**[Stanford historian re-examines practice of racial 'passing'](https://news.stanford.edu/news/2013/december/passing-as-white-121713.html)** Stanford U. News

Dr. Albert Johnston grew up in Chicago, attended the University of Chicago Medical School in the 1920s, and went on to become a radiologist in a small town in New Hampshire. He and his wife were black – a fact they initially hid so that Johnston could secure an internship – and for 20 years, they kept this secret from their neighbors, and even their children.

After the United States entered World War II, Johnston effectively "outed" himself by applying for the Navy. He was rejected because of his racial background, and word of his mixed-race roots spread. What motivated Johnston to sacrifice his social status and job security? Was it wartime patriotism, or something else: a desire to have the truth out in the open?

Questions like these have motivated the latest research project of Stanford history Professor [Allyson Hobbs](http://history.stanford.edu/hobbs_allyson). The Johnstons' story is one of the many instances of racial "passing" – the practice in which light-skinned African Americans chose to present themselves as white – that Hobbs profiles in her upcoming book, *A Chosen Exile: A History of Racial Passing* ([Harvard University Press](http://www.hup.harvard.edu/), 2014).

Passing is a subject that historians have taken up before, but Hobbs' work stands apart by approaching the phenomenon from a new angle. Even as she narrates the personal experiences of those who passed, she uses the wider phenomenon of passing to chart changing perceptions of racial difference in America.

Historians tend to think of passing as "an individualistic and opportunistic practice; a tool for getting ahead," Hobbs said. But cases like that of the Johnstons convinced Hobbs that there was another side to the story: that many who successfully "crossed over" did so with a heavy conscience.

"I'm not as interested in what people gained by being white, but rather in what they lost by not being black," Hobbs said. "To understand passing we can't just look at the story of the person who passed, we have to look at their whole social world, because everyone is going to be impacted."

Hobbs' book, then, is notable both for its sweeping historical scope – from antebellum America to the present – and for its intimate glimpses into individual lives.

Drawing from a range of source documents, including slave narratives, family archives, small-town historical societies' materials and magazines such as *Life* and *Ebony*, Hobbs details the sometimes triumphant, sometimes tragic stories of those who passed as white.

**Difficult research**

The riveting stories of passing that Hobbs has uncovered are not always easy to research, as those who passed worked hard to cover their tracks, leaving little trace in the historical record. An undergraduate research assistant, Maya Humes, '14, helped Hobbs in the effort, poring over newspapers and magazines through the Stanford Libraries databases, searching for the rare reference to passing.

Through their efforts, the researchers found that no two stories are alike. As Hobbs puts it, "from the late 18th century to the present, racially ambiguous men and women have wrestled with complex questions about the racial conditions of their times, and they have fashioned complex understandings about their places in the world."

The fruits of this work are apparent, throwing new light on racial conditions of 20th-century America. Some of Hobbs' subjects, such as Dr. Johnston, have received scant scholarly attention before now. In *A Chosen Exile,* their stories speak volumes.

When Johnston "came out" as black, Hobbs discovered, the community reaction was mixed. He was fired from the hospital, but the community at large had little reaction to the discovery. The diverse responses offer insight into the construction of racial difference in the era before the civil rights movement, a time when, for Hobbs, passing represented "resistance against a racial binary."

Such a view runs contrary to other literature on passing that focuses on the upward mobility and careerism of such attempts. And while "crossing over" – as passing was sometimes described by African Americans – may be a thing of the past for a more multiracial society that recognizes gradients of race and ethnicity, the lessons of Hobbs' work can apply to many 21st-century groups.

Undocumented immigrants, for instance, often "pass" as citizens in their daily lives. Hobbs said conversations with history colleagues, as well as peers from the Clayman Institute for Gender Research and the Center for Comparative Studies in Race and Ethnicity, have highlighted these contemporary forms of passing.

Examining stories of passing throughout American history thus offer insight into the racial tenor of the present day. "During periods of relative racial openness and pluralism, most notably, after emancipation, during the Reconstruction era and the Harlem Renaissance … American society revalued black identity in positive terms," Hobbs said. Thus, "the choices of racially mixed people in these periods reveal moments when racial categories appeared more malleable" – including periods like our own.

**A personal quest**

For Hobbs, the study of racial passing in America has never been solely an academic pursuit, but an investigation rooted in family lore. Hobbs had a distant relative, whom she had never met, who grew up in a light-skinned black family on the South Side of Chicago in the 1930s.

When her relative graduated from high school, Hobbs said, "her grandmother said to her, 'you're going to graduate, you're going to leave Chicago, you're going to go to California, and you're going to become a white woman. And this is the best thing for you.' The young girl protested, she didn't want to leave her friends, her family, the only life she'd ever known. And her grandmother said, 'no, this is the best thing for you. You'll have the best life chances if you do this.'"

The relative moved to Los Angeles, married, had children, and lived as a white woman, with no one knowing her true roots. Years passed, and eventually her mother contacted her with the news that her father was dying and asked her to come back to Chicago immediately. "And she says to her mother 'I can't go back. I'm a white woman now,'" Hobbs relates. "'This what *you* forced me to do. What you wanted for me. These are the consequences of what you chose for me.' And she never went back."

In graduate school, Hobbs felt called to return to the topic, with her relative's story guiding her historical lens. "Historians and literary scholars have paid far more attention to what was gained by passing as white than to what was lost by rejecting a black racial identity," she said. "I want to show that passing is a deeply individualistic practice, but it is also a fundamentally social act with enormous social consequences. I want to show what was lost by walking away from a black racial identity."