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# Passing in American Culture

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Passing in American Culture: Biracial, Queer, and Disabled Bodies

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Submitted to faculty of the Rollins College English Department  
in partial fulfillment of the requirement for honors in the English major  
in the Hamilton Holt School  
Rollins College

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*To mom and dad,  
Thanks for always believing in me even when I was crying at 3am  
because I thought I couldn't do it. Without you, I truly couldn't have.*

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## Introduction

When we think of passing, race is usually the first thing that comes to mind. Whether it's James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, Mark Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, or general thoughts of the Harlem Renaissance, The Civil Rights Era, and contemporary struggles that people of color face, race is typically at the center of perceptions of passing.

Passing occurs when an individual portrays themselves or is regarded by others as a member of a social group other than the one that he or she belongs to, such as race, ethnicity, caste, social class, gender, sexuality, disability, etc. For example, a black person might assimilate or pass into whiteness, an LGBTQ+ individual might pass into heterosexuality, or a physically disabled person may pass as able-bodied. These examples and definition of passing only provide a very limited look at the concept, which is actually much more complicated than just a black person assimilating to whiteness.

Because race is the first thing to come to mind when thinking of passing, scholars typically discuss it in terms of race, as well as how passing affects individual identity. Critic Cheryl Wall, in an article about the passing in Nella Larsen's novels, states, "'passing' does not refer only to the sociological phenomenon of blacks crossing the color line. It represents instead . . . the loss of racial identity" (105). Here, Wall suggests that in passing for a different race, the very construct of race is rendered an empty category of identity. In other words, when one is viewed as blacker or whiter than they may actually be, successfully convincing others of their feigned blackness or whiteness, they illustrate that race, a category of identity that holds a lot of meaning within societies, actually has no depth or authenticity to it.

Another issue that comes up when scholars discuss racial passing is the idea that people can be both black and white, i.e. mixed race or biracial. Biracial individuals used to be referred

to as mulattos, which were generally people who had one white parent and one black parent, or some mixture of the two. The term is now considered to be derogatory, and mixed race, multiracial, and biracial took its place instead. Each of the newer terms just implicate that the individual is made up of more than one race, with biracial specifically catering to individuals made up of two predominant races. From being referred to as mulattos and on, it has been difficult for biracial individuals to be regarded as authentic in either one of their dominant races. In an article about biracialism in Danzy Senna's novel *Caucasia*, Critic Sika Alaine Dagbovie asks, "Can one acknowledge and take pride in one's multiple identities without exploiting any or all of them (or having them exploited)?" (99). Most passing narratives, as well as the American history of multiracial and biracial individuals, would suggest that because American society does not allow for pride in multiple identities, it is impossible to take pride in one's multiple identities without having them exploited.

Though race is at the center of most discussions of passing, scholars have begun to discuss passing with regards to gender and sexuality as well. Passing in the case of gender/sexuality functions a little differently than racial passing, especially in the way that it is discussed. For instance, sexuality passing is typically discussed in terms of the closet/coming out, which is somewhat different from passing. If a man is gay, but he is closeted, that would seem to mean that he is hiding something that he really is. Conversely, passing is typically described as, for example, a black individual "faking" whiteness, i.e. pretending to be something that they are not. Although passing and closeting are different, they are also alike: the gay man is closeted and is therefore, in a way, passing as straight, just as one could say, though no one describes it in these terms, that the black individual passing as white is closeting their blackness. In a critical article about sexuality, disability, and coming out, disability scholar Ellen Samuels

states, “Passing, closeting, and coming out become vexed issues that strain at the limitations of the discourse meant to describe them” (319). As Samuels has pointed out, these terms, as well as the term passing, are too narrow for the complexities of the phenomenon. Passing is complicated and so is coming out/closeting, and the vocabulary used to describe their similarities and differences cannot encompass all of the nuances.

Similar to both racial and gender/sexuality passing is disability passing, an idea that has only become prevalent in recent years. Though there are not many narratives or fiction novels on disability, there are a few critical texts as well as journal articles that describe disability passing in terms of the closet/coming out, almost passing, and hiding any deviation from the normal. In a critical article on almost passing and disability, critic Julie-Ann Scott states, “According to Rosemarie Garland-Thompson, disability, unlike race and gender, is not based on ‘predictable and observable traits’ but on an deviation from what we consider normal” (228). She cites Rosemarie Garland-Thompson, a prominent disability theorist, arguing that disability is different than race and gender, which means that disability passing must be different as well.

Though not always mentioned, there are a few key issues worth discussing when it comes to the passing phenomenon. The first is whether or not an individual passes intentionally, the second is the idea of passing from a marginal group to a dominant or “normal” group and vice versa, and the third is the question of whether or not the passing was or is successful.

When discussing passing, theorists typically refer to intentional passing. Conversely to intentional passing, in the Ellen Samuels article mentioned earlier, she coins the idea of passing by default: “Such condemnations of passing often conflate two dynamics: passing deliberately . . . and passing by default” (321). Like scholars of passing, the passing narrative typically deals with intentional passing as well. Although passing by default is not always included in narratives

or arguments about passing, it is relevant specifically to individuals with invisible disabilities, or other invisible categories of identity, such as homosexuality. American society tends to automatically assume that everyone is both heterosexual and able-bodied unless proven otherwise. It can be difficult, though, for disabled or homosexual individuals to prove their status as deviant from the norm if it is not visible to others. Sometimes saying, or even acting, disabled or homosexual will not be enough to convince people of the authenticity behind those identities, thus passing by default ensues: these individuals are assumed to be heterosexual and able-bodied, or a part of the dominant or “normal” group, even if they wish not to be viewed that way.

Just as intentionality is typical of passing narratives, so is passing from a marginal group to a dominant/“normal” group. This just means that the individuals in passing narratives usually pass from a group of color to white, from homosexual to heterosexual, from woman to man, from disabled to able-bodied, etc. There are, however, deviations from this rule: in some narratives, Birdie in Danzy Senna’s *Caucasia* for example, pass from the dominant group to a marginal group. Individual power functions differently in these cases when an individual passes into the marginal group, such as from white to black or from man to woman, conversely to the collective power that is the dominant group.

Success is another important aspect of the passing phenomenon. Whether an individual is successful in their passing, marginally successful, successful until outed, or unsuccessful makes a difference in the tone used when that passing is discussed. If it is successful, it is convincing, and it highlights the emptiness that many categories of identity have because they can be successfully faked. If it is marginally successful, then it convinces some groups of people though not others, which causes a less negative view of identity categories. If it successful until an individual is outed, then it convinces everyone except for people who previously may have



known the individual passing. If one of those people outs the passing individual for being fake, then that convinces the rest of the dominant group that identity categories are authentic because if someone is passing, they will be found out. Similarly, if the passing is unsuccessful, then it fails to convince, and thus reinforces positive views of identity categories as authentic.

All of these issues become more fully fleshed out when looking at several examples of different kinds of passing. Archetypically, passing is racial, intentional, and occurs when individuals attempt to conform to the dominant group within their society, which is why the issues mentioned above are so important. As stated above, however, there are situations that vary from this. In Nella Larsen's *Passing*, Clare Kendry, a prominent character in the novel, represents this archetype of passing.

Clare Kendry represents the archetype of passing in several different ways: she passes racially, intentionally, from the marginalized group into the "normal" group of her society, and she passes successfully. Clare is a black woman who crosses what W.E.B. Du Bois calls the "color line" and passes as a white woman. She also passes intentionally, knowing that the only way for her to get ahead in the world is to play the part of a white woman.

Another characteristic of the passing archetype is the paired abandonment but also protection of the community one passed from: "'it's funny about 'passing.' We disapprove of it and at the same time condone it. It excited our contempt and yet we rather admire it. We shy away from it with an odd kind of revulsion, but we protect it'" (Larsen 56). It's clear from this quote that the community Clare passed from resents her passing. They are full of contempt, they are disapproving, and they shy away from it with revulsion. They also, however, admire it, condone it, and protect it.

Passing works out so well for Clare that she wonders why more people don't do it: "I've often wondered why more coloured girls . . . never 'passed' over. It's such a frightfully easy thing to do. If one's the type, all that's needed is a little nerve'" (25). For Clare, there is no question: passing is the only way for "coloured girls" to make it in the world, and it's easy for them to do it, too. She specifies that it's "girls" that it's easy for, because it is harder for women to get ahead than men, which is why she elaborates that more girls should pass over the color line.

If that is the archetype of passing, then the Rachel Dolezal case from June of 2015 provides a deviation from that archetype. Clare Kendry and Rachel Dolezal do have some commonalities in that both cases involve race, both were intentional, both were (mostly) successful, and both individuals are women. That is where the relation ends, however, because Rachel Dolezal, unlike Clare Kendry, passes from the dominant group into the marginalized group of her society, i.e. from white to black. This phenomenon is linked to blackface, a term often used with regards to cultural appropriation.

The power dynamic is different here than that of Clare Kendry's passing, because Dolezal, as a white woman passing as black, was born into more power than Clare Kendry was. In her interview with *Vanity Fair*, Dolezal states that her passing is not a costume, and she doesn't "know spiritually and metaphysically how this goes, but I do know that from my earliest memories I have awareness and connection with the black experience, and that's never left me. It's not something that I can put on and take off anymore." Dolezal does not perceive herself as passing, but rather tapping into her "true self." She sees herself as "spiritually" black, and believes that transcends any physical aspect of herself. It's also interesting that she states

“anymore,” which implies that she did or was able to put on and take off her blackness at one point.

Dolezal’s passing was successful, up until June of 2015, when her parents publicly “outed” her as being born Caucasian. Despite this, Allison Samuels, the writer of the *Vanity Fair* article “Rachel Dolezal’s True Lies,” states, “Dolezal’s claim on black womanhood still seems to be non-negotiable. Even in conversation with an actual black woman on the other end of the line or sitting in her cozy home, Dolezal unequivocally identifies as black.” Even when confronted by a biologically black woman, Dolezal continues to defend her blackness.

Samuels states that “Dolezal spent years researching and then perfectly molding her black identity,” and even Dolezal says “it’s taken my entire life to negotiate how to identify, and I’ve done a lot of research and a lot of studying.” This suggests that Dolezal chose to identify as black, but is aware that she is not actually black. Though people talk about her as a liar and in terms of blackface and she cannot keep up the charade any longer, she is still able to present herself the way that she wants because of the power that she has as a biologically white woman. If she were like Clare Kendry in that she passed from the marginal to the dominant rather than the dominant to the marginal, and therefore had much less social power, she would likely not be so lucky as to have the ability to continue to present herself as the identity that she passed into.

Another example of passing that varies from both Dolezal and Clare Kendry is Caitlyn Jenner, a transgender woman who came out early in 2015. The nature of “coming out” is a little bit different than that of passing, but that aside, Caitlyn Jenner differs from Clare Kendry on many levels. Her passing is intentional, but it is gender based, not racially based. From there, her case becomes much more complicated.

If we assume that her identity as a man was ever truly her identity, then she, like Rachel Dolezal, would have passed from the “normal” or dominant group (male) to the marginalized group (female) of her society. However, saying that Caitlyn Jenner used to be a man and has passed to become a woman overly simplifies her case and the possibilities that her case entails. It could very well be that Caitlyn Jenner never truly accepted herself as a man, and passed as a man her entire life until she came out as Caitlyn, thereby accepting her “true self.” If that is the case, then it could be said that her passing as a man was not actually intentional, but rather something that happened to her. If the former were true, and Caitlyn Jenner used to be a man but has now passed over to become a woman, then she differs from both Clare Kendry and Rachel Dolezal in that she is unsuccessful in her passing as a woman.

Looking at her *Vanity Fair* cover, paying special attention to her more masculine features (jaw line, shoulders, arms, etc.) the general public may be able to tell either that she was once a man, or just see her as a masculine-looking woman. Looking at the same cover, however, it could be argued that her feminine attributes outweigh her masculine ones, and that one cannot tell that she was once biologically male just by looking at her. Even if that’s the case, Jenner made a big deal about her transition: even on the *Vanity Fair* cover it says “Call me Caitlyn,” which suggests that there’s something more going on than just a woman on the cover of a magazine.

It’s general knowledge that Caitlyn Jenner was once Bruce Jenner, and that fact alone proves her passing, if we are to call it that, as unsuccessful. On the other hand, if the latter were true, and Caitlyn Jenner had passed as a man her whole life until finally accepting her “true self” as a woman, then she was successful in her passing up until when she chose to come out. There are several possibilities to consider when looking at her transition: her passing is based in gender

studies, it could be intentional or unintentional depending on how it's considered, it's from the dominant group to the marginal group, and she's a female. Other than being female, all of these vary from the archetype of Clare Kendry, and therefore further complicate the passing phenomenon.

An example of passing that varies from each of the aforementioned examples is that of Aimee Mullins. Aimee Mullins is a woman, an athlete, a model, and an actress with a physical, visible disability: she has prosthetic legs. She differs from the passing archetype in that her passing involves ability/disability. Her passing is similar to Clare's, however, in that she passes from the marginal group to the dominant group, it can be intentional, it is sometimes successful, and she is a woman. Mullins is not exactly passing in that if one searches her name on the internet, they will immediately see and find out that she has a disability. It can be argued, however, that she almost passes, or is at least willing, in some cases, to hide her impairment from the public eye.

Aimee Mullins' case is so complicated because she can choose when she passes and when she doesn't, which is actually similar to the way in which Irene, another character from Nella Larsen's *Passing*, passes: she chooses when to play the part of the white woman, and when to remain black. Mullins, too, chooses when she wants people to know that she has a disability, and when she wants that to remain unknown. This ability to hide her disability is exemplified between two images of Mullins: one of her on the cover of *Dazed and Confused* in which you can tell that she has prosthetic legs, and another of her ad for L'OREAL in which it is impossible to see that she has prosthetic legs.

On her *Dazed and Confused* cover, it is obvious that Mullins is disabled and has prosthetic legs. She is wearing the kind of prosthetics that look sort of like bent metal pegs; they

look nothing like real legs, and that fact is showcased on this cover. Mullins clearly chose here to let the public see that she has a disability and that she needs prosthetic legs. In this instance, she is very obviously not passing, and instead choosing to let her impairment, or her “true self,” show.

In her ad for L’OREAL, on the other hand, it is impossible to see that Mullins is disabled and has prosthetic legs. The prosthetics that she chose to wear in this ad look exactly like real legs, and she has a dress on that covers where they connect. In this image, Mullins clearly chose to hide her disability and the fact that she needs prosthetic legs from the public. In this instance, she is passing as able-bodied, and therefore hiding her “true self” from the public eye.

Each of these cases provides a look at passing that varies from the archetype. Each case is complex in its own way, and further complicates the passing phenomenon. In looking at other examples of racial, gender, and ability passing later within this paper, the ideas surrounding passing and identity will prove to be richer, and mixed race, transgender, and disabled will prove to be unstable categories of identity.

## Chapter One

From their time of entrance into the United States and even long after slavery was abolished, African Americans have been denied rights and discriminated against. America was founded upon ideals of white supremacy, a fact that shows through the prevalence of racism in American culture nearly two and a half centuries later. Nella Larsen’s novel *Passing* (1929) concerns itself with these issues of race as it follows the story of a woman of color, Clare Kendry. Clare is biracial, but due to the history of the one-drop rule and Jim Crow laws, her African heritage is considered prevalent. Whiteness is idealized within the novel, as opposed to

blackness, which Larsen demonstrates through Clare's passing: though she is biracial, she looks white, and is thus able to cross the "color line" to live as a white woman.

In chapter one I will discuss racial passing, juxtaposing Larsen's *Passing* with Danzy Senna's *Caucasia* (1998), in which the biracial protagonist, Birdie Lee, passes for black rather than white, illustrating that blackness is idealized in Senna's novel as opposed to the whiteness in Larsen's novel. Though both novels take place at very different times, Larsen's in the 1920's and Senna's in the 1970's, both authors highlight the struggle of biracial individuals in having to choose one race over the other, and how that "choice" can be seen as agency or a lack thereof. This chapter will look at these two works, focusing on several moments of passing in order to demonstrate the impossibility of biracial bodies in America and the passing that results from that.

## Chapter Two

American society worships white heterosexuality, leaving almost no room for atypical sexualities to exist in dominant culture. In chapter two, I will focus on gender and sexuality passing, gender performance, the idea of "the closet" and coming out, and how these issues differ from racial passing. Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues* (1993) looks at passing with regards to gender through the protagonist, Jess. Jess never feels like she fits into a typical female gender role, eventually establishing herself as a butch lesbian, and later taking hormones to pass as a man. Feinberg explores gender identity and transgenderism through Jess's struggles, ultimately highlighting that even in passing, Jess defies societal categories of gender.

Conversely to Feinberg's novel, Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (2006) explores gender performance, sexuality, and the closet. Similarly to Feinberg's Jess, Alison, the protagonist of Bechdel's graphic memoir, never feels that she fits into a female stereotype. Alison eventually comes out as a lesbian, juxtaposed with her father passing as

straight/living a life in the closet. Through her memoir, Bechdel demonstrates that, despite the struggles faced by LGBTQ+ individuals once they come out, the struggles of those who remain in the closet may be greater. Feinberg's novel and Bechdel's memoir paired with theoretical works by Judith Butler and Ellen Samuels stage a conversation about the process of identity formation broadly, but especially with regards to gender and sexuality. This chapter will focus on the process of identity formation and ideals of gender and sexuality in worlds where individuals pass, come out, closet themselves, and must follow specific rules with regards to their gender.

### Chapter Three

In America, visibly disabled bodies are almost always viewed as anomalous, freakish, and other: after all, disabilities undermine the ideals of autonomy that Americans hold dear. Just as American society worships whiteness and heterosexuality, we are obsessed with the able body. Disability theorists have only recently begun to examine passing with regards to disability. This chapter will vary in form from the other two: instead of exploring cultural texts, I will use theoretical works by Rosemarie Garland-Thompson, Julie-Ann Scott, Ellen Samuels, and others to examine how passing has been useful to the field of disability studies.

In this chapter, I will examine the cultural obsession with the able body, as well as the stigmas that accompany visible and invisible disabilities. Disabilities tend to make the able-bodied population uncomfortable, which may cause disabled individuals to pass or at least make their impairment seem lesser than it is. Using the aforementioned texts, chapter three will explore the constructs surrounding able-bodied discomfort, inequities evident in able-bodied society, and the obstacles that disabled individuals may often face.

It is important to note that race, gender, and disability are all socially constructed categories of identity, something that each of the three chapters will explore. We obsess over



categorizing people, whether they are white, female, disabled, or any other combination of identifying categories, which is what makes the passing subject so troubling: they defy societal categories, sometimes without anyone noticing. Each of these chapters will explore passing in a variety of settings, together ultimately fleshing out the complicated structure of identity formation in a society where specific identities are idolized over others.

## Chapter One: Passing and the Biracial Body—Forced Choice and Impossibility

Though Donald Trump's recent speeches have induced horror in many people at his blatant racism against people of color, his rhetoric is nothing new. Discussions of race, often involving racial prejudice, have been prevalent within America for centuries, and though it is a more contemporary issue, passing is often wrapped up in those discussions as well. Just as Nella Larsen's Clare Kendry serves as the archetype of passing, her novel that Clare comes from, titled *Passing*, serves as a base for most critical discussions of passing. As exemplified already in my introduction through the example of Clare Kendry, Larsen's novel features the typical passing narrative: a black, or biracial, individual passing as white, resulting in judgment from the black community that they "betrayed." Juxtaposed with the typical passing narrative contained in Larsen's *Passing* is Danzy Senna's novel *Caucasia*. Senna's *Caucasia* features a narrative of passing in which the protagonist is biracial and attempts to pass for black rather than white as she appears. Senna's novel is essentially the opposite of Larsen's in that in *Passing* the characters pass for white and in *Caucasia* the characters pass for black. These differences in the novels illustrate that the ideal race in *Passing* is Caucasian, and the ideal race in *Caucasia* is African American, which is an important juxtaposition because it demonstrates that passing and racial prejudice can go both ways. In comparing these two works, themes of idealized race, visible racial categorization, and a semblance of "choice" between races become more fully fleshed out.

Larsen's exploration of passing could be more specifically described as an exploration of biracial, or black and white, individuals. In her novel, Larsen explores passing through the two main characters: Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry. Before reconstruction in America, and even long after, "biracial" did not and could not exist as a category of identity. Thanks to Jim Crow laws—a rule that promoted the idea of African Americans as "separate but equal," which is

clearly a social construction as it segregated society based on skin color—as well as the more long-standing one-drop rule, everyone was either black or white, and nothing in between. The complicated structure of biracialism as an unrecognizable category of identity lends to the struggle of Larsen's characters. They cannot be both black and white, which constantly forces the characters to choose, but their “choice” is really only a semblance of choice, an idea that I will return to later in the chapter. Irene, at the beginning of *Passing*, “chooses” to pass for white at the Drayton hotel, and then wonders about Clare, “Did that woman, could that woman, somehow know that here before her very eyes on the roof of the Drayton sat a Negro?” (16). Irene couldn't believe that Clare caught her in the act of passing because she had already chosen to be white at that time.

Larsen portrays Irene as only offhandedly and occasionally passing, and only for convenience. This portrayal of Irene makes it seem like she does not really have to choose as others do: Irene is black, but occasionally acts white, and that's fine. Larsen juxtaposes Irene's passing with Clare's, clearly laying out Clare's passing as a more permanent choice that she has made. As literary critic Johanna M. Wagner says, Clare embodies Irene's “anxieties about race,” as well as “a constant reminder that race is never quite a settled affair” (145, 146). Without Clare, Irene believes that she is free to be who she wants and act how she likes, but with Clare in the picture, Irene is forced to reconsider these beliefs: “Later, when she examined her feeling of annoyance [at Clare], Irene admitted, a shade reluctantly, that it arose from a feeling of being outnumbered, as sense of aloneness, in her adherence to her own class and kind; not merely in the great thing of marriage, but in the whole pattern of her life as well” (34). Though at first Irene sees Clare as having settled her fate when she decided to permanently pass as white, she is able to come back and socialize within her black community. Irene felt that she had followed the

rules of her society: in race, in marriage, in class, and in her whole life, she had adhered to where she was “supposed” to be. When Clare comes back, better off than she would have been had she stayed, she challenges Irene’s ideas of choice, through which Larsen demonstrates that the “choice” between being black or white is even more limited than just black and white, because either way the characters succumb to racism in some way.

Conversely for Clare, Irene serves as an open door to exploring both parts of her heritage. She sees that Irene can remain in the black community while also living in the white community at places such as the Drayton hotel. When Clare sees Irene living this way, Larsen illustrates that Clare would like to do the same with how she makes her way back into the black community from which she came, while still maintaining her white life and marriage. Through both Clare’s death and Irene’s growing paranoia/insanity, Larsen places pressure on this idea of being able to live as both races. In both cases, Larsen exhibits the impossibility of biracialism, as well as the unfortunate possibilities for individuals who attempt it. Literary critic Cheryl Wall states that “Larsen draws characters who are, by virtue of their appearance, education, and social class, atypical in the extreme... they become the means through which the author demonstrates the psychological costs of racism and sexism” (97). In creating these characters, Larsen not only demonstrates the psychological costs of racism and sexism, but she also demonstrates the costs of a society that doesn’t allow for biracial individuals, illustrating that the cost is ultimately sanity, happiness, and life.

Another part of the struggle that Larsen’s characters face lies in the need to categorize people in the first place. Categorizing people based on their race is especially problematic because we typically determine race based on visible markings, which makes someone who is white without typical Caucasoid features difficult to categorize correctly. With regards to

Larsen's character Irene, Johanna M. Wagner states that "she prides herself in her loyalty to her 'race,' but she can and often does disregard race because of her own lack of visible racial markings" (145). Irene does not appear stereotypically black, and can therefore pass for white. Moreover, she prides herself on her loyalty to her black heritage, but in sometimes passing for white, she becomes hypocritical.

Larsen's tone is ironic with regards to the issue of hypocrisy, as she illustrates and recognizes the struggle, not hypocrisy, inherent to biracial individuals. In fact, most often, passing is portrayed as members of the black community masking their "true" heritage and passing for white. Larsen, through *Passing*, forces reconsideration of the accuracy behind the idea of betraying one's race because these individuals are not just black passing for white, but they have white heritage too. Along the same line, Valerie Smith, expert in African American literature, states, "The light-skinned black body thus both invokes and transgresses the boundaries between the races and the sexes that structure the American social hierarchy. It indicates a contradiction between appearance and 'essential' racial identity within a system of racial distinctions based upon differences presume to be visible" (45). Smith, like Larsen, rejects the notion that all race is visible in some way and that if it's not then it must be inauthentic. Like Larsen, Smith illustrates that people are uncomfortable with biracialism because there's not an identifiable category for it. People are uncomfortable placing individuals in two racial boxes, as both black and white, and so they usually choose a single race. Again, thanks to the one-drop rule, blackness almost always wins out as the racial category biracial individuals are placed into, therefore making a biracial category unnecessary because there is already a place to put everyone.

Despite all of Irene's talk about her black pride and heritage, Larsen clearly offers whiteness as the idealized race within the world of her novel. Her characters view whiteness as celebratory and superior in several scenes. Most of the praise of whiteness happens through Clare, who is always described in terms of her beauty, whiteness, and wealth: she's "An attractive-looking woman . . . [with] that wide mouth like a scarlet flower against the ivory of her skin," she has "white hand[s]," "nice clothes," and a perfect white husband, daughter, and a big house (14, 15, 33). In addition to her descriptions of Clare, Larsen illustrates that whiteness is superior in the fact that Clare wants to keep her white life while also dabbling back in her African American community. She doesn't want to wholly switch back over to being black because she is comfortable with her beautiful, rich, white life, more so than she could ever be if she were black, which suggests that race is not just about visual taxonomy but also about class. In this way, Clare is portrayed as passing for black rather than white, which shows that blackness can never achieve as much as whiteness, through which Larsen demonstrates that blackness is something to keep secret and be ashamed of.

Clearly, Larsen offers *Passing* as a critique of the racism imbedded into societies that place so much weight on someone's racial features and heritage/blood, which may or may not even be visible. Critic Gabrielle McIntire says of the novel, "Every character in the book, we realize, is infected by the pathologies of a society that insists difference demands fear, fear requires lying, and that passing for what one is not is safer than telling the complicated versions of truth available in a racially stratified society" (790). In other words, Larsen's characters succumb to a racist society in the very act of their passing. Rather than truthfully exploring both parts of their heritage and attempting to fit into society as biracial individuals, Irene and Clare choose to pass. Despite McIntire's claims, however, Larsen illustrates that her characters, as

individuals with African American heritage, really have no choice but to succumb to the racism of society whether they do so through passing or not.

The lack of choice that Larsen presents is masked by a semblance of choice in the act of passing, which is a part of her critique: society has individuals believe that they have a choice, but in actuality they do not. Though Larsen's novel focuses mainly on racism and passing, she also explores the idea of visible racial markings that identify individuals as a part of a certain group. Again, McIntire presents thoughts on the idea of visible, identifiable racial markings with regards to passing:

When one passes one affirms both that you will not see me for my racial designations (because I deem you incapable of knowing this without prejudice), and to will only see me as I want to be seen (because, for at least this instant, I control the semiotics of my body within a color-phobic culture). By passing racially one hopes, then, to be seen and not seen: seen but without being interpolated as a racial Other. (790).

In spite of both Clare's and Irene's ability to control the semiotics of their bodies within a color-phobic culture, Larsen demonstrates they are still affected and controlled by the color-phobic, i.e. racist, culture within her novel. Larsen, through *Passing*, shows the struggle of biracial individuals who are forced to choose between parts of themselves, all the while dealing with the inherent racism of their society, all because biracial does not and cannot exist as a category of identity.

Like Larsen through *Passing*, Danzy Senna, through *Caucasia*, explores biracial individuals in a world where biracial is an impossible category of identity. Though the time span between these novels is nearly a century, biracialism is impossible in either world, meaning, as

race scholar Daniel Grassian states, “With a growth of interracial couples and their progeny, the increased presence of the ethnically mixed threatens the legitimacy of racial and ethnic categories” (321). Because the mixing of ethnicities threatens racial and ethnic categories, mixed race gets rejected as a category in order to keep the other preexisting categories in tact. *Caucasia* explores this concept through a particular character, Birdie Lee.

Unlike Larsen’s characters, Senna’s Birdie believes that blackness is to be celebrated because African American is the ideal race in the world of this novel. This difference in idealized race between these two novels partially has to do with the time periods: *Passing* takes place during the Harlem Renaissance and *Caucasia* takes place in the 1970s (though not published until the 1990s). *Caucasia*, taking place during the Civil Rights Era, celebrates blackness as a counter narrative to the still-prevailing racism of the time.

A prime example of how blackness is established as ideal in this novel is when Birdie and her sister Cole attend a new all-black school and have to pass in order to fit in. Senna illustrates this struggle through this scene: “I stood many nights in front of the bathroom mirror, practicing how to say ‘nigger’ the way the kids in school did it, dropping the ‘er’ so that it became not a slur, but a term of endearment: *nigga*” (63). In this scene, Senna nods towards the phenomenon of reclamation: in the last few decades, as Senna illustrates above, many African Americans have taken the derogatory term/racial slur “nigger” and made it a term of endearment to others in their community. This reclaiming of a racial slur as their own is an obvious parallel to the LBGTQ+ community reclaiming the word “queer” as their own. Cole and Birdie mimic this reclamation of “nigger” that often occurs at the Nkrumah school because, as Cole tells Birdie they “talk like white girls,” and this scene shows Birdie’s attempt to combat that and talk like a “black girl” instead (53). As Grassian says, “The Afro-centric Nkrumah school that Birdie and Cole



subsequently attend forced them to reconsider their identities and becomes their first real attempt to pass. Unlike a traditional passing narrative in which the main character would attempt to pass as white, Birdie and Cole try to pass as African American and have a difficult time doing so” (324). At the all-black school, Birdie’s caucasoid features outshine her African ones, much to the other students’, and Birdie’s, disliking. Senna, through this scene, shows that racism and passing work both ways, from black to white and from white to black.

Lori Harrison-Kahan, a scholar of American literature and culture, states in response to the scene above, “Acting black does not always come easily to Birdie,” and then after she’s had some success passing, says, “Birdie is finally able to pass for black” (20). This idea of passing for black is an interesting shift from the typical passing narrative. Because here, rather than passing for white, Birdie passes for black. In either case, she would be “passing” for something that she partially is. Through this reversal Senna highlights the fact that, in terms of biracial individuals passing for black or white, they are not really passing because they belong to both races/have both black and white heritage.

Juxtaposed with Birdie’s first scene of passing is a passage from much later when she describes passing as white. She states:

Around Mona, I was usually performing, trying to impress her, but never letting her in. From the outside, it must have looked like I was changing into one of those New Hampshire Girls. I talked the talk, walked the walk, swayed my hips to the sound of heavy metal, learned to wear blue eyeliner and frosted lipstick and snap my gum. And when I heard those inevitable words come out of Mona’s mouth, Mona’s mother’s mouth, Dennis’s mouth – nigga, spic, fuckin’ darkie – I only

looked away into the distance, my features tensing slightly, sometimes a little laugh escaping. (233)

Senna clearly highlights the differences between these two instances of passing. When she's passing for black, Birdie changes the way that she dresses and talks. Yes, it's an attempt to fit in at school, but it also seems like an attempt to find her "true self" within that blackness. Here, however, Senna chose the word "performing," which is a word used often by Birdie to describe her life as a white girl, but never her life as a black girl. In that small difference, Senna exemplifies blackness as ideal and whiteness as something to avoid.

While Birdie recognizes that she's biracial/mixed race, she does not identify herself that way: it's always white or black. As critic Michele Elam states, "Passing is at the dead-center of, rather than peripheral to, questions of racial identity, including 'mixed race' identity" (751).

According to Elam, biracialism is at the center of passing, which Senna exemplifies in *Caucasia*. Even when Birdie is young, she describes seeing herself as her sister, who has obvious African features. She desires blackness and resents her whiteness, even though she is both. As the novel progresses, however, Birdie begins to accept herself as biracial. In the middle of the novel she states, "The girl was black like me – half, that is. I could spot another one immediately. But her blackness was visible. Deep-set eyes, caramel complexion. She looked tired, with dark bruises of exhaustion around her eyes. Her features were a jumble of tribes and unplanned unions – full lips, a tangle of half-nappy black curls" (223). The phrasing "a jumble of tribes and unplanned unions" creates a negative connotation around biracialism: the word "tribes" seems suggestively primitive, especially when paired with "jumbled," and "unplanned unions" makes it seem like every biracial child happened due to an accidental union between parents of different races. Similarly, Senna's emphasis here on the word "half" is not a positive one. The implication is that

“half” is negative: the word sounds dirty and undesirable, as if being half black is not good enough. At the end of the novel, however, Birdie sees a different girl and says, “She was black like me, a mixed girl” (413). Senna juxtaposes “half” and “mixed” in these two moments, illustrating that by the end of the novel, Birdie has accepted herself as both black and white, and has realized that being half, mixed, biracial, or whatever else one might call it, is not actually a bad thing.

Birdie teeters on the “color line” throughout the entirety of this novel. She constantly tries to maintain her blackness while at the same time she is forced by her mother to pass as white/Jewish. Her mom tries to placate her, which Senna shows when Birdie states, “When we were alone she also liked to remind me that I wasn’t really passing because Jews weren’t really white, more like an off-white. She said they were the closest I was going to get to black and still stay white” (140). Jews as “off-white” gets Birdie closer to black, or at least that’s what her mom believes, but Birdie still worries. Elam points out that “Her passing becomes a mode of staying black” (760). Senna portrays Birdie as needing to constantly prove to herself that her whiteness is not taking over her identity, that there is still some black in there somewhere. Birdie herself states, “Allowing a white boy inside of me would make my transformation complete, something I wasn’t ready for,” as if she were literally standing on the color line, just waiting to fall off into whiteness and leave her blackness behind (274).

Though her mother tries to placate Birdie by telling her that she’s passing for “off-white” and not white, her mother also erases her racial identity as a black woman, first by forcing her to pass and then by referring to her and Cole as different races. Senna illustrates this, writing, “But the fact that I could pass, she [Birdie’s mother] explained, with my straight hair, pale skin, my general phenotypic resemblance to the Caucasoid race, would throw them off our trail” (128). In

this scene, Birdie's mother negates Birdie's African heritage simply by pointing out how much more prevalent her Caucasian heritage appears outwardly. She negates Birdie's heritage again later, saying, "And the crazy thing is, your sister was the reason I did what I did. Having a black child made me see things differently' . . . My mother did that sometimes, spoke of Cole as if she had been her only black child. It was as if my mother believed that Cole and I were so different. As if she believed I was white" (275). Birdie's mother's discourse about her race causes her to question herself as authentic African American individual. Sika Alaine Dagbovie, a scholar in mixed race studies, states in response to Birdie's mother, "When Birdie's mother refers to Cole as her only black child, she erases Birdie from blackness, causing Birdie to feel racially invisible" (104). Senna exemplifies Birdie's racial struggle through the words of her mother, who insensitively says things that make Birdie feel like her African heritage does not matter when all she wants is for her blackness to matter.

Though both Larsen and Senna explore passing in their novels, Larsen does not discuss biracialism nearly as much as Senna does. Where Larsen's novel appears more focused on the choice that biracial individuals must make between black and white, Senna focuses on the struggle that biracial individuals face in accepting themselves as biracial. They face this difficulty because, as Dagbovie exemplifies, it's hard to acknowledge and take pride in one's multiple identities without having them exploited (99). If that's the case, then Birdie faces the choices of either having her identities and her biracialism exploited by society, or having her race erased by her mother. Through *Caucasia*, Senna exemplifies Birdie's struggles as a biracial individual and suggests that being a biracial individual will not get any easier unless several ethnicities can be celebrated at once.

Clearly, these novels establish race as the highest meaning in each of their worlds. Race is what the characters most relate to, and feel the most anxiety about. The authors illustrate this through several moments of racial passing in each text, which is also how the texts are differentiated: though meaning in each text is located within race, each text's ideal race is different. While in *Passing*, the ideal race is Caucasian, in *Caucasia*, the ideal race is African American. Looking at key moments of passing in each text, this racial split becomes obvious.

Whether they do so consciously or not, the characters in *Passing*, particularly Clare and Irene, rely on their lack of racial markings in order to pass. In a scene where they meet at the top of the Drayton, a fancy all-white hotel/restaurant, Irene does not recognize Clare despite having known her years before. Instead, she describes her as, "An attractive-looking woman . . . with those dark, almost black, eyes and that wide mouth like a scarlet flower against the ivory of her skin" (14). To Irene, Clare just looks like a pretty white woman, and Clare knows that that's how she is perceived, which is why she appears comfortable in an all-white establishment. Irene additionally notices Clare's "white hand" and her "nice clothes," further portraying Clare as a rich white woman devoid of any racial markings that would tie her to her African American heritage (14, 15).

This opening scene demonstrates how essential setting is in establishing racial boundaries. Irene herself appears comfortable at the Drayton. At first, she does not even give a thought to the fact that it's an all-white hotel; the reader is unaware of this fact until Irene thinks, "It wasn't that she was ashamed of being a Negro, or even of having it declared. It was the idea of being ejected from any place, even in the polite and tactful way in which the Drayton would probably do it, that disturbed her" (16). Though she appears comfortable at first, the longer Clare stares at her the less confident she becomes. She wonders, "Did that woman, could that woman,

somehow know that here before her very eyes on the roof of the Drayton sat a Negro” (16)? As time ticks on and Clare continues to survey her, Irene begins to doubt herself and wonders if there is some surface sign of her heritage that others can see. She then exclaims that it’s impossible, and that “white people were so stupid about such things . . . They always took her for an Italian, a Spaniard, a Mexican, or a gipsy. Never, when she was alone, had they even remotely seemed to suspect that she was a Negro” (16). If Clare and Irene do not recognize their advantage, they at least recognize their status as people of color without any color identifying them, and use that to their advantage.

Larsen uses this scene of passing, as well as others, to illustrate that Caucasian is the idealized race within the world of her novel. The Drayton is a fancy hotel only available to the white population; likely, if Irene had enjoyed a glass of tea at an establishment for African Americans, it would not have been nearly so posh. Larsen also goes out of her way to describe Clare as rich and beautiful, both adjectives not typically associated with the African American, but almost always associated with whiteness. Like in *Passing*, the idealized race in mass American culture is, and always has been, Caucasian: Jim Crow laws, the one-drop rule, and slavery all have helped to purport this ideal. In the novel, the realities are similar to those in American culture. The characters pass for white because, in the American culture found in the world of the novel (similar to real American culture), Caucasian is the advantaged race.

Another moment of passing in this novel, also demonstrating the function of setting with regard to racial boundaries as well as establishing whiteness as superior, is when Irene and Gertrude, who is also a member of the African American community, go to meet Clare’s white husband John at dinner. In this scene, Clare not only relies on her own lack of racial markings to keep her secret safe from her husband, but also on the lack of racial ties in both Irene and

Gertrude. Just as Clare was described as beautiful and rich at the Drayton, upon Irene's entrance in this scene, she describes "a sitting-room large and high, at whose windows hung startling blue draperies which triumphantly dragged attention from the gloomy chocolate-coloured furniture. And Clare was wearing a thin floating dress of the same shade of blue, which suited her and the rather difficult room to perfection" (33). The room is large, implying richness, and Clare is dressed beautifully. Her "gloomy chocolate-coloured furniture" is racially symbolic as well, brownness/blackness being equated with gloominess. Larsen describes Clare in contrast to her dark furnishings because she passes as white even though she is technically both black and white. Despite her African heritage, her husband and society believe that she is white and she lives the life of a white woman, which means that the beauty in her whiteness outweighs the gloominess in her blackness.

Conversely to Clare's description, Larsen describes Gertrude as homely and unattractive: "sunk deep in the cushions of a huge sofa, a woman staring up at her with such intense concentration that her eyelids were drawn as though the strain of that upward glance had paralysed them" (33). Gertrude is described as deeply sunk into the cushions of a huge sofa, as well as her eyelids as "paralysed," illustrating that she is stagnant, sunk into a huge cushion, and paralyzed in her life, with no hope of moving up in the world. Gertrude, like Clare, "married a white man, though it couldn't be truthfully said that she was 'passing'" (33). Gertrude's husband knows of her African American heritage. Larsen describes her the way that she does because she lives the life, in some ways, of a black woman, which means that she must be undesirable.

White superiority shows in this scene even in discussions of children. Whether this is because black children would grow up unable to pass and be at a disadvantage in society, or just because Larsen portrays black as undesired is unclear, but Clare states, "I nearly died of terror

the whole nine months before Margery was born for fear that she might be dark. Thank goodness, she turned out alright. But I'll never risk it again" (36). In Clare's case, she's afraid because she's passing, and if her child turned out black then that would reflect back on her. Gertrude, however, who is not passing, says, "nobody wants a dark child," which suggests an aversion to the African American race rather than Clare's fear of being found out (36). Even when Irene proudly states that she has a dark child, the other women pity her. Larsen's tone here is ironic, and she purposefully presents Clare and Gertrude as somewhat ridiculous for their internalized racism. Even so, the anxieties the characters face about race come through loud and clear: they cannot celebrate their identities as biracial individuals and they have to choose one race over the other, which often forces them to pass.

Conversely to Clare and Irene, *Caucasia*'s protagonist, Birdie Lee, resents her lack of racial markings. Irene, and especially Clare, use it to their advantage, but Birdie only does when she is forced to, and it makes her feel too white when she does. Senna does a lot in this novel to establish blackness as cool and desired over even whiteness. Birdie exemplifies this idea when she has to pass in order to fit into Nkrumah; each student at the end of class had to stand and say "Black is beautiful," and when it's Birdie's turn, someone replies, "Guess you must be ugly" (45). Here, Senna establishes whiteness as undesirable and inferior to blackness. The kids at the school "thought this was supposed to be a black school," and Birdie wasn't black enough for their tastes (43). In an attempt to fit in at school, Birdie begins to change her speech to sound "more black," as Senna demonstrates in an example I cited earlier: she tries to say "nigger" as "nigga" instead (63). Again, this example also shows the African American race as superior as Birdie attempts to mimic their speech patterns: "it took a while, but sometime later that fall at



Nkrumah, my work paid off” (63). As Birdie began to change herself and pass, she finally got what she wanted, which was to fit into an African American community.

Another scene in which Senna establishes blackness as superior happens much later, when Birdie is passing as Jesse Goldman, i.e. passing as white. Birdie sees “a group of black and Puerto Rican teenagers . . . smoking and goofing around and had a boom box. It played some kind of talking music, the first I had ever heard of its kind,” and Birdie was so enthralled with it that she walked over (260). She “clapped my hands, laughing at their expertise and began to move to the music. Mona stood stiffly by my side” (261). Senna describes Mona, the white girl, as stiff. She’s not dancing and she seems boring, while Birdie dances along with the group of teenagers. Moreover, this scene suggests that race is located within culture, such as arts and music. If Mona had heard music she was more familiar with, i.e. “whiter” music, perhaps she would have danced too, but the music was too unfamiliar, i.e. too black, for her.

Another moment of black superiority comes a few pages later, when Jim, the lover of Birdie’s mother, gets punched by a group of black teenagers. Instead of feeling bad for Jim, Birdie “slid low in the seat. I was scared, but also embarrassed. Jim looked like a fool lying there, holding his face and groaning. I didn’t want the teenagers to think I belonged with these white people in the car” (264). Again, Senna describes Jim, the white man, as a fool, and Birdie doesn’t want the black teenagers to think that she was one of them, that she was white, that she was a fool too. Even when passing as white, Birdie wants to establish herself as separate and as black. She feels at a disadvantage because of her lack of racial markings and, in spite of them, works to show her African heritage.

Similarly to *Passing*, the characters in *Caucasia* cannot celebrate themselves as biracial individuals: they, too, have to decide to act black or white based on the visible taxonomy of their

bodies. Senna exemplifies this when Birdie tells her sister Cole, “They say you don’t have to choose. But the things is, you do. Because there are consequences if you don’t,” and Cole replies, “yeah, and there are consequences if you do” (408). Senna did the best that she could, portraying blackness as superior to whiteness in contrast to the typical American belief, but even in *Caucasia*, biracial proves to be an impossible, unstable category of identity.

Going hand in hand with the struggle biracial individuals face in each novel is the idea of choice with regards to biracialism and passing. The concept of choice in passing is complicated: on the one hand, the characters have to choose on race over the other. On the other hand, though it’s not portrayed in this way, it can be argued that the characters have a sense of agency because they are able to make that choice, to pass, and to live as black or white as they choose. However, each author clearly illustrates that their characters have a lack of agency in their ability to pass, that they are forced into it in a lot of ways. In each respective novel, the authors present the idea of agency in the choice a different way, and it corresponds to the idealized race in each novel.

In *Passing*, Nella Larsen originally presents the agency that Clare has as flashy, new, and interesting, but by the end of the novel has revealed that biracial individuals are forced into their choices about race/passing, which does not really give them agency at all. Elam states that individuals pass “as a strategy of survival, as a means to economic gain,” which is in part why Clare makes the choices that she does (749). The choice is never really Clare’s, however, and in her death Larsen masks Clare’s supposed “agency” with a semblance of choice in her own actions/life. She achieves this by presenting Clare’s life choice as a good and luxurious one: Clare’s house has “a sitting-room large and high, at whose windows hung startling blue draperies which triumphantly dragged attention from the gloomy chocolate-coloured furniture. And Clare was wearing a thin floating dress of the same shade of blue, which suited her and the rather

difficult room to perfection” (33). In this scene, it seems like Clare did have a choice, and in that choice, agency. Her choice to live as a white woman with riches and beauty galore is portrayed as the obvious one, the right one.

Larsen juxtaposes scenes of Clare’s beauty and riches with a much later scene when her husband discovers the truth of her heritage, angrily exclaiming, “So you’re a nigger, a damned dirty nigger!” (111). On the same page, Clare falls to her death, which Larsen uses to illustrate that Clare’s presumed agency is a lie: she could not live as a biracial individual, and so she died. This scene shows that Clare was forced to make a choice between her heritages. Either way, she had to pass, and therefore she never had agency. When she was young she chose to live as a white woman, and eventually wanted to go back on that choice, but by then it was too late for her. She had chosen to live as a white woman, and there was no going back, because that goes against the racial categories. Biracial cannot exist as a category, so Clare cannot switch back and forth between her heritages as she pleases because that implies biracialism. When she tries to switch back and forth, she dies, because she never really had a choice, and therefore, no agency.

In *Caucasia*, Senna presents the subject of agency/choice both similarly and differently to Larsen’s presentation. Part of this has to do with the time difference in the novels, Larsen’s occurring in the late 1920’s and Senna’s in the 1970’s. Race relations in the United States were much different during each of these time periods, and as such Senna presents Birdie with more agency and choice than Larsen presents Clare with. However, Senna doesn’t present Birdie with a choice until very late in the novel. At first, she portrays Birdie as along for her mother’s ride with no choice in the matter of who she was to be, illustrating that it’s due to her caucasoid features: “my straight hair, pale skin, my general phenotypic resemblance to the Caucasoid race” is what caused her mom to create their identities as “a half-Jewish girl named Jesse Goldman,

with a white mama named Sheila” (128, 131). She has no choice in the matter, and when on the run, she’s never told when she’ll get to see her sister again or even what’s really happening.

During this time, she begins to learn, as Grassian states, “how destructive arbitrary boundaries of race or ethnicity can be. This is a realization that runs contrary to contemporary multicultural theory, which champions the equality of cultures but seeks to keep their boundaries in tact”

(335). Birdie realizes that, in focusing on racial boundaries, she has been forced to choose a part of herself while throwing away the other parts. Because of racial boundaries, Senna illustrates that Birdie could not be the mixed race person that she wanted to be, but could only be “half”:

“In those years, I felt myself to be incomplete – a gray blur, a body in motion, forever galloping toward completion – half a girl, half-caste, half-mast, and half-baked, not quite ready for consumption” (137). She has no choice but to endure her mom’s paranoia for years on end, never feeling whole and forced into pretending to be white/Jewish/anything but what she wanted to be.

When Birdie expresses to her mother discomfort with her lack of choice/forced passing, her mother, “liked to remind me that I wasn’t really passing because Jews weren’t really white, more like an off-white. She said they were the closest I was going to get to black and still stay white,” hiding Birdie’s lack of agency in the idea that she wasn’t “really passing” (140).

In the beginning of her novel, Senna illustrates the lack of choice her characters have due to the impossibility of biracial bodies in America, writing: “In a country as racist as this, you’re either black or you’re white,” making clear that there is no other choice available, and in that forced choice, no agency (27). Other than the society, in a lot of ways Birdie is not given a choice because of her own body: “There were no curls, no full lips, still no signs of my sister’s face in my own. There had been a time when I thought I was just going through a phase. That if I was patient and good enough, I would transform into a black swan” (180). Outwardly, Birdie

looks and talks and seems like a white girl. In a novel where blackness is upheld as the ideal race, however, this is a problem for her. As Dagbovie states, “By depicting Birdie’s painful awareness of the absurdity of her dream, Senna critiques the impossible standards by which is defined blackness. As a biracial subject, Birdie becomes entrapped into this restrictive criterion” (105). In other words, Birdie wants to be black. Her own body forces her to choose her white heritage over her black because of the way she looks, and Senna exemplifies that there is no agency in that: there is nothing that Birdie can do to change it, because she cannot live biracially.

Much later in the novel, however, Senna presents Birdie with agency. She chooses her fate and identity, finally, after many years of living what she saw as a lie. Juxtaposed with Larsen’s scene of Bellew finding out about Clare is Senna’s scene of when Birdie tells her father how things really are. She says:

Fuck the canaries in the fucking coal mines. You left me. You left me with Mum, knowing she was going to disappear. Why did you only take Cole? Why didn’t you take me? If race is so make-believe, why did I go with Mum? You gave me to Mum ‘cause I looked white. You don’t think that’s real? Those are the facts.  
(393).

Birdie recognizes that because of her white skin, her father left her behind with her mother, with no choice but to live as a white girl, and when he denies the accuracy of this and the existence of race, she says, “I got what he was saying, but I also knew what I had seen and heard in New Hampshire. Who I had become. That was a real as anything else” (396). Here, nearing the end of the novel, Senna gives Birdie a choice to be who she wants. As Harrison-Kahan says, “for Birdie, her time spent as a Jewish girl, in some sense, leads her to recognize that, despite her deceiving white appearance, she can *choose* blackness” (38). Birdie gets to decide, which is

something Clare could never have once she had lived as a white woman. Birdie has a choice, she decides to leave and to be who she wants, but Clare has no choice. Senna portrays Birdie as taking ownership of her life and her identity, finding herself in other people, saying of a girl on a bus, “she was black like me, a mixed girl,” and truly choosing who and where she wanted to be, and who she wanted to be with, something that Clare never could have gotten.

Ultimately, these two novels illustrate the impossibility of the biracial body in America, and the racial passing that occurs as a result of that. In *Passing*, Larsen exemplifies the absolute impossibility of mixed-race individuals through Clare’s imminent death. In *Caucasia*, Senna, too, demonstrates biracial as an impossible category of identity, only granting Birdie choice and agency once she has realized the barriers of society that have held her back for years. Even then, Senna highlights the difficulty that Birdie will face if she attempts to live biracially. Both of these novels feature biracial individuals who were forced into passing partially because of their circumstances, but more so due to their multiple heritages. The characters in either novel have bodies lacking in any visible racial markings that tied them to the African American race, which is why they are able to and have to pass. As Elam says, “Passing is at the dead-center of, rather than peripheral to, questions of racial identity, including 'mixed race' identity,” a fact that both Larsen and Senna explore in their novels featuring biracial individuals who pass (751).

## Chapter Two: Androgyny, the Closet, and Performativity—Complications of Passing and Sexuality

“Are you a boy or a girl?” This question, so familiar to any American youth with any degree of androgyny, demonstrates several dynamics that are central to gender and identity formation. First, the question describes the impulse to categorize others. Second, as Leslie Feinberg describes in her novel *Stone Butch Blues*, it demonstrates a broad feeling of authority in the questioner; as she writes, ““Are you a boy or a girl?’ I’d drop my eyes in shame, never questioning their right to ask” (16). Androgyny and the concept of “the closet” are important challenges to the concept of passing as discussed in the first chapter.

Feinberg’s *Stone Butch Blues* focuses mostly on sex/gender passing, which provides a good place to open a conversation on the topic. The novel follows the childhood and early adulthood of Jess Goldberg, who was androgynous as a young child and grew up to be a he/she/butch lesbian. Jess constantly feels separated from her family, peers, coworkers, etc., and longs to fit in somewhere. This novel goes well with a conversation of racial passing because, similarly to race, society is categorized by gender as well. Illustrating this concept, Feinberg, through Jess, describes androgyny as something “wrong”: “No one ever offered a name for what was wrong with me. That’s what made me afraid it was really bad. I only came to recognize its melody through this constant refrain: ‘Is that a boy or a girl?’” (13). Because being unable to put someone in a standard category creates discomfort in those who count on categorizing people, Jess began to feel a sense of shame in her inability to be categorized by others. Feinberg demonstrates the irrational anger that people feel when they cannot tell if someone is male or female, and so Jess became accustomed to strangers squabbling about whether her name was

really a girl's name, and constant questioning looks and comments regarding her gender, believing that it must be their right to wonder.

Fitting well into this conversation of passing and gender/sexuality is the transgender person. A transgender person is someone whose self-identifying gender is different than the gender they were born as, and so often transgender individuals will attempt to change their appearance and anatomy to line up with their self-identity. Transgender is different from androgyny, which is the combination of masculine and feminine characteristics. As shown in the introduction through the Caitlyn Jenner example, transgenderism is involved in discussions of passing. It's a complicated concept because of difficulty in knowing which way transgender individuals are considered to be passing: either passing as their transgendered self, or passing during their lives before they became transgender. Transgenderism falls into the discussion for *Stone Butch Blues* because Jess, at least for a part of the novel, takes hormones to pass as a man/become a transgender man, which defies societal categories of gender just as Jess's androgyny did. As critic Elyssa Warkentin states, "Jess exists at the intersection of transgender and androgyny in the overarching realm of a disruptive third gender position. Jess's body refuses categorization as either butch woman or transsexual man, thus disrupting various forms of stereotypical gender and sexual categorization" (164). Jess's disruptive third gender position, along with her lacking gender categorization, lead to the alienation she feels. Her alienation could be argued as the force that causes her to pass as a man, so that people, especially employers, can finally categorize her.

As a result of the need to categorize people by gender, everything is gendered: hats, clothes, toys, names, etc. Though these gendered objects are a result of categorization, they also lead to a gendered society, and, as exemplified in Feinberg's novel, the inability for people to



accept anything other than preconceived notions of gender. In her novel, Feinberg explores conventional genders and people—including family members, coworkers, and law enforcement officers—who are bent on not accepting anything else. Feinberg demonstrates this denial of unconventional genders through a conversation that Jess has with another he-she, Ed:

“Can you pass?” I asked her. Ed shook her head. “It’s like I’m not taken for a man or a woman anymore. They see me as something in between. That’s scary. I wish I could hurry up and get to the part where they just think I’m a man.” “But Ed, people always act like we’re half-woman, half-man” “It’s true. But now they don’t know what I am and it drives them nuts.” (149).

Through this passage, Feinberg shows that there is some sort of third gender at play here. Ed is not taken for a man or for a woman, and despite Jess pointing out that they were always seen as a mixture of the two, Ed says that it is different now that she’s trying to pass for a man. Rather than being both a man and a woman, she is in between. She is neither man nor woman, especially not to others, and it “drives them nuts” because they cannot decide what she is.

Later, after Jess has begun passing too, a potential employer says that she “look[s] like a clean-cut young man,” and in response Jess thinks, “Only a short time before I had been a monster” (174). Feinberg illustrates here that Jess cannot be herself because that’s monstrous, to borrow a term from Rosemarie Garland-Thompson. Jess could not live somewhere in between male and female because the world of Feinberg’s novel would not accept that. As critic Jay Prosser states, “She chooses, instead, an incoherently sexed body, ending up in an uneasy borderland between man and woman, in which she fails to pass as either” (489). This concept of the borderland between man and woman mirrors the idea of the racial color line: Jess could only live on either side of the gender line, but not on top of it.

Because of this borderland between man and woman, i.e. the gender line, androgynous individuals are likely to feel forced into passing as one gender or the other rather than remaining unrecognizable and unable to be categorized. As Feinberg illustrates through Jess, passing is not all it's cracked up to be: "I slowed my pace as she crossed the street and hurried away. She was afraid of me. That's when I began to understand that passing changed almost everything. Two things didn't change: I still had to work for a living, and I still lived in fear, only now it was the constant terror of discovery" (173). Because she had a hard time finding a job as a he-she, Jess was forced into passing by gender constraints and a need to work. The fear that she lived with before passing, however, did not dissipate: it just transformed into a different kind of fear, suggesting that she could not be truly happy while passing or not passing. Theorist Cat Moses states that the novel "exposes the quotidian practices through which fixed gendered and sexual identities are culturally constructed and systematically imposed" (74). Feinberg, through her novel, illustrates that family, teachers, coworkers, employers, and other members of society believe so strongly in a gender binary that if individuals cannot or will not fit into one of the two accepted gender spaces within that binary, those people must either pass or be considered monsters.

In addition to showing how the people and situations around her has forced Jess to pass, Feinberg demonstrates Jess's ever growing unease with herself the longer that she passes. Upon being referred to as "cute" by some girls, Jess thinks, "All my life I'd been told everything about me was really twisted and sick. But if I was a man, I was 'cute.' Acceptance of me as a he felt like an ongoing indictment of me as a he-she" (178). Jess was forced into passing in order to gain acceptance in important places like the work place, but finds that it was not acceptance that she was looking for. The acceptance erased her as a he-she, making her simply a he. She exemplifies

her unease further, saying, “What I saw reflected in the mirror was not a man, but I couldn’t recognize the he-she. My face no longer revealed the contrasts of my gender. I could see my passing self, but even I could no longer see the more complicated me beneath my surface” (222). With this passage, Feinberg illustrates Jess’s struggle feeling trapped while trying to fit into a gender category, all the while just wishing to be herself again.

Because employers, law enforcement, and other groups within Feinberg’s novel could not accept Jess as she was, she lost everything. She was forced to pass as a man in order to simply find work, and therefore she was also forced to give up her relationship, her home, and everything just so that she could survive. Even as she began to fit in as a man and find work, people still made her feel unwelcome: “Before, strangers had raged at me for being a woman who crossed a forbidden boundary. Now they really didn’t know what my sex was, and that was unimaginable, terrifying to them” (225). This concept of a forbidden boundary within society is interesting and complicated. Because Jess did not fit the mold of a typical, conventional woman, because she was too androgynous, she had crossed some “forbidden boundary.” The boundary that Jess had crossed into meant that as a woman, she was too manly, too masculine, too much of something that she should not have been, and that bothered people, but not as much as being unable to decipher her gender: that, as Feinberg pointed out, terrified them. The possibility of a non-gendered person is scary because it is foreign, and impossible to the people in Feinberg’s novel who push a boy/girl binary onto every person.

Through her novel, Feinberg attempts to show the struggle that androgynous, transgender, he-she, and any atypically gendered individuals face in their families, schools, work, and any other place that enforces strict gender rules and binaries. Similarly to how there is

no category or place for the biracial individual in *Passing* and *Caucasia*, Feinberg illustrates that there is also no space for the non-gendered or androgynous body.

Feinberg's novel offers a good transition into discussions of gender and sexuality more broadly. Judith Butler refers to gender as a performative action, and in her article "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," she champions discussing gender as a continuous set of performed actions. This idea of gender as performance sets up the complicated structure surrounding passing and sexuality as Butler critiques the same strict societal structures surrounding gender that Feinberg gets at in her novel.

Conversely to the societal structures set up in *Stone Butch Blues*, Butler argues that gender is not a stable category of identity. She says, "In this sense, gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed: rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through stylized repetition of acts" (519). This view of gender does not fit the prevalent societal views of gender in which it is seen as the cut and dry absolute truth about a person. Instead, Butler sees it not as a category of identity, but a process that everyone learns and then continually repeats.

Though it does not fit with the views of the society, Butler's idea of gender fits in with the characters' actions in *Stone Butch Blues* in that if gender is a learned performance, Jess does not perform hers right, and she is then ridiculed for it by people who do perform their genders right. On this issue of performing womanhood, Butler states, "To be female is, according to that distinction, a facticity which has no meaning, but to be a woman is to have become a woman, to compel the body to conform to an historical idea of 'woman,' to induce the body to become a cultural sign" (522). Jess fails to have become a historically sound woman and a cultural sign of womanhood. Even though gender, according to Butler, is not an identifiable form of

identity, society still cannot identify Jess as a woman. She has failed to conform to the historical idea of a woman that her peers, employers, and family demand.

These groups of society that Feinberg lays out in *Stone Butch Blues* discriminates not only against Jess and not only against all butches, but the femmes too. She illustrates this discrimination in a scene where Jess is talking to her lover, Theresa:

“I think it’s because they draw a line—women on one side and men on the other. So women they think look like men are the enemy. And women who look like me are sleeping with the enemy. We’re too feminine for their taste.” “Wait a minute,” I stopped her. “We’re too masculine and you’re too feminine? Whatdya have to do, put your index fingers in a meter and test in the middle?” (136).

Feinberg shows that the women, employers, coworkers, law enforcement officers, etc. within her novel excommunicate femmes as well as butches, because neither group fits the norm of what is historically female: “Discrete genders are a part of what ‘humanizes’ individuals within contemporary culture; indeed, those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished” (Butler 522). Butler argues here exactly what Feinberg illustrates through *Stone Butch Blues*: that people who perform their genders “right” are humanized for it. Feinberg’s characters clearly do not perform their genders right and are dehumanized, even by law enforcement officers, for it.

Still, despite Feinberg’s illustration of social injustice for the femmes and butches in her novel, that demonstration does not make the dehumanization of those groups dissipate. Just as society places so much pressure on the “true,” dominant race of biracial individuals, society also places a lot of pressure on “true” gender and gender identity, which makes it hard for androgynous individuals—or opposite of androgynous, in the case of femmes—to fit in. As Butler states, “What is called gender identity is a performative accomplishment compelled by

social sanction and taboo” (520). Here, Butler points out that gender identity is okay if it is socially sanctioned, i.e. boy/girl, but if it’s a social taboo, i.e. androgynous/too masculine/feminine/etc., then those individuals can expect to be ridiculed as those are not socially acceptable gender identities. She also states that gender identity is performed either way, whether it falls into social sanction or social taboo, meaning that even though Feinberg’s characters may not be performing their genders right, they are still performing them. Though that performance doesn’t get them too far socially, and they are constantly ridiculed for it, they are still performing their gender, they are just not performing gender acts that are historically correct as far as society is concerned.

Though Butler continually points out that gender is a performance, she demonstrates that it is tremendously powerful. She discusses how all genders are performed, including those frowned upon by society, because gender is all an act that everyone had to learn from somewhere. She says, “In other words, the acts by which gender is constituted bear similarities to performative acts within theatrical contexts” (521). Going along with this idea of acting as in the theater, Feinberg writes: “she finally said how she hates this society for what it’s done to ‘women like me’ who hate themselves so much they have to look and act like men” (5-6). Putting the words of Butler up against the words of Feinberg brings clarity to what both writers were getting at with regards to gender. In *Stone Butch Blues*, Jess and women like her *act* like men. They act in a way that does not line up to how they look outwardly to their society, but they are still acting, as if in a play, like men. Butler’s article shows that not only do people like Jess and her peers act their genders as if they were actors in society, but everyone does, even those people ridiculing Jess: the only difference is that they act theirs “right,” which makes them feel like they have the right to ridicule anyone who does not act their gender right.

People put pressure on many categories of identity to determine what a person is like and whether they are worthy of respect or ridicule. Race and gender are just two of these categories, and both are important. For Butler, gender is especially important: “Performing one’s gender wrong initiates a set of punishments both obvious and indirect, and performing it well provides the reassurance that there is an essentialism of gender identity after all” (528). The people in Feinberg's novel, notably family and peers, feel that, because Jess and others like her perform their genders wrong, they have the right to punish and ridicule them always. As Butler points out, punishing these individuals instills into the people doing the punishing, in a vicious cycle, reassurance that gender identity is essential, which then causes them to punish those who aren't performing right, which then reassures them that gender identity is essential, etc.

As I mentioned before, even the law enforcement officers in Feinberg's novel feel obligated to punish those who perform their genders wrong. In fact, they not only feel obligated, but they act like it is both their right and their duty to do so:

The cops picked out the most stone butch of them all to destroy with humiliation, a woman everyone said “wore a raincoat in the shower.” We heard they stripped her, slow, in front of everyone in the bar, and laughed at her trying to cover up her nakedness. Later she went mad, they said. Later she hung herself. (8).

In this passage, Feinberg really demonstrates how hatred of a society can turn into hatred for oneself. The joke that the most stone butch woman “wore a raincoat in the shower” exemplifies a feeling of intense self-loathing, illustrating that even in private, this woman hated herself so much that she had to be covered. She hated herself as a woman, and that hatred turned to madness. The cops punished her for not performing her gender right. They punished her for passing. She felt like she was truly a man, or at least not meant to be feminine, so much so that

she could not stand to see herself even when she was by herself, and so she dressed like a man/not femininely. In a way she was passing, but in a way, if she had stayed feminine, that would have been passing too, but it's unlikely that she would have been punished for her passing in that case. Nonetheless, she died, because she was humiliated by her female body and the cops, peers, employers, etc. that constantly ridiculed her for being who she was. She did not perform acts that were historical of a woman, and so she could not survive.

The butch who hung herself did not perform her gender right, and neither did Jess. Though Jess does not die in Feinberg's novel, she too is punished for her androgyny, for her lack of feminine actions, and it breaks her in ways unimaginable. Though that androgyny is normal from Jess's point of view, it is outlandish from the view of society. Butler touches on this view of society and how it gets established: "Hence, gender is an act which has been rehearsed, much as a script survives the particular actors who make use of it, but which requires individual actors in order to be actualized and reproduced as reality once again" (526). Gender is rehearsed and acted, like how a script survives by passing from actor to actor, meaning that society rehearses and passes down rules and roles with regards to gender. Though the dominant views of gender within society are passed down, they still require individuals to keep acting them in order for those views to be reality. Because individuals in society's continue to act according to societal views, those views continue to exist, which then allows ridicule to fall on those who do not act their gender according to societal views.

Looking at Feinberg's novel through the lens of Butler's critical article sheds light on dominant societal views of gender and how rules surrounding gender are established. Though Butler's work doesn't relieve any of the horror produced by the social injustice in Feinberg's novel, it does show how some of those injustices begin to take place. Ultimately, through her



article, Butler argues that gender is performed by actors, as if in a play, and it is passed down through society, requiring individuals to perform it and make it into reality. In a way, Butler is arguing that because everyone performs their gender, whether their gender is typical or atypical, then everyone is passing, because everyone is just putting on a performance. Through her article, Butler argues that, similarly to biracialism, gender in general is an unstable category of identity, which is why so much confusion often surrounds gender and gender identity.

Butler's article, which went well with discussion of Feinberg's novel, also provides a good transition into Alison Bechdel's *Funhome: A Family Tragicomic*. Bechdel's graphic memoir features Alison's dad who "passes" as straight his entire life, and Alison who refuses to follow this example. This memoir brings up exactly what Butler meant about the performativity of gender in several instances: namely, Alison's dad attempting to be ultra masculine/the head of the household and trying to instill femininity in his daughter to combat his queer tendencies. This dynamic of performative gender is more complicated in this context than the passing taking place in Feinberg's novel, and Alison's dad would more often be described in terms of being closeted than as passing.

As far as performativity goes, Alison constantly tries not to perform the historically feminine acts that Butler lays out. Bechdel writes, "But I hate pink! I hate flowers!" (7). She attempts to not conform to society's expectations of her as a young girl, despite her dad's constant pushing for exactly that. Bechdel illustrates that her father's pushing for her to be feminine has to do with his failed performance of his gender: "In this regard, it was like being raised not by Jimmy but by Martha Stewart" (13). She openly compares her father's habits to that of a woman, demonstrating that his tendency to push femininity in her stems from his lack of masculinity. He wanted his daughter to succeed where he failed.

Despite their differences, both Alison and her father are alike in their struggles with their sexuality. As critic Robin Lydenberg states, “Both father and daughter are drawn to the idea of a house that camouflages (even as it inadvertently reveals) their secret desires. Bruce Bechdel constructs a heteronormative family home within which his interior design obsession nevertheless exposes him, in the young Alison's judgement, as a 'sissy' and a 'pansy' (ibid.: 90 and 93)” (59). Though Alison’s dad projects a heteronormative family and home outwardly, the interior of his life and interior design of his home demonstrate something different. He passes his home and family off as heteronormative in order to pass/closet himself as heteronormative, but he is ultimately unsuccessful: “But would an ideal husband and father have sex with teenage boys?” (Bechdel 17). This line implies that Alison’s father failed to successfully perform his gender, as well as that her father was lying about his sexuality, i.e. passing as a heterosexual, ideal husband and father. The accusation inherent here about Alison’s father’s lies is complex, similarly to how biracial individuals are perceived to be lying about part of their heritage, the implication being that either black or white is more true to their identity than the other. However, if neither part of their heritage is a lie, if, in fact, biracial individuals are just as truly black as they are white, who is to say that Alison’s father is really lying? He has had relations with men and women and perhaps enjoys both and believes that both are equally true to his sexuality. Despite the possibility that he enjoys both, Bechdel clearly lays out that he is passing at the very least in the form of how he presents his family life.

Though similar to racial passing in some ways, the idea of being closeted differs in that it is more performance based than racial passing is. Bechdel illustrates this performativity, writing, “His [her father’s] death was quite possibly his consummate artifice, his masterstroke. ‘I can’t believe it. Such a good man’” (27). Here, Bechdel states that her father’s death was his

“consummate artifice” and his “masterstroke,” implying that he had had many artifices, all of which were masterful. This image of her father is juxtaposed with a man at the funeral telling her that her father was “such a good man,” but Alison knew that all along he was only pretending to be. He was passing as a good man.

Bechdel’s father’s performance as a good man and father is a direct result of his performance as straight, i.e. his closeted homosexual tendencies, which he felt he had a duty to hide because of the strict rules surrounding gender that Butler lays out in her article. On the issue of Bechdel’s father’s performance as straight as well as his obsession with the décor of his home, Lydenberg writes: “Rather than presenting the reassuring spectacle of masculine competence and order as we see it on TV makeovers, Bruce's labours always hint at something missing or amiss, a suggestion of masquerade or cover-up that hides some gender ‘deficit’ or transgression” (59). In other words, rather than presenting Bruce as a manly man who fixes the house, Bechdel illustrates that he is meticulous and precise about even the smallest detail in his home, and in that behavior there is something not stereotypically manly. Lydenberg is saying that it, in fact, does not just suggest something not typical of a man, but even more so suggests that he is hiding some sort of gender deficit, which only becomes obvious in the precision he uses when it comes to the way that his house looks.

Bechdel illustrates that she, like her father, struggled performing acts stereotypically feminine. Bechdel, however, unlike her father, refused to pass and to closet herself, writing: “As I told my girlfriend what had happened, I cried quite genuinely for about two minutes,” and “‘I am a lesbian.’ My homosexuality remained at that point purely theoretical, an untested hypothesis” (46, 58). By discussing her girlfriend, and openly writing “I am a lesbian,” even though it was an “untested hypothesis” at the time that she describes in the story, Bechdel very

clearly takes herself out of the closet that her father hid within. She refused to pass as a straight girl living in a heteronormative society and instead chose to live as her true self, despite the ridicule she likely received from peers for being a lesbian.

Juxtaposing these passages about her sexuality with ones of her father's, Bechdel demonstrates the differences in a closeted, i.e. her father's, sexuality vs. an open one, i.e. hers. She writes, "My father's death was a queer business—queer in every sense of that multivalent word," and "My father had been having sex with men for years and not telling anyone" (57, 59). Contrasted with Bechdel's "I am a lesbian" line are these lines, Bechdel calling her father queer even in his death and telling readers that he had been having gay sex for years without saying so to anyone. She very obviously and openly illustrates her sexuality while showing that her father hid his. In fact, critic Rebecca Scherr argues that Bechdel, from the beginning of the graphic memoir, shows through the images she uses that her father is closeted in comparison to her openness. Scherr states:

With Bruce taking a picture of his wife and three children on the steps of their home, Bechdel's caption reads: "He used his skillful artifice not to make things, but to make things appear to be what they are not... That is to say, impeccable" (16). Already indicating a rupture in the image of the cohesive family, Bechdel then queers this moment almost immediately. (43).

By saying that Bechdel "queers this moment almost immediately," Scherr means that in this moment, Bechdel has already illustrated that her father is a master of artifice and making things appear perfect, in turn indicating that he's good at hiding imperfections. Because the implication is that Bechdel's father is good at hiding things, Scherr argues that Bechdel has queered this

moment because the imperfection that Bruce Bechdel hides is the imperfections that he locates within his sexuality.

As far as the graphics/images within this graphic memoir go, it's interesting that Bechdel chose to tell her story in this way. The memoir features several drawings of family portraits/old pictures that actually exist, and the act of telling her story through these drawings in itself demonstrates that the small town society viewed her family only through the surface level acts that her father portrayed. Because Bechdel drew depictions of these images rather than copying them directly into her memoir, however, she clued her readers in on the imperfections not obvious to the society described in the story. Scherr writes:

Throughout the text Bruce is framed as attempting to control the outward image of the family through photographic imagery and his complete control over the aesthetics of the family home; this, Bechdel shows, was his way of manipulating the surface of things in order to hide in plain sight. It is Bechdel who literally handles things differently, transforming her own private universe into public spectacle through drawing and through outing. (45).

In a way, if Bechdel had chosen to put the actual photos into her memoir rather than drawing them, her book would have been passing and closeted in the same way that her father was. Because she drew them instead, the memoir is out in the same way that she is. Despite the society that believed in the façade that her father presented, and despite facing ridicule from her society by jumping out of the closet that her father hid in, Bechdel drew the pictures and blatantly stated her sexuality in order to not pass and not closet herself.

Bechdel, through *Fun Home*, illustrates that though passing/closeting is an option in cases of sexuality, it's not always necessary despite the ridicule faced from society. In fact, in the

memoir, Bechdel survives happily as a lesbian who is out, but her father, who passed/closeted himself for his whole life, did not survive. American society is heteronormative and based in stereotypes, and through *Fun Home*, Bechdel shows that in spite of the heteronormativity of society, LGBTQ+ individuals don't have to perform according to societal standards and can survive despite the ridicule.

This concept of closeting/being closeted/coming out of the closet paired with gender performance as well as passing is a complicated set of issues. Both Feinberg and Bechdel begin to delve into these issues, but Ellen Samuels really dissects them in her critical article about the discourse of "coming out" of the closet.

Part of the difficulty faced in coming out is that people have to come out in the first place. In a heteronormative culture, everyone is presumed to be straight, and, as discussed already, if they perform in a way unexpected of them because of the way they appear outwardly, they are ridiculed for it. In her article, "My Body, My Closet: Invisible Disability and the Limits of Coming-Out Discourse," Ellen Samuels discusses the phenomenon of having to come out. She writes, "Unlike dual or multiple labels such as male and female, and black, Asian, Latina, and white, the labels of nondisabled and heterosexuality are always presumed 'unless otherwise stated'" (317). Though I would argue that even though gender and racial categories have dual or multiple labels, gender and race is often assumed as well, Samuels illustrates here that unless someone comes out or explicitly states that they are not straight, society will assume that they are. Sometimes, even if someone has come out, they are still perceived as straight, because they do not perform typical acts that signal their sexuality is something other than straight.

In Feinberg's novel, Jess is mostly met with anger from society at her androgyny rather than an automatic categorization as straight and female. As I discussed, however, she still

performs specific acts that evoke the angry reaction she receives from others. Similarly to how Butler discusses the performativity of gender in general, Samuels combines it with the concept of coming out. She states: “In both queer and disabled contexts, however, coming out can entail a variety of meanings, acts, commitments” (319). Just as being male or female requires a constant set of performances by actors, Samuels argues here that in coming out, queer individuals must also be actors putting on performances in order to be perceived as queer. In other words, a consequence of coming out is that individuals must act in a way typically and recognizably queer in order for society to accept them that way, otherwise they may still not be perceived in the way that they hope to be when they come out.

This need to perform queerness, however, brings up a host of other issues surrounding being queer and acting queer. Samuels states, “Clearly, simply voicing one’s identity in any and all situations is a far-from-perfect solution to the dilemmas presented by invisibility. In addition, the general cultural prejudice against such statements means that embarrassment may be the least disturbing negative response they evoke” (322). In other words, because LBGTQ+ individuals often appear straight, their sexuality is “invisible,” meaning that they have two choices: either pass as straight because that’s how they are already perceived, or perform their identity very specifically in a way that lines up with societies stereotypes, stereotypes that are often found offensive.

Even if a queer individual chooses not to pass, if they choose the option of performing so that society perceives them not as straight but as whatever they are coming out as, that’s not the end of their story. It’s not as simple as coming out just one time, as Samuels articulates, “I believe that the majority of us find that, even after our own internal shift, and even after a dozen gay pride marches, we must still make decisions about coming out on a daily basis, in personal,

professional, and political contexts” (319). So, even if a queer person has come out and they live the life of a queer person including performing the stereotypes of society, people will still perceive them as straight sometimes. They will have to make decisions every day to tell their friends, coworkers, even family that they’re not straight. Often against their will, queer people are forced to pass as straight simply because they are perceived that way in their heteronormative society. They pass by default, a term that Samuels coins in her article.

Passing by default happens when parts of someone’s identity is taken for granted/ignored because it’s invisible. If people cannot see it, then it must not be there. I suppose this concept of passing by default could apply even racially, especially in cases such as Birdie Lee’s from Senna’s *Caucasia*. Her society cannot see her black heritage, and therefore they deem her to be white, i.e. she passes by default. Rather than race, however, Samuels discusses it in terms of invisible disability and sexuality: “Such condemnations of passing often conflate two dynamics: passing deliberately (as implied by the term hidden) and passing by default, as it were” (321). In cases of sexuality, if not performed specifically so that society can see it, individuals will be considered straight and therefore pass by default regardless of whether they have previously come out of the closet or not.

The concept of passing by default is different than closeting/being closeted. For example, Alison’s father in *Fun Home* is not passing by default because he has not come out. In an interesting way, passing by default requires the individual to have come out already. It is society’s ignorance of someone having come out that causes that person to pass by default. If Alison’s father does not pass by default because he has not come out, then he must be participating in the other kind of passing Samuels mentions, which is passing deliberately. She articulates this split between passing deliberately and by default near the beginning of her article:



The uneasy, often self-destroying tension between appearance and identity, the social scrutiny that refuses to accept statements of identity without “proof”; and, finally, the discursive and practical connections between coming out – in all meanings of the term – as queer and as disabled. Thus I begin with Samantha’s story to frame a discussion not only of analogies between queerness and disability but of the specifics of coming out in each context as a person whose bodily appearance does not immediately signal one’s own sense of identity. (316).

In the context of sexuality, bodily appearance often does not immediately signal one’s sense of identity. Queer individuals pass by default because society cannot tell that they are queer, and so society believes those people to be straight because that is what they believe is typical. Samuels states that there is a tension between appearance and identity, and a society that refuses to accept statements of identity without tangible proof. So, unless a gay man acts stereotypically gay, society may not accept his coming out and perceive him to be straight instead, thereby forcing him to pass by default. To use Bechdel’s graphic memoir as an example again, if Alison, after coming out, were to act like a regular girl rather than with masculinity/as a butch as lesbianism is often viewed, then she may be looked at as straight within her society because she did not perform in a way that provided proof that she was a lesbian.

Samuels, through her article, illustrates that coming out in the context of sexuality is not as simple as just coming out. She argues that individuals who come out face false categorization from society if their sexuality is not visible enough, and in that false categorization they are forced into passing, i.e. passing by default. She also articulates, however, that if queer individuals do not come out, and remain closeted instead, they are passing deliberately. Samuels’ argument also fits in with racial passing, with Larsen’s Clare Kendry passing deliberately, and

Senna's Birdie Lee passing by default, both characters fighting to keep their identities as authentic and their lives as fulfilling as possible, which is the same with individuals passing in contexts of sexuality. Samuels, through her article, argues that there is a fine line between passing and living as someone who has "come out," and illustrates that the line is difficult to find without performing societal stereotypes in the case of sexuality or other types of invisible identity.

Ultimately, the works of Feinberg, Butler, Bechdel, and Samuels flesh out gender binaries, androgyny, transgenderism, gender performance, and the closet. They bring light to passing with regards to these concepts, and demonstrate the ridicule and discrimination that any atypically gendered person receives from others. All in all, these works demonstrate how passing functions with regards to gender and sexuality, how it is different from racial passing, and the forces that cause individuals to pass or choose not to with regards to their gender and sexuality.

Chapter Three: Freaks, “Monsters,” and Deviants—Passing with Invisible and Visible  
Disabilities

“What greater gift could you offer your children than an inherent ability to earn a living just by being themselves?” (7). Discourse surrounding disability has changed throughout the last century with the medical and social models, as well as more recent disability rights and pride movements. Katherine Dunn’s 1989 novel *Geek Love*, following the story of a family that bred their own freak show, demonstrates movements of disability pride in the above quote. More than just pride, this quote illustrates an intense feeling of self worth because of a disability rather than in spite of it. This groundbreaking pride within disabled communities that Dunn exemplifies is juxtaposed with discomfort among able-bodied individuals who assume that everyone with a disability is a freak that wants to be cured, which complicates the issues of passing and disability discussed further in this chapter.

This chapter deviates from chapters one and two in that in the other two I dealt with cultural texts such as *Caucasia* and *Fun Home* as primary sources, and in this chapter I focus on critical works as my primary, rather than secondary, area of study. This chapter looks at disability studies as an academic field, represented by foundational texts, and the extent to which passing has or has not been useful in looking at disability. As I discussed in the last chapter, passing applies to a variety of cases aside from race, including gender and sexuality. In addition to these previous subjects, passing also applies to disability. Passing in the case of disability functions similarly to racial and gender passing, but it is not quite the same. Disability passing is similar to the two types of passing I have discussed thus far in that it has an element of invisibility, as well as an element of visible, bodily markings that indicate disability. There are also societal restrictions with regards to abled and disabled bodies, similar to the rules, binaries,

and systems surrounding race and gender. Disability studies is a relatively new field, however, only gaining recognition within the last few decades. As such, discussion of passing with regards to disability is an even newer concept, only becoming more prevalent in the last ten to fifteen years, exemplified through works of Ellen Samuels, Garland-Thompson, Julie-Ann Scott, and Jeffrey A. Brune and Daniel J. Wilson.

Interestingly, the same article by Ellen Samuels that concluded chapter two discusses disability in terms of the closet/coming out, as well as disabled individuals passing by default just like queer individuals. Ellen Samuels argues that disability passing is most similar to gender and sexuality passing, especially with regards to invisible disability. The very idea of an invisible disability immediately illustrates that individuals with invisible disabilities will most often appear able-bodied. To return to a quote that I used in the last chapter, Samuels states that there is “tension between appearance and identity, the social scrutiny that refuses to accept statements of identity without ‘proof’” (316). If an invisibly disabled person were to say that they were disabled, it is unlikely that they would be accepted as such because there is no visible tell or sign that proves it. In fact, rather than simply refusing to accept someone’s invisible disability as fact, many people feel indignant or angry about it, even when individuals are taking specific steps to not appear able-bodied. For instance, there are countless stories of people parking in a handicapped parking spot—something specific to disabled individuals—and walking into a store only to be harassed and yelled at because they do not look disabled: this harassment is an example of passing by default or being forced into passing in the world of disability, in which the outcome is a negative one.

Disabled individuals in general, but especially invisibly disabled individuals, may have a hard time finding a niche or circle in which they fit. For people with invisible disabilities the

attempt to fit in is especially hard because even other visibly disabled people may not believe the invisible disability to be real or authentic. Samuels states that “Most people with disabilities, like most queers, do not share their identity with immediate family members and often have difficulty accessing queer or crip culture,” which is especially true for people with invisible disabilities (317). Because even their disabled peers discredit their disabilities, individuals with invisible disabilities tend to feel left out by those that are most similar to them. Unfortunately, because the nature of invisible disabilities is that they are non-visible, there is not much of a social circle for the invisibly disabled.

Samuels argues that the same discourse of coming out that surrounds queer discussions also applies to invisible disability. In the same way that queer individuals must “come out” because queer is an invisible category of identity, individuals with invisible disabilities must “come out” as well. Samuels argues that “The narratives of people with ‘hidden impairments,’ like those of people with other non visible social identities, are suffused with themes of coming out, passing, and the imperatives of identity” (319). In other words, people with hidden impairments or invisible disabilities must either come out, embracing their disability as a part of their identity and hoping that others will as well, or pass as able-bodied, forcing themselves and others to ignore the part of their identity that lives with their impairment.

Both the ability to pass and the nature of coming out for invisibly disabled individuals are issues that Samuels explores in great depth. She discusses coming out as disabled in terms of taking ownership of one’s impairment, portraying it as a positive practice: “Coming out, then, for disabled people, is a process of redefinition of one’s personal identity through rejecting the tyranny of the normate, positive recognition of impairment and embracing disability as a valid social identity” (319). Rather than conforming to societal norms, disabled individuals who

choose to come out reject hegemonies of normalcy with regards to the able body and embrace and recognize their impairment instead. Coming out as disabled is a process of tying disability into one's social identity and finding positivity in that.

Despite condoning coming out for disabled individuals, Samuels is careful not to talk about passing in the negative light in which it is often discussed. She does not discount the individual's choice to either path of coming out or passing. Recognizing that in coming out, disabled individuals place social hurdles and barriers in front of themselves in ways they would not have if they had kept their disability invisible, Samuels states: "Kleege's account points to the flip side of having to come out to be recognized as disabled: the ability to pass. Like racial, gender, and queer passing, the option of passing as nondisabled provides both a certain level of privilege and a profound sense of misrecognition and internal dissonance" (321). Though Samuels recognizes the positive side of passing for able-bodied, she also points out that the agency found in it does not come without a cost.

Though passing as nondisabled can privilege disabled individuals more than they could ever expect if they were not passing, it also leads them down a path in which people constantly misrecognize them, and they have to ignore it because it's a choice that they made. Despite this downside, however, Samuels states:

Nevertheless, the perception persists that nonvisibly disabled people prefer to pass and that passing is a sign and product of assimilationist longings: "By passing as non-disabled, by minimizing the significance of their impairments within their own personal and social lives . . . people with hidden impairments often make an effort to avoid the perceived stigma attached to a disabled identity." (321).

Though an impairment may be significant to the disabled individual, though they may feel that it is an integral part of their identity, by passing they stamp out the significance of their impairment in personal and social settings. They pass to avoid the negative stigma that follows disability.

There is agency in the able body, but for the disabled, only inasmuch as they can keep up the act. By placing themselves into the hegemony of normalcy that is the able body, disabled individuals who pass must hide an important part of themselves in order to appear as normal, nondisabled individuals.

Passing or coming out in the world of disability is so complicated because on the one hand, in coming out as disabled, individuals are likely to face discrimination, and on the other, in passing, they are conforming to the norms of society. On this issue of coming out vs. passing, Samuels states:

Discourses of coming out and passing are central to visibility politics, in which coming out is generally valorized while passing is seen as assimilationist. Thus vigilant resistance to external stereotypes of disability and lesbianism has not kept our subcultures from enacting dynamics of exclusion and surveillance over their members. (324).

Coming out and passing only apply in situations where visibility politics are involved, i.e. when an individual falls into a category of identity that may not be visible, such as race, gender/sexuality, and disability. Part of the complication of coming out in any of these situations though, especially disability, is the possibility that one will not be taken seriously or will be called a liar. Others may not believe a disability that they cannot see, and so the only choice left is to pass, but if they are somehow found out then they are seen as assimilating and, again, as a liar.

When someone has two choices with regards to their identity, and either one of those choices will label them as a liar, it can be difficult to know which path to take. Even if not labeled as a liar, these choices for invisibly disabled individuals still appear pretty grim. As Samuels argues, “Thus many nonvisibly disabled people may feel that our choice is between passing and performing the dominant culture's stereotypes of disability” (326). Even if they are not labeled as liars, their choice is still to either pass by default because their disability is not visible and so they are automatically believed to be able-bodied, or to act the dominant culture’s typically negative and offensive stereotypes surrounding disability.

Samuels, through her article, articulates the two very limited choices invisibly disabled individuals have with regards to their personal and social identity. She argues that it is not so simple as to just come out one time and from then on everyone will perceive that person as disabled and see it as a part of their identity. She does not even argue that coming out is the best decision for everyone, but rather recognizes that both coming out and passing have their advantages and their disadvantages. She illustrates again and again that “In both queer and disabled contexts, however, coming out can entail a variety of meanings, acts, commitments,” that it’s more complicated than coming out as disabled once because from then on it is a constant set of performances (319). Further, she reiterates this point about coming out, saying that “simply voicing one’s identity in any and all situations is a far-from-perfect solution to the dilemmas presented by invisibility” (322). In other words, it is not enough for an individual to simply say that they are disabled in every social situation, because they also have to prove and act it out somehow. Ultimately, through her article, Samuels shows that there is not a simple or perfect solution to the dilemmas faced by invisibly disabled individuals daily, and that their choices to either pass or come out can prove to be equally as difficult.



Rosemarie Garland-Thompson, a prominent theorist in disability studies, wrote a book titled *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*. This critical work is the first of its kind, and through it Garland-Thomson examines literary and cultural representations of physical disability. Clearly, this text differs from Samuels' article about invisible disabilities as its focus is on physical, visible disabilities, and how visibly disabled individuals fit into the world. People with physical disabilities may also pass, as we saw with the Aimee Mullins example in the introduction, though it may be more difficult than for those with invisible disabilities.

Similarly to sexuality and invisible disabilities, visible/physical disabilities often have themes of coming out, the closet, and passing. These themes occur because people feel that their disabilities are a private matter more so than a social or identity forming one, and so by definition they could be passing but not feel that they were. On this issue of disability as a private matter, Garland-Thomson writes:

This book is the consequence of a coming-out process. As is often the case for people with disabilities, I had learned to see my bodily difference as a private matter, an aspect of myself that I acknowledged and negotiated in the world with a mixture of composure and embarrassment. I knew that my body made people uncomfortable to varying degrees and that it was my job to reassure them that I was going to be fine. (IX).

Because she knew that her disability made people uncomfortable, Garland-Thomson hid it as best as she could, passed as best as she could. She has since then come out as disabled. She no longer tries to hide her disability to make others feel comfortable. Instead, she researches why

disability makes people uncomfortable, theorizing that it has to do with the otherness and the fear that something could happen on any day that rendered them disabled as well.

Garland-Thomson discusses disability in relation to other social minorities such as blackness, queerness, poorness, etc. However, she differentiates these minorities by illustrating that what makes an impairment a disability is the literal, physical structures that have been created within cultures. She states:

Although these expectations are partly founded on physiological facts about typical humans—such as having two legs with which to walk upright or having some capacity for sight or speech—their sociopolitical meanings and consequences are entirely culturally determined. Stairs, for example, create a functional “impairment” for wheelchair users that ramps do not. Printed information accommodated the sighted but “limit” blind persons. Deafness is not a disabling condition in a community that communicates by signing as well as speaking. People who cannot lift three hundred pounds are “able-bodied,” whereas those who cannot lift fifty pounds are “disabled.” (7).

If all buildings had ramps, all words had corresponding braille to go along with them, and all communities spoke verbally and in sign, then wheelchairs, blindness, and deafness would not be impairments, or at least not as impairing as they seem to be as it is. Because there are not always, or even often, ramps, braille, or signing, however, these people and their impairments are singled out as disabled. If they can pass, they likely do so to ignore the stigma of disability. If they cannot, they are subject to a life of discrimination based on an impairment and lack of accommodation for that impairment, both of which are out of their control.

Part of the stigma attached to disability comes from fear instilled in the able-bodied when it comes to the disabled. In the previous passage, Garland-Thomson demonstrates the fine line between the able body and the disabled body: people who cannot lift three hundred, two hundred, or likely even one hundred pounds are considered able-bodied, but anyone who cannot lift fifty pounds must be disabled. Through this example, Garland-Thomson shows where the fear and discomfort that able-bodied people feel about disability comes from: if they are only a few pounds away from being considered disabled by Garland-Thomson's lifting definition, then they must not be too far off in day to day life.

If someone has a disability, and the majority, able-bodied population is in fear of becoming disabled, it is not hard to see why so many disabled individuals would attempt to pass. People treat disability poorly because they are afraid of becoming disabled, thereby causing the disabled to want to pass for the able-bodied norm: "disabled people are made to signify what the rest of Americans fear they will become. Freighted with anxieties about loss of control and autonomy that the American ideal repudiates, 'the disabled' become a threatening presence, seemingly compromised by the particularities and limitations of their own bodies" (Garland-Thomson 41). In other words, disability has come to represent what the rest of the population could become, and moreover, what they fear becoming. The disabled body represents a lack of control in one's self, which undermines the American ideal of control and autonomy, and thereby instills anxiety in the able-bodied population because that is what their lives could potentially come to.

Because disability represents a lack of autonomy with regard to American ideals, there are certain rules and regulations surrounding the body and how the body must behave. Garland-Thomson writes: "Disability, then, is the attribution of corporeal deviance—not so much a

property of bodies as a product of cultural rules about what bodies should be or do” (6). So, disability is considered deviant, which is not a property of the body, but rather a societal rule regarding what a “normal” body should do and how it should be.

Clearly, it is possible to survive and live a long and happy life even with a disability. Individuals with disabilities have friends, lives, marriages, etc. Due to the discomfort of able-bodied individuals when it comes to disability, however, many disabled individuals are forced to play down their disabilities in order to make others comfortable and to be considered whole and human by their able-bodied peers: “To be granted fully human status by normates, disabled people must learn to manage relationships from the beginning. In other words, disabled people must use charm, intimidation, ardor, deference, humor, or entertainment to relieve nondisabled people of their discomfort” (Garland-Thompson 13). Charm, intimidation, ardor, deference, humor, and entertainment, used by the disabled to make able-bodied more comfortable, is just a list of things one might do in order to pass. In order to pass as able-bodied, or at least as less disabled, disabled individuals must use the tools in this list such as charm or deference, and then some, so that they can make those without disabilities feel more comfortable.

Because disability is seen as other, and, in ways, almost inhuman, disabled individuals often choose to pass rather than living with everyone knowing about their disability and then treating them differently because of it. On this issue of disabled individuals being treated differently, and as others, Garland-Thomson states:

Cast as one of society's ultimate “not me” figures, the disabled other absorbs disavowed elements of this cultural self, becoming an icon of all human vulnerability and enabling the “American Ideal” to appear as master of both destiny and self. At once familiarly human but definitively other, the disabled

figure in cultural discourse assures the rest of the citizenry of who they are not while arousing their suspicions about who they could become. (41).

So, the disabled “other” represents human vulnerability and the fears and anxieties of what able-bodied individuals could be one day. Disabled individuals are the ultimate “not me” group in society, meaning the people disassociate themselves from disability as much as possible, claiming that it is “not them.” Following this logic, it is safe to presume that even disabled individuals see disability as the ultimate “not me” category. Seeing disability as a “not me” category, or as something to not associate with, means that the disabled, too, may claim “not me” when it comes to disability, meaning that they choose to pass as able-bodied rather than associate themselves with disability.

Part of the negative stigma that surrounds disability, that makes it the ultimate “not me” category, comes from media constantly purporting that disability is bad, and other, and alien, and inhuman. There are rarely representations of disability in popular culture that are not inherently negative. Almost never will there be an example of disability as something that is different but good, as a human variation, or as just another part of identity. On this issue of lacking representation with regards to disability, Garland-Thomson adds, “Indeed, main characters almost never have physical disabilities” (9). Representation is vital for identity development. Not just any representation will do either: for example, if all a black person ever saw was negative representations of black people, they would have a hard time forming an identity that they could feel proud of as a black person. Similarly, negative representations of disability create the same effect in the disabled. Their representation is either lacking, as Garland-Thompson points out, or their representation is negative. If the only representation someone sees of themselves is either nonexistent or negative, it is easy to see why they might want to pass for able-bodied.

Ultimately, through *Extraordinary Bodies*, Garland-Thomson argues that the social structures and rules that critique abnormal or extraordinary bodies are what cause disabled individuals to pass for able-bodied. The structures within cultures that regulate what bodies should be or do causes a negative stigma that surrounds disability, and Garland-Thomson argues that that causes the disabled to want to pass. All in all, Garland-Thomson discusses physical disabilities, and argues that the physically disabled hide their disabilities and pass as able-bodied in order to make the able-bodied population more comfortable

Garland-Thompson's critical work focuses on visible, physical disabilities, and passing with regards to that. Julie-Ann Scott, disability theorist, wrote an article in which she discusses the act of "almost passing" in a context of physical disability rather than passing fully. The concept of "almost passing" differs slightly from the passing that Garland-Thompson discusses, though they do go hand in hand, with Scott actually referencing Garland-Thompson's work several times within her article.

Scott's article follows narratives of seven different women who struggle with their identity and "almost pass" as able-bodied as well as traditionally feminine. She states that they question and blur the lines of identity "through their personal stories of almost-passing physically disabled performances of femininity" and that "each of the storytellers teeters between able and disabled" (227). This idea that there is a line between ability and disability functions similarly to the color line in that Birdie teeters on in Senna's novel. Birdie goes back and forth from black to white, passing over the color line and back again, and similarly, the narrators in Scott's article go back and forth from appearing able-bodied to appearing disabled, passing back and forth over an ability line, or "almost pass."

Disabled individuals who pass, or “almost pass,” over the ability line typically do so to avoid negative stigmatization as a disabled individual. As Scott states, the women in her article “illuminate how bodies deemed ‘abnormal’ receive cultural acceptance and esteem from others by reciting familiar performances of the ‘normal’” (227). So, as long as abnormal or disabled bodies attempt to perform the normal or able body, they will receive a certain amount of acceptance. Though, in almost passing, these individuals do not receive the complete acceptance that able-bodied individuals do, they do obtain more acceptance than they would if they stayed on the disabled side of the ability line and chose not to pass at all.

Part of the negative stigmatization that the disabled attempt to avoid comes from the unpredictability of disability. On this issue of unpredictability, Scott writes, “According to Rosemarie Garland-Thompson, disability, unlike race and gender, is not based on ‘predictable and observable traits’ but on any deviation from what we consider normal” (228). If disability is based on any deviation from the normal, then that makes it extremely unpredictable. There are a lot of factors that can deviate from the norm. In fact, by that definition, more people are probably disabled than able-bodied, which is exactly the kind of thing people are afraid of, and that’s partially where the negativity surrounding disability comes from.

If disability is any deviation from the norm, meaning that more people would be considered disabled than able-bodied, and that people could be considered disabled and not even know it, then that challenges disability as a negative category of identity with all members more vulnerable than the normal, able-bodied population. In her article, Scott adds that the narrators “illuminate how almost passing in embodied communication and the choice whether or not to disclose to others details of a disability affects interpretations of femininity and disabled identity, reiterating and/or challenging meanings that marginalize certain cultural members as more

vulnerable than others” (228). In this passage, Scott argues that in almost passing, in having the ability to choose whether or not to disclose details of a disability to others, individuals challenge views that marginalize and demean the disabled. However, Scott also asserts that in choosing to almost pass and in choosing to hide parts of a disability from others, individuals may also reiterate the ideas that marginalize the disabled, and in their performances that result from them almost passing, reiterate that all disabled individuals are more vulnerable than able-bodied individuals.

Because the definition of disability is any deviation from the normal, meaning that many more people are disabled than able-bodied, from there it is easy to assert that disability and ability, or abnormal and normal, are a lot more connected than we may have thought. With regards to almost passing as well as this issue of the normal and abnormal being connected, Scott states:

Bodies that almost pass offer a unique opportunity to see how that which we value and that which we stigmatize are intertwined, embedded in cultural discourses that marginalized disabled and feminine performances in our daily acts of communication, even in moments of connection, acceptance, and approval. These pervasive meanings of human vulnerability and cultural power are formed and continually reiterated through ongoing communicative interaction—but can also be challenged and dismantled by it. (229).

In this passage, Scott argues that through daily acts of ongoing communicative interaction, vulnerability and power are reiterated, but can also be challenged and dismantled. She states that the values and stigmas are intertwined, which makes disability as any deviation from the normal even more complex. Even while accepting and approving certain disabled and feminine



performances, the able-bodied population still marginalizes them through the cultural discourse that takes place. It is normal to marginalize the people and their performances, and so that is what continues to happen.

Even while accepting disability, or at least certain disabled performances, we still discriminate and marginalize disability and the disabled. We consider disability to be abnormal, alien, and monstrous, even while we accept and like those with disabilities. Scott says of the disabled narrators in her article:

These women draw attention to how their physical bodies and their choices regarding if, how, and/or when to disclose the details of their atypical embodiments impacts others' interpretations of their performances of femininity. By almost passing for able-bodied, these choices repeatedly surface as others deem their bodies "abnormal," even though they still find them pleasing, attractive, and overall non-disruptive to their expectations for a colleague, romantic partner, and/or an acquaintance across interactions. (229).

Even as people find the disabled to be pleasant, smart, good-looking, etc., even as people see those with disabilities as similar to themselves, as relatively normal, they still view them as abnormal. Even as they attribute these normal and able-bodied characteristics to the disabled, they view them as other as well. It can be argued that we do this because, with a definition of disability that says that any deviation from the normal constitutes as a disability, we want to separate ourselves as much as possible from the disabled. So, even though someone may seem normal, and pleasant, and attractive, in order to distance ourselves from their disability, we label their body as abnormal as a sign to others that we are normal and our bodies are not like theirs.

Essentially holding up a sign that says “I am normal and you are not” to disabled individuals, even ones that we like, forces all people with disabilities into a position where they are vulnerable and they are less. These people tend to pass, or almost pass, in order to not be vulnerable or less, but to be equal, human, and hopeful that some day the able-bodied population might hold up a sign that says “I am different and so are you and that’s okay” instead. Again, Scott writes of her narrators:

I then move to narratives from those who upon first glance can pass for “normal.” However, others often view their daily performances as suspicious . . . rather than successfully normative. Together, their lived performances illuminate how physically disabled bodies that almost pass co-constitute their identities as designated vulnerable but not disruptive across cultural contexts. (230).

Physically disabled individuals who “almost pass” appear more suspicious to the able-bodied than they do normal because, due to their discomfort around disability and fear that they may become or may already be disabled, the able-bodied can spot an abnormality from a mile away. Though they may elicit suspicions, however, physically disabled bodies that almost pass do not typically disturb or disrupt the able-bodied. Instead, they view these people as more vulnerable than them and somewhat different than them, but not enough to be avoided in any social context including friendships or even relationships.

Scott, through her article, demonstrates that physically disabled individuals who almost pass are simultaneously accepted despite their disability while also being discriminated against for it. She states, “Stories of almost-passing, physically disabled embodiment offer opportunities to recognize the conditions and restraints we place upon bodies marked as ‘Other,’ and to consider when acceptance depends on being deemed nondisruptive to current power

relationships” (247). She argues that, when a body marked as abnormal is not disrupting current cultural conditions, then that body is deemed okay despite the disability, most often applying to physically disabled individuals who almost pass. Ultimately, Scott illustrates that there are a variety of disabled bodies because disability is considered to be any deviation from the normal. She argues that realizing that more bodies are disabled, or even almost passing, than we think, is the first step in relieving the disabled of the burdens of discrimination and presumed vulnerability that they face every day.

With disability defined by Scott and Garland-Thompson as any deviation from the norm, editors Jeffrey A. Brune and Daniel J. Wilson join the conversation with their collection *Disability and Passing: Blurring the Lines of Identity*, in which they include varying forms of disability including polio, mental illness, blackness, deafness, and even the history of menstruation. Looking at *Disability and Passing*, as well as Hannah Tweed’s critical article of the same title, in which she analyzes Brune and Wilson’s collection, we will see how disability becomes both more and less complicated. In applying principles of passing, stigmatization, and disability to unusual issues such as menstruation, disability seems to more accurately fit Scott and Garland-Thompson’s definition as any and all deviations from the norm.

Brune and Wilson, at the start of their collection, agree with much of the rhetoric surrounding disability and passing that has been laid out up to this point. They state, “Disability passing is a complex and wide-ranging topic. Most often, the term refers to the way people conceal social markers of impairment to avoid the stigma of disability and pass as ‘normal’” (1). This quote lines up with the rules of disability, passing, and stigma discussed thus far within this chapter, illustrating that disability is wide-spread, with a negative stigma attached that many individuals attempt to avoid by passing.

Still, the collection adds new perspectives to the issue of disability passing. Tweed states in her article that the Allison C. Carey article, which is included in the Brune and Wilson collection:

Provides a solid grounding in the rhetoric surrounding intellectual disabilities . . . highlight[ing] public alarm at the lack of visual indicators of cognitive impairment, and outlines how passing was seen as a deeply undesirable act, allowing the intellectually disabled to mingle with the general populace—and how this attitude led to the segregation of schools for the cognitively disabled. (120).

Though this passage deals specifically with invisible disability, it still highlights the discomfort people feel with disability as a whole. Disability is viewed with a negative stigma, but, as pointed out in the passage above, so is passing: able-bodied people do not want to be around the disabled, but even more so do not want to allow disabled people passing as able-bodied to “mingle” with the “normal” population.

This dynamic of the able-bodied population disliking passing more than the actual disability is complicated, because passing itself is the result of an able-bodied majority that feels uncomfortable with disability and therefore refuses to associate with and accommodate the disabled. In Brune and Wilson’s collection, contributor Michael A. Rembis, in “Athlete First,” states:

The act of passing is rooted in a seemingly infinite number of specific sociocultural locations and historical moments. It is a never-ending, and ultimately debilitating, process that all disabled people experience and that in nearly every situation gets played out within and through their impaired bodies . . . . Confronting these passing moments head on will enable us to use disability and

our impaired bodies to challenge the ubiquitous social and structural inequities of the nondisabled world. (116).

Rembis clearly states here that passing is a result of the able-bodied population and their prejudices. He states that the able-bodied are responsible for that which they resent, which is passing. Passing is social and historical, it is never ending, and disabled individuals pass because they have been and continue to be discriminated against in social situations. Rembis argues that in confronting these moments of passing, in facing the rules that force disabled individuals to hide their disabilities, we can use the disabilities as a tool to break down social barriers that bar the disabled from the rest of the “normal” world.

Though most often discussed in the terms of social contexts as it has been thus far, disability passing can also take place through literature and other mediums, such as the press. Disabled authors, journalists, essayists, etc. will pass so as to not lose credibility as a writer/intellectual. The fact that a crippled journalist could be considered less of a journalist or less of an intellectual than an able-bodied journalist, simply because of an impairment that does not at all effect writing, shows how ingrained contempt of disabilities is within able-bodied societies. It also shows the contempt for passing that is ingrained into able-bodied societies because if a writer were found out, if people found that someone had been hiding their disability, any credibility that they had as an intellectual would diminish. This issue of passing within literature vs. passing socially obviously intersects with social passing in that, similarly, if an athlete that had been hiding a disability were found out, they would lose their credibility as an athlete. In an article in *Disability and Passing* that he wrote, editor Brune states that the fact that someone would “cover up issues of disability in his writing shows the strong tendency even for modern progressive writers to bury the issue and allow it to pass out of the text” (50). In other

words, even a modern progressive writer, someone who could be an advocate for disability rights in their spare time, would likely choose to pass in their writing rather than lose credibility due to their disability.

Public figures, in a complicated way, pass socially and through literature/press. Though President Franklin D. Roosevelt was known to have had polio, he still stood and walked during public appearances, demonstrating to the American public, and in writing/press about him, that he had overcome his disability. In an article that Wilson wrote for the collection, "Passing in the Shadow of FDR," he states that FDR,

Successfully cultivated the image of a healthy man who had recovered from polio with no significant permanent disability . . . Roosevelt passed as a man recovered from polio who could walk and stand and was thus fit to hold high political office. In fact, FDR walked and stood with great difficulty and spent most of his time in a wheel chair. (13).

As Wilson points out, even though it was a known fact that FDR had had polio, he was still successfully able to pass publicly, especially in the press, earning the title of, as Wilson says, the "cured cripple" (15).

Other public figures also pass socially and through literature in order to remain credible. As mentioned previously, this kind of passing especially applies to athletes. If an athlete is deemed disabled, or if there is any possibility of an athlete being unable to perform due to an impairment, it is unlikely that they will get the position, which causes them to pass as able-bodied. In his article "Athlete First," Rembis states that, in the case of athletes, "passing need not always involve the act of physically concealing one's impairment, but rather depends on how well one can approximate the gendered, white, heterosexual, nondisabled norm and meet societal

expectations” (113-14). In other words, while an athlete’s disability may still be visible, if they are able to perform able-bodied, normative behaviors, they are likely to be viewed as less disabled. Rembis illustrates, however, that this kind of “almost passing” that Scott discussed, and any other passing, is not ideal. He states, “One way to move beyond the overcoming narrative is to recognize it for what it really is—passing—and to acknowledge that ‘choosing’ to pass is a direct violation of our civil and human rights” (135). Rather than overcoming a disability, or hiding it/passing for able-bodied, which over time takes a toll on the mental and physical state of disabled individuals, Rembis argues that in looking at passing for what it is, we will begin to change societal beliefs about disability and a proper or “normal” identity.

Ultimately, the works of Samuels, Garland-Thompson, Scott, and Brune and Wilson illustrate specific situations that often require disability passing, and demonstrate passing in contexts of invisible disability, physical disability, almost passing, and disability as any deviation from the norm. Together, these works highlight the inequities evident in an able-bodied society, and the obstacles the disabled must face in order to survive within that society. In all, these works show how and why the disabled choose to pass for able-bodied, demonstrate how passing has been helpful to the field of disability studies, and offer theoretical solutions to the issues that disabled individuals may face.

## Conclusion

“From Roxy’s manner of speech a stranger would have expected her to be black, but she was not. Only one sixteenth of her was black, and that sixteenth did not show” (63). In his 1894 novel *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, Mark Twain complicates the passing subject, presenting Roxy and others as white even though they are technically slaves by blood. In Roxy’s case, Pudd’nhead could only tell that she was a slave/African American by her speech, not by looking at her. Twain’s Roxy complicates issues that I previously discussed of intentionality, default, and success, and introduces an idea of imitation, something I have not discussed thus far but that applies specifically to *Pudd’nhead Wilson* and race in general.

Twain’s entire novel deals with race, and specifically with the idea of imitation. The novel is about a slave woman, Roxy, and her son Chambers. She cares for Chambers, as well as her master’s son Tom. Tom and Chambers look just alike as children, and so Roxy switches them so that her son will have the life of a white man rather than the life of a slave. The issue of imitation is interesting with regards to race because, though in *Pudd’nhead Wilson* race has a lot to do with blood, it also has to do with visibility, as does imitation. Roxy looks white, but because of her black blood, she is understood in the novel as just an imitation of white but not actually white. Twain writes, “To all intents and purposes Roxy was as white as anybody, but the one sixteenth of her which was black outvoted the other fifteen parts and made her a negro. She was a slave, and saleable as such. Her child was thirty-one parts white, and he, too, was a slave and, by a fiction of law and custom, a negro” (64). Twain points out that “Roxy was as white as anybody” but that by “a fiction of law and custom, a negro.” The “fiction of law” Twain refers to is the one drop rule, which dictated that because Roxy was one sixteenth black, she was a slave,



despite the fact that she looked as white as anybody. She was an imitation of whiteness, but by law she was not actually white.

Twain further explores this idea of imitation during a conversation that Roxy has with “Chambers.” She calls him a “mis’able imitation nigger,” to which “Chambers” replies, “If I’s imitation, what is you? Bofe of us is imitation *white* – dat’s what we is – en pow’ful good imitation too . . . we don’t ‘mount to noth’n’ as imitation *niggers*” (103). By this, Twain points out that Roxy and “Chambers” look white but because of law they are not. They are just a lesser and worse imitation of white. “Chambers” argues that being an imitation nigger does them no good because then they are the imitation of the imitation. At least as imitation whites, they are just the imitation of one thing rather than the imitation of the imitation. Along with this sense that the “negro race” in general is a poor imitation of an idealized white race, Twain also demonstrates that “Chambers” and Roxy are miserable imitations of “niggers” because their white skin makes it difficult for people read them as black. In that sense, “Chambers” and Roxy pass by default, at least until people hear them speak.

Another example of imitation comes soon after Roxy switches the children. Twain writes: “the little counterfeit rift of separation between imitation-slave and imitation-master widened and widened, and became an abyss, and a very real one – and on one side of it stood Roxy, the dupe of her own deceptions, and on the other side of it stood her child, no longer a usurper to her, but her accepted and recognized master” (77). Here, Twain demonstrates that at some point, the imitation may become the real. Roxy switched the children and had to pretend that her son was really the white child, especially when others were around. By imitating the slave and bringing up her son to imitate being her master, she became his slave and he became her master. She became “the dupe of her own deceptions,” because to fulfill the roles she had

created, her son, who could not yet even walk or talk, also had to pass. He played the part of her master before he even knew that he was her master, through which Twain demonstrates the dangers of passing and how it can become reality.

*Pudd'nhead Wilson* also complicates issues already discussed such as intentionality, default, and success. In a way, the passing of Tom and Chambers is intentional, but only in that it was Roxy's intention to switch them. Otherwise, the boys' passing cannot be intentional because they do not even know that they are passing. Similarly, in a way, the boys also pass by default. Everyone assumes that "Tom" is the real Tom and that "Chambers" is the real Chambers, partly because that is how they are raised and introduced, but also because "Tom" must have looked white enough to convincingly play the part. If he had grown up looking black, it may have raised some suspicions. The boys passed by default: everyone assumed that they were who they said they were. Even the boys assumed that they were who they said they were, which is why their case is so much more complicated.

Along with default and intentionality, success is an important concept within this novel. Even though they did not know they were passing, and maybe even because of that, their passing was successful. It was only successful, however, until they were outed. No one would have known, but because Pudd'nhead Wilson took the boys' fingerprints before Roxy switched them, and again later, after they were switched, he was able to figure it out. Similarly to how Rachel Dolezal's parents outed her, Pudd'nhead Wilson outed "Tom" and "Chambers," ultimately rendering the boys' passing unsuccessful due to a few minutiae on their fingers. The novel's conclusion is painfully ambiguous: "Tom" is sold down the river, and "Chambers" never fully integrates into white society. Both of them were so used to their passing lives that they could not successfully live their non-passing lives, which Twain uses to show that what was once passing

and lies became the truth to “Tom” and “Chambers,” and when they were outed and forced to switch societal positions, their “true” places became the lies and the passing. *Pudd'nhead Wilson* ties together the issues of success, intentionality, and default. Twain's novel also brings in a new perspective of imitation with regards to race that can be applied to gender/sexuality and disability as well, especially in the context of passing.

As I mentioned in the introduction, race is usually the first thing we think of when we think of passing. As I explored throughout this paper, however, passing applies to a variety of other situations as well. The purpose of the body of this paper is to explore processes of discrimination against minorities and how that causes the passing phenomenon, and in turn how it affects identity formation. My exploration of passing has highlighted how passing has been helpful to racial, gender, and disability studies, as well as the negative stigmas that surround each of these categories. Looking at passing across these various manifestations demonstrates that all identity formation shares elements of both intentional and unintentional passing as well as performativity, and demonstrates the mutual reliance between individual choice and social context.

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