].

Although Craft does not explicitly connect the written pass and the visible pass of skin color, he reminds us that “every colored person’s complexion is prima facie evidence of his being a slave” at the same time that he undermines “first impressions.” Consistently, and not simply in the third “borrowed” tale discussed above, Craft delights in the ambiguities of face and race.

Judith Berzon, in her *Neither White Nor Black: The Mulatto Character in American Fiction*, focuses one entire chapter on “The Novel of Passing.” Although the critic discusses texts written prior and after the Harlem Renaissance, she differentiates more between black and white authors than older or more recent texts. Although “there is much similarity in the approach of authors of both races,” Berzon argues that the “primary difference between the treatment of the subject by whites and blacks is the emphasis in black novels on racial pride”. Countless novels support this distinction, and Nella Larsen’s *Passing* more than typifies the concern with racial pride. But *Passing* also reduplicates the narrative of the tragic mulatto, a narrative which reverberates with racial angst and questionable racial politics [10].

Much like the romantic and oftentimes melodramatic novels of the nineteenth century, Nella Larsen’s *Passing* delights in contrasts of black and white. Various other colors often are highlighted, but the contrast of black and white is given noticeable attention. Often an intense or mysterious blackness of eye or a distinctive whiteness of skin will precede the explicit introduction of the passing theme. In Larson’s novel, for example, we “see” Irene and Clare as dark-eyed, white-skinned beauties before we learn that they are “mulattoes.” It is the idea of passing (Irene worries that someone has guessed that she is passing) that first reveals her “blackness.” But both Irene and her friend Clare’s blackness is already suggested by the novel’s title and more than a few descriptive markers that overly attend to skin and eye color: “a pale small girl,” “pasty-white face,” “warm olive cheeks,” “red in the face,” “dark almost black, eyes,” “white hand,” “her brown eyes... the other’s black ones”. In a novel that is entitled *Passing*, and written by an African-American woman during the Harlem Renaissance, these are significant clues. But Larson undercuts the lesson of such visual signs by having Irene herself incorrectly read the race of her counterpart, Clare [11].

Skin and eye color are noticeably absent from this explicit list, while the gaze of the narrator may be said to provocatively highlight little else. Though an astute reader might read the excessive and unusual attention to skin color to suggest the introduction of some passing figure, Irene does not.

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## 5. Conclusion

Over the struggle for consensual nomenclature, color looms. Vocabularies, or schemata, of color have not only provided certain terms for “race” but no doubt participate in the construction of racial meanings. It is important to emphasize that the schematization, and not the essential color, create meaning; and though some theorists, Edward Shils for example, have at times looked to color as a substantive factor in creating “racialism,” the following reading draws strength from theorists like Audrey Smedley who see color not as foundational but already implicated in systems of belief.

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