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## On *Passing. Anatomies and Physiologies of Identity Transformations*

Review by Réka M. Cristian

Edited by [Mihaela Mudure](#) and [Aparajita Nanda](#), *Passing. Anatomies and Physiologies of Identity Transformations* is a print-and-digital form volume supported by the Fund for Supporting Research of Babes-Bolyai University and published in 2024 by Presa Universtară Clujeană (Cluj University Press), founded in 1993 at Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca. The volume is entirely open access, available in pdf format at the following link: <http://www.editura.ubbcluj.ro/bd/ebooks/pdf/4396.pdf>

The editors of the book aim to “bring a new perspective on the much-discussed problem of passing” (14) by shedding light on the politics of re-presenting this phenomenon as a medical metaphor in English-language literatures, a still pertinent topic today, as it was in the twentieth century. The concept of racial passing has been the focus of many belletristic works, especially in American literature, since Nella Larsen’s 1929 novel with the same title, including Philp Roth’s *The Human Stain*, James Weldon Johnson’s *Autobiography of a Colored Man*, Kate Chopin’s *Désirée’s Baby*, Mark Twain’s *The Tragedy of Pudd’nhead Wilson*, Fanny Hurst’s *Imitation of Life*, Langston Hughes’ “Passing” and “Who’s Passing for Who,” Regina Anderson’s *The Man Who Passed: A Play in One Act*, alongside many English and European works such as Francis Spufford’s *Golden Hill* or Edith Hahn Beer’s *The Nazi Officer’s Wife: How One Jewish Woman Survived the Holocaust*— to name only a few.

The vast concept of passing holds a spectrum of versions of boundary crossings such as cultural, ideological, class, caste, sexual, religious, digital, vocal, ethnic, and lately even that of posthumanist anthropomorphic passing, with many other variations on the way. Accordingly, performing passing is thus wide topic that would have involved volumes to discuss it. The present volume has chosen to talk about a few of the above-mentioned ones by grouping them in three categories in a noteworthy book for those who are interested in reading current approaches to issues and applied theories and readings of passing.

Erving Goffman and Daniel G. Renfrow discussed the concept of passing at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, emphasizing the idea of multi-dimensional motion of various cultural performances, with special focus on the narrative treatment of the border crossing strategy. The editors of the present volume invoke primarily the works of Jandel Crutchfield, Martha Cutter, Katharina Gerund, Elaine Ginsberg, Van Gosse, Randall Kenner, Josephine Lee, Kathleen Pfeiffer, Ella Shohat, Maria Sanchez, Linda Schlossberg, Werner Sollors, Gayle Wald, among others for their theoretical frame of the concept. However, reading narratives on passing can be more practically seen as performative actions, more precisely as *performance* in the sense of which Enikő Bollobás explained it in *They Aren’t Until I Call Them. Performing the Subject in American Literature* (2010). According to Bollobás, the passing of gender and race, for example, are “visibly constructed in a catachrestic manner, lacking both a literal referent where ontologies might be located and an ‘original’ which might be copied and cited” (167), an approach that would have further benefitted this volume on passing.

In terms of book structure, *Passing* is divided in three parts. After an “Introduction” authored by the editors of the book, the first part discusses the issue of passing boundaries; the second chapter of the volume focuses on gender passing, while the third part envisages the topic of Jewish perspectives on passing. The authors of the edited book are researchers from Hungary, Romania, United Kingdom, Russia and the United States.

The book's more general "Passing Boundaries" part begins with Ivan Balogh's text on "An Indian in White Man's Camp," which analyzes Native American Identity in Johnny Cash's work, with special emphasis on the Cherokee, the Mohawk and the Seneca, explaining the deradicalization of Cash as celebrity singer by mid-1970s and his legacy in the current context of him being accused of cultural appropriation. Next, Claudia Davidson-Novosivschei's "Coming Out from Forced Collective Passing in Peter Carey's *A Long Way from Home*" is a work on the Australian genocide and on the stolen generation phenomenon. Written by a white person the essay sheds light on the protagonist's coming out and its uprooting in a situation in which it is very difficult to define oneself. Alongside the boundary crossing theme of passings is Adina Dragoș's text on David Mitchell's post-apocalyptic *Cloud Atlas*. She claims that a boundary "is not merely an inherent feature of the individual's identity, but rather a purchasable feature" with a value "contingent upon the system which sells it" (91). The last work of this part is Aparajita Nanda's essay, which tackles the Indian writer, Kiran Desai's *Inheritance of Loss* novel that chronicles the life of Anglophile Indian judge, Jemubhai Patel into "his delusions of whiteness" (99) as postcolonial passer, a discussion based mostly on Homi Bhabha's strategies of mimicry and other fitting postcolonial approaches.

The part on the more focused "Gendered Passing" starts with Elisabeta Simona Catană's work on "The Dynamics of Identity in Nella Larsen's *Passing*," where Catană focuses on the dynamics of Irene and Clare, which have different views on passing. Following, Monica Manolachi's essay on "*The Fifth Figure* by Jean 'Binta' Breeze: From 'Bush Children' to 'Rainbow Children' tackles the combined issue of racial, gender and class passing in the Caribbean region through the Jamaican storyteller's work, which was first published in 2006. The third essay in the second part is Mihaela Mudure's "Passing the Burden of Masculinity in 'She Was the Weaker.'" Mudure discusses the Egyptian Nawal El Saadawi's 1979 story in terms of applied passing in the context of a girl's virginity by emphasizing that patriarchal culture's obsession with female virginity in a certain case actually "demands passing" (181). The gender passing is the topic of Ana Voicu's study on Sarah Waters's works, *Tipping the Velvet* and *The Night Watch*, where the researcher maps various narrative strategies of character survival.

The third part of the book zooms in Jewish perspectives on passing, beginning with Alexandru Bar's study on Tristan Tzara and Marcel Janco's experience in Romanian society through assimilation and adoption of alternative identities in order to evade antisemitism during the first four decades of the twentieth century, to pass as members of the cultural and religious majority. Anna Branczeiz's introspection on John Berryman's work entitled "I Don't Look Jewish, Do I?" concentrates on Berryman's identification with Jews in a reformulation of identity and sheds light on new shades of meaning by turning the attention to "the oppressed minorities, to the tragedy of the Holocaust and to those who dared to fight against any injustice" (261). Additionally, Ștefana Iosif's "Between Passover and Passing: Considerations on Visibility and Jewish Identity" engages in a variety of iterations of passing as a social phenomenon, underlining the zones between invisibility and assimilation in the European and American context, with special emphasis of passing narratives during the Holocaust. The third part of the book ends with George Prokhorov's study on Arkadii Kovner's *From the Jew's Notes* (1909) that indicate the importance of flexibility in remembering, re-shaping and self-identification in the autobiographical context.

Although, as previously mentioned, the book is far from being a comprehensive atlas of the readings on passing, it is an important academic documentation of current researches into the matter. An imprint of an international project, the book indicates that discourses on the complex phenomenon of passing are still relevant in various countries, with newer additions to the corpus of texts that can be read from this perspective. The 2024 volume on passing published by Presa Universtară Clujeană is a good handbook for BA, MA and doctoral students researching and writing on this concept, and for readers interested in various forms of cultural studies that involve passing as phenomenon.

## Work Cited

Bollobás, Enikő. (2010) *They Aren't Until I Call Them. Performing the Subject in American Literature*. Frankfurt am Main, Berlin, Bruxelles, New York, Oxford, Wien: Peter Lang.