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### Scapegoating the Past, Sacrificing the Present: The Pains of Racial Passing

*A lot of secrecy has gone on in my family ... My family past [sic] themselves as white and married whites; we were all raised to think we were white. I just found out ... a couple of years ago and was quite surprised. Not to mention angry that I had been lied to all my life. I think it's terrible that they felt they had to lie about themselves. I feel so bad that they were ashamed of their background. Of course, they didn't count on the PC age when people could get all this info readily. Because of all the lies it has been very hard for me to get any info because I didn't know the truth. I do hope you'll help me (Email received by this writer).*

“I do hope you’ll help me” - These were the words contained in an email written to me from a sixty-year-old distant cousin in California searching for her family history. I had emailed her a few days earlier in response to a web query she had posted on her grandparents. When initially writing to her, I had a strange premonition she was “white.” All the clues were present: a query from a Californian with an unfamiliar surname who wrote of her grandparents with a vagueness somehow not in keeping with the seemingly omniscient picture one usually paints of beloved grandparents.

The task fell to me—at sixteen—to help give a sense of identity to a person old enough to be my grandmother. As a result of segregation and prejudice, her family had made a decision more than eighty years before to migrate to Los Angeles and live as white. California was among the choice locations for those wishing to pass. Nobody in California was interested in one’s past, and with so many families of Hispanic and Pacific origin, looks could be deceiving. According to Randall Kennedy, Harvard professor who has often studied race and its legalities, estimates placed the number of people who passed for white as between 2,500 and 50,000 annually (1145). Each year thousands of black Americans escaped segregation and gained access to schools, jobs, and accommodations generally

afforded only to whites.

Passing and assimilation are different. A Latino-American could strive to perfect his English, anglicize his name or adopt an English nickname, move to a majority white neighborhood, and even gain admission to mainstream organizations. He could more-or-less assimilate into the dominant white American culture. The black American, no matter how much education he obtained, how much wealth he amassed, how fair his skin might be, or how straight his hair, could never escape discrimination and could never fully assimilate. An American named Rodriguez, O'Malley, or Luciano could count on being assimilated after a few decades. After one or two generations, most immigrant groups are securely woven into the patchwork of America. A black person, no matter how "white" physically, economically, or socially, could never remove the stigma his ancestry assigned him.

Racial passing is no secret in America. The character, the "tragic mulatto," is found throughout literature from the writings of Charles W. Chesnutt to the twice-made film *Imitation of Life*. Most often presented are the stories of those whose attempts at passing are ultimately unsuccessful. Presenting stories of those who have successfully passed is difficult, as few ever are in a position to reveal their true background and record their experiences. Presenting such stories might also put too much fear into white Americans; their neighbors, spouses, in-laws, or even themselves could have ancestry of color. Generally ignored in literature, the press, and the public mindset are the thousands of Americans who have and those who continue to pass for white. For those thousands of Americans who passed, they were not only required to take on the superficial or exterior aspects of another group but also to scapegoat their ancestry and give up the lives they had known since birth. To enjoy the benefits of living as white, they tragically had to sacrifice

their homes, cultures, and their families.

The decision to live as white almost always necessitated a change in residence. For many this move was to a far off state where no one would know them or their family. For those leaving Louisiana in the first half of the twentieth century, the most popular destinations were southern California and Chicago, as these were the ending points of two major railroad lines. Often times these migrants would only make vague references to their birthplace. Many of their children and grandchildren grew up only knowing that mother or grandmother was “from Louisiana.” For others wishing to pass, a trip across town or to a neighboring parish could complete a transition into life as white. Despite living right at home, their decision to pass marked a death of sorts to the community. Many New Orleanians of color can recall a relative, neighbor, or classmate who moved to “da Parish,” meaning St. Bernard Parish or to Plaquemines Parish in order to pass as white. In at least one well-publicized case, Ralph Dupas, a world champion boxer originally born Ralph Duplessis, a “negro” in Plaquemines Parish, went to court maintaining he was born “white” in New Orleans and had never been issued a birth certificate. Though he won his case, it still brought a smirk to the faces of many black south Louisianans to recall the many others who went by undetected. Prior to White Flight, New Orleans, unlike many other major cities did not have housing strictly divided by race. On occasion members of one’s own neighborhood could be known to be passing to obtain work or passing altogether. Careful attention had to be paid so that nothing beyond neighborly familiarity could be suspected between blacks and their so-called white neighbors. One family researcher and native of New Orleans’ Seventh Ward known personally to the writer recounts her daily sadness at passing the home of relatives who lived directly across the street. Each day when playing in the streets, going

to school or to church, she could not acknowledge her uncle and first cousins.

As mentioned earlier, when one decides to pass, one often becomes dead to the community, similar to the old Orthodox Jewish custom of sitting Shiva for someone who converted or married a non-Jew. Along with sacrificing one's home, often one's culture is also sacrificed. In an effort not to give indication of from where one hails, many times the children of those who pass are raised in homes completely devoid of the celebrations, rituals, and heritage that emanate from their neighboring families. The reality of this removal from community life came for me and for my cousin when we discovered the memoirs of another cousin who described family and community gatherings at the turn of the century. It included the fact that she and my cousin's grandmother were university classmates and were in each other's weddings. Often times the only traits denoting Louisiana heritage are a mysterious French surname, the use of French language, Catholic religion, and the occasional Louisiana dish. These characteristics are attributed to being descended from some ancient French nobleman. This may occasionally be true, but it denies the importance of two hundred years of racial mixing and scapegoats ancestors of color and the cultural contributions they made.

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*All Marcelin and Celeste's children married white people except Marcelin Dugas, Jr. who married a Mexican Lady. Mother knows none of this because she has made it clear that we have no black in our ancestry and she isn't interested in our genealogy. She says she doesn't remember anything anymore which isn't so. But she is 94 yrs. old now so I leave her alone about it. I don't want to make her tell lies and upset her. I married an Ark. redneck; you can just imagine what he would say if he knew. I'm divorced from him now so it doesn't matter anymore. But he would have had a fit when we were married. I have only told my brother and sister-in-law. After my mother is gone I'll tell all to my cousins. I just don't want them going to her and upsetting her. [Fictional names substituted]*  
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Like the story related earlier about the relatives of the seventh ward who lived right across the street from each other, perhaps the most tragic sacrifice made by those who

decided to pass was that of family. In many cases parents, grandparents, siblings, cousins, and other relatives were left behind only to communicate by mail or phone call if ever again. Bliss Broyard recounts in her book on her father's experience with passing, that his parents were privately cremated with no services and their remains were shipped to their home only to sit on a closet shelf (450-51). Many are the weddings, funerals, and holidays at which those who passed were missing. According to Louisiana African-American history scholar Wendy Gaudin, "Perhaps, the greatest risk was the damaging effect that passing had on the family. When people [passed] they made an ancillary choice to treat their brown-skinned loved ones as strangers or to cut ties to life-long friends. While some persons respected their siblings' or friends' choices and the underlying motivation, they also recognized the losses all parties experienced" (3).

Also painful are the later discoveries that many people like my sixty-year-old cousin made. As genealogy increases in popularity and in this "PC age," as my cousin called it, more and more people will make discoveries about their hidden pasts. This writer has engaged in numerous conversations with people who have discovered that they are of black ancestry. The first emotions felt are often shock and anger at being lied to for years. The next step after discovery is generally confrontation of an older relative. I know of at least three elderly mothers who have refused to tell their children anything about their heritage after being confronted. My cousin summed up her mother's reluctance simply: "She is trying to keep a family secret."

Fortunately, the "PC age" has arrived and in this so-called "post-racial" era, young people of all ages are glad to accept whatever heritage they possess be it white, black, or mixed. By laying down legally enforced segregation and discrimination, America has

allowed the children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren of those who passed the opportunity to embrace their past. They no longer have to scapegoat or sacrifice their familial bonds and ancestral links as their forebears did. Ultimately, what was scapegoated was the truth. As the truths about our individual stories are discovered, it will help us as Americans come to a greater understanding of our common past. My cousin succinctly expressed a wish for the future in the conclusion of one of her emails to me:

*I haven't even told my own children what I know yet, but some day all will know the lies that have been told to us by our grandparents and parents and the truth will prevail.*

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