A Little White Lie:

Walter White, the Harlem Renaissance, and the Politics of Racial Passing

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Racial passing has been sporadically been written about in history as a negative construct involving an exceptionally fair skinned black person attempting to “cross-over” or “pass” into white society. In the late nineteenth and twentieth century most blacks who could pass did so for reasons involving escaping the discrimination and horrors that darker skinned blacks had to endure. The attempt at passing can be done in two different ways: permanently or situational. Blacks who chose to permanently cross over the color line made the difficult decision to cut all ties with their African American roots and assumed a new white identity. The other form is known as “situational passing,” occurred when a light-complexioned person of color passed temporarily to better a certain situation such as attending a movie in the whites-only theater. Whites and blacks typically had negative connotations about passers, however for different reasons. Whites believed that a light-complexioned Negro who passed intended to “trick” whites as a means of challenging white supremacy and blacks unable to pass typically regarded blacks as “sellouts.”

My thesis will attempt to shed new light on how past historians discussed racial passing. Often historians have failed to deepen their search of activists involved in the phenomenon unless they did not support the movement, such as the ideas that W.E.B. DuBois expressed about passing. Most historians regarded the personal choices made by Walter White as trivial, because he was a rarity amongst his fellow light-complexioned blacks. On the contrary, the life of Walter White offers a different look into the Negro passer and White’s supporters help to present a fresh take on the seemingly unjustifiable
phenomenon and how they joined the cause was ever present during the Harlem Renaissance. Artists such as Langston Hughes expressed their positions on the passing phenomenon through literature and were inspired by the activism of Walter White. During the Harlem Renaissance artists used the “tragic mulatto” in these work as the platform to challenge racial hierarchies and the injustices of the color line. Those who wrote about “tragic mulattoes” during this time period described them as persons who passed to have “better” life by gaining “false” access to the social and economic advantages usually only available to whites. During the era of the “New Negro,” Walter White and other activists used the passing phenomenon as the most astonishing device to progress the civil rights of the entire Negro population. I plan to rewrite Walter White back into the history of passing as a figure that sought to awaken the consciousness of America about the Negro plight. Through a series of secondary and primary sources I will investigate the use of literature as propaganda and Walter White’s fight for the rights of the African American until his death in 1955.