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Long Paper 2: Racial Identity

America is often referred to as “The Melting Pot,” so one would assume that all cultures are equal to the rest. That’s how it should be anyway, but unfortunately that’s not the reality. As if physical war weren’t enough, people are at war with identity; whoever stands outside the circle of norm is seen as an “other”. Members of the LGBTQ+ community had to take a stand for their right to feel the way they want to and to love who they want regardless of gender, and they’re still fighting. Women have fought for centuries to be heard and to be a rightful part of what the American Constitution states for its people. African Americans were enslaved and even now, hundreds of years later, continue to fight for equality among the white-dominated ideology of American society. But what about when race and sex come together? The white experience tends to be seen as the default within these journeys, like how white women got their right to vote before African American women and conveniently didn’t include women who weren’t white in the feminist activism movement. If America is a true melting pot, everyone must be accounted for, including African Americans. In Nella Larsen’s *Passing*, racial identity drives peoples’ lives in behavior and success due to societal pressures and standards in America; anyone outside the norm of a white-dominated society is put at a disadvantage.

A strong theme of *Passing* is how race relates to success, which is reflected in real American society. It appears that an immigrant family-of-color’s well-being depends on their

children's ambition and means to success through educational opportunities, as Alejandro Portes and Rivas say in their article "The Adaptation of Migrant Children":

The overall advancement of the immigrant population, however, is largely driven by the good performance and outcomes of youths from professional immigrant families, positively received in America. For immigrants at the other end of the spectrum, average socioeconomic outcomes are driven down by the poorer educational and economic performance of children from unskilled migrant families[...]Racial stereotypes produce a positive self-identity for white and Asian students but a negative one for blacks. (Portes 219)

So those immigrant families who are furthest away from the norm in American society (social class, blackness, etc) are associated with the low-class stereotype that because they're poor, they're unintelligent and are not hard-working. Hence, they're treated as less-than, which only encourages the cycle to continue. This directly ties into *Passing* where Gertrude and Clare, both with African American blood, are talking about children, "Nobody wants a dark child" (Larsen 37). They don't because they're afraid of them getting that low-class stereotypical treatment which creates an endless cycle of difficulty for immigrant families to have comfortable lives.

African American women in particular have a difficult time too, and if they're mothers they have many responsibilities and have to work very hard for their families. Research done by Jullianne Y. Richard and Hang-Shim Lee is described in their article, "A Qualitative Study of Racial Minority Single Mothers' Work Experiences":

One participant described her stigmatizing experience regarded to her single parent status, and racial minority background.

'I think we just had, me just being a single parent not wanting to be a statistic you know um African American, young woman and stuff and divorced so you know it's, you already have

the stigma associated with that especially being young, Black with a kid you know?’

(Participant 1).

[Another] participant described her experience of having to put in additional work above and beyond the work expected by her other colleagues in order to be taken seriously as a working single mother. (Richard 149)

In the eyes of American society, if a white woman were at work, it’s possible that no one would question her. The low-class stereotype comes back in to this; here a woman of color is working like everyone else and doing what she’s supposed to, and just because she’s different from that “American ideal” she has to work even harder to prove that she’s a hard-worker and is intelligent. Irene, the main character in *Passing*, expresses that, “It was, she cried silently, enough to suffer as a woman, an individual, on one’s own account, without having to suffer for the race as well. It was a brutality, and undeserved” (Larsen 101). Later, Irene wonders if her African American husband means only to her the providing and fatherly roles he fulfills (Larsen 112-113). When race and sex are separated in American society, women are placed as an “other” to men and African Americans are placed as an “other” to White people. For someone like Irene and for those in life, they have a double displacement: they’re an other for being a woman, and an other for being African American. This displacement is more than unfair and is quite damning, because in such a strict society, it will take perhaps ridiculous measures to be able to reach their potential and to be successful in America, a place that judges those outside the norm.

So families rely on children to conquer American predispositions, and those responsible for the children are mothers/parents; if they suffer from “inflexible hours and scheduling, lack of paid time off, limited work related resources (e.g., insurance and day care), lack of empathy and inflexibility among employers” (Richard 149), how will their kids get the care and opportunities

they need to better their family's life? It's further elaborated by Robert T. Teranishi in "Race, Ethnicity, and Higher Education Policy: The Use of Critical Quantitative Research" where he says "low educational attainment among adults often results in a lack of college guidance and support for children" (Teranishi 44). That endless cycle chimes in again: the seemingly only way for immigrant families of color to get over this huge low-class stereotypical wall American ideals built is for their children to have the means towards educational opportunities and care. But since their parents are their source of care and *they're* being mistreated with a lack of resources, what are the children supposed to do?

A scene in *Passing* describes Clare and Irene's conversation in a "white-only" restaurant and Clare explains, "I've often wondered why more coloured girls[...]never 'passed' over. It's such a frighteningly easy thing to do[...]As a matter of fact, I didn't [have to explain where I came from]" (Larsen 26). Irene and Clare both have light skin, but Clare is the one who decided to lie about her true race for ease of living; she has a rich, white husband and a daughter in a nice house--she's secure. The African Americans at this time are put in such an unfair place, Clare sincerely felt the need to not identify with her own race, which unfortunately does really happen. Perhaps those out in the world don't lie to themselves, but since their skin is light, they don't get the same low-class stereotypical treatment and therefore have a better chance at thriving in America in every way.

In the midst of this, it'd make sense for the African American community to come together in support of each other. In Arnold K. Ho's article "'You're One of Us.': Black American's Use of Hypodescent and Its Association With Egalitarianism" he talks about the one-drop rule and how white and African Americans alike categorize black-white biracials as more African American than white, but for very different reasons:

Because previous research on perceptions of biracials has focused on high status (i.e., White American) social perceivers, it is no surprise that hypodescent is widely regarded as an exclusionary rule used by antiegalitarian members of privileged groups who are interested in maintaining group boundaries [...] [Whites] use hypodescent to the extent that they are relatively opposed to equality[...] [Blacks] use hypodescent to the extent they are relatively *supportive* of equality. (Ho 755-756)

A certain brother/sisterhood comes with being any percentage African American in that community, but white people seem to see that as a taint of sorts for their white community. This presents challenges to biracials trying to live well in America like every other American, being that they're cast out from the ingroup (white people) of American society.

On another note, does regret come with “passing” if one chooses to do so? Appearing white when, in reality, someone is African American may present temptation to associate with the dominant American society for ease of living, but in that case that'd be considered an inauthentic life. In *Passing*, Irene expresses multiple times throughout the book that she hears Clare's pleas to be let back into the African American community and feels obligated to help (Larsen); Clare lives in fear of being found out, and perhaps after all that time of pretending under the cruelty of her aunts' care growing up, she realizes that being authentic is worth the sacrifice of societal comfort. It's a complex conflict within, as discussed in Leah Donnella's online article ““Racial Impostor Syndrome’: Here Are Your Stories” where audience members responded such as Kristina Ogilvie who “wrote in to tell us that ‘living at the intersection of different identities and cultures’ was like ‘tumbling around in a forest in the dark’[...]We got 127 emails from people who are stumbling through that dark, racially ambiguous forest” (Donnella). Just like Clare, Donnella's audience members question which part of their racial identity they should be the most loyal to and should practice, and that will ultimately determine what kinds of people they attract and what opportunities they'll have in life.

Racial identity and everything that comes with it is affecting people all over America; it's influencing people's behavior and success in a white-dominated society, as is described in Nella Larsen's *Passing*. America is called "The Melting Pot," insinuating that all cultures come in and intermix with the rest, but that's not true--there's much separation and bias happening towards those who fall outside the circle of norm (being middle-class and white). Many fights have happened throughout society's timeline: fights toward gender equality, sexuality equality, and racial equality, and they, unfortunately, still rage on. As long as there is that unspoken exclusion embedded in American society, the fight will continue. The good news is that the current, youngest generations seem quite promising because they have parents to teach them awareness, *true* love, and *true* acceptance. Furthermore, better representations are in the media - something everyone has access to and sees - so the image of America has much potential to change and be more of the melting pot it says it is. A place where everyone's equal and everyone can contribute culture and values to this land built on freedom and bravery--freedom to be all of who you are (sex, race, sexuality, religious affiliation, etc) and to be a part of the brave face of America where everyone is represented and equal, and ready to fight to keep that. That future is the right future, and hopefully coming very soon.

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