

Passing Narratives

By Wendy Ann Gaudin

The following narratives are compiled from interviews conducted by Wendy Ann Gaudin, Professor of History at Xavier University, New Orleans, Louisiana. The interviews are part of a larger study Professor Gaudin is conducting on the phenomenon of blacks passing for whites in the Jim Crow era of Creole New Orleans and its rural environs. All of the interviewees wish to remain anonymous in keeping with "the code" of secrecy that still prevents those who have passed for white, or who know those that did and still do, from breaking the pact. This secrecy, represented in the lack of photographs of those telling their stories and in the alteration of their names, is one legacy of Jim Crow identity politics that continues to this day.

1. Passing in the workplace: "They kept my secret. But, it was a strain...."

When I came out of the service in '45 and went to see about a job, Revius Ortique was working for the Louisiana State unemployment service as a counselor. And, there was a white and a colored side to the service. So, I went on the colored side, talking to Revius. He asked me, "What can you do?" I said, "Nothing." He said, "You can't do anything? What you been doing all these years?" I was in the service. "What did you do in the service?" I baked. "What you baked?" Pies, cakes. "Well, you're a baker," he tells me. I guess I'm a baker. So, he put me down for baker. And, he sent me--to D.H. Holmes on Canal to see about a job that they had for a baker.

And, I went to Canal and asked to see the manager. And, of course, I had my suit and my tie and all. The manager came and said, "You wanted to see me?" I said, "Yes, I was sent over by the employment service to see about the position you have open as a baker." "Oh, yeah, come into our office," he tells me. "Say, what can you bake?" Now, I'm thinking to myself, if they wanted black bakers (I'm sorry: colored bakers), they're not going to pay them anything. So, I've got this on my mind, so I'm really not trying to sell myself. And, he's telling me, "What can you bake?" So, I told him what I can bake. I said, "Now there's one problem: I bake with a recipe. I don't try and remember what goes in my products. I don't know today what I put in a cake that I baked yesterday." "Oh, that's fine, that's fine! Because, we have our own recipes! And, you better not be caught using some other recipes! You use that!"

They had everything chalked down to the hundredth of a penny, how much it costs. He says, "That's fine, that's fine. We can give each other a try; I don't know if you're gonna work out, you don't know if you're going to like it. But, you can try it. There's only one other thing before we come to an agreement." I said, "What's that?" He says, "How do you feel about baking around colored people?" I didn't raise my eyes or nothing. I just said, "Doesn't bother me at all!" I don't know how, because I was sent from the colored section, but they thought I was white. So, I went in as a white baker in a kitchen full of black people who immediately wanted to know where I was from. And, to keep questions down, I said, San Luis Obispo, California! If I said Los Angeles, [they would say], oh, I know somebody in Los Angeles! But, San Luis Obispo. "Where is that?" they asked. So, I told them, "Oh, it's a little town."

Now, the manager apologized because he could only start me off at 40 dollars a week! "But, if it works out like I think it will," he tells me, "we'll see that you get a raise." Okay. So I went into baking. And, like I said, there's nothing but ladies in the kitchen. Girls, as he called them. They're all black. So, that went on for a while until my wife and I started going to dances. I'd see them at the dance! I'd say, "Well, you caught me!" They kept my secret. But it was a strain, it was a strain in as much as: I go to work on the bus, and, like a good citizen, I sit behind the screen. And, I was always afraid that one of these little sales people that know me from work is going to be sitting in front of the screen and wonder what I'm doing behind the screen. So, I went and bought a Simplex motorcycle to go to work on. And I used that. I didn't have to worry about the screen or anything else. And, of course, you couldn't get sick. Because, by the time I'd been there a while,

I'm well-liked; oh, he gave me a raise after a month. And, I'm well-liked, and you get sick, they come to see how are you, and here I am living in a black neighborhood, so I'd go to work sick.

2. Passing in entertainment facilities: "So we just slipped by."

You see, we was just raised that way. There was six of us sisters. We grew up during the segregation, and we was just raised to get around it. We watched our mama, our daddy, we watched our aunts going as white, so we didn't think nothing of it. That's what you had to do, you know? We had two aunts who worked in a cigar factory, El Trellis, and they didn't hire nothing but Creole. So, they worked there until they heard that they could get more money working for another guy, doing the same thing, making cigars. Well, one of the aunts was brown-skinned and the other was white-white. But, they didn't do nothing apart, so they both went and worked for this other guy. Making cigars. One of the sisters worked on the white side. One of them worked on the colored side. They brought home more money like that.

And, that's what I grew up with. So, it was nothing for me and my sisters to go as white. You do it to be human! You do it just to be a person! My sisters and I went everywhere! We went wherever we wanted to go! We went to Pontchartrain Beach, and, you know, that was for whites. Well, we got our things together, we packed a lunch, and with some friends, we went! But, we had to sit in front of the screen to get off at the white beach, because we couldn't sit behind the screen and then go to the white beach! So, we sat in front [of] the screen. Then, we got off the bus and went to the beach. And nobody told us nothing.

Back then, the Saenger Theater on Canal Street was for whites. Not even a balcony for the colored. But, we wanted to see The Passion Play. We wanted to do what the white people did, so we just went! We paid our fare and sat down with the white people and nobody told us nothing! In fact, I'll tell you this: while we was sitting there, I looked down the aisle, and who did I see? My mama's cousins! They was there too! See? That's how we was raised. So, we just said hello and gave each other a knowing look, like, these white people don't know nothing! We was all around them!

But, with my blond hair, my sister's green eyes and freckles, what they gonna say? What made us colored? See, that's what you got to know. Those signs didn't mean nothing to us, and the white people didn't even know that there were colored people who weren't real black. If they knew, then they didn't care. As long as we looked like them. And, we was as white as them.

What else did we do? Well, we sat at the lunch counters, like Woolworth's lunch counter. We sat there and ate. No problem. One time, our friend from school got a job serving at the lunch counter, and we saw her there. She didn't say nothing; we didn't speak to her. We just ate and then left. She didn't give us up--she probably would have done it, too, if she could have! But, she couldn't. Nobody wanted to sit up in them balconies--you couldn't see nothing! And it was crowded! Nobody wanted to drink from them nasty water fountains that didn't work most the time anyway! But that's what they gave the colored people! So, we just slipped by. And, they didn't know nothing about it.

3. Passing and its effects on the family: "Either live with the degradations and racism that white people put on us. Or, use your skin to your advantage"

I can tell you about my own family. See, we were all colors. Not real dark, but we weren't all what you call blue veins. Some of us were, and some of us were more on the Spanish side. Well, that's three generations I can tell you about. My grandmother and her sisters and brothers. Some of them went as white, and some of them didn't. My grandmother would pass all the time.

You see, she was from the country and, out there, the mixed bloods had their own life. Their own world, you could say. They only lived with other mixed bloods. They only married other mixed bloods. They didn't go to school with the coloreds--they had their own school just for the mixed bloods. They only had one church out there, so they sat in their own section, away from the whites and in front of the real blacks. They had their own church fair, their own fundraisers, and they didn't mix. So, that's what she knew.

So, she came to the city with her family, and they were used to being to themselves, but in the city, they had no choice. You're either colored or white. No mixed blood. So, she went as white. Well, my grandmother always went as white. She used to go to a white church, Our Lady Star of the Sea. They had two pews in the back for the colored. The ushers put her in front with the whites, and that's where she stayed. And, that's where she sat.

Well, her brother and his family, they were a little too dark to pass. They sat in the back. And, they could see her, sitting up front, taking her communion with the whites. And, that was it. I don't think they resented each other for that. They just knew she did what she could. They walked past her on the bus or saw her, sitting right behind the streetcar driver! His own sister! But, they didn't say nothing. So, that generation was like that: some went white, some went colored.

Well, the next generation comes, my mama and them. Same thing: some of them went white. That was the days before the integration. My mama married a dark man, so she couldn't pass unless she was alone. But, I'll tell you what she did: this is a good story. She worked as a riveter during the War. That job was for whites. My daddy, who was brown-skinned, worked at the same plant, Higgins; but, he was like a janitor. He swept the floors. Mama and daddy would walk to the bus every morning to ride down to the factory. They walked together, now. When the bus comes, they act like they don't know each other. She pays her fare and gets on in front. She sits in front the screen. Now, her husband pays his fare and goes to the back door. He sits in back the screen! Husband and wife!

They get to work and they don't speak. It's like they strangers. Grown people! She punches the white clock. He punches the colored clock. They work their day and do the same thing in the evening. And then, they go home and live as husband and wife. They did that for two years. That's that generation right before integration came. My mama had two brothers serve during the War. One served in the army as colored; the other served in the navy as white. Two brothers. How did they do that?

I'll tell you: they lived in a mixed neighborhood, so nobody could tell what race they were by looking at their address. One brother was sent to live with an old aunt who was living as white. They put him in a white school, Rivers Fredrick. The other brother stayed at home and went to a colored school, Albert Wicker School. That's how they did it. But, that didn't split up the family. They just kept their associations careful. The white ones visited the others at their homes, but the ones who couldn't pass couldn't visit the white ones' homes. And, they accepted that.

Okay, so then you get to my generation. That's when integration changed things all around. Here's how I'll tell you about my generation: I have two cousins on my mama's side and two cousins on my daddy's side. They went to California and became white. Understand, now, my grandmother didn't go to the other side for good. She just did that in public. But, she loved her family, dark or bright. My mama married a brown man. She worked as white to get more money for her children. But, these cousins, I'm telling you about: they are white now. We know they still living. But, they're strangers to us now. They married white people, their kids are white, and they're lost to us. Segregation is over now, but they had a choice. Either live with the degradations and racism that white people put on us or use your skin to your advantage. And, that's what they did.

4. Passing and legal designations: "So they had two social security cards! One white and one colored!"

People found ways to get around the law. That wasn't that hard back then. How did I come to be white? Well, my mama grew up in the country, out there in the bayou. They all fish out there, and they're all mixed up. You can't tell who's who. She had aunts who lived in the city, so with every baby she had, she came to the city. And, that wasn't easy, no. She had to take a boat to the end of the bayou, then get in a truck and ride a long time to the city. And, she was carrying the baby then. She'd stay with her old aunts until she had the baby. She had those babies in the white section of the hospital, and they would put white on the birth certificates. As soon as she could, she would call on that man, and he would come and get her and take her back to the bayou. With her "white" babies! She did that with all of us! All of us got white on our birth certificates!

And, I'll tell you how those old aunts come to be white. After they got to be adults, they had social security cards with the number. Well, they put those social security cards away and got new ones, as white! So, they had two social security cards! One white and one colored! Then, they got driver's licenses: [for] whites. They dead now, but that's how they did it.

I heard another story in my family. On my daddy's side, they all from Mississippi. But, they was from mixed types, too. They came to Louisiana with a little bit of money. They claimed that they lost their records when they moved here from up there. So, all their new records: white. Then, they put their kids in white schools, and that was it. I even heard they voted all those years when colored couldn't. They did, my daddy and his brothers. They looked white. And, they had the papers to back it up. What difference did it make that they had some black blood? It wasn't visible! And, every now and then, here in Louisiana, somebody gets it in their head to burn down the courthouse. It's terrible, but for us, that works out fine. We get new records, and we become white.

5. Passing and poverty: "So I mean, it wasn't the best thing in the world to do, and then, you know, a lot of people went on the other side because of economics."

During [the] Depression, we watched our neighbors suffer. Those were some bad days. Hard days. Folks were fired from their jobs. They went hungry. They were killing themselves because they couldn't handle it. They were losing their houses, losing their land. That was a time when it was a great advantage to look like white.

My daddy was able to do a lot for folks during Depression. My daddy had red hair and freckles. He looked just like white. Our people called him "red" as a nickname for light-skinned people. White people called him "red" because of his red hair. I don't think the Lord would ever punish him for that, because I said this to the priest in my parish: There was no way that anybody could say my father was not a white man. So, what he did, he had a team, a horse, and wagon, because most of the men at that time--they used to haul the bricks and all of this, okay. But, when things were real bad, he went to this Works Project Administration, too, because they needed bricklayers; they used to do what we would call catch basins and things like that.

So, okay, we were three children, and my mother wasn't working at the time. I told you, we had good neighbors, and I told you all along the railroad track over here was black families, and most of the fathers worked on that railroad track. But, my father used to go and get the bread, the milk, and whatever else--they gave orange juice, they gave potatoes, things like that. And, when he went, since they did not know who he was--and he knew if he got more than he needed, he would be helping the other poor people--they used to ask him how many children he had, and he would say, "Eight." And so, they said, "Red, you know, you can have as much as you need."

So, when he came back, he would come back with arms full of bread, whatever they gave, and he would go and distribute it to the neighbors who were not able to get that. And, my mother used to say, "Oh, I'm so worried you might get in trouble." He said, "Oh, no I'm not, I'm not, don't worry. God will look out for me, he knows I'm doing a good deed."

I remember one particular incident where they were giving mattresses away, and my mother said we needed one for my brothers' room. So, when he went around to the neighbors and asked them who needed mattresses, and they said, "Oh, Emile, if we just could get a couple of mattresses." So, anyway, when he went up to the place where they were giving them, the man before him was a colored man, and they gave him two. And he said, "Oh, but you know, I really need three." "Oh no, that's all we have. Come back another time, and maybe we'll give you another one." So, the man went off. So, when my father [comes before them], they ask him, "Red, how many you need?" He said, "Six." "No problem." They had piles of them. Now, why would they do this other man that? But, they gave him [my father] six. And, he unloaded them and gave them to our neighbors who needed them. So, I mean, it wasn't the best thing in the world to do, and then, you know, a lot of people went on the other side because of economics. They weren't going to let their children be hungry.

Passing for White in Jim Crow America Activity Suggestions.

To learn more about "passing as white" in Jim Crow America, **read the essay on Passing.**