

Exploring race and ethnicity: racial passing assignment

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Although this term is broad and is meant for anyone ut it is usually referred to members of the black race who passes beyond the color line. There are many instances where this can be seen throughout history, and the mass media (books, and films). Today I WOULD like to expound on the historical aspects by speaking on the life and times of Ellen and William Craft. Also, I will give a brief explain utilizing two movies that highlights the topic of racial passing (The Imitation of Life and An American Scandal). The world is comprised of many beautiful people filled with many attractive colors, races, and creeds.

Like a kaleidoscope, which depicts several swiftly hanging scenes and patterns; people's thoughts on controversial issues tend to be colored often with a jaded eye. Ellen and William Craft the names of two African American abolitionists who were husband and wife. Ellen Craft (1826-1891) was a light-skinned black who helped her and her husband escape from slavery by passing as white. Ellen was born in Clinton, Georgia, to a biracial slave woman and her master and was so light-skinned that she was often mistaken for a member of her father's white family.

Because of this confusion at age 11 Ellen was given as a wedding gift to a daughter who lived in Macon. There Ellen met William, whom he married in 1846. Two years later, the Crafts began to devise their escape plan, which involved Ellen posing as a white slaveholder traveling with " his" slave William. This plan required many levels of deception. Because a white woman would not travel alone with a male slave, Ellen had to pretend to be not only white but a white man. She cut her hair, changed her walk, and wrapped her jaw in bandages to disguise her lack of a beard.

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To hide her illiteracy, she wrapped her right arm in a sling to have a ready excuse for being not able to sign papers; and she explained all of the bandages by claiming to be an invalid traveling north to receive medical care. In this manner, the Crafts traveled from Georgia to Pennsylvania by train, steamer, and ferry without being discovered. They arrived in Philadelphia on Christmas Day in 1848. In Philadelphia they quickly made friends with abolitionists William Wells Brown and William Lloyd Garrison, who was inspired by the power the Crafts' story could have as an antislavery method.

The Crafts relocated to Boston, Massachusetts, and began traveling as antislavery lecturers. But the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which mandated that fugitive slaves living anywhere in the United States must be returned to their owners, put their freedom at risk (see Fugitive Slave Laws). Because of their celebrity, the Crafts were singled out by slave catchers as targets. In November 1850 they made their way to England, where they had five children, attended an agricultural training school, and continued to support antislavery activists.

Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom, William's autobiography, was published in London in 1860. In 1868, following the American Civil War, the Crafts returned to the United States with two of their children and settled in Ways Station, Georgia, near Savannah. There they farmed a cotton and rice plantation and attempted to start a school, although financial debts from the plantation and hostility from white neighbors ultimately led to the school's demise. Ellen Craft had deceased in 1891 and, at her request, was buried under her favorite tree on their land.

William eventually moved to Charleston, South Carolina, where he died.

Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom was reprinted in Arna Bontemps' 1969 collection Great Slave Narratives. The Crafts' story remains a testimonial to the intelligence, cunning, and courage many African American slaves brought to their determination to be free. Let's take the film imitation of life, this film clearly states a young lady is determine to racially pass off as white. When Sara Jane was younger it seems as though she was envious of Susie from the very beginning.

She sees all the things that Caucasians have and how life for them seems to be easier. There was a scene in the 1934 version where the children were in the kid's bedroom and they were playing with dolls one white the other black. The bi-racial child insisted on playing with the white doll. There was also another scene where Susie's mother kneeled down to give her a kiss and Peoliah insisted that the white child's mother isses her too. There was another scene where Peoliah and Sara Jane were in school and when her mother shows up to bring her rain gear the bi-racial child storms out of with embarrassment.

Her teacher was also fooled stating the she has no colored students in her class; however when her mother points her out the bi-racial child storms out and never returned to that school again. This is clearly a case of being ashamed of being who you are. All through the 1959 version we see Sara Jane treats her mother really bad, so bad that she don't want to be seen with her mother in public. Sara Jane has found a boyfriend and when e finds out that she is part black he beats her up.

Sara Jane gets employed at a department store and her mother shows up and she denies that is her mother! Annie who is her mother makes a statement you were born to hurt or to be hurt! What a painful statement! Her mother (Annie) desperately tries to let her daughter know that no matter what “ I love you Sara Jane” her mother goes to the extreme to go to her place of business (Sara Jane) as she’s performing as a showgirl. Annie shows up unexpectedly because she knows her days are accounted for, her last dying wish was to see Sara Jane and instill in her of her mothers love!

Sara Jane still angry when she sees her mother because of who she is treats her mother so rudely and when one of her young white associates enters the room she doesn’t admit the fact that’s her mother she simply states that’s someone she once knew. It took the death of her mother to come to grips with her racial identity. She now wants to admit that she is black and that was her mother. This is a story that indicates that there are some people in this world who has racial identity issues and depending on which race is more acceptable in society eyes then that is the race they are more likely to accept.

Let’s take Sara Jane ho is the perfect candidate for racial passing. She passed off as being white just as long as her mother wasn’t around to let the world know of her true race! But did her racial passing have her succeeding in life or was it her down fall? It was a combination of both she succeeded as long as no one knew of her true identity. Sara Jane wanted what she saw other whites had. Sara Jane didn’t live as some one of color for her that meant fewer opportunities so she figured that if she passed off as white then

there would have been some open doors for her just because she presented herself as being of the white race.

Now this did hurt her in the end because of her stubbornness she wasn't able to read between the lines and realize that her mother was dying right before her very eyes! Sara Jane was so bitter that the world could be so cold to her she passed for white to escape persecution! I have viewed *An American Scandal* to my surprise was exposed to something I didn't have any knowledge of. Sally Hemings was a slave to Thomas Jefferson. To my surprise they had 6 children together. Sally Hemings at the age of 14 was taken advantage of. How you might ask?

Obviously, because of her age she shouldn't have been involved in any sexual relationship with a man (even though that man was Thomas Jefferson). Many people might say that was the norm in those times but I have to disagree because she was still a minor. In the movie it showed that the slaves were treated so well on Thomas Jefferson's Plantation. However; the darker slaves were on the outside but the lighter slaves were his servants, butlers and maids. The movie portrayed that Thomas Jefferson being in love with his slave mistress Sally Hemings.

Sally was fortunate on having the ability to have her freedom and the ability to learn how to read and write English and in French while living in France. Her mother wanted a great free future for Sally. However Sally saw life in a different light. Once she became intimate with Mr. Jefferson there were feelings that no other man could have taken away from her. I've watched how Sally was portrayed as a bi-racial pressing the issue to her master Mr.

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Jefferson for slaves to have some kind of moral rights. History says that Thomas Jefferson was against slavery.

However; how is it that some one of his stature who wanted to abolish slavery own slaves himself? That seems so contradicting to me. Thomas Jefferson couldn't have believed that slavery was immoral nor could he have believed in the "Declaration of Independence" when it says that all men are created equal". James T. Callendar a journalist had threatened to go public with the affair of Thomas Jefferson and his slave mistress. He even went as far as letting it be known that Sally and Thomas had children together! While serving as President, Jefferson has never made it clear in whether or not these accusations were true or false.

Jefferson's policy was to offer no public explanation on the matter. Although a letter surfaced in 1805 was interpreted by some as a story of denial. Jefferson's daughter Martha Jefferson Randolph privately denies the reports to the public. Two of her children Randolph Coolidge and Thomas Jefferson Randolph, maintained many years later that such liaisons were both immoral and was not practical therefore; making the allegations ludicrous. Callendar also makes claims that Jefferson's nephews Peter and Samuel Carr were light skinned Monticello slaves who were also his children because of their strikingly resemblance to him.

Sally was described as a really beautiful fair skinned woman who was so close to white. The movie also describes that two of her children has made it through racial passing! Their skins were so close to Caucasians that they passed. With that knowledge she was able to pass this fortune down to her

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children. She wanted history as well as the future to know that there was such a thing as racial mixing and her children were a huge product of it! I admired that she made it clear to her children that you make history known that you are a part of Thomas Jefferson.

Racial passing for me was a hard topic to write about! However I'm sure that people don't admit their dark side for obvious reasons. Now that our topic has been defined and we've uncovered some very important, historical information; how do we "really" feel about racial passing? Is it an individual problem? Or is it a societal problem? For those who were/are directly effected (children born of bi-racial parents) by this issue tend to perceive things from a much different perspective than those who were/are indirectly affected by this topic.

Acquiring knowledge of self is a life long process and most of us do not take it as such a task. Therefore; we tend to limit our selves in such a way that we silence our selves from hearing that true inner guidance which liberates us in our time of needs. What does this all mean? How we view ourselves in relation to how we identify with the world dictates ur thoughts, our behaviorisms, and ultimately who we become in our future endeavors. When I think about those individuals who engaged in this type of act I have to ask myself the question; Why?

While researching this subject matter my findings came down to individuals just wanting to get ahead in life. Unfortunately, racial passing was the choice that they made in order to do it. Presently, those who are still participating in this type of behavior the reason is totally different. They say that they just

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don't identify with that portion of their heritage. How does society view this dilemma? Well, in the past many felt betrayed, isgraced, and angered by the vicious web that was spun by those who passed the color line.

Nowadays, society turns a blind eye as if to say that what you do doesn't affect me. But then again they might be saying I just don't care anymore. Someway, somehow, racial passing has a way of making our ugly side surface while suppressing our intellectual self. Racial passing has been some what of eye opener to me! I've tried to put myself in ones shoes in order to have a clearer understanding. Maybe if I were lighter with straight textured hair (no relaxer) no rhythm; would society accept me more if I was more white looking than black?

I believe that being trapped into a bi-racial body where on the outside I appeared more of the white race I would have to say that I would have been more privileged! For one I use to reside in Pennsylvania one of the most racist states there is (in my opinion). While living in Pennsylvania I had the opportunity to meet a girl named Ashley and she was bi-racial but she appeared more white than black. She almost looked 100% Caucasian, however when she went out to her home town Ohio she acknowledge her black side of her family.

Yet and still when she came back to Pennsylvania she married Mark who was white. When she was questioned on why she hid her nationality she boldly explained that putting her race on job applications would have meant a lower wage and if she decided to elevate her race instead of her pay it may have held her back for a little while. She also went on to explain the issues of

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racism that goes on in Pennsylvania. She made it very clear that many black people are set up to get a criminal record to stop them from advancing.

myself have experienced the racism that Ashley so passionately expressed!

I also asked her why it is so hard to talk about your race. She explained that don't let me wrong I love both races but in order to get a head I have to play it on the white side. I tried to feel sympathy for her but if I can't walk in her shoes than can only empathize on how she was feeling at the time. Is it possible that she would face persecution in these times, in the year 2008? Is this possible? She has experienced so much racial frustration. Although have mixed emotions on this issue I can't help but to be happy for her with having the determination to strive for success.

If this kind of behavior makes her happy as well as if it secures her future then I'm all for it. I just have one argument with her. I asked her that if she was to move from Pennsylvania to another state would she still feel the same. Her reply was " I wouldn't know because this is my comfort zone right her in Pennsylvania" that answer kind of disturbed me because she has never even traveled to see if her there were limitations on her anywhere else. asked her how she would feel about a new york city! Her response was " the city was too big and she didn't care for the smog'.

I then began to ask her about her up bringing and as I dug deeper with the questioning I found out that her mother never wanted her to meet her father because he had left her mother before Ashley was born. Ashley also expressed that she was raised by her white side of the family who had given her the world and all she knew was how to live as a white person.

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Consequently when she met her biological father at the age of nine years old that's when she started to embrace her colored side. She expressed how the black side of her family always seems to struggle with bills.

And no matter how much education they perused it seems like something keeps holding them back and deep down Ashley believed that it was their race. She says that she has the best of both worlds but she rather live in her white world. There are words in the dictionary that represents a mixture in races such as octoroon- which means that if you have 1/8 of blood in you then you are considered black! For all those bi-racial children who were considered "house niggas" should have considered that as the perfect excuse to escape slavery.

What would you do in a predicament such as this? If I could have pass for being white then why should I suffer the beating and lynching that would have occurred to me because of my race. From what has been said in history there were slaves that were starved to death, left on the side of road to die because of hem just being the color that they were. Racial mixing has been so hard for individuals who try and find them selves; they go through the notions of questioning them selves then questioning their parents. Sometimes ignorant people are the cruelest people.

First we have white supremacy. Then we have the K. K. K. who is totally against the mixing of race they only believe that the white race should be the only race. But if God intended that to be then we wouldn't have these beautiful colors that make the world so beautiful and unique. Below are so many different definitions of mixed racing. Quadroons mean that if you have

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1/4 of black ancestry in you that you are considered black. Mulatto is a person having one white and one Black parent. I have so many friends that fits this definition.

Matisse- this is a white offspring and an American Indian Bi-racial- the combination of two races Multiracial- this a combination of various races Interracial-this is composed of different races Half breed- a person having different ethnic races in them Eurafrican- a mixture of European and African Eurasian- a mixture of Asian and European Half-caste this can be one parent that is European and the other parent Hindu or Muslim also it can be of a parent that is Australian (one born of a white parent) and Aboriginal.

Hapa- this is when one race is half Hawaiian this word is from the colonial time set was often combined with the word “ haole” which meant stranger, foreigner, or white person. As time passed, “ hapa” was used on the Continental United States by Japanese Americans and other Asian to describe a person of partial Asian ancestry. Many Nisei – second generation Japanese Americans. Today hapa is accepted as a way to describe someone from an Asian ancestry Colored- (Us) one dark race, not white

Mestizo – a person mixed with European and Native American ancestry

Zambo- a child of African and a mulatto person, the child or person is of Indian and a black Griffe- a person that is Negro and American Indian blood, if these two combined had children they would be considered mulatto.

Mustee- child of a white person and an American Indian Metisse- child of a white person and quadroon; an octoroon also known as the West Indies” –

(This information was extracted from Dictionary. om) When I ponder on all of

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these definitions I can't help but to wonder if there any pure races at all? So what was the lesson learned? It's easy to get caught up and thrown off course from your path. Also perception at times can seem to be a lot stronger than reality. The more you define a thing the harder it becomes to describe it. And racial passing is just that an issue that is neither Black nor White but filled with many Grey areas. My opinion on the issue has definitely taken many twists and turns.

Yes, it can be perceived as hating where you come from and yes it can be that you are just trying to get ahead. As long as you don't lose yourself in the process I will have to honestly say that to each its own (I just happen to know that in today's day in age there shouldn't be any excuse for anyone to continue this facade). In conclusion, I would like to leave a poem that my brother wrote sometime ago because it captures my truest feelings on this topic. I just pray that it touches you as much as it has touched me.

LISTEN TO YOUR HEART Listening to your heart, is about being still, living within the moment, even if it exposes how one feels. Today, listen to your heart, because it understands the pain, that when it rains it rains on the inside. We are all silent victims, groping in and out among the dark webs of our being. We all have a song, thus we must continue to encourage each other to sing them. When you listen to your heart, it will give a name to the nameless a voice to the voiceless.