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# The Sigh of Triple Consciousness: Blacks Who Blurred the Color Line in Films from the 1930s through the 1950s

Audrey Phillips

*The Graduate Center, City University of New York*

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THE SIGH OF TRIPLE CONSCIOUSNESS:  
BLACKS WHO BLURRED THE COLOR LINE IN FILMS FROM  
THE 1930S THROUGH THE 1950S

By

Audrey Phillips

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

2019

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ii

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This manuscript has been read and accepted by the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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Date

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Julia Wrigley

Thesis Advisor

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Date

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Elizabeth Macaulay-Lewis

Executive Officer

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

## ABSTRACT

### THE SIGH OF TRIPLE CONSCIOUSNESS: BLACKS WHO BLURRED THE COLOR LINE IN FILMS FROM THE 1930S THROUGH THE 1950S

By

Audrey Phillips

Advisor: Julia Wrigley

This thesis will identify an over looked subset of racial identity as seen through film narratives from the 1930's through the 1950's pre-Civil Rights era. The subcategory of racial identity is the necessity of passing for Black people then identified as Negro. The primary film narratives include *Veiled Aristocrats* (1932), *Lost Boundaries* (1949), *Pinky* (1949) and *Imitation of Life* (1959). These images will deploy the trope of passing as a racialized historical image. These films depict the pain and anguish Passers endured while escaping their racial identity. Through these stories we identify, sympathize and understand the needs of Black people known as Passers, who elected a chosen exile in order to live in a world which offered opportunity to the White race. These films will also portray the social betrayal forced upon Black people for the need of survival. These films show the desperation for equality as seen through a new genre of film trail blazers, all of whom understood the need to expose this hidden truth. These films also demonstrate the imperativeness to adjust in all aspects of their lives including physical, mental, emotional and psychological. This constant demand for interchange puts tremendous pressure on the psyche of Passers.

Through the cover of passing one life was denied while another was born, allowing Blacks to inconspicuously wear a mask of survival. This strategy was based on the prejudice of America, which judged people by the color of their skin and not the content of their character. The study of passing, which is an identified classification of being Black, is useful in courses about race and identity. Educators dealing with themes of race and identity in their classes would greatly benefit by incorporating these films on racial passing as part of their lessons. They will help students to better understand the connection between race and identity in American society, especially for those living under the yoke of government supported racism.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I dedicate this thesis to my family. My father, the late James Phillips Jr., and my sister the late Kim Phillips. It is my sincere hope that somewhere beyond the sky they are rejoicing with me. I thank my mother, who has always been my rock, for understanding when it got hard and never allowing me to waver; my sister Sonji, who did everything but let me fail; my husband Derrick, who encouraged me throughout my years of study; and my son Jamere, who always had my back. I love you all and thank you from the bottom of my heart.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	iv
Introduction.....	1
The Roots of Passing.....	6
The Impetus to Pass.....	8
Films Featuring Characters Who Passed.....	12
<i>Veiled Aristocrats</i> , 1932, Oscar Micheaux.....	13
<i>Figure 1...</i> John and Rena Walden (Micheaux Film Corporation (1932)).....	13
<i>Pinky</i> , 1949, Elia Kazan.....	19
<i>Figure 2...</i> <i>Pinky</i> with Ms. Em (Twentieth Century Fox, 1949).....	22
<i>Lost Boundaries</i> , 1949, Alfred Werker.....	24
<i>Figure 3...</i> Howard with Lt. Dixie Thompson. (Film Classics, 1949).....	27
<i>Figure 4...</i> The Original family from <i>Lost Boundaries</i> , Albert Johnston & Family.....	29
Kitty, NH. “‘Lost Boundaries’ and Dr.Johnston's Brave Choices.” <i>Yankee Skeptic</i> , 5 Feb. 2019, yankeeskeptic.com/2019/02/04/lost-boundaries-and-dr-johnstons-brave- choices/	
<i>Imitation of Life</i> , 1959, Douglas Sirk.....	31
<i>Figure 5...</i> Annie (Juanita Moore), Young Sarah Jane (Karin Dicker), Young Susie (Terry Burnham), Lora (Lana Turner) (Universal International Universal Pictures 1959).....	31
Factual Cases of Racial Passing.....	36
Literature Which Illustrates the Lives of Passers.....	38



Conclusion.....45  
Works Cited.....49

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: John and Rena Walden (Micheaux Film Corporation 1932).....	13
Figure 2: Pinky with Ms. Em (Twentieth Century Fox, 1949).....	22
Figure 3: Howard with Lt. Dixie Thompson. (Film Classics, 1949).....	27
Figure 4: The Original family from <i>Lost Boundaries</i> , Albert Johnston & Family.....	29
Kitty, NH. “‘Lost Boundaries’ and Dr.Johnston's Brave Choices.” <i>Yankee Skeptic</i> , 5 Feb.	
2019, yankeeskeptic.com/2019/02/04/lost-boundaries-and-dr-johnstons-brave-choices/	
Figure 5: Annie (Juanita Moore), Young Sarah Jane (Karin Dicker), Young Susie (Terry Burnham), Lora (Lana Turner) (Universal International Universal Pictures 1959).....	31

## Introduction

In the 1930s through the 1950s, Hollywood scriptwriters began to expose the clandestine society of Blacks, including, specifically Blacks called Passers who were able to cross the color line into White America and into the world. Films like Oscar Micheaux's *Veiled Aristocrats* (1932), Douglas Sirk's *Imitation of Life* (1959), Elia Kazan's *Pinky* (1949), and Alfred Werker's *Lost Boundaries* (1949), all delve into the hidden world of passing. Filmmakers exposed Americans to the psychological and emotional torment that Passers endured in stepping into the life of White America. Passers treaded backward into the mindset of an escaped slave, always living in fear and hiding in plain sight. Passers lived under the principle of "invisible Blackness," and having to be unceasingly vigilant caused them to be exceedingly paranoid. This obsession is based on the demand to be ready to regulate their behavior, to, under no circumstances, be exposed. These films demonstrate the imperative to adjust in all aspects of their lives, including physical, mental, emotional and psychological. This constant demand for interchange puts tremendous pressure on the psyche of Passers.

Governed by the concept of the One Drop Rule, during the 1930s through the 1950s, Passers existed in a constant masquerade of being a Black American, a Black American as perceived by White Americans, and a Black American who lives under the deception of being a White American. This shift in identity for the sake of survival forms a Triple Consciousness in Passers, thus creating the theory of Triple Consciousness.

Triple Consciousness expands upon W.E.B. Du Bois's "Double Consciousness" theory. In *The Souls of Black Folks* (1903) Du Bois explains that because Black Americans live in an oppressive and racist society, they are compelled to live as two people. One life is the family life at

home and within the Black community. Home is where they are secure and free to be themselves. The other life is the one in which they live among White people. Here they must be careful. Though they are no longer slaves, they are still far from free. They must know their “place” in a civilized society. Accordingly, they behave in a manner that signals deference to the White race which includes mannerism, speech, and body language. Jim Crow laws ensured that Black and White Americans knew that White Americans still held power over Black Americans in the Deep South United States. Jim Crow laws ensured that if the actions, mannerisms or respect that White Americans felt was due from Blacks, was less than what was purported from slaves, they would severely be punished, in a variety of ways, such as being jailed, suffering physical violence (which included mental and emotional torment of the person and their loved ones) or even death. Du Bois coined this existence as “Twoness,” a mode of survival formed by Black Americans to survive living in an oppressive society.

Du Bois gives a brilliant and succinct label to a complicated existence, which inevitably gives rise to the internal psychological trauma of Blacks. Similarly, the Black novelist Richard Wright elaborated on the experience of “Twoness” in his essay “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow: An Autobiographical Sketch” (1903), in which Wright gives personal accounts of the many times he had to adjust his behavior in order to avoid a threat to his person, or worse, his life. One such account is the following:

Here my Jim Crow education assumed quite a different form. It was no longer brutally cruel, but subtly cruel. Here I learned to lie, to steal, to dissemble. I learned to play that dual role which every Negro must play if he wants to eat and live...There were many times when I had to exercise a great deal of ingenuity to keep out of trouble. It is a southern custom that all men must take off their hats when they enter an elevator. And especially did this apply to us Blacks with rigid

force. One day I stepped into an elevator with my arms full of packages. I was forced to ride with my hat on. Two White men stared at me coldly. Then one of them very kindly lifted my hat and placed it upon my armful of packages. Now the most accepted response for a Negro to make under such circumstances is to look at the White man out of the corner of his eye and grin. To have said: "Thank You!" would have made the White man think that you thought you were receiving from him a personal service. For such an act I have seen Negroes take a blow in the mouth. Finding the first alternative distasteful, and the second dangerous, I hit upon an acceptable course of action which fell safely between these two poles. I immediately-no sooner than my hat was lifted-pretended that my packages were about to spill and appeared deeply distressed with keeping them in my arms. In this fashion, I evaded having to acknowledge his service, and, in spite of adverse circumstances, salvaged a thin shred of personal pride. (Wright, *Children* 13-15)

What is most striking and chilling about Wright's account is the palpable threat of violence that is just beneath the surface and could come to the forefront for something as minor as a look or a momentary forgetting of a social nicety. The only way to survive these moments was to do what White Americans expected of Black Americans, which was to take on a subservient persona to make it clear to White Americans that they were in power. The sobering aspect of this account by Wright is that he describes one of the countless moments Black Americans experienced palpable threats every time they went out in public. The psychological sadism of these experiences reinforced their sense of powerlessness, not to mention serving as a warning never to forget their place concerning White Americans. One can only guess the toll this must have taken on the minds and bodies of Black Americans living in this kind of existence or "Twoness."

According to Du Bois, this "Twoness" gives rise to a state of consciousness he calls Double

Consciousness. Du Bois elaborates on this in the following:

It is a peculiar sensation, this Double Consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife, this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging, he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of White Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face. (Du Bois 8-9).

For Black Americans of this time, Double Consciousness comes from a heightened state of awareness that they are living in a country where they are unwanted and have no power. This awareness comes in the constant denial of opportunities for social mobility, including the little to no employment offered by racist business owners, to the deplorable conditions in which their children are given a so-called public education. The reminders of marginalization came from the countless number of lynchings that were ignored (or even encouraged) by law enforcement to the everyday experience of legalized segregation among White Americans in public places. Despite all of this, they were still Americans and therein lay the indignity of it all; Black Americans were forced to watch another group of Americans live well, and the only difference between them and

the other group was the color of their skin. There is no way any individual can live under these circumstances and be psychologically and emotionally at peace. Black Americans were always struggling with the rules of society. They could neither express their frustrations, nor undo the injustices inflicted upon them. Also, there was a constant sense of self-betrayal in accepting the indignities of a racist society without defending oneself. Thus, there was an internal struggle. This “dual” existence or Double Consciousness defined the lives of Black Americans living in Jim Crow America.

In the case of Passers or Black Americans who possessed light skin and European features, there was another option. They could take on the persona of a White American and live as one, to escape the miserable existence of Black Americans in general. It was not an easy choice. For one, it was illegal. Besides, it did not free them from having to adjust or modify their behavior in the presence of White and Black Americans by using their well-learned Jim Crow lessons and by “acting White.” Lastly, they had to take on the added burden of behaving as if they were White since birth in the company of Black Americans. As Passers, they had three identities: a Black American, a White American and a Black person hiding his or her racial identity from everyone. The internal turmoil caused by “acting” to appease White Americans as described by Du Bois was still there for Passers, but it was coupled with the shame, guilt, and pain of "acting" like a White American in the presence of Black Americans. In addition, the tremendous fear of exposure by White or Black Americans was with them at all times.

Passers possessed the Double Consciousness described by Du Bois, but their unique situation gave rise to another state of consciousness, Triple Consciousness, that came from hiding their true selves from both White and Black Americans. The constant shifting of identities created a Triple Consciousness in Passers. *Imitation of Life*, *Pinky*, *Veiled Aristocrats* and *Lost Boundaries* all deal with characters who are Black Americans who choose to create a White persona to have the

advantages that are enjoyed by White Americans. Each film is a unique story, in which a protagonist is in the midst of passing is beginning his or her journey of passing, or has decided to stop passing. The films all depict the struggles and turmoil experienced by racial Passers. In each of the films, an acknowledgment of Triple Consciousness is appreciable. It is seen through a simple gesture, like a sigh. The movies show directly, as well as imply, that Passers live as three people in one body. The directors of these films show that although Passers attain better lifestyles and opportunities than dark-skinned Americans, they live chaotic, fragmented lives caused by the psychological, emotional strain and stress of forming and maintaining a Triple Consciousness. Though the directors of these films did not intend to show the Triple Consciousness of Passers, they do confirm the different existence from the perspective of Passers, and in doing so, Du Bois's theory of Double Consciousness is expanded by showing the presence of a Triple Consciousness as viewed through these films.

### **The Roots of Passing**

The Transatlantic Slave Trade took place from the 16<sup>th</sup> through the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Slaves were kidnapped and exported along the Atlantic Ocean slave route. Once bought to the Americas they were sold on auction blocks like chattel. Ownership of slaves was found among privileged White individuals. It was illegal for a slave to learn to read and write or to have any form of advancement or education of any kind; ironically, however, slave masters utilized slaves as mechanics, Blacksmiths, drivers, carpenters, and other skilled tradespeople. In the Deep South, masters used slaves to help take care of the crops grown on the large plantations or in a domesticated field. White farmers, who previously were considered lower level farm workers, now had someone to be superior to, all based on phenotype.



In the late 1600s, slave codes were established. They were laws that defined slaves as property and not people, allowing slave masters carte blanche on the treatment of slaves. Slaves lived under the tyranny of the slave masters. To keep slaves in their "place," they were forbidden to have any sense of community. Slaves who were removed from their homes and had to adjust to a new land were unable to form a cooperative society among themselves in the presence of slave owners. However, in secret, they could affirm community in underground or hidden culture. To escape the cruel and inhumane punishment, they continuously hid their feelings and emotions. In addition to being sold and separated from their families and communities, a slave could be sold as punishment for the slightest infringement. Slaves became subservient as a means of survival; this natural survival technique has continued to be utilized by Blacks throughout time. Slaves constantly lived in fear for their lives.

Slave masters not only dehumanized slaves, they viciously brutalized the slave women with their sexual prowess. Many slave owners procreated with their slaves. From this procreation, children were born with a combination of Black and White features, and they were known as octoroons, mulattos, or quadroons. In later years, these people were described as biracial or mixed race. For some, the European or White features dominated over the Black features. Some of these children could be and were often mistaken for being exclusively European/ White children. The appearance of being "White" became an asset for many mixed breed slaves. A slave with more dominant White features sold for more than a slave with a darker complexion and Black features. On the plantation, some of these mulatto children were favored and treated better than the darker complexion slaves. Alternately, there were times when the mistress of the house treated the children of the slave master harshly and in times of deep despair would kill the offspring of her husband's affair.

## The Impetus to Pass

The cruelty with which Blacks had to live weighed heavily on Passers' minds, souls and psyches. They were keenly aware of the torturous conditions under which Blacks were forced to live, Passers are a part of this. Black history is a Passer's history. No matter how far they went to deceive themselves and others, the truth is Black history is the history of people who pass. Without this history, the need for transition would not exist. Thus, through the history of Black people, Passers have found themselves with no other choice but to free themselves from this cruelty and re-embodiment themselves anew.

Many reasons led up to Blacks deciding to pass for White. Life for Black Americans was harsh. So much so, that reconstructing their identity was the only alternative many of them believed they had. To continue to live the life of a citizen who is valued less than a dog was no longer an option. In *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), James Weldon Johnson writes:

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 a shame, unbearable shame. Shame at being identified with a people that could with impunity be treated worse than animals. (191)

It is this idealization that Passers feel they have no option but to pass. Passers have developed an internalized racism that they are unable to escape. For them, family members no longer exist, so they are estranged from everything familiar. They always live in fear of being found out and suffering the repercussions that will follow if their secret is exposed. They live the lives of thieves, stealing an identity that does not belong to them from a race that doesn't want them.

Phenotype and other characteristics allowed Passers to cross over; however, there were those who opted not to. They preferred to be middle-class Black citizens in the Black community than to be lower-class White people in the White community. Walter White was such a man. He maintained pride in his race. In his article, “Why I Remain a Negro,” White speaks to keeping his Blackness and its importance. White states:

I am not White. There is nothing within my mind and heart which tempts me to think I am. Yet I realize acutely that the only characteristic which matters to either the White or the colored race—the appearance of Whiteness—is mine. White is the rejection of all color; Black is the absorption of every shade. There is magic in White skin; there is tragedy, loneliness, exile, in Black skin. Why then do I insist that I am a Negro when nothing compels me to do so but myself? (13)

Though White knows the reasons that Blacks would disappear, he speaks of the pride of his people. He knows that to pass, he has to give up himself and all that he believes in and supports. White also does not allow others to place him in the world of White people. He adamantly makes it known that he is a Black man.

After the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation that was to end slavery in the south, Blacks continuously found themselves fighting for equality and fairness under the law. For Blacks, a real opportunity or chance at freedom did not appear until the 1960s with the rise of the civil rights movement. Due to this hardship and perverse treatment of American Blacks, many Blacks found themselves desperate and alone. To be treated fairly, some Blacks felt they had no choice but to change themselves drastically.

This mistreatment of Blacks caused many organizations to arise. The National Alliance for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was established in 1909, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) was instituted in 1957, the Student Non-Violent Coordinating

Committee (SNCC) was established in the 1960s, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Porters (BSCP) was created in 1925 and the United States Commission on Civil Rights (USCCR) established in 1967, to name a few. All of these organizations arose to assist and protect the rights of people of color and to create equality for them.

In addition to these organizations, many Black leaders began to emerge, including the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Medgar Evers, A. Phillip Randolph, and Adam Clayton Powell Jr. to name a few. They all followed in the steps of other Black leaders like Benjamin Banneker, Frederick Douglass, and W.E.B. Dubois. All of these leaders also had one common goal in mind, equal rights for all.

The fight and necessity for equality are indissoluble. Black leaders held many protests, sit-ins, marches, and demonstrations. Of these protests, those, which included Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. became very prominent. Exposure to America's civil unrest gained the attention of the world. The civil rights protests that were going on in the south were televised for the world to see. King rallied with other Black leaders for the infamous Montgomery Bus Boycott (1955), March on Selma (1965) and March on Washington (1963) to name a few. In the case of Rosa Parks, her action of sitting in the White's only section of a city bus led to the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955-1956. Planned protests began in the safest place for Blacks to meet, the church. The march on Selma, Alabama was vital. This protest helped secure Blacks the right to vote. Racial demonstrations grew and became ever more widespread. Black protesters began to gain support from the elementary schools, high schools and colleges. Students from all levels of schooling joined in the civil rights movement. Black people from young to old all wanted to be a part of the struggle for equality and freedom for Black people.

Lawsuits were filed to help desegregate schools like in the cases of Brown v. Board of Education and the desegregation of Little Rock Central High School and the integration of

Mississippi universities. Sit-ins and freedom rides were conducted. Movements and campaigns were formed. Boycotts of buses, stores, and companies were organized. Active voter registration campaigns arose in addition to riots which occurred in response to police abuse of Black residents or other provocations. Blacks became skilled on how to act and respond in these protests, marches and impending arrests. For Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr and his supporters, the movement was to be non-violent. However, lives were lost, and people were getting hurt. This caused anger among the Black community. The treatment of Blacks became harsher and made life a struggle. Their ultimate goal was to fight non-violently and to achieve treatment equal to that of Whites. Black leaders and movements arose that challenged this non-violent way of thinking. Leaders like Malcolm X and movements like the Black Panther Party emerged with the essence of “Black Power,” an “eye for an eye,” and “by any means necessary” mantra.

The famous Plessy v Ferguson case was decided by the Supreme Court in 1896 and enshrined the “separate but equal” doctrine. Homer Plessy was a man who was born of Creole and Black parents and was seven-eighths white. Plessy’s phenotype was that of a White man. Plessy was a member of a Citizens Committee that organized a deliberate challenge to segregation laws. In an arranged protest by the Citizens Committee of New Orleans, Plessy was recruited to violate Louisiana’s Separate Car Act of 1890. He was White enough to get into a car reserved for Whites and Black enough to be arrested for doing so. Under Louisiana law, he was considered legally Black due to the “one drop rule.” According to this “rule”, if an individual, regardless of his appearance, has one drop of Black blood, he is considered a Black person. F. James Davis, the author of *Who Is Black: One Nation’s Definition*, states:

...this [one –drop] definition of who is Black was crucial to maintaining the social system of White domination in which widespread miscegenation, not racial purity, prevailed. White womanhood was the highly charged emotional symbol, but the

system protected White economic, political, legal, education and other institutional advantages for Whites...American slave owners wanted to keep all racially mixed children born to slave women under their control, for economic and sexual gains...It was intolerable for White women to have mixed children, so the one-drop rule favored the sexual freedom of White males, protecting the double standard of sexual morality as well as slavery...By defining all mixed children as Black and compelling them to live in the Black community, the rule made possible the incredible myth among Whites that miscegenation had not occurred, that the races had been kept pure in the South. (qtd in Piper 15)

From the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the One Drop Rule secured White men from being accountable for the mixed-race children that they bore with Black slave women. These Blacks, though their appearance may have been more White than Black, were subjugated to the same treatment as their Black counterparts. Their mixed genotype did not allow them freedom. However, being the children of the slave masters may have caused them to gain favor among the father but hatred from the mistress, or jealousy from other slaves of the house. This created even more hostility for the slave mother who may have had a forced continuous relationship with the slave master.

### **Films Featuring Characters Who “Passed”**

Several notable films depicted the social forces that led some Blacks with White phenotypes to decide to pass in White society and the emotional stresses and complications this created for them. These films provide a window into a highly segregated society where there was no mixing across racial lines and where the “one drop rule” governed racial identity for legal and

social purposes. These circumstances meant that Blacks who wanted to pass had to abandon their original families, friends, and social worlds and commit completely to the fraught effort to pass in White society. This led to the tensions created by Triple Consciousness.

**Veiled Aristocrats, 1932, Oscar Micheaux**



Fig. 1. John and Rena Walden in *Veiled Aristocrats*, directed by Oscar Micheaux (1932).

An all-Black audience first viewed the all-Black cast of Oscar Micheaux's *Veiled Aristocrats* in 1932. The movie is based on the novel *The House Behind the Cedars* written by Charles W. Chesnutt (1900). Oscar Micheaux is known as the first Black feature filmmaker of race films during the silent movie era and the era of sound introduction. Micheaux, an author and director, produced over 44 films. His film company was titled Micheaux Film Corporation from 1918-1940. Race movies arose from discrimination. The creation of race films was for the sole purpose of showing them to Black audiences. Blacks viewed the films as having a real meaning to them. For the first time in history, an aspect of the Black experience was portrayed for the world which had never been disclosed. According to Thomas Cripps (1993), *In Making Movies Black:*

Race movies had not merely risen out of segregation; they had been anointed by it and, after a fashion, prospered from it. At their best, they had provided Black audiences with a shock of recognition of their plight and put forth group morale that called upon African Americans to strive for, as one character says, 'the finer things.' At their worst, they fed off Black misfortune rather than dealt with it...so that the subsurface play of the text allowed the inference that Blacks had only themselves to blame for the hand they had been dealt. (126)

Hence, the assumption can be made that White spectators viewed the films merely as entertainment pieces. Race films were screened at designated race theaters in Black neighborhoods. These films ran from the end of 1915 through the early 1950s. During this period, approximately 500 race films were produced, but today only 100 remain, mainly because they were cast and produced outside of the Hollywood film industry.

*Veiled Aristocrats* is considered one of the first race films created by Oscar Micheaux. This film deals with the issue of passing in America. *Veiled Aristocrats* begins with one of the main characters, John Walden, returning to his childhood home. John Walden, who can pass, left his family when he was young. John moves away and joins the White community, later becoming a prominent doctor. He comes back to visit his family 20 years later and realizes that his younger sister Rena, is now grown and convinces his mother that since his sister possesses the same characteristics as he does, she should be given the equal opportunity offered him (see fig. 1).

John's proposition to his mother will allow Rena the opportunity for success. By moving to John's town, Rena can now also masquerade as White, with the privileges of White America. For Rena, this is no easy task. She has met a Black man, Frank Fowler, and fallen in love. Opportunity and race are not high on the list of priorities for young Rena; however, she is willing to do whatever her mother and brother recommend. W.E.B. Du Bois states that all Blacks have Double



Consciousness, which is the internal conflict possessed by being in an oppressive society.

Alternatively, this can be viewed in Du Bois theory of Double Consciousness, “constantly looking at oneself through the eyes” (Du Bois 8) of a racist society. Rena has Double Consciousness, the consciousness of self and the consciousness of how Whites view Blacks. To survive in a White society, she forms a Triple Consciousness, as she must now see herself through the eyes of a Black person who camouflages herself as White. This third consciousness requires Passers to see Blacks the same way that Whites do. Triple Consciousness can be temporary or permanent depending on how long the situation remains or, in this case, on how long the person chooses to pass. This consciousness is not innate but taught by the society which is the oppressor. That society dictates naively that you are one of them, and therefore should see Blacks the way they do. Once a Passer realizes that this is a means of survival, the consciousness falls in place. The poet Langston Hughes explains Triple Consciousness in his short story “Passing” in his 1934 collection *The Ways of White Folks*:

Since I've begun to pass for White, nobody has ever doubted that I am a White man. Where I work, the boss is a southerner and is always cussing out Negroes in my presence, not dreaming I'm one... Funny thing, how some White people certainly don't like people of color do they? (If they did, then I wouldn't have to be passing to keep my good job.) They go out of their way sometimes to say bad things about colored folks, putting it out that all of us are thieves and liars, or else diseased, consumption and syphilis and the like... I never knew they made a practice of saying such terrible things about us until I started passing and heard their conversations and lived their life. (46)

Hughes in his story concurs that there is another consciousness that must be utilized to survive being "White" in White America. A Passer must build a shield to protect themselves from the pain

of prejudice. Contrarily, in truth, this shield never protects the Passers, but it slowly kills them.

Micheaux is an avid follower of Booker T. Washington's theory of Black progress. Washington urged Blacks to accept discrimination and educate themselves through hard work and entrepreneurship. By doing so they would gain the respect of Whites, in the hopes of ultimately being accepted by them and into all strata of society. This theory is opposed to W.E.B. Du Bois's theory of the need for polemics to oppose racism, Jim Crow Laws, and discrimination. Du Bois believed that only through fighting racism, obtaining education and continuously moving forward in equal rights would there be any change for Blacks. In *Veiled Aristocrats* Micheaux shows these two categories of successful Blacks. One is Frank Fowler, a successful dark-skinned farmer, who would represent Washington's theory of progress. The other is represented by the light-skinned debutantes at the ball, who were educated, sang classical music, danced to the waltz, and spoke proper English. In *Veiled Aristocrats*, Micheaux shows that Du Bois's outcome to success assimilates White culture. Thus making it more attractive to Black people, especially Passers. Du Bois's method of accomplishment, implements his theory of Double Consciousness, which develops into a Passers Triple Consciousness. Micheaux proposes through the film *Veiled Aristocrats* that the only way to be successful is to blur the color line and become White, as seen by the two main characters Rena and her brother John.

John's Triple Consciousness develops as a child. As a youngster, he is sent away by a judge and immediately survives by becoming White. Masquerading is more comfortable for the child John, as he later comes to realize that children are taught prejudice and hate. It is through his knowledge and experience that he will decipher who he indeed is. However, despite being Black, he knows early on that he must think as White people do. He must eat and speak as White people do. He learns from childhood that as long as he can fool the White community, he will be accepted in the White community. When young John is sent away to school disguised as a White

boy, he immediately adapts to his community and surroundings. Hence, so long as all the children looked alike, grew up together doing the same thing and were taught the same there was no difference. In the case of John Walden, he knows his truth and keeps it well hidden to survive. As he grows up, he becomes White through his imitative and trained mannerisms.

Class is evident in Micheaux's movie. Micheaux's movie purposely uses darker and lighter complexioned Blacks in this movie to demonstrate that hierarchy also existed in the Black community. Micheaux had his issues with race and color as he cast darker Blacks in lower level positions in society rather than lighter skinned Blacks. A darker complexion Black could never be at the top of the Black chain. At the debutante ball, he uses light-skinned Blacks as socialites, representing success, while dark-skinned Blacks were the kitchen help and entertainers. This conviction stemmed from times of slavery when the lighter the skin color, the more valuable the slave was for sale. This mindset or consciousness remains present throughout history.

Miscegenation gave Blacks like Rena and John the ability to pass. This appearance of Whiteness offered those "privileged" Blacks the opportunity to disappear and reincarnate as very different people, which John offered to Rena. However, this is not the only feature that qualifies them as White. In William M. Kephart's article, "The Passing Question," he states:

...It is maintained that "passing" depends on attributes other than skin color: nose shape, eye color, hair color, and hair type. Countless numbers of Negroes could pass by skin color alone were it not for the aforementioned 'giveaway features.' Also, taken singly, the typically Negroid features such as everted lips, broad nose, dark eyes, dark and kinky hair, appear to be dominant over the corresponding White features. (338)

Passing as White requires that many decisions be made. Passers have to go through a critical self-analysis. They must look at themselves, including the things about them that make them happy but

also the things about them that they believe are the most precarious. They make the ultimate decision that living their life as a White person is far better than the life any Black person can have. Hence, they abandon the world they know to delve into the world of White people. Rena has difficulty with this ideology.

Rena Walden decides in the end that the price of being White is too high for her. She is in love with Frank Fowler, a Black farmer, and cannot live her life without him. She goes to her brother to let him know that she wants to return home. Rena explains to her brother:

When Judge Strait sent you away to school as a White boy, you were young and unburdened. A new environment had settled upon you and shaped you for another life, as it has me. You grew up and went to school as a White boy, so, that by the time you were old enough to go with girls, you had forgotten your childhood days sufficiently to feel at home. It wasn't a case of being suddenly picked up and placed in a new and strange environment, as you have placed me. All this frightens me. I'm afraid to talk, to smile, to do anything; for fear that I'll make a mistake and embarrass you. (Micheaux 28:46-29:24)

In her moment of honesty and truth, Rena releases her sigh. The sigh represents the acknowledgment and release of Triple Consciousness. Rena decides that being Black is far better for her than pretending to be White. She has accepted that living a life of Triple Consciousness has overtaken her and she needs to return to who she is. Rena's Triple Consciousness has taken a toll on her psyche. She is living in fear of not only being revealed but of exposing her brother who has been "White" since childhood. She understands his Triple Consciousness has consumed him, but she cannot allow it to destroy her. In the end, Rena returns home and to the love of her life, Frank Fowler.

*Veiled Aristocrats* is only forty-five minutes long, but the message is clear. Passing has

always been present. Micheaux gives clear reasoning why Passers existed. He provides concise motivation for Passers to take advantage of the opportunity for a better life and human privileges among the White race. Micheaux also verifies that there is a Triple Consciousness that forms once a Black person becomes a Passer. In the case of Rena Walden, it is the sigh that is representative of the acknowledgment of Triple Consciousness. In *Veiled Aristocrats*, Rena was able to disappear and reappear, which is a luxury not afforded all Passers. As we examine other films, we will see examples of how passing shaped, changed and destroyed Passers, all through the experience of Triple Consciousness.

### **Pinky, 1949, Elia Kazan**

The film *Pinky* is based on the Cid Ricketts Sumner novel *Quality*. In 1949 director Elia Kazan accepted the challenge of directing the film *Pinky*. The original director John Ford left the movie after only a week of filming. It was announced that Ford had left the production due to illness. Darryl Zanuck, the film production head, later reports that Ford may not have liked the whole project. In a *Turner Classic Movie* film article, Darryl Zanuck also states the following about the film,

This is not a story about how to solve the Negro problem in the South or anywhere else. This is not a story particularly about race problems, segregation or discrimination. This is the story about one particular Negro girl who could easily pass as White and who did pass for White. This is the story of how and why she, as an individual, finally decided to be herself a Negress. (LoBianco)

Kazan took on the project as a favor. He destroyed everything Ford had done. He reports that Ford's material showed a lack of connection and awareness to the film. During this period,

Mississippi novelists were creating the earliest arguments against racism, and Hollywood jumped on board. Kazan is famous for dealing with controversial social topics. Kazan directed movies that would reach the heart of the audience about current situations involving society at the time. *Pinky* is one of the first films to address racial prejudice against Blacks. Walter White of the NAACP and his daughter actor Jane White worked in partnership on the final version of the screenplay to ensure that the film displayed authenticity and respect to Black people. The film received three Academy Award nominations.

*Pinky* begins with Patricia “Pinky” Johnson returning home to her grandmother Dicey Johnson, who was played by Ethel Waters. In the film, she had moved away years earlier to go to nursing school, all paid for by her grandmother. While away Pinky decided to pass as White. Now she had returned to her home to reclaim the person that she lost when she went away. Typically, when Blacks “pass over” into White privilege they never return. They have no connection to their families or any part of the past. Triple Consciousness is instilled the minute Pinky goes to school among her White colleagues. She realizes that by becoming White, she can obtain equality in education, her social world, and all aspects of life. In her deception, Pinky falls in love with a man who could have potentially hated her because of her race.

In the movie Pinky’s boyfriend, Dr. Thomas Adams, locates her due to a telegram and old information from one of the schools she attended. She explains her secret to him, and he stays with her in spite of the lie. Upon returning home and reclaiming her Black heritage, Pinky is reintroduced to the reality of being Black. She gets into a fight with a Black woman and her beau over money. The officers assume she is White, and they are only going to punish the Black couple for fighting with a White woman. However, once it is revealed that she too is Black, everyone is arrested. There is a moment in the film that Pinky plays upon being White; she is never the person who divulges her race to the officers. Once it is known, she does not deny it, but it is apparent that

she would have never disclosed it.

In another scene, two White men accost her. The men attempt to rape Pinky, though this scene was deleted in some places the film was shown, such as Atlanta, Georgia. Pinky is assaulted once they realize she is Black and not White. The assailants display disdain for her when they recognize she could pass for White though she is Black. These events send her mind into a tailspin over why she has returned. She has maintained Triple Consciousness and succeeded at it, so why return home?

Her grandmother Dicey gets her a job, and she becomes a nurse for a White woman, Ms. Em, who was a previous slave owner in their town. She despises Ms. Em; however, Ms. Em teaches her humility and pride. In a conversation with Pinky, she tells her, “Nobody deserves respect as long as she pretends to be something she isn’t.”(Kazan 42:44). This comment stays with Pinky. It makes her look more closely at herself and the life of lies she has lived. In her double life, she lives the truth of Blacks and the lies of Whites. She has listened to and endured Whites’ hate of her, a Black woman. Pinky states in an argument with Ms. Em, “You are the ones who set the standards. You Whites. You are the ones who judge people by the color of their skin. However, by your own standards, I am as White as you are.” (Kazan 43:20) It is at this moment that Pinky sighs. She releases years of anguish she has carried being Black and White. She declares to a White woman that none of the hurt, pain, lies, and camouflage would have ever been needed if Whites had not made it necessary (see fig. 2). It is the discrimination, prejudice, and hate that forged the necessity to escape Black cruelty. If Blacks were genuinely treated as equal to Whites, no one would have to be deceived.



Fig. 2. Pinky with Ms. Em, in film *Pinky* directed by Elia Kazan (1949).

Pinky's Triple Consciousness is blatant when she explains to Ms. Em that Whites are to blame for passing. In her statement, "...But by your own standards, I am as White as you." (Kazan 43:20) she refers here to her change and having to be "White." Kazan uses the actor to let the audience know that becoming White was as easy as perception; however, he also shows that there is a constant internal fight within Passers to still be themselves, Black. When Pinky feels the need to explain her reasons for converting to "White"; Kazan uses this moment to display the exhaling of the burden of Triple Consciousness. When Pinky declares to Ms. Em, she (Whites) are the cause of passing, she relinquishes the pain. Pinky demonstrates that though she has returned to being Black, there is a continuous fight to be true to herself finally. There is a permanent scar left on her psyche. It is her psyche which has established Triple Consciousness, which has also defined who she is and who she is not.

Kazan displays Triple Consciousness in showing the result of living as a Passer. When



Pinky returns home, she brings with her resentment and hate for all that she was forced to go through. Family obligates her to go away to school, and she decides to be something she is not to have the same opportunity as her White counterparts. She displays her resentment immediately when forced to take care of a person who openly hates her due to race. Ms. Em mistreated her as a child, but Pinky is able to enter Ms. Em's world unnoticed and become better than her. Kazan exposes Pinky's hatred of Ms. Em's constant judgment of her and the scar it has left on her psyche.

*Pinky* is an informative movie regarding the secret of passing and the lives Passers live. It discloses the feeling and enigmas of prejudice. It also shows that everyone plays a role in racism. The kindness that Ms. Em shows Pinky after being so hard on her years earlier spoke to the humanity and humbleness that sometimes comes with age and experience (regardless of the hardness being real or acted upon.) In the end, Ms. Em dies and leaves Pinky her estate, which Pinky has to fight the woman's heirs for and wins. Pinky makes the mansion into a hospital to aid Blacks in the community. The ending of the movie differs from the ending of Cid Ricketts Sumner's book. In the book, the building given to Pinky by Ms. Em is burned down by the Ku Klux Klan.

A theme, which I Kazan makes prevalent in *Pinky*, is the strong Black woman. For Pinky, it is returning home and facing her truths and her fears. How would the community treat her? Is she the same? Can she go from being Black to White and back to Black? Kazan shows that although Pinky has gone through great hardship, she is still strong and can succeed. Triple Consciousness has scarred Pinky. Society has taught her that she needs to survive, and when she returns home, the knowledge she has absorbed has left her damaged.

At the end of the film, there is a depiction of the American dream of wealth, success and unity, caused by the hope of forgiveness. This American dream offered in the film is so much more favorable than the life provided to Blacks. This idea is the one most supported by the society

of this period. *Pinky* is the coming full circle of a Passer who has lived in both worlds. By ending with a positive perspective, *Pinky* represents the coming together and recognition of Black and White humanity. Though the film offers no resolution to the racial problem it depicts, it explores the problem. By not ending on a negative note, it gives hope of better tomorrows. Kazan lets the audience know that people can change and there is room for forgiveness.

Kazan is one of a few trailblazers in films during this time. He speaks of interracial love, which was not acceptable at the time. In *Pinky*, he writes into the story that her boyfriend Dr. Thomas Adams learns who she is and still loves her. For 1949, this was very controversial. In the casting of actors in the film, he was unable to place Black and White actors in intimate scenes, though interracial couples and love affairs have existed since the beginning of time. As we see in the case of *Passers*, this actuality can be present without the knowledge of either or both parties.

### ***Lost Boundaries, 1949, Alfred L Werker***

The real-life story of Albert Johnston is depicted in the movie *Lost Boundaries*, which is based on the book of the same title written by William Lindsey White. In the film *Lost Boundaries*, produced in 1949 and directed by Alfred L Werker, Scott Carter plays Johnston, a Black man who has gone to school and graduated from Rush Medical College in Chicago, with the intention of using his degree to become a doctor. Scott Carter is a proud Black man, and like his mentor, Walter White, states, "He is Black though his appearance could be mistaken for White." Rejected by his people due to his appearance, he is offered a job by a White colleague in New Hampshire and told never to divulge his race. Carter, with a pregnant wife and the desperate need to make money, takes up the offer and becomes the doctor of the little town in New Hampshire. In the movie, it is clear that this decision was not easy to make. Allyson Hobbs, author of *A Chosen*

*Exile*, in the "Stanford News Service" article, states:

I'm not as interested in what people gained by being White, but rather in what they lost by not being Black...To understand passing we can't just look at the story of the person who passed, we have to look at their whole social world, because everyone is going to be impacted. (qtd in Sloan).

His wife who can also pass goes along with the deception and keeps the secret of being Black. Not only is the secret kept from the community in which they live, but they also keep the secret from their children. Scott Carter's Triple Consciousness begins the moment the decision is made to become White. Carter was rejected by the hospitals in the Black community because he appeared too White. Black people were unable to trust him because of the uncertainty of who he was.

The Carter children grow up with the same prejudices as the people around them. In one scene, the daughter, Shelly, speaks of a Black boy her brother Howard has brought home from school. Shelly calls him a "coon" and feels disgusted that Howard would bring him to their home. The neighbors upon seeing the Black young man also call him names, "negro" and "darkie," and question the ethics of the mother, Marcia, who allows this child into her home.

Alfred Werker uses a painful scene to demonstrate the impact of Triple Consciousness in Dr. Carter. In working closely with people of different races, apparent prejudices will arise. In a scene, a nurse informs Dr. Carter that the only blood they have left in the blood bank is that of a Black person. He instructs the nurse to save it for future use. Disturbed with his response, the nurse deliberately drops the blood on the floor. The oath the nurse has taken matters less than her racial hatred. Dr. Carter must maintain his professionalism and keep his composure, though what the nurse has done is despicable. He must keep his serenity and peace as he is passing. He has to endure the hatred that White America inflicts on Blacks while never giving away who he indeed is or how he truly feels.

There are many instances of close calls. One such example is in a visit with another White doctor, Dr. Carter accidentally mentions his affiliation to a Black doctor, but the White doctor dismisses this comment. He believes Dr. Carter is mistaken about whom they were speaking. It is Marcia, Dr. Carter's wife, who informs him that they may have been exposed. Fortunately for the Carters, it was not this incident that would reveal their truth; however, it is Dr. Carter's absence of self that exposes his family. Dr. Carter applies to be a doctor in the service. Upon a thorough investigation, it is found out that Dr. Carter is Black. For the first time in his life, he has to face the implications of how his decisions affected his family. This is Dr. Carter's sigh. At this moment of exposure, Dr. Carter drops the weight of Triple Consciousness. He must admit the deceit that he and his wife have committed to. A lie he has allowed his family to grow in. He is faced with many questions but has one standard answer. In his time of release, he is finally able to be true to himself — a justification that every person desires in his or her lifetime. Dr. Carter must now admit who he is and accept what he has done. The sigh of Triple Consciousness is displayed vividly by Dr. Carter. As he is presented with the question of being Black, he immediately sighs, releases the burden of Triple Consciousness and admits his truth. His children go into seclusion, and the neighborhood ostracizes them. White people could not believe that this family fooled them. Questions immediately filled the minds of community members, they asked, for example, "How could you fool us?" "How could you become one of us?" and "How did we not see this?"

Touching moments are seen in the movie also. Dr. Carter's son, Howard, runs away to Harlem once he finds out he is Black. He gets into an incident and is arrested. He explains to the Black officer Lt. Thompson what he has found out about his race (see fig. 3). He states how confused he is and voices his disappointment. Lt. Thompson explains that his father only lied to him to give him an opportunity of a life without limits. He states, "Knowing how Negroes have to live do you blame anyone who crosses the boundaries in the White man's world?"(Werker 1:23:47)



Fig. 3. Howard and Lt. Dixie Thompson in *Lost Boundaries*, directed by Alfred Werker (1949).

*Lost Boundaries* was not met with open arms in all areas of the United States. In Atlanta, Georgia the city censor Christine Smith placed a ban on the movie due to its racial theme. According to the *New York Times*, Ms. Smith refused a permit because "it is contrary to the public good." In return Film Classics filed a federal lawsuit. Lloyd Binford, the local censor in Memphis, Tennessee, also banned the movie, stating, "In passing as White, the Negro doctor in the film had slurred his race by proving himself 'an imposter and a liar.'" (*Lost Boundaries Notes*) In the end, the Georgia censorship ban was upheld. Former Justice Samuel Rosenman, who was the prosecuting attorney stated:

Films are no longer a spectacle but a medium of information and opinion as much or more than they are amusement. Our interests go beyond those of my client and the motion picture industry. They should be of concern of all Americans interested in

their freedom. (*Lost Boundaries* Notes)

The case was brought to the Appeals Court and the Supreme Court, which both refused to hear it. In New York, it received a very different response. It was reported that at its world premiere the audience sat in stunned silence. This was a very different response from that of people in the south who believed that the movie should not be allowed to be shown at all. This uncovering of the American secret was too much for people of the south to understand. At some point, people who could pass must have questioned what made others who held the secret decide to share it with the public. Moreover, the questions arose: When and what made it safe to expose their real identity? Also, who and what gave filmmakers the right to put their stories on camera?

Albert Johnston and his family were the people on whom the film *Lost Boundaries* was based (see fig. 4). Dr. Johnston graduated with honors from the University of Chicago Medical School and studied radiology at Harvard University. Dr. Johnston claims that after the film's release, he was fired from his job at Keene Elliott Community Hospital. Hospital Board President Chester Kingsbury declared that racial discrimination played no part in the decision making. However Johnston always believed his firing had something to do with the revelation by the movie's release and his race. Though this statement is hard to prove, it was believable for the Black community. Johnston played the worst joke on White America. He made them accept him into their world. Johnston forced them to see him as a man with capabilities like them. He challenged them to recognize him as a man, not a Black man.

In viewing the original photo of the Johnston family, members of the family do show traits of Black heritage. In the picture below the daughter and Albert himself appear to be light-skinned Blacks, not Whites.



Fig. 4. The Original Johnston family, which the movie *Lost Boundaries* is based on.

Kitty, NH. “‘*Lost Boundaries*’ and Dr. Johnston’s Brave Choices.” *Yankee Skeptic*, 5 Feb. 2019, [yankeeskeptic.com/2019/02/04/lost-boundaries-and-dr-johnstons-brave-choices/](http://yankeeskeptic.com/2019/02/04/lost-boundaries-and-dr-johnstons-brave-choices/).

Alfred Werker displays racial prejudice at its core. He tells the story of a Black man who has succeeded as a White man. He shows a community that was accepting of this man until the truth was revealed. The core of Dr. Carter’s identity does not change due to his race. What changes about Dr. Carter is his awareness and understanding of Triple Consciousness. He went from accepting the damage of what Triple Consciousness did to his psyche, and that of his family, to being a Black man with an intricate knowledge of both. Triple Consciousness, which is taught by the oppressor, has now come full circle. Dr. Carter must face the masquerade that he has impressed upon his family and especially his children. He is guilty of wanting a better life for himself and his family. He also paid the ultimate price, losing the trust of his family, being

exposed to his community and denying the love of self. As a result, it leaves his children with a choice to make. Do they continue to pass or embrace the reality of who they undeniably are? At the end of *Lost Boundaries*, the last scene is that of the bewildered and unhappy daughter Shelly walking out of the church, leaving the audience to wonder if she will accept her new identity or choose to pass.

The act of passing is not just a betrayal of race it is a betrayal of self. Blacks portrayed in the films have pride in their race but issues with their racial identities. All of the directors, as mentioned earlier, represent them as strongholds in their commitment to pass the color line. In *Veiled Aristocrats*, *Pinky* and *Lost Boundaries* the characters return “home.” In the films, there is no repercussion for going back except for the wounds left on the psyche of the Passer. These are wounds that can never be healed. However, the directors themselves admit the encumbrance of Triple Consciousness through the simple gesture of a sigh. The directors omit describing how the life of the returning Passer will be. Due to the directors being White, they do not know the Black family. Also, the directors left viewers with the knowledge that the issue of race is still unresolved.



*Imitation of Life*, 1959, Douglas Sirk



Fig. 5. Annie (Juanita Moore), Young Sarah Jane (Karin Dicker), Young Susie (Terry Burnham), Lora (Lana Turner) in *Imitation of Life*, directed by Douglas Sirk (1959).

The film *Imitation of Life* based on the book of the same name written by Fannie Hurst in 1933. Hurst credits her writing the book, on her friendship with author and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston. Hurston worked as Hurst's secretary during their time at Barnard College. The book was later made into a movie in 1934 and a remake of the film in 1959. *Imitation of Life* became Hurst's magnum opus, the essential work of an artist or writer. The plot is of two single mothers, one White the other Black, raising daughters alone. The movie provoked substantial controversy due to issues of race, gender and the question of passing. For this paper, I will use the 1959 version which Douglas Sirk directed. In my use of this version, I will illustrate Triple Consciousness as displayed by the socially conscious Douglas Sirk. Douglas Sirk was known to produce melodramas like *Imitation of Life*. He became known as cinema's greatest ironist because his characters perceive themselves differently from the viewing audience (see fig 5).

*Imitation of Life* begins with the meeting of parents Lora and Annie at the beach. Lora is in

search of her daughter Susie, who is found playing with Annie's daughter Sarah Jane. When Lora meets Annie and Sarah Jane, she immediately assumes that Annie is the caretaker of Sarah Jane. Once the correction is made that Sarah Jane is indeed Annie's daughter, they negotiate Annie going to work for Lora as her housekeeper. On Annie and Sarah Jane's first trip to their new home with Lora and Susie, Susie offers Sarah Jane her Black doll to play with. Sarah Jane rejects the doll and wants the White doll. When encouraged by her mother Annie to take the Black doll, Sarah Jane discards the doll. This scene sets the plot for which the movie develops.

Contradictory impulses are displayed in this early scene in the movie. First Susie offers Sarah Jane a Black baby doll. The question could be asked, where would Susie get a Black baby doll from? Is Lora, her mother, that open-minded regarding race in the 1950s? Black women during this period, though the times were beginning to change, mainly worked in the domestic field. When Susie played with the Black doll among her White dolls, where did her imagination/imitation take her? Susie is offended when Sarah Jane rejected the doll. Susie felt as though she had done a good thing by offering a Black child a Black doll. Children usually come together by commonality, for example, little girls playing with dolls or boys playing with cars. Differences, on the other hand, are taught. In this scene, both girls appear to be the age of 7 or 8. With Sarah Jane as White in complexion as Susie is, how is Susie able to differ between her and Sarah Jane at this age? Or is this scene a paradox unto itself?

The doll scene in the movie is a new one, adopted in the 1959 version, which makes this about Sirk's direction. In the original film (1934), the White child calls the Black child, Black. Herein opens the difference in the two races. In the doll scene, Sirk uses Sarah Jane character as an example of Dr. Kenneth and Mamie Clark's theory of the "Doll Test Experiment." Dr. Kenneth Clark and his wife Dr. Mamie Clark are the first and second graduates of Columbia University both receiving their Ph.D.'s in Psychology. They are the originators of the doll test/experiment, which

was conducted in 1940. As a result, the Clarks noted that the feeling of inferiority among Black children was created due to prejudice, discrimination and segregation. This is immediately visualized to the audience upon Sarah Jane's refusal to accept the doll that did not symbolize whom she envisioned herself to be. The eyes, skin tone or hair looked like her. Sarah Jane is unable to connect to Blacks as this is not what she sees when she looks in the mirror. Again, children relate to familiarity. In the doll test study, the Clarks go on to study the reaction of other Black children who were a part of the study. Dr. Kenneth Clark notes that when he asks one child which doll is like him, the child responds, smiling and pointing, "That's a Nigger. I'm a Nigger." Dr. Clark described this experience as or more disturbing than the children in Massachusetts whom he had studied. These children would refuse to answer the question or would cry and run out of the room.

Being a nigger was not how Sarah Jane saw herself. She could fit in with Whites. Why did she have to take a back seat when she could blend? Sarah Jane developed Triple Consciousness as a child. She is aware of her Blackness, how Whites view Blacks and how because of her vision she must be White, though Black and ultimately choosing to pass, even as a child. Ultimately Dr. Kenneth Clark concludes that racism is a lack of self-respect. What positive sense of self could a Black person have who has had to fight for their basic rights?

Sirk identifies his knowledge of Triple Consciousness by having Sarah Jane reject being any part of the Black race. She is a child who identifies as being White, though she is Black, and begins to see her life as the life of a White person. Throughout the beginning of the film Sarah Jane asks, "Why can't I be White?" Sirk sets the plot for the audience, the unfolding of a tumultuous life, and the mindset of Triple Consciousness. What did the child Sarah Jane see as the benefit of being White? Several benefits may have come to mind, but she clearly understood that perception defined reality.

Another very poignant scene in the movie is between Sarah Jane and her mother, Annie.

Sarah Jane was very unhappy with her life as a young Black adult woman; therefore, she decides to pass as White. She left home and worked and lived among White people. This entitled her to a better life than that which was offered to Blacks. Annie would go in search of her daughter, to plead with her to return home and to the life of a Black woman. By this time Annie is very sick and wants to have one last moment with her daughter. She finds Sarah Jane working at a nightclub as a dancer. She goes backstage to confront her for a final time. Upon their meeting, Sarah Jane immediately asks her mother, “Why can’t you leave me alone?” (Sirk 1:23:19) Annie is tired and perplexed by her daughter’s decisions, but she questions: “Are you happy here? Are you finding what you really want?” (Sirk 1:23:50) By this time Sarah Jane is so caught up in who she now believes she is, she responds, “I’m somebody else! I’m White...Then please Mama will you go and never do this again? And if by accident we should ever pass on the street, please don’t recognize me.” (Sirk 1:23:59-1:24:16) Annie agrees to Sarah Jane’s request, and the two have one final embrace. This scene is a full realization of Triple Consciousness. Sarah Jane has absorbed being White. Her only desire is for her mother to stop invading her life.

The scene between mother and daughter as produced by Sirk is an acknowledgment of Triple Consciousness. It is in this scene the sigh of Triple Consciousness is exposed to the audience. Once Sarah Jane allows her mother to hug her for one final time; it is in her release, in exhaling, that she drops the crutch of Triple Consciousness. In Sarah Jane’s mind, the hug represents the final time she will have to acknowledge her true self. Her mother is that constant reminder that she can’t seem to get away from. The hug for Annie is goodbye to a child she sacrificed her life for because she is terminally ill. During the hug, Sarah Jane releases only momentarily, her hatred of herself and who her mother was, a Black woman. She releases a sigh and calls out, “Mother!” At this moment Sarah Jane drops the hate, anger, guilt, and shame of being Black. She accepts who she is, though she will not be differentiated by it, to honor her

mother for the last time. Sirk uses this moment between mother and daughter to confirm that, although he may not have been aware of it, there was indeed another consciousness going on, Triple Consciousness.

The movie inspired viewers to look at life differently. It made audiences socially aware of the climate in America during the 1950s. It also informed audiences how quickly they could be fooled by perception. Diana Ross and the Supremes performed a song based off the movie: *I'm Living in Shame*. The song epitomizes Triple Consciousness through the life of the Passer or anyone who struggles with identity. A verse from the song tells of the Passers plot:

*I was always so ashamed for my uptown friends to see her,*

*Afraid one day when I was grown that I would be her.*

*In a college town, away from home, a new identity I found.*

*Said I was born elite, with maids and servants at my feet.*

*I must have been insane,*

*I lied and said my mom died on a weekend trip to Spain.*

*She never got out of the house, never even boarded a train.*

*I married a guy, was livin' high,*

*I didn't want him to know her,*

*She had a grandson, two years old,*

*I never even showed her.*

*I'm Livin' In Shame, Momma, I miss you. (Ross)*

The shame, guilt, and disgrace felt by a Passer are what songwriters Berry Gordy and Frank Wilson wanted to display. The songwriters exposed a new group of listeners to the degradation some felt

living in a life where they thought they did not belong. Individuals who passed had untruthful, secreted and obsolete lives.

### **Factual Cases of Racial Passing**

The first known case of racial passing in New York State is the Kip Rhineland case, which led to a 1925 trial. It is the case of annulment of Leonard Kip Rhineland and Alice Jones. Leonard Kip Rhineland came from an elite family. Alice Jones was the daughter of Black parents with European blood. The couple met in 1921 and fell in love, and in 1924 they eloped. When Rhineland's family found out about the marriage in *The Standard Star Newspaper*, the headlines read "Rhineland's Son Marries the Daughter of a Colored Man." The marriage sparked outrage in Kip's father. Immediately he demanded that the marriage be annulled, and court proceedings began.

The lawsuit against Alice stated that she defrauded the rich, young, naïve, and socially awkward Kip into marriage by deception about who she was. Alice's defense is that not only did Kip know of her race but also that it was impossible for him to have been deceived. Alice never took the stand in her case, but several family members and friends testified on her behalf. Kip admitted that he had seen his wife in the nude on several occasions and continued to sleep with Alice even after the article revealing her racial identity was published. Alice contended that she had features on her body that only a woman of color would have. To prove her race Alice agreed to the most egregious search for a woman at that time. According to the article "When One of New York's Glitterati Married a Quadroon," by Theodore Johnson III:

She was escorted into the bathroom where she removed all but her underwear and then slipped on a long coat. She began to weep. In one of the most outrageous

courtroom scenes in American history, she was paraded into a closed room where judge and jury awaited her and told to show her legs up to the thigh. To prove it was impossible to mask her race, the color of Alice Jones Rhinelanders' nipples was examined by judge and jury as evidence of her Blackness. She was told to remove the coat and show her nude body from the waist up. She did, and she wept.

(Johnson III)

In the end, the jury found in favor of Alice Jones Rhinelanders and disallowed the annulment, citing that "no deception is evident." Kip was disowned by his family and eventually filed for divorce. Once settled in 1930 Alice was awarded a lump sum payment of \$31,500 and a \$3,600 annuity for life. Alice never remarried and received a \$300 a month until her death in 1989 at the age of 90.

Perception defined reality for many Blacks of a mixed or lighter complexion, which led to observation being utilized to determine their lifestyle. Anita Florence Hemmings was a Black woman who could pass and the first Black person to graduate from Vassar College in 1897. By all accounts, Hemmings was one of the most beautiful, well-mannered and educated students who had attended there. Upon a visit from Hemmings' brother, who was a shade darker than her, questions began to surface about her racial identity. Her roommate told her father about her doubts, and he found out that Hemmings was not White but Black. This secret was reported to school officials, and a secret meeting was held to determine Hemmings' fate at the college. It was decided that Hemmings, days away from graduation, should graduate and the secret should be kept. Year's later Hemmings' daughter Ellen would attend Vassar College under the same disguise and would become known as the second Black to graduate from Vassar College.

Harry S. Murphy was the first Black to attend Ole Miss, University of Mississippi. Murphy went on to join the Navy's V-12 program. This program allowed sailors to take college classes while receiving naval training. When Murphy went to be interviewed, the White man who

interviewed him checked the box that he was White. Murphy never corrected the mistake nor was his race ever questioned by anyone, so he attended Ole Miss under the disguise of being White. Murphy ended up transferring from Ole Miss to Morehouse. Years later when Black students were protesting to attend Ole Miss, Murphy came out with his secret. Once Murphy left Ole Miss, he returned to live his life as a Black man. Murphy moved to New York and became a graphic designer. At the age of 63, he committed suicide. Speculation could be made about the reasons for Murphy's death.

The plight of these Passers were determined by perception. Man's acuity defined the life of these two Passers. With that notion these particular Passers obliged. For Anita Hemmings, it established her for the rest of her life and her children. Harry Murphy exploited his ability to pass for the period it was required. The mistake in appearance is an example of how easy it was for some Passers to cross the color line. This astuteness is what Sarah Jane (*Imitation of Life*), though only a child herself, understood and had difficulty in understanding how others could not conceptualize it.

### **Literature Which Illustrates the Lives of Passers**

One of the first written stories of interracial love is Kate Chopin's short story, "Desiree's Baby", written in 1893. It is a story of a Caucasian French King Armand and Queen Desiree, who fall in love and have a child. The child is born with visible Black features. This obvious "stain" causes division among the family. For Armand, a mystery has to be solved. He questions whether his wife slept with one of the slaves. This would be an abomination to the family. Thus, Armand dismisses Desiree and their baby from his life. Desiree is so distraught by Armand's rejection that she goes into a deep depression. She and the baby are cast out from home and eventually die. One



day, while burning Desiree's belongings, Armand finds old family letters. He finds a love letter written from his mother to his father. In the letter, he reads a section in which his mother thanks God for her husband's love and the following:

But, above all," she wrote, "night and day, I thank the good God for having so arranged our lives that our dear Armand will never know that his mother, who adores him, belongs to the race that is cursed with the brand of slavery. (5)

Here, in Chopin's work, readers are given one of the earliest depictions of internalized racism and interracial love. Also, Chopin divulges the secrecy involved in passing, even if involuntarily. Though King Armand did not know his heritage, he was still passing for someone he was not. Being Black is the curse. Armand's treatment of the love of his life and his child borders on the perverse. In rejecting Desiree and the baby, Armand brings on their death.

Consequently, Armand cuts off his bloodline. Thus, he symbolically kills himself. The family secret will die with him. The depths of self-hatred are found in Armand's reaction to his child's dark complexion, and of all things, his mother's love letter, in which she thanks God for her child not being dark-skinned. This absurd and irrational mindset leads to misery and perverts a human being's ability to love, as well as speaking to the psyche of a man who knows not who he is.

In *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison, we are introduced to the painful and heartbreaking life of a child, Pecola Breedlove. Pecola like Sarah Jane, learns early that she needs to escape being Black. For Pecola it is based on internal forces (her family) and external (society). There is no question that Pecola's family has internalized the racism of the dominant White society. Morrison indicts the media for playing a significant part in promoting the White ideal of beauty as superior. This ideal encourages Passers to cross the color line and causes impressionable Blacks to embrace its message. Morrison examines the effect of this ideal through Pecola's mother, Pauline. Pauline is a victim of internalized racism. In Pauline's case, it's at the movies that she is taught to idolize

the white ideal of beauty. Morrison writes:

Probably the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought, both originated in envy, thrived in insecurity, and ended in disillusion. In equating physical beauty with virtue, she stripped her mind, bound it, and collected self-contempt by the heap. She forgot lust and simple caring for. She regarded love as possessive mating, and romance as the goal of the spirit. It would be for her a well-spring from which she would draw the most destructive emotions, deceiving the lover and seeking to imprison the beloved, curtailing freedom in every way. She was never able, after her education in the movies, to look at a face and not assign it some category in the scale of absolute beauty, and the scale was one she absorbed in full from the silver screen. (Morrison, *Bluest* 125)

Sadly, Pauline applies this “scale” of beauty to her own daughter. After that, there was little to no hope for Pecola. Pauline calls Pecola ugly and insists that Pecola call her Mrs. Breedlove when she is around the White family Pauline works for as housekeeper. Pauline never shows kindness or affection to Pecola. She keeps her at bay because she does not meet the White standard of beauty. Though Pauline never says this to Pecola, she does not have to for Pecola to understand that her mother sees her as unlovable because she is not White. It is this internalized self-hatred that causes a child not able to cross the color line to desire to do so. Sadly it is the person she trusts the most that has pushed her beyond sanity.

Morrison details the breaking down of Pecola’s sanity as she sees being White as her only path to happiness. Yes, Pauline sees herself in Pecola. She has the same self-hate that her mother and Sarah Jane (*Imitation of Life*) have for themselves. Morrison makes it clear that the ramifications of internalized racism are destructive to the individual and society.

In *God Help the Child*, Morrison revisits the topic of internalized racism and describes the

need to pass through the story of her main character, Bride (Lula Ann) who is also a child. Bride's mother, Sweetness, subscribes to the White ideal of beauty and notion of superiority. Furthermore, Sweetness is a light-skinned Black woman who passed as White her whole life. Being able to pass was a "plus" in the life of a Black person because it afforded them privileges in a White society that were denied to dark-skinned Black Americans. Bride dislikes her daughter. She describes her perfectly healthy baby as having something wrong with her as if her dark skin color were an illness. Bride begins her relationship with her daughter by distancing herself from her by insisting that she is not dark like her daughter nor does she have the same type of hair. She also insists that Bride call her "Sweetness" instead of mother. Bride justifies her negative reaction to her daughter's skin color with the following words:

You should've seen my grandmother; she passed for white and never said another word to any one of her children. Any letter she got from my mother or my aunts she sent right back, unopened. Finally, they got the message of no message and let her be. (Morrison, *Child 1*).

Blacks who were able to pass had a better quality of life than the darker complexioned Blacks. For example, they could sit in the front of the bus. They could try-on shoes in the front of the store. They could exist in society without the fear of hateful stares or attack. They did not have to apologize for living in a society where the dominant group continuously made them feel targeted and inferior for being dark. In the case of Sweetness, her internalized racism stems from the knowledge of the victimization of Blacks for being dark by White society through its laws, macro-aggressions, and micro-aggressions. That is why Sweetness makes no apologies for her grandmother who cut off ties with her whole family once she realized she could pass. Sweetness never apologizes for her behavior towards her child, but she says the following:

I wasn't a bad mother, you have to know that, but I may have done some hurtful

things to my only child because I had to protect her. Had to. All because of skin privileges. At first, I couldn't see past all that Black to know who she was and just plain love her. But I do. I think she understands now. I think so. Taught me a lesson I should have known all along. What you do to children matters. And they might never forget. (Morrison, *Child* 43).

Sweetness knows in that her denial of love to her child has caused her to lose her relationship with her daughter. Triple Consciousness plays heavy on Bride as she is unable to hide from who she is because of her daughter's dark skin. Before her daughter's birth, Bride's character was based on perception. It is this same perception that delineates her reality.

Nella Larsen's *Passing*, written in 1929, stunned readers with her story of Black women who could pass for White. The novel begins with two childhood friends who meet by chance at a restaurant and reminisce with each other. One is Clare Kendry, who passes as White, and the other is Irene Redfield, who is also a light-skinned Black who can pass but chooses to pass only sometimes. Clare is married to a White man named John Bellow, who is a racist. Irene is married to a Black doctor named Brian.

Clare, Irene, and Gertrude, another childhood friend who could pass but chooses not to, meet for tea at Clare's home. Clare informs her husband that they have been friends since their youth. During the tea, Clare's husband John comes home and meets his wife's friends. John begins to chat with the women and during his conversation begins to berate Black people. Additionally, upon the ladies first meeting of John, they discover his pet name for Clare is "Nig". Confused about whether he knows his wife is passing or not, the women are dumbfounded and silent. Clare immediately asks her husband to explain why he calls her this. He states:

When we were first married, she was as White as-as- well a lily. But I declare she's getting' darker and darker. I tell her if she don't look out, she'll wake up one of

these days and find she's turned into a nigger...I know you're no nigger [Clare] so it's all right. You can get as Black as you please as far as I'm concerned since I know you're no nigger. I draw the line at that. No Niggers in my family. Never have been and never will be. (39-40)

John has no idea he is married to a Black woman. She has fooled him, and in the end, she will make a total fool of him. When Irene asks if he dislikes Negroes, he responds:

I don't dislike them, I hate them. And worse so does Nig, for all she's trying to turn into one. She wouldn't have a nigger maid around her for love nor money. Not that I'd want her to. They give me the creeps. The Black scrimy devils. (40)

Little does John know that he is speaking to three Black women who by appearance alone have fooled him into a false sense of security. Being away from Black people has changed Clare into someone she is not. She is fearful that bringing back familiarity may expose her. When she meets with Black friends in her home, it is obvious that she misses who she once was. Clare admits the following to Irene:

It was that, partly, that has made me want to see other people...If it hadn't been for that, I'd have gone on to the end, never seeing any of you...I've been so lonely since! How could you know? You're free. You're happy. And safe. (67)

This safety of which Clare speaks is living with the absence of Triple Consciousness. For Clare, the hatred of who she is was always in her face. Her husband makes it clear that he has no love for Blacks; therefore, he is incapable of loving her the way she deserves to be loved. The price of being found out could end her life as she knows it.

By the end of the book, Irene fears that Clare is having an affair with her husband. She is spellbound by the deceit of her husband and old friend whom she allowed back into her life. While doing some shopping with a naturally Black female friend, Irene runs into Clare's husband, John.

Upon seeing Clare with a visibly Black woman, John realizes that the connection the women have is race. Irene, who is distraught over her suspicion of the affair between her husband and Clare, did not warn Clare of the meeting. Later that evening, John comes to a party hosted by some of Clare's Black friends in search of confronting his wife about his discovery. He enters the party in a rage and yells at her, "So you're a nigger, a damned dirty nigger!" Irene walks over to Clare, who is standing at an open window. In a blink, Clare is gone; she seems to have fallen, or to have been pushed, out of the window.

Larsen uses a grand stratagem here in leaving the reader guessing. Was Clare pushed? By Irene? By John? Did Clare jump? Or did she faint? Is it a terrible accident? If she jumped, was it John's hatred of Blacks that caused her to jump? Is it the fact that her lies have been exposed? For Clare, is death better than going back to being Black? Had the curse of passing finally destroyed her? In this story, Triple Consciousness has collided with and imploded in Clare. Allowing herself to be submerged and immersed in White society has ruined any chance of her going back or surviving it.

Dorothy West tells a different story in the case of passing. Her story, *Mammy*, details when Triple Consciousness becomes a permanent part about passing. In her story she tells of a White woman, Mrs. Coleman, who would like to get her maid back to assist the family with their daily needs and cares. Ms. Mason is the maid, and she had left the family due to the awful treatment she received from Mrs. Coleman. A social worker gets involved because Ms. Mason has applied for public funds to assist with her living expenses. When the social worker speaks to Mrs. Coleman, she is told how much Ms. Mason is loved and needed by the family.

The social worker goes out to visit Ms. Mason. Upon visiting Ms. Mason at her home and reiterating the praises given about her by Mrs. Coleman, the social worker doesn't understand why

Ms. Mason will not return. Ms. Mason states that working for that woman is like “fighting the devil” and she refuses to do it any longer. The social worker insists that Ms. Mason must go back because she does have a job and her benefits will be denied. She begins to assist Ms. Mason with packing her belongings to return to Mrs. Coleman’s house and comes across a picture. “She turned it over and involuntarily smiled at the smiling child in old-fashioned dress. "This little girl," she said, "its Mrs. Coleman, isn't it?" The old woman did not look up. Her voice was still listless. "That was my daughter." The investigator dropped the photograph on the bed as if it were a hot coal. (West).

In this story, the mindset of the Passer has transformed. Mrs. Coleman has wholly converted into the person she pretends to be. In doing this, she has become the aggressor, even toward her mother. She has begun to treat her mother in the way that made her transition to White. Her lie becomes her truth, and she begins to punish her mother because her phenotype allows such behavior. Triple Consciousness as seen in this story has encapsulated Mrs. Coleman, destroying all connection to anything of the past.

## **Conclusion**

Triple Consciousness is the coming full circle of an innate consciousness that Black people who can pass possess. This consciousness is bought on due to the dominant White society’s insistent hold on the Black race. It is through the half smiles, cunning looks and secret thoughts that this consciousness lives. It lives in secrecy, exposing its juxtaposition only when safe. Passers conform to a new reality but it is at a price. They live in and with a new consciousness that can either transform or destroy them. It is the mindset of the Passer that determines the outcome.

The films discussed here, *Lost Boundaries*, *Pinky*, and *Veiled Aristocrats*, all conclude that the Blacks depicted in them are in search of pride in their race. If this existed, they would lose their need to pass. They entered these secret lives to survive, not because they were disgusted or disgraced by their race. All three movies recognized the hardships experienced by Blacks and refused to show Blacks in a negative light. The films show the harshness of society's treatment of Black people, and underscore the disadvantages. In these movies, Passers wear Whiteness like a uniform: White by day, Black by night. Though there are casualties, family members and friends, in the lives of the people who felt no choice but to do this, it is worth it to a person who felt there is no other option than to pass. This departure of self and reincarnation into someone else is of no consequence to them. However, it is living with Triple Consciousness that can destroy their inner being and soul. In the case of *Imitation of Life*, it is the internalized racism that affects Sarah Jane at a young age.

In all of the movies, there is no exact answer to the problem of racial passing. No director could resolve the reasons for passing. No director dared to take racism head on and say, "This must stop, we must act now!" However, they did all expose that the issue needs to be addressed. They all proved that the Passer existed. Passers have been and will always survive in America so long as there is racial prejudice. Today, Passers have extended beyond the Black community. The directors of these films wanted to inform America about the truth, needs and reasoning's behind passing. They want to educate viewers and prompt them to respond. Through film, the directors were able to reach all audiences. Black audiences are very aware of passing. White audiences, who viewed these films as solely entertainment pieces, have to be concerned as it brings into question who among them are White.

*Lost Boundaries*, *Pinky*, *Veiled Aristocrats* and *Imitation of Life* challenged the social norms of the society of that day. These films were produced at a time when the United States,



especially the south, was in a desperate need of social reform. Though the directors and producers of these films were not out on the front line picketing with protesters, they were in the studio producing and creating these films to get awareness out. These films spoke to the freedom struggle. They did not give a resolution to the problem, but they informed America that there was a war being fought among our own people. We cannot truly be free unless all of us are free. These films spoke to segregation as a culture.

Passers have existed as long as slavery and other forms of racial oppression. So long as there is a need for equality, these people will never go away and the reasons for passing will never disappear. The reasons for passing will never disappear. Though Passers were the best-kept secret, they did and do exist. Hollywood exposed them and their motives. Also White directors' limited knowledge, can only give a vague look at their existence. However, for the post- World War II period (1949), an excellent job was done in sharing their life with the world. Werker, Kazan, Sirk and Micheaux went to new heights in informing the world about a presence that plagued them. Oscar Micheaux introduced this reality to society as early as 1932. Racial hatred is predominant in all movies and especially the contempt of self.

The works of all the writers and directors discussed here have documented the need, desires, and reasons why Passers have no choice but to switch. Black history in America is traumatic, and only the strong survive. Equality is just a word. To survive, we must stand up and fight and use what we have. Passers used skin color and phenotype to succeed. They are not sellouts. They are not traders. They are survivors. They risked their lives for what they believed in. They gave themselves the opportunities the American dream did not. Passers are stronger than Blacks and Whites for they are both. They dominate Triple Consciousness and carry it as an emblem only known to them. The weight of clandestineness is massive, and the owner defines the reward.

In the end, the issue of White domination is still central. Passers have found the escape route and plan. They have become them. Dissatisfaction with your fellow man who has never presented himself as your equal has developed. How do you crush this line of divide that keeps you down? Richard Wright suggests an answer to this query. In his autobiography *Black Boy*, he speaks of the idea of unity among men:

I began to wonder if a solution of unity was possible. My life as a Negro in America had led me to feel-though my helplessness had made me try to hide it from myself-that the problem of human unity was more important than bread, more important than physical living itself; for I felt that without a common bond uniting men, without a continuous current of shared thought and feeling circulating through the social system, like blood coursing through the body, there could be no living worthy of being called human. (Wright, *Boy* 302)

Passers have found a solution. It may not be the solution for all, but it can put a patch on the sore to keep it from festering. Passers' only issue is survival and for them this is what passing means. However, for each Passer, it is whether they are strong enough to survive the sigh of Triple Consciousness.

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