



To Be Suddenly White: Literary Realism and Racial Passing

Steven J. Belluscio

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To Be Suddenly White explores the troubled relationship between literary passing and literary realism, the dominant aesthetic motivation behind the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century ethnic texts considered in this study. Steven J. Belluscio uses the passing narrative to provide insight into how the representation of ethnic and racial subjectivity served, in part, to counter dominant narratives of difference.

To Be Suddenly White offers new readings of traditional passing narratives from the African American literary tradition, such as James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*, Nella Larsen's *Passing*, and George Schuyler's *Black No More*. It is also the first full-length work to consider a number of Jewish American and Italian American prose texts, such as Mary Antin's *The Promised Land*, Anzia Yezierska's *Bread Givers*, and Guido d'Agostino's *Olives on the Apple Tree*, as racial passing narratives in their own right. Belluscio also demonstrates the contradictions that result from the passing narrative's exploration of racial subjectivity, racial difference, and race itself.

When they are seen in comparison, ideological differences begin to emerge between African American passing narratives and "white ethnic" (Jewish American and Italian American) passing narratives. According to Belluscio, the former are more likely to engage in a direct critique of ideas of race, while the latter have a tendency to become more simplistic acculturation narratives in which a character moves from a position of ethnic difference to one of full American identity.

The desire "to be suddenly white" serves as a continual point of reference for Belluscio, enabling him to analyze how writers, even when overtly aware of the problematic nature of race (especially African American writers), are also aware of the conditions it creates, the transformations it provokes, and the consequences of both. By examining the content and context of these works, Belluscio elucidates their engagement with discourses of racial and ethnic differences, assimilation, passing, and identity, an approach that has profound implications for the understanding of American literary history.

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