

Passing for Oneself  
Literature of Passing, Covering, and Becoming

**Course**

To pass is to be recognized as belonging to a race, sexuality, gender, or class that differs from one's own. This course begins by tracing the notion of passing in literature backwards in time across historical periods, from racial passing in American Modernism, to sexual passing in nineteenth-century poetry and fiction, to class and gender passing in eighteenth-century fiction and autobiography. How does passing enable certain rights, protections, and privileges, while foreclosing on others? To what degree does passing involve performing a different identity versus concealing an identity of one's own (what is sometimes referred to as "covering")? After exploring literary passing in its early manifestations, we turn our attention to post-WWII literature. Does the history of passing/covering offer us ways of understanding contemporary questions of identity, such as who we are when we are online, or what it means to belong to multiple subjugated or marginalized groups? How does this history inform or hinder discourses of *becoming*, as in writing about trans identity? In answering these questions, we will think not just across identity categories but across media: novels, short stories, poetry, drama, autobiographical prose, films and graphic novels.

**Objectives**

In addition to thinking about literary works on passing, you will also read key texts representing a range of critical methods, including critical race theory, psychoanalysis, queer theory, and deconstruction. In other words, as you read the primary texts, you will also learn how to ask the kinds of critical, historical, and interpretive questions that lead to incisive close readings.

More broadly, you will learn how to engage with the discipline and practice of English literary studies at an upper-division level. The tutorial will culminate in the writing and revision of a 20-25-page research paper in preparation for an honors thesis. You will learn to come up with a research question, develop a critical bibliography around that question, put secondary criticism in conversation with your own ideas and with other criticism, and write with clarity and precision.

**Attendance**

Your attendance in tutorial is vital to the success of the class. So, too, is your attendance at the Junior Tutorial General Meetings and at other required events. Each student will be allowed a "free" tutorial absence to be used in case of sickness, travel, etc.: no explanation necessary. Missing more than one class will decrease your participation grade, and excessive absence could result in failing the course. Please come to tutorial on time. If you have extenuating circumstances, please discuss with me so that we can work out a solution.

### **Expectations for Written Work**

Papers are to be submitted on time, in hard copy: please double-space and print on both sides of the page. You are encouraged to talk with other students about the course and its readings, and to read each other's work. In individual assignments, academic collaboration and external sources should be always cited.

Plagiarism is strictly forbidden. From Harvard's Plagiarism policy: "All homework assignments, projects, lab reports, papers and examinations submitted to a course are expected to be the student's own work. Students should always take great care to distinguish their own ideas and knowledge from information derived from sources. The term "sources" includes not only published primary and secondary material, but also information and opinions gained directly from other people." For the full policy, and information on using sources, please visit: [usingsources.fas.harvard.edu](http://usingsources.fas.harvard.edu). When in doubt, ask!

### **Assignments/Grading**

**10% - Short Paper: Archival Research.** Archival research on a real-life story of racial passing, inspired by Prof. Allyson Hobbs's *A Chosen Exile: A History of Racial Passing* (2014),

**65% - Critical Essay.** The critical essay, 20-25 pages double-spaced, is the culmination of the tutorial. It is due in several parts as the term progresses:

- **(10%) Prospectus and Annotated Bibliography** (week 6). A two-page prospectus introducing the topic of your research, along with a bibliography of 8-10 sources. Included in participation grade.
- **(15%) First Draft**
- **Workshop** (week 11). Workshop letters for your peers' essays due in section. Included in participation grade.
- **(40%) Final Draft**

**25% - Participation** (including seminar starters and workshop letters).

### **Due Dates & Late Grades**

Due dates and times are listed on the syllabus. Late assignments will be docked 1/3 letter grade per day late, except for the final paper, which must be turned in before the due date. Students failing to turn in a final paper, or turning it in late without an official excuse, will fail the tutorial. If, well in advance of an assignment, you expect you will need an extension, please talk with me.

## Schedule

- Primary text
- ❖ Theory/criticism

### **Week 0.** *Are We Past 'Passing'?*

- ❖ Baz Dreisinger, “‘Passing’ and the American Dream”
- ❖ Robert Fikes, “The Passing of Passing”
- ❖ Kenji Yoshino, “The Pressure to Cover”

## I. Racial Passing in Modern America (Critical Race Theory; Feminist Theory; Media Theory)

### **Week 1.** *How did passing originate?*

- Charles Chesnutt, “The Passing of Grandison” (1899)
- James Weldon Johnson, from *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912)
- ❖ Frantz Fanon, “The Fact of Blackness”
- ❖ Pamela Caughie, “Passing as Modernism”

### **Week 2.** *When is passing about more than race alone?*

- Nella Larsen, *Passing* (1929)
- ❖ Hortense Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book”
- ❖ Gabrielle McIntire, “Toward a Narratology of Passing: Epistemology, Race, and Misrecognition in Nella Larsen’s *Passing*” (2012)

### **Week 3.** *How does passing translate from text to screen or stage?*

- *Passing*, dir. Rebecca Hall (2020)
- *PassingSOLO*, performed by Nancy Cheryll Davis (2015)
- ❖ Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”
- ❖ Richard Dyer, “The Matter of Whiteness”

DUE: Assignment 1

## II. Sexual Passing and Covering in Late Nineteenth-Century Literature (Psychoanalysis; Deconstruction)

### **Week 4.** *Is sexual passing visible or invisible?*

- Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890)
- ❖ Michel Foucault, from *The History of Sexuality, Vol 1* (1976)
- ❖ Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny”

### **Week 5.** *How do texts themselves become vehicles for passing/covering?*

- Katherine Mansfield, “The Garden Party,” “The Little Governess” (1922, 1915)
- Walt Whitman, “Calamus” poems (1860); “Walt Whitman and his Poems” (1855)
- ❖ Martin McQuillain, from “Introduction: Five Strategies for Deconstruction”

III. Testing Class and Gender Boundaries in the Eighteenth Century  
(Gender Theory; Class Theory)

**Week 6.** *What happens when you pass over and over?*

- Eliza Haywood, *Fantomina* (1725)
- ❖ Judith Butler, from *Gender Trouble*
- ❖ Leslie Morrison, “Serialized Identities and the Novelistic Character in Eliza Haywood’s *Fantomina* and *Anti-Pamela*”

DUE: Prospectus + Annotated Bibliography

**Week 7.** *Could you pass before passing was a thing?*

- Charlotte Charke, excerpts from *A Narrative of the Life* (1755)
- Shakespeare, *The Twelfth Night* (1602)
- ❖ bell hooks, “Crossing Class Boundaries,” from *Where We Stand*

IV. Postwar: Passing, Covering, Becoming  
(Intersectionality; Black Feminist Theory; Transgender Studies)

**Week 8.** *What is the ‘Neo-Passing Narrative’?*

- James Baldwin, *Giovanni’s Room* (1956)
- Langston Hughes, “Who’s Passing for Who?” (1956)
- ❖ Godfrey + Young, “The Neo-Passing Narrative”
- ❖ Valerie Rohy, “Passing, Nostalgia, and *Giovanni’s Room*”

**Week 9.** *How does passing relate to intersectionality?*

- Fran Ross, *Oreo* (1974)
- ❖ Danzy Senna, “Passing and the Problematic of Multiracial Pride (or, Why One Mixed Girl Still Answers to Black)”
- ❖ Jennifer Nash, “Feeling Black Feminism,” from *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality*

**Week 10.** *Does the language of passing/covering help or hinder transgender, nonbinary, and genderqueer identification?*

- Casey Plett, *Little Fish* (2018)
- ❖ Jack Halberstam, “Queer Temporality and Postmodern Geographies,” from *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*
- ❖ Andrea Long Chu, “On Liking Women”

DUE: Final Essay Draft 1

**Week 11.** [Workshop]

- Selections from *Troubling the Line: Transgender and Genderqueer Poetry and Poetics*

**Week 12.** *How do graphic novels use visuality to express interiority?*

- Liana Finck, *Passing for Human* (2018)
- Mat Johnson, *Incognegro* (2008)

**Week 13.** *What does it (or could it) mean to pass beyond the human?*

- *X-men: The Last Stand* (2006)
- Patch O’Furr, “The Furclub Movement” (2016)

DUE: Revised Final Essay

### **Recommended Sources**

Jeffrey Brune and Daniel Wilson, *Disability and Passing: Blurring the Lines of Identity*

Pamela Caughie, *Passing and Pedagogy: The Dynamics of Responsibility*

Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks* (1998)

Elaine Ginsburg, *Passing and the Fictions of Identity* (1996)

Gwendolyn Audrey Foster, *Class-Passing: Social Mobility in Film and Popular Culture* (2005)

bell hooks, *Where We Stand: Class Matters*

Brooke Kroeger's *Passing: When People Can't Be Who They Are* (2003)

Julie Neraud, *Passing Interest: Racial Passing in US Novels, Memoirs, and Television and Film*

Chris Mounsey, *Presenting Gender: Changing Sex in Early-modern Culture*

Kathleen Pfeiffer, *Race, Passing, and American Individualism* (2003).

María Carla Sánchez and Linda Schlossberg (eds), *Passing: Identity and Interpretation in Sexuality, Race, and Religion*. New York University Press, 2001.

Gayle Wald, *Crossing the Line: Racial Passing in Twentieth-Century U.S. Literature and Culture*. Duke University Press, 2000.

Kenji Yoshino, *Covering: The Hidden Assault on our Civil Rights* (2008)