

Passing For White in Jim Crow America

By Wendy Ann Gaudin

When southern legislators wrote into law the separation of the races in their regions, they set into motion an array of socioeconomic, political, ideological, and personal phenomena. These laws, their philosophical foundations and tangible effects, dramatically shaped every aspect of life in the post-Civil War South. Southern whites used a powerful combination of economic control, political domination, criminal justice administration, and mob violence to assert their supremacy. The social system they fastened upon the land defined privilege, citizenship, and freedom by one's whiteness. It made virtually impossible the ability to assume an identity that did not comply with the binary racial system that white southerners established and defended.

To the South's African-American citizens, Jim Crow laws clearly rang. "Colored" persons, presumed to be physically identifiable and behaviorally distinct, were excluded from virtually all public accommodations, including hotels, libraries, theaters, public parks, and swimming pools. This exclusion marked black men and women as subordinate human beings, whose presence within the white world should never threaten white authority, and reinforced African Americans' caste status.

Furthermore, African Americans' access to education, housing, and health care was limited, too, by potent obstacles to the ballot and, ultimately, by the Supreme Court's decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which upheld the legality of the "separate but equal" doctrine. Segregated within or excluded from the white world, African Americans persisted in carving out their own communities, resisting whites' encroaching authority, and maintaining their own dignity and humanity.

The Jim Crow state not only forced black women and men into semiautonomous and defiant communities, it also fixed the boundaries around privilege and citizenship. The abilities and rights to vote, to provide one's children with a suitable education, to live in a paved and electrified neighborhood, to drink clean water from a clean facility, to check out a book from a lending library, to obtain a fair trial, and to ally one's self, psychologically, with the ruling body, these were unquestionably tied to one's whiteness.

Throughout the antebellum and postbellum periods, ethnic immigrants assimilated into the "white" population, hence benefiting from their "not black" status. In the slowly urbanizing South delineated by "colored" and "white" signs in public places, those with "white" appearances enjoyed the socially significant privilege of walking, sitting, eating, worshiping, and relaxing where they wished. The rewards of whiteness were plentiful, not only to those whose families had long resided in the nation, but also to those who were able to assimilate into the "white" category.

But, in writing the laws that protected white status and in dividing the public sphere into "colored" and "white" spaces, white legislators and citizens overlooked the large body of persons of mixed race, who presented many challenges to southern ideologues. Realizing that there were "white Negroes" in their midst and fearing that they would somehow slip into and poison the white world and bloodlines, white lawmakers began categorizing measurements of blood and defining the races accordingly.

Twentieth-century society proved to have little or no room for what was, in the antebellum period, a three-tiered social structure, with mixed-race free persons inhabiting a tenuous but real middle position. Thus, the descendants of the South's antebellum class of racially blended, freeborn, and socially entitled free persons of color were made "colored" throughout the southern states. In some places, they were "colored" if they carried 1/32nd percent "African blood;" in others, 1/16th or 1/8th. In still other contexts, persons of mixed race were considered "colored" if they were discernibly "dark" to the white eye.

While lawmakers legislated ancestry and categorized blood to more carefully clarify and carry out Jim Crow laws (particularly those of inheritance and marriage), persons of mixed race were faced with a quandary of their own. Given that many persons of mixed race had enjoyed a middle position with some privileges and had, for many generations, defined themselves according to their status as free and partially white, segregation laws forced a whole population into an unfamiliar position. Witnessing and often experiencing the poverty that black people braved and watching as southern whites erected the emblems--particularly "white" and "colored" labels that invariably represented superior and inferior facilities--of Jim Crow, persons of mixed race recognized the options available to them.

Many joined forces with other persons designated as "colored" and agitated for equal access and equal rights. Accepting the race label assigned to them, these persons often took leading roles in African-American political organizations. Others attempted, sometimes successfully, to maintain their "in-between" positions. Forming closed societies--tight-knit communities in which all the members shared the same ancestry, physical characteristics, and culture--they often rejected altogether racial designations that made their mixture an impossibility.

Still, most people of mixed race lived and worked in a world dominated and delineated by whites. Despite their separatist attitudes and actions, they interacted with whites in the public world. Many recognized that, while the law made them "colored," their appearances often told another story. Seeing that segregation was essentially a dividing of persons by physical appearance, many of those with "white" appearances blended into the white world. This phenomenon is often called "going to the other side," "crossing over," or "passing." Not coincidental are the colloquialisms used to describe those who sought to reap the benefits of whiteness, for this often led to a kind of social death. Depending on the degree to which a person passed--from sitting in the white section of a theater to working in an exclusively white occupation to completely altering one's identity-- a person passing necessarily separated from his/her family and peers. For instance, people passing for white in the public realm often had to ignore darker-skinned or black friends and family as they walked by on the sidewalk. It also sometimes meant moving into a neighborhood where one's friends and family would be conspicuous to the white eye. Often, it entailed altering one's legal status or that of one's children.

For many, it meant leaving the city, state, or region and losing communication with peers and siblings. Considering the maneuverings and risks that racial passing required, it is understandable that many did not think it was worth the trouble. Nevertheless, "passing" proved a useful tool to many persons of mixed race whose appearances were "white" or ambiguous enough to get away with it.

Some people, perhaps most, deliberately masqueraded as white or allowed themselves to be taken for white when applying for work. Because segregation affected the workplace--designating some jobs as "white" and others as "colored"--and because persons in "white jobs" invariably earned greater incomes than those in "colored" ones, people who "looked" white often accepted these positions. Working as whites, they most definitely earned greater incomes, even in blue-collar trades. Greater incomes enabled them to send their children to a private school or to college, to own rather than rent their homes, to purchase the badges of middle class sensibility, or to migrate to areas that offered greater opportunities.

Working as white is one example of how passing represented a form of resistance to Jim Crow's conditions. Some not only passed for white to earn a better living, they also used their appearances to enjoy facilities available only to "whites." Thus, persons of mixed race not only sat comfortably on streetcars or listened to operas and symphonies, they also resisted those local laws and customs that labeled them black, hence undeserving of these diversions. Able to pass the so-called "eye test," these persons illustrate their determination to maintain their humanity, even if it meant risking their safety for a **simple meal at a lunch counter**.

However, working as a white person also entailed many risks, **as [pseudonymous man] explains**. While most people assumed that a white person would not "accuse them of really being colored" because doing so would embarrass the accuser if he or she were wrong, many worried, nonetheless, that a white person would challenge their status. Another risk discouraging many from passing was the possibility of being "outed" by a person of color who witnessed someone masquerading as a white man or woman. Perhaps, the greatest risk was the damaging effect that passing had on the family. When people chose to work as white or attend white churches or take classes at white colleges, they made an ancillary choice to treat their brown-skinned loved ones as strangers or to cut ties to life-long friends. While some persons respected their siblings' or friends' choices and the underlying motivation, they also recognized **the losses all parties experienced**.

For those with the greatest nerve, or perhaps the greatest investment in their whiteness, the possibility of altering one's legal status remained. Again, this involved great risk. Persons of mixed race recognized that, in some cases, a "white" appearance was enough to garner them the rewards they sought; in other cases, official proof of one's race was necessary. Birth certificates, social security cards, drivers' licenses, induction papers, and baptism and marriage records required that they confirm of their racial status. By obtaining these records and falsifying them (depending upon the definition of "colored" in a locale), some persons secured their status and the economic, political, and **psychological amenities it promised**.

Ultimately, passing embodied a survival strategy at a time when the South, especially, lagged behind the nation in economic, educational, and health conditions. Segregation meant that, even in the largely rural and impoverished South, those who were "white" earned higher salaries, were given raises and promotions, enjoyed seniority; those who were "white" were better educated and sent their children to state-funded schools, which prepared "white" children for skilled or professional occupations; and those who were "white" enjoyed access to hospitals, clinics, and pharmacies, practically guaranteeing better health. One's ability to mask, particularly during the Great Depression, offered the poor and destitute a chance to earn a little more money, to accept a job earmarked for a white person, or to share resources with the larger "colored" community. Whiteness carried with it many advantages, and persons who could slip across the color line often did so **to benefit themselves and others**.

Although the literature on race, constructions of race, and racial transgression is growing at a rapid and encouraging rate, there is still a culture of apology and secrecy around passing, as illustrated by the pseudonymous woman in narrative 5. One informant referred to this culture as "the code" that one should not break—even in the present day from which Jim Crow's specter is fading, the identity of those who passed (and continue to pass) should not be revealed. This secrecy, represented in the lack of photographs of those telling their stories and the altering of their names, is one legacy of Jim Crow identity politics that continues to this day.

Read some **first hand accounts** of people who experienced "passing" on a very personal level.

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