

Allyson Hobbs, *A Chosen Exile: A History of Racial Passing in American Life*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014. 382 pp.

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Popularized in part during the Harlem Renaissance of the early to mid-twentieth century, the passing novel, including James Weldon Johnson's 1912 *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, Walter White's 1926 *Flight*, and Jessie Redmon Fauset's 1928 *Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral*, has received a wide range of scholarship. Elaine K. Ginsberg's 1996 study, *Passing and the Fictions of Identity* explores the politics of passing from the early experiences of African slaves through the present day while Gayle Wald's 2000 *Crossing the Line: Racial Passing in Twentieth-Century U.S. Literature and Culture* explores cinematic and literary representations of passing produced in the United States. Together, these works reveal the struggle of an African-American community marginalized and disenfranchised within an American society defined by its Jim Crow culture and racial hierarchy. Under these circumstances, racial passing is most often an attempt to obtain what Cheryl L. Harris terms "whiteness as property" as a result of the very limited opportunities and restricted social mobility afforded to blacks. Such scholarship provides insight into the historical function of passing and the ways in which the passing novel brings to the forefront of the American consciousness an increased awareness of its changing socio-racial landscape.

In her critical work, appropriately titled, *A Chosen Exile: A History of Racial Passing in American Life*, Allyson Hobbs seeks to add a new dimension to this existing conversation, her book is "an effort to recover those lives" lost in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as "countless African Americans [knowingly] passed as white, leaving behind families, friends, and communities without any available avenue for return" (4). Hobbs' work, a welcomed addition to the field, thus uses the lives of the everyday participants of passing to show not only what they gained from assuming their white identities—economic opportunity, social mobility, increased acceptance, etc.—but also what they lost along the way—the all-important connection to family

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and community that had long sustained the African-American people in the midst of cultural oppression. Because racialization exists all around us and “[r]ace is reproduced . . . at every level of society, including in our everyday lives”, the concerns that Hobbs advances in what proves a vital study of racial passing in American life will certainly remain, even despite the growing number of claims (which Hobbes disputes) that America has transitioned into a post-racial society (277).

Of the text’s five tightly defined chapters, perhaps Hobbs’ most important contribution to this growing field of scholarship is her examination of passing during the Harlem Renaissance era when the issue oftentimes took center stage in cultural discourse about miscegenation and race. Chapter four, “Searching for a New Soul in Harlem,” calls attention to the duality of the passing debate—what Hobbs describes as “[t]he delight of ‘fooling white folks’ and prevailing over an unjust racial regime” coupled with “the agony of losing one’s sense of self and one’s family”—a reality foregrounded in the era’s many passing works (176). Hobbs, however, adds a third dimension to the already widespread discussion of the era’s inquiry, asserting that one of the key themes of the Harlem Renaissance was its ability to unearth those previously untapped discussions of racial indeterminacy and the complicated issues it unveils about racial identity in a society that heavily stigmatizes race (177). Under this lens, works such as Fauset’s *Plum Bun* and Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand* are vital cultural texts, both tracing the experience of the tragic mulatta figure and her attempts to overcome the limitations impinged upon her since the days of the slave and the plantation myth. For Hobbs, such works proposed “to move beyond the double-barreled world of black and white” by introducing “a ‘new race’” not comprised of two warring bodies, as Du Bois’ notion of double consciousness suggests, but rather comprised of wholeness and plurality—a fusion of horizons and racial identities (177).

Extensive in its research, *A Chosen Exile* includes eighty-two pages of supplementary end notes and critical commentary that offer readers an in-depth perspective on the American racial landscape, the politics of passing (from a cultural and intra-personal lens), and the notion of loss so vital to a history still prevalent. Through discussing the tales of otherwise forgotten figures like Sam, a light-skinned and highly intelligent slave who craftily sells his darker-skinned master in order to escape the throes of slavery, Hobbs provides a more personalized portrait of racial passing, interweaving the very real experiences of American slaves—the product of rape and miscegenation—with the fictionalized tales constructed by black authors as a vehicle to highlight and critique the artificiality of race. At the same time, Hobbs provides discussion of the intersecting issues of class, going beyond scholarship past—studies that emphasize the real or the imagined but seldom both. In doing so, Hobbs

foregrounds the role of passing in the larger social debates about the stratification of an American society built on notions of equality, in the process acknowledging that, while “passing, as traditionally understood, has ‘passed out’ in the twenty-first century,” the ever-present racializing perpetuates the need to “negotiate,” in a variety of different ways, “the terrain of a racist society” (278).