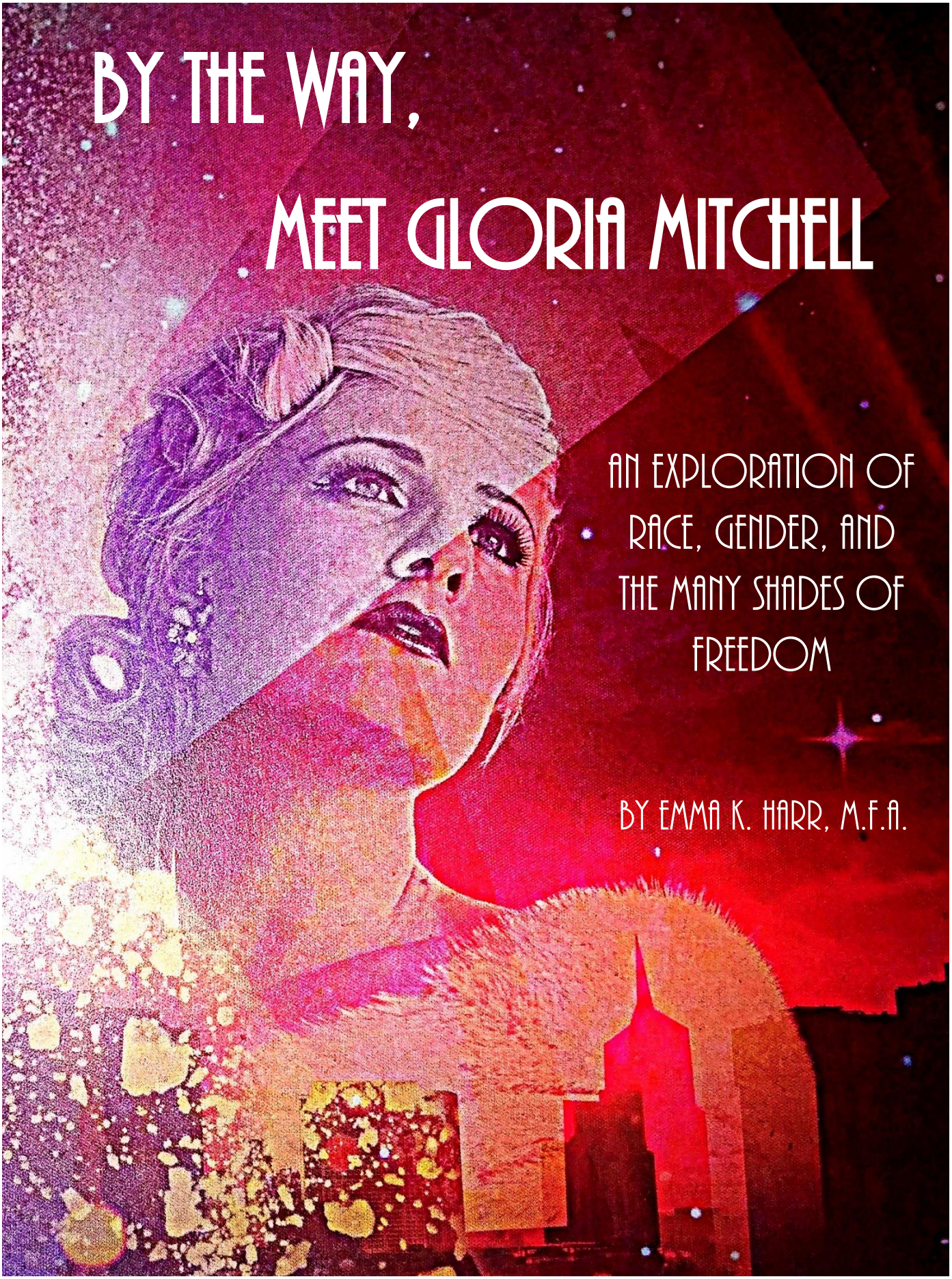

BY THE WAY,
MEET GLORIA MITCHELL
AN EXPLORATION OF RACE, GENDER, AND THE MANY SHADES OF FREEDOM
BY EMMA K. HARR, M.F.A.

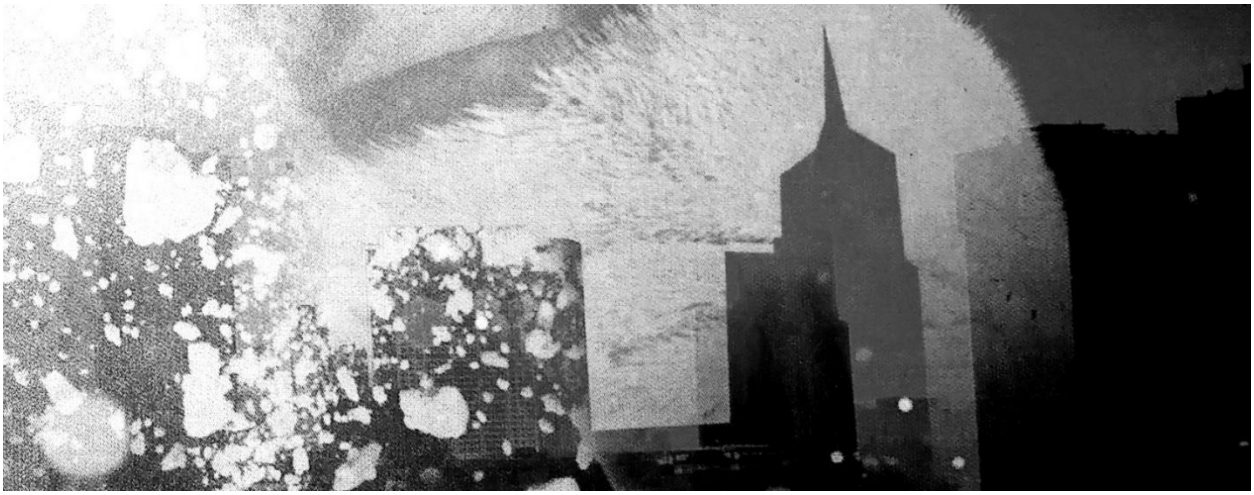
The following pages document the creative process in its entirety of an actor before, throughout, and after the full realization of a mainstage production in the University of Southern Mississippi's Department of Theatre.

With the support and guidance of my graduate committee, I was given the task of taking on the life of Gloria Mitchell, one of the leading characters in Lynn Nottage's brilliant play, *By The Way, Meet Vera Stark*.

This thesis work, also known as a Creative Project, chronicles the in-depth research, script analysis, rehearsal, and performance process of this production. The information herein was gathered and accumulated over the course of a calendar year, and brought to fruition in my third and final year of graduate study at USM.

This document was signed and approved by my graduate committee in May of 2015.

Cover image from theatrical production poster provided by the USM Department of Theatre.



PRELUDE: HAIKU

THIS IS MY BODY
DISTORTED AND RECOLORED
BIRTHING THE NATION

Janelle Hobson, *Body as Evidence: Mediating Race, Globalizing Gende*

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AN INTRODUCTION

It has always been clear to me that any pursuit of mine, artistic or theatrical in nature, must be attended to with passion and ferocity of spirit. This personal mission statement of sorts has served me well thus far in life, in terms of what I have been able to create and discover. Working on and pouring life into something that, in some special way, *matters* just a little bit more than anything else—that's when true progress is made. It transcends the banal and mundane, and becomes ablaze with color and depth and ubiquity. Would that everything I touched burn with such fervor as I hope this document reveals to you.

The study and creation of Gloria Mitchell, as imagined by the ever illustrious Lynn Nottage, is a feat that surpasses the initial superficial impression of sleek satin gowns and carefully coifed locks; here is a character with whom I have wrestled and loved into being, whose depth goes far beyond the bottom of the page, and whose history is vitally important to not only myself as the actor, but to the audiences I share her with. Lynn Nottage, arguably one of the most important artists currently writing for the stage, has made something beautiful and crucial through the characters and story of *"By The Way, Meet Vera Stark."* By taking on the task of giving breath and fire to Gloria Mitchell for my Creative Project, I have been submerged in a world of magic, fame, and lost glory. I hereby invite you, the reader, to travel with me through time as I examine the world of *Vera Stark*: beginning in glitzy 1930s Hollywood, up through funky 1970s talk shows, into the sober circles of scholastic criticism of the early 2000s. My research delves into subjects with long and storied pasts, and rightly so: I explore and

discuss mediations of race and exploitations of gender, examining how these issues evolve along the timeline of our play, and what this means for audiences being exposed to this information now.

The work I am doing and have done in order to bring myself up to the high level of excellence of this piece of art has shaken me psychologically and spiritually. My activist's heart is passionate about social change, and has humbly gained so much from the knowledge *Vera* has required me to amass. I gladly and enthusiastically share with you my findings on the following pages, regarding the long history of women being used as media fodder, particularly women of color, and the exploitations of the female form in all its diverse iterations, a practice that is still feverishly engaged the modern world over. What follows in the pages beyond is an impassioned and care-filled discussion of the historical contexts of race and gender which make up the identity of Gloria Mitchell and greater microcosm of *Vera Stark* as a whole. Throughout the research I have collated here, I also provide comments to the reader regarding qualifications for an informed understanding of the information being presented, as some of the ideas grow quite large and vast in their historical contexts, so I have done my best to siphon comprehensible meaning out of centuries' worth of data.

I invite you now to be transported through space and time to a place where stars are made, dreams are fabricated, and gin runs thicker than blood. Oh, and by the way—meet Gloria Mitchell.

A WORD ON LANGUAGE

Before we set our feet to the winding pathway before us, I would like to address a concern of mine that deserves attention. One of the incredible facets of art is that there are an infinite number of ways to create, share, and discuss it. Because of how plugged in the modern age is, the internet and media makes this process of creation, sharing, and discussion even easier, and puts it on an even wider stage. The language that we use in these processes is vitally important to the product itself and the community that supports it. Words, whether spoken, signed, or implied through symbols, are magnificently powerful: as I explore my research and share with you the images and passages that I have collected along the way, I aim to speak as clearly and objectively as possible. This Creative Project is not just about following an actor's journey through the rehearsal process of a show—it is also about the content of preparation. Much of what I am living and breathing in this voyage is the deconstruction of social and historical constructs of race and gender, two topics that I care a great deal about, and therefore seek to portray accurately and fairly. I understand that my language choices, while they may make perfect sense to me, may not read the same to someone else—so the words I choose herein are words that I have chosen very carefully, words that I hope mean something to the furthering and honoring of this incredible play and the art it carries. I am not immune to the knowledge of my own privilege. I am aware that I am a young woman in her twenties, bred from a middle-class American family, who has always had access to food, shelter, and education, whose skin is white, whose hair is blonde, and whose lineage comprises

mostly European bloodlines, leading back to England, Ireland, and Scandinavia. It is with awareness of who and what I am that I respectfully and earnestly share the stories of those who, historically, have had their agency and humanity stripped away, for reasons related to both race and gender. I strive to make it perfectly clear that I do not hold the authority on any of the topics I discuss here regarding racial passing and the heinous perpetuations of racially motivated prejudice and violence that have existed for centuries. These experiences are not mine; on the whole, my own ancestors were the ones who perpetrated this historic violence upon people of color. Some of the content in the following pages is painful and may be hurtful to read about; these topics are complex, and can be difficult to navigate, and have required so much emotional maturity and vulnerability from me in the process. I have done my best to do the work to get informed and approach these subjects with empathy, compassion, and sensitivity. Through the research and experiences I have gathered throughout this project, I present all of this information to you, the reader, in the hope that it will add positively to the very necessary greater discussion of human worth.

In addition to the aforementioned topics, I have also taken underway the study of the lexicon of racial identifiers—"white/black" versus "Caucasian/African-American," and so forth. Because language is so powerful, it interests me greatly to study how these terms, these labels of identity, have evolved over time. Depending on the specifics of the research I am referencing, I may use these terms interchangeably, based on how the author in question might have used them. However, based on the reading I have done in this field, the terms I will be using universally are in reference to physical color, such as "white," "brown," or "black." The reason I have chosen to use these terms is because they are historically motivated, and the

majority of the authors I reference use them for this purpose. "Blackness" and "whiteness" were very different things at the start of the twentieth century, and each term carries with it the burden of oppression and cultural silencing. So much of what transpires in Nottage's brilliant play, particularly between Gloria and Vera, is directly in relation to the exact hue of their skin tones, and how that hue then codes their societal worth. How *black* or *white* they are is the sole difference between what sets them free or what keeps them bound. The sources I have consulted regarding racial passing also use these terms, more often than anything else, for this very same reason. Race is not biological; it is relative, it is cultural—and therefore it can be manipulated.

I offer this word on language with transparency and informed humility, that I may make the pilgrimage of the following pages more accessible to the reader. I am operating under no pretenses that what these next pages contain is immaculate and unblemished, but I do seek to offer the guarantee that what they *do* contain is carefully and thoughtfully penned. With this in mind, I thus invite you to grab your gin and tonic, turn the page, and travel with me into the Golden Age of Hollywood's silver screen.

"By The Way, Meet Gloria Mitchell" by Emma K. Harr

"I LIVE BY A **MAN'S CODE,**
DESIGNED TO FIT A
MAN'S WORLD,

YET AT THE SAME TIME
I NEVER FORGET THAT A
WOMAN'S FIRST JOB

IS TO CHOOSE THE
RIGHT SHADE OF LIPSTICK."

— CAROLE LOMBARD

"Carole Lombard." *Bio*. A&E Television Networks, 2014. Web. 22 Nov. 2014.

BODY as EVIDENCE

Prelude: Haiku

This is my body

distorted and recolored

birthing the nation

(Hobson 1)

The body is the epicenter of life. It is what breathes, it is what moves; it is the flesh carefully constructed around the skeleton that allows us the immense privilege of mobility, the housing of rational thought and motivated action. It is capable of great strength, of accomplishing incredible tasks. It is capable of attending to fine detail, of detecting the slightest and subtlest of changes in the environment around it, of picking up on cues from other bodies nearby. It is made to self-regulate—it feels pain, it seeks to stop it; it is self-healing, it is self-aware, it alerts the mind to danger and seeks safety. The body is the very foundation of feeling and expressing emotion, inextricably linked to the mind and all psychological processes. And the body, for all its practical uses throughout time, has often been the battleground for

cultural constructs and social change. It is here then, with the body itself, that we begin our conversations of agency, identity, and how history defines privilege.

In her novel *Body as Evidence: Mediating Race, Globalizing Gender*, Janell Hobson tackles the idea that skin color and biological sex have become cultural commodities, used throughout the last century, and particularly in the modern technological age, as platforms for the buying and selling of ideas.

> …while the early-twenty-first-century discourse of 'postracial' and 'postfeminist' often declares the loss of meaning attached to race and gender, I find that their definitions have become even more entrenched in the body politic. Far from reflecting a world in which race or gender no longer restricts the upward mobility of certain bodies, I argue… that the global scope of our media-reliant information culture insists on perpetuating raced and gendered meanings that support ideologies of dominance, privilege, and power. Undeniably, these meanings have attached to certain bodies to provide 'evidence' of the hypersexual or the sexually innocent, the beautiful or the ugly, the ignorant or the advanced, the illicit or the legitimate, the victimized or the liberated, the deviant or the normative (Hobson 8).

What Hobson, and indeed many other scholars, hope for is a time in which race and gender no longer hold anyone back in their respective fields; whether it be upward advancement in their careers, their ability to garner a raise for a job consistently well done, or

even in the spheres of their social lives, who their friends are, whom they choose to love. The hope is that the body only becomes a tool for unity, and no longer division. However, as Hobson states here, that is certainly not currently the case. In 2015, we are not in a postracial or postfeminist society, though some of those unaware of the global scope of the problem would still like to think so. In general, it is much safer and freer to be a woman or a young person of color now than it was a hundred years ago, but across the board, men—particularly white men—still hold the corner on social privilege and intellectual status and power. In the last century of media, how bodies were used spoke strongly to how culture thought about the importance of those bodies—marketing was geared to a particular audience by using a very specific image to advertise whatever their product. "Indeed, these older forms of media determined whose stories got told (the narratives of those in power), which bodies *produced* media (often male bodies, which still dominate fields of science and technology today), and how bodies get positioned (often women, colonized, and people of color get reduced to objects and commodities)" (Hobson 9).

In Lynn Nottage's play, *By The Way, Meet Vera Stark*, conversations about race and gender are exceedingly important, as they define the very basis of the play's story arc. Gloria Mitchell, Hollywood starlet and savvy businesswoman, knows how to play the game. She is keenly aware of how to portray the right image to the right people in order to advance her career. In order to satisfy the male movie executives who are directly responsible for hiring her, she utilizes her persona as "America's little sweetie pie" to provide for them the demure and innocent ingénue that they crave: she affects her pattern of speech, alters her physical movements, hides her exorbitant gin habit, and balances the ever-juxtaposed sense of virginal

purity with attractive sensuality to reel them in. Gloria is also firmly aware that her family lineage in 1933 is dangerous, not only to her career but to her life. She exalts her whiteness and buries her blackness. The only possible thing standing in the way of her getting away with her self-whitewashing is her relationship with Vera, and whether or not Vera is willing to keep her secret, at the inevitable expense of their friendship.

Allyson Hobbs tackles this exact conundrum in her newly published novel, *A Chosen Exile: A History of Racial Passing in American Life*. If we take Nottage's many clues laid out in the script, we cannot ignore that Gloria and Vera are meant to be cousins, and the very fact that Gloria is able to pass as fully white, while Vera is solidly entrenched in the racial identity Gloria chose to leave behind, the very proximity of these two women as "mistress and mammy," and eventual film co-stars, is sure to be rife with tension. Allyson Hobbs sets the stage for us with this historical context:

> To pass as white was to make an anxious decision to turn one's back on a black racial identity and to claim to belong to a group to which one was not legally assigned. It was risky business. In today's multiracial society, the decision to pass may seem foolish, frivolous, or disloyal; it may be reminiscent of an unexpected plot twist in a novel or a film; or it may be understood as a desperate act compelled by the racial constraints of the bygone era of segregation and racial violence. Once one circumvented the law, fooled coworkers, deceived neighbors, tricked friends, and sometimes even duped children and spouses, there were enormous costs to pay. In each historical

> period, those who passed experienced personal and familial losses differently. Their experiences open a window onto the enduring problem of race in American society and onto the intimate meanings of race and racial identity for African Americans (Hobbs 5).

This, then, begs the question: what losses did Gloria Mitchell suffer? Some today might argue that because the majority of her bloodline is traceably white, that she rightly claimed the racial identity that is most hers. But in the context of 1933, "even one drop" of black blood meant an entire life of shame—much like the parallel storyline of Marie the octoroon, the lead role in *The Belle of New Orleans* that Gloria so desperately longs to play. Perhaps because Marie's onscreen story is so like hers off-screen, Gloria seeks to use this film as the only outlet she will allow herself to face the psychological and emotional ramifications of the life she's chosen—as she certainly doesn't allow herself any other opportunity to do this, even after forty years. On Brad Donovan's talk show in 1973, we're just past the tail-end of the civil rights movement, and well into one of the biggest cultural shifts for women and feminism of the last century—surely this would be the perfect time for Gloria to make a stand, take back her identity, and reveal publicly, for the first time, her true heritage? But this is not the case, as she's given opportunity after opportunity, and multiple openings from Vera, and dismisses each of them. After a lifetime of existing with one face, it certainly cannot be easy to show the world another. But here then is another question—would Gloria have even *wanted* to reveal her past and her relationship to Vera, had she had the courage to do so?

On the one hand, it is distinctly possible that Gloria had every intention of reclaiming her past and sharing it with the world, but in this particular moment on this particular talk show, didn't find it to be the right time for her. Allyson Hobbs posits that it is "possible to pass for something without becoming what it is that you pass for… that the core issue of passing is not becoming what you pass for, but losing what you pass away from" (Hobbs 17-18). If we use this premise as an umbrella, then Gloria's hesitancy to speak up is not fueled by a lack of desire to share, but by a presence of fear for acceptance from those she left behind—specifically Vera and their combined family. Gloria's situation is unique, in that after she starting living her fully-white life, she brought Vera along with her, something the majority of those who passed would not and could not do, for fear of being found out and having their new lifestyles compromised. Would Vera have been able to accept Gloria's confession? What would Vera have been able to offer her? Forgiveness, praise, understanding, a welcoming embrace, a shared sense of "home"? Those left behind are not typically quick to forget the actions of those who chose their exile. "For many family members and friends of those who passed, racial identity came to mean much more than an individual's rejection of the race. It meant no longer belonging as a family member and no longer sharing experiences, stories, and memories of times past" (Hobbs 14-15). I would like to think that Vera would have been ready for Gloria to come out with the truth in a public forum—that it was a wish she'd had for years, for the two of them to finally be united, to finally be made equal. They'd spent so much time together, so much of their adult careers side by side, it would be the perfect cap to their joint legacy to make it known just how connected they truly were.

Gloria's hesitation, however, could very well be from an uncertainty over claiming something she no longer values as being "hers." "Undoubtedly, there were those who walked away from a black identity and never looked back," Hobbs explains (15). "Once they arrived safely in the white world, some may not have felt any compunction about leaving a race that had constrained them, injured them, or meant little to them at all" (Hobbs 16). This point is perhaps the murkiest of them all when it comes to Gloria and Vera, and the kinship between them: it is mentioned in the script that Gloria's father was absent, as his identity isn't "a hundred percent" known (Nottage 11), and there's absolutely zero mention of her mother—one might conclude, then, based on Gloria's references to "Granny," someone she and Vera shared as a guardian as children, that her parents were entirely out of the picture, and Gloria was solely brought up by the remainder of Vera's line, the Stark family. If this is indeed the case, it is possible to conjecture that Gloria, for all the affection she may have had for "Granny" and whomever else, never felt like she fully belonged with them. She had effectively become an orphan, a little white girl raised by a black family, who grew up to eventually leave them and fall into her white identity with abandon. She kept Vera by her side, so there is kinship there, certainly, but maybe she felt no real ties to the rest of them—and thereby did not interpret her leaving and subsequent passing as an exile or as any great loss: to Gloria, it was finally becoming who she was supposed to be all along. Hobbs goes so far as to defend the psychology of the passer, citing that:

> From their point of view, race was neither strictly a social construction nor a biological fact. The line between black and white was by no means imaginary;

> crossing it had profound, life-changing consequences. Race was quite real to those who lived with it, not because of skin color or essentialist notions about biology, but because it was social and experiential, because it involved one's closest relationships and one's most intimate communities (Hobbs 17).

So on which side does Gloria align? Which identity does she want to take with her to the grave, to be remembered as by her legions of adoring fans? Prior to rehearsals, as the actor in this process I was not sure which way she (I) would go. However, through the process of production this question became even more difficult to define. Gloria's identity is, as shall be explained in more depth as we move forward, wholly complex—she cannot have one without the other. She longs to be free to live the truth of her heritage and lineage, but is crippled by the comforts of her life as America's Little Sweetie Pie. She cannot publicly claim them both; and so will finish out her days always in conflict with herself. The longer you leave on a mask, the harder it is to remove.

- WHITE - IS THE COLOR OF FREEDOM

—It is also, allegorically, the color of innocence, purity, virginity, hope, godliness, holiness, spirituality, cleanliness, sterility, blankness, newness, indicative of cool temperatures rather than warm—and these are just the ones I can recite from memory. Color symbolism has been used in art and literature for centuries upon centuries, and through the last hundred years of media advancement through technology, this symbolic color coding has only become more foundational to the way we communicate and interpret meaning. You don't need to search for the meaning of a color symbol in an encyclopedia—the color itself will evoke a particular psycho-intellectual response within you, as the consumer, that will speak for itself. Based on the terms above, it is no accident then that "white," truthfully the absence of all color light wavelengths, has been linked historically with elevating the status of those with a skin shade to match. Lighter skin was perceived to mean a fairer spirit, a purer heart; darker skin meant danger, something exotic, something unknown and potentially unclean. These are not, of course, fair or correct assessments regarding skin color as it relates to character and human worth whatsoever—but it does, however, set the stage for a conversation regarding where these social constructs of melanin-based prejudice come from.

> To pass as white meant to lose a sense of embeddedness in a community or a collectivity. Passing reveals that the essence of identity is not found in an

> individual's qualities, but rather in the ways that one recognizes oneself and is recognized as kindred. These forms of recognition may begin with superficial markers such as skin color, speech, and dress, but these are only indicators of associative relations, ways of being in the world, and an imagined sharing of a common origin and iconic experiences.
>
> Passing works as a prism: it refracts different aspects of what we commonly think of as racial identity and reveals what is left once the veil of an ascribed status is stripped away. Behind that veil what we know as 'race' is simply the lived experience of a people, expressed perhaps as an ache for family and interconnections or sometimes as a longing for music, humor, or food. Thus passing unmasks race as conventionally understood, revealing the intimate and personal meanings of a putative racial identity (Hobbs 14).

Let's begin by looking at the history of whiteness in America. To understand how Gloria and Vera would have been affected in 1933, we have to shift our gaze into the past a hundred years. For a long time before the abolition of slavery, there existed two main categories of people: owned people and owners of people, slaves and slave masters. The issue did not have so much to do with race as it did with the valuation of property and personal rights based on their status of autonomy. The concept of passing, as a means of escape from being owned to impersonating someone who owned, has existed alongside this dichotomy for centuries. In the early nineteenth century, specifically in the United States, passing was a way for those clever enough to learn to navigate how to do it to find personal freedom from their owners. "Before

'passing as white' became meaningful, racially ambiguous men and women frequently and successfully 'passed as free'" (Hobbs 34). The concern was not to *physically appear* white in terms of hue—it was to appear "white" in terms of demeanor, dress, and general decorum. The idea of "acting the part" in order to fool others was in great usage here, and worked for many men and women during this time.

> The wide range of evidence taken into account in nineteenth-century trials of racial determination reveals that at times, passing had very little to do with skin color. This is not to suggest that passing as white is not contingent on a racially ambiguous or white appearance, but rather that a racially ambiguous or white appearance is contingent on a brew of actions, behaviors, and mannerisms. Looking white is, in many ways, contingent on *doing* white. Racially ambiguous slaves drew on highly sophisticated understandings of racial, gender, and social norms to enact whiteness; by doing so, they successfully passed to freedom (Hobbs 45).

Hobbs provides several examples to put this idea into perspective. One such example was regarding a young man named Sam, who was a valuable slave to his owner in terms of his youth and strength and worth ethic, but he was also a danger and considered a liability because he was exceedingly intelligent, fairer-skinned than the others he worked with, and had a habit of "putting on airs" to make fun of the other white owners he came into contact with. During an outing where he was to be traded to another family by his owner, his discovered that if he

looked the part and acted well, he was not taken as a slave by the surrounding light-skinned company. He then used this stratagem of *doing white* to his advantage, and managed to escape his new assignment.

> Passing is a flexible strategy that relies heavily on the category of class. The cunning and cleverness of Sam's escape reflect the possibility—even within the constraints of a mature slave regime—of fashioning a new, free self by acting and dressing the part. Sam's disguise (and that of countless others) worked because he presented himself as 'a most polished gentleman'; the ruse would likely have failed had he dressed in overalls, been unable to read and write, and displayed coarse manners. Slaves drew on all available resources to construct the appearance of the free person that they resolved to become, and in all but very few incidents, the category of class shaped these disguises. Slaves bought, traded, and stole clothing; they feigned grief, illness, and injury; and they borrowed, reused, and forged passes and certificates of freedom. With one's liberty hanging in the balance, all sorts of disguises were imaginable (Hobbs 30).

As white plantation owners and businessmen began to catch on to the growing number of slaves who tended to "disappear," only to start new lives as their freer selves, a cultural shift began to take place as the common denominators of the "runaway slave" problem were scrutinized. If all it took was for a cunning slave to put on that he or she had status, the society around him or her would assume they had a right to their social power. Rather than leaving

this to chance, it became widely socially acknowledged that an unchanging visual marker was necessary to identify the truly free from the owned. It is through this line of thinking, in an effort to eliminate confusion and put a stop to passing, that skin color became the definitive marker for slave versus slave master.

> By the 1820s, the fluid and cosmopolitan Atlantic world began to give way to a new racial regime. As it hardened, this regime neatly aligned one's status with one's race. Correspondingly, the phenomenon of passing as free gave way to the phenomenon of passing as white and reflected the rearrangements within the slave system as well as larger changes in American society… (Hobbs 41-42).

With this shift in the definition of freedom now being entirely based on color and race, the tactics of how to achieve freedom also had to change. Those who sought autonomy and liberation were no longer able to rely on intelligence and skill alone—physical appearance was now too much of the equation. This meant that almost all racially ambiguous men and women were now faced with the new task at hand: to attain freedom, you must attain whiteness. The problem, of course, is that once you attained freedom, your whiteness had to remain an integral part of your passing—it was now clear that in leaving one racial category behind to accept another, personal and familial identity hangs in the balance.

> White skin functioned as a cloak in antebellum America. Accompanied by appropriate dress, measured cadences of speech, and proper comportment,

> racial ambiguity could mask one's slave status and provide an effectual strategy for escape. Many runaway slaves neither imagined nor desired to begin new lives as white; they simply wanted to be free. As literary critics P. Gabrielle Foreman and Cherene Sherrard-Johnson have written, fugitive slaves 'passed *through* whiteness'; and once through, they would '*reject* rather than *embrace* the power and superiority whites claimed as their singular possession.' Tactical or strategic passing—passing temporarily with a particular purpose in mind—was born at this moment out of a dogged desire for freedom. In later historical periods, this type of passing would allow racially ambiguous men and women to get jobs ('nine-to-five passing'), to travel without encumbrance, and to attend elite colleges. But in the antebellum period, passing was keyed to a larger struggle for freedom (Hobbs 29).

The very idea that these men and women would have to turn their backs on their entire heritage and history just to be free was an odious concept. They used this twisting and modification of their racial identities to their advantage in order to pass when necessary, but once safely on the other side, it was seen as callous and disloyal to remain "white." Thus begins the internal conflict in the black community with disowning those who chose to keep their new personas in favor of dismantling the old ones after their journeys to freedom were complete.

ALL THAT GLITTERS IS GOLD:

THE SILVER SIDE OF THE SCREEN

The Princess Comes Across (1936)

No other era of film developed as rapidly, exploited as grossly, and excelled as fully as that of early twentieth-century Hollywood. With the advent of the "talkies," full-length pictures

with sound, the medium seemed to expand and open across broad horizons, its creators now able to explore just how far they can push their artistic limits. While the 1920s and 1930s were a volatile time economically for the nation, Hollywood's production houses were thriving. It is during this glamorous and gilded period that we see the fabrications of race and gender on the screen transform and solidify into the polarizing archetypes we are familiar with today, particularly with regard to women and people of color in general.

> When it comes to white female bodies, however, globalization efforts are far more successful. We need only look to Hollywood's cinematic history for a lesson in global circulations around raced and gendered bodies—a history founded on what film theorist Richard Dyer recognizes as an imperialist 'culture of light' that promotes white visibility through film lighting technology and through what Laura Mulvey calls the 'to-be-lookedatness' spectacle of white femininity (Dyer 1997, 103; Mulvey 1975, 11). In globalizing whiteness, Hollywood cinema reframed foreign sites through white female bodies (Hobson 14).

Gloria Mitchell herself is modeled after this exact ideal—the thin yet statuesque Hollywood blonde, starry-eyed, soft-spoken, demure but physically captivating, the very pinnacle of white femininity displayed on a pedestal of pearls and furs. It's after the turn of the century, between the two world wars, following the end of Prohibition, in the middle of the Great Depression, when the American consciousness is seeking fervently to redefine itself.

Racial passing during this time period has a lot more riding on it than even thirty years prior—we've moved on from the general issue of slavery versus freedom, but now the question has become more complex. Freedom in the 1930s is a much murkier state to attain, because the American social consciousness has now indelibly ingrained within itself a deep-seated prejudice rooted to the physiology of race. Passing isn't just about not being black anymore, but about achieving the *right kind* of whiteness, and keeping it once it's yours. It is no secret that whiteness during this decade afforded privileges nothing else could, particularly for aspiring artists and actors, especially women.

> Almost all white women—even prostitutes—were remade into 'ladies,' a class that excluded even the wealthiest and most refined black women. White ladies were to be protected—economically, physically, and sexually—at all costs, and in the Jim Crow South, daily reminders of white women's heightened status were visible on 'white ladies only' signs on public bathroom doors. The 'ladies car,' or the first-class car, on trains excluded black men and black women unless a black caregiver accompanied a white child. No white child would be made to endure the indignities and the filth of the 'smoking car,' and the second-class car, to which all blacks, white drunks, and other undesirable passengers were assigned. Legal scholar Cheryl Harris has argued that whiteness is a form of property, a privilege that unfairly allocated economic, political, social, and institutional resources along the color line (Hobbs 12).

This same preferential treatment was abundant on film sets, and in agency offices, and on the studio lots. In order to secure that leading role, in addition to being available to "casting couch" sessions with studio executives and directors, women in particular were encouraged to "white-wash" themselves as much as possible. And if you were African American or Hispanic, anything but the fair-skinned genuine article, it was doubly expected before any consideration of hiring was offered. All in service of the camera, of course.

> Relating to these exotic representations, marked spectacularly on the white female body, are the more typical examples of white assimilation in which women of color are encouraged to 'whiten' or Anglicize their identities. Light-skinned black performers such as Lena Horne were encouraged to 'pass for white' or, in her specific case, as an 'exotic Latin American,' while genuine Latine American actresses such as Margarita Carmen Cansino were encouraged to change their names and public image (hence her transformation into Rita Hayworth). When Horne refused to identify as anything but African American, her film career was cut short; whereas Rita Hayworth became a movie star—a stark reminder of how race, when intersecting with gender, determines whose bodies can cross or grate against the color line and the national border (Hobson 14).

At this time in the media, "blacks represent[ed] less than [ten] percent of the actors and [were] often cast as domestic workers while their blond-haired, blue-eyed counterparts

play[ed] the leading roles" (Hobbs 22). It is no small wonder then that passing and the modification of racial identity were cornerstones for every performer seeking work in the business. Even the actors who were genuinely Caucasian in appearance and lineage were made to locate ways in which to alter themselves to become even more aligned with the prototype: superb whiteness equaled perfection, equaled the ideal, and meant more success and larger payouts than any other shade of identification. Beyond simply the premature ending to a career, being "called black was to be defamed, insulted, and slandered. No injury was incurred when one was called white" (Hobbs 13).

Now, while the 1920s and '30s were a time of rigidly prescribed on-screen archetypes, they were also a time of incredible social change behind the scenes. It took a number of years, and a lot of grunt work to make it happen, but subtle shifts in the uses of black bodies in front of the cameras slowly but steadily made it possible for African Americans to make a living off of legitimate film work. "The decade of the 1920s was the earliest period in which records were provided on African Americans working in white Hollywood" (Regester 95). In the beginning, bright-white Hollywood was staunchly competitive and fiercely exclusionary for the masses of men and women who just wanted the opportunity to work. But as many times as the studios put obstacles in front of them, they continued to return, eager to be a part of the silver machine, even if it meant swallowing a lot of pride in the process.

> However, while the number of African American actors working in white Hollywood increased, the roles assigned to them more often than not confined them to the status of extras… White Hollywood in the pre-1950 period utilized

> the screen to transfigure its construction of race, to project its own ideological complexities regarding racial otherness, and to transform an endless variety of representations deemed racially different—representations that more often than not were parodic constructions and that were manifested in the African American extras' screen representation (Regester 95).

To someone like Gloria Mitchell, her only real competition would be other similarly built light-skinned, light-haired actresses of the time. She is only ever in contest with herself, worrying over changing type categories as she ages, which is why at twenty-eight she is so concerned with scoring yet another lead ingénue role with Marie in *The Belle of New Orleans*. Vera's interest in working alongside her in the film is never actually a threat to her success. But to Vera, it means significantly more. Even though "African American extras were continually marginalized in American cinema" (Regester 95), as they were used primarily to create atmosphere rather than to play complex characters, Maximilian Von Oster's vision of slaves (albeit marginalizing) at least included something the other films of the times didn't have—significant on-screen time with spoken lines, meaning the actors playing those roles would actually get credited with those roles, and compensated accordingly, a huge step for black actors in the industry during the period.

> African Americans were certainly not cast in redeeming roles and occupied a degrading range of gradations in employment. For example, those hired to assume domestic roles were relegated to 'bit' roles, while those employed in

> individual or what was referred to as 'mammy' roles were characterized as landing 'parts.' Parts were distinguished from other roles because they allowed actors to be photographed in close-ups and remain prominently visible in the film. Part actors were usually hired on contract with individual studios and, therefore, records regarding their contracts were generally kept by the studios and not the Central Casting Bureau office. Generally, however, African American extras depended on the [CCB] office whose efforts resulted in laws to regulate earnings and to insure that some accommodations to which they were entitled were provided. For African Americans, being employed in white Hollywood meant being employed as an extra (Regester 96).

Vera understands what she's gambling for—"as long as they're casting fools," she tells Lottie (Nottage 19), asserting her knowledge that she will likely be misused, but because of the way things are, this is where she has to start, if she wants to work in this business. It takes an incredible amount of fortitude and personal courage to pursue a career in film and entertainment at any period in time, and even more so during this one. For the black men and women that waited outside in long lines to be seen for potential background roles, the reality of their situation was not invisible to them.

> The roles assumed by African American extras, arguably, were not to be envied. In comparison to its treatment of other ethnicities, Hollywood's racial othering of African Americans was pervasive and all too apparent… Most African

> Americans were denied opportunities to land major roles. At the same time, the African American body was commodified as an object of danger and desire because of its blackness… yet these actors were rendered as unimportant, expendable, and merely embellishments to the enhancement of the white stars with whom they shared the screen (Regester 96, 99).

Even though they knew they were up against great odds to really make it in the movie business, something slowly started happening for the black actors of Hollywood with the influx of artists like Maximilian Von Oster. For all his faults and prejudices—after all, he is still a man of the times, rooted in the social consciousness of the society in which he lives—Max has a new vision for the direction of cinema that involves bringing the "negroes," as he terms them in Gloria's living room, out into the open on camera. He wants to see the stories of real people, he wants to hear the "songs of the South," to capture the "true essence" of what it is to be black. Max has been enraptured, like so many others in the industry at this time, by the idea that African-American men and women are gifted with an inherent talent for deeper and more soulful speech and song, a talent that was then used to give these previously expendable performers a leg up in their visibility. "Particularly after the advent of sound, white Hollywood would capitalize on the widely held view that African Americans possessed remarkable vocal and musical talent" (Regester 98). Von Oster himself asks Vera to sing the blues for him while in Gloria's living room, effectively giving her the floor, and the impromptu audition of a lifetime.

> Arguably, African American extras had arrived in white Hollywood and were there to stay. The end of the silent era coincided with the indisputable fact that African American extras had established themselves as marketable commodities within the Hollywood ranks and they could expect continued visibility in subsequent decades (Regester 98).

While many of the types of roles available to actors of color were still the same old archetypes, sometimes relegating them to nothing more than human furniture, a palpable shift had indeed been felt within the industry. Nottage is capitalizing on this shift in the world of the play, showing us how we got from one side of the margin to the other, drawing on very real and very historically prevalent stories of the people who actually went through it. The benefit to our story is that Gloria, for all her fault and shortcomings, is an agent on the inside. Because of her relationship with Vera, we can assume she would have been encouraging and persuasive in casting decisions behind the scenes, because again, Vera posed no threat to her career—Gloria only sought to gain from the professional success of bringing talent to a director like Von Oster, and the personal success of bringing work to her friend. Vera's landing of the role of Tilly may be fictional, but it acts as a stand-in for decades of real-life stories of men and women who endured marginalized casting decisions in order to make a living and to follow their dreams of being in the entertainment industry. Tilly is modeled after the 'mammy' type, a type of nurse-nanny character who takes care of white children, who would have raised Marie as her ward and cared for her for years. A stereotype that follows Vera to her grave, Tilly is the slave girl she's bound to, "her shame and her glory" (Nottage 59). Because even though the character

type plays right into the white-washing of Hollywood, it's the role that opens doors to future liberations down the line.

> Such gains were considered advancements as African Americans penetrated white Hollywood, despite the fact that many of the roles maligned African Americans and marginalized them in cinema in much the same manner that they had been marginalized in American life. However, it is also argued that their acceptance of such roles should not imply that they were oblivious to their marginalization or distortion; in fact they were fully aware of the travesty that was being inflicted upon them, but many felt that before they could argue for improved screen roles, they first had to gain visibility (Regester 98).

Vera, like so many of the real women she was written to represent, knew what she was signing on for, and the potential pay-off it could have if the film did well. As we have seen over the trajectory of the film industry in the last hundred years, the industry changed along with the culture around it, sometimes in advance of significant social movements. That's certainly not to say there are no instances of marginalized casting in occurrence, but on the whole the industry has evolved into a machine that works much more ethically for its constituents. It is at once an art and a business—a dangerous combination, as they tend to eclipse one another. There are still films being made where casting calls ask for people of color to play maids, slaves, inmates, and the like. The difference now is that these films are telling the story of these people, rather than using them as backdrops for the pale-faced plantation owners.

The stories being told now are different, and sociologists are beginning to pose questions about whether or not we really have come as far as we think on issues of racial equality in industry and social realms. Janell Hobson wrote her entire book about the relationship of race and gender to the media and society's consumption thereof, and even she is left with a string of unanswered, but insightful, inquiries. It is a discussion that we as a culture are still having, and that I do not presume to have solutions or answers for. What I do know is that whether or not it is easy to ask, and whether or not we can find the language to discuss it, there is worth in letting your guard down to examine the issues of how culture treats humanity. If not for any other reason than to honor the people that have been lost to it continually over centuries of prejudice and injustice.

> What do millennial narratives reveal about race relations, gender dynamics, and class and status mobility? How is the body positioned to make new or recycled meanings of race and gender? Does the hyper-visibility of black bodies make legible the claims, successes, and struggles of marginal communities? Or, does it render such communities *in*visible through the promotion of certain narratives and imagery? And how do these representations shift meaning when crossing national and transnational borders (Hobson 5)?

BLONDE AMBITION:

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF PASSING

> The distinctiveness of the bipolar American racial regime—the persistence of the "one-drop rule"; the lack of official categories for multiracial people; the social and economic distance between blacks and whites and the illegality of interracial marriage until the *Loving v. Virginia* case in 1967; and the history of the United States as a white majority/black minority nation until increased immigration led to massive demographic changes in the mid-twentieth century—creates conditions ripe for the singular and spectacular nature of racial passing in the United States (Hobbs 23).

Gloria Mitchell was not given an easy choice to make when she was old enough to begin to understand that the lightness of her skin in comparison to that of her family's was considered taboo and unacceptable. She was raised by her beloved Granny, in a small but colorful home in Brooklyn, where she grew up alongside her cousin, best friend, and play mate, Vera. The Starks were a theatrical bunch—on Fridays there was music-making and dancing, and Gloria and Vera quickly developed a love for performing together. The story of the two young girls growing up to become beautiful and successful stars would have had a much happier

ending—if only their skin had been the same color. The unfortunate reality is that both Gloria and Vera were subject to circumstance, and both women had to face horrible decisions in order to preserve their freedoms, their safety, and their identities.

We've looked at the history of racial pacing in America and the shift made from passing as free to passing as white. Now we turn to the lesser known evils of passing that are only just now being discussed and recorded publicly—the personal ramifications leftover. As an actor, part of my job in taking on the role of Gloria is to study the bones of the character Lynn has given me, and then flesh her out by creating history and backstory that are necessary to the performance. The script is fairly explicit in its clues as to the relationship between Gloria and Vera and where they come from—you are supposed to walk away from seeing the show believing the two were related, which completely colors (excuse the pun) the entire experience of the production. Everything else about their interaction across the arc of the play is based on that single fact—that Gloria and Vera are more connected than anyone else knows, and that is what brings them, always, back together. Included in the Character Analysis section is a family tree chart that defines the exact familial relationship Gloria has to Vera, as created by myself and director Michelle Taylor. The play itself argues for the position of Vera—the marginalization and injustices she suffered as a black woman seeking work in the film industry in the 1930s, culminating with discussions about her legacy and disappearance in the early 2000s at an academic colloquium. Her argument has been made. Let us examine then what the other side looks like from Gloria's perspective, the side that remains—from the playwright's point of view—private to the actors portraying her.

Growing up, I imagine that Gloria loved her family, and loved performing with them more than any other childhood pursuit. By the time she would have neared the age of ten, however, Gloria would have begun to notice that she was treated differently in her neighborhood by passersby, depending on who saw her and who she was with. It was uncommon for a young, blonde white girl to be seen with an all-black family in a poorer neighborhood—it was more common for a young, blonde white girl to be seen with a black caretaker on the bus or train or around the more affluent white neighborhoods, as nannies of color were still the norm. Gloria most likely endured unkind and unwelcome comments from some of the kids in her neighborhood, telling her she didn't belong with them because to them, *she* was the different one, the outsider. It is also likely that these comments found their way to Vera, and to Granny as well, and to the "whole crew," however many that encompassed. The older she got, the more Gloria realized that she was a ticking time bomb. The part of her heritage that was white didn't exist in reality—her mother had left her after discovering her father's true racial identity, and her father was out of the picture. She was an orphan taken in by relatives that socially were not encouraged to look after her. They were family, and yet, they were not alike. Gloria's whiteness and Gloria's blackness were at odds. She did not look the part convincingly enough to claim her blackness without questioning, and so was always questioning. The time would come when Gloria would have to choose between her family and herself—her own identity always the thing at stake. Around age eighteen is when Gloria decided to leave and make a new life for herself, pursuing her whiteness full-stop, in the hope that it brought her success in the performance industry. "Mitchell" is most likely a stage name—probably pulled from her mother's side, to ensure her light-skinned lineage. She had

always been close to Vera—the two had discussed leaving and running off to Hollywood to become stars multiple times. This way, if Gloria paved the way, Vera could follow after her. They could still try to make their dreams come true, together. But this kind of life-altering move does not come without a cost. For Gloria to have made such a decision, one that she never turns back from, a huge part of herself had to be sacrificed in the process.

> Some African Americans used passing as a crucial channel leading to physical and personal freedom. They declared their rights as American citizens and insisted on their humanity. What they could not fully know until they had successfully passed was that the light of freedom was often overshadowed by the darkness of loss (Hobbs 27).

In order to successfully and fully pass as "Gloria Mitchell, white Hollywood Starlet," Gloria had to leave her entire family behind, with little to no hope of ever contacting or seeing them again. Even if she had been able to anticipate the trade she was making by choosing privilege over blood, she could not have possibly prepared herself for the amount of loss and grief, the immense sense of loneliness that would inevitably find her.

> Loss is a complex human sentiment that a historian should not expect to be discussed casually or openly. It can be so transparent and palpable that it leaps off the page. But more likely, the sense of loss is voiced through hesitations, pauses, and other manifestations of the trouble that one finds when looking at

> an old photograph and trying to recall a family member's name or the location or occasion when the picture was taken. It is the struggle to find the right words or it is the absence of words entirely that conveys the depth of personal loss (Hobbs 24).

Her loss is there when she spars with Vera in the first scene—*"And besides, no one was ever really sure he was my daddy"* (Nottage 11); her loss is there when she speaks too freely in her gin, after Max and Slasvick have run out after fighting—*"How come every time I come into my living room I find someone new standing there? It's like a rent party in Harlem…"* (Nottage 37); and her loss is there when, after so many years, she still can't bring herself to speak openly about everything that is happened between them—*"Forgive me, Vera… I wish things had… well… I missed you, terribly"* (Nottage 60). On *The Brad Donovan Show*, we are lulled into thinking that maybe, just maybe, this is her moment, when Gloria will confess and reveal it all—but in the end, she can't bring herself to do it. And it's because if she did, if she actually said aloud what she'd been hiding for so many years, her concept of self would splinter and shatter and she would be drowned in questions again. Never mind what it would do to her reputation, her entire career—the very real possibility that someone could be waiting outside the studio door with a gun ready to shoot her for such an admission (the Civil Rights movement has barely had time to effect that much change)—it's the personal psychological damage that she would be facing, the overwhelming lifetime's worth of grief over the loss of her family, the what-ifs of another life.

> Passing offered countless freedoms—from the pleasures of sitting in other sections of movie theaters besides the 'buzzard roost,' to the simple dignities of trying on a hat in a store without being compelled to buy it, to the elusive opportunities to 'feel more like a man' or 'to be treated like a lady.' But passing—the anxious decision to break with a sense of communion—upset the collective, 'congregative character' of African American life; it undermined the ability for traditions, stories, jokes, and songs to be shared across generations. Even the task of completing a family history became prickly, if not impossible. To be sure, not all family relationships were congenial, but once a relative decided to pass, meaningful touchstones and common experiences were lost. The fragmentation of one's identity and ancestral memory and the scattering of family relationships represent only a handful of passing's most troubling dilemmas (Hobbs 159).

The fact that Gloria would have been able to hold on to Vera, to bring her with her, is an amazing feat. That Vera would have understood—would have been able to extend that grace, that courtesy to Gloria, and that Gloria then would do anything she could to provide for Vera, offering her a job (they still had to play by society's rules, since they couldn't be family anymore), helping her get cast, says so much about the commitment these two women have to one another. Theirs is a bond not easily broken.

> Other inconvenient—and emotionally taxing—arrangements were possible. Recognizably black relatives could choose to work as maids in the homes of family members who were passing. Those who were passing could leave white family members behind and visit black relatives clandestinely, and passable blacks could visit with family members who lived 'on the other side.' Well versed in the demands and social limitations imposed by the Jim Crow regime, some family members accepted these terms to maintain relationships with relatives who no longer identified as black… Once family members 'crossed over,' they were usually lost, essentially dead to their families. But the equation of passing to death too quickly dismisses both the ambiguity and the logic of passing, as well as the tolerance and understanding that family members extended to those who passed. Why else would a relative agree to work as a maid in a family member's home in the interest of continuing an untenable relationship in the Jim Crow era? As passing disrupted family life and made certain topics of conversation awkward if not impossible, it also called into question one's own identity and sense of personhood (Hobbs 163, 169).

Whether it was something easily admissible or not, Gloria was permanently altered by the choices that took her further away from her family and closer toward her career goals. By having Vera so close to her, Gloria flirted with the line between claiming her whiteness and flaunting her knowledge of black culture, like it was a secret she wasn't supposed to have. She is able to speak freely in front of Lottie and Leroy differently than she is able to in front of

Maximilian, Slasvick, and Anna Mae (who she presumes is genuinely foreign). Gloria even goes so far as to open flirt with Leroy, in front of both Lottie and Vera, with no thought of repercussion or consequence, should he decide to say something to his employer—though Leroy's word against Gloria's would hardly have been taken seriously, so she knew she was safe in being so brash.

> Although some buckled under the fear of being discovered, others experienced a 'strange longing' for black people and black culture, which is captured best in some of the fictional treatments of the phenomenon. Bored by her 'pale life,' Clare Kendry in Larsen's novel *Passing* is attracted to Harlem 'as if by a magnet,' as Nathan Huggins explained, because 'there is something essential to Negro life—the gaiety, the warmth that she misses in her white world.' Clare finds the appeal of Harlem irresistible, and it is 'this terrible, this wild desire' that prompts her reckless actions: she attends Negro balls, introduces black (yet passable) women to her unsuspecting white husband, and repeatedly jeopardizes her identity as a white woman (Hobbs 161).

Although Gloria never actively seeks to return home, she does seem to relish in her ability to cross the "color line" at will with comfort when she wants to, something she most likely does out of a need for camaraderie and a glimpse of home. It is not something she seeks out when she is alone or without Vera, however—Vera is her rock, her safety net, the person who keeps her grounded. Vera shows no surprise at her flirtation with Leroy, used to these

passing moments of gin-fueled wandering before Gloria passes out in her bedroom. And why should she? The relationships she has with Leroy, with Lottie, with Anna Mae, they are each authentic and full of life. She has what Gloria—who has no other friends—wants.

> In *Following the Color Line* (1908), journalist Ray Stanard Baker asked why more light-skinned blacks do not pass. He was given a variety of reasons, all of which referenced the jollity of black life. 'Why, white people don't begin to have the good times that Negroes do,' one man explained, adding, 'They're stiff and cold. They aren't sociable. They don't laugh.' These comments are not universal truisms that can be taken at face value. At the same time, the sentiments behind these responses should not be dismissed entirely. These expressions emphasize a belief in the effusiveness, effervescence, and conviviality of black life that sharply contrasts with white life as bereft of levity and laughter. The dimensions of racial identity—although sometimes imagined, amplified, and emotionally constructed—can be powerfully felt, nonetheless. These responses reveal the profound attachments that some blacks had to African American communities, notwithstanding the tendency to sometimes mischaracterize those attachments as inherent 'racial' traits. Many blacks envisioned separating from their communities as psychologically and personally devastating. In some cases, feelings of loss were intolerable, leading some passers to eventually jettison their white identities and to return 'home' to the black community (Hobbs 161-162).

Here Hobbs touches on an extremely relevant point to the issue of race and how it's used in Nottage's play. The audience is meant to love and enjoy and identify with Vera, Lottie, Leroy, and Anna Mae, all of the characters who identify as African-American and who are just trying to carve out a life for themselves the best way they know how. Max and Slasvick are thick with privilege. Gloria is draped in it herself, but exists mostly in flux—she is exalted on a pedestal of her own making, kept far from the very people she wants so desperately to be close to. The other side of the sword is that it wouldn't be as simple as just jumping down from her perch to join them—Gloria is separated because of her appearance. She is literally *too white* to be black, and is therefore not entirely accepted within either community. She vacillates in search of an identity and a purpose, using her Sweetie Pie persona to get what she wants professionally, while she spends her days alone on her balcony nursing bottles of gin privately. Gloria is, of course, not unaffected by the culture of prejudice around her. She hears the comments made to and about Vera and Lottie by Slasvick during the party and is just as stung by his comments; worse still, she has to stay even more stoic than Vera and Lottie do, as she has to pretend that they don't bother her. In between a fear of exposure and a fear of appearing too empathetic, where does that leave her?

> Another woman described her experiences with the darker side of passing: she listened to white coworkers speak about blacks with bitter contempt, and she found herself teetering on a 'state of nervous collapse,' constantly fearing that her secret would be discovered. With the ever-present fear of being exposed,

> the workplace became an anxiety-ridden site where those who were passing could never rest (Hobbs 160).

Gloria spent the next forty years of her life pouring herself into her work and relationships built out of convenience. After Vera, the only other person she ever truly loved was her third husband, Malcom Braithwaite, with whom she moved to London for twenty years before returning to reunite with Vera on *The Brad Donovan Show*. Nottage frames Gloria's arc in the show in a rather smart and beautiful way. In Act I, she's all chaos, in full denial and crisis of identity, but working to own it. In Act II, she's taken time away, she's older, wiser, more settled in herself, mature, much softer—but still unable to shed fifty years of lies and falsehoods at the drop of a hat—she had too much to lose at this point, and asks Vera, the one person who matters, for forgiveness for it. And finally, we return to the filming of *The Belle of New Orleans*—the women are bright-eyed and young, with so many dreams ahead of them, and we see Gloria for the first time wonder aloud what it would have been like had they both stayed. What we can never forget about during this entire process is that the central issue is always Gloria's relationship with Vera. Both women suffered at the hands of social circumstance. Vera's blackness is extorted and glamorized throughout her career, so much so that Vera in 1973 no longer feels like a person, but a shell that's become property of the media at large. Gloria's fame isn't like that—her whiteness was never a part of it, because it was just accepted. Is it possible, though, that they could both want what the other has, from 1933 through 1973? Vera may have been extorted, but she was herself, and never had to choose

exile over her family. Gloria got the life and the fame she wanted, by the privilege of being white, but at what personal cost?

In the end, Gloria does what all actors do: when she cannot say it herself, she has her character say it for her. If she had to choose exile, she chose an avenue that gave her a loophole with a sideways view of freedom.

Because Gloria is unable to, Marie, welcoming death, declares it instead:

"I'm free, Tilly. I'm free."

(IN)VISIBLE:

A MODERN CONTEXT

> Fact: some Whites consider themselves superior to Blacks.
>
> Another fact: some Blacks want to prove at all costs to the Whites the wealth of the black man's intellect and equal intelligence.
>
> How can we break the cycle?
>
> (Fanon xiv)

If we are to take anything away from Nottage's brilliant play, it is that these issues of race and gender are not antique ideas that belong in the past. By neatly crafting the story to last through three time periods, bringing us all the way into the twenty-first century, Nottage is giving audiences a massive hint to pay attention to what is happening around us culturally: this conversation is far from over.

In his novel *Black Skin, White Masks,* Frantz Fanon describes it in this way: "The white man is locked in his whiteness. The black man in his blackness. …As painful as it is for us to have to say this: there is but one destiny for the black man. And it is white" (Fanon xiii-xiv). Fanon was a French psychiatrist and writer who wrote this statement in 1952, as a part of his treatise examining colonialism and racism. But his observations from more than sixty years

ago, and in another country no less, still ring alarmingly true in the American modernity of the 2010's. Society today is arguably better off than it was a century ago, and yet the evolution is still not complete. While many would argue racism is not as prevalent as it used to be, the struggle for black communities to achieve the same level of status and privilege that exists within white communities is still ongoing. In some ways, *passing as white* in order to attain levels of social freedom is still highly ubiquitous.

The largest benefit we have at our disposable for social change now is the pervasiveness of technology, the ease with which the average person can connect to multitudes of audiences the world over. This access to information has allowed for a significant increase in visibility for these kinds of struggles and discussions throughout our social structure. Now, if there is an instance of prejudice, bigotry, or a riot, the rest of the world is immediately informed, allowing millions of people to respond and comment, furthering charges for change with historically unheard-of speed. While this immediacy of access is an incredible gift to our society at large, it poses a problem unto itself: with so much constant visibility, it is entirely possible and probable that many events and circumstances in need of assistance fade into the background and go entirely unseen. When the market is saturated, individual events become less important, and the numbers that pile up become obsolete in the eye of the public.

For this very reason, artists and creators, such as Lynn Nottage, take it upon themselves to devise a way for the visibility and representation to continue by making statements that demand attention. History has always been on the side of those with the most power, the ones with the loudest and clearest voices, with the resources to get their side of the story heard. With every improvement of technology and increase in easier access for the majority of the

nation and the world, these artists are finding bigger audiences for their work, and are able to actualize change more effectively through it.

After her Oscar-winning performance in the film *12 Years A Slave*, actress Lupita Nyong'o did an interview with *Glamour* magazine, as one of their featured Women of the Year for 2014. In addition to discussing the film, her training at the Yale School of Drama, and having just become the most recent one of only seven black women to have won an acting Oscar, Lupita shared personal experiences with the magazine about what it was like to grow up in Africa under the shadow of harsh beauty expectations:

> European standards of beauty are something that plague the entire world—the idea that darker skin is not beautiful, that light skin is the key to success and love. Africa is no exception. …This is the message: that dark skin is unacceptable. I definitely wasn't hearing this from my immediate family—my mother never said anything to that effect—but the voices from the television are usually much louder than the voices of your parents. …But to rely on the way you look is empty. You're a pretty face—and then what? Your value is in yourself; the other stuff will come and go. We don't get to pick the genes we want. There's room in this world for beauty to be diverse (Bennetts 238).

How wonderful it is, then, that we are now in a time when the visage of a successful African-American woman graces the covers of popular magazines, celebrated for her accomplishments, where she can speak openly about issues of beauty standards and colorism,

and use her platform as a way to encourage younger generations of women like her. Even sixty years ago, Frantz Fanon again says it perfectly: "Society, unlike biochemical processes, does not escape human influence. Man is what brings society into being. The prognosis is in the hands of those who are prepared to shake the worm-eaten foundation of the edifice" (Fanon xv). The health of our social wellbeing is entirely in the collective hands of ourselves and everyone around us. If we as a people, as a human race, wish to see the narratives of oppression and prejudice change, we have to be responsible for that shift in the cultural paradigm. Artists have always been some of the most influential players to this process, asking the questions others are afraid to, and challenging the problematic schemas of the culture. It is up to us, then, to keep the conversations, that people like Lynn Nottage encourage, alive. And we must continue to encourage our artists to keep creating, our writers to keep writing, and our youth to keep speaking. For in doing this we hope that, as Fanon suggests, we might be able to shake apart the rotted foundations of the past to make way for the rebirth of a more inclusive and compassionate society ahead.

> Writing is dangerous because we are afraid of what the writing reveals: the fears, the angers, the strengths of a woman under a triple or quadruple oppression. Yet in that very act lies our survival because a woman who writes has power. And a woman with power is feared.
>
> (Anzaldúa 170)

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