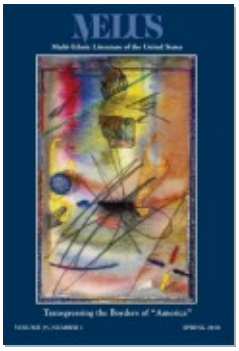
Near Black: White-to-Black Passing in American Culture (review)



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MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the U.S., Volume 35, Number 1, Spring 2010, pp. 190-192 (Review)

Published by Oxford University Press
DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/mel.0.0078

Near Black: White-to-Black Passing in American Culture. Baz Dreisinger. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008. 224 pages. $80.00 cloth; $24.95 paper.

Passing narratives have long been a fixture of American literature. For African American authors, plots of racial mobility have been used to expose the permeability of racial boundaries and to reveal the irrationality of racial categorization, while for many white authors, passing narratives have expressed fears of racial contamination as well as voyeuristic fantasies of blackness. Our interest in stories of passing, whether fictional or autobiographical, has not waned, and the popularity of recent memoirs, novels, and films depicting passing and mixed raciality attests to this fact. Baz Dreisinger's study, *Near Black: White-to-Black Passing in American Culture* (2008), capitalizes on the enduring curiosity surrounding the transgression of racial boundaries. While passing has mostly been thought of as a black-to-white affair, Dreisinger focuses on those crossing the color line in the direction of white-to-black. Her investigation of white-to-black passing provides a compelling perspective on past and current perceptions of race in American culture.

Dreisinger sets the parameters of her study by positing white-to-black passing as a commonality rather than an anomaly. She distinguishes between black and white passing, explaining that white passing is about neither deception nor survival. White passing is not even exactly about successfully becoming black. For Dreisinger, white-to-black passing is about those "moments of slippage in which whites perceive themselves, or are perceived by others as losing their whiteness and 'acquiring' blackness" (2). According to Dreisinger, this slippage can occur because of physical appearance, as in the case of John Howard Griffin's *Black Like Me* (1961), as well as by way of "cultural and social transformations" (3), as with musicians Mezz Mezzrow and Johnny Otis. There is no "uniform mode of white passing" (6), a fact that is essential to the effectiveness of *Near Black*. The variety of passing narratives and the range of racial mobility within them allows Dreisinger to use white-to-black passing to destabilize race as a category and theorize the color line in a more useful way. Her goal becomes "recognizing the potency and longevity of the white passing myth [as] crucial to our understanding of how whites and blacks look upon each other, whether with awe, fear, desire—or all three" (14).

Chapter One, "White Panic and White Passing: Slavery and Reconstruction," takes up this project through an analysis of Mark Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894) and George Washington Cable's "Salome Miller, The White Slave" (1889). Following theorists such as Barbara Browning and Eric Lott, Dreisinger demonstrates how these narratives reveal cultural notions about the contagious nature of blackness and the fragility of whiteness. Salome Miller, the classic example of the white person sold into slavery, epitomizes this idea. Later, in the absence of slavery, the fear of racial interchangeability remained a prominent concern, as miscegenation became the focus of white anxiety. Dreisinger continues to examine this defining fear in subsequent chapters, but in the second chapter, which focuses on Charles Chesnutt's short story "Mars Jeems's Nightmare" (1899), Griffin's *Black Like Me*, and Melvin Van Peebles's film *Watermelon Man* (1970), she studies narratives that dramatize both black and white fantasies of white-to-black passing. In Chesnutt and Van Peebles, a black fantasy of white passing is explored in which white men experience blackness as a nightmare, while in Griffin, we see a white fantasy of passing meant to satisfy curiosity about segregated black existence. In these cases of passing, the men return to whiteness wholly transformed or do not return at all (Jeff Gerber of *Watermelon Man* remains black). As Dreisinger explains, Griffin's experience with blackness demonstrates that "his white and black selves are not separated by skin tone," which he has voluntarily altered. This fear, though, is ameliorated by the divided nature of black and white space. Dreisinger concludes that "skin-dye" passing narratives like these are ultimately conservative and mollifying, proving "comfortable . . . for those who do not envision a blurred line between white and black—for those who see race as something that is, so to speak, skin deep" (69).

The second half of *Near Black* focuses on disruptions of the conservative white-to-black passing narrative. Grace Halsell's passing experiment in *Soul Sister* (1999) provides Dreisinger an opportunity to discuss the sexual dimension of racial identity. Locating racial threat in the black male, Halsell's narrative becomes a basis for understanding cultural movements such as the Beat movement and hip-hop, in which a gendered form of white-to-black passing has been instrumental. Mezzrow and Otis, the two main figures discussed in Chapter Four, for example, are white musicians—one of Russian Jewish heritage, the other Greek—who came to prominence playing black music in the 1950s and 1960s. Their careers illustrate how proximity, cultural adoption (vernacular language and intermarriage), and simple assertion of racial identity served as an entry point to blackness. Dreisinger uses Mezzrow and Otis to highlight the complex condition of contemporary white male hip-hop figures such as Eminem,

MC Serch, Kid Rock, and Bubba Sparxxx, who have engaged in similar forms of passing, although with an important distinction: each has used his proximity to blackness to define his own whiteness.

In her final chapter and in the epilogue, Dreisinger uses this distinction to offer us a view of passing and racial identity in the "post-racial" moment, when white-to-black passing is never a fully completed project of racial transformation. As Dreisinger explains, for white passers to "claim blackness legitimately, they must simultaneously claim whiteness" (129). This kind of analysis is the strength of *Near Black*. Dreisinger uses white-to-black passing to theorize racial identity in ways that can be helpful in untangling the confusing claims we make about race—that it is both a fiction and an undeniable reality, that it is consequential but not essential. *Near Black* helps reveal the ways racial boundaries are defined, sustained, transgressed, and balanced through the dialectical tension between various racial subjectivities. Dreisinger compels us to consider how narratives of passing can function progressively only when the passing is "persistently self-reflexive" (149). For her, this means being conscious of the ways racial identity is indelibly preserved as one moves into another racial realm. This cultural "double consciousness," which Dreisinger labels a legacy of the "color line" (150), shows us who we really are in plain black and white.

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