The Damage of Passing

I “passed” most my life. As a mixed-race child, I was very light skinned with wavy brown hair that was straight when cut short. My parents were married but spent most of the time apart, as my African American dad was in the Army. He was in school, in training or deployed when I was small. The military does not focus at all on race, and likewise, my dad largely ignored the fact that I was mixed. With him not around, my white mother brought me up the way she knew best. She taught me manners like not being loud in particular situations, respecting authority at all times, being polite, etc. I found in time that being brought up white also meant that I learned or “appropriated” some things such as taking opportunities for granted, feeling entitled, and becoming insensitive. But that was later.

When I was young, most of my friends looked a lot like me and acted a lot like me. I lived in an established neighborhood where the people were mostly all white. I went to a neighborhood school, which was quite diverse, but in the classes I was in, the children were mostly similar to me – pale faces, smooth hair texture, and the same manners. In other classes were children of other circumstances with different colors of skin, different textures of hair, and different mannerisms. Looking back, I could have tried to talk more, play with, and just be friends with these kids. But at the time, I was drawn to and cornered by a racial literacy that was rooted in whiteness. By middle school my parents had been divorced for some time,
and I spent less and less time with the African American side of my family. My middle school experience was largely the same as elementary, but the environment became more tense, and factors like belonging or being different were amplified. My mom and I really did not talk about race or fitting in. Mannerisms, hairstyles, and skin color came to represent certain identities that most middle schoolers know too well. This consciousness of “drawing” and “cornering” grew worse and really did not stop for me until I realized the damage of passing.

I was in ninth grade and at a friend’s birthday celebration with his family at a Brazilian steakhouse. This dinner was not out of the ordinary for me; I felt comfortable, if not privileged, to be there. The dinner was good, one I probably would take for granted, like most of my meals. I was very comfortable with the family. It never occurred to me they knew I was just passing. We talked about everything from current events to family pets. I was really enjoying the dinner. Then my friend’s mom remarked, while looking at her phone, that it was June 19th. She looked straight at me and asked, “Hey, David, what is Juneteenth?” I froze. Everyone at the dinner table looked at me. I felt like they were glaring into my youth, my experience, my culture, my identity. My face flushed red and I felt hot. I suddenly felt everything around me. My nerves started tingling in my whole body. I didn’t know what to think. I was blank. With my lack of racial literacy on full display, my identity was ripped open as I realized I had no answer to this seemingly simple question. I simply responded, “I don’t know.”

This jarring realization made me reflect on my reality and reckon with my lack of African American literacy. I have found that racial literacy is not a thing for white people because it is assumed. I define racial literacy as being able to acknowledge and understand the history of your culture and ethnicity. It is also being able to transparently communicate with
others also familiar with the literacy, in a bond of shared understanding or ownership. Being racially literate is like finding your identity, the same way a writer finds a writing style. In Deborah Brandt’s “Sponsors of Literacy,” sponsors are described as “agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy” (166). While my friend’s mother may have inadvertently put my racial literacy in the spotlight at that dinner, I have come to realize over time that my racial literacy was largely influenced by one key sponsor: my mother.

As Brandt noted, sponsors “are engaged in ceaseless processes and repositioning, seizing and relinquishing control over meanings and materials of literacy as part of their participation in economic and political competition. In the give and take of these struggles, forms of literacy and literacy learning take shape” (173). In my story, my mother repositioned African American racial literacy, to me, by the white environment to which she exposed me as a child. I never sat down with my mother and discussed my African American heritage. I did not feel compelled to learn more about that heritage or ask questions of my dad who was never around. We did not seek out African American cultural experiences. I was not regularly exposed to the African American side of my family. I do recall when I did see this side of my family, some would remark that I looked like a little white boy. They viewed me even as a young child as passing, causing a suppression in my connection and association with them. My mother also chose an environment that was an effect of her “participation in economic and political competition” (173). Her financial status allowed her to live in a higher income area, resulting in a very close proximity to other white individuals and families. She sponsored an unbalanced racial literacy for me that was heavy on whiteness.
Because this sponsorship is so complex, I cannot simply call it negative or positive. My mother is a white woman who raised a mixed child who was passing for white. It was extremely easy, even natural to “enable, support, teach, [and] model” a white racial literacy (166). This literacy was natural for her to sponsor because it was the same literacy she was taught. Another complexity is that I was denied another sponsor who might have counterbalanced my white racial literacy. When my parents divorced, my mother retained custody while my father moved away. My mother did not cause my father’s relocation, but the move cost me a primary connection to African American identity. I had a role to play as well, as continuous advancement of my white identity was also due to me appropriating it. Brandt describes this as the “the potential of the sponsored to divert sponsors’ resources toward ulterior projects, often projects of self-interest or self-development” (179). I appropriated my family’s financial status to the point that I felt entitled. I appropriated my family’s physical security to taking food, safety, and health for granted. What I learned of white racial literacy soon made me very insensitive to people who did not follow the same model. I found it hard to relate to non-white people. All these appropriations polarized my racial literacy. In a way, I developed myself as a negative sponsor, furthering the suppression of my African American racial literacy.

In my high school sophomore year, after reckoning with my racial “illiteracy,” I started to take steps to become a positive sponsor for myself. I made efforts to teach myself and expand my comprehension of African American culture and literacy. While I wish it had happened sooner, I nevertheless immersed myself in the predominantly African American high school I attended. I grew my dark hair into long curls. I started becoming true friends with other African Americans, one of whom I call my best friend today. I started applying
myself to African American issues; I started a National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) chapter at my high school. I started researching my African American genealogy and family history. Senior year I accepted an offer to be a 1967 Legacy Scholar at the College of Charleston. The 1967 Legacy and Beyond Program honors the College of Charleston’s African American trailblazers, furthers the values and ideals they adopted at the College, and surrounds me with other African American students, teachers, and mentors.

During this immersive process, I realized the possible problem of having two racial literacies. The family I live with has a white identity. The extended family members I know and love have white identities. I do not want anything to come between us, but I still want to honor and apply my African American racial literacy in my life. Historically, African Americans with a similar complexion to mine often ran away from their racial literacy to survive the prejudice, racism, and discrimination that black people regularly suffered. There was social, political, and economic gain from “passing” in that time. However, I am trying to do the opposite today. Instead of running away from one racial literacy or another, I am working to become fluent in both. Still a work in progress, I am learning how to live with an intertwined duality of black and white racial literacy. And I am still trying to repair the damage of passing.
Dear Reader,

I hope you enjoyed my abbreviated racial literacy journey. In this narrative, I hoped to highlight my white and African American racial duality using Deborah Brandt’s literacy ideas. Specifically, I wanted to show the causes of an unbalanced racial literacy scale, which I experienced for most of my life. I also hoped to convey the difficulty in trying to live with both, as it is not an exact science. I think a strength of my paper was adeptly referencing Deborah Brandt’s “Sponsors of Literacy”. I could easily relate to her ideas, which gave me an easy vocabulary to convey a difficult and complex topic. Because of its narrow focus to my experience, the average person may not be able to relate much to my paper. My narrative adapted a very personal and subjective topic, which might not connect to some readers. The biggest challenge I experienced while writing this was putting my mother in the limelight. It is difficult to measure my mother’s efforts and actions, when those assessments could possibly lead to criticism, which is not my motive. Writing this paper again, I would expand on the effects and actions of an African American parent who lacks cultural influence, especially as a sponsor of racial literacy.

Works Cited