

Passing and the Costs and Benefits of Appropriating Blackness

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Abstract

The socioeconomic position of Blacks in America cannot be fully contextualized without considering the marginalization of their racialized social identities as minorities who have historically combated subjugation and oppression with respect to income, employment, homeownership, education, and political representation. It is not difficult to understand why the historical reference to “passing” primarily has been associated with Blacks who were able to—and many who did—claim to be White to secure the social, educational, political, and economic benefits that were reserved for Whites. Therefore, the majority of passing narratives have focused on Black to White passing. This article departs from the tradition in the literature by considering appropriation of various aspects of Black culture and White to Black passing. We evaluate the socioeconomic costs and benefits of being Black and inequalities in citizenship status between Blacks and Whites. Furthermore, we examine the socioeconomic and political capital of Blackness versus Whiteness in an attempt to explore the rationality of passing for Black.

Keywords

race, citizenship identity, social construct, passing

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Introduction

“The genealogy of the term *passing* in American history associates p. 2 it with the discourse of racial difference and especially with the assumption of a fraudulent ‘white’ identity by an individual culturally and legally defined as ‘Negro’ or black by virtue of a percentage of African ancestry” (Ginsberg, 1996). The consideration of racial difference leads to the question “Who is Black?” Historically, the answer has been that any person with any known African, Black ancestry is considered Black. This definition is reflected in the “one-drop rule,” meaning that a single drop of “black blood” makes a person Black (Davis, 1991). The term passing metaphorically implies that a person of Black or African descent who crossed or passed through a racial line or boundary trespassed to assume a new racial identity, escaping the subordination and oppression accompanying their Black identity and accessing the privileges and status of their newly created White identity (Ginsberg, 1996). Those with the requisite physical appearance, emphasizing such “white” features as blonde hair, light skin, and blue or green eyes, to name a few, still needed to relocate to a new geographical area where his or her true identity—parentage, legal status, and the like—was unknown (Ginsberg, 1996).

While the cultural logic of passing suggests that passing is usually motivated by a desire to shed the identity of an oppressed minority group to gain access to the social and economic opportunities of the majority group, the rationale for passing may be more or less complex or ambiguous and motivated by other kinds of perceived rewards.

Each historical era since the period of legal African enslavement determined not only how people of African descent lived but also what they lost (Hobbs, 2014). In *A Chosen Exile: A History of Racial Passing in American Life*, Allyson Hobbs details the costs and benefits of passing for White. During the antebellum period, it meant escaping the horrors of slavery—back breaking work, and the fear of being sold, beaten, raped, or even killed. The ability of racially ambiguous slaves to create a new “white” identity—pass for White—was a breach of legal and cultural boundaries (Ginsberg, 1996). Passing out of slavery was a move from a category of subordination and oppression to one of freedom and privilege, a movement that threatened the system of racial categories and hierarchies established by social custom and legitimated by the law (Ginsberg, 1996).

During the Jim Crow era, it meant starting a new life and leaving behind one’s family and community. While there were benefits to those who passed, the associated costs included loss, alienation, and isolation which for some outweighed the benefits of Whiteness (Hobbs, 2014). Historically, passing narratives by African American authors have focused on plots of racial mobility and been used to expose the permeability of racial boundaries, and by White authors to express fears of racial contamination as well as voyeuristic fantasies of Blackness (Lawrence, 2010).

We consider the appropriation of various aspects of Black culture and White-to-Black passing and highlight three individuals who did so at different points in American history: Clarence King, Johnny Otis, and, most recently, Rachel Dolezal. However, we make no claim that these particular incidents of passing are the only deviations from

cultural norms, nor do we posit that they took place in a vacuum, exogenous to and unaffected by the socioeconomic and cultural aspects of the time, space, and location in which they occurred. Our discussion makes at least two contributions to the passing literature. First, our analysis contributes to a growing literature on the historical and contemporary socioeconomic costs of being Black and inequalities in citizenship status between Blacks and Whites in America. Having laid a socioeconomic and cultural backdrop, we then consider the racial iconography and benefits of appropriating Blackness and highlight the stories of King, Otis, and Dolezal.

Fictive Kinship and Socioeconomic Inequality

The idea of White-to-Black passing seems paradoxical—even oxymoronic—given the current disparities, challenges, and crises that vex Black lives daily. Recent increases in access to education, employment, political representation, and opportunities for upward socioeconomic mobility have not resulted in a sufficient windfall for people of color to the degree that passing for Black can be seen as providing a comparable level of pecuniary and social capital to Whiteness. Indeed, if one were to consider wealth differentials, racial gaps remain far from closed by the usual means associated with upward mobility, educational attainment, and effort; for example, Blacks with a college degree have more than US\$10,000 less in net worth than Whites who did not finish high school (Hamilton, & Darity, 2017). Hence, the decision of a White American to pass for Black has direct and distinct consequences and implications. The entire notion of passing for Black has raised questions about the socioeconomic and political ramifications of voluntarily abandoning White privilege.

Fictive kinship refers to connections between members of a group who are unrelated by blood or marriage but who nonetheless share reciprocal social or economic relationships which serve as integral components of cultural networks (Chatters, Taylor, & Jayakody, 1994; Harris-Perry, 2011). Positive fictive kinships were experienced by some African Americans when Barack Obama became the first Black President of the United States in 2008 and when O. J. Simpson was found not guilty of murder in 1995. Examples of negative fictive kinships include African Americans who struggle with and are devastated by the deaths at the hands of police officers in 2016 of Terence Crutcher and Philando Castile; in 2015 of Samuel DuBose, Sandra Bland, Freddie Gray, and Walter Scott among many others.¹

Choosing to abandon Whiteness and pass for Black also means joining a new fictive kinship, one that includes experiencing the disadvantages of racial inequality. This inequality manifests itself with respect to homeownership in multiple forms, including White capping, redlining, and housing covenants. Racial and gender inequality, along with lenders' exploitation of the differential social power that inequality generates, are central to the political economy of subprime lending and, hence, the subprime crisis (Dymski, Hernandez, & Mohanty, 2013). The U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Shelley v. Kraemer* (1948) that private racial covenants, which prevented Blacks from moving to neighborhoods with better amenities and public schools, could not be enforced by the state to evict Black buyers (Andrews, 2010; Kucheva & Sander, 2014). Redlining, the

refusal of lenders to make mortgage loans in certain areas regardless of the creditworthiness of the individual loan applicant denied Blacks equal access to capital for investment by excluding them from most legitimate means of obtaining a mortgage (Dymski et al., 2013; Holmes & Horvitz, 1994). Recent research has emphasized that the subprime and foreclosure crises are rooted in historical and contemporary practices that generate and reinforce racial and gender inequality (Dymski et al., 2013). The persistence of the income and homeownership gaps have unintended consequences for access to quality education because families with lower incomes tend to purchase homes in poorer neighborhoods or rent, thereby generating lower property tax revenues to support public schools within their school districts (Sharpe, 2010).

Political Capital in Black and White

The fact that Barack Obama was the 44th President of the United States from January 2009 to January 2017 was the most tangible reminder that Black people are full citizens of the United States, endowed with the same inalienable rights as their fellow Americans (Harris-Perry, 2014). His presidency was the contemporary embodiment of the astonishing possibilities of Black citizenship, particularly with respect to politics (Harris-Perry, 2014). Furthermore, the 114th U.S. Congress was one of the most diverse in history, with 108 women (20% of the membership) and 17% non-White representation. However, this increased political representation did not display a significant shift and advantage for either group. The gender representation of the House consisted of 88 females, while the Senate had 20. When race is examined specifically, the makeup of Congress becomes an important variable in the overall thesis of political capital being garnered by representation. Although nearly one-in-five members in the House and Senate were a racial or ethnic minority, Congress continued to be disproportionately White in comparison with the overall U.S. population despite a steady increase in minority populations over the past decades (Krogstad, 2015). Unfortunately, the underrepresentation of Blacks in Congress is fully compensated for by their historical overrepresentation in U.S. jails and prisons.

The currency of political capital has immense utility when attempting to understand the benefits of representation. While skin color, race, culture, ethnicity, or racial affiliation does not guarantee trust and the goodwill that is somewhat expected when electing political officials, it is nonetheless often the tipping point. It is not a farfetched conclusion that Whites stand to benefit more due to the significant number of White elected officials on the national and local level. Malcolm X (1963) argued that Blacks shared a common problem—“political oppression at the hands of the white man, economic exploitation at the hands of the white man [and] if we don’t do something real soon, I think you’ll have to agree that we’re going to be forced either to use the ballot or the Tullet.” Many would posit that the proverbial bullet that was never launched after his speech is now an intractable bullet that is taking an alarming number of Black lives under far too many suspect circumstances. Choosing to exist in this reality—not as a spectator, but as a potential target under the guise of selective racial identification

with Black people to the point of passing for Black—just like abandoning political privilege is a symptom of an individual's larger internal problem.

Citizenship identity, the sense of belonging and solidarity, depends not only on legal status but also on access to social, economic, and political resources and is therefore connected with the problem of unequal distribution of resources in society (De La Paz, 2012). Disparities in citizenship identity between Blacks and Whites have been evident since the involuntary arrival of enslaved Africans in 1619. The term “slavery” encompassed illegitimate domination, political subordination, and the absence of republican government; “chattel slavery” was only the most extreme and visible example of slavery (Balkin, 2012). The Emancipation Proclamation was issued on January 1, 1863, freeing slaves in the areas of the Confederacy that remained in rebellion. However, it did not free slaves in areas of the Confederacy that were under union control (Chambers, 2013).

The end of slavery only came with the end of the Civil War and the passage of the 13th Amendment (13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, 1865), according to which

neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.

The 13th Amendment may have abolished slavery within the United States and its territories, but not for those in prison, thereby laying the groundwork for the development of the convict lease system, which enabled convicts to become a source of revenue (Work, 1913). Henceforth, each state had a financial interest in increasing the number of convicts (read “slaves”). While the convict lease system increased the revenue of the states, it made the condition of convicts infinitely worse than was possible under a system of slavery in which the slave belonged to his master for life (Work, 1913). Masters had a financial investment in their slaves as slaves served as both a source of labor and a source of capital when sold. For this reason, masters had an incentive to exercise a certain level of restraint in the amount of work required and punishment issued to their slaves. However, this restraint would not be bestowed upon a leased convict where no right of ownership existed.

Lynching, a form of terror experienced by African Americans during and after slavery, further illustrates the cost of being Black. A report examining lynching in the United States by the Equal Justice Initiative, a non-profit based in Alabama, suggests that the number of African Americans lynched in Southern states in the 19th and 20th centuries is much higher than previously thought. The summary report echoes the Black experience, clearly noting that “lynchings were violent and public acts of torture that traumatized black people throughout the country and were largely tolerated by state and federal officials” (Equal Justice Initiative, 2015, p. 3). Table 1 illustrates the number of lynchings of Blacks in southern states, 1877 to 1950. Furthermore, the number of lynchings relative to each state's population and its Black population is indicated. The 12 most active lynching states in America, Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee,

Table 1. Lynchings of Blacks in Southern States, 1877-1950.

State	Lynching victims by state, 1877-1950	Lynched annually per 100,000 residents, 1880-1940: per capita
Georgia	586	0.378
Mississippi	576	0.556
Louisiana	540	0.475
Arkansas	503	0.545
Texas	376	0.154
Florida	331	0.594
Alabama	326	0.256
Tennessee	225	0.165
South Carolina	164	0.18
Kentucky	154	0.111
North Carolina	102	0.068
Virginia	76	0.072
Total/Average	3,959	0.296

Source. Adapted from Equal Justice Initiative Report (2015).

Texas, and Virginia, resulted in the documented lynching of 3,959 Black people in these southern states.

Of the 3,959 lynchings of Black people that occurred in South, Georgia, Mississippi, and Louisiana had the highest numbers. Virginia had the lowest with 76 people. According to the Equal Justice Initiative report (2015), lynchings peaked between 1880 and 1940. Furthermore, the report noted that while Florida, Mississippi, and Arkansas had the highest per capital rates of lynchings by total state population, the states with the highest per capital rates by African American population were Arkansas, Florida, and Louisiana. An examination of lynchings by counties revealed that Phillips County, Arkansas, ranked number one with 243 from 1877 to 1950. Perhaps the most telling when considering the value of Black bodies is the fact that Congress never passed an anti-lynching bill. Although southern states created their own anti-lynching laws, they were not enforced, thus resulting in only 1% conviction of the criminal offense after 1900 (Equal Justice Initiative, 2015). Furthermore, these accounts do not include other acts of racial terrorism that were perpetrated in Northern states, particularly in Ohio, Illinois, Kansas, and Oklahoma (Pfeifer, 2013).

From the 1950s to the present, lynchings of Blacks increasingly have become the purview of police forces instead of “mobs” and include the deaths of Michael Brown, Donte Hamilton, Eric Garner, John Crawford, and Tanisha Anderson along with numerous others. While the officers who killed these unarmed African American citizens have not been incarcerated for ending Black lives, African Americans constitute nearly 1 million of the total 2.3 million incarcerated population (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People [NAACP], 2015). While comparing criminal



Figure 1. U.S. incarceration rate, 2010.

Source. Statistics as of June 30, 2010, and December 31, 2010, from *Correctional Population in the United States* and from U.S. Census Summary File 1 (Graph: Peter Wagner, 2012).

Table 2. The 114th U.S. Congress.

Congress			
Race	House	Senate	Total representation
White	342	93	435
Black	46	2	48
Hispanic	34	4	38
Asian American	11	1	12
Native American	2	0	2
Totals	435	100	535

Source. Adapted from Congressional Research Service (2015).

statistics may be hazardous, the racial disproportionality in incarceration rates is clear. According to the 2010 U.S. Census, non-Hispanic Whites have an incarceration rate of 380 per 100,000. They account for 64% of the U.S. population and 39% of the U.S. prison population. Conversely, Blacks account for only 13% of the U.S. population, but for 40% of the incarcerated population. Their incarceration rate per 100,000 persons, 2,207, is 5.8 times that of Whites. Figure 1 presents the number of people incarcerated per 100,000 by race for 2010.

Table 2 provides an analysis of the 114th U.S. Congress. While it was historically one of the most diverse Congresses, with 108 women (20% of the membership) and

17% non-White representation, it did not display a significant shift and advantage for either group. The gender representation of the House consisted of 88 females, while the Senate has 20. When race is examined specifically, the makeup of Congress becomes an important variable in the overall thesis of political capital being garnered by representation. Although nearly one-in-five members in the House and Senate were a racial or ethnic minority, Congress continued to be disproportionately White in comparison with the overall U.S. population despite a steady increase in minority populations over the past decades (Krogstad, 2015).

The representation in both the House and the Senate is illuminating. According to Manning (2016), the racial demographics for the 114th U.S. Congress consist of 46 African American members of the House (including two non-voting delegates) and two in the Senate; 34 Latino members serving in the House (including one delegate and the Resident Commissioner) and four in the Senate; 13 members of the House (including two delegates) and one Senator are Asian Americans or Pacific Islanders; and there are two American Indians (Native Americans) in the House. The full congressional representation was roughly 81% White, 9% Black, 7% Hispanic, and 2.6% Asian American and Native Americans. With more than half the U.S. population being female and White non-Hispanics constituting about 63% of the population, Bump (2015) argues that “Congress is starting to look more like the rest of the country, in other words—but the 114th Congress won’t look much like it at all.” Unfortunately, the underrepresentation of Blacks in Congress is fully compensated for by their historical overrepresentation in U.S. jails and prisons.

The confluence of racial, socioeconomic, and political barriers faced by African Americans historically and today is evidenced by persistent racial disparities in income, employment, homeownership, education, political representation, and incarceration. In defiance of discriminatory tactics and in spite of adversity, African Americans have persevered in demonstrating their agency under difficult circumstances by crafting alternative images of themselves (Harris-Perry, 2011). While Harris-Perry (2011) focuses specifically on the negative iconography of Black women as lewd and angry, parallels can be made to Black people overall. However, the strength of Black people can be heard in the music of Marvin Gaye’s *What’s Going On*, Bob Marley’s *Get Up, Stand Up*, and Aretha Franklin’s *Respect*. The strength of the African American community is illustrated by movements with hashtags including #ICantBreathe, hashtag referring to Eric Garner’s repeated calls that he could not breathe while an NYPD officer performed a fatal chokehold²; #BlackLivesMatter, which aims to end state-violence against Black people; and #VRA50, an effort to protect voting rights, among others.

Clearly, the costs of being Black are high with respect to socioeconomic indicators of success and levels of citizenship identity. The fight for recognition, inclusion, and equality has been and continues to be an uphill battle. Therefore, the circumstance of a White person passing for Black elicits responses of anger, resentment, confusion, and frustration, if not fascination with contemporary assertions that passing for Black is unreasoned and not possible because the attempt at appropriating a Black identity is absent of individualized and collective Black struggle and experiences.

Hierarchies of Skin Hue and the Privilege of Lightness

Given the cumulative disadvantages associated with being Black, it is difficult to imagine why anyone who is White would seek to pass for Black. However, the distribution of socioeconomic advantage and disadvantage in American life for African Americans is conditioned not just on race, Black versus White, but on skin hue as well (Gyimah-Brempong & Price, 2006). For African Americans, skin hue is associated with a significant array of socioeconomic outcomes (Gyimah-Brempong & Price, 2006).

Hierarchies of skin hue that systematically privilege lightness over darkness persist in their effects, particularly for women of color (Hunter, 2002). The problem of colorism affects both dark- and light-skinned Blacks, though to be clear, the advantages of lighter skin outweigh the disadvantages both within and outside of the Black community (Hunter, 2002). In the hierarchy of skin hue, the brown paper bag is significant because its color is the historical marker that distinguishes “light skin” from “dark skin” and serves to center Blackness on a continuum stretching continuously from Black to White (Kerr, 2006/2007). The brown paper bag principle comes to life in Spike Lee’s iconic movie, “School Daze,” where members of the fictional “Gamma Rays,” a group of light-skinned women (derogatorily the Wannabees) with long straight hair, battle through word and songs against a group of non-Greek dark-skinned women (derogatorily the JiggaBoos) over skin hue, hair length, and texture.

The preference for lighter skin in the Black community is derived from concrete social advantages associated with lighter complexions in the wider society. Black people care because America makes skin shade matter. Million-dollar homes, summers in Martha’s Vineyard, membership in The Links, Jack & Jill, Deltas, Boule, Guardsmen, AKAs, an obsession with the right schools, suitable family ties, social clubs, “good” hair and light skin complexion characterize the Black upper class (Graham, 1999). For upper and middle-class, light-skinned Blacks, skin tone represents a significant source of social capital. In some circles, light-skinned men and women are not regarded as legitimate members of the Black community (Hunter, 2002). Piper (1992) describes growing up in Harlem and being teased by darker skinned children, being called White, and being required by some Blacks to prove her Blackness by passing the Suffering Test—recounting her experiences of racism. However, the net material disadvantage plainly is greater for darker skinned Blacks whether female or male.

Dark-skinned Blacks lack the social and economic capital that light skin provides and, therefore, are disadvantaged in education, employment, and housing (Hunter, 2002). In addition, dark skin is generally not regarded as beautiful leading some Blacks to adapt their hair, and the rest of their body to an essentially Afrophobic culture, a culture that rejects full lips, dark skin, and so-called nappy or kinky hair (Gaskins, 1997; Hunter, 2002). However, today more African Americans are rejecting the notion that their physical features are ugly or bad, but choosing instead to celebrate them (Gaskins, 1997).

When a White person passes for Black, they typically will be seen as a lighter complexioned Black person—so that the penalties of crossing over into Blackness are not as severe. Also they might be able to locate near the top of the stratification structure in the Black community because of other resources they possess (e.g., college education, wealth, and social connections) while they only might be in the middle of the pack or lower among Whites. Relative position in each group is key with respect to social, economic, and political capital. Still, in general, Whites are reluctant to make this jump. So, the fundamental question becomes do you want to be near the top of the subaltern community or in the middle of the dominant community? In general, it appears that Whites overwhelmingly reject the first option.

Racial Iconography and the Benefits of Appropriating Blackness

In *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes and Black Women in America*, Harris-Perry explores the confluence of racial- and gender-based stereotypes that have been used to characterize, shame, and subjugate Black women in America. The author examines three of the most pervasive myths about Black women: sexual promiscuity, emasculating brashness, and Mammy-like devotion with respect to domestic occupations. On the contrary, Black males were characterized as savages with hypersexual animalistic tendencies, from whom White women needed to be protected. These and other negative stereotypes create an interlocking mythology with harmful political implications and contributed to the misidentification of Black identity (Harris-Perry, 2011). Between 1880 and 1960, more than 4,700 Americans, the majority of whom were African American men, were lynched (Thomas-Lester, 2005). Between 1932 and 1972, the U.S. Department of Public Health used 399 unsuspecting Black men to study how long it takes syphilis to kill someone in what is now known as the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment (Jones, 1993). Viewed from this historical lens, it is not difficult to understand why during slavery and Jim Crow, for racially ambiguous Blacks, the ability to pass for White served as an escape from these stereotypes and their corresponding implications.

As Eversley (2004) explains, the issue of discerning the difference between “white” and “Black” became an urgent demand by Whites seeking self-definition after slavery as they could no longer define themselves as masters or slave owners and they could no longer define Blacks as slaves. The Supreme Court decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) helped to formally organize a notion of race as visible and public. The decision in *Plessy* upheld the constitutionality of racial segregation under the “separate but equal” doctrine and made racial divisions visible and public with separate railroad cars, water fountains, and many other public spaces (Eversley, 2004). Following the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954 and the end of segregation, racial regulations with respect to public space could no longer be used to delineate racial difference.

Race, however, is defined by more than just the color of one’s skin. In America, race is associated with dialect, culture, style, and in some cases neighborhood. Black popular culture can be seen as an amalgamation, as a product of partial synchronization, as engagements across cultural boundaries, as the confluence of more than one

cultural tradition, as the negotiation of dominant and subordinate positions, as the subterranean strategy of recoding and transcoding, and as critical signification and of signifying (Hall, 1993). Furthermore, the signifiers “Black” and “African American” embody the historical, cultural, and political experiences of people of African descent and represent more than a biologically constituted racial category (Hall, 1993).

When White Americans essentialize Blackness, they often do so in ways that maintain “whiteness” as the master trope of purity, supremacy, and entitlement, as a ubiquitous, fixed, unifying signifier (Johnson, 2003). Using the values, characteristics, and features of the dominant group, in this case White Americans, as the supposedly neutral standard against which all others should be evaluated then serves as the basis to “otherize” and subjugate non-Whites (Kirk & Okazawa-Rey, 2010). Maintaining a system of inequality and White supremacy requires the objectification and dehumanization of subordinated peoples (Kirk & Okazawa-Rey, 2010). Therefore, the tropes of Blackness that Whites circulated in the past Mammy, Sapphire, Jezebel, Jim Crow, Sambo, Zip Coon, pickaninny, and Stepin Fetchit—and now enlarged to include welfare queen, prostitute, rapist, drug addict, prison inmate, and so on—have historically insured physical violence, poverty, institutional racism, and second-class citizenry for Blacks (Johnson, 2003). An even more complicated dynamic occurs when Whites appropriate aspects of Blackness through methods including botox and other forms of cosmetic surgery to increase lip, breast, hip, and buttocks size; tanning to darken skin; and hair braiding among others. History demonstrates that cultural usurpation has been a common practice of White Americans in their attempts to exoticize and/or fetishize Blackness (Johnson, 2003).

Against the backdrop of historical, stereotypical characterizations of Black Americans, we now consider Rachel Dolezal, the 37-year-old president of the NAACP’s Spokane chapter, who in June 2015 resigned after being outed by her parents as a White woman who had been passing for Black for 10 years (Bouie, 2015). Dolezal’s dissemblance was foreshadowed by her birth and upbringing in rural Montana. Her early life was dictated by her parents’ strict interpretation of the Bible and fundamentalist puritan-like commitment to simple living and harsh punishment (McGreal, 2015). In discordance with her parents’ beliefs, as a child, Dolezal imagined that it was all a horrible mistake and that she was really “a princess in Egypt and [her parents] kidnapped and adopted [her].” She believed that if she could just make it through childhood, she would be okay (McGreal, 2015). In actuality, Rachel Dolezal is not a princess in Egypt, but that fact did not deter her from her mission of being a Black woman.

Dolezal went on to receive a Master of Fine Arts degree from Howard University and sued the institution in 2002 for discriminating against her for being White, claiming retaliation based on her race, gender, pregnancy, and family responsibilities, saying she had been denied teaching positions and scholarship aid (Kingkade & Svokos, 2015; Syrluga, 2015). She also complained that some of her artwork had been removed from an exhibition because Black students were being favored (Syrluga, 2015). However, a judge, and subsequently an appeals court, found no basis for her claims stating that she failed to show that race was a substantial factor in the university’s

decisions to deny her a position and scholarship money (Kingkade & Svokos, 2015). Color prejudice or the belief in color prejudice has been a topic of discussion at Howard University since the very early history of the school (Kerr, 2006/2007). Through the early part of the 20th century, it was customary to send a picture along with one's application to Howard. A common practice was that a prospective student's skin tone was "evaluated" and was a key factor in whether or not one would be accepted (Kerr, 2006/2007).

Race is after all one of the most divisive issues in America today (Altbach, 1991), as evidenced by the recurring tragedy of unarmed Black men, boys, women, and girls being killed by police officers; the racially disproportionate presence of Blacks in the prison population; and discrimination in employment. The disparities are striking with one indicator of the degree of discrimination in the labor market given, for example, the fact that typically Blacks with some college education have a higher unemployment rate than Whites who dropped out of high school.

Historical research has shown that the idea of "race" has always carried more meaning than mere physical differences; indeed, physical variations in the human species have no meaning except the social ones that humans put on them. Today, scholars in many fields argue that "race" as it is understood in the United States was a social mechanism invented during the 18th century to refer to those populations brought together in colonial America: the English and other European settlers, the conquered Indian peoples, and those peoples of Africa brought in to provide slave labor (American Anthropological Association [AAA] Executive Board, 1998).

Dolezal would go on to alter her appearance using makeup to darken her skin, and hair extensions to simulate her idea of the outward appearance of Black womanhood. She concocted a new story about her upbringing and family background, which included a Black son, who was actually her adopted brother. Dolezal's charade came to light on June 11, 2015, when during a television interview she was asked, "Are you African American?" to which she replied that she did not understand the question (McGreal, 2015). In disputing accusations that she had deceived people about her racial identity, Dolezal stated that the issue was "a little more complex than me identifying as black or answering a question of are you black or white." Dolezal claimed that she was first identified as "trans-racial" while doing human rights work in north Idaho, later as "biracial" by news outlets, and finally as "black," which she never corrected (Yuhas, 2015).

In many cases, the appropriators of Blackness including Dolezal have the economic and/or social clout to secure particular attributes of Blackness—for example, dreadlocks or micro braids, vernacular speech, a residence in a particular area of town, and other components of the template from which Blackness originates (Johnson, 2003). Aspects of Black popular culture are appropriated at varying levels up to and including the confabulation of Rachel Dolezal whereby she replaced gaps in her life story with self-constructed memories of a Black life, family, and upbringing to the extent that she herself may have come to believe the story was true. Many would consider Rachel Dolezal's decision to pass for Black and subsequent associated behaviors to be unorthodox.

Although infrequent, there are other equally idiosyncratic displays of attempts to pass for Black by Whites including the double life of Dr. Clarence King (1842-1901), a well-known White geologist, but not so well-known Black husband. An ancestor of Alfred the Great, King was undoubtedly White, with pale skin and blue eyes as evidence (Sandweiss, 2009). In 1887, King met and fell in love with Ada Copeland, a former slave who had gained her freedom after the U.S. Civil War. Anti-miscegenation laws in many states remained in effect until the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that they were unconstitutional in *Loving v. Virginia*, 388 U.S. 1 (1967). Therefore, King introduced himself as James Todd, a Black Pullman porter from Baltimore. This new identity was the only one Ada Copeland ever knew (Foulkes, 2011). In the context of the legal restrictions and social taboos circumscribing interracial marriages, this elaborate ruse seemed to King the only way he could enjoy a private life with the woman he loved and still protect his public reputation (Johnson, 2003). Together, he and Ada had five children, two girls and three boys, though one of the boys died as a toddler. All of the children were listed on "colored" on their birth certificates. The confluence of mounting debt, as a result of risky investment decisions, and the burden of living a double life led King's arrest for disorderly conduct and 2-month commitment to an insane asylum in 1894 (Foulkes, 2011). After suffering from tuberculosis, whooping cough, and a heart attack, King wrote a letter to his wife explaining his true identity. He died on December 24, 1901, in Arizona, a month before his 60th birthday. Although he had assured his wife that he had provided for her financially after his death, King's will had been written prior to his common law marriage to Ada and listed his mother as the beneficiary. Therefore, she was not entitled to anything.

Twenty years after the death of Clarence King, Ionnis Alexander Veliote was born to Greek immigrants on December 28, 1921 (Lewis, 2012). He would later be known by the name Johnny Otis, "Godfather of Rhythm and Blues." Johnny Otis was a pioneering rhythm-and-blues singer, songwriter, drummer, bandleader, and disk jockey, famous for writing and recording the R&B classic "Willie and the Hand Jive" (Lewis, 2012). Otis grew up in a Black section of Berkeley, California, where he immersed himself in Black culture and music and became, as he called it, "black by persuasion" (Lipsitz, 2010). He identified more with Black culture than his own, an identification which led him to change his name because he thought Johnny Otis sounded more Black (Associated Press, 2012). For Otis, identity was more a matter of culture than color; living as a "Black" man enabled Otis to be a part of the world that he understood best and that meant the most to him. In his autobiography, Otis explains that he knew that there were some dimensions of the African American experience that he could not feel, that his biological makeup allowed him the theoretical option of living as "white." But his absorption in Black culture became such an internalized part of his experience that he found it impossible to think of himself in any other terms (Otis, 1993).

Otis displayed his respect for Black culture and Black people openly because he felt that he had been captured by the beauty of the Black community and saved by its political, spiritual, and moral force (Lipsitz, 2012). The choice to identify as Black gave him a deep connection to Black culture that helped him discover such future stars of R&B and rock as Etta James, Little Richard, Jackie Wilson, Hank Ballard, and

Little Esther Phillips (Lewis, 2012). In 1979, Otis told the *LA Times* “Yes, I chose, because despite all the hardships, there’s a wonderful richness in black culture that I prefer” (Lewis, 2012). However, unlike King, Otis was not a racial imposter; he never denied or disguised his family origin.

Concerning Rachel Dolezal specifically and racial passing in general, Abdul-Jabbar (2015) suggests that as there is technically no such thing as race, Rachel Dolezal, Clarence King, and Johnny Otis merely selected the cultural group with which they most identified. The argument against demonizing Dolezal and others lies in recognizing their contribution to the Black community. Dr. King’s argument of judging a person according to “the content of their character” rather than skin hue has caused some would-be cynics to give Dolezal and others a pass on passing, choosing instead to recognize their public service in the struggle for Black equality (Abdul-Jabbar, 2015).

However, Piper (1992) argues that once a racial imposter is exposed as a fraud, they can never regain their legitimacy because the criterion of legitimacy presupposes an absolute discordance between the person they appeared to be and the person they are now revealed to be. No fraud has the capacity to convince his or her accusers that they merely imagine an incompatibility where there is none in fact. Furthermore, the devaluation of status consequent on such exposure is absolute, and the suspicion of fraudulence spreads to all areas of interaction (Piper, 1992).

The very idea of race as an organizing principle of human identification and social organization has played a major role in the formation of contemporary systems of symbolic representation, misrepresentation, and social and personal identification (Maldonado-Torres, 2014). The introduction of racial classification in humans based on certain apparent morphological traits provides important emphasis to those characteristics to which human perceptions are most finely tuned (nose shape, lip size, eye color, skin color, hair texture and quantity, etc.), specifically because they are the characteristics that humans customarily use to differentiate between individuals (Lewontin, 1995). While some of these physical characteristics are more likely found in specific populations or “races” than in others, race is void of biological foundation (Sapp, 2012). Geneticists and evolutionary biologists have shown that human race taxonomy has no scientific basis. Nonetheless, racialized science seeks to explain human population differences in health, intelligence, education, and wealth as the consequence of undeniable, biologically based differences between “racial” groups (Smedley & Smedley, 2011; Witzig, 1996). Despite all the evidence indicating that “race” has no biological or evolutionary meaning, the biological-race concept continues to gain strength today in science and society, and it is reinforced by those who design and market DNA-based technologies. Race is still used in forensics, medicine, and the genetic-ancestry business. Individuals have illnesses, not racial populations. Belonging to any socio-culturally defined race is a poor predictor of an individual’s genes, and one’s genes a poor predictor of one’s health (Sapp, 2012).

The term “racism” is often used in a loose and unreflective way to describe the hostile or negative feelings of one ethnic group toward another (Fredrickson, 2009) and the resulting actions and conveniently concocted theories and justifications for such attitudes.

Evidence of racism in the form of government sanctioned subjugation exists throughout history buttressed by Biblical and pseudo-scientific rhetoric. Hitler invoked racist theories to justify his genocidal treatment of European Jews, and White supremacists in the American South to explain slavery and subsequently to explain why Jim Crow laws were needed to keep Whites and Blacks separated and unequal (Fredrickson, 2009). Color bars and skin pigmentation were used in the South African gold mining codes of the 1890s and early 1900s, which led to the Rand Revolt, the Pact Government, and the enactment of apartheid laws (Ndabezitha & Sanderson, 2000).

It is written in Ephesians 6:5 “Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ.” This passage was used to justify the enslavement of Black people and to validate their brutal treatment at the hands of White slaveholders for hundreds of years. Somehow, history completely ignored Ephesians 6:9, “And masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with him.” The first African slaves arrived in the United States in 1619. However, the law did not formally recognize the condition of perpetual slavery or systematically identify slaves of African descent for special treatment as chattel until 1661. Therefore, between 1619 and 1661, African slaves enjoyed rights that not even free Black people could claim in the 19th century (Fields, 1990).

A law enacted in the colony of Maryland in 1664 established the legal status of slave for life and experimented with assigning slave condition after the condition of the father. That experiment was soon dropped. Paternity is always ambiguous, whereas maternity is not. Slaveholders eventually recognized the advantage of a different and unambiguous rule of descent, one that would guarantee to owners all offspring of slave women, however fathered (Fields, 1990).

Unlike the African descended slaves, there is no ambiguity with respect to Rachel Dolezal’s parentage—her mother, Ruthanne, and father, Larry, are Whites who reside in Troy, Montana. Dolezal actually lived as a White woman for many years but hid that fact, undermining her credibility when she was “outed” from her Blackness. Part of the tragedy of the trans-Atlantic slave trade was the fracturing of lineage. Family ties and bonds were inextricably severed. Recorded information for Blacks differed from records of other groups, particularly prior to 1870. This is due to the enslaved status of the majority of the Black population, and the legal marginalization of those who were free prior to the 1870 census (National Archives and Records). Therefore, today Blacks usually are met with a brick wall when attempting to trace their family heritage prior to enslavement. Conversely, once Dolezal’s starring role in the fetishizing of Black identity ends, she has the luxury of returning to a life of White privilege and to her family of origin, perhaps even with welcoming arms, like a returning prodigal son.

Conclusion

The infrequency of documented passing for Black phenomena has led to a vast cross disciplinary silence in theorizing about when and why it occurs. We have provided what we hope is a fresh perspective on passing for Black that interrupts the silence.

Our investigation is anchored on the Black historical experience and current reality to properly frame the costs of being Black and to underscore why passing for Black is so puzzling. While fetishizing Black culture is far from rare, fetishizing Black culture to the extent that an individual who otherwise would live as White chooses to live as Black is rare. It typically is seen as an opportunistic attempt at appropriation for a windfall personal gain. In the case of Rachel Dolezal, the gain was one of notoriety through her position as president of the NAACP chapter in Spokane, Washington. For Dr. Clarence King, the gain took the form of an illegal, interracial marriage to the woman he loved. The gain for Johnny Otis was immersion in Black culture, which he loved and respected.

The situation is aggravated if the individual has an escape option of returning to Whiteness at any moment. Arguably, therefore, the ire of Blacks across the nation has been so fervent concerning the Dolezal case. The persistent disparities that African Americans experience are debilitating and traverse all dimensions of what constitutes success in American life. Our discussion exposes the potential for the acts of abandoning White privilege and taking on a Black identity to be odious, despite the passers apparent identification with the Black struggle. History has invariably yoked us to an intricately woven narrative of race, culture, and identity. We are bound to the unrelenting complexity of acquiring and sustaining viable group memberships and establishing a sense of belonging, sometimes succeeding and quite often failing to carve out a meaningful and proud existence and to navigate our individual and collective human experience without borders—forced or imagined.

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Notes

1. Lee and Park (2017).
2. deHahn (2015).

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