

English 69 : “Passing”

Is identity natural or cultural? This question has persisted through centuries of American writing, and many of the most interesting meditations on this question arise from books and films that deal with passing. Texts about passing, about people who can successfully pass themselves off as something different from what they were “born as,” form an important subgenre of American culture because they force us to question some strangely consistent inconsistencies in how we define identity. If race, for example, signifies a real and material difference, how could there be such a thing as racial passing? But, at the same time, if race is “only” a social construction, then why is racial passing so often characterized as a crime against nature? Stories about passing often illustrate a fundamental ambivalence on the personal meaningfulness of biopower in America, and also reveal the nascent virtuality of worldly experiences more generally.

Workload, Deadlines, & Grading

This is primarily a course in literary and cultural theory, which means that we are not only interested in the interpretation of texts, but also in building and refining the critical apparatuses through we make such interpretations.

Because this is a large class that nonetheless requires an intellectual **commitment to writing**, the workload for this class is heavily tilted toward its online writing component and class **participation**. To take this class you must allow at least 5 – 6 hours per week for screenings, your blogging, and reading the work of your peers, in addition to the scheduled **readings**.

After add/drop you will be divided into **workgroups**. Each group will be responsible for developing and editing a journal on a topic derived from this class’ materials and published online for its peers. Over the course of the semester, each group is responsible for the management of its project, with each group member made responsible for writing **one 3-5 page article** chosen and designed in *editorial collaboration* with the rest of his or her group. Every student is required to read each journal, and articles from the journals will be included in class discussion and on the exams. Groups must meet with me a minimum of twice during the semester, to conceptualize, outline, and discuss the final drafts of their journals.

An **outline** of your project, including an **abstract** of each individual article, is due two weeks before your publication date, and a draft of each article is due one week before your publication date. Every group will have a different publication date, chosen in consultation with Professor Parham. You are also required to engage the ongoing discussion of class materials on the class **blog**, with a minimum of 1 post and 1 comment per week. There will also be six 1.5 hour **online exams** for this class, of which each person must take four: **3 + the final**. You will not get to choose which exams you take, so please make yourself available for every exam time. Exams will always be made available on Sunday evenings, to be self-scheduled between 8 and midnight. The final is scheduled for **12/21**.

Weekly class time will be divided between lecture and discussion, and for both attendance is vital. I will not, however, detract from your final grade until you have **2 absences**, after which you will lose 1/3 of a point for every subsequent absence (so, for instance, an A would become an A- and so on down the line). This logic of threes does have an end: 5 absences will mean automatic failure. As well, 3 tardies = 1 absence. I hold regular office hours, for you to arrange using my online scheduler. Your final grade will reflect the level of your class and blog participation, your exam grades, and your final project.

Materials

Viewing materials will be available online, under the library reserves for this course. Books will be available from Amherst Books, and there is also a multilith, for which you will be billed at mid-semester. It will be available in the English department office in the fourth week of classes.

Professor Marisa Parham : 10 Johnson Chapel : mparham@amherst.edu / x.8551

Schedule of work

wk	unit	Readings / Lectures	Screenings & Exams		Notes
9/7	welcome!	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 🗣 Introduction: structure of the course its thematic concerns 📺 "White Like Me" 📖 <i>Running A Thousand Miles for Freedom</i>, William and Ellen Craft 	No screenings		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 🗣 = lecture 📺 = screening 📖 = streaming video only 📖 = novels and short stories ◦ = article or essay
9/14	bodies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 🗣 "Nature/ culture debates" 📺 scenes from <i>The Human Stain</i> ◦ James Davis, "Who Is Black? One Nation's Definition" 	Sun	Tentative Special Event (9/12)	
			Tue	📺 <i>Saturday Night Fever</i>	
9/21		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 🗣 "Thinking historically: passing and national crises" 📖 <i>The House Behind the Cedars</i>, Charles Chesnutt ◦ Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny" and "Fetishism" 	No screenings		
9/28		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 📖 <i>The House Behind the Cedars</i>, cont'd ◦ James Davis, "Conflicting Rules" ◦ James Davis, "The Rule Becomes Firm" 	Sun	📺 <i>Pinky</i>	
			Tue	📺 <i>Boys Don't Cry</i>	
10/5	Narrative lives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 🗣 "Reading books, reading bodies" 📖 <i>Passing</i>, Nella Larsen ◦ Piper, "Passing for White, Passing for Black" 	Sun	EXAM 1: 10/3	
10/12		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 📖 <i>Passing</i>, cont'd ◦ Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage" ◦ Muller and Richardson on reading Lacan's "Mirror Stage" ◦ Elizabeth Grosz, "Psychoanalysis and Psychical Topographies" 	No screenings		Fall Break
10/19	Membership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 🗣 "What did I do to be so black *and* blue?" 📖 <i>Black Like Me</i>, William Griffin + "Epilogue" ◦ Baz Dreisinger, "Dy(e)ing to Be Black" 📖 <i>The Watermelon Man</i> (for next exam) 	Sun	EXAM 2: 10/17	◦ recommended: Eric Lott, "Racial Cross-Dressing and the Construction of American Whiteness"
			Tue	📺 <i>Avatar</i>	
10/26		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 📖 <i>Caucasia</i>, Danzy Senna 	Sun	EXAM 3: 10/24	
11/2	Nets and narratives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 📖 <i>Caucasia</i>, cont'd 	Sun	📺 <i>Gattaca</i>	
11/9		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 🗣 "Surveillance: Looking and being looked at" ◦ Kaja Silverman, "The Bodily Ego" ◦ Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" ◦ Michel Foucault, "Panopticism" 	Sun	📺 <i>Trading Places</i>	
			Tue	📺 <i>Maid in Manhattan</i>	

cont'd

wk	unit	Readings / Lectures / Discussions	Screenings/Exams		Notes
11/16	Nets II: cybernetics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☛ "The new informatics, or, the object against the liberal Subject" 📖 <i>Robot Visions</i>, Isaac Asimov (selections TBD) ◦ Katharine Hayles, "Prologue," ch. 1, ch. 8 (selections) ◦ Elizabeth Grosz, "Refiguring Bodies" 	Sun	EXAM 4: 11/14	
			No screenings		
11/23		<i>Thanksgiving Break...</i>			
11/30		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 📖 <i>Robot Visions</i>, cont'd 📖 <i>Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?</i>, Philip K. Dick ◦ Katharine Hayles, ch. 2 – ch. 4, ch. 6 (selections), ch. 9 (selections) 	Sun	📺 <i>A.I.</i>	
12/7		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 📖 <i>Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?</i>, cont'd ◦ Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia" 	Sun	EXAM 5: 12/5	
12/14	<i>Wrap-up</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☛ "Typesetting, and other problems of the informational" 📖 <i>Erasure</i>, Percival Everett 	Tue	📺 <i>Whiteboyz</i>	
12/21	Final Exam texts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 📖 "Passing," Langston Hughes ◦ Elizabeth Grosz, "Cyberspace, Virtuality, and the Real," "Lived Spatiality," and "The Thing" ◦ Friedrich Kittler, "Introduction" and "Translator's Introduction" ◦ Gayle Wald, "Anna Deveare Smith's <i>Voices at Twilight</i>" 	Sun	📺 <i>Twilight: Los Angeles</i>	
			Mon	📺 <i>Caprica</i> (season 1 pilot)	
			Tue	📺 <i>Tropic Thunder</i>	

Books				
	Author	Title	Publisher	isbn
1.	Isaac Asimov	<i>Robot Visions</i>	Penguin	451450647
2.	Charles W. Chesnutt	<i>The House Behind the Cedars</i>	Penguin Classics	140186859
3.	William and Ellen Craft	<i>Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom</i>	[Project Gutenberg]	handout
4.	Philip K. Dick	<i>Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?</i>	Del Rey	345404475
5.	Percival Everett	<i>Erasure</i>	Hyperion	786888156
6.	John Howard Griffin	<i>Black Like Me</i>	Signet	451192036
7.	Katherine Hayles	<i>How We Became Posthuman</i>	UChicago Press	226321460
8.	Nella Larsen	<i>The Complete Fiction of Nella Larsen...</i>	Anchor	385721005
9.	Danzy Senna	<i>Caucasia: A Novel</i>	Riverhead Trade	1573227161

Film and Television	
1.	“White Like Me”
2.	<i>Trading Places</i>
3.	<i>Maid in Manhattan</i>
4.	<i>Pinky</i>
5.	<i>Tropic Thunder</i>
6.	<i>Caprica</i> (2 hr. pilot)
7.	<i>Boys Don’t Cry</i>
8.	<i>Whiteboyz</i>
9.	<i>Gattaca</i>
10.	<i>A.I.</i>
11.	<i>Twilight: Los Angeles</i>
12.	<i>Avatar</i>
13.	<i>Saturday Night Fever</i> (streaming only))
14.	<i>The Watermelon Man</i> (streaming only)
15.	<i>The Human Stain</i> (selected scenes)