Narratives of Passing
Africana Studies 345 / Comparative American Studies 345
Spring 2015
Tuesdays and Thursdays, 1:00 – 2:50 pm

Course Description
If individuals can undetectably pass through social boundaries meant to keep those individuals—and others categorized with them—out, then the act of passing calls into question the nature both of the boundaries and of the categories they delineate. This course uses passing as a paradigm to destabilize normative notions of race, ethnicity, gender, class, and sexuality and to illustrate how those phenomena are produced. In doing so, we will consider questions like: How does passing operate in the specific context of the United States of America? Is passing about pretending to be someone you are not, or is it about becoming someone different than you were before? What is the relationship between passing and assimilation? To answer those questions, we will analyze narrative literature and film about passing in the 20th-century U.S. alongside theoretical texts about identity, in order to understand relationships between inequality and privilege, performativity and representation, normativity and difference, and visible and invisible identities.

Course Objectives

Content Objectives
To analyze the nature of sociocultural phenomena like race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and class
To synthesize theoretical and narrative texts so that each illuminates what the other has to teach us about passing
To demonstrate your understanding of the theoretical concepts of identity and subjectivity in discussions and writing

Research and Writing Objectives
To articulate research questions, learn about and select methods to answer those questions, deploy those methods, adjust the questions and the methods as needed, and make meaning of the results
To develop a practice of making incremental progress on a research/writing project over the course of an entire term, which can help you manage your time in academic and non-academic contexts
To reflect upon your process in order to identify your own tendencies as researchers and writers, and to develop an understanding of the relationship(s) between research and writing
To synthesize and analyze a variety of primary and secondary sources in order to learn how to answer a research question by making meaning out of multiple kinds of materials
To demonstrate, through writing, your abilities to make a clear analytical argument, select appropriate evidence to support that argument, and sustain that argumentation throughout a piece of [academic] writing
Expectations
Our class is a teaching-learning community. That is not to say that I am exclusively the teacher, and you are exclusively the learners. Instead, we all come in with different experiences and various perspectives on the course material. Your presence and participation, both as a listener and as a vocal contributor, are necessary for everyone else to learn. It is not possible to build a community of trust and learning if the population of that community is always in flux. Because of that, I expect you to be at every class session.

The requirements in this course are designed so that you can finish them completely and on time, and arrive at each class session fully prepared to engage in productive conversation. We alternate books and films throughout the semester in order to give you time to complete the reading. For book-length texts, any part of the narrative is fair game throughout the week we’re discussing it, so it will serve you well to read the entire book by the start of class on the first day the text is listed in the schedule below. Doing so will improve the quality of your participation in discussions about the text and prevent you from experiencing what others in the community say as “spoilers.” In any case, you must have the book read in its entirety before the start of the second class session when we’ll be discussing the text.

Laptops, tablets, and cell phones are not allowed out in class.

Attendance
Attendance at every meeting of our class is absolutely mandatory.

That said, I know we all exist outside the classroom, and sometimes things happen to us that are outside our control. So if you need to be out one day because of illness, a health emergency, or a family emergency, get in touch with me about it in advance.

In addition, if you ever need to be absent, you must proactively make an appointment with me to discuss one-on-one in office hours the text relevant to the missed class session.

Participation
In-Class Participation (Required)
The success of our teaching-learning community depends on your willingness to actively and voluntarily share your analyses of the assigned readings. As a member of the community, you should take personal responsibility for contributing toward an exciting and productive conversation every class.

There are a number of reasons I’ve learned why some people don’t speak up in classroom discussions. But formulating thoughts based on something you’ve read, and putting those thoughts in conversation with others’ ideas, in the context of an ongoing conversation, is a necessary academic skill—just like essay-writing and test-taking. In order to demonstrate that skill you need to participate actively, meaningfully, and regularly.

Co-Facilitation (Voluntary)
In the second half of the term, students will have the opportunity to volunteer to co-facilitate. Individuals or pairs of co-facilitators will meet with me in my office at least two days in advance of the class session they’ll be co-facilitating. During that meeting, we will develop a lesson plan and then work together to facilitate that lesson plan on the day of class.

Assignments
Semester Research Project (Required)
There is one capstone assignment in this course: a research project of your own design that engages with the concept of passing. In order to maximize your engagement, the project should be in some way of use to you
and/or to a community in which you are invested. Your research could manifest in a term paper you might use as a writing sample for graduate school applications, a sample syllabus with associated assignment descriptions and lesson plans for a course you might teach, an exhibition of artistic works with artist’s statement that you could display publicly, a poster or paper presentation with an abstract you might submit for an academic conference, a chap book of poems you could self-publish, a narrative memoir or collection of short stories you might revise someday for publication, or something else entirely. In any case, your proposal for the research project will include the questions your research is aimed at answering about passing and identity; the methods you think will best serve you in answering those questions; the rationale for why those methods are the most effective ones you could choose for this project; and a list of sources you will use in completing the project. Your research project will be due in stages, as listed below. Each stage will include a written reflective statement in which you consider how you have met the objectives of the assignment and how you have built and improved upon your work from the previous stage. **Research assignments are each due in a period of one academic week, no later than 5:00 pm on the Friday of that week (with the exception of the final).**

1. Research Proposal due Monday, February 16 – Friday, February 20
2. Annotated Bibliography due Monday, March 2, 2015 – Friday, March 6, 2015
3. Research Proposal Revision due Monday, March 16 – Friday, March 20
5. Full Draft of Research Project due Monday, April 27 – Friday, May 1
6. Final Revised Research Project due Saturday, May 16 (by 11:00 am)

**Daily Writing (Required)**
This serves as an alternative to typical academic writing practices, in which you often think and write about the subject matter of a major assignment only right before that assignment is due. In this course, you will instead write daily to make steady, incremental progress toward completing your research project. Your daily writing should serve two primary functions: 1) to produce writing that you will revise into your semester capstone, and 2) to reflect upon, process, or analyze course texts before (or after) class discussions. I may at times give you prompts for particular things to produce, and I may at other times indicate that you need to post what you’ve written. Whether or not I do, you should write for at least 15 minutes at a time, any five days out of each week. **Your daily writing practice begins immediately at the beginning of the semester.**

**Accountability Group (Required)**
Each of you will be a member of a small group that will serve as a source of accountability to facilitate you completing your daily writing. You will be in the same group for the whole semester. The function of this group, in addition to serving as a more intimate community within our class, is to set goals for the type and amount of daily writing you will do, check in about whether and how you completed that writing in the time allotted, and provide suggestions and support for how to meet your goals each week. Your primary responsibilities are to attend a weekly accountability group meeting, post your progress daily through your personalized tracking form on Google Drive, and write comments of encouragement on the daily tracking forms of the other members of your group. You may also choose to use the group as a space to continue or build upon class discussions, and to peer-review your research assignments. I will assign the groups. Pablo, our Writing Associate, and I will split up the groups so that we will each serve as a coach for half the class. **Each group will meet with its coach once a week for the length of the entire term.**

**A Note from Our Writing Associate**
Hello everyone. My name is Pablo Cerdera, and I’m a fourth year CAS major and a GSFS and Art History minor. I love dogs, and I grew up just north of Philadelphia. I will be a fellow learner in this class as well as your Writing Associate. I took this course a year ago, but I will be attending every class session and
participating in the class alongside you. I am eager to see all of the insights that can be produced from the texts of this class based on the different sets of knowledge and experiences each of you brings, and I can’t wait to see what the course develops into this semester.

In addition to participating in class, I will be working with half of you in your weekly accountability group meetings to help keep all of us (including myself) on track with our long-term and short-term research and writing goals. I am also available to all of you at any stage in the writing process to meet one-on-one or in groups to workshop, peer-edit, and otherwise work with you on your research and writing.

I will not have regularly scheduled office hours this semester (in the past they have tended to be pretty lonely), but I am always happy to meet! Please feel free to contact me either by email (pcerdera@oberlin.edu), phone (215-688-2853), or in person before or after class to schedule a meeting time. In general, if you can schedule a meeting a few days in advance that is best, but I will always do what I can to meet with you if you need to.

I am deeply interested and invested in the material of this course, so I am happy to meet to talk about it even if you haven’t written anything, or if you want to work through the concepts or discuss your experience in the class. I am also more than happy to be the last set of eyes to work through your final draft, or to do anything before that stage! I’m looking forward to working with you all this semester!

**Office Hours**

Office hours are an integral part of this course. They are times when you can ask for help with concepts from readings or discussions that you don’t quite get, seek guidance in advance of turning in graded assignments, talk to me about future interests of yours that may be relevant to the course (or to literature or cultural studies in general), and give me a chance to get to know you and your individual style and needs better. Because of the individualized nature of your semester research project, you are required to attend office hours to discuss ideas, check in about your progress, and receive feedback various times this semester—once in the first few weeks of the semester for an introductory meeting, once at mid-semester to discuss your progress in the course, and once after each research assignment submission to get feedback before the next project phase.

**Evaluation**

We’ll talk about grading on the first day of class. These are the basic guidelines:

You earn an **A** or **A-** if you do everything you are supposed to do and do it outstandingly.

You earn a **B+, B, or B-** if you do everything you are supposed to do and do it well.

You earn a **C+, C, or C-** if you do the bare minimum of everything you are supposed to do.

You earn a **D+, D, or D-** if you do not do everything you are supposed to do.

You earn an **F** if you do not do most or any of what you are supposed to do.

**Plagiarism**

I take plagiarism very seriously. I have also found that it is not always clear to students what constitutes plagiarism. To clarify that, you should take this very helpful quiz at Indiana University’s website: [http://www.indiana.edu/~tedfrick/plagiarism/index2.html](http://www.indiana.edu/~tedfrick/plagiarism/index2.html). To familiarize yourself with Oberlin’s Honor Code, which has bearing on plagiarism and other issues of academic integrity, you should go to: [http://new.oberlin.edu/students/policies/honor](http://new.oberlin.edu/students/policies/honor). An incident of plagiarism initiates procedures that no one wants to go through—not you, not me, not the administrators. So avoid all that by using the resources above to understand what plagiarism is and, most importantly, by giving yourself time to come to me for help if you need it, well in advance of when an assignment is due.
Disabilities
If you need accommodations for any sort of physical, psychiatric, or learning disability, please talk to me about it the first time we meet during office hours. Also, I encourage you to contact the Office of Disability Services in Peters G-27/G-28 (440.775.5588 or http://new.oberlin.edu/office/disability-services/), if you have not already done so. The office provides accommodation plans, documentation, and support for students who are blind, deaf, hard of hearing, or who have AD(H)D, Autism, Asperger’s Syndrome, head injury or Traumatic Brain Injury, learning disabilities, orthopedic or mobility disorders, or psychological disorders. If something unforeseen happens during the semester—like injury, debilitating illness, or clinical depression—please let me know so that we can discuss arrangements for appropriate accommodations. If you experience a medical emergency that interferes with any work for our class, you should contact your class dean or the Dean of Studies Office in Peters 205 (440.775.8540 or http://new.oberlin.edu/office/dean-of-studies/index.dot).

Texts
Books
Nella Larsen, Passing (1929) – 103 pages
John Howard Griffin, Black Like Me (1976) – 193 pages
Danzy Senna, Caucasia (1998) – 432 pages
Janet Mock, Redefining Realness (2014) – 120 pages
Brian Ascalon Roley, American Son (2001) – 256 pages

The above books are available for purchase at the Oberlin Bookstore. The books are also available to borrow through OhioLink or Interlibrary Loan (http://www.oberlin.edu/library/books.html).

Films
Imitation of Life (1934) – 111 minutes
Gentleman’s Agreement (1947) – 118 minutes
The Spook Who Sat By the Door (1973) – 102 minutes
Six Degrees of Separation (1993) – 112 minutes

Secondary Texts
Articles, essays, and book chapters listed in the schedule below are available on our course Blackboard site.

Schedule

Week 2: Intersectionality and Passing

Tuesday, February 10
Read Before Class
Passing.

Thursday, February 12
Read Before Class
Week 3: Race and ‘Passing Up’

RESEARCH ASSIGNMENT DUE

Monday, February 16 – Friday, February 20
Research Proposal Due No Later Than 5:00 pm on Blackboard

Tuesday, February 17
View In Class

Thursday, February 19
Read Before Class

View In Class
Imitation of Life (1934).

Week 4: Race and ‘Passing Down’

Tuesday, February 24
Read Before Class

Thursday, February 26
Read Before Class
Black Like Me.

Week 5: Race and ‘Passing Down’

RESEARCH ASSIGNMENT DUE

Monday, March 2 – Friday, March 6
Annotated Bibliography Due No Later Than 5:00 pm on Blackboard

Tuesday, March 3
Read Before Class
Black Like Me.

Thursday, March 5
Read Before Class

Week 6: Religion, Ethnicity, and ‘Passing Down’

Tuesday, March 10
View In Class
Gentleman’s Agreement.

Thursday, March 12
Read Before Class

View In Class
Gentleman’s Agreement.
Week 7: Religion, Ethnicity, and ‘Passing Up’
RESEARCH ASSIGNMENT DUE

Monday, March 16 – Friday, March 20

Research Proposal Revision Due No Later Than 5:00 pm on Blackboard

Tuesday, March 17
Read Before Class

The Human Stain.

Thursday, March 19
Read Before Class

The Human Stain.

Week 8: Spring Break
NO CLASSES

Week 9: Political Passing

Tuesday, March 30
View In Class

The Spook Who Sat By the Door.

Thursday, April 1
Read Before Class


Week 10: Forced Passing
RESEARCH ASSIGNMENT DUE

Monday, April 5 – Friday, April 9

Analytical Source Synthesis Paper Due No Later Than 5:00 pm on Blackboard

Tuesday, April 6
Read Before Class

Caucasia.

Thursday, April 8
Read Before Class

Caucasia.

Week 11: Class and Passing

Tuesday, April 13
View In Class

Six Degrees of Separation.

Thursday, April 15
Read Before Class


Week 12: Gender, Sexuality, and Passing

Tuesday, April 20
Read Before Class

Redefining Realness.

Thursday, April 22
Read Before Class

Redefining Realness.
Week 13: Immigration, Ethnicity, and Passing
RESEARCH ASSIGNMENT DUE

Monday, April 27 – Friday, May 1
Research Project Draft Due No Later Than 5:00 pm on Blackboard

Tuesday, April 28
Read Before Class
American Son.

Thursday, April 30
Read Before Class
American Son.

Week 14: Passing Research

Tuesday, May 5
Student Research Presentations
In Class

Thursday, May 7
Student Research Presentations
In Class

Final Exam Period
RESEARCH ASSIGNMENT DUE

Saturday, May 16
Final Research Project Due on Blackboard No Later Than 11:00 am

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