

La Maison d'être  
(The House of Being)  
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To pass, “passer,” is a verb in French conjugation that can be paired with either auxiliary verb. Most verbs can be conjugated with “avoir,” but only some verbs can be conjugated with “être.” My primary school teacher drew a house on the whiteboard. Inside the house, she wrote the few, special verbs that go with “être,” and drew little stick figures: she wrote “rester” (to stay) and a stick figure sitting in a chair; she wrote “entrer” (to enter) and a stick figure just inside the doorway. She wrote “passer” (to pass), and a stick figure crossing the threshold, headed inside with half its little stick-body still poking out, to help us remember: “je *suis* passée par la porte.” (I passed through the front door.)

A few years later, I was taking one of those tests with all the bubbles to fill in. On the first page: a bubble for each letter of my name, for each digit of my birthdate, one for my gender, and, this was 2007, so one bubble for my race, just one. I felt that “Other” was the best available option, and I colored the bubble in.

According to the white girl sitting next to me, I’d already answered a test question wrong. “Why d’you fill in ‘Other?’ Claire, you’re white.” I’ll admit I didn’t answer gently: “No, I’m not. I think I’d know better than you.” Middle school isn’t supposed to be a good time for anyone.

As I got a little older, people stopped telling me, and started quizzing me instead: “Really? Like how much? On which side? So, um, how dark is your dad?” In middle school, I’d felt that that telling girl had been *wrong*: like I knew myself, and what she knew about me didn’t count. But, when people started quizzing me, I felt like, no matter what I said, I would never really shake the big answer they’d already chosen. I felt like all my little answers were adding up to a big picture I couldn’t see, like I needed to be standing further back, outside myself, to know what it all really looked like: like they knew something, and what I knew didn’t count.

And the strange truth is that what I am *does* depend on what others know me to be. After all, why does it matter so much to *know* what I am? In part, it matters because it affects how others treat me. I don’t have my racial makeup written on my face; every moment that I’m not stating my blackness, I may as well be passing for white. And, passing means that, no matter what I know about myself, other people treat me as white more than three quarters of the time.

After my last class last semester, a classmate turned to me: “Hey, this might come off a little weird, but...are you black?” A question: as if any piece of blackness, any kind of piece, be it the treatment I’ve received from others *or* the experiences I’ve shared with

others, be it what I think about, what I feel connected to, even what I choose to say, as if the invisible things I know about myself *do* count.

He reminded me that identity is but isn't just about how others treat you; it's also, and maybe more so, about how you feel towards and feel for and feel with others. He reminded me of what college, where we so often know people by face before we know them by spirit, had made me start to forget: that, when I am "passing," I am not "passing" by choice. Passing preempts some exclusionary experiences, some discriminatory experiences, it preempts some inclusionary experiences, but it also erases experiences that I have had. We are all made up of parts of all kinds, racial and other, and "passing" threatens to erase one of my parts. Maybe I need other people to help me describe my parts, but, if I'm welcome to, I'd like to keep them all.

When I answered my classmate, yes, he exclaimed, "I knew it!" He offered me the choice to agree with him, but he wasn't really *asking* me. He still helped me pick the answer.

Then, a few weeks ago, the salesman at Office Depot asked for my last name. I said Benoit, he said Oh French, I said Technically Haitian, he paused, "That's right, 2% of the Haitian population is white," I said, "Um, actually my Haitian family is black," and then, putting the tape down for a moment, he looked up at me and asked, "Do you identify as black?"

I...I faltered. Someone was asking me to come up with an answer all on my own.

I started thinking about this activity my little cousin had told me about: everyone is sitting down in a big room; someone at the front asks a series of questions; whenever your answer to a question is yes, you stand. They ask things like: "Do you identify as a woman? Do you identify as an atheist? as Jewish? As white? Black? Mixed?" At Office Depot, stuttering in front of the salesman's open expression, I felt like I didn't know how to stand, like I needed someone to push me up or reach out a hand. These words kept buzzing through my head: *I don't know, I don't know, I don't know.*

And then, I realized that I do know something: that what others know counts and what I know counts, but that neither they nor I alone know the whole. You don't know how to define my identity without me, and I don't know how to define my identity without you.

What might "passing" mean, for someone like me, today? I think that it's to waltz in through the front door, and then, while no one's looking, to put the plates in the glasses cabinet and the glasses in the liquor cabinet; it's to remake the bed so that the pillows are on the other end. It's to make the home a little unfamiliar. I think it's to serve a purpose that "passing," by choice or not, has served throughout American history: to plant doubt, maybe even enough doubt to make us wonder,

If we don't know what's going on within our walls, why are we building such thick walls in the first place?

Thank you.