



Near Black: White-to-Black Passing in American Culture

Baz Dreisinger

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In the United States, the notion of racial "passing" is usually associated with blacks and other minorities who seek to present themselves as part of the white majority. Yet as Baz Dreisinger demonstrates in this fascinating study, another form of this phenomenon also occurs, if less frequently, in American culture: cases in which legally white individuals are imagined, by themselves or by others, as passing for black.

In *Near Black*, Dreisinger explores the oft-ignored history of what she calls "reverse racial passing" by looking at a broad spectrum of short stories, novels, films, autobiographies, and pop-culture discourse that depict whites passing for black. The protagonists of these narratives, she shows, span centuries and cross contexts, from slavery to civil rights, jazz to rock to hip-hop. Tracing their role from the 1830s to the present day, Dreisinger argues that central to the enterprise of reverse passing are ideas about proximity. Because "blackness," so to speak, is imagined as transmittable, proximity to blackness is invested with the power to turn whites black: those who are literally "near black" become metaphorically "near black."

While this concept first arose during Reconstruction in the context of white anxieties about miscegenation, it was revised by later white passers for whom proximity to blackness became an authenticating badge. As Dreisinger shows, some white-to-black passers pass via self-identification. Jazz musician Mezz Mezzrow, for example, claimed that living among blacks and playing jazz had literally darkened his skin. Others are taken for black by a given community for a period of time. This was the experience of Jewish critic Waldo Frank during his travels with Jean Toomer, as well as that of disc jockey Hoss Allen, master of R&B slang at Nashville's famed WLAC radio. For journalists John Howard Griffin and Grace Halsell, passing was a deliberate and fleeting experiment, while for Mark Twain's fictional white slave in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, it is a near-permanent and accidental occurrence.

Whether understood as a function of proximity or behavior, skin color or cultural heritage, self-definition or the perception of others, what all these variants of "reverse passing" demonstrate, according to Dreisinger, is that the lines defining racial identity in American culture are not only blurred but subject to change.

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