

Shifting the Social Identity: Passing as a Categorisation of the Self in a Stratified Society in Langston Hughes' Short Fiction

Dr. Prachi Behrani

Independent Researcher; Ph.D. in English Literature

Dr. Nandini C Sen

Professor, Department of English, Bharati College, University of Delhi

Abstract

Racial Passing can be viewed as a conscious masquerade by the African-American mulatto to shift their categorisation in the society, in pursuit of opportunities and acceptance. Through the analysis of Langston Hughes' short fiction, "Passing" and "Who's Passing for Who?", this research article seeks to interrogate the politics of racial pretense and the rationale behind it. Drawing from the Social Identity Theory of Tajfel and Turner, and W.E.B. Du Bois' concept of "double-consciousness" this study delineates the manner in which the coloured population responds to a threatened selfhood in a stratified society. In the first story, Passing is observed as a subversion of racism, and the second story expands the horizon of the same from merely a racial masquerade to a garb of social behaviour. The stories viewed in the light of the aforementioned theories aid in exploring and explicating the perplexity and the woes experienced by the mixed-race American due to their dual heritage and an ambiguous identity. The analysis puts forth the argument that though the coloured population was "passing" in the strive for opportunities, the veil came at the cost of alienation from one's home and heritage. It also aims to depict the tragic fate and the tumult of the African-American mulatto in light of the confusion created due to the indistinctness in the colour-line, due to the act of Passing.

Keywords: Social-Identity Theory, racial passing, double-consciousness, identity, Langston Hughes

Introduction

The Reconstruction era brought with itself legal rights for the Black American; however, the privileges and opportunities continued to belong to the White population (Bullock 79). Even as late as the Harlem Renaissance, the social conditions upheld a barrier against racial equality and served to implement discrimination through laws of segregation, such as the Jim Crow alongside hate groups such as the Ku Klux Klan. The Coloured folk were free

from the ties of slavery but not from the shackles of racism and oppression, meaning that they were only “quasi-free”, thrust in the middle ground where they were “not Chattel, not Free” (Hornsby 105). Thus, the Coloured people found themselves in a quagmire, unable to decipher if they were chained or not. The Mulatto, here is the epitome of life on the Colour line, divided not only by his/her skin colour and race, but also by the roots of his family. Thus, in striving for opportunities, “the light-skinned mulattos started to cross the 'barrier' that was set up between black and white societies” and began to Pass for White (Watson 2).

The Mulatto, generally defined as the descendant of a Black and a White individual, is specifically termed as a “cultural hybrid, as a stranded personality living in the margins of fixed status” by the sociologists (Bullock 78). Always struggling between two different identities originating from two different cultures and races, the Mulatto is termed to be a “normal biological occurrence but a sociological problem in the United States” (78). The traumas of the Coloured American often position them as the “Tragic Mulatto” in literature, where the phrase often denotes a bi-racial character, mostly the offspring of a White father and a Coloured Mother. Often light-skinned, the Mulatto is depicted to suffer hardships due to his/her mixed-blood identity (p.78). Due to their fair skin, the Mulattos often indulged in the act of Passing, where the Coloured people often pretended to be White. Passing has often been described as the act of “crossing the colour line”, especially in the postbellum era when the “black bourgeoisie” aspired to “Whiteness” and the privileges that came along with it (Watson 1-3).

The works of the Harlem Renaissance writer, Langston Hughes, often discuss the themes of the tragic Mulatto and racial Passing, in addition to discussing ideas of identity, humour, hardships, and much more. Being a versatile expert in the realm of writing, Hughes was all, “a journalist, historian, essayist, translator, playwright, lyricist, founder of a theatre group, and editor” (Brown 253). Interestingly, the themes of the Mulatto and Passing are spread across all forms of his art. He discusses the tumult of the Mulatto in his poems “Cross” (1925), and “Mulatto” (1927), his short stories “An African Morning” (1952) and “Father and Son” (1934) which was written from the plot of his play with the same name as his poem, “Mulatto” (1935) and further crafted into an opera called “The Barrier” (1949). (Davis, 1955, p.195). The theme of Passing has also been explored in his autobiography *The Big Sea* (1940), his poems “Cross” and “Passing” (1925), his short stories “Passing” (1934) and “Who’s Passing for Who” (1952), his novels and plays are also adept with the traces of the same (Bennett, 2000, 670). Though the themes often intersect as

they originate from the same source, there is a fine line of distinction between them. While the Mulatto does not always refer to an individual Passing; “the Passing figure is a subset of the Mulatto” (Alolaiwi 298). The selected stories are observed to depict the fate of the “tragic mulatto” and the description of Passing as both a justification from the ones in a garb and a conflicting social obligation to survive. Though this research article only focuses on two short stories from the literary oeuvre of Hughes, it must be noted that the aforementioned themes are not confined only to the selected works.

The two forthcoming sections analyse Hughes' “Passing” (1934) and “Who's Passing for Who?” (1952) respectively, in light of the Social Identity theory and the 1903 Duboisian model of “double consciousness” (Turner& Tajfel, 1986; Bois 2007). The basis of the former is that one's identity is defined by the social category one belongs to, and this group “provides a definition of who one is in terms of the defining characteristics of the category—a self-definition that is a part of the self-concept” (Hogg et al. 259). Thus, the social identity becomes a protocol for “self-regulation”, governing one's behaviour, thoughts, and feelings, also leading to stereotypical “in-group” and “out-group” behaviours (260). In the African-American context, if the Mulatto associates with the Coloured social group, he/she would regulate one's behaviour similarly to the patterns noticed in the group. However, if the Mulatto chooses to Pass to be White, or shift the social identity, the behavioural patterns would change accordingly. It is vital to note that, as per the theory of Turner and Tajfel, this shift occurs in the case of a “threatened social identity”, which may be the case with the marginalised groups or, in the scope of the research, the African-American individual, specifically (Worchel et al. 19). This deliberate shift of identity, however, raises the question of the person's knowledge of the change. This consciousness of looking at oneself through the glance of an outsider in America is described by W.E.B. Du Bois in his *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) as “Double Consciousness” (8). In the tumult of a twoness, the Coloured person measures himself against the scale of “a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity”, or the White world (8). The “American Negro”, finding himself in both social groups, attempts to uphold his dual identity without losing sight of any (9). In other words, the Mulatto's association with two different social groups came with the power and the simultaneous confusion of social shift and fluctuation.

The aforementioned stories, in light of the theories in question, depict that racial Passing emerges from a tumult of identity due to their “double-consciousness”, and leads to a conscious shift in social categorisation in pursuit of opportunities otherwise reserved for the White population of the society. Focusing on the politics of Passing as a defence mechanism in a racist

society, the stories seek to question if the masquerade is merely limited to a racial crossing of the colour-line, or does it also expand to pretence and behavioural shifts as a means of “social comparison” (Worchel et al. 20). Through the response of the protagonists to the stratified society, this study interrogates what is of prime importance to the Mulatto, one’s identity, home, and heritage, or social elevation and acceptance.

“Passing”

Written in the form of a letter by a son to his mother, this short story depicts the tale of Jack, a Coloured man Passing to be White. Though referred to as the “shallow offspring’s apologies”, the letter justifies the masquerade that the marginalised section of society had to put up to attain the basic rights of a citizen and equality in one’s profession (Mayberry15). Jack begins with a tone of self-condemnation, calling himself a “dog” for not speaking to his own mother on the street, justifying that he would have done it if he didn’t have a girl along (Hughes 46). Thus, suggesting that it wasn’t merely a career, but one’s social life and prospects of love that were hampered by being Coloured in America. He highlights that he wouldn’t have to Pass to keep a “good job” if the White people liked their Coloured counterparts, but they simply assumed the latter to be “thieves and liars, or else diseased—consumption and syphilis” (46). This serves as an appropriate example of the reaction of a group with a “lower subjective status” in comparison to the others, which Tajfel and Turner discuss in great detail in their 1986 chapter “The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behaviour” (Worchel et al. 19). The reaction of Jack refers to the aspect of “Individual Mobility”, wherein:

Individuals may try to leave, or dissociate themselves from their erstwhile group. This is probably more likely the more they approach “social mobility” pole of the continuum of belief-systems...This strategy usually implies attempts, on an individual basis, to achieve upward social mobility, to pass from a lower-status to a higher-status group. (19)

In other words, Jack had perceived the “Black” world to be the “lower-status group” and the “White” world, due to the presence of opportunities, and dominance over the former, as the “higher-status group”. In light of this, he decided to completely dissociate himself from his mother, his Coloured family, and his roots.

However, on shifting the group and beginning to Pass, he comes to know of this “false propaganda” and the terrible tales being circulated about

his people (Hughes 46). This draws towards the assertion of Tajfel and Turner that the evaluation of one's group was done in reference to the comparison held with the other group (Worchel et al. 16). Thus, Jack suggests, after being a part of the "in-group" Whites, that the White population considered themselves superior as a result of conscious belittlement of the Coloured. Jack proudly tells his mother of the \$65 he makes a week in addition to being a prospective candidate for the "chief office secretary", but in extreme humility accepts that he could be in the place of the "Coloured boy porter who sweeps out the office" if he wasn't dark-skinned like him (46). Jack is aware that despite his talents and accomplishments, a Coloured person wouldn't be hired even for a clerk's post, no matter how smart. This reflects his "double consciousness" where he views his primal identity through the eyes of the White Americans, who measured the "out-group" with "amused contempt and pity" (Bois 8). By Passing, not only does he seek privileges otherwise denied to him, but also subverts the power structures by deceiving the boss who would detest having a Coloured secretary (46).

Despite the joys and the perks that Passing offered him, Jack is ridden with guilt and feels "mighty bad" about ignoring his mother in the public, who, he believes, knows that it is for the best and in fact encourages him to pass (Hughes 46-47) He confesses that what makes Passing difficult, was "having to deny your own family when you see them" even though both him and his mother realise that it was for the best (p.46). Jack's guilt originates from his dual identity and the consciousness of belonging to two social groups and ethnicities. His simultaneous co-existence in a "low-status and high-status group" makes him experience a "psychological tension derived from their motivation to improve their social identity while still belonging to a low-status group" (Chipeaux et al. 2). In other words, his racial masquerade might be able to provide him with social opportunities and elevation, but it also brought forth a culpability of not only belonging to a marginal group but also of keeping it clandestine.

Not only does his mother understand his Passing, she also supports him by refraining from speaking to him in the street (Hughes 46). In fact, Jack points out it was she who "backed me up, and told me to go ahead and get all I could out of life" (47). Thus, it isn't merely Jack's alienation from his family, but also his mother's strength that highlights the woes associated with Passing. Mayberry describes Jack's mother as a "tragic mulatta... who gives up her son" for him to earn a living (15). In addition to his mother, there also exists an estrangement from his siblings, who, unlike Jack, didn't get the privilege of a White skin to Pass for White, nor did they get a college education like him because their White father died, leaving all his wealth to his White family

(Hughes 47-48). Though his mother is depicted to be proud of her roots, enough to forsake the rights and the aid her husband's White family owed them, she does not prohibit her son from breaking ties with his heritage; in fact, she encourages him.

The Social Identity Theory serves as a parallel to Jack's condition with a hypothesis of a stratified social group with social hierarchies of "unequal division of objective resources and a corresponding status system" with "weak prohibitions to Passing" (Worchel et al. 20). It points out that since "individual mobility" suggests "disidentification," the subordinate group is likely to lose its cohesiveness (21). In specific terms, Jack's Passing to be White, implies a reduction of the family's attachment and cohesiveness, as can be noticed in the disdain of his siblings with regard to his masquerade (Hughes 47). Jack doesn't understand why they were not happy about his act of Passing since he was not harming them in any way. Tajfel and Turner explain this in their theory, affirming that the weakening of "subjective attachment" due to an individual's mobility to a high-status group can cause dual damage. First, it might lead to a blur in the vision of "distinct group interests corresponding to the distinct group identity"; and second, it might "create obstacles to mobilizing group members for collective action over their common interests" (Worchel et al. 21). With respect to the short stories, the first damage relates to the specific interests of the members of the subordinate group, for instance, the siblings of Jack, who aim for either the skin colour to have the privilege to pass, or educational benefits like Jack, which they were devoid of (Hughes 47-48). The second problem suggests that the members of the low-status group, who do not mobilise, or cannot mobilise, such as Jack's siblings in the story, may try to hinder the ones Passing for collective benefit rather than an individual's specific well-being. Jack's doubt about Glads and Charlie being as tactful as his mother in being oblivious of him in the street with a girl points out to the second claim of the Theory as per the aforementioned hypothesis (47-48). This can also be viewed as an "intergroup conflict", attached to the notion of "renegade" or "traitor", where the existing members of the group might scorn the one trying to shift or elevate his identity (Worchel et al.10). His mother's reaction, however, does not align with the response of the group as mentioned in the story, depicting a mother's selflessness, and having the primal interest in the child's well-being, while also highlighting the "pain of miscegenation as the mulatta unwittingly passes her tragic alienation onto her child" (Mayberry 15).

Jack ends the letter with a relief that there was nothing that could stop letters from "crossing the colour-line", and even if they couldn't meet in public, they could at least write to each other (Hughes 48). His longing to

connect with his mother and the simultaneous zeal to make a place for himself in the White world of opportunities demonstrate that “individuals with multiple identities do not necessarily disengage from their low-status group” but attempt to cope with the various roles and self-hoods (Chipeaux et al. 3). Though the son claims to have found a “good place” in the personal and professional spheres of his life and is on the verge of a promotion and matrimony, his home and family are pledged as the collateral. Thus, suggesting that the White garb and a higher social identity weren't merely a means to attain privileges associated with Whiteness, but a tumult of a dual selfhood, a mess of pottage, for which the Coloured Americans had to sell their “birth right”, or their original identity group. (Johnson 100).

“Who's Passing for Who”

Published in Hughes' 1952 anthology, *Laughing to Keep from Crying*, this short story is often claimed as his “most discussed passing narrative” (Bennett 676). Unlike the aforementioned narrative of *Passing*, this story does not classify the character as a true Mulatto. Located in a speakeasy of Harlem, the story narrates the tale of the confusion that surrounded the act of putting up a racial masquerade where no one could decipher who was passing for whom, or as the title states, “Who's Passing for Who”. The story begins with the acknowledgement that the narrator belonged to a minority race, thus suggesting that he was Coloured (Hughes 163). He refers to a Coloured social worker Caleb Johnson, who was considered a “bore” by the narrator's friends belonging to “Harlem's literary bohemia during the Negro Renaissance” (163). The narrator and his friends are met by Caleb in the company of White schoolteachers from Iowa who appear to be amazed at meeting Black writers and painters (163). Not only do the narrator and his friends put forth a fitting response to the White people's stereotypical image of the Coloured folk, but they also answer with a “bored nonchalance” to highlight their disregard of prejudice (164). However, along with their pride that many talented dark-skinned writers existed in Harlem, came the urge to “impress both Caleb and his White guests” by their literary knowledge (164). The narrator's response to the White guests serves as a rebuttal to the subtle racism projected by them. Thus, as per the norms of the Social Identity Theory, the Coloured artists' knowledge of being a “minority” highlights that they had understood the social stratification, and found themselves in an “inferior” social system, while the White guests who were astonished on meeting educated and talented Blacks, belonged to a “superior” section (Worchel et al. 10). Comprehending the hierarchy based on the unequal distribution of resources such as “power, prestige and wealth”, which Tajfel and Turner describe as scarce and the pervasive ethnocentrism, the narrator and his friends form an “out-group

antagonism”, hoping to not only counter the stereotypical belittlement but also to impress the superior group with competition (11). In addition to this, the first of the three major principles of the evaluation of one’s group in comparison with the rest states, “Individuals strive to achieve or maintain a positive social identity” (16). In other words, people try to enhance their self-opinion and self-esteem, which can be noticed in the narrator’s conceit while proudly displaying their knowledge of eminent writers and declaring themselves to be agreeable to all social groups and races (Hughes 163).

The focus of the story shifts from the “perverse nature” of the narrator and his friends to the source of the story’s climax. When a Coloured man turns violent to an apparently White woman, one of Caleb’s White guests begins to protest, only to realise that the victim was not only Coloured, but also the abuser’s wife (Hughes 164). However, what made the White man from Iowa relent and apologise was the knowledge of the former, which is questioned by the Coloured artist who asks, “Don’t you think a woman needs defending from a brute, no matter what race she may be?” (164). The painters disregard sprouts from both, the knowledge that the visitor only intervened owing to his assumption that it was a “Black man” harming a “White woman”, and from his surrender on realising her true identity. Though the idea of a woman “needing defence” also paves the way for a feminist discourse, the focus of the critics lies on the social stature and the identity group of the dark-skinned woman, who was subjected to a “double burden of race and gender” (Belluscio 228). The fact that the question of a White woman’s identity was put on a higher pedestal than that of a Coloured woman proves the discourse of “double jeopardy” where the society placed the latter at the bottom of the social hierarchy (Beal 168). In addition to this, the Coloured painter’s disregard of the White man’s support only for the women of his race highlights his disdain for discriminatory behaviours among social groups. The narrator, at the beginning of the story claims to be “too broad minded to be bothered with the questions of colour”, and their response not only proves their previous assertion but also aligns with the second principle of self-reflection of groups vis-a vis the other, which states that positive social identity is perceived with a “favourable comparison” as opposed to the other group (Worchel et al. 16). Through social comparison of having the positive connotation of an impartial attitude, the narrator and his friends openly state their aversion to the White group, despite belonging to the “inferior” social group (16). On the other hand, the White man’s discrimination, or the “ingroup favouritism” showcases a means to attain “positive distinctiveness for one’s own group in the social situation” (Fraser et al. 529). This represents the competition between both the two groups to appear superior to the other.

The story further refers to Nella Larsen and James Weldon Johnson to bring to light the act of racial Passing. Attempting to “épater le bourgeois”, or to shock the bourgeoisie, the narrator and his friends begin sharing the knowledge of the countless “Negroes passing for White all over America” with Caleb and his White friends (Hughes 165). The tables turn when the White couple claims to be passing as well, for monetary benefits. The response of the White couple can be correlated with the third principle of the Social Identity Theory of self-evaluation, wherein “When social identity is unsatisfactory, individuals will strive to leave their existing group and join some more positively distinct group” (Worchel et al. 16) Thus, when condemned for their discriminatory behaviour, and with the simultaneous urge to trick the Coloured artists, the White couple shift their social identity and associate themselves with the same group as their counterparts. Not only does it take the “wind out” of the Coloured artists, but also makes them curse (Hughes 166). Bennett questions the hypocrisy of the narrator and points out:

“Before the action begins, the prolix and witty narrator introduces his friends and himself as “too broad-minded to be bothered with questions of color.” This statement sets up the dramatic irony that positions the narrator for his ultimate blunder: being fooled by the white Iowans. Although the narrator's bohemian world is meant to stand in contrast to the boring white folks from Iowa, Hughes eventually reverses the roles. The Iowans prove to be the tricksters, and the narrator must confront his own naiveté. That the narrator could not see through the Iowans' dissimulation” (677).

The narrator's previous claim is now depicted as false, and it also puts forth the idea that one couldn't ever decipher who had put on a masquerade and who hadn't. In addition to this, it highlights the confusion of the Black American artist, who, on one hand, didn't consider ideas of race vital in a social setting, but is shocked at not being able to recognise the people of his own group. This incident also connects the idea of a person Passing to the popular trope of the African-American trickster figure. Interestingly, the trickster is viewed as an archetypal figure “dangerously outside of societal boundaries” willing to “discombobulate the power figures” (Jeffries 292). Symmetrically, the marginalised Passing characters also serve to subvert the colour hierarchy by going against the authority of the White Americans and fooling them by attaining the opportunities otherwise reserved away from the Coloured citizen.

Similar to a trickster figure, who would “move about as a completely unstructured, chaotic free spirit”, the Passing characters, upon their confession, create chaos and hysteria among the entire group (Jeffries 292). Making

everybody laugh and drop down their garb of “professionally self-conscious “Negro” manners” and become “natural” in their behaviour, the White couple proves that the narrator and his friends were passing as much as them (Hughes 165). The difference being, that the White couple was Passing to be of another race, while the Coloured artists were passing off as more civilised and proper, feigning their true identity and behaviour. The narrator claims to become “natural” in the sense that they could now talk and joke “freely like colored folks do when there are no white folks around” (166). By stating this, he renders his previous assertion of being unaffected by matters of colour, futile and false, since their behaviour clearly depicted the contrary. This resonates with the dual sense of the idea of “double consciousness”, “the one created by racism; the other, by conflicting perspectives on life” (Bruce 306). This is reflected in the two forms of twoness demonstrated by the narrator in the story, first, is the knowledge of being a Coloured person in America, second, is the response created due to racism. Bruce points out that the difference between the senses lies in the element of one’s will. It can be better explained as, “The merging of African and American selves was, or at least could be, an act of will, and Du Bois so treated it. The merging of selves created by American racism was not” (307). While living in America, with African roots suggested a conscious merging of the identities, the feigned behaviour in front of the White people suggests a subconscious garb of identity (Hughes 166). However, both the intentional and the unintentional forms of merging of identity created a form of “double consciousness” for the Coloured people.

Post the merrymaking, when the couple bids adieu to the Coloured artists, the woman confesses that they were actually White, pretending to be Coloured. She proclaims, “We just thought we’d kid you by passing for colored a little while, just as you said Negroes sometimes pass for white” (Hughes 166). Not only does it shock the narrator and his friends, but it also renders them confused about matters of Passing and being unable to decipher who could be Passing for whom. Confusions like this, are what paved way for “complexion tests” such as the “Paper Bag Principle” and the “One Drop Rule”, where the former signifies a “degree of acceptance and inclusion (that is if one is fairer than the brown bag)” and the latter asserted that “the admixture of one race type and an inferior one results in a reversion to the “lower type”” (Kerr 272; Belluscio 94). Thus, proving that in addition to enforcing discriminatory laws, the Whites ensured that they weren’t fooled by Coloured Americans wishing to pass to attain the fundamental necessities otherwise denied to them. This also suggests that not only did the change in a social group lead to intergroup conflicts, but it was also frowned upon by the members of the other groups, especially the “high-status” groups joined by members of the “low-status” groups (Worchel et al. 10).

Conclusion

This research article aimed at discerning the representation and the treatment of the Passing Mulatto vis-à-vis the works of the Harlem Renaissance writer, Langston Hughes. The short stories in question delineate the multifaceted experiences of the mixed-blood protagonists. It showcases how the Coloured American often indulged in the act of racial Passing in search of better opportunities, social upliftment, and to evade discriminatory laws and behaviour. "Passing", the short fiction investigated in the first section of the article, depicts how the garb of Whiteness often resulted in estrangement from one's roots, family, and heritage leading to the woes and isolation of both the Mulatto and the people they are forced to distance themselves from, to an extent of public ignorance (Hughes 46-47). The second section, discussing "Who's Passing for Who", explains that the masquerade also served to create confusion as one couldn't ever decipher the true race or colour of a person, especially when the Coloured people wanted to behave differently, or more as "sophisticated" and "civilised" people in front of the White gentry (165). Thus, suggesting that Passing isn't merely limited to the garb of Whiteness in terms of one's skin colour, but also extended to the social behaviour. It also depicts the antagonism of the White Americans towards Passing, since it assisted the Mulatto to subvert the social laws of discrimination, which denied the fundamental rights to the Black population by fooling their White counterparts. Thus, the Passing character is often compared to the African-American trope of the "trickster" figure (Jeffries 292).

Both stories depict that the colour-line is easily penetrable, or that it is possible to shift one's social identity conveniently. Through an analysis of the Social Identity Theory, one may infer that "individual mobility" may take place only when the "intergroup boundaries are perceived as 'soft' and 'permeable'" (Fraser 673). In the case of Passing, the presence of a light skin colour ensures permeability and fluidity of members across the social groups. However, this shift has its drawbacks, such as the confusion of identity and selfhood, loss of one's heritage, and the antipathy of both the former group members and the group one aspires to belong to. On leaving a group, one may be called a "renegade" in addition to experiencing nostalgia for the previous social identity.

The quagmire of Passing also extends to the confusions associated with "Double-Consciousness", where Du Bois asserts that neither do the Black Americans hold the ambition to "Africanize America" by moulding the

country according to them, nor do they aim to “bleach” their “Negro Soul” by completely letting go of their identity (9). However, the act of Passing showcases a bleaching of identity along with a social shift, which may be due to the triple identity of the Passing Mulatto. Not only are the Passing Americans subjected to a duality on account of having African roots but residing in America, but also due to being Coloured Americans but masquerading to be White in appearance or behaviour.

This research article paves the way for further discussion concerning the Passing Mulatto, and scholarship on matters regarding the rationale and the consequences of Passing in a stratified society. Given the struggles associated with Passing, this research suggests that it wasn't an escape from discriminatory attitudes associated with race, but was a clandestine combat accompanied by conflicts of identity and alienation, and confusions of identification.

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