From “Mulatto” To “Negro”: How Fears of ‘Passing’ Changed the 1930 United States Census

By

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This thesis could not have been completed without the help of the Cheshire County Historical Society in finding the archival records of Albert C. Johnston and his family.
The year is 1926 and Leroy Edmonds heads to work in the bustling city of Philadelphia. He walks into Kramer’s Fruit and Vegetables shop, puts on his apron, and begins to bring fruit outside to sell. Edmonds and his coworkers notice that someone is taking photographs outside of the shop, so they pose for the camera. A police officer spots the scene, and he too decides to join them.

Edmonds looks so comfortable next to his white coworkers that it may come as a surprise that, according to the 1930 census, he lived in 37th ward located in North Philadelphia where the African American population had doubled since 1920.¹ That same census identified Edmonds as

“Nig” or “Neg” for Negro, although he had been recorded as “Mu” for “Mulatto”\(^2\) just ten years earlier. His skin had not changed in those ten years, but the United States Census Bureau had subsequently instructed their enumerators to record people as “Negro” if they had any African ancestry. Leroy Edmonds was my great grandfather and his experience resembled those of many other African Americans who intentionally or unintentionally passed for white.

Essentially, this thesis is about how fear can drive people to label others as threats and the effect that labeling has on the so-called “others.” In this case, the dread of losing the exclusive privileges attached to whiteness caused many white people, including politicians, to attempt to draw strict racial lines. Through examining the context of this fear from 1920 to 1949, this thesis connects scientific racism, white supremacy and popular culture to the United States Census Bureau’s reclassification of mixed race people in 1930. It argues that White America’s fear of mixed race people passing for white led the Census Bureau to reclassify “mulattoes” as “negroes” in an attempt to stop this practice, however “negroes” continued passing and White Americans remained afraid and fascinated by it.

In fact, the “mulatto” category was only added in 1850 after an early eugenicist, Josiah Nott, convinced a Kentucky congressman that mixed race people should be counted in the census so that he could prove that mixed race people were less fertile and had inferior life spans compared to the “pure” races.\(^3\) In Virginia, two eugenicists named John Powell and Walter A. Plecker used this pseudoscience and their connections to the Anglo-Saxon Clubs of America.

(A.S.C.O.A.) to push the local government to pass the Virginia Racial Integrity Act of 1924.\(^4\) This act prohibited interracial marriage and essentially determined that one was black if they had one drop of black blood.\(^5\) The Census Bureau adopted this rule in 1930.

Scholars frequently analyze the 1930 United States Census because the Census Bureau made many changes regarding racial classifications that remained for decades afterwards.\(^6\) Similarly, authors and artists have used passing as the subject of their poems, fictional narratives, biographies, memoirs, essays, and films. In doing so, they observe its effects on passers, their families, and their communities. However, scholars do not often associate the 1930 census change with passing. This paper links white America’s fear of racial passing to the census change in 1930 and reveals that this reclassification did not prevent people from passing or diminish white America’s fascination and fear.

Some scholars asserted that the Census Bureau was more concerned with classifying non-white immigrants than determining who was “negro” or “mulatto,” so they decided to adopt the one-drop rule already accepted by many people in the North and South. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the 1930 census enumerators were instructed to record the following categories for non-white immigrants: Mexican, Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, “Hindu” and Korean. “All other races were to be written out in full.”\(^7\) In his 1991 book *Who is Black?*, sociologist F. James Davis claimed that the Census Bureau no longer wanted to count people of mixed race as mulatto


after 1920 since there were so many of them and some happened to “appear white.” He added that the Bureau was most concerned with counting “all persons of any black ancestry,” rather than separating them by the percentage of “black ancestry.” Davis asserted the Census Bureau shifted its focus to “counting foreign-born whites.” In 1910-1930, the Census Bureau used questions about one’s “mother tongue” and national origin in order to gain information on the number of European immigrants who were considered white and record those who could be classified below the “Nordic” white subspecies according to supposed racial distinctions of “European-origin ‘races.’” Former Director of the U.S. Census Bureau, Kenneth Prewitt also insisted in 2013 that the Census Bureau removed the mulatto category because it “produced useless statistics” and that despite the Bureau’s insistence on becoming more objective and separate from “social reform interests,” it adopted the one-drop rule for classifying black people. His argument lacks Davis’s connection to black people who were “near white.” Claudette Bennett, a former Government professor and current Research Content Advisor at the U.S. Census Bureau, agreed with Davis and Prewitt in 2000. She concluded that social policies and immigration laws drove the racial category changes, although Bennett did not fully describe these fluctuations in immigration or the laws that restricted immigration for non-whites. Her analysis also did not reveal the particular social policies that influenced the racial categorization of Native Americans, Mexicans, and African Americans.

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More recently, scholars have attributed the census change to inconsistencies in counting “mulattoes” and America’s acceptance of scientific racism and segregation, which required strict racial boundaries. In 2005, Historian Paul Schor argued that the Census Bureau removed the “Mulatto” category from the U.S. Census because the results became confusing in 1910 and 1920 when the number of “Mulattoes” decreased significantly. Schor explains that the Bureau associated the fluctuations in the number of mixed race people to the races of the officials who observed certain counties where many mixed race and black people resided. Black enumerators counted some of the communities in 1910, but white officials surveyed those communities in 1920. Schor claims that the black officials were more likely to record more people as “Mulatto” than the white officials were. While there were descriptions of what would classify someone as “Mulatto” or “Negro,” clearly, average enumerators could not determine someone’s “true race” by looking at them. In their 2008 article on racial reorganization, Jennifer L. Hochschild and Brenna M. Powell claimed that the 1930 census did not include the “Mulatto” category because the mainstream ideology was focusing on the “bright-line differences between races to maintain white racial purity.” They pointed out that when this change came about there was no push back because it simply reflected racial classifications that were accepted in laws and mainstream society. Hochschild and Powell stated that since the one-drop rule had already been used in state and federal legislation, the Census Bureau did not need to continue recording “mulattoes.” This thesis argues that “mulattoes” were reclassified as “negroes” to stop racial passing.

Much scholarship on passing for white emphasizes the experiences of passers, their reasons for passing, the benefits and consequences, and how the one-drop rule attempted to stomp out this practice. In 2000, Gayle Wald described passing as a practice of struggling “for control over racial representation,” despite claims of differences between the physical appearances of whites and blacks. Similarly, in 2003, Kathleen Pfeiffer noted that black communities saw this practice as self-loathing or a way of abandoning one’s “blackness” but described passers as people who may be trying to succeed in life or not really feel the need to participate in whiteness or blackness. She posited that racial passing increased after Plessy v. Ferguson, which can be demonstrated through the amount of stories about passing that followed this ruling.\(^\text{14}\) Allyson Hobbs agreed with Pfeiffer’s argument in her 2014 history of racial passing. Within this book, she focused on what passers lost when they rejected their “black racial identity.” Hobbs discussed the loss of community, friends, and families for support that occurred when someone decided to pass for good. She also describes how passing continued after the one-drop rule was meant to keep them in their place, since increased racial boundaries provided more incentives for passing.

Despite acknowledging the vast efforts that white politicians and eugenicists made to solidify the color line and stop “near-white” people from passing, few seem to focus on the root of it: fear. They feared losing power over minorities through miscegenation and possibly feared accepting that there are no real differences between white and non-white people, aside from their outward appearances. Smith-Pryor described the “anxiety over ‘invisible blackness’” and argued that racial passing created issues in “accurately” counting the white population which caused the

\(^{14}\) Kathleen Pfeiffer, *Race Passing And American Individualism*, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010).
1930 census change.\textsuperscript{15} She did not expand, however, on the other anxieties of whites in the 1920s. This thesis argues that it was fear, rather than anxiety, that drove the reclassification of “mulattoes.” Anxiety implies that whites were worried about racial passers, but does not fully express their reactions to passing. The increase in newspapers, books, and films telling stories of light skinned “mulattoes” passing for white throughout the 1920s, illustrates a feeling stronger than anxiety.

Through examining the historical, political, and social contexts from 1910 to 1930, this thesis will reveal the fears of white Americans that made the existence of passers threatening, leading to the removal of “mulatto” from the 1930 census. This thesis will also analyze these contexts within the context of “passing” films from 1930 to 1949, in order to determine whether the “mulatto” to “negro” change in the census affected anything aside from the way mixed race people were classified by the government. Did this clarification quell white people’s fear of passers? Did this stop people from passing? This thesis argues that “mulattoes” became “negroes” on the United States Census in 1930 because white Americans feared that black people were secretly among them, passing for white. While the census and segregation laws may have changed the classification of mixed race people to create harsher racial lines, white people still feared and were fascinated by passing, and some people continued to pass for white.

With these revelations, one can reflect on how fear affected the identities of people of color and immigrants in the United States. This thesis seeks to inspire others to analyze the ways in which fear affects the identities and treatment of people today through government policies and identity recognition in the United States Census.

\textsuperscript{15} Elizabeth M. Smith-Pryor, "Passing and the “Seemingly Absurd Question” Of Race", in Property Rites: The Rhinelander Trial, Passing, And The Protection Of Whiteness, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 89-111.
Chapter one presents evidence of white America’s fear of passing through the context of the Great Migration, sensational newspaper articles, court cases, literature, scientific racism, anti-miscegenation laws, segregation, and ultimately, the 1930 United States Census. The newspaper articles are predominately from the *New York Times* and the *Chicago Tribune* because both were big cities known for their news coverage and are easily accessible online. This chapter includes a brief analysis of Nella Larsen and her novel *Passing* for a contemporary understanding of passing from a mixed race and/or black perspective. Chapter two searches for the effects of the census change on white fear and passing using film. This chapter analyzes four films on passing from 1930 to 1949, their censorship, and their reception. The four films are *Veiled Aristocrats* (1932), *Imitation of Life* (1934), *Lost Boundaries* (1949), and *Pinky* (1949). Of those four films, this chapter highlights *Lost Boundaries* and its censorship in Atlanta, Georgia. It also includes articles from the *New York Times* and the *Chicago Defender* to highlight both white and black responses to the films. Chapter two connects the reception of these films to contemporary issues and their censorship to the anti-miscegenation and segregation laws introduced in the first chapter. These two chapters demonstrate the fears of white Americans, how those fears merged with the fascination and horror of black people passing for white, and how they influenced policies, the census, and the lives of mixed race people and African Americans.
White Fear and the Crusade against Passing

During the Great War, many African Americans began leaving the South to migrate North, West, and to the Midwest. In leaving the South, they left behind communities that knew them. Entering big cities gave some the opportunity to blend in by passing for white. There were numerous reasons African Americans they left the South, but the main reasons are Jim Crow segregation, industrial job openings, diseased cotton crops, social opportunities, and to escape racial violence. As the Great War waged on, immigration decreased and the jobs that military men left behind opened. These jobs looked attractive to Southern black people as natural disasters in the forms of drought, rain, and boll weevil destroyed much of the cotton. African Americans were the targets of lynching and racial violence since the end of the Civil War, with its apex in the 1890s. James K. Vardaman, the governor of Mississippi from 1904 to 1908, proclaimed that if it seemed “necessary,” he believed that “every Negro in the state will be lynched” and was against “Negro education.” It was time to leave the South for many. An estimated 300,000 African Americans migrated out of the South before 1920.

Leroy Edmonds left Lunenburg County, Virginia for Philadelphia in the mid-1920s, likely in search of a better life and opportunities for employment. He found a job at a fruit and

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vegetables shop in the city and began his new life, working as a white man. In a written reflection, my great aunt Angela Edmonds Brooks remembers her father, writing, “in his personal life, my father always identified as Black. But he had another life he lived, where he was a white man. This was in the working world, far enough away from our Black neighborhood that his [two] lives wouldn’t clash.” She explains that her father was “very fair skinned” with “hazel eyes” and “straight hair,” so passing would have been fairly easy for him. 20 His daughter, Angela states that with her father’s “limited education” he must have known that the best chance he had to make money and provide for his family was by passing for white. “Of course, he earned way more money working as a white man than he ever would have working as a black man,” she notes. 21 According to my grandmother, Andrea Edmonds, Leroy did not deny that he was black to his employers, he just never told them his race. Leroy Edmonds was just like many other African Americans who moved North during the Great Migration, looking for job opportunities.

In his book, *Neither Black nor White*, Werner Sollors claims that white people were terrified of the idea of passing, but also fascinated by it. 22 Some of the Philadelphia newspaper headlines of the 1920s and 30s appear to confirm this fear and exhibited their suspicions of how many blacks or “mulattoes” were passing into whiteness. The *Afro-American* claimed that a portion of those passing for white in Philadelphia were “Virginia Near-Whites.” 23 The paper claimed that people of color who were passing for white escaped the state-sanctioned “crusade

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21 Ibid.
23 Ibid., 123–24
for so-called racial purity” moved to Pennsylvania.\textsuperscript{24} It explained that these people often passed only to find jobs, but others decided to cross the color line permanently. The description of “Virginia Near-Whites” almost perfectly echoes my great grandfather’s experience of leaving Lunenburg County, Virginia and passing in Philadelphia for work in the 1920s.

Sources differed on the exact number of African Americans who passed for white. On July 12, 1928, the \textit{Philadelphia Tribune} claimed that 3,000 black people were “passing” each year\textsuperscript{25}, but on December 19, 1931, the \textit{Afro-American} stated that there were 75,000 passing in Philadelphia every day. Neither of these articles stated an origin or rationale for their enumeration of “passers.”

Similar headlines guessed the number of people passing for white in nearby New York City. \textit{The New York World} published an article about “Crossing the Colorline: Social and Economic Ambitions Lead Negroes to “Pass” at rate of 5,000 a year to White Fold.”\textsuperscript{26} On August 26, 1931, the \textit{Outlook and Independent} magazine published an article by Caleb Johnson entitled “Crossing the Color Line.” In this article, Johnson claimed that an estimated “10,000 persons of fractional Negro ancestry each year ‘cross the color line’ from Negro to white society.” The article further defined “quadroons” and “octoroons” and stated that so many blacks passed for white that black people created the term “passing.” Johnson wrote that black people who passed relied upon their family and friends not to give them away, claiming that they saw this as a joke on white people, which made them proud. Johnson explained,

\begin{quotation}
It is a matter of common repute among the colored folks of Harlem that more than ten thousand of their number have “passed,” and are now accepted as white in their new
\end{quotation}

\textsuperscript{24} In 1924, Virginia passed the Racial Integrity Act, which will be further explained later in the chapter.


\textsuperscript{26} Emilie Hahn, “Crossing the Colorline: Social and Economic Ambitions Lead Negroes to ‘Pass’ at Rate of 5,000 a Year to White Fold,” \textit{New York World}, July 28, 1929.
relations, many of them married to white folks, all unsuspected.\textsuperscript{27} Werner Sollors explains that everyone from Johnson to Carl Van Vechten and Walter White attempted to identify the number of “passers” there were. Just about everyone knew that people were passing for white, but none knew exactly how many people were doing so because it was nearly impossible to trace.\textsuperscript{28} Some people who passed surrounded themselves by white people and were probably identified as white on the census, while others continued to travel back and forth between the white world and the black world and were identified as “mulatto” or “negro” on the census.

No matter how speculative and pointless the reports and articles on “passers” may have seemed to some, many people were enthralled by the scandalous cases of bi-racial couples or white people unknowingly marrying “mulattoes” or “quadroons.” One such case became a focal point of this obsession in the mid-1920s. On October 14, 1924, Alice Jones and Leonard Kip Rhinelander married after 3 years of dating. Jones was a mixed race woman and Rhinelander was a white man from a wealthy New York family. Rhinelander’s father found out about the relationship and tried to separate his son from Jones but to no avail. They tried to keep the marriage a secret from his elite family, but the press found out and Rhinelander felt pressured to end it. He attempted to get an annulment based on fraud, stating that he did not know that Jones was not white for she never told him that she had “black blood.”\textsuperscript{29} However, letters between Jones and Rhinelander revealed their love for one another, intimacy, and Rhinelander’s pursuit of her. The jury could not understand how a white man could be intimate with Jones and not notice that she is mixed race. The prosecution argued that Rhinelander’s continued pursuit of

\textsuperscript{27} Caleb Johnson, “Crossing the Color Line,” \textit{Outlook and Independent} 1931,. –Give full citation
\textsuperscript{28} Werner Sollors, \textit{Neither Black Nor White Yet Both} (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 281.
\textsuperscript{29} \textit{The New York Times}, "Rhinelander Sues To Annul Marriage: Alleges Race Deceit"\textsuperscript{,} November 27, 1924.
Jones was proof that he did know her race. Rhinelander lost the case and *The New York Times* was there to report on everything.

*The New York Times* published over 100 articles on the Rhinelander/Jones case. They covered the Rhinelander/Jones annulment trial from November 1924 to about December 1925, but continued to write about it when Rhinelander began to fight for an appeal. This coverage lasted until 1929, when he filed for a divorce in Nevada. The couple had been separated since a month after their wedding. Their divorce was finalized in December of 1929. The newspaper even made sure to publish a couple of updates on the separated couple in 1930, as well as the settlement Rhinelander and Jones agreed to. At first, the articles criticized Jones’ class status. A headline from November 14, 1924 reads, “Society Youth Weds Cabman’s Daughter.” They make it quite clear that Jones is not of the same economic and social class as Rhinelander by emphasizing her father’s work as a taxi driver and her brother-in-law’s job as a butler. They also added further indicators that connected Jones to people who were known to be “mulattoes” or “negroes.” Headlines changed Jones’ identity from “mulatto” to “quadroon” to “octoroon” to “negro” and “negress” in the span of almost six years. These changes in terms slowly took away her mixed race identity and European ancestry so that Jones could be placed within blackness. Later, the articles added that Jones’ brother-in-law’s employer’s housekeeper said that Jones was a Negro.30 Numerous articles also mentioned that Rhinelander knew that Jones’ sister married a “colored” man.

*The New York Times* covered everything from Rhinelander’s trial testimony to the letters he and Jones wrote to one another. The trial was clearly a product of gossip and entertainment. The trial became even more of a sideshow when Jones was forced to strip naked to the waist in

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front of the jury, attorneys from “both sides,” her husband and the stenographer, so that the jury could determine whether her “true” race was discernible.31 Mr. Davis, Jones’ lawyer advised Jones to reveal her upper body so that they could make Rhinelander “identify the color of his wife’s skin.”32 Throughout the annulment trial, when Rhinelander was pressured to answer the questions of whether or not he noticed his wife’s skin tone, he said that he noticed she was dark, but that she looked darker now. A witness named Joseph Rich, however, said that he was a friend of theirs and that when he had dinner with the Rhinelander’s, Jones stated she was of Spanish decent. Rich believed she looked Spanish because her skin was a little dark. Based on these testimonies and the images of Alice, “dark” probably meant that she was tan, not dark brown. Most likely, the white jury, judge, and lawyers believed that there were physical traits that could tip them off to knowing who was truly white and who was not. If Jones possessed any of these traits, they could claim that there was no way that Rhinelander did not know that she was indeed a mulatto, since the letters Jones brought to court stated that they had been intimate. In the end, Jones won the case because Rhinelander had admitted to pursuing her, he knew of her relations with “colored” people, and the jury believed it impossible for Rhinelander to have not noticed her race.33 She won the case but lost her privacy, and after their divorce was finalized, her husband.

The Rhinelander/ Jones case was not the first time The New York Times had published articles about white men taking their wives to court for lying to them about their “true race.” Beverly D. Harris, the former Vice President of the National City Bank, sued his wife, Elaine

Lee Harris and their case quickly became high profile.34 Beverly claimed he heard his wife was the daughter of a quadroon and she was after his money.35 The New York Times covered the legal battle from 1922 to 1926. The Harris and the Rhinelander/Jones cases were so enthralling that the Chicago Tribune also published articles about them.36

Before the Harris’ and the Rhinelander/ Jones case, there were the Hortons. In 1910, The New York Times reported the damning testimonies of the maternal aunt and the grandmother of Mrs. Edith May De Williams Horton. They stated that Edith’s father was “mulatto.”37 This case did not garner much coverage, most likely because her husband William S. Horton “was a plumbing contractor in Harlem.” Unlike Rhinelander, Horton was not a part of a wealthy and social family, and unlike Harris, he was not a prominent businessman. However, The New York Times still reported his annulment case.

These well-publicized cases also served as inspiration for lawmakers in multiple states. Although some states had already enacted legislation against interracial marriages, in February of 1926, The New York Times reported that New York State Senator J. Griswold Webb was planning to introduce a bill that would make interracial marriage a felony. According to the article, Webb wanted to prevent the unions of “whites and negroes” crediting the inspiration of the Rhinelander/Jones case and “the more recent marriage of Sarah Mildred Ziegler, the 16-year-old daughter of a Dutchess Junction brick manufacturer to Charles Edgar Smith, a negro laborer in a brick-yard, now a fugitive from justice.”38 Elizabeth M. Smith-Pryor noted that a senator from South Carolina planned “a bill to create a national ban on interracial marriages” in the same

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35 A quadroon was someone with one-fourth black ancestry.
year. One year later, in 1927, six more northern states introduced similar legislation:

“Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania.” These initiatives prove there were connections between passing, interracial marriage, newspaper coverage and state legislation. It is unlikely that the aforementioned trials were the first to claim that mixed race people duped whites into marriage through racial passing. Sensational news coverage of these trials made passing and interracial marriage seem like more of a problem than before.

Newspapers were not alone in their concern for people passing for white. From 1900 to 1930, at least eight novels were published with stories about or including characters passing for white. Two were published between 1900 and 1920, but six were published between 1920 and 1930, showing an increase in novels on passing. To glean the perspectives of mixed race and black people on passing, this thesis turns to fiction. In 1929, Nella Larsen published *Passing*. It did not garner much attention outside of New York City in its time, but *Passing* has become a significant piece of literature for analyzing race, passing, and sexuality since the 1980s.

In this story, a light skinned “mulatto” woman named Irene Redfield lives a comfortable life among other black people and passes for white on occasion so that she can get food or beverages at nice hotels or restaurants. She bumps into a high school friend of hers named Clare Kendry discovering that Clare has completely crossed the color line into whiteness. Clare married a white man who hates black people with a passion but has no idea that his wife has

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40 1890-1930: An Imperative Duty by William Dean Howells (1891), Iola Leroy or, Shadows, Uplifted by Frances Harper (1892), Désirée’s Baby by Kate Chopin (1893), Pudd'nhead Wilson by Mark Twain (1894), The House Behind the Cedars by Charles W. Chesnutt (1900), Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man by James Weldon Johnson (1912), Flight by Walter White (1926), Nigger Heaven by Carl Van Vechten (1926), Show Boat by Edna Ferber (1926), Quicksand by Nella Larsen (1928), Plum Bun by Jessie Redmon Fauset (1928), Passing by Nella Larsen (1929)
mixed racial ancestry. Once Clare learns about Irene’s life, she realizes that she misses being around other black people and that pretending to be white was tiring. Clare wiggles her way into Irene’s social circles to rejoin the black community, but ends up risking her own life, as well as that of those around her. *Passing* depicts how a woman who seemingly has everything, thanks to her ability to pass as white, can also feel unfulfilled because she cannot fully be herself in front of white people.

Nella Larsen happened to be a “mulatto” like the women in *Passing*, but she did not feel a need to pass in her daily life. Her mother was a Danish immigrant and her father was black or mixed West Indian.\(^{41}\) Larsen’s *Passing* and a few of her letters make her feelings and thoughts on “crossing the color line” clear. In *Passing*, Clare Kendry puts herself in danger time and time again by passing for white while still attempting to stay connected with the black community because she can’t stand being white and lonely all of the time. She enjoys the perks of being white, but feels disconnected from her true self. Claire Kendry wants the best of both worlds and that is her downfall.\(^{42}\) Irene, on the other hand, does not choose to straddle both of these worlds because she feels like she has everything she needs, “except…a little more money.”\(^{43}\) However, she saw Clare Kendry, for the first time in a while, while she was passing to get refreshments on a very hot day. The only difference between the two being that Claire is completely passing in her daily life and Irene only does so when she feels that she needs to.

To Larsen, it seems, passing would always be an unwise decision because not only was it dangerous, but she thought that anyone who decided to pass would surely miss living among black people because there was a sort of spirit and culture in the black community that was not

\(^{41}\) Ibid., 149–56.
\(^{42}\) Ibid., 7
available in “the white world.” In a letter to Charles S. Johnson, Larsen criticized a review on *Flight* by Walter White in Johnson’s magazine *Opportunity*:

> Here it is again, your reviewer’s inability to grasp the fact that Mimi Daquin came to realize that, for her, there were no advantages of the spirit in the white world, and so, spiritual things being essential to her full existence she gave up voluntarily, the material advantages.44

In the “white world” there was always a risk of being discovered and not knowing how one’s “deceit” would be taken. A “passer” could be exposed and lose their job or other work opportunities, their friends, their spouse, and sometimes their life. As Allyson Hobbs describes, in *A Chosen Exile*, within the “black world,” mixed and black people had shared experiences, food traditions, music, and jokes. If they chose to leave their black families, they lost their family stories, memories, and traditions.45 There was no “mixed race world.” Either “mulattoes” hid in the “white world” or they lived in the “black world.”

Although passing was usually a serious gamble, some African Americans thought the idea that white people could tell whether or not they were black using physical traits was humorous. Despite being quite clear that she did not desire to pass as a white woman, Larsen wrote to her friend Carl Van Vechten that when she and another friend named Grace Johnson passed in order to each lunch at “the best restaurant” in a Southern town called Murfreesborough. She wrote about it as a “stunt” and seemed to think that it was humorous because they received great service and invitation to return.46 In *Passing*, there is a moment when Irene is nervous that a white woman sitting near her at the hotel she was visiting could tell that she was black. She

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44 Ibid. 158–60
quickly waved this away, “White people were so stupid about such things for all they usually asserted that they were able to tell; and by the most ridiculous means, finger-nails, palms of hands, shapes of ears, teeth, and other equally silly rot.” Among the handful of comical accounts of passing shared by family members of “passers,” Hobbs shared that Langston Hughes believed that white people deserved to be fooled if they were racist. Even if some white people had a feeling that the seemingly white person near them may be black, it would have been improper to ask.

These supposed physical markers of blackness, used in the Rhinelander/Jones case and referenced in Passing, stem from scientific racism. As mentioned in chapter one, eugenicists argued that the “true race” of a person could be determined by outward physical attributes. Concerned with racial purity, eugenicists also measured whiteness among immigrants.

With growing fears of radicals immigrating to the United States, Southern and Eastern European immigrants were not immediately accepted into the “white fold.” In fact, there were cases in which their whiteness was debated. In 1912, the whiteness of Italians, Finns, and Armenians was questioned. The House Committee on Immigration was not sure if Italians were “full-blooded Caucasians.” In Alabama in 1922, “a Sicilian woman charged with

\[47\] Ibid., 10–11
In a many books with white-passing characters, those who are suspicious of the presence of “black blood” often claimed that the best way to find out if someone is “passing” or a “negro” is to check their nails for dark or bluish “half-moons.” Some characters note that the “passer’s” black ancestry was so far back that they didn’t have any evidence of it on their nails.; Werner Sollors, Neither Black Nor White Yet Both, 1st ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 146.


miscegenation…was acquitted. Although she had been involved with a black man, the court ruled that she was ‘inconclusively white’.”

Eugenicist Madison Grant and many of his colleagues believed that there were differences between these people and used scientific racism to create a hierarchy of the races. Scientific Racism was a sort of pseudo-science that used other disciplines to claim racial superiority. According to Grant, there were three European subspecies: Nordics/ Baltic, Mediterranean/Iberian, and Alpine. He described Nordics as the purest and strongest species, but Mediterranean people were weak with “more or less swarthy” skin. Grant claimed that Nordic people were those from England and Scotland, as well as the countries along the North Sea and the Baltic Sea. Alpines were predominately from central and Eastern Europe, while Mediterranean described the countries that surrounded the Mediterranean Sea. The United States census recorded the country of origin for immigrants, possibly to trace immigration trends. However, with scientific racism claiming that certain European origins were lesser than others, it seems that these records were also for tracking the lower types of the European subspecies in order to keep them separated from those who had already been folded into American whiteness. In response to eugenic arguments, the United States Congress passed the Immigration Act of 1924, which restricted the amount of immigrants allowed entry into the U.S. based on the number of people of each nationality who were naturalized as of 1890. This reduced the number of immigrants allowed entry from southern and eastern Europe.

Madison Grant and Lothrop Stoddard wrote books on the supremacy of the Nordic race,

51 Michael M Topp, The Sacco And Vanzetti Case: A Brief History With Documents (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2004), 7.
52 This includes Northern Africa.
54 Ibid., 301
the growing populations of immigrants and blacks, and the “solutions” to the race problem. Grant’s book, *The Passing of the Great Race* was first published in 1916, but was revised and new editions were reprinted from then until 1932.\(^{54}\) Grant states, “It has taken us fifty years to learn that speaking English, wearing good clothes and going to school and to church do not transform a Negro into a white man.”\(^{55}\) He does not analyze the reasons why black people are still not on the same level as white people, such as over one hundred years of slavery beforehand or the lack of economic opportunities and education. The only proof he points to is that they still did not “act white” after being freed. Grant’s eugenic logic concludes that some races are simply better than others. “The unfortunate fact that nearly all species of men interbreed freely leaves us no choice in the matter. Either the races must be kept apart by artificial devices of this sort, or else they ultimately amalgamate, and in the offspring the more generalized or lower type prevails.”\(^{56}\)

Some white Americans were fearful that their race had unknowingly led their country to be overtaken by immigrants and blacks. Previously, they thought that black people were dying out and that the white race would not, due to its racial superiority. However, Theodore Roosevelt believed that black people and immigrants were having more children than white Americans and that this could be detrimental to them if they did not do something about it. In 1905, he gave a speech titled “On Motherhood” before the National Congress of Mothers. In this speech, he told the women that it is selfish to not have more than two children because doing so would bring the white race “to the point of extinction.” Roosevelt argued that this would be “race suicide.” It is clear that he was referring to immigrants and black people when he said, “a race that practiced

\(^{54}\) This is possibly due to a decline in the popularity of the book. According to The Nazi Connection, Hitler was a big fan of Madison’s book and wrote to tell him so. Stefan Kuhl, *Nazi Connection*, 1st ed. (Cary: Oxford University Press, USA, 2014).

\(^{55}\) Ibid., 16

\(^{56}\) Ibid., 222
race suicide—would thereby conclusively show that it was unfit to exist...better give place to people who had not forgotten the primary laws of their being.”  

His argument focused on women and their reproductive role in preventing “race suicide.”

In the twenties, women’s sexual lives garnered even more concern because it appeared to be a time of loosening morals. Some people believed women were becoming too bold and swept up in Jazz. This so-called “devil music” encouraged men and women to dance in ways that were deemed too provocative.  

Jazz was especially concerning because there were popular clubs in Harlem, New York that catered to mixed race audiences. In 1929, Judge Charles C. Nott Jr. “charged that the so-called black-and-tan dance halls, which some white people…think it ‘smart’ to patronize, are the main breeding places of crime.” He claimed that the “moral conditions” of Harlem was “deplorable and very dangerous.”  

Even Henry Ford of the Ford Motor Company strongly disapproved of jazz. He blamed foreigners, African Americans, immigrants, and particularly what Ford termed the “International Jew” for the creation of jazz and its promiscuous dances. This shift in women’s behavior towards the more provocative was a break from white traditional values.

Although people like Judge Nott and Henry Ford disapproved of white people mixing with black people in the clubs of Harlem, the possibility of white women having liaisons with black men was a larger concern. White men with black women were less of a threat, according to Madison Grant.

This miscegenation was, of course, a frightful disgrace to the dominant race but its effect on the Nordics has been negligible, for the simple reason that it was confined to white men

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crossing with Negro women and did not involve the reverse process, which would, of course, have resulted in the infusion of Negro blood in the American stock.\textsuperscript{61}

Grant claimed racial impurity was detrimental to the United States’ identity as a white nation.\textsuperscript{62}

Grant’s colleague Lothrop Stoddard was also concerned with the threats that black men posed. In his book, \textit{The Rising Tide of Color: The Threat Against White World-Supremacy} (1920), Stoddard argued that the Great War and breakdown of white solidarity allowed people of color to rise, while the population of whites would decline. He predicted the ways in which each non-white race would grow in so-called white lands like the United States and England. Stoddard claimed that black men were animal-like, had intense emotions, were quick “breeders,” and had “prepotency” which meant their “black blood…never really [bred] out again.”\textsuperscript{63} Stoddard also threatened that the black population of the world would grow rapidly and they were “excited by Pan-Islamic propaganda spread by Negro radicals from America.”\textsuperscript{64} He devalued these perceived threats through his claim that “the black race has never shown real constructive power and have no historic pasts.”\textsuperscript{65} Stoddard went on to assert that the idea of the “melting-pot” was “an absurd fallacy” because different races could not truly “melt” together. He argued that with “members of the same race-stock…English and Swedish Nordics…there seems to be genuine amalgamation,” but when “negroes” or “Amerindians” have offspring with whites, the result is a “mechanical mixture” or “a mongrel…so consumed by his jarring heredities that he is quite worthless.”\textsuperscript{66} However much Stoddard tried to minimize the black threat, he clearly feared the black population of the world was growing quickly, was excited by Pan-Islamic propaganda, and

\textsuperscript{61} Grant, 82
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., 83
\textsuperscript{63} Lothrop Stoddard, \textit{The Rising Tide Of Color Against White World Supremacy}, 1st ed. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1921), pg 90.
\textsuperscript{64} Ibid., 100
\textsuperscript{65} Ibid., 91-92
\textsuperscript{66} Ibid., 165-166
they would mix with white people which would taint the white bloodline forever.

The language and the concerns in *The Passing of the Great Race* and *The Rising Tide of Color* were sprinkled throughout articles in *The New York Times* in the 1920s. One article in September of 1920 included eugenicist Dr. Charles B. Davenport’s claim that the best thing to do to “preserve” this country from “dilution” was to encourage “the people of the ‘best’ strains” to have four or more children and to sterilize people who exhibit “anti-social or criminalistic” behavior.67 The article questioned whether these plans would actually make America great but did not openly denounce them. Other articles promoted the work of Grant and Stoddard, with headlines like “American Civilization on the Brink” and another “Can White Races Be Submerged by Colored Hordes?”68 While some featured specialists and scientists who claimed that “European Stock” was gaining control in the Americas due to migration from Europe, others argued that in 100 years the United States would be a country of mixed race people.69 A British scientist, President J. W. Gregory of the Geographical Section of the British Association for the Advancement of Science predicted only four possible ways of solving “the negro problem,” which were miscegenation, “complete social separation” of the races, “disenfranchisement of the colored population…or the segregation of the different races in separate countries or communities.”70

Although the aforementioned articles exhibited racial fears with eugenic solutions others revealed concerns about people of color becoming or passing for white. In 1910, a man named Q.T. Simpson who attended the American Association for the Advancement of Science “declared that it was only a matter of time” when black people “could be made” to look as white

as any Caucasian. He claimed that since scientists discovered chromosomes and how they functioned, they could find a way to control or destroy the “color units” of black men through “baths or injections” and later, their “offspring.”\textsuperscript{71} Almost twenty years later, Dr. Yusaburo Noguchi, a Japanese biologist, “declared” that he could “change an Indian to a darker color, and with the physical characteristics of a Negro, or mold a Japanese so that he would have the same appearance as the Caucasian” through “electrical nutrition and glandular control.” Noguchi also claimed that soon, he would be able to transform infants in this way and also change their mental state.\textsuperscript{72} Although the British scientist, Gregory, mentioned solving the “negro problem” through miscegenation, Simpson and Noguchi sought to erase any “color units” from black people so that they would simply be white.\textsuperscript{73}

Clearly, states in the U.S. did not accept Gregory’s solution of miscegenation because many created anti-miscegenation laws to prevent and/or discourage these “unnatural” liaisons and marriages. As anti-miscegenation laws were being revised, drafted, and legislated in many states, it became important to have rules for racial classification.\textsuperscript{74} These laws worked in tandem with the “one-drop” rule. The “one-drop” rule was the belief that if a person had even a small percentage of non-white “blood”, they were classified as entirely non-white. For the 1890 census, enumerators were instructed to identify people as “black” or “negro” if the person had

\textsuperscript{72} The New York Times, "Biologist Asserts He Can Remold Man", October 24, 1929.
\textsuperscript{73} The term miscegenation, defined as “a mixture of races,” was coined and “popularized” by Copperheads during the 1864 presidential election. The Copperheads anonymously published a pamphlet entitled “Miscegenation: The Theory of the Blending of the Races,” which “advocated for the intermarriage and blending of the races until race was indistinguishable.” The pamphlet was meant to appear to be written by a Radical Republican to promote fear and to hamper President Lincoln’s re-election campaign. After this pamphlet was published, many people openly advocated against miscegenation.
\textsuperscript{74} Peggy Pascoe, What Comes Naturally: Miscegenation Law And The Making Of Race In America, 1st ed. (Oxford University Press, 2010), 111.
“three-fourths or more black blood; ‘mulatto,’ those persons who have from three-eighths to five-eighths...’quadroon” for “one-fourth black blood” and “octoroon” if the “persons” have “one-eighth or any trace of black blood.” The one-drop rule ignored all of these guidelines. Instead, a person with any black blood would now be considered a “negro.” Between 1910 and 1930, nine states passed “one-drop” type statutes. Eight other states already had similar laws.

Virginia’s “one-drop” law worked for more than one purpose when it was passed on March 20, 1924 as the "Act to Preserve Racial Integrity." The state registrar of vital statistics, Walter A. Plecker was adamant about racial classification, “often worrying that blacks were attempting to pass as white.” The law only defined two races: white and “colored,” so “all persons of mixed-race ancestry” would now be noted as “colored.” In this way, the Racial Integrity Act forced people of mixed ancestry to identify legally as colored, which worked with racial segregation and laws against interracial marriage. In the same year, the United States Supreme Court ruled in favor of the Racial Integrity Act of 1924, which “forbade miscegenation on the grounds that racial mixing was scientifically unsound and would ‘pollute’ America with mixed-blood offspring.” Thus, the “one-drop” rule strengthened anti-miscegenation legislation.

Although there were so many rules that delineated who was and was not white, light skinned people of color could yet elude them. In 1940, Plecker admitted that a test to ‘determine the race of an individual’ did not exist. Oftentimes, there were no visual markers of your “true” race, counter to what scientific racism would have many believe. A white supremacist could

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marry someone who appears white without ever knowing. The one-drop rule may have affected the way in which “mulattoes” identified themselves and how others identified them, but it could not stop people from passing and marrying white people, unless documentation described them as “mulatto.”

Another measure aimed at keeping black people “in their place” was segregation. Segregation legally kept the races apart in every way possible, from bathrooms, to schools, to building entrances, and doctor’s offices. Not only were “whites” and “coloreds” separated, the accommodations for “coloreds” were always lesser than for the “whites,” which openly communicated the superiority and privileges afforded to whiteness. While segregation began during the Reconstruction era, it gained momentum with the ruling of “separate but equal” in Plessy v. Ferguson before the turn of the century. In Buchanan v. Warley in 1917, the court ruled that residential segregation in Louisville, Kentucky violated the 14th amendment.79 However, whites in Louisville and other cities found ways around this precedent by putting restrictions on the people to whom property owners could rent or sell their homes based on race.80 Despite the protests of African Americans against segregation, President Woodrow Wilson was convinced that it was the best way to ensure harmony in the U.S. and introduced it into federal government agencies in 1913. Black employees were separated from other workers or “downgraded,” while some were even fired.81

With segregation laws spreading across the country, growing fears driven by anti-miscegenation laws/scientific racism, and increasing confusion around racial classifications, the

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80 The Supreme Court declared this unconstitutional in 1948 in Shelley v. Kraemer.
81 National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. A Letter to President Woodrow Wilson on Federal Race Discrimination, August 15, 1913. Printed document. NAACP Records, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress (025.00.00) Courtesy of the NAACP.
U.S. Census Bureau decided to follow the course of one-drop rule legislation. Hinting at the issues surrounding racial classification in the census, a newspaper article in January of 1910 declared the census director would have “negroes enumerate negroes, whites for whites.” Census Director Durand told his “supervisors” that “negroes…can obtain the information required from their own race more accurately than white enumerators” and explains that he would not want black enumerators doing so for white communities. “In many…parts of the South negro enumerators would not be able to obtain as accurate statistics regarding the white population as white enumerators could.” The article remained vague about why a white enumerator would be better at documenting other white people than a black one. Perhaps they simply did not approve of black enumerators entering white homes, but it is also possible that they believed black people would not identify passers in white communities. White enumerators likely struggled with differentiating mixed race people from blacks. In this case, the Census Director may have believed that classifying “mulattoes” as “negroes” would solve this issue.

The anti-miscegenation legislation, inspired by the Rhinelander/Jones case, its obsessive coverage, and eugenics proved to be a precursor to the removal of “mulatto” in the 1930 census. A closer look at the social and political climate of the United States in the 1930s and 40s can help determine the efficacy of the census change. Did the census change actually solve anything? Did white Americans stop fearing “passers”? This next chapter will explore the social aspects of these decades through the new medium of film and place them within the context of race relations in the thirties and forties.

Racial Passing in Film and Censorship, 1930-1949

After the Great Depression began, the economic woes of everyday people drove them into movie theaters for an escape. Films represented their desires, interests, fears, and American values. At least six films on passing appeared in theaters across the country from 1930 to 1949 with two debuting in the same year. Evidently, America’s fascination with and fear of passing did not fade away with the 1930 census change or any of the legislation and scientific theories that drove it. These influences did, however, affect the production and censorship of “race” films. The following films approach the topic of passing differently, but all of them were reviewed and sometimes censored by censorship boards across the country. Some cities even banned three out of the four films this chapter analyzes: *Veiled Aristocrats* (1932), *Imitation of Life* (1934), *Lost Boundaries* (1949), and *Pinky* (1949). *Veiled Aristocrats* did not receive much publicity and remains obscure today, while *Imitation of Life* performed well at the box office and older generations still remember it fondly. *Lost Boundaries* and *Pinky* were very successful films in 1949, but are now forgotten in the sea of Hollywood Classics. Two of the films depict families passing with male leads, while the other two have female leads. A black man directed two out of these six passing films. Through these films, one can view the changing tide of race relations and passing in the United States. Since the plots of these films are not widely known, this chapter gives a thorough overview of each.

Oscar Micheaux, a black director, adapted *Veiled Aristocrats* (1932) from the novel *The House Behind The Cedars*, which was written by the black author Charles W. Chesnutt. In this film, a man named John Walden, played by Lorenzo Tucker, returns home to Fayetteville, North
Womack

Carolina after twenty years away from his family and community. Walden left to pass for white and become a lawyer in another city. While his reasons for returning are unclear, his mother Molly Walden (Laura Bowman) is very proud of his accomplishments and reminds her son of his sister Rena (Lucille Lewis) who is now twenty-two years old. When her brother greets Rena and asks if she has a love in her life, it is apparent that she does. John notices their mother’s unhappiness.

While Rena is away, John and Molly discuss Rena’s suitor who they decide is unsuitable because he is a dark-skinned black man. The two decide that the best thing for Rena would be for her to live with John and pass for white so that she would meet and marry a white man. Rena overhears their discussion and brings it to the attention of her suitor, Frank Fowler (Carl Mahon). She professes her love for Frank and desire to elope against her mother’s wishes rather than pass for white and leave him. However, he insists that she give her brother’s idea a try, even though they both believe that it will not work. While she is away, he will work to become a successful contractor in Fayetteville and make a contribution to the “Negro race.”

Reluctantly, Rena moves in with her brother and his white friend George Tryon (Barrington Guy) begins to court her. While George appears smitten with Rena, she seems uninterested and depressed by her situation. He proposes to her but she hurriedly declines before running away from him. Despite Rena’s refusal, John insists that George and Rena are engaged, but Rena hates living a lie and passing as white because she does not identify with its culture. Rena explains that she does not know how to act around white people out of fear that they will discover her secret and ruin John’s career. She worries about her mother since she has not been able to contact her, due to the “silent agreement” she made with her brother to forget her past and
her mother. Rena also misses her community and Frank. She tells John that she no longer wishes to pass for white and that she plans to return home to marry Frank and take care of their mother. She does not disparage his decision to pass for white, but she acknowledges that she did not want to pass all of her life. While John comes to terms with Rena’s decisions, she meets Frank and they drive home as they discuss their impending marriage. The film ends with Rena telling Frank to wake her up when they get to Fayetteville.

Before Veiled Aristocrats, Oscar Micheaux also released a silent film in 1927 named after the novel The House Behind the Cedars (1900). Veiled Aristocrats was its remake. While the first film remained more faithful to the novel, it was heavily censored and did not enjoy a large debut. It is likely that the censorship issues caused some of the significant changes that Micheaux made in Veiled Aristocrats. In his original film, Rena gets engaged to “a wealthy white North Carolinian” but “decides to return to her black lover.” Her fiancé discovers her “true race” but is still in love with her and continues to “pursue her until she marries the black suitor.” Just one year after the Racial Integrity Act of 1924, The House Behind the Cedars disregarded the law, which caused issues with the Virginia Board of Censors when they screened it in 1925. Not only did the original version focus on a mulatto woman and visible evidence of miscegenation, but she also passed for white despite the recently passed laws in Virginia declared that anyone with a drop of black blood was a “negro.” Worst of all, Rena not only chooses a black man over a white man, but the white man continues to love and pursue her even after he has found out that she is mulatto. This insinuation that a woman could prefer a black man over a white one was dangerous, but even more alarming was that a white man would continue to love a “Negro.” This aspect in particular was an issue with the Virginia Board Censors because it appeared to promote

83 A black frame in the film describes this “silent agreement”
miscegenation. They agreed that if Michaeux made cuts to the film in places that referred to the woman as mixed race and any part that alluded to the white man’s continued love of Rena. Despite their reservations, the film was shown in black theaters in Virginia, but it was unsuccessful and all remaining copies of it were allegedly lost.

With a revamped plot and the addition of voice acting, Micheaux’s *Veiled Aristocrats*, brought Charles W. Chesnutt’s novel to the big screen again. Rena’s white suitor, George Tryon, never finds out about Rena’s race and does not pine after her. She refuses his proposal and, in fact, does not seem interested in his affections at all. Rena refers to herself as a “negro” or “negress” and none of the characters acknowledge the Walden’s mixed race ancestry. Despite these changes, *Veiled Aristocrats* does not appear to have been successful since it was not mentioned in *The New York Times*, the *Chicago Tribune*, or even the *Chicago Defender*. The film also faded into obscurity until rediscovered in 1992 “in a garage in Tennessee.”

In contrast, *Imitation of Life*, a 1934 film based on Fannie Hurst’s novel of the same, was a big success from the start. In 1935, it was nominated for Academy Awards in Outstanding Production and Sound Recording. The film is about a white widowed mother named Beatrice “Bea” Pullman (Claudette Colbert), a black mother named Delilah Johnson (Louise Beavers), and their daughters Jessie (Rochelle Hudson) and Peola (Fredi Washington), whom they raise together as Delilah works as the Pullman’s housekeeper. Bea struggles as a single mother trying to care for her daughter and make a living from selling her late husband’s maple syrup. When she realizes that Delilah’s pancakes are uniquely wonderful, she opens up a pancake shop where Delilah cooks the pancakes and Bea sells her syrup. Without asking Delilah, Bea rents a shop

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85 Ibid, 101-103
and capitalizes on her recipe, despite Delilah’s proclamation that the recipe was a family secret. With Delilah’s smiling image on the shop front, Bea also puts it on the boxed pancake mix. Bea makes a small fortune by selling “Aunt Delilah’s” pancake flour mix. She offers Delilah a twenty percent share in the corporation, but Delilah refuses it because she wants to continue taking care of Bea and Jessie instead of getting her own house and car. When Bea insists on putting Delilah’s share in the bank, Delilah tells her that she has “a hankering for a good funeral” for which she could use the money.

As Jessie and Peola head to school one day, Peola runs back into the shop crying because Jessie called her “black.” Delilah holds her daughter, but Peola cries out “I won’t be black” and blames her mother for her blackness. Bea insists that Jessie apologize for saying such a “terrible” thing, but Delilah says that it is no one’s fault and Peola must learn to accept it. Later, Delilah catches Peola passing for white at school one day when she notices her daughter forgot her rain jacket and boots. Delilah’s dark appearance gives Peola away and her white teacher excuses her from class.

As the girls get older and Bea becomes wealthier, Peola still struggles with her racial identity. Delilah suggests that Peola go to a school in the South, meaning a historically black college. Although she does not want to, Peola obeys her mother, but leaves school and passes for white as a cashier at a restaurant. Delilah receives a letter from Peola’s school expressing their surprise at her daughter’s sudden departure. When Peola does not return home, panic-stricken Delilah travels south with Bea. They find Peola, but she denies knowing Delilah until Bea shames her in front of a white man at her job. Peola runs away, only to return home to tell her mother that she has decided to cross the color line permanently and would like her mother to stop
claiming her. Heartbroken by her daughter’s decision, Delilah falls into a depression and her health declines rapidly.

Meanwhile, Bea has finally found love again with a man name Stephen Archer (Warren William). When her daughter Jessie comes home on a school break she becomes infatuated with Stephen, while her mother is away with Delilah. This complicates Bea’s relationship with both her daughter and Stephen. Delilah’s doctor beckons Bea downstairs to speak with Delilah one last time. Delilah longs for her daughter and speaks of her wishes for her funeral before seemingly dying of a “broken heart.” At her elaborate funeral, Peola comes back and runs to her mother’s casket crying. She asks her late mother if she will ever forgive her and in the car with Bea, she cries, “Mrs. B, I killed my own mother.” Peola decides to go back to school in the South, as her mother wished. Seeing Delilah’s tragic relationship with her daughter, Bea decides to choose her daughter’s happiness over her own and tells Steven that they cannot marry for quite some time. As the film comes to a close, Bea and Jessie reminisce about the old days with Delilah with a brightly lit billboard of Aunt Delilah’s Pancake Mix in the background.

Just like Oscar Micheaux’s films on passing, *Imitation of Life* was a victim of censorship, this time by Hollywood’s Production Code. The Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) “adopted its list of ‘Don’ts and Be Carefuls’ in 1927, which “forbade miscegenation” in films.” Usually this clause pertained to visible sexual relationships between the races, but in this film, the mere presence of Peola, a character who was evidence of miscegenation, was objectionable. In order to make Peola’s blackness clearer, Universal cast an African American actress name Fredi Washington and supposedly had her “wear make-up to

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darken her light complexion."\textsuperscript{89} To reinforce Peola’s blackness, the film placed Delilah, her visibly black mother, with her in every scene. Whenever Peola appeared to blend in with her white classmates or when selling cigars to a white man, her mother would show up to remind Peola and the audience that she was not white.

Although \textit{Imitation of Life} performed well at the box office, critics were mixed. The \textit{Chicago Defender}, a black newspaper, published over twenty articles of critique, commentary, and sometimes praise about the film. In one article, Dewey R. Jones wrote that he knew there were women like Peola, “without the ability to…reason and thereby to get out of life all there is to get,” and explains that her “moping because she is not white is no sign of intelligence.”\textsuperscript{90} However, this same writer continued to say that he understood Peola’s feelings and reactions. Jones also noted “most dark mothers” he knew “would not tolerate” Peola’s complaints about wanting to be black and the blame she pushes to her mother for being black. Most notably, Jones wrote that it did not make sense for “all this fuss to be made about being something you are not.” He argued that it should not be shocking to black or white folks that someone of mixed ancestry would want to identify as white and that everyone should just respect each other for who they are. Despite all of these critiques, Jones claimed that he still liked the movie because he believed it would make people think.

A woman named Grace Bowen Smith had harsher comments about \textit{Imitation of Life}. Smith wrote “Fannie Hurst…does not know Negroes, or else she could never have written such a book, based on so superficial an ambition…”\textsuperscript{91} Smith explained that usually when a “Negro” passes for white, they do so with some beneficial motive, like better pay or more flattering jobs,

\textsuperscript{89} Ibid., 14
but when Peola passed, she only got a job as a cashier. Smith called the film “propaganda” and claimed that it was just like other movies that never show a black person as an intelligent moral being living in the present. Another article taken from the Kansas City Star, raved about the “pathos” of the film and Delilah’s devotion to Bea. 92 This praise did not come from a black newspaper, so it did not analyze any of the themes, which black people had come to expect in films that depicted them. The newspaper critics found great merit in the acting abilities of the cast, but many disliked the script because the plot and dialogue were not believable.

While their plots differ, Veiled Aristocrats and Imitation of Life possess some similar themes. Both films push the notion that it is best to accept oneself, which would make one happy. Both films also chose very light-skinned African American women to portray Rena and Peola. Veiled Aristocrats had an “all black cast”. Imitation of Life, however, sends the message that black people should accept their place because it will make them happy. In terms of gender, it communicates that motherhood is more important than anything. Veiled Aristocrats portrays passing as possibly unnecessary, but it promotes the notions that one should be proud of being black, that helping the black race progress is honorable, and that family/blood is more important than success (especially in the white world).

Of course, no film exists within a vacuum and is always influenced by the social and political environment of its day. It is likely that the issue of race relations in society and in relation to President Roosevelt (FDR) affected the ways in which the plots and race were treated in Veiled Aristocrats and Imitation of Life. In 1930, a white mob of 10,000 lynched two young black men named Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith in Marion, Indiana for allegedly attacking a

white couple. In 1939, after a court ordered that a black student named Lloyd Gaines be admitted to the all-white University of Missouri Law School, he was reported missing.

Although FDR was lauded for his New Deal laws, African Americans often did not benefit from programs like Social Security because “segregationists made sure that farmers and domestics—Black’s primary vocations—were excluded from the law’s new job benefits.” The Home Owners Loan Corporation and the Federal Housing Administration effectively “prevented Black renters from purchasing a home and acquiring wealth” through the process known as “red-lining.” These events and lack of assistance from the government are examples of the inequalities that convinced some mixed race people to pass for white, thus keeping passing relevant in film.

As the United States entered World War II, FDR’s record on race relations produced poor results. On the other hand, Harry Truman’s performance was surprisingly beneficial. Although he opposed the anti-lynching bill, pressure from activists, the NAACP charges of human rights violations before the United Nations, and his desire to win the next election, pushed him to support it. In 1947, Truman condemned racial violence in his State of the Union address, and in 1948 he issued the Executive Order that desegregated the armed forces.

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94 Family members attribute this either to being killed or running away from the threats of violence.
95 Ibram X Kendi, Stamped From The Beginning: The Definitive History Of Racist Ideas In America, 1st ed. (New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2016), 336.
96 Ibid., 337 “These agencies drew ‘color-coded’ maps, coloring Black neighborhoods in red as undesirable. The maps caused brokers to deny residents new thirty-year mortgages…”
97 Ibid.
Segregation within the Navy, in particular, affected the main character of the film *Lost Boundaries* (1949). The movie begins in 1922 when Scott Mason Carter (Mel Ferrer). Scott is a near-white medical school graduate in Chicago marries Marcia (Beatrice Pearson), whom is also light-skinned. Scott and Marcia travel to Georgia for a job opportunity in a black hospital, but the hospital workers see his pale skin and seem unsure of him. The hospital director turns him down for the position and explains that the board would like to give the job to a Southerner. While Scott looks for work in his field, the young couple stays with Marcia’s family in Boston. Marcia’s father, who had been passing for white for years, suggests that she and Scott pass, too. Scott does not want to pass for white, at first. He and his wife are adamant about being themselves, but after he's turned down for jobs in his field due to his racial ambiguity, he and his pregnant wife get desperate. Scott decides to pass for white to obtain an internship in Portsmouth, New Hampshire.

Not long after taking the position, there is an emergency at a nearby lighthouse, so Scott responds and saves a fisherman’s life by operating on him at the site. The fisherman turns out to be a doctor and is so impressed with Scott that he tells him about a position opening in Keenham, New Hampshire. Scott admits to the doctor that he is black, but the doctor lets his job offer stand, although suggesting that Scott keep his race concealed. Scott accepts the doctor's offer and moves with Marcia to Keenham to begin his new position. People in Keenham are skeptical of them, at first, because they're new to the small town. He and Marcia worry about the expected baby’s skin tone, but the worry is alleviated when their son is born light skinned.

Everything seems to be going well for the Carter family by the time the US enters WWII. Their son Howard (Richard Hylton) has made friends at college and dates a white girl from Keenham. One of his college friends happens to be a black student named Arthur “Art” Cooper
(William Greaves) with whom he writes and plays music. The Carters also had a daughter named Shelly (Susan Douglas Rubes) who is now in high school and has a white boyfriend named Andy (Carleton Carpenter). The kids don't know that they have black blood in their veins and neither does the town.

Art comes to visit Howard and they go to a party in town. Shelly is annoyed by Art’s visit because she is worried about what her friends will think about a "coon" visiting their house. Scott shouts at Shelly, telling her to never use that word again. Some of the white people gossip and make fun of Art until he and Howard perform a song impressing everyone with their talents, including Shelly. Later that night, Art and Howard have a drink with Scott and the father and son talk about their enlistments in the Navy. Art says that he does not really want to join because “if you’re colored the Navy makes you a Steward’s Mate,” so he plans to go into the Air Force. Howard seems to be a bit upset by the truth of Art’s statement.

The next day, Scott gets news from the Navy that he is to become a Lieutenant Commander. As he tries on his uniform, he gets a visit from a Naval Intelligence officer. The man has Scott identify his documentation and asks if he has any Negro blood in his veins because he read in Scott’s file that he was a part of a “negro fraternity” while at Chase Medical School. Scott admits that he is a Negro. Meanwhile, Howard gets home with his uniform on and sees that a party has been arranged in their honor. Scott, visibly deflated, goes to Marcia and tells her that his commission has been revoked because he is black.

After this disappointment, Scott and Marcia decide that it is time to tell their children the truth about their race, so they begin with Howard. Scott says, “I’m part Negro, Howard, and so is your mother.” Howard is confused and looks at his parents, as if to see if it is true. He insists he is white, until his mother tells him that they are all “Negroes.” Howard is in shock and breaks
down, analyzing his face, skin, fingernails, and palms of his hands. Scott wants to tell the whole party, which has grown since he broke the news to Howard, that they are black. However, Marcia insists that they wait until the next day, so that she can tell Shelly first.

The town presents Scott with a gift and insists he return after his service. He leaves for the naval base, although his commission has been revoked, because the Navy requested that he report to them until the information about his race reaches Washington, D.C. After three days, they finally discharge Scott and he goes to the black and white clinic he runs with his medical school friend Dr. Jessie Pridham (Ray Saunders) in Boston. He shares his rejection letter with Jessie, which claims that his service was revoked because he did not meet the “physical qualifications.” Scott calls this his twenty-year hangover, but Jessie points out that although he helped convince Scott to pass for white, he does not regret it. He tells Scott that now is not the time to feel sorry for himself because he chose this life and it was his responsibility to tell his children a long time ago. Jessie suggests that Scott move his family down to Boston now since New Hampshire does not have Negro doctors, but Scott does not want to seem to be running away from the truth and its consequences.

After Scott leaves for the base, Howard breaks up with his girlfriend, because he cannot date her now that he knows he is black. He runs away to Harlem to see what it is like to be black. He walks through town all day and rents a room. His nightmares are filled with images of his family members as dark-skinned black people. While he is away, the whole town gossips about the Carters’ being black. Shelly’s boyfriend heard rumors that the Carters’ are “colored,” but she admits that it is not a rumor. He still wants to take her to the dance, but she turns him down.

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99 Art lives in Harlem.
Still in Harlem, Howard walks around at night and happens to witness two men fighting in an apartment hallway, so he stops it. One of the men fires a gun in the struggle, and when the police come, they arrest Howard after the real perpetrator escapes. At the police station, the detective and officers are trying to figure out who Howard is and if the gun was his. The Detective Staples (Royal Beal), a white man, explains to Lieutenant ‘Dixie’ Thompson (Canada Lee), a dark-skinned man, Howard keeps saying that he just found out that he is colored, so he ran away. Thompson understands and contacts Howard’s friend Art, with the address they found in Howard’s clothes.

Thompson speaks to Howard one-on-one, so Howard explains how he came to be there. He tells Howard that he seems to have the same prejudices as white people. Howard says the men who were fighting were “killers.” Lt. Thompson explains that there are gangs in any slum section of New York City, white and black, because they are “caught in a trap and this is a way of showing their defiance.” He says that people are “whether they’re white or whether they’re black, pretty much the same.” Howard says, “except me, I’m neither white nor black, I’m both.” But Thompson says, “Howard, you’re a negro” and claims that there are plenty of blacks that can be mistaken for white, “some eight million or so.” He says that Howard should not pass judgment on his dad for passing because life is hard for black people. He tells Howard that he cannot understand what it is like to be black in just five days. Thompson calmly says that Howard’s father was only trying to give his children a happy childhood. He tells him to talk to his father about it and releases him with Art.

Howard goes to his father’s clinic in Boston, which has a slogan saying that it is for the “treatment and care of all races and creeds”. Scott tells his son that he raised him white and that

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100 But his mouth seems to say a different unintelligible word.
there is no reason that he should not continue living as white. Scott says that he plans to go back
home to Keenham, so that he and Marcia can live their lives the way they planned to when they
first married, but he recognizes that the people of Keenham may not all still be their friends.
Howard says that he wants to go home with his father, too. Shelly has not fully adjusted to her
father, but she is happy to see Howard again. They go to church the next day, as a family.

People in town do not seem to be returning their greetings as they walk to church.

Howard, in his Navy uniform catches up with them. The Carters get to church late and sit in the
pews as everyone watches them walk in. The priest gives a sermon about ignorance and hate. He
tells the congregation that all men are brothers and that the Navy has extended commissions to
all qualified citizens regardless of race or color. He tells the congregation that they will sing the
hymn 519 because the number belongs to their doctor, his mailbox, etc. They begin singing, but
Shelly has a hard time continuing to sing so she walks out of the church. The voiceover reveals
that the Carters still live in Keenham, and Scott Carter is still their doctor.101

The public and critics seemed to love *Lost Boundaries*. Walter White, of the NAACP,
wrote that it “was not only the finest film made to date about Negroes but one of the best and
most honest moving pictures I have ever seen on any subject.”102 The *Chicago Defender* printed
numerous reviews of *Lost Boundaries*. In one article, the author Lillian Scott expressed
reservations about seeing the movie because of the producer’s choice of white actors over light
skinned black actors, who already had a hard time getting work due to their race and “near-
white” appearance, but she was pleasantly surprised to find that it was “a beautifully produced

101 The real Scott Carter, Albert C. Johnston was “ousted from his position shortly after” the board of
directors at the Elliot Community Hospital found out he was black.; Allyson Hobbs, *A Chosen Exile: A
History Of Racial Passing In American Life* (Cambridge, MA, United States: Harvard University Press,
2014), 245.
102 Walter White, "Southerner’S Hypersensitivity To Criticism On Increase", *Chicago Defender (National
Aside from Scott’s frustration with the white casting, she critiqued a few instances that did not seem authentic, particularly the scene in the black hospital and when the dark-skinned friends encourage the Carters to pass for white. “There are far too many light skinned southern Negroes for the sight of one to throw a public institution into the tizzy pictured.” She explained that black people usually look down on passing and do not encourage it, despite their knowledge of “any economic gains made by it.” Another review in the Chicago Defender called the film “interesting and soul stirring,” although the author noted that the film distorted the actual experiences of the Johnston family, as depicted in the book Lost Boundaries adapted. The real Johnston family even kept clippings of articles on the film and its premieres.

Later in 1949, another film on passing entitled Pinky came out, this time with a very light skinned woman as the lead. The story of Pinky begins when Pinky Johnson (Jeanne Crain) returns home to see her “granny” Dicey (Ethel Waters) after becoming a nurse in the North. Dicey, a dark-skinned woman has her suspicions about what happened to Pinky up North and why she wrote to her granny less and less. Pinky admits that she initially passed by accident, but then continued to do so. Dicey tells her that pretending to be what she is not is a sin and is so disturbed that she tells Pinky not to speak of it again. Pinky has a nightmare about the white man she fell in love with when she was up North, named Dr. Thomas Adams (William Lundigan).

The next day, when Pinky talks to Dicey again, she finds out that her granny never stopped sending her money. Jake Waters, the man whom Dicey would give the money to send to Pinky, kept Dicey’s money. Pinky confronts him and his wife, but their argument is cut short.

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when the police arrest them all. At the judge’s office, the Judge Walker (Basil Ruysdael) recognizes Pinky and, knowing Dicey, he lets her go.

Before Pinky left to confront Jake, she found out that Dicey does the laundry for the white woman, Miss Em (Ethel Barrymore) who lives in the large plantation house nearby. Pinky hates Miss Em and her house because it was “slave built, slave run, and run down ever since.” Pinky believes that Miss Em is probably as racist as her ancestors and the other white people in town, so she does not understand why Dicey insists on taking care of this old woman without compensation.

Later, Pinky goes for a walk to clear her mind and two drunk, white men in a car start following her, trying to give her a ride. After she tells that she lives in the “negro section” of town that they are driving through, they continue to follow her and try to sexually assault her. She runs away from them, all the way home. Meanwhile, Jake stops by Dicey’s house and reads a letter Tom wrote to Pinky, which Dicey had been hiding. Most likely, Tom expressed wanting to see Pinky, but that is never revealed because Dicey grabs the letter before Jake can read it aloud and burns it. Jake offers to write a letter back to Tom as Pinky to repel him, as long as Jake can deduct the expense from the money he owes her.

After being assaulted by the white men, Pinky is distressed and starts packing to return North, but Dicey tells her that she wants her to stay to take care of Miss Em. At first, Pinky refuses, until Dicey tells her that Miss Em took care of Dicey when she caught pneumonia. Reluctantly, Pinky agrees to nurse Miss Em until she passes away and plans to go back North after that. Miss Em comes off as harsh and stubborn to Pinky, but as time goes on, she and Pinky begin to understand one another. In her last few days, Miss Em decides to give Pinky her house and property when she dies, instead of her family members who do not seem to care much for
her. When Pinky receives the news, she also finds out that Miss Em’s cousin (through marriage) Melba Woolley (Evelyn Varden) is furious and wants to challenge the will in court. Instead of giving up the property and house to avoid confrontation, Pinky pushes back. She convinces Judge Walker to defend her, as he was a friend of Miss Em’s.

Tom shows up at her house and Pinky explains to him that the black woman he saw outside is her grandmother. She tries to get him to leave but he will not go until she explains the whole situation to him. Pinky tells him that she fell in love with him, but panicked when he proposed to her, so she went back home. After Pinky explains that she is black, Tom tries to kiss her. When she turns her head away, he says that he hopes that he is not prejudice. Tom explains that as a doctor, he does not believe in the idea of superior and inferior races, but “it is a tricky business, though…you never know what exists deep down inside yourself (most likely referring to prejudice). He tells Pinky that he still wants to be with her and claims that they can work everything out between them and no one else will have to know. Pinky gives in to him.

In court, despite all of the testimonies and accusations made by the white people in town to make Pinky appear undeserving and manipulative, the Judge Shoreham rules in her favor because the will appeared to be written very deliberately and “with sound mind.” When Pinky thanks her attorney, he congratulates her, but says that he “doubts that any other interests of the community has been served.” After the commotion of the trial, Tom wants Pinky to sell the property and move to Denver with him, even though his family and connections are in Boston, because of the publicity of the trial. She refuses because she realizes that Miss Em wanted her to have the house for a reason. Pinky reasons that Miss Em wanted her to be herself, but Thomas wants her to pretend to be white so that they can marry. She does not want to lose her identity as Pinky Johnson, so she turns Thomas down. “I’m a Negro and I can’t forget it and I don’t want
to.” She identifies as black, rather than as mixed race. Pinky thinks back on a time, not too long ago, when she met a black doctor named Dr. Canady (Kenny Washington) who asked her to train black prospective nurses. Pinky decides to turn Miss Em’s home into “Miss Em’s Clinic and Nursery School” for black people.

Since *Lost Boundaries* and *Pinky* debuted in the same year and were both about passing, they faced the same film censorship board. Atlanta film censor Christine Smith reviewed both films, but only banned one. Just like *Veiled Aristocrats* and *Imitation of Life*, the mere presence of mixed race characters implied miscegenation. However, this time, one of the films featured an interracial relationship that implied intimacy. In *Pinky* there is a scene where two white men attempt to sexually assault Pinky after she tells them that she is black. Not only do these white men fail to realize that Pinky is black, they are not repelled by her revelation, as the censorship board would have preferred. The men go from offering a ride to a defenseless white woman to attempting to sexually assault a black one. They see Pinky as open for the taking, reminiscent of the sexual vulnerability of enslaved black women. Tom, on the other hand, expresses love for Pinky and kisses her after she reveals she has been passing for white.106 Both of these scenes and one in which a white officer slaps a black woman were cut so that *Pinky* could be approved. Smith viewed these scenes as possible threats to “peace” in Atlanta. However, she saw the overall film as one with “important social value,” since it would make white southerners “realize how unlovely their attitudes are,” and it “mirrors both the darker side and the progressive side, which all good entertainment should have.”

Smith did not find the same appeal in *Lost Boundaries*. In a lawsuit that the RD-DR Corporation and Film Classic, Inc. brought against her and the censorship broad, the defendants

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claimed that “it was disapproved by defendants solely because...defendants decided that the exhibition of said motion picture ‘will adversely affect the peace, morals, and good order of said city.’”  However, it did not describe the exact ways in which Lost Boundaries could negatively affect Atlanta. Margaret T. MacGehee argues that the differences between the ways in which Pinky and Lost Boundaries addressed “white black relations, integration, and segregation” are key to understanding why the latter was banned.

In Pinky, the protagonist decides against marrying a white man and stays within the bounds of segregation by opening a nursing school and clinic for blacks. In contrast, Lost Boundaries allows the Carters to continue living in a white town, go to the white church, Dr. Carter works at a clinic that allows both black and white patients, and the town of Keenham lets him continue to be their doctor. All of which appeared to be “prointegrationist...propaganda,” which could “elicit protests or violence” from white southerners. While some people were okay with the idea of equality, they did not necessarily agree with desegregation. The plaintiffs of this case argued that the board’s censorship code was unconstitutional because it violated section one of the fourteenth amendment. Still, Judge Andrews ruled against the plaintiffs stating that this film did not qualify as “part of the press,” so there was no violation of the fourteenth amendment, meaning that it was still “subject to censorship.”

Pinky was an even larger hit than Lost Boundaries but shared its mixed reviews. In anticipation of the film, “scenarist” Philip Dunne wrote, “the production of ‘Pinky’ marks

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107 RD-DR Corporation and Film Classics, Inc. v. Christine Smith, Milton G. Farris, Sherwood L. Astin, Ralph A. Juie, Mrs. William J. Davis, J. Howard Monroe, John M. Slaton, Aubrey Milam, Troy Steone and William B. Hartsford
"Lost Boundaries Becomes A Censorship Test Case", Manuscript (Keene, 2017), MG No. 44, The Cheshire County Historical Society.
109 Ibid., 31-33
110 Ibid., 43
another break with the long-standing taboo against films dealing with the problems of racial and religious prejudice.”\textsuperscript{111} He reminded the readers that “last season,” there were films “concerned with anti-Semitism” and explained, “this year…will touch on the inflammable topic of the Negro in American life.” Dunne analyzed the issues and goals of films like \textit{Pinky}. While movies were entertainment, some believed “the industry should confine its efforts to musicals…comedies, whodunnits and Westerns,” while others thought it could be a place for telling the stories of “contemporary life.” When \textit{Pinky} made it to the movie screens, one \textit{The New York Times} reader named John M. Howard submitted his thoughts on it.\textsuperscript{112} Howard claimed that \textit{Pinky} had stock characters like “the long suffering Negro mammy” which made for a good “melodrama.” However, he believed \textit{Lost Boundaries} was the better film because it “attains a middle ground…is realistic, honest, objective…yet we view the people in it with compassion.” He continued to say that \textit{Lost Boundaries} did not “pretend to solve the problem,” but it aided people in thinking about the problem. One article in the \textit{Chicago Defender} shared the reactions of black “socialite women” to the newspaper’s “premiere preview” of \textit{Pinky}.\textsuperscript{113} The general consensus among the women was that they enjoyed the film, but “Mrs. Nerline W. Simons wondered: ‘What good is ‘Pinky’ going to do? I’d rather keep them in the dark about the ‘Pinkys’ of our race, many of whom have made a successful and satisfactory adjustment. I’m afraid to enlighten them will cause them to become too curious.”

While many people, both blacks and whites, thought that the film was great entertainment and good for helping to understand race relations, some stated that they did not believe \textit{Pinky}

\textsuperscript{112} \textit{The New York Times}, "Comment In The Mail: Pertaining To ‘Intruder In The Dust’ And Others", December 4, 1949.
would solve any problems. Cab Calloway echoed this sentiment in his article in the *Chicago Defender*.\(^{114}\) He explained that the issue with “Hollywood’s attempt to deal with ‘the Negro problem’ in *Pinky* and *Lost Boundaries* is that they focus on the experiences of black people who can pass for white, although there are even more black people who could not. He continues,

> Obviously the intent of the pictures is to show white audiences that a person with Negro blood is no different from one without. From this the white is supposed to draw the conclusion that if a light Negro is no different, then neither is a dark or a very dark Negro. The purpose is good but I am inclined to feel that all to few white people will not realize the purpose, understand it, or sympathize with it from the evidence in these films.

Other critics in the *Defender* were particularly bothered by the choices these films made in casting because they chose white actors to play “near-white negroes,” unlike past films like *Imitation of Life*.\(^{115}\) The article even depicted black actors who could have played the female leads in *Lost Boundaries* and *Pinky*. The most popular sentiment about both of these films was that Hollywood was beginning to change its treatment of race in film.

With *Lost Boundaries* and *Pinky*, Hollywood attempted to appeal to white audiences by casting white actors, presenting moral figures, and depicting films that encouraged black people to stop passing for white. Both films used white actors to play the passers, possibly to coerce white audiences to empathize with their plights. Perhaps *Lost Boundaries* inspired some white people to wonder how life changing and upsetting it might be to suddenly find out that they were black, too. In both films, moral figures like Judge Walker, the Keenham priest, and the Harlem police officer explain to the passers that they understand that in passing for white, they gained advantages that darker-skinned “negroes” could not. They do not, however, advocate for the main characters to continue passing. The passers reach the conclusion that they are proud to be


black and decide to stop passing for white. They embrace who they are and turn to their white love interests away from them.

Both films also call out racial prejudice, which seemed to be avoided in *Veiled Aristocrats* and *Imitation of Life*. The Carters and Pinky were not helpless when their identities were revealed. The Carters stayed put in their town, as did Pinky, despite the unwanted attention they garnered, because they had just as much right as the white people did to stay. Surprisingly, in both films, the white romantic interests, Tom and Andy try to continue pursuing relationships with the near white characters Pinky and Shelly, after they revealed their blackness. This pursuit, of course, pushed the boundaries of Hollywood’s production code. When *Lost Boundaries* revealed racism, it was institutional and covert, whereas Pinky experienced overt and institutional racism. The people in Keenham gossip about the Carters being black, but they do not attempt to push them out of town or take action against them (in the film). The white people in *Pinky* distrust her for gaining Miss Em’s property through her will. In the courthouse, they attempt to embarrass her and assign racial stereotypes to her to make her seem unfit or deceiving. Unlike *Veiled Aristocrats* and *Imitation of Life*, these films acknowledged the effects of racism on the daily lives of black people through the lens of those who could pass between black and white worlds.

Although all of these films attempted to explain racial passing, white Americans still feared them, as evidenced by their censorship. From 1930 to 1949, the depictions of passing on screen have differed and their messages have evolved. These changes displayed how white Americans felt about passing because white filmmakers created most of the movies. In the 1930s, the films on passing emphasized an updated version of the “tragic mulatto,” a literary trope of a mixed race woman who is tortured by the feeling that she does not fit in the black or
the white world. In *Veiled Aristocrats* and *Imitation of Life*, Rena and Peola are torn between two worlds and have to choose a side, lest they become hopeless. In the 1940s, *Lost Boundaries* and *Pinky* presented mixed race people who do not truly want to be white, but who recognize their own hardships as “negroes” and the benefits of passing for white. All of the films shunned the idea of passing instead of accepting blackness. Even when *Lost Boundaries* and *Pinky* pointed out the reasons why someone would want to pass for white, the outcomes of the films still emphasized that the characters were black, rather than biracial. In addition, the fact that all of the passing characters with white love interests felt they had to break off their relationships emphasized the idea that miscegenation was wrong. The biggest red flag lies in the reasons for censoring these films. State censors claimed that they did not want to create racial tensions in their cities as a result of showing these films, while Hollywood censors opposed miscegenation and any evidence of it in films.

*Veiled Aristocrats, Imitation of Life, Lost Boundaries, Pinky,* and films like them were message movies as much as they were race films. They showed the inequalities between the races, but they also dwelt on accepting blackness and sometimes pride in blackness. This acceptance was not just one of being dark-skinned, but of accepting the ways in which black people were treated. While *Imitation of Life* may have comforted white audiences because there was harmony between the black characters and the white characters, *Lost Boundaries* and *Pinky* may have made them a bit uncomfortable. *Lost Boundaries* exposed the subtle racism of white New Englanders and racist restrictions in the military. *Pinky* displayed the institutional and violent racism of the South. The film industry and censorship attempted of make stories of passing palatable and less fear invoking than the sensational newspaper articles of the 1920s.

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The plots of these films, their receptions and censorship are products of the coverage and policies surrounding passing in the 1920s. All four embraced the one-drop rule, describing the passers as black, rather than mixed race. However, they were plagued with censorship resulting from anti-miscegenation policies and segregation. Although, the main message behind *Veiled Aristocrats, Imitation of Life, Lost Boundaries*, and *Pinky* was that people should accept their race and plights instead of passing for white, they continued to provide for white American’s obsession with stories of passers. *Lost Boundaries* also made it clear that people were still passing for white, despite the census change of 1930.
Conclusion

Figure 2: Leroy Edmonds with coworkers at the Philadelphia Navy Yard in 1943. Courtesy of the Edmonds Family.

The swell of the Great Migration brought unknown faces into northern and western cities, allowing some to slip into the cover of whiteness for work opportunities or in perpetuity. Suspicions of passing inspired novels and sensational newspaper articles. Fueled by the "science" of eugenics, anti-miscegenation and segregation laws worked in tandem to stop more near-whites from slipping under the radar. Rather than looking into why people passed for white and addressing issues of inequality, lawmakers opted to create even more inequalities. They wanted racial passing to cease, but did not understand how disenfranchisement fueled the need to pass. Lawmakers were too concerned with upholding white superiority and purity through segregation to notice this irony.
When the census changed in 1930, it seemed like “mulattoes” would finally be pushed behind the darkened line of race. However, people continued to pass and some permanently changed their race to “white” on the census. My great grandfather Leroy Edmonds continued passing for employment opportunities after the census change and as depicted in the film *Lost Boundaries*, the Carter/Johnston family passed until the late 1940s. The films that portrayed the experiences passing in the 1930s and 1940s, the responses they received, and their censorship reveal that white Americans were still grappling with their fear of passers. At the same time, some felt that these “race films” were food for thought and believed that they made it possible for people to sympathize with “the Negro problem.” Thus, it appears that the 1930 census did not stop people from passing for white and could not placate the obsession and fear of this invisible issue.

Passing continued because the boundaries of whiteness, anti-miscegenation, and segregation laws were all based on the notion that physical characteristics could determine someone’s race. Changing the racial classification of “mulattoes” could not stop people from passing because they could pass permanently, being classified as white on their records. White Americans so feared this invisible threat that they made contradictory decisions on ways to track those who were passing. They changed the census believing that stricter racial categories would stop “mulattoes” from reaching whiteness. Ironically, the measures that were taken to create more rigid lines in the races did nothing to expose those who did not appear to be black. It would take much more than a “whites only” sign to stop them.

If I had more time to research and write this thesis, I would have wanted to analyze more of the novels and all of the films on passing from 1910 to 1950. I also would have started my analysis in the 1890s to draw attention to the addition of “quadroon” and “octoroon” in the
census records. Hopefully, my future research will dive deeper into the connections between eugenics, government policies, and the census at a later date. It is my hope that scholars will continue to research and write about the effects of racial passing and the census change on the present day and possibly explore racial passing from the perspective of Latino people in the United States.
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