

Conference Paper

Racial Identity Choice and its Consequences: A Study on Elizabeth Alexander's Race

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ORCID:*Nur Saktiningrum*: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8369-986X>**Abstract**

Race, as people understand it, is something that you were born with. One was born with specific physical features that by social construction, define one's race. What if a person was born with physical features that enable him to choose whether to embrace the race defined by blood or the one defined by social construction? And are there any consequences of the choices made? This research studies the choice made by mulatto to pass as white and the consequences following the decision. The focus of the study is a poem written by Elizabeth Alexander entitled *Race* (2001). To answer the abovementioned questions, the poem is analyzed using a new historical approach. The approach enables the researcher to understand the historical background of and the author's perspective on racial passing depicted in the poem and its relation to the reality of racial passing in American society. The results show that there are external and internal factors that make it possible for an individual to pass as a member of a different race from what he was. The external factors include the biological taxonomy that identifies him as belonging to a dominant race and the social construction that classifies people based on their physical features. The internal factor is the passer's belief that by assuming a new racial identity, he will be able to lead a better life and be relieved from the oppression of the dominant race. Despite the privilege and opportunity that the new racial status can offer, racial passing can also bring some disadvantages such as the loss of the sense of belonging to the old racial identity, the feeling of insecurity, and the possibility of being disowned by one's family.

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1. Introduction

When Barack Obama was elected president for the first time, a lot of American colored people, particularly the African Americans, were overwhelmed with a surge of euphoria. They were having a high expectation that his political ascendancy would be a beacon of hope with the power of ending the racial discrimination they have been suffering since the outset of American slavery in the 17th century. Some of them even promoted



a discourse dubbed *postracialism*, which became popular at the beginning of its introduction to the public sphere. Post-racial view assumes that the United States has finally succeeded in freeing itself from discrimination, prejudice, and racial bias (Paccher, 2012). In the course of time, however, the assumption remains a mere assumption, without any evidence that race-based issues have been completely gone from American life. The fact that Obama was the president of the U.S.A. did not end racial profiling, prejudice, discrimination, and segregation, and not even the two terms of his presidency could wipe out those discriminatory practices.

Indeed, the above mentioned Obama's political ascendancy can be considered an epitome of the fulfillment of American Dream, which is supposedly not unattainable for all Americans, regardless of race and ethnicity. However, it is also an example of how America can be perceived as the land of paradox wherein the ideal culture it claims to value and the real culture it practices are often contradictory. In reality, despite the fact that people of African-American descent can secure the highest ruling position in the country, judgemental attitudes related to skin color in American society can still be frequently found in everyday social interaction. For African Americans, this condition has become a driving force for many of their decisions and actions in their lives. Many of them do not feel comfortable in their own skin. They can be overly self-conscious of their physical characteristics, unsettled by the way they look, confused about their self-identity, or can even decide to define themselves differently. Some of them can pass as someone with different racial identity in an environment where they are categorized based solely on their physical appearance and the social construction established by the majority. This kind of case is known as racial passing, which was a particularly widespread occurrence during Harlem Renaissance (Brown, 2006: 218). Historically, racial passing describes a situation in which an African American with relatively light skin because of his multiracial descent, e.g. mulatto, is identified or passes as white and thus has a chance of experiencing the privilege generally enjoyed by white people that is otherwise inaccessible for him if he is identified as an African American.

The questions to explore in this context are: (1) What does it take for an American to experience a racial passing? and What consequences does the passing have on the individual who pass as member of another race (the passer)? In the present article, these questions are critically addressed from a social perspective that is represented in a poem by Elizabeth Alexander titled "Race." For this purpose, the poem is examined as a literary response to the social issues related to racial passing in America. It is closely read in a new historical framework that allows the poem to be regarded as one

among many discourses through which racial passing phenomenon in American history is foregrounded and perceived.

Lois Tyson describes that

For new historicism, the literary text and the historical situation from which it emerged are equally important because text (the literary work) and context (the historical conditions that produced it) are mutually constitutive: they create each other. Like the dynamic interplay between individual identity and society, literary texts shape and are shaped by their historical contexts. (2006: 291–292)

Alexander's "Race" is structured as a poem with a story about race-related experiences, and in the aforesaid theoretical context, the poem offers a specific interpretation of—or a case representation of—racial passing. Accordingly, the analysis of "Race" in the present study is essentially an analysis of its text as an individual's way—i.e. the poet's way—of seeing the subject in question. Her perspective on it reflects how the American sociohistorical background of racial passing has shaped her literary expression of it and how her poem enriches the discourses related to racial passing experiences in American society.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Racial Identity Based on Biological Taxonomy

For a long time, people categorize human beings into different races by their physical characteristics. Scientifically, according to Peter Isaax Rose (1997: 9), the method is called biological taxonomy. It observes physical features such as skin color, head shape, nose shapes (low or high nose bridge), eye shapes (small or big eyes), hair textures, and body hair distribution. The focus of discussion here is physical features that characterize two races, namely White and Black (in American cultural context). As explained by Rose, an individual is classified as White if he, for instance, has the following physical features: white- or pale- or fair-skin, blonde or brunette hair, wavy or straight hair, blue or green eyes, and Grecian or Roman or bulbous nose. He is classified as Black if he has dark or brown or dark brown skin, curly or kinky-curly hair, brown eyes, big nose, and big lips. Because these features are easily noticeable, they are often used to group people into White and Black race categories.

While commonplace, the effective use of the grouping method mentioned above requires that the members of each race category are able to maintain their "racial

purity” in their bloodline and thus avoid multiracial marriages in order that their physical racial characteristics remain intact through generations. However, in reality, interracial marriage among white and black Americans is not uncommon. Consequently, the number of people with mixed-race ancestry, whose physical features no longer fully typify one particular race group, is increasing. Biological taxonomy for different races is getting less clear-cut as marriage between mixed-race individuals is increasing. Therefore, it will not be surprising if there will be much more people with multiracial backgrounds whose physical characteristics show substantial differences from those of their ancestors.

Throughout American history, marriages between white and black has occurred since the era of slavery. Four centuries later, some Americans of African descent have certain physical features that make them difficult to be categorized as Black. However, there is also a ‘one drop-rule’ (<https://www.jstor.org/stable/20027957/> 2 November 2019, pk 0:22) in the US. It is a social and legal principle in racial classification that any presence of black in one’s ancestry is sufficient to identify him as Black American. As expected, this rule is conflicting with the racial classification by physical features because in reality, there are people with multiracial ancestry that don’t show clearly recognizable characteristics of particular race. How would they be categorized? What if they choose not to abide by the social construction that the majority relies on in identifying one’s racial membership? What if they want to decide for themselves which racial group they belong to and refuse to comply with one drop rule?

3. Discussion

Indeed, some Americans who have black in their ancestry can enjoy the privilege of choosing a particular race to associate themselves with because of their Caucasian-like looks. This kind of case is illustrated in Elizabeth Alexander’s poem, *Race*, through a character called Great-Uncle Paul. He is described as a mixed-race man who has Black ancestry but his appearance is characteristically White according to the prevailing biological racial taxonomy. In line 5 to 6, the speaker of the poem says, “*just as pale-skinned, as straight-haired, as blue-eyed as Paul*” The implication is that he can pass as White and therefore has a chance to disregard his black ancestry to claim himself as White. Accordingly, if Paul chooses to be White, he uses what Belluscio (1968: 1) calls racial passing—crossing boundaries that generally separate the dominant culture, race, or ethnic from the marginal one—to his advantage. Paul’s ability to experience

such passing reflects the ambiguity of race as a socially constructed concept and the untenability of one drop rule in American social system.

For his family and his friends who are well acquainted with his background, Paul is Black, just like them. However, over the course of time, he builds a self-identity that is different from what they have expected. Paul's decision to identify himself as White is inconceivable and too disagreeable for most of his relatives. The persona of the poem, who seems to be a great niece of Paul, represents this resentment.

*Sometimes I think about Great-Uncle Paul who left Tuskegee,
Alabama to become a forester in Oregon and in so doing
became fundamentally white for the rest of his life,*

(Alexander lines 1-4)

The lines above suggest a disapproving undertone from the great-niece who wants to question her great-uncle's decision to pass as White. Her phrase "*fundamentally white*" indicates a fact that Great-Uncle Paul has truly assumed a new identity as a white man and let go of his old identity as a black man. Leaving Tuskegee can have two meanings. The first one is that Paul left his cultural background as Black Americans since Tuskegee is often perceived as an important historical site for African Americans that has witnessed their growth and survival in the US. In Tuskegee there is an educational institution that was established specifically for black Americans by Booker T. Washington in 1881. Its mission is to train Blacks to develop skills in farming, mechanics, and other practical skills as an effort to empower them to fight for their civil rights as American citizens.

The second one is that Paul had graduated from Tuskegee Institution, and with his title in forestry he started his career as a forester. Paul moved to Oregon to become a forester and at the same time changed his racial identity from Black to White for good. It is interesting that although the USA had freed slaves and abolished slavery since the Proclamation of Emancipation, some decades afterwards in the 1930s, Paul felt the importance of changing his racial identity.

Unlike other state legislatures in the US, Oregon Legislative Assembly first enacted anti-black policies and Black-poll Tax in 1862. In Oregon, the Whites were prohibited from marrying the Blacks and other people from minority racial groups. Any citizen who was found engaging in interracial marriage or taking part in its ceremony was compelled to pay certain amount of fine in addition to a jail sentence. During 1930s, property ownership in Oregon was limited to white people. Americans from minority

racial groups were deprived of such access. This unfortunate condition became an external driving force for Paul to take on his new identity as a White man besides the social construction of racial identity based on biological taxonomy and his wish to have a better life.

Paul's racial identity choice led him to other choices he made in the course of his life. His choices reflect the opportunities available for him for looking White and living like white people. As he lived among white society, he was obliged to follow white culture, values, and norms and developed his sense of belonging to this dominant racial group. Paul's successful passing was followed by his success in securing a career as forester which was at that time a job only white people could have. To prove his whiteness, Paul even complied with the white-marrying-white rule that was prevalent in the US in the early 20th century and thus married a white woman. With all these paths he took to assimilate into white culture, he had become *fundamentally white for the rest of his life*. Not only had he crossed the borderline between Black and White's physical characteristics, he had also adopted and practiced traditions that typically belong to white people.

Paul's racial passing represents the fact that one can use the social construction that groups people's races by a biological taxonomy to defy one drop rule and choose to change his racial identity. Assuming a new racial identity based on physical appearance (biological "racial" taxonomy) leads to the need of adopting the social values and the cultural tradition of the racial group associated with the new identity. When an individual has internalized the values and the traditions of the race he passes as and lives by them in his daily life, he has affirmed his membership in that racial group.

3.1. Consequences of Choosing a Racial Identity for Passers

Contrary to Paul, none of his siblings wanted to change their racial identity although like Paul, their looks allow them to pass as white: "*The siblings in Harlem each morning ensured, no one confused them for anything other than what they were, black*" (Alexander lines 9-10). Instead of a doubt, the words *ensured* and *confused* suggest an emphasis on their racial membership, which is Black. Their blackness is a professed identity and meant to be their lifetime racial membership despite their Caucasian physical features that should have been categorized as White according to biological "racial" taxonomy. Lines 9 to 10 in "Race" narrates that they chose to be defined as Black Americans, upheld the norms and values that Black people believe in, and married

colored man/women. In one sense, their decision to stay members of African American society is in line with one drop rule.

Paul's siblings had a chance to pass as White, but they didn't use it to define themselves as White. In so doing, they allowed themselves to remain living among African Americans without the need of making code-switching all the time. For them, their racial status was not ambiguous, and thus their allegiance to African American social and cultural traditions came naturally to them besides the fact that they were people who were born and raised in those traditions.

Consequently, the different racial identities that Paul and his siblings adopted have certainly put them in two different extremes: Black and White. As he and his siblings went their separate ways, they lived by different values, norms, and sociocultural traditions. Accordingly, their behaviors and interpersonal relationships were governed by different sets of value systems. By implication, a racial gap had been created in the family. An issue that is associated with racial difference is, in Du Bois' words, described as "the problem of the color line" (1986: 359).

In American history, skin color-related problems were one of major concerns throughout the 20th century, but their prolonged implications and social dynamics continue to draw much attention up to the present time. The Emancipation Proclamation by Abraham Lincoln on 1 January 1863 was followed by waves of Black people's migration from South to North. The largest ones occurred from 1890 to 1914, and this period is widely known as The Great Migration. Ex-slaves migration created an unusual opportunity for mulattos to pass as white in that they could move to a place where no one knew them and assume a new identity as white people without any resistance from their social environment because of their Caucasian-like skin and features. Paul in Alexander's "Race" exemplifies this social phenomenon. He moved from Tuskegee to Oregon and changed his racial identity from Black to White. The Great Migration and interracial marriage contributed to the complexity of the issues related to skin color and racial identification in the US. Racial identification that focuses on physical features requires people to behave according to the racial status applied to them by the society because of their appearance. In other words, they are expected to comply with the values, norms and traditions of the given racial group and build their sense of belonging to it.

The lines in "Race" illustrate the aforementioned complexity, particularly the kind that most likely affects the passer and his/her family. In Paul case, on the one side, being White helped him to fit in to the mainstream society in Oregon since the white community perceived him as one of them, he was a white forester, and he married a

white woman. On the other side, in his relationship with his siblings, he has to go back and forth between his two identities.

The 13th line of the poem, which says, “*When Paul came East alone he was as they were, their brother,*” suggests that when Paul was with his siblings, from whom he couldn’t hide his family history, he was back to the way he had been, part of a black community. Not only did he share physical characteristics with them, he grew up in the same sociocultural system—values, norms, and traditions—as them, the one that had been passed down from generation to generation. They knew full well who they were and how to maintain their sense of racial belonging. However, they faced a different situation when Paul took his wife to visit them. Paul switched to his white identity, which was his personal choice, and asked his siblings to act like they were on the same racial and cultural background as him as a white family, which was not who they were.

Paul wanted their siblings to see him and his wife but without their spouses coming with them. They refused to do so. This refusal signifies their disapproval of Paul’s passing. What Paul did is essentially ask his siblings to make a temporary racial passing, which was met with refusal. They chose not to see Paul and his wife than to see the couple without their respective spouses. For Black people, family is their most immediate social unit and most important support system in which woman as a mother and wife is the central figure whose basic role is to unite the whole members of the family. To have a family gathering without the spouses will be disrespect for the values, norms, and tradition they believe in.

Paul’s request for the exclusion of his siblings’ colored spouses in the family gathering during his visit connotes at least two issues. First, it indicates that Paul didn’t feel fully secure about his decision to pass as white. He felt the need to take a precaution to protect his new identity. Second, he perceived himself as fundamentally white in most aspects of his life that he felt that the presence of his colored in-laws is a flaw for his ideal image of family’s whiteness. So, they must be out of sight. Of course for his siblings, Paul’s request was too preposterous to even think about. It deserves to be turned down outright.

*The one time Great-Uncle Paul brought his wife to New York
he asked his siblings not to bring their spouses,
and that is where the story ends: ivory siblings who would not
see their brother without their telltale spouses. (Alexander lines 22-25)*

Interracial conflict in Paul’s family represents the reality of racial tensions in American society in the early 20th century. During the Civil War (1861–1865), racism under slavery

was the reason for war between the North, which was against slavery, and the South, which was pro slavery. Into the first half of the 20th century, as what “Race” portrays, racism in interpersonal context can be the reason of gap and conflict between family members.

4. Conclusion

Classifying humans into different races based only on physical characteristics is increasingly harder to rely on. The main cause is clearly the growing number of children born from multiracial families with mixed-race appearance. Marriages between black and white, for example, produce mulattos whose skin is lighter than their black parent. Marriages between mulatto and white may produce children with white characteristics. An individual that is identified as white according to a biological taxonomy because his looks fits the white category can pass as white in the community and have an opportunity to choose between two racial identities to live by, including the values, norms, and traditions that come with the choice.

From the discussion of Alexander’s “Race” in this article, it is apparent that the poem suggests that there are external and internal factors that contribute to a black’s decision to pass and assume new racial identity as white. The external factors include the passer’s Caucasian physical features and the prevailing social construction that allow biological “racial” taxonomy to categorize him as white. The internal factor is the passer’s wish to break away from the limitations in more aspects of his life and improve his opportunity to live better than the way he was in his old identity. He expects that with his membership in the new race, he can enjoy the same rights and opportunities as the members of the race. Much as the new identity gives the passer benefits, it doesn’t come without consequences. In certain racially complex situations, it may cause insecurity to the passer. It may also cost him his sense of belonging to his old racial identity and his good relationship with his family.

Through the poem, Elizabeth Alexander captures the personal and interpersonal aspects of the complex implications of racial passing and racial inequality in American society through a passer character named Great-Uncle Paul. Paul case reflects the social and historical background of such phenomenon in 1930s and, at the same time, presents a way of construing it in a network of cultural discourses that define it.

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