IN SEARCH OF A "SINGULAR I:" A STRUCTURATIONAL ANALYSIS OF PASSING

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INTRODUCTION

It is easy to envision the socio-cultural phenomenon of passing as a relic of a bygone era, yet passing is markedly more. From a historical perspective, "passing-as-white" is a strategy of representation through which light-skinned, white-looking, legally non-white Americans attempt(ed) to reconcile "two unreconciled ideals:" their limited opportunities as non-white people in a segregated society with their idealized life goals as full American citizens (DuBois, 1903; Gandy, 1998). Recent scholarship on the phenomenon explains that passing is more than a masquerade. Passing can be accidental, incidental, or a committed lifestyle that is noted:

> when people *effectively* present themselves as other than who they understand themselves to be...[and] when other people actually see or experience the identity that the passer is projecting, whether the passer is telegraphing that identity by intention or by chance (Kroger, 2003, p. 7-8).

"Effective passing" is a strategy that forces passers to culturally produce and persuade others of their whiteness to the extent

that acts of passing are accepted and authenticated (Ehlers, 2004; Mullen, 1994). More broadly, passing is a practice that sheds light on how individuals relate to social structure and questions the stability of racial identification. Although passing is a historical and contemporary practice that involves the intersectional relationships among nationality, race, ethnicity, class, gender, class, sexuality, historical era, and self-image, the representative anecdotes in this essay are taken from narratives and legal precedent dealing with middle-class, bi-racial (black/white), heterosexual American men during the early 20th century in order to investigate why and how they cut ties with their racial/ethnic communities and families.

To this end, this analysis employs Structuration Theory, legal precedent, and literary evidence. Structuration Theory explains that passers note a contextual diversity or dissonance at the macro level between the general white world of social activity and the general non-white world of social activity. Legal precedent describes why severing social contact and communication with racial/ethic communities and social worlds becomes necessary for effective long-term passing. Literature describes how, often times, passers renounce their communities and families in search of a unified self narrative, referred to as a "singular I."

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: STRUCTURATION THEORY

Giddens's (1991) Structuration Theory provides an ontological framework for examining acts of passing as strategies for reconciling the natures and relations between individuals and social structures. As a theory developed within the context of modernity, an era marked by its official narrative of progress and by its suppressed narrative "of destruction, loss, and the terror of life without meaning" (Lemert, 1999, p. 23), structuration is designed to grapple with the tensions and dilemmas that constitute crises of self. These crises "on one level or another, have to be resolved in order to preserve a coherent narrative of self-identity" (Giddens, 1991, p. 188). Thus, Structuration Theory is understood as a method that recognizes instances in which macro and micro levels overlap and merge. With regard to acts of passing, this merger occurs at "the vast veil," also referred to as the color line.

Acts of passing are the result of a crisis of self which, in the cases examined here, is resolved by realigning one's limited life chances as a black person with one's life goals of fully participating in mainstream American society.

Structuration Theory investigates how the concepts of action, meaning, and subjectivity are made meaningful, and how they relate to notions of structure and constraint (Tucker, 1998). The core concern is with recurrent social practices and their transformations. In other words, structures cannot be separated from human behavior, and larger circumstances can be changed by recursive routine actions. Day-to-day actions are imbued with agency, the power to make a difference in the world, because they can be altered at any time (Cassell, 1993). As such, individual actions carry the prospective capacity for bridging the gap between life experienced as it is in one's current social situation and life as it might be if one's situation were altered. In this paradigm, an individual's life chances are both structurally and personally determined (Gandy, 1998).

Structuration is defined as the production and reproduction of systems of social interaction involving four ingredients that combine to generate structured social practices: rules, resources, social actors, and actions (Cassell, 1993). Rules are the norms and values that govern appropriate social action. Resources allow individuals to exercise power by coordinating their actions with rules to achieve desired life goals (Giddens, 1991; Gandy, 1998). Skilled social actors are those who understand the contexts in which actions are appropriate and inappropriate. Actions are the recurrent and routine behaviors that are made meaningful within and able to alter structure.

Structures provide limits in terms of the rules and resources that labor recursively to instantiate and reshape society at the macro level. Structures provide limits that communicate appropriate and inappropriate behavior which can be employed to reduce ambiguities and increase levels of "ontological security" of individuals, whose identities may or may not be in states of crisis. An individual only feels secure to the degree that others accept him/her as a valuable social actor and his/her behaviors as rational and appropriate (Giddens, 1991, p. 191). The basic units

of measurement for an individual's ontological security are the recursive routine behaviors that instantiate structure.

The primary dilemma is that of fragmentation versus unification. Thus, the heart of Structuration Theory is concerned with unifying a vision of oneself with relation to the narrative of a dominant structure. Further, the theory has three dimensions: (1) to account for human agency and embeddedness of social institutions through routine behaviors; (2) to understand how subjectivity is inaugurated through the recurrent nature of action; and (3) to investigate the "ontological implications" of social practice and recurrence (Cassell, 1993; Giddens, 1991).

A STRUCTURATIONAL ANALYSIS OF PASSING

As applied to acts of passing, Structuration involves the power struggle through which passers make use of resources available to them in order to reach their desired life goals. Passing is a practice of unifying a fragmented self-identity, a practice in which risk is high and trust is fragile. It is a fundamental crisis of the self which underscores the point that a secure individual life cannot be detached from larger social systems and institutions. Through this lens passing can be interpreted as an attempt to seize control by interacting with, rather than avoiding, the external and often dangerous general white world of social activity. On the other hand, passing can also be interpreted as a response to "engulfment," in which the passer defies the encroaching dominant forces of the racial structure (Giddens, 1991, p. 190). Thus, passers are individuals who "feel deprived of adequate social mastery in a threatening series of personal and social environments" (p. 193). In order to transcend and achieve some sense of "ontological security," passers adjust their presentations of self and appear exactly as they perceive other whites do.

Passers undergo the painstaking process of developing the appropriate responses to both whites via acceptance and assimilation and blacks via separation and exclusion. They seek out and attempt to attain "active mastery" in which their survival is ensured by being able to navigate and triumph over the trials of a racially segregated life (p. 193). Active mastery of the lifestyle variations between black and white people is acquired

in terms of what Bourdieu (1984) refers to as "cultural capital." Cultural capital represents the collection of non-economic forces which influence success such as family background, social class, investments in and commitments to education, and knowledge of the practices of various social groups. The concept of cultural capital brings available resources to individuals and communities by virtue of their social ties and the fungibility of such resources with economic capital into focus. Actors who possess extensive and diversified social networks and who have learned the "proper" manners can mobilize their actions toward attaining economic resources. Passers acquire cultural capital by getting to know whites intimately through the processes of taking in and bearing witness to "all of the mundane yet critical things that made up [white] lives" (Harris, 1993, p. 1711).

Cultural capital to aide the passing process is often generated in the workplace. Colleagues regularly engage in communication practices that force passers to encounter their subordinate social positions (Hughes, 1933):

> I never knew they made a practice of saying such terrible things about us...putting it out that all of us are thieves and liars, or else diseased—consumption and syphilis, and the like...until I started passing and heard their conversations and lived their life (p. 52).

It is quickly learned that dissociation from blackness was a main mechanism of survival (Butler, 1993). Passers inhabit the "worlds within worlds that exist just beyond the edge of [white] awareness and yet were present in [whites'] very midst" (Harris, 1993, p. 1711). Passers tenuously position themselves at the edge of the color line in search of a "singular I," a coherent and secure narrative of self-identity (Roth, 2000).

In this sense, the search for a "singular I" leads passers to alter the rules which regulate their interaction with the dominant system by changing their daily actions. Passers constantly negotiate their blackness, which cannot be detected or publicly exposed. Standing with one foot in the black world and the other in the white world, passers seek to resolve the dissonance between their perceived life chances on either side of "the vast veil" and their

desired life goals (e.g. financial security, physical safety, access to social institutions, dignified and humane treatment, and full participation in white American society). In this phase passers begin to experiment with multiple subject positions and to cross social and economic boundaries that are perceived as exclusionary or oppressive. In Hughes's short story "Passing" (1933), Jack, the protagonist, describes this feeling in the last letter he ever writes to his unnamed black mother:

> But I don't mind being "white," Ma....It got me this job, Ma where I still get $65 in spite of the depression...When I look at the colored boy porter who sweeps out the office, I think that that's what I might be doing if I wasn't light-skinned enough to get by. No matter how smart that boy'd get to be, they wouldn't hire him for a clerk in the office, not if they knew it....That's why I sometimes get a kick out of putting something over on the boss, who never dreams he's got a colored secretary (p. 52).

This fragmented self both transgresses and remains trapped by a biased black-or-white-only racial structure. As a legally constructed black person, yet a person of multi-racial heritage and perspective, the passer simultaneously sees the problem of the black world of "we" with its imposed ethic of submission and the white world of "they" with its imposed bigotry and limitation. The passer's crisis, the crisis of developing a "singular I," is resolved by reducing contextual diversity and increasing ontological security by performing the routinized actions that make crossing the color line possible.

Such actions are daily routines including: what vacant seat of the train one occupies on the way to work, what job one holds, the area of town in which one resides, the social clubs or groups to which one belongs, where one dines, with whom one communicates, and to whom one refers as family and friends (United States Supreme Court, 1895; Giddens, 1991; Hughes, 1933; Roth, 2000; Harris, 1993; Kroger, 2003; Graham, 1999). Most striking is the realization "that blacks—not whites—are the ones who can threaten...security" (Graham, 1999, p. 382). These daily activities are the stepping stones of the passing process and

are instantiated within the context of a black-or-white-only racially biased structure.

This structure consists of the rules (laws) plus actions (everyday routines and internalization of structure) plus resources (cultural capital and skin color) plus actors who trust that they will morph into the dominant structure as variables in the recursive equation (passers). The law provides the rational impetus for acts of passing that fit the legal model of whiteness. This is not to say that acts of passing are solely practiced and made meaningful within a culture whose laws, customs and habits are based on racial segregation. Passing can be practiced in a variety of circumstances for a host of reasons—i.e., investigative reporting, entertainment, interracial or homosexual romance. An understanding of passing in the context of early 20th century American segregation law and discriminatory events reveals that laws are as much reflective as constitutive of these events. Further, such an understanding reminds the critic that issues of ownership, labeling, and appropriation are core aspects of self-identification. Next, the laws that surround racial labeling are examined to understand why passers cut ties with the African American community at large.

HISTORICAL AND LEGAL RATIONALES FOR SEVERING TIES.

The Supreme Court's transcript from *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1895) demonstrates why passers cut ties with the black community in general. Although passing was used by Homer Plessy as a strategic action aimed at eradicating racial discrimination, at trial passing was deemed a problem of appropriation (Robinson, 1994). The court transcript defines passing as the act of appropriating a reputation of whiteness in order to achieve desired life goals or "special treatment" as a black person. Thus, in order to lay claim to "the reputation of belonging to the dominant race, in this instance the white race, [which] is 'property,' in the same sense that a right of action or of inheritance is property," (p. 6) passers could in no way afford to be associated with non-passing blacks; not even on the same car of a public train. The mere intimation that a passer was not legitimately white could throw his/her entire world out of orbit. Passers considered it necessary to cut ties with the African

American community at large in order to avoid being spotted and outed as a black person and in order to appropriate the whiteness denied them at birth.

In order to understand passing as an issue of appropriating a legal model of whiteness, it is necessary to understand the legal model of blackness. For, as Frantz Fanon eloquently explicates, "not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man" (1967, p. 110). The racial classification of "black" denoted a mixed legal status lying somewhere between property and humanity (Harris, 1993, p. 1719). This mixed legal status is reflected in the Constitution, individual state mandates, and the "one drop rule." For purposes that benefited white people only, black people were included in the United States Constitution as three-fifths of a free person. This "Great Compromise," reflected in Article I, § 2, clause 3 of the Constitution, recognized blacks as assets who yielded their owners vast benefits with regard to issues such as political representation, taxation, commercial regulation, domestic tranquility, state sovereignty, and interstate relations (Matthews, 2002). Giddings (1984) points out that the black mother was a serious obstacle with regard to being considered white also referred to as effective passing. As early as 1667, state statues dictated that "[c]hildren got by an Englishman upon a Negro woman shall be bond or free according to the condition of the mother" (p. 37). This was related to the "one drop rule," which defined the race of a person of mixed descent "in the proportion of seven eighths Caucasian and one eighth African blood...was of the colored race" (United States Supreme Court, 1895, p. 1-2). To be considered legally white a person could not have any trace of discernable black blood. The fear of black contamination of whiteness, especially without visible trace, is further reflected in legal precedent:

> In one decade the mixed bloods rose from one-ninth to one-eighth of the population, and...as early as 1663 a law was passed in Maryland to prevent English women from intermarrying with slaves; and, even now...laws against miscegenation presuppose... danger from that source (Harper, 1988, p. 228).

Thus, the children of black women, even if fathered by white men

and phenotypically white, assumed the subordinate legal and social status of their mother as black.

The lack of protection under the law and social stigma associated with blackness created the context for discriminatory events that set DuBois's vast veil into position as the color line. Acts of passing are frequently sparked by a social encounter in which the passer is made to feel different from whites, and is "shut out of their world by the vast veil" (DuBois, 1903, p.9). For instance, consider Roth's (2000) narrative description of his passing protagonist's, Coleman Silk's, humiliation as he goes about his Saturday afternoon routine and is called a "nigger" for the first time:

> And...when he eagerly went off on Saturday with his roommate...and they stopped in Woolworth's to get a hot dog, he was called a nigger. His first time. And they wouldn't give him the hot dog. Refused a hot dog at Woolworth's in downtown Washington, on the way out called a nigger, and, as a result, unable to divorce himself from his feelings...In the segregated South there were no separate identities, not even for him...No such subtleties allowed, and the impact was devastating. Nigger—and it meant him (p. 102-103).

The passer first understands the veil/color line as a cultural barrier to life chances and goals. The feelings of anxiety and personal doubt produced by inhabiting the social status of "nigger" spill into and skew all of the passer's activities (Cassell, 1993). In order to achieve some sense of stability, or ontological security, the passer decides whether he will self-identify as black or white. The passers examined here chose to bracket out the aspects of their identities that are associated with blackness and to embrace the aspects of their identities that are associated with whiteness. Whiteness is interpreted as protective measure or insurance, a shield from degradation, external domination, and a line of demarcation with regard to privilege, protection, and full autonomous participation in white American society (Harris, 1993; Roth, 2000). In order to make life less insufferable whiteness is appropriated via acts of passing.

Historically, Jim Crow segregation laws that proscribed the

social and personal encounters between whites and blacks had three main effects: (1) the laws ensured their "separate and *in*herently unequal" social statuses (United States Supreme Court, 1954; Woodward, 1974); (2) the laws instantiated distinct social worlds that opened spaces of agency; and (3) the laws ensured that a passer could be called into question at any moment, even when he/she "entered a passenger train and took possession of a vacant seat in a coach where passengers of the white race were accommodated" (United States Supreme Court, 1895, p. 1). Recursive routinized activities, such as the seat occupied on a passenger train, are embedded in macro-level institutional rules of legal segregation. The case of *Plessy v. Ferguson* is important in this regard because Plessy, an outed passer, sued the railroad company who accused him of being black. Passers realized that they did not have to be legally white in order to take part in the socio-legal privileges associated with whiteness. However, they did have to fiercely protect their reputational interests in being regarded as white. This shows that law and public debate have a reflexive impact on self-identity and lifestyle.

Social researchers Conyers and Kennedy (1963) cite the primary rationale for passing as the desire "to secure equal cultural, social, and recreational advantages" and the secondary rationale as the desire "to secure economic advantages" (p. 218). In other words, though the economic impulse for passing is significant, on its own it is inadequate for explaining why passers take the physical and psychological risks associated with crossing the color line. Johnson's (1912) Ex-Coloured Man, eloquently explicates this idea after witnessing the lynching of a black man:

> All the while I understood that it was not discouragement or fear or search for a larger field of action and opportunity that was driving me out of the Negro race. I knew that it was shame, unbearable shame. Shame at being identified with a people that could with impunity be treated worse than animals (p. 191).

Hence, the decision to pass is motivated by a deliberate rejection of identifying with a social group whose lived experiences are so painful that they become unbearable. Passing is a representational

strategy whose objective is to achieve a "singular I" and a "fate to be determined not by the ignorant, hate-filled intentions of a hostile world, but, to whatever degree humanly possible, by [one's] own resolve. Why accept life on any other terms?" (Roth, 2000, p. 121). Ultimately, passers wanted to be "human not raced," that is, they wanted the privilege of whiteness (Dyer, 1997, p. 4). Becoming white greatly increased the probability of controlling critical aspects of life rather than being an object of domination. It can be concluded that the decision to pass is triggered by a difference in perceived life chances on the other side of the color line.

LITERARY EXAMPLES OF HOW PASSERS SEVERED TIES.

Structuration Theory provides an account for severing kinship relations. Passers sever ties because they:

> can no longer count on the presence of a network of kin to provide [them] with trustworthy companions [kin may out or otherwise associate passers with blackness]; at the same time [they] are freed from the necessity to provide such companionship to relatives whose company [they] find unrewarding (Cassell, 1993, p. 31).

A structurational analysis of passing involves a reflexive conception of self-regulation and a recursive concept of social structure. The passer is an object and a subject of history, an effect and agent of power, and entangled in an identity crisis (Foucault, 1976; Giddens, 1991).

Taking a cue from Giddens (1991) and Bourdieu (1984), passing narratives argue that the family serves as a microcosm of larger national structure, in which individuals internalize and enact structural ideology on a personal level. Thus, (re)situating the passing phenomenon within the merged contexts of macro level social and legal structures with micro level family and communal relations illuminates the sociological and historically-specific behaviors produced as a result of and in response to its practice.

Roth (2000) and Hughes (1933) provide cogent examples of the drastic measures passers undertook to protect their interests

in whiteness in a familial context. Namely, severing ties with their families by way of the black mother. As aforementioned, it is the socio-legal status of one's mother, as white or black, which determined one's socio-legal status. From a structurational perspective, having a black mother constitutes one's place in terms of time-space and access to opportunity, particularly when passing means moving into a different spatial situation in which autonomous subjectivity is established (Giddens, 1991; de Certeau, 1984). Cutting ties with the family can be interpreted as the final stage of transition from the black to the white general world of social activity. From this perspective, passing is the decisive experience of a child's separation from the mother's body; a body that birthed the passer into a state of subjugation. Thus, the black woman as mother is revealed as the source of the passer's ontological insecurity. She:

> remains in last place within the color/economic hierarchy, her disadvantaged status reinforcing the already existing prejudice against her. She is always a fly in the buttermilk, imagined as the least likely candidate for cultural assimilation, just as her dark skin would seem to make it less likely that she could reproduce white children or assure them a secure white identity. It is this woman furthest from whiteness who is therefore imagined as being also furthest from the advantages that whiteness has to offer (Mullen, 1994, p. 73).

Sadly, it is through this experience, this severing of the metaphorical umbilical cord, that passers inaugurate the space for the "singular I." This step is usually catalyzed by the passer's intention to marry a white woman and create white children. Once the obstacle of black motherhood is eliminated, the male passer stands free to become the patriarch of his own white family (Mullen, 1994). Cutting ties with the black mother allows the passing child to be reborn into the dominant majority.

Roth (2000) describes the moment when his passing protagonist, humanities scholar Coleman Silk, constitutes his "singular I" as a murder:

> [M]urder the mother...that's what he saw he was

> doing to her...Murdering her on behalf of his exhilarating notion of freedom! It would have been much easier without her. But only through this test can he be the man he has chosen to be, unalterably separated from what he was handed at birth, free to struggle at being free like any human being would wish to be free. To get that from life, the alternate destiny, on one's own terms, he must do what must be done (p.138-139).

At this exact moment, when Coleman disowns his mother, he exchanges his place as a black man for a place as a man in the white world. His journey across the color line is complete and he can proceed to use and enjoy his white reputation.

Hughes's short story, "Passing," provides another example that illuminates the moral dimensions and rules of racial passing. Hughes's protagonist, Jack, writes:

> Dear Ma, I felt like a dog, passing you downtown last night and not speaking to you...It's funny I was the only one of the kids light enough to pass...I used to feel bad about it, too, then. But now I'm glad... I'm going to go ahead and get all I can out of life. Ma...I won't get caught in the mire of color again. Not me. I'm free, Ma, free! (Hughes, 1933, p. 51, 54)

In cutting ties with his black mother, Jack makes a final statement of his intent to live an autonomous and guilt-free white life. The tropes of freedom voiced by passers in these excerpts directly relate the rules of effective passing (i.e., acquiring cultural capital, cutting ties with racial/ethnic communities of origin) to destiny and necessity, agency and choice. These passers exercise agency as they choose to deny aspects of who they are in order to evolve into the free men they wish to become. These excerpts highlight the duality of structure: self-identities are social constructs and racially-defined institutions are constructs reinforced by individuals acting in line with their rules. The rules of effective passing as evidenced in the literature examined here entail abandonment of the African American family and community.

CONCLUSION

Acts of passing-as-white work both to knot and unravel the complicated ideological cords of race, identity, family, and democracy within the United States. A structurational analysis yields several observations: (1) that passing is a representational strategy and communication practice with rules and, consequently, appropriate and inappropriate language and behaviors that are affected by a racialized structure; (2) that passing engages the theorem of duality of structure. Recursive routine behaviors, such as occupying a seat on a passenger train in the case of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, constitute macro-level considerations at the same time that macro-level structures give specific meaning to routine behaviors; (3) that passing is a practice through which passers arrive at the sense a unified self-narrative, or "singular I," by taking on rather than openly resisting the dominant white structure; and (4) that passing can be read as a process of piecing together the fragments of a shattered self, which is a project of control guided by the perspectives and dilemmas of the individual in the modern age (Giddens, 1991; Johnson, 1912). Consequently, passing sheds light on how race and ethnicity can be performed and examined contemporaneously. As a present-day phenomenon, passing emphasizes the contradictions of self-identity based on essential definitions of race and the deployment of such contradictions for a variety of goals, interests, and desires.

In summation, a structurational analysis of passing provides a more nuanced understanding of race as a shifting social structure that defines life chances and, in the case of effective passers in the modern era, encourages denial of one's racial/ethnic cultural background and family. If the great problem of the twentieth century has been correctly identified by DuBois as "the problem of the color line," then passing, as explored here, exposes the arbitrary nature of that line both then and now. Passing is a practice through which subjects appropriate the structures of racial demarcation in order to redraw the color line and to experience the "singular I" as full American citizen (DuBois, 1903; Roth, 2000). Passing can also be a strategy through which passers simultaneously criticize a black-or-white-only structure and attempt to be more truly themselves (Kroger, 2003). A structurational analysis focusing on the early twentieth century passing in the context of juridical,

political and cultural policies that demanded racial segregation unearths and destabilizes the ideological and epistemological foundations of race. Moreover, it provides a framework for identifying contemporary institutions, environments and social situations that brew the cultural drama that abets passing; whether it is along the lines of race, gender, sexual orientation, class or any other powerful social force. Most poignantly, a structurational analysis of the passing phenomenon attests to the history of the color line as a powerful structure of difference and a formidable obstacle to those who continue to find themselves, by accidents of birth, on the less fortunate side.

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