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*Dangerous or in Danger? Exploring Safety, Omission, and Beauty in Rebecca Hall's Passing (2021)*

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## Dangerous or in Danger? Exploring Safety, Omission, and Beauty in Rebecca Hall's *Passing* (2021)

Nella Larsen, the American novelist, exposes the complexities of safety and danger for a Black person in her short story *Passing*, raising questions of visibility, invisibility, and the threat that comes with each. Telling the story of two Black women passing as white in 1920s Harlem, Rebecca Hall's 2021 *Passing*, an adaptation of Nella Larsen's 1929 short story, further establishes themes of safety in a visual context and, therefore, experiments with the Black body in both white and Black spaces. Protagonist Irene Redfield, a passing Black woman married to non-passing Black man, lives in Harlem in New York City, and is generally shown in darker shady areas. When reunited with old time friend Clare Bellew, Irene must encounter the tragic consequences of passing. Using lighting, Hall's adaptation explores invisibility as a means of safety and danger, exposing the complexities of *passing* and what is gained and lost in doing so.

After meeting Clare and her ragingly racist husband, Mr. Bellew, at the Bellew residence, Irene and Gertrude share their feelings of endangerment as "anything could have happened" to them even though Clare seems to be "safe" in the Bellew's home (Larsen 45). Irene goes on to solidify Clare as a person who does not "[consider] anyone else's feelings," and Clare later reinforces her own dangerous character. Clare states: "Can't you realize I'm not like you [Rene] a bit? Why, to get the things I want badly enough, I'd do anything, hurt anybody, throw anything away. Really, 'Rene, I'm not safe" (83). This last phrase, "I'm not safe," is striking. Larsen's decision to use "not safe" instead of words like *unsafe* or *dangerous* forebodes Clare's trajectory as a Black woman: her life ends in tragedy despite passing as white and having access to her desires. Larsen's creation rejects the possibility of ever being safe as a Black person, regardless of whether one can pass as white or not, as Clare's character is perceived as *dangerous* and yet is always *in danger*.

In the opening of the film, we see two white women walking into a toy store and then knocking over

a display, at which point Irene enters the screen to help pick up objects (1:36:45). When Irene first comes onto the screen, her body is completely turned away from the camera. Her eyes are hidden by her hat, and the camera continues to follow her, shifting focus from the toys in her hand to her half-concealed face. To be passing means to be contorted, fragmented, and invisible. After leaving the store, Irene witnesses a man who has fainted. Yet she appears in danger as cars speed past her. Additionally, blares of car horns and yelling amongst all sorts of loud, diegetic sounds are heard. Introducing Irene's character while she is "passing," rather than beginning with Clare's letter as in the short story, immediately contextualizes Irene's as a body in danger when in white spaces. In fact, we do not see Irene's full face straight-on until she is no longer visible for subjection by the white gaze while seated in a cab, being driven away from the "danger."

The film reinstates a notion that invisibility yields safety when Irene attends the Drayton Hotel for tea. Irene's face and relaxed composure are only revealed when she knows everyone else in that space is too preoccupied to notice her amongst them. This is visible when she lowers her face when Mr. Bellew passes her on his way out, hiding her full face from his view. However, there is a complete rupture in the practice of invisibility when Irene meets Clare, and "fear [slides]" over Irene (Larsen 17). The film renders this encounter horror-like, with the camera gliding along the dining area only to find Clare staring directly into the camera (1:32:11). This point-of-view shot inserts the viewer into Irene's body, exposing audiences to the dangers of being seen, and to the possibility of being subject to violence as a Black person.

Rebecca Wanzo's article, *Things You can Tell by Looking*, further elaborates on the racial awareness the viewer is confronted with when watching the film. Wanzo asserts: "Hall's casting choices ... never allow audiences to forget they are looking at Black actresses and thus ensure that they 'feel the weight of passing'" (69). Going beyond the audience feeling this "weight" through Tessa Thompson and Ruth Negga, the viewers also face the materiality of Black bodies onscreen. Brownlee discusses the ability for film adaptation to provide a "new cultural and social imaginary . . . of the self," in which adaptation allows us "to engage materiality" through the medium of film (166). Along with the importance of casting choices, the mere act of casting Black actors exposes the Black body to material objectification and scrutiny under the white gaze: an objectification that is less immediate and vulnerable through written narratives.

There is a danger when telling Black stories of suffering and trauma, of creating, as Wanzo calls it,

“trauma porn”—a narrative that romanticizes the violence and suffering of Black persons (70). Christina Sharpe’s *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, returns to the history of the transatlantic slave trade, in which enslaved Black persons were seen as “human cargo,” with the precursor “human” horrifically ironizing their suffering and objectification (55). The category of human then became a racist and exclusive category, with the Black person being historically marked as Other. The extortion and subjection of Black bodies is referred to in the Rhinelander case, which is briefly cited by Irene when considering her decision to hide Clare’s true identity from Bellew (Larsen 105). Alice Rhinelander was accused of “having concealed her biracial identity” and was asked by courts to “reveal her shoulders and the tops of her breasts, her back, and her legs to the jury in the judge’s chambers” (Wanzo 71). While “Blackness is not written on these body parts,” the Black body is still inscribed with cultural notions of race (e.g., demarcation, exploitation, contortion, fragmentation), and is therefore always under the possibility of violence.

*Passing* refuses to subject the Black body to the white gaze, through the medium of cinema, using aesthetics, or beauty, as a means of “explor[ing] black suffering” rather than glorifying it (Wanzo 69). Beauty in *Passing* becomes a source of ontology—one that rejects conventional epistemologies and instead promotes Black personhood and lived experience (McIntire 778). The film’s choice of grayscale allows for the audience to take note of the difference in light rather than difference in colour, thereby allowing for shadows and brightness to emphasise characters’ experiences of invisibility as well as vulnerability. Returning to Irene’s vulnerability at the film’s beginning, the moments where she is in danger, where she experiences a fear of being visible, all happen in well-lit areas. The brightness and beauty of the Drayton, with its abundance of natural lighting, wide open landscape, and white tablecloths, invoke vulnerability for Irene rather than a safety of being in broad daylight. The use of light at the Drayton makes Clare’s stare more menacing because Irene is fully visible here. We get another moment of danger in a well-lit space right afterwards in Clare’s room upstairs, where Mr. Bellew spews racial slurs in Irene’s presence. It is only after this scene when she gets home that she is safe. Irene emerges out of the shadows in her darkly lit home, with her hat finally off and in the arms of her husband (18:59). This moment of coming out of the shadows signifies a different Irene: one who is free to speak her mind, show her face, and exist as a Black woman. Irene is no longer a fragmented being in the dark lighting. The use of grayscale then focuses on light and

dark, rather than the actual *colour* of the actors in the film. Now of course, we can tell which actor is lighter, darker, or gets to pass and who does not, but I believe that this is not the point the film is trying to make, nor do I think it was Larsen's.

The film constantly foreshadows Clare's tragic fall but does so in a way that does not allow the viewer to see how it happens. We see the gentleman who fainted outside of the toy store on the ground already, but not the act of him falling (4:01). There is also the moment where Irene drops her planter out the window, but we only hear it crashing, with the camera still being on Clare (40:08). In each case, we only see the final remains of destruction rather than the process of collapse. This pattern of omission, however, is subverted near the end the movie, when Brian and Ted are talking about the lynching of John Carter. Ted tells his mother: "You got to know about these things Ma" (1:07:45). Ted then proceeds to share the gruesome details of John's lynching, in which, "they attached [Carter's] body to a Caravan and dragged it through the city" (1:08:13). This final detail of John's lynching was added in the film, but not present in Larsen's story. This is the first instance where we as viewers are given the processual details of downfall or destruction. It is only revealed verbally, and only revealed for the purposes of Ted's understanding of the world as a Black boy rather than for white consumption.

I bring this distinction up because in the ending of Larsen's story, we are unsure of how Clare really falls. Like the gentleman on the sidewalk and the planter out of the window, we only see Clare's body on a blanket of snow after scenes of guests running down to check on Clare's body, and Irene standing by the window. The two shots of Clare's corpse are longshots in which we are not privy to Clare's face, nor is there any bleeding. Only being able to see the finality of Clare's body and not how it happened, Hall and Larsen refuse the consumer's want for "neat resolution," and therefore shifts the importance of *how* Clare fell, to the fact that Clare will *inevitably* fall (McIntire 779). Whether it was Irene who pushed her, or Mr. Bellew who did, or even whether it was Clare who fell on her own volition, it does not matter—Clare died because she was Black. Clare was always "not safe" (Larsen 83). Both the film and short story's use of omission is crucially tactful because finding a singular, concrete cause for Clare's death, would be a misunderstanding of the complexity of both Clare's death and her existence as a Black woman.

Hall's adaptation brings into fruition a new way of telling stories of Black suffering without

glorifying Black trauma, but it also brings up many questions on the aesthetics of omission. How does one decide what needs to be omitted and what should be present—who gets to decide this? How does beauty in the film support Black story rather than Black suffering, and how does beauty enable omission in the film? Most importantly, when does omission become ignorance, especially in relation to Black violence? The aesthetics of omission is an astute choice by Rebecca Hall, urging viewers to see a story differently than what they have expected. Clare Bellew's death, by way of omission, the use of light and dark, and the absence of Black trauma all work together to portray the dangers of existing in a Black body regardless of whether one is passing or not.

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