

Passing for Oneself Literature of Passing, Covering, and Becoming

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Tuesdays, 12:45-2:45pm ET, on [Zoom](#)

Office Hours: Tuesdays 2:45-4pm ET and by appt.

Course

To pass is to be recognized as belonging to a race, sexuality, gender, or class that differs from one's own. This course begins by tracing the notion of passing in literature backwards in time across historical periods, from racial passing in American Modernism, to sexual passing in nineteenth-century poetry and fiction, to class and gender passing in eighteenth-century fiction and autobiography. How does passing enable certain rights, protections, and privileges, while foreclosing on others? To what degree does passing involve performing a different identity versus concealing an identity of one's own (what is sometimes referred to as "covering")? After exploring literary passing in its early manifestations, we turn our attention to post-WWII literature. Does the history of passing/covering offer us ways of understanding contemporary questions of identity, such as who we are when we are online, or what it means to belong to multiple subjugated or marginalized groups? How does this history inform or hinder discourses of *becoming*, as in writing about trans identity? In answering these questions, we will think not just across identity categories but across media: novels, short stories, poetry, drama, autobiographical prose, films and graphic novels.

Objectives

In addition to thinking about literary works on passing, you will also read key texts representing a range of critical methods, including critical race theory, psychoanalysis, queer theory, and deconstruction. In other words, as you read the primary texts, you will also learn how to ask the kinds of critical, historical, and interpretive questions that lead to incisive close readings.

More broadly, you will learn how to engage with the discipline and practice of English literary studies at an upper-division level. The tutorial will culminate in the writing and revision of a 20-25-page research paper in preparation for an honors thesis. You will learn to come up with a research question, develop a critical bibliography around that question, put secondary criticism in conversation with your own ideas and with other criticism, and write with clarity and precision.

Required Book Texts

Since this is a multi-media class, many primary and secondary sources will be available online through Canvas (under the “Files” tab). The last that follows contains only book texts (i.e., not films) that will not be uploaded. You don’t have to purchase all of these: items in blue may be accessed online via the “Course Reserves” tab on our Canvas site. That said, you may *want* to, in order to reduce screen time this semester.

James Baldwin, *Giovanni’s Room*. Vintage, 2003. ISBN: 9780345806567

Liana Finck, *Passing for Human*, Random House, 2018. ISBN: 9780525508922

Nella Larsen, *Passing*. Penguin, 2003. ISBN: 9780142437278

Casey Plett, *Little Fish*. Arsenal Pulp Press, 2018. ISBN: 9781551527208

Fran Ross, *Oreo*. New Directions, 2015. ISBN: 9780811223225

Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Penguin, 2003. ISBN: 9780141439570

Attendance

Your attendance in tutorial is vital to the success of the class. So, too, is your attendance at the Junior Tutorial General Meetings and at other required events. Each student will be allowed a “free” tutorial absence to be used in case of sickness, travel, etc.: no explanation necessary. Missing more than one class will decrease your participation grade, and excessive absence could result in failing the course. Please come to tutorial on time. If you have extenuating circumstances, please discuss with me so that we can work out a solution.

Expectations for Written Work

Papers are to be submitted on time, in hard copy: please double-space and print on both sides of the page. You are encouraged to talk with other students about the course and its readings, and to read each other’s work. In individual assignments, academic collaboration and external sources should be always cited.

Plagiarism is strictly forbidden. From Harvard’s Plagiarism policy: “All homework assignments, projects, lab reports, papers and examinations submitted to a course are expected to be the student’s own work. Students should always take great care to distinguish their own ideas and knowledge from information derived from sources. The term “sources” includes not only published primary and secondary material, but also information and opinions gained directly from other people.” For the full policy, and information on using sources, please visit: usingsources.fas.harvard.edu. When in doubt, ask!

Accessibility

Harvard’s [Accessible Education Office \(AEO\)](#) notes: “Students needing academic adjustments or accommodations because of a documented disability must present their Faculty Letter from the

AEO and speak with the professor by the end of the second week of the term. Failure to do so may result in the Course Head's inability to respond in a timely manner. All discussions will remain confidential, although Faculty are invited to contact AEO to discuss appropriate implementation.”

Assignments/Grading

Due dates and times are listed on the syllabus. Late assignments will be docked 1/3 letter grade per day late, except for the final paper, which must be turned in before the due date. Students failing to turn in a final paper, or turning it in late without an official excuse, will fail the tutorial. If, well in advance of an assignment, you expect you will need an extension, please talk with me.

10% - Short Exercise. You will read and summarize Professor Allyson Hobbs’s [*A Chosen Exile: A History of Racial Passing*](#) (2014) and compose a 4-5 page essay linking Hobbs’s argument to one of the texts we’ve read.

65% - Critical Essay. The critical essay, 20-25 pages double-spaced, is the culmination of the tutorial. It is due in several parts as the term progresses:

- **(10%) Prospectus and Annotated Bibliography** (week 6). A two-page prospectus introducing the topic of your research, along with a bibliography of 8-10 sources. Included in participation grade.
- **(15%) First Draft**
- **Workshop** (week 11). Workshop letters for your peers’ essays due in section. Included in participation grade.
- **(40%) Final Draft**

25% - Participation (including seminar starters and workshop letters).

Schedule

- Primary text
- ❖ Theory/criticism

Week 0 (Wed, 9/2). *Are We Past ‘Passing’?*

- ❖ Baz Dreisinger, “‘Passing’ and the American Dream”
- ❖ Robert Fikes, “The Passing of Passing”
- ❖ Kenji Yoshino, “The Pressure to Cover”

I. Racial Passing in Modern America (Critical Race Theory; Feminist Theory; Media Theory)

Week 1 (Tues, 9/8). *How did passing originate?*

- Charles Chesnutt, “The Passing of Grandison” (1899)
- James Weldon Johnson, from *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912)
- Langston Hughes, “Passing” (1934)

- ❖ Frantz Fanon, “The Fact of Blackness”
- ❖ Pamela Caughie, “Passing as Modernism”

Tues, 9/8 | 5-6pm ET | Tutorial General Meeting #1

Week 2 (9/15). *When is passing about more than race alone?*

- Nella Larsen, *Passing* (1929)
- ❖ Hortense Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book”
- ❖ Gabrielle McIntire, “Toward a Narratology of Passing: Epistemology, Race, and Misrecognition in Nella Larsen’s *Passing*” (2012)

Week 3 (9/22). *How does passing translate from text to screen or stage?*

- *Imitation of Life*, dir. John Stahl (1934)
- *PassingSOLO*, performed by Nancy Cheryl Davis (2015)
- ❖ Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”
- ❖ Richard Dyer, “The Matter of Whiteness”

DUE Friday, 9/25, 8pm ET: Short Exercise

II. Sexual Passing and Covering in Late Nineteenth-Century Literature
(Psychoanalysis; Deconstruction)

Week 4 (9/29). *Is sexual passing visible or invisible?*

- Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890)
- ❖ Michel Foucault, from *The History of Sexuality, Vol 1*
- ❖ Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny”

Week 5 (10/6). *How do texts themselves become vehicles for passing/covering?*

- Katherine Mansfield, “The Garden Party,” “The Little Governess” (1922, 1915)
- Walt Whitman, “Calamus” poems (1860); “Walt Whitman and his Poems” (1855)
- ❖ Martin McQuillan, from “Introduction: Five Strategies for Deconstruction”

Tues, 10/6 | 5-6pm ET | Tutorial General Meeting #2

III. Testing Class and Gender Boundaries in the Eighteenth Century
(Gender Theory; Class Theory)

Week 6 (10/13). *What happens when you pass over and over?*

- Eliza Haywood, *Fantomina* (1725)
- ❖ Judith Butler, from *Gender Trouble*
- ❖ Leslie Morrison, “Serialized Identities and the Novelistic Character in Eliza Haywood’s *Fantomina* and *Anti-Pamela*”

DUE Friday, 10/17, 8pm ET: Prospectus + Annotated Bibliography

Week 7 (10/20). *Could you pass before passing was a thing?*

- Charlotte Charke, excerpts from *A Narrative of the Life* (1755)

- Shakespeare, *The Twelfth Night* (1602)
- ❖ bell hooks, “Crossing Class Boundaries,” from *Where We Stand*

IV. Postwar: Passing, Covering, Becoming
(Intersectionality; Black Feminist Theory; Transgender Studies)

Week 8 (10/27). *What is the ‘Neo-Passing Narrative’?*

- James Baldwin, *Giovanni’s Room* (1956)
- Langston Hughes, “Who’s Passing for Who?” (1956)
- ❖ Godfrey + Young, “The Neo-Passing Narrative”
- ❖ Valerie Rohy, “Passing, Nostalgia, and *Giovanni’s Room*”

Week 9 (11/3). *How does passing relate to intersectionality?*

- Fran Ross, *Oreo* (1974)
- ❖ Danzy Senna, “Passing and the Problematic of Multiracial Pride (or, Why One Mixed Girl Still Answers to Black)”
- ❖ Jennifer Nash, “Feeling Black Feminism,” from *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality*

Week 10 (11/10). *Does the language of passing/covering help or hinder transgender, nonbinary, and genderqueer identification?*

- Casey Plett, *Little Fish* (2018) [CW: sexual violence, substance abuse, suicide]
- ❖ Andrea Long Chu, “On Liking Women”

DUE Friday, 11/14, 8pm ET: Final Essay Draft 1

Week 11 (11/17). [Workshop]

- Selections from *Troubling the Line: Transgender and Genderqueer Poetry and Poetics* (2013)
- ❖ Jack Halberstam, “Queer Temporality and Postmodern Geographies,” from *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*

Week 12 (11/24). *How do graphic novels use visuality to express interiority?*

- Liana Finck, *Passing for Human* (2018)
- MAYBE (we’ll discuss): Mat Johnson and Warren Pleece, *Incognegro* (2008) [CW: graphic racial violence; lynching]

Week 13 (12/1). *What does it (or could it) mean to pass beyond the human?*

- *X-men: The Last Stand*, Brett Ratner (2006)
- Ash Kreis, *The Fandom* (2020)

DUE Tuesday, 12/8, 4pm ET: Revised Final Essay

Wed, 12/9 | time tba | Junior Tutorial Conference

Recommended Sources

Jeffrey Brune and Daniel Wilson, *Disability and Passing: Blurring the Lines of Identity*

- Pamela Caughie, *Passing and Pedagogy: The Dynamics of Responsibility*
- Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks* (1998)
- Elaine Ginsburg, *Passing and the Fictions of Identity* (1996)
- Gwendolyn Audrey Foster, *Class-Passing: Social Mobility in Film and Popular Culture* (2005)
- bell hooks, *Where We Stand: Class Matters*
- Brooke Kroeger's *Passing: When People Can't Be Who They Are* (2003)
- Julie Nerad, *Passing Interest: Racial Passing in US Novels, Memoirs, and Television and Film*
- Chris Mounsey, *Presenting Gender: Changing Sex in Early-modern Culture*
- Kathleen Pfeiffer, *Race, Passing, and American Individualism* (2003).
- María Carla Sánchez and Linda Schlossberg (eds), *Passing: Identity and Interpretation in Sexuality, Race, and Religion*. New York University Press, 2001.
- Werner Sollors, *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both: Thematic Explorations of Interracial Literature*. Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Gayle Wald, *Crossing the Line: Racial Passing in Twentieth-Century U.S. Literature and Culture*. Duke University Press, 2000.
- Kenji Yoshino, *Covering: The Hidden Assault on our Civil Rights* (2008)