

Introduction

The (Not So) New Face of America

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In a *Politico* story that reads somewhat like a postmodern, absurdist version of a news report, Stella O’Leary, the president of the Irish American Democrats, is quoted as saying that United States President Barack Obama is “as much Irish as he is Kenyan,” although, she adds, “he’s been very wrapped up in his African-American heritage” (Lovely par. 5). In this same spirit of recognizing Obama’s interracial—or, more precisely, international—heritage, the Irish band The Corrigan Brothers (nee “Hardy Drew and the Nancy Boys”) recorded a hit song entitled “There’s No One as Irish as Barack O’Bama” that went viral on the Internet in 2009.¹ Notwithstanding that according to the song his “granddaddy’s granddaddy came from Moneygall,” President Obama identifies as an African American. Of this fact, he has been consistent despite the media’s debate over just “how black” he is. Beginning with the run-up to his declaration of candidacy for the presidency through the actual presidential election of 2008, various “political pundits” and scholars cast and recast his racial identity as Black (he is phenotypically “black”); as African American (his father was from Kenya); as not “really” Black (his ancestors were not held in the American slave system); as bi- or multiracial (his mother was white); back to Black (he can’t hail a cab in Chicago); or as African American (as a respectful term of identity). His election in 2008 at least temporarily stemmed the tide of debate: Barack Hussein Obama is now almost

universally hailed as the “first African American President,” even if the “birthers” still insist on questioning his American birth.

Regardless of the “degree” or quality of his “blackness”—after all, historically in America, *any* black makes you *all* black, despite the disagreements noted above—his election and inauguration are certainly significant moments in U.S. history. Indeed, many Americans framed Obama’s presidency as heralding the end of racism, as signaling the ascendancy of a “post-racial” society, or, at the very least, as evincing to the world an America that has finally overcome its legacy of slavery and Jim Crow segregation. President Obama is, as the white, British commentator Andrew Sullivan writes in *The Atlantic*, the “new face of America”:

[W]hat does he offer? First and foremost: his face. . . . Consider this hypothetical. It’s November 2008. A young Pakistani Muslim is watching television and sees that this man—Barack Hussein Obama—is the new face of America. In one simple image, America’s soft power has been ratcheted up not a notch, but a logarithm. A brown-skinned man whose father was an African, who grew up in Indonesia and Hawaii, who attended a majority-Muslim school as a boy, is now the alleged enemy. If you wanted the crudest but most effective weapon against the demonization of America that fuels Islamist ideology, Obama’s face gets close. It proves them wrong about what America is in ways no words can. (par. 1, 2)

This passage implicitly heralds the “brown-skinned” Obama as America’s savior against extremist Islamists. But it is explicitly Obama’s *face* and not his political position that enables him to change how the world “sees” America. In this hypothetical situation, Obama’s face undercuts any religious and cultural differences between America and a “young Pakistani Muslim,” who is (we are to assume) a possible future terrorist, because what he sees in the televised image is presumably his own blackness reflected in Obama’s. In other words, Obama’s skin trumps every other marker of his identity, including nationality, religion, class, age, etc. that might otherwise mark him as “the alleged enemy.” Of course, what the young Pakistani cannot possibly “see” in Obama’s face is that childhood spent in Indonesia and Hawaii, his (brief) Muslim schooling, or his current religious affiliation. More important here, however, is what Sullivan cannot imagine him seeing: despite Obama’s lighter skin tone, what is *not* “apparent” to the young Pakistani (through Sullivan’s lens) is Obama’s white

mother or the white grandparents who raised him. In short, Sullivan's young Pakistani Muslim does not see Obama's *Irish* heritage; he sees only his *African* (or, more precisely, nonwhite) heritage. He sees, in Sullivan's imagination, the image of a man *like him*. This passage tells us as much or more about what Sullivan "sees" than what a young Pakistani Muslim might see. In short, the (il)logics of this passage highlight both the continued importance of race in the Western imagination and the ocularity of the racial system in the United States. It also illustrates the unidirectional nature of racialization via the lingering power of hypodescent—better known as the "one-drop rule"—the Irish American Democrats' "open arms" notwithstanding.

The continuous importance placed on Obama's racial and national heritages demonstrates a paradox of twenty-first-century racial discourse: part of America wants to claim that we have moved "beyond race" and that the election of President Obama demonstrates that racism is a thing of the past. However, ironically, we can only make that claim by *emphasizing* his race.² That is, we must point out the significance of his racial identity, only then to dismiss it as irrelevant or secondary. These countervailing trends were evident in one of Obama's own press conferences in March 2009. Referencing his "historic presidency," ABC reporter Ann Compton asked President Obama if, over the first sixty-four days of his presidency, he felt that race had shaped his image or whether it had been "a relatively color-blind time." In response, President Obama recognized the social significance of his personal racial identity, but then quickly moved to depersonalize his presidency by shifting the focus to economic issues. He explained:

[A]t the inauguration, I think that there was justifiable pride on the part of the country that we had taken a step to move us beyond some of the searing legacies of racial discrimination in this country, but that lasted about a day. . . . [R]ight now, the American people are judging me exactly the way I should be judged. And that is: Are we taking the steps to improve liquidity in the financial markets, create jobs, get businesses to reopen, keep America safe? (Obama)

As opposed to Sullivan's image of the young Pakistani whose religio-political beliefs are effectively scrambled by President Obama's face, Obama's response does imagine a "color-blind" citizenry who will judge him on his ability to grapple with economic affairs. His answer, that is, posits

a public able to see him as just “the president,” a body politic who can effectively sever our cultural racial epistemology from a particular embodied man. His dismissal of racial identity as irrelevant to his ability to perform his job is not a new strategy. In the earlier twentieth century, for instance, Harlem Renaissance authors such as Claude McKay and Jean Toomer wanted to be known as talented poets, not as talented (for) “Negro” poets. While the implicit suggestion that Obama’s skin color has no bearing on his capacity to manage national and international affairs is certainly true, a sidelining of racial issues is perhaps both overly optimistic and slightly disingenuous—and even potentially dangerous—because his response problematically conceptualizes race as a distraction: the celebration of our historic (if partial) triumph over the “searing legacies of racial discrimination” lasted “about a day” before we had to get down to the *real* business at hand. Certainly, President Obama understands that race largely played a role in the housing and credit crises, the rising unemployment rate, and the breakdown of the healthcare and education systems that occurred in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Thus, continued socioeconomic disparities among racial groups—“the searing legacies of racial discrimination”—can only be addressed, once again, by *highlighting* race, not by *sidelining* it.

As Gayle Wald explains, however, many see color blindness as the means to a democratic society:

[I]t is now commonly held, by liberals and conservatives alike, that a purposeful indifference to race and a corresponding elevation of the “individual” as a social agent is an effective strategy of achieving the end of a just, democratic society. According to such color-blind arguments, a concerted “blindness” to race presents that most promising alternative to a society in which racialization—however unstable, shifting, or unenforceable—historically has played a role in governing social opportunity and status. (183)

Those critical of color-blind policies, however, might note the alternative way of reading the phrase “the *end* of a just, democratic society.”³ Indeed, in twenty-first-century America, being “color blind”—refusing to recognize race as a significant component of identity—is coming to mean being blind to continued systemic racial disparity, the kinds of disparity that were dramatically and publicly exposed after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita during the George W. Bush administration.⁴ Thus, what some Americans

want to do in this “post-Bush” world is simply to pat ourselves on the back for electing an African American president, offer that achievement as evidence that race no longer matters, and then maintain policies that continue to increase socioeconomic and educational gaps among racial groups. Jodi Melamed names this type of willed blindness and the political and economic policies that grow from it “neoliberal multiculturalism” in which “esteeming some people of color of the same race, according to conventional categories, makes it easier to accept that others of the same race may be systematically treated unequally” (153).⁵

In the United States, race *does* still matter. Indeed, the concept of race continues to be a fundamental element of identity in America. The tenacity (and centrality) of race is due in part to the fact that, notwithstanding scientific evidence that debunks the claim of significant genetic difference among races, America as a culture—and Americans as individuals—continues to believe in the *biological* reality of race.⁶ In a kind of circular logic, we still believe in the “reality” of race because lived experience continues to validate race as a significant marker of identity and kinship, and because race continues to have real social and economic consequences. Telling people that race isn’t biologically “real” doesn’t erase history or trump personal experience, both which continue to reinforce the reality of race. As Baz Dreisinger puts it: “Theoretical jive about race as a ‘disproved’ concept is, well, jive; good old Race, rigid and old hat, lives on in our hearts and minds. Slay something—blackness, whiteness, Latino-ness—in concept and you still haven’t slain it in the flesh” (125). Dreisinger here articulates the significant gap between theory and praxis. And nothing continues to highlight this gap like racial passing, the lens through which the contributors to *Passing Interest* each explore contemporary understandings of race and racial identity in the United States, particularly as represented in texts produced between 1990 and 2010.

While any limitation of time frame is to some extent arbitrary, I selected 1990 as the beginning point for this collection for several reasons. The first few years of the 1990s were a watershed of national and international events that marked a new phase in history—a breaking down of barriers—that may, arguably, have set the stage for the 2008 election of an interracial president, one who so motivated the young voters of Generation Mix.⁷ Nineteen ninety was the last year of the Cold War. It was also the year of German reunification (the Berlin Wall fell in November 1989). In South Africa, in February 1990, Nelson Mandela was freed after twenty-seven years of imprisonment. While the changes were not all peaceful—1990 also saw the start of the Persian Gulf War—Ameri-

can culture was flooded with images of walls literally and figuratively crumbling. On the home front, George H. W. Bush vetoed the Civil Rights Bill of 1990, before signing the Civil Rights Bill of 1991 into law in November 1991.⁸ William Jefferson Clinton, later affectionately and sometimes derisively known as our “first black president,” was elected in November 1992.⁹ The Rodney King beating by Los Angeles police officers in March 1991, and the resulting “not guilty” verdict announced in April 1992, sparked both a violent six-day race riot and a national conversation on race in the United States.¹⁰

All this happened in the very years that the Multiracial Movement—a movement founded on the idea of barrier breaking—was coming into its own. In 1993, the U.S. House Subcommittee on Census, Statistics, and Postal Personnel held hearings to discuss the racial and ethnic classifications that would be available on the 2000 U.S. Census. Representatives of the Association of Multiethnic Americans argued for “either a simple ‘multiracial’ check box or the possibility of checking all applicable racial categories” (DaCosta 1). By the time of the hearings, of the roughly sixty social support organizations for mixed race people that existed, most had been formed in the preceding five years (DaCosta 3).¹¹

While certainly this movement toward recognizing *multiracial* identity grew in part from the *multicultural* movements of the late 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, and is sometimes still collapsed into that term, it is unique from that earlier effort in that rather than highlighting and demanding equality for distinct identities—the thrust of identity politics—multiracials highlight points of intersection in a way more akin to a feminist theoretic that attempts to balance a collective identity with innumerable articulations of difference/subject positions.¹² In other words, multiracials specifically insist on their multiplicity and diversity, and use this “as a basis of collective identification” (DaCosta 17). No one individual represents the multiracial.

Although the Census debate may not have concerned the “average American”—whoever that might be—most Americans witnessed this emergent multiplicity/identity in multiple forms of media that, not coincidentally, highlight the visual component of racial and ethnic identification: Michael Jackson’s single “Black or White”—from the *Dangerous* album—was released in November 1991. The video begins with a catalog of nationalities in traditional cultural dress dancing with Jackson, and ends with a computer generated morphing of faces, sexes, (presumably) nationalities, and races. The video was an almost immediate national and international success. This facial morphing/melding surfaced again in 1993 when *Time* magazine published a Special Issue entitled “The New

Face of America” precisely the label Sullivan passed on to Obama. On the cover was a woman’s face: this new “Eve” is a composite image of various races: “15% Anglo-Saxon, 17.5% Middle Eastern, 17.5% African, 7.5% Asian, 35% Southern European and 7.5% Hispanic” (“New Face of America” 2).¹³ A few years later, in 2000, *Newsweek* offered its own Special Report entitled “Redefining Race in America.” Its article, “The New Face of Race,” features the face of a child whose “ethnicity” is listed as “Nigerian, Irish, African-American, Native American, Russian Jewish, Polish Jewish” (38), with little awareness of the slippage from the classifiers of “race” to “ethnicity.”

While Jackson’s video and song are clearly antiracist statements that suggest that cultural and racial melding are good things (the original video also featured Jackson destroying objects with racist graffiti, scenes purportedly cut for their violence), the magazine articles evidence an undercurrent of resistance. In addition to propagating the long-standing tendency to consider distinctions of nationality, race, ethnicity, and even religion as synonymous types of identity markers, these articles reported (or warned?) of the shrinking “white” population in the United States, emphasizing the rapidly coming minority status of whites and the ever-increasing waves of “brown” immigrants.¹⁴ For instance, the subtitle of *Time*’s “New Face of America” issue reads “How Immigrants Are Shaping the World’s First Multicultural Society.” While generally optimistic and celebratory in tone, such articles also have the potential to create a defensive animosity on the part of whites. In this sense, they are reminiscent of eugenicist works such as Madison Grant’s *The Passing* [meaning “death of”] *of the Great Race* (1916) or Lothrop Stoddard’s *The Rising Tide of Color Against White World Supremacy* (1920), texts that were key in the anti-immigration legislation act of 1924.¹⁵ The articles, meant to document current trends in immigration and intermarriage, implicitly (and even explicitly) suggest that whiteness will be subsumed by a new “multicultural” (nee “mulatto”) face.¹⁶ As Shawn Michelle Smith argues, such articles also paradoxically reaffirm the assumptions that there are discernible, distinct racial “types” and that blood or race can be quantified and classified. She notes: “[C]ontemporary attempts to envision, to define, and to codify racial and national identities, as well as to determine where and when those constructs intersect, diverge, and can be challenged, are haunted by their explicitly racist nineteenth-century origins” (Smith 225). This is so even if the articles are not themselves “racist” in message or tone.

Similarly, even the change instituted for the 2000 U.S. Census—the opportunity to check multiple racial labels—can also be seen as just

another way of compartmentalizing one's self into racial "parts." Although the opportunity to recognize multiple aspects of one's racial identity was liberating for many, it certainly did not eliminate the de facto one-drop rule, under which *any* amount of African heritage makes one black. For instance, Obama may have checked boxes to recognize both his mother's and his father's racial identity. But he is still our first African American president. Or we might think of Tiger Woods, whose self-labeling in 1997 as "Cablinasian" was intended to be liberatory and reflective of the multiplicity of his racial heritage. Instead, it garnered him considerable (and still ongoing) criticism from those who read the term as evidence of internalized racism against his blackness. Furthermore, the term "Cablinasian" ultimately fails to destabilize the racial *system*. That is, because "Cablinasian" has no unique referent in U.S. racial discourse; the term simply loads Woods with multiple racial signifiers—Caucasian, Black, Indian, and Asian—with the "black" understood (by most Americans if not Woods himself) as his primary racial identity because of both the residue of the one-drop rule and Woods's physical appearance. Finally, Woods's neologism highlights the cultural pressure to have *some* kind of racial label, albeit one that strives to blur the lines.

Part of the problem is that, while we as a culture now (theoretically at least) recognize the absurdity of a racial system based on "divisions" and "drops" of blood, we continue to use racial rhetoric and terminology that relies on such proportioning because that remains the primary language we have to discuss race. In turn, that language in many cases continues to limit our conceptual ability to understand ourselves in race-neutral terms even as more Americans find themselves uncomfortable wearing one particular racial label. As Jennifer Ho argues, "(Generally speaking) there is not a space or a language for mixed race people to claim a multiple, hybrid, or heterogeneous subjectivity" (143). What Woods and the "new face" articles attest to is our continuing belief in the embodiment and the quantifiability of race—and the visibility of racial faces—even into the twenty-first century.

This desire to compartmentalize, to label, to know *who* someone is by *what* that person is—black, white, brown; gay, straight, bisexual; male, female, transgender; American, immigrant, illegal; Christian, Muslim, Jew—and to be able to confirm that information visually perhaps unsurprisingly reflects our desire for control in a postmodern (or perhaps *post*-postmodern) world where rapid cultural, social, and technological changes seem to blur even further the line that has historically separated fact from fiction—to meld, for instance, six different faces into one. While the epistemology of racial

visibility has never been reliable, the advances in technology that let us “see” the new Eve assure us only that we cannot be assured that what we “see” is “real.”¹⁷ Ironically, in one sense such technologies seem fabulously anachronistic, as the “new” face of Eve (or Woods or Obama) isn’t really “new” at all. As Kimberly McClain DaCosta—among many others—succinctly notes: “People of mixed descent have existed in American society since its inception” (7).¹⁸ It is those bodies of “mixed descent”—and the texts that treat such bodies through the trope of racial passing—that are the focus of the essays collected in *Passing Interest*.

Specifically, the essays included in this collection explore contemporary engagements with racial passers in four genres: novels, memoirs, television, and film. Multiracialism put in conversation with the trope of racial passing provides a particularly fruitful intersection for the study of race in the United States. On the one hand, as Michelle Elam persuasively argues, “because mixed race has been often represented since the 1990s as hip testimony to American democracy, the corporeal resolution of racial diversity and national unity, it is also represented as a painless antidote to the centuries-old practice of racial passing. Passing, then, seems a particularly antique phenomenon in this ‘mulatto millennium’” (*The Souls* 96). On the other hand, the merging of racial identities into a single body outside the strictures of a one-drop rule—a process that generates a state of unified multiplicity—further muddies the water by creating *more* rather than *fewer* opportunities/possibilities for passing by multiplying racial indeterminacy and the options for identification, by both the self and others. The opportunities for *mis*recognition—the primary strategy through which passing functions—multiply as quickly.

Passing, in the broadest sense, is now understood by many scholars as synonymous with *performance*: it is the iteration of a set of behaviors, cultural codes, language, etc. ascribed to a specific identity category such as race, gender, sexuality, class, religion, and so on. This understanding of all identity as performance/passing challenges at a fundamental level the idea of biological essentialism, that we are *who* we are because of *what* we are. As Samira Kawash puts it: “[M]y identity is not what I am but what I am passing for” (73). This position—that we’re all passing all the time; that passing is constituent of identity—suggests that there can actually be no such thing as passing in the more traditional sense. Werner Sollors offers a general definition of passing in this traditional sense: “Passing, an Americanism not listed in the first edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, may refer to the crossing of any line that divides social groups” (*Neither* 247).¹⁹ Passing, then, as a social practice of transgression, is usually understood as

a particular performance of an identity that is not “one’s own.” As many scholars have noted, this conception of passing paradoxically undercuts *and* reinscribes an antiessentialist position.

On the one hand, passing recognizes that identities are performed rather than innate by the very act of the successful pass. Passers perform quite convincingly and with apparent authenticity in ways that do not fit their legal or cultural classification, classifications which have historically been assigned based on biological heritage and the body—and read on faces. Passing thus also highlights and problematizes the importance of specularity in identity construction (internal and external—identity and corporeality—are supposed to match). As Linda Schlossberg explains, “we are subjects constituted by our visions of ourselves and others, and we trust that what we see and read carries with it a certain degree of epistemological certainty” (1). Because passing disrupts visual expectations, because the passer doesn’t “look like” how one of a category “should” look, passing “becomes a highly charged site for anxieties regarding visibility, invisibility, classification, and social demarcation” (Schlossberg 1). In sum, passing highlights our cultural tendency to assign individuals into mutually exclusive, singular boxes (gay or straight; white or black) *and* exposes as unreliable a visually based system of identification and classification by troubling the illusion that you *are* what you *look like* you are.²⁰

On the other hand, passers are often understood as performing an identity that they do not “own” legally, psychologically, or culturally. The trope of passing can also simultaneously reinscribe the very categories that the pass destabilizes (and thus underwrite an essentialist position) because it is often conceptualized as a betrayal of one’s “real” identity or as an “inauthentic” performance. Such passing is usually assumed to be intentional. As Elaine K. Ginsberg argues: “[A]lthough the cultural logic of passing suggests that passing is usually motivated by a desire to shed the identity of an oppressed group to gain access to social and economic opportunities, the rationale for passing may be more or less complex or ambiguous and motivated by other kinds of perceived rewards” (3). The rationale might also stem from the avoidance of persecution (rather than to garner a reward): for instance, in a homophobic culture, a gay man might pass as straight to have access to socioeconomic opportunities he would otherwise be excluded from, but he also might pass to avoid violence he would be subjected to as an openly gay man. Despite the motivation of the pass, the logics behind it often turn on the idea that the passer is concealing or repressing a “true” identity and is performing an assumed or “false” one.

This is the framework within which *racial* passing has generally been understood: the performance of a racial identity other than what one “is” biologically, a classification that is assumed to be visually verifiable.²¹ Although racial passing challenges the idea of fixed, immutable, mutually exclusive racial categories, because it is also often understood as an act of betrayal (of one’s true self, as well as of family and community), it can simultaneously undergird essentialist beliefs about race. Representations and discussions of passing thus often reproduce the antithetical tendencies in our understandings of race itself: the movement toward understanding identity as performance rather than essence, *and* the movement to fit individuals into neat, containable, policeable categories.

Although there are incidences of white-to-black passing,²² because of the history of slavery, Jim Crow segregation, and racism in the United States, the most common iteration of racial passing has been black-to-white (a “light-skinned” black person living as white). Racial passing in this more specific sense goes back as far as—at least—the 1740s, as evidenced by advertisements for runaway slaves who might use their light skin to help them escape.²³ Because the act of passing depends upon the ability to blend into the targeted group—to go undetected—there is no way of knowing how many people actually “crossed the color line” over the last few hundred years. Estimates vary widely. As Daniel J. Sharfstein writes, “For nearly a century, sociologists and others have attempted to estimate the percentage of whites in the United States who have some African ancestry; speculation ranges from 1 to 20 percent” (338).²⁴ Elam suggests, however, that ultimately racial passing’s “relative statistical irrelevance bears little on its cultural and literary relevance to the national drama over it” (*The Souls* 99). Indeed, what we can easily document is that the trope of racial passing has been a significant part of American *literature* since—at least—the middle of the nineteenth century.

Some of the earliest published texts written by African American authors are racial passing texts, including William Wells Brown’s *Clotel or, The President’s Daughter* (1853) and Frank J. Webb’s *The Garies and Their Friends* (1857). Harriet Jacobs’s autobiographical novel, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), also includes race (and gender) passing scenes. The trope appealed early to white writers as well. Cora in James Fenimore Cooper’s *Last of the Mohicans* (1826) is passing for white, and Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1851–52) includes the well-known “Spanish masquerade” scene, in which George Harris darkens his skin and passes as a Spanish gentleman to escape enslavement.²⁵ As readers even of these few early texts will recognize, there is a wide range of variation in

the trope of racial passing. Some of these variations include those who pass situationally for momentary convenience or access; those who pass primarily for economic reasons (white at work; black at home); those who pass as tricksters or as undercover agents; those who pass unintentionally (they do not realize their “true” racial classification); those who pass to marry a person of another race; those who pass deliberately to escape the systemic inequities of racism; those who pass as a result of internalized racism; and so on, and in various combinations. In short, racial passing has both served as a tool to subvert the American system of racial classification throughout U.S. history and captured the imagination of American writers. It has been documented or represented in novels, plays, poems, memoirs, essays, songs, comic strips, family lore, journalistic exposés, biography, autobiography, and more recently, films and television; and has been the object of study for, at least, ethnologists, historians, law theorists, psychologists, sociologists, and literary and cultural scholars.

Indeed, since the 1990s, a vast body of scholarship has been produced on racial passing. Three key works are Elaine K. Ginsberg’s edited collection *Passing and the Fictions of Identity* (1996); Gayle Wald’s *Crossing the Line: Racial Passing in Twentieth-Century U.S. Literature and Culture* (2000); and Maria Carla Sánchez and Linda Schlossberg’s edited collection *Passing: Identity and Interpretation in Sexuality, Race, and Religion* (2001).²⁶ Since the publication of these foundational works, many other insightful studies—from journal articles, to special focus journal issues, to monographs—have been published. These works generally read passing texts from early American literature up to the Civil Rights Era.²⁷ An important recent collection that focuses on passing specifically in the work of Charles W. Chesnutt, perhaps the single author who dealt the most with passing, is *Passing in the Works of Charles W. Chesnutt* (2010), edited by Susan Prothro Wright and Ernestine Pickens Glass.

Contemporaneous to this growing list of scholarly studies on passing, however, we have also seen repeated declarations over the last two decades that “passing is passé.”²⁸ Maria P. P. Root argues that “[t]he dialogues about mixed race identity reflecting pathology, self-hate, or ‘passing’ are relics of an era of history that is gone” (4). Similarly, in “Toni Morrison and the Burden of the Passing Narrative,” Juda Bennett assumes that “passing for white . . . no longer seems to engage contemporary novelists” and assumes as a starting point the “relative disappearance of the passing figure from contemporary literature” (205). He characterizes Charles Johnson’s *The Oxherding Tale* (1982), Danzy Senna’s *Caucasia* (1998), Ralph Ellison’s *Juneteenth* (1999), and Philip Roth’s *The Human Stain* (2000) as “anomalies”

in a body of literature no longer interested in passing as a trope (note 1). In contrast to those who suggest that passing is a trope that has come and gone, however, I side with those who recognize that the production of passing texts (new, newly published, or republished) over the last two decades is significant, sustained, and substantial. Among others, Elam notes that “the theme of passing lives on—is, in fact, resurrected to assume a spectacular new life” (*The Souls* 97), and Dreisinger acknowledges that “[r]ecent years have witnessed an upsurge in racial passing narratives” (121). Similarly, Sollors suggests that “contemporary writers and artists may be returning to representations of racial passing” (*Neither* 284). Indeed they are, if, that is, they ever left.

In addition to the novels Bennett listed (noted above), we could add Walter Mosley’s *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1990), J. California Cooper’s *Family* (1991), John Gregory Brown’s *Decorations in a Ruined Cemetery* (1994), Colson Whitehead’s *The Intuitionist* (1999), Wesley Brown’s *Darktown Strutters* (1994), Elizabeth Atkins Bowman’s *Dark Secret* (2001), Alice Randall’s *The Wind Done Gone* (2001), and Karen E. Quinones Miller’s *Passin’: a novel* (2008), among others. The last two decades have also seen the publication of several previously unpublished novels (Ellison’s *Juneteenth* could actually fall into this category), including *Paul Marchand, F. M. C.* (1998), *Mandy Oxendine* (1997), and *The Quarry* (1999), all by Chesnutt, as well as Hannah Craft’s *The Bondswoman’s Narrative* (2002), a novel discovered by Henry Louis Gates Jr. New editions of several other passing novels have been printed. Complementing this list of fiction is the remarkable surge in the production of memoirs that explore race and passing in familial and historical contexts, including the 2007 memoir of Bliss Broyard (daughter of the famed *New York Times* literary critic Anatole Broyard) and those by Elaine Galindo, Shirlee Taylor Haizlip, Neil Henry, Clarence Major, David Matthews, Rebecca Walker, and Gregory Howard Williams, to name a few. Perhaps the most highly visible evidence of the continued relevance of racial passing in American culture are Ice Cube’s recent FX network series *Black.White.*, as well as episodes of the popular television dramas *Angel*, *Cold Case*, *Law & Order*, and *Without a Trace*, and recent films such as *The Human Stain*, based on the Roth’s 2000 novel of the same name, a film version of Mosley’s *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1995), or Wayne Booth’s *Slow Burn* (2005).²⁹

Thus, the title of this collection—*Passing Interest*—recalls both what I see as the unwavering interest in passing *and* the notion or suggestion that passing is no longer relevant/necessary or no longer appeals to writers—that it is a “relic of the past.” Perhaps the numbers of actual people

who pass into whiteness in a traditional sense are on the decline. But the textual explorations and representations of passing are certainly still multiplying. In fact, the trope of racial passing remains an ideal means for exploring and for representing the shifting multiplicity and performativity of racial and national identities, as well as the boundaries that police those categories, in this increasingly multiracial, interethnic culture. The fluid, multicultural citizen has become an almost ideal body upon/through which to write the twenty-first century passing narrative.³⁰ Indeed, Dreisinger argues that “[a]s Americans become reacquainted with their racial mixed heritages, and as we slowly begin to recognize how much cultural borrowing has shaped our intellectual landscape, we consume narratives about passing and multiracialism with avidity” (123). Furthermore, as Elam puts it, authors find passing “a particularly timely medium to explore the ongoing relevance of race amidst the recent rise in anti-identitarianism and post-racialism” (*The Souls* 122). Racial passing continues to serve as a touchstone for gauging public beliefs and anxieties about race, for pressing the paradoxes inherent in the discourse of “color blindness,” and for evidencing the reactionary backlash and fundamentalist tendencies that significant cultural changes such as increased immigration, economic instability, and rapid globalization provoke. Finally, in an age and culture increasingly inundated with visual media in both communal and private spaces—from police cameras watching citizens, to individuals capturing images of others with cell phones—and the almost limitless ability to manipulate the visual image—to create the “new face” of Eve—television and film (as well as other visual technologies) have become as fundamental to the construction and maintenance of race and identity categories as the novel was to nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century audiences. Racial passing—a trope dependent in large part upon the embodied, visual cues that construct and police racial identity—is perhaps, then, particularly suited for televisual and filmic exploration.³¹

In their analyses of recent passing narratives, the contributors to *Passing Interest* attempt to address a set of questions that helped me shape this project as a whole. At the most basic level were questions about the use, relevancy, and popularity of racial passing as a narrative trope: In this multiracial, post-civil rights era, how has the trope of racial passing—as a structural element of texts—changed? Or how has it remained the same? How have authors of the last two decades used passing to explore the construction of a bi- or multiracial individual’s sense of racial identity? Does “one drop” of blood still reign supreme in the American court of popular culture? To what extent does contemporary American culture

allow for the racially indeterminate individual? Or does it? Do we continue to exoticize such individuals? Another set of questions focused on passing at a thematic level, as a means to examine cultural constructs about race and national identity. To that end, I asked: In what ways does passing challenge or fortify social, economic, and political hierarchies structured through a rhetoric of racial difference? Are we moving toward a truly color-blind society or one in which racial intermixture is increasing the reactionary impulse to ossify racial categories? Where is the intersection between cultural borrowing and passing? And, finally, I asked: How is the trope of passing—which is mired in issues of visibility—used in a technological age so fundamentally mediated by the visual image and saturated by media?

The essays in *Passing Interest* answer such questions in multiple—and sometimes contradictory—ways. The conclusions the essays reach are not monolithic, nor are they definitive. Because the concept of race itself has shifted and adapted to different historical moments, passing—both the actual, historical practice of passing and our textual representations of it—has adjusted correspondingly. There is no one way to describe all contemporary racial passing texts, and consequently, the working definition of “passing” in this collection has a bit of deliberate elasticity to it without, I hope, emptying the term of useful meaning. Under this approach, certain general trends surfaced that help us see both continuities and differences from earlier, traditional treatments of racial passing. In some texts, the traditional passing trope survives unchanged. Like their predecessors, these texts explore (either explicitly or implicitly) how racial identity is constructed, how those processes are policed and/or can be subverted, and the identity crisis that can occur in the bi- or multiracial individual. Others look at passing texts whose underlying racial conservatism subverts their purported racial and social liberalism. Another group focuses on the “ethnic” passer in texts that complicate the black-white binary of the traditional racial passer. And the remainder explores the slippage between traditional racial passing and related forms of racial performance (such as blackface minstrelsy, racial masquerade, or the more contemporary concept of cultural borrowing). Thus, while the essays in the collection are loosely organized around the texts’ treatment and choice of passing subjects and passing as a trope (as listed above), the essays could have been grouped in various ways. They might instead have been grouped by genre. Or by theme: some link issues of racial performance to the matrix of self-community-nation in unique ways that highlight political, capitalist, and social investment in a racial hierarchy, while others focus specifically

on the role of the consumerist-driven media in the maintenance of racial categories and stereotypes within the capitalist marketplace. Alternatively, they might have been organized through the various cultural discourses and phenomenon they engage, such as immigration law/nationality, the Post-Soul Aesthetic, contemporary political satire, affirmative action, or the rhetoric of “post-racialism.” In any arrangement, these essays show that, as the culture becomes more (openly) multiracial/multicultural and as visual technologies proliferate, passing as a trope becomes more rather than less fluid and malleable, and it is this very elasticity that enables it to serve as a tool to explore the increasing complexities of racio-national identity within the United States.

The opening pair of essays explores relatively traditional uses of the passing trope within contemporary memoirs and records how interracial families, usually over multiple generations, have been and continue to be affected by racial passing.³² The memoirists in many cases continue to reproduce language that conceptualizes race as a biological element of identity: they evidence the tenacity of the one-drop rule and even a belief in racial atavism (the reappearance in children of the racial traits of grandparents or more remote ancestors). However, some of the memoirs also implicitly illustrate how this reactionary, or at least traditional, understanding of race survives not *just* because those in control would like to stay in control or because it is so deeply engrained in the language we have to talk about race. Biology has been used to make race, to fuel racism, to fracture families, but it has also made families, communities, and a sense of collective identity used to *resist* racism. Resistance movements (such as the civil rights movement) were built largely by a sense of group identity based on authenticity—an authenticity primarily based on that same biological system of racial classification.³³ That power lingers and supports, rather than destabilizes, a system of rigid and singular racial classification. Thus, the memoirists often vacillate between traditional conceptualizations of race and the language of hybridity or racial-multiplicity, specifically within a framework of multiracialism. Put differently, they maintain racial difference while foregrounding the shift from “mulatto” to “multiracial” that began in the 1990s.

In “On the Margins of a Movement: Passing in Three Contemporary Memoirs,” Irina Negrea offers a close reading of three early memoirs: Shirlee Taylor Haizlip’s *The Sweeter the Juice* (1994), Gregory Howard Williams’s *Life on the Color Line* (1995), and Judy Scales-Trent’s *Notes of a White Black Woman* (1995). Negrea examines the traditional use of passing in the memoirs, focusing part of her argument on the psychological conse-

quences of those family members left behind. According to Negrea, Hai-zlip, Williams, and Scales-Trent—in contrast to their ancestors—ultimately try to situate themselves in a place of *in-betweenness*, a space *on* the color line, in an attempt simultaneously to elude an exclusive racial classification and to claim multiple familial histories. These memoirists' somewhat tenuous conclusion that identity is ultimately based not on an assigned racial category, but on an individual's choice, mark them as forerunners of the multiracial movement. That claim also highlights a contemporary trend in racial classification *not* to choose a single racial identity. Their own difficulty with *not* choosing—with not having a clear racial label to affix to themselves—however, surfaces in their language, which paradoxically continues to describe them as black and evidences the lingering power of the color line at the end of the twentieth century.

In “‘A Cousin to Blackness’: Race and Identity in Bliss Broyard’s *One Drop: My Father’s Hidden Life*,” Lynn Washington and I argue that Broyard—like the earlier memoirists—claims all the racial branches on her family tree. However, rather than situating herself on the color line while also being black, Broyard ultimately exits the novel as biracial, but still white. The discovery of her father’s “one drop” does not essentially change her primary racial identification. Broyard admits that she initially believes it *should* alter her sense of identity, but through her quest she discovers that having black ancestors does not translate into a sense of blackness. Nor, the memoir suggests, should it. As importantly, Broyard ultimately invests blackness with a specific cultural value: blackness becomes property that one must earn and that is not inherited automatically through blood. This positive valuation of blackness allows her to maintain a primary white identification without being subject to the accusation of self-hate that racial passers, such as her father, bore. Finally, the memoir highlights the dramatic sociocultural changes that happened between her father’s generation and hers—and even in the decade between the early memoirs and her own—changes that allow her to be a “cousin” to blackness rather than a “tragic mulatto.”

The next set of essays read texts that counter the movement toward multiplicity and racial liberalism suggested (if not always reached) by the memoirs. The first two examine television episodes/shows that, on the surface, expose the horrors of segregation and racism. However, the contributors demonstrate through their analyses that these texts conceptualize passers primarily as transgressors, cultural thieves, self-haters, or imitators. Like passers from earlier generations, these passers demonstrate the tragic consequences of not staying in one’s culturally sanctioned racial

box and thus suggest that life-in-the-box is actually the better option.³⁴ Such texts ultimately suggest that rather than moving toward a multiracial, color-blind, or post-racial society, we continue to operate within a system in which racial ambiguity serves primarily to fuel a reactionary, exclusionist impulse to ossify racial categories. The third essay in this section looks at a text whose reception—rather than the text itself—evidences such a reactionary impulse to maintain racial categories and white hegemonies.

In “Can One Really Choose?: Passing and Self-Identification at the Turn of the 21st Century,” Jené Schoenfeld argues that despite their pretenses to being narratives of racial progress, passing episodes of two popular drama series—*Law & Order* and *Angel*—are clearly invested in maintaining a present-day racial order in which identity is fixed, such that one may (temporarily) assume an identity through passing, but one cannot define a new identity simply by choosing. Indeed, these episodes often trade on the lingering residue of the one-drop rule and regressively frame the new “multiracial” through the older stereotype of the “mulatto.” Through their resuscitation of the tropes of passing, the tragic mulatto, and the “black baby,” Schoenfeld argues, the episodes illustrate the tension between an apparently progressive racial attitude and a deeper cultural conservatism about race and identity.

In “Passing in Blackface: The Intimate Drama of Post-Racialism on *Black.White.*,” Eden Osucha examines competing discourses of cultural authenticity and critical spectatorship involved in the production of “blackness” in the 2006 race-changing “reality” miniseries *Black.White*. Osucha contextualizes her discussion within the contemporary discourse of post-racialism and American culture’s ever-growing obsession with “reality” television, linking these seemingly disparate issues through their shared impetus toward the construction of racial epistemology in the United States. According to Osucha, the point of the show was not to highlight the constructedness of race itself, but to make into profitable spectacle the overt performance of racial stereotypes that blends into caricature and does little to destabilize fixed racial identity categories.

In the final essay in this group, it is not the text, but the text’s reception that evidences a reactionary backlash. In “Broke Right in Half: Passing of/in Alice Randall’s *The Wind Done Gone*,” I argue that Randall’s 2001 novel, a parallel novel to Margaret Mitchell’s 1936 now-mythic novel *Gone With the Wind*, attempts to (re)write history on a larger scale and suggest that the legal battle surrounding the publication of Randall’s novel illustrates how deeply America is still invested in its own denial of racism: in order to see print this postmodern novel itself had to pass as a

parody rather than be recognized as a serious indictment of historical and contemporary racism. Thus, the essay discusses the novel in the context of the rise of contemporary political satire. But I argue that the novel's most transgressive element is that Other—Randall's version of Scarlett O'Hara—is a light-skinned black woman. This revelation is the fulcrum of the novel's politics and what makes the novel so threatening.

The next three essays take a step away from the traditional black-white passer to focus on multiethnic passers, those who live not on or across "the color line" but in the neo-borderlands, where multiplicities seem to proliferate exponentially. The multiethnic passer can arguably highlight a much more complex socio-racial-national nexus, one that understands the production of individual identity not within the either-or dichotomy of a Jim Crow society, but through the diversity of globalization, immigration, and cultural fusion. The language that dominates the texts themselves and the critical explorations of those texts is thus filled with words of motion: "flux," "fluidity," "indeterminacy," "hybridity," "ambiguity," "ambivalence." That some of these passers retreat to the safety of monocultural subjectivity that offers a sense of racial closure because it corresponds to a traditional definition of race (they select one box) perhaps speaks to the lingering cultural power of whiteness within the United States. That others don't—that they insist on multiplicity not as a transgressive challenge but as a normative state of being—is indicative of the larger social, economic, political, and demographic shifts in the United States in the twenty-first century.

In "Passing for Chicano, Passing for White: Negotiating Filipino American Identity in Brian Ascalon Roley's *American Son*," Amanda Page reads Roley's 2001 novel, which focuses on two brothers of Filipino and German heritage who pass for Chicano or white. The liminal position of these brothers as "invisible" Filipino Americans allows Roley to extend the boundaries of traditional passing narratives to groups who remain outside of the dominant racial discourse, moving the ethnic Other from margin to center. Page situates her reading within a discussion of anti-immigration nativist rhetoric in the United States and examines how the passing narrative is transformed when applied to "ethnic" subjects. Page argues that despite the potential for interethnic affiliation, however, white hegemonic power continues to divide ethnic minorities and to work against a mestizo sense of collective identification.

Ana Mendes's "Race in the Marketplace: Postmodern Passing and Ali G" also explores indeterminacy and ambiguity in a cultural borderland where the performance of race, ethnicity, religion, and nationality collide.

Framing her argument within a discussion of the (globalizing) consumerist impulse that drives the production of a Western conception of race, Mendes argues that Ali G—a character developed and acted by the British Jewish comedian Sacha Baron Cohen—is the postmodern passer.³⁵ The light-skinned Ali G claims a black identity by overtly relying on racial stereotypes that render visible the discursive nature of race. However, Ali G complicates the black-white binary by employing a Middle Eastern name and Asian cultural references. Commentators label him concurrently as a black man, a white man pretending to be black, an Asian being black, or a Jew being an Asian being black. Mendes argues that the kind of “racial morphing” documented in Ali G’s passing, or in a technologically blacked-up image of Kate Moss, or in the conscious racialization of the body in Japanese *ganguro*, suggests a readiness to recognize openly—and indeed to manipulate—the performative nature of identity categories such as race, ethnicity, and nationality but that such a recognition does not necessarily destabilize the stereotypes upon which it functions. Instead, the very indeterminacy of identity, highlighted through the reproduction of fixed stereotypes, generates a new market for capitalist consumption.

In the next essay, Lori Harrison-Kahan examines one novel—Danzy Senna’s *Caucasia* (1998)—and one memoir—Rebecca Walker’s *Black, White and Jewish* (2001)—to explore the increasing tendency of passing narratives to feature mixed-race protagonists who pass for Jewish.³⁶ These texts reflect the current trend to convey the social construction of race through what she calls “the metaphors of performance.” Furthermore, she argues that texts in which African American protagonists pass as Jewish shift the paradigm of the passing narrative to rewrite the biracial binary of black and white in terms of more complex categories of identity: black, white, and Jewish. Jewishness, Harrison-Kahan argues, “functions as a representation of multiplicity and ambivalence in contemporary multiracial literature” and is particularly suited to the passing narrative because Jewishness itself is a multiple signifier as, variably, a religion, a race, an ethnicity, and/or a culture.

The final pair of essays takes what was most transgressive about earlier passing narratives—the idea that race is a performance—as their starting point. These essays (and the texts they study) work to show how alternate operative strategies of racial performance, such as racial masquerade, cultural borrowing, satire/parody, blackface, etc., have moved closer to the trope of passing as our understandings of racial production have shifted. These works engage the concepts of (racial) fluidity and hybridity at a textual or generic level through a playful postmodern genre shifting and blending. In them, racial identity and the trope of passing are much