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CONTEMPORIZING *PASSING* IN BLACK AND WHITE
Rebecca Hall's Larsen Adaptation

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For Zsazsa

To pay tribute to Zsazsa in the present volume, I want to discuss Passing*, a recent movie released last year at the 2021 Sundance Film Festival and then, after a limited theatrical release, streamed on Netflix for larger audiences.*[1] *British actress – screenwriter – director Rebecca Hall's debut film is an adaptation of Nella Larsen's canonical American novel* Passing *(1929), which seems to me an appropriate choice both to celebrate the pioneering feminist scholarship Zsazsa was instrumental in establishing in Hungary and to re-acknowledge, indeed, celebrate, our long-lasting friendship for at least two reasons. Throughout her career, Zsazsa has not only been an outspoken academic but also a public personality whose contributions to razor-sharp conceptualization of homophobia, racialization, hate speech, and stigmatization – the hinge-points of Larsen's novel, hence also Hall's cinematic adaptation – have helped many of us to problematize discourses of hierarchy and domination even in our own different disciplines. A few years after Larsen's rediscovery by feminist scholarship and the republication of* Passing *in 1986 (in one volume with her first novel Quicksand and with a cutting-edge introduction by Deborah E. McDowell), I literally tripped over this book as a Fulbrighter in the Indiana University library. This "corporeal" contact with the book all of a sudden rerouted my formerly devised research project and inspired me to submit a dissertation on Harlem Renaissance women, which eventually secured me the title of Candidate, and hence also my position at ELTE as well as my part-time appointment at József Attila University in Szeged. At JATE I was fortunate – thanks to Larsen once again – to find myself within a burgeoning feminist community in the English Department, Zsazsa being its foremost organizer and mouthpiece (along with Sári, the late Dr. Sarolta Marinovich-Resch). Thus, I would venture to say that Larsen has been a highly significant intermediary between us, strengthening both my personal and scholarly bonds with Zsazsa.*

1. Introduction

Based on all the above, I am happy to revisit Larsen's *Passing*, this time discussing relevant aspects of interart adaptation, namely, its recent *media transfer* from literature to film. Regarding adaptation as an intersemiotic and intermedial operation, simultaneously a product and a process, I look first at Larsen's novel, then at Hall's film to address the transfer of meaning from one sociocultural

[1] Hall's adaptation can also be accessed in Hungarian under an awkward title, *A másik bőrében: A látszat ára*, which could even reinforce racial stereotypes neither Larsen nor Hall would approve of.

context to another, with special attention to the cultural and personal moment of the novel's and the film's making. Along these lines, I also intend to discuss specific word, image, and sound configurations in Hall's adaptation, relying on relevant aspects of adaptation studies.

2. Nella Larsen, *Passing* (1929)

The adapted text is Nella Larsen's tightly structured, short novel (published by Knopf, one of the white publishing houses during the Harlem Renaissance that supported Black Modernist writing), which revolves around the repeated encounters of two young women in the Jim Crow America of the 1920s. Both Clare (Mrs. Bellew) and Irene (Mrs. Redfield) are middle-class and bi- (or multi)racial, with shared memories of friendship as girls on the South Side of Chicago.[2] Their lives begin to get entangled again on a brutally hot day when they accidentally find themselves in the same pleasantly cool tearoom at the top of Chicago's elegant Drayton Hotel, where they both seek refuge from the scorching sun and the crowded, sweating city below. Both Clare, now a white international banker's wife, and Irene, a Black doctor's wife from New York's Harlem district, are passing for white to secure privileges of physical comfort and social prestige in a segregated country with racial codes and spatial restrictions to consider, even in large, multiethnic cities with no visible "No Coloreds" signs, such as Chicago and New York, the two diegetic locations of the novel. As it turns out, Clare has committed herself to a lifetime of passing at the side of a wealthy white husband to compensate for years of childhood poverty and abuse by religious white aunts, who take her in after her white father's sudden and ignominious death.[3]

Irene passes only occasionally and – in contrast to Clare, who is always on the move, hopping cities, even continents – lives cocooned in a Black middle-class life in Harlem. She is the conscientious mother of two young boys, the wife of a well-respected man with professional prestige in the community, and a popular *race woman*, who socializes with both the *Nigerati* and white intellectuals, such as Hugh Wentworth (the fictional rendering of photographer-writer-patron Van Vechten,

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[2] Although I am aware of the "semantic burden" these terms carry, I still use *biracial*, *multiracial*, *Black*, *white*, and later *interracial* in this essay, following Werner Sollors' suggestion in his *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both* to regard them as indices of distinctly American cultural operations for us to foreground and unpack. I also capitalize the word Black to divert attention from arbitrary biologization to the artistic creation, cultural distinctiveness, and racial dignity that African Americans sought to demonstrate in the Harlem Renaissance and after. See Werner Sollors, *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 4.

[3] Clare's father is a white college dropout-turned-drunkard who has a child with a Black woman and dies prematurely of an alcohol overdose. The fictional Black mother is missing from the novel, just like Nella Larsen's Caribbean father, who vanished from her life when she was a child. Her mother later remarried a Dane.

one of Larsen's friends in New York).[4] The women's repeated encounters, mostly initiated by Clare, who is adamant about reconnecting with her race (by which she means the upper crust of Black urban society) through her old school friend, Irene, play out in a variety of scenes in Harlem, which was at the time the hub of postwar Black art, music, entertainment, and political activity on the East coast. Their lives become dramatically enmeshed at all possible levels, including the homoerotic, only to result in Clare's fatal fall from the window of a seventh-floor apartment. The novel is, in a way, an open-ended puzzle, making any confident answer to the question of "whodunnit" untenable. The reader is kept in suspense and so is unable to commit herself to a final decision, vacillating among a range of possibilities, including accident, suicide, and even murder (with at least two possible suspects involved). At this point, the novel also runs full circle with its spatial-racial design, beginning with two women characters, who simultaneously pass the color line and are transported by elevator to the top of a white hotel, and ending with guests who climb seven floors up to a Black party in a modern high-rise, from which a woman suddenly falls to her death.[5]

The *horizontal structure* in Larsen's text,[6] which includes the hinge-points of the narrative, is kept under control by Irene's focalization and the third-person external narrator's voice that together frame readerly expectations. The body of the text is carefully carved into three parts, each further divided into four chapters, and each assisting the reader in recognizing different time shifts in the plot, which is otherwise suffused by the focalizer's introspections and reflections. The course of events is structured in *Part One* as Irene's retrospective narrative, beginning *in medias res*, after she receives a letter from Clare, delivered to her home address on a respectable Harlem street. Reluctantly, though, she feels compelled to recollect her two earlier encounters with Clare two years before, the first in Chicago's Drayton Hotel, the second in the Bellews' lavish Chicago apartment. Irene finds both occasions embarrassing enough to risk seeing her childhood friend again, yet, at the same time, she also feels compelled, almost despite herself, to read Clare's passionate letter, which entones romantic sentiments of unrequited love and the desire to see her again. *Part Two* returns to the diegetic present of the novel with which it begins, and then the narrative gradually advances to its climactic end

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[4] These terms were widespread in the culture of the Harlem Renaissance: *race woman* designated the Black woman who actively promoted the cause of racial integration, usually through welfare work; *racial uplift* relates to two early (and competing) Black discourses of social integration on behalf of Black Americans and is associated with Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois. *Nigerati* is Wallace Thurman's term for his colleagues, the Black artists, writers, and poets of the Harlem Renaissance.

[5] An excellent contemporary refiguration of the trope of the elevator (with an elevatorman protagonist and a whole corporate elevator establishment) associated with strategies of racial integration is Colson Whitehead's speculative fiction, *The Intuitionist* (New York: Anchor, 1999).

[6] Roland Barthes qtd. in Brian McFarlane, *Novel to Film, An Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 13.

through *Part Three* to the *Finale*. Complicated by recurring flashbacks and the representation of Irene's inner thoughts, the novel finally evolves into Irene's psychological drama: she feels torn apart by love, hate, jealousy, self-doubt, and the terror of losing everything she has tenaciously built so far as a Black, middle-class race woman, wife, friend, and mother, safely ensconced in the bubble of her delusions and imaginary security, far from both female rivals and lynch parties. Foregrounding the imagined and real threats besetting Mrs. Irene Redfield's life, the novel also suggests the precariousness of Black lives in the 1920s, even when the "Negro was in vogue,"[7] and her ability to shelter herself in the Black center of a multicolored, modern American metropolis.

As for the novel's key concerns with racializing and racism, Larsen noticeably tapped into the tradition of a distinct American fabula, that of the *passing* (and predominantly tragic) *mulatta*, who had long been portrayed as an inevitable racial and hence social outsider, albeit with distinctly subversive political potential in the works of Lydia Maria Child, Harriett Beecher-Stowe, William Wells Brown, Charles Chesnutt, Kate Chopin, and Langston Hughes, to name only a few. While revisiting, that is, *adapting* and thus reinscribing the boundaries of this literary tradition in the light of her experiences in postwar American culture, Nella Larsen sought to critique the contemporaneous mainstream discourse of masculine Blackness and the politics of racial integration as promoted by W.E.B. DuBois and Alain Locke. Availing herself of this cultural tradition, she also challenged long-established boundaries of race, class, gender, and sexuality. In Larsen's modernist adaptation of the trope, *Passing* also speaks to her own personal concerns regarding her biracial/Danish-American female identity, and her aggravating marital problems with Black physics professor Elmer Imes. From the perspective of adaptation studies, I can even suggest that the textual and contextual border-crossing dynamics of Larsen's novel duly represent what adaptation in its extended sense implies: "[a]daptation adapts the textual and the contextual borders that it crosses as well as the texts and contexts it adapts."[8]

3. Rebecca Hall, *Passing* (2021)

Larsen's *Passing*, which marks young British actress Rebecca Hall's first film as director and screenwriter, seems to me the result of a truly "creative and interpretative act of (re)combination," to cite Regina Schober, an adaptation studies scholar, who concludes that "as soon as an adaptation has been created, it is automatically emancipated and disconnected from its source medium."[9] While acknowledging the relevance of her insight, which implies that conventional

[7] Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1993), 228.
[8] Kamilla Elliott, *Theorizing Adaptation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 199.
[9] Rebecca Schober, "Transmediality Reconsidered," in *Adaptation Studies*: *New Challenges, New Perspectives,* edited by Jorgen Bruhn, Anne Gjelsvik, and Eirik Frisvold Hanssen (London: Bloomsbury Academy, 2014), 89.

responses to literary adaptations usually get stuck in a discussion comparing the "primary" (or literary) to the "secondary" (or filmic) versions – dismissing the latter as derivative and celebrating the former as original and of higher artistic value – I also suggest a look at Linda Hutcheon's contention: when approaching adaptation as "repetition with variation," she suggests that "[r]ecognition and remembrance are part of the pleasure (and risk) of experiencing an adaptation; so too is change."[10]

Intriguingly, Hall's film adaptation seems to underscore the significance of "repetition with variation," making sure her viewers are reminded of the adapted novel. Far from being a radical rethink that audaciously seeks to ignore the *precursor text*, Hall's adaptation appears to acknowledge, respect, and even emphasize its existence: it recirculates some of its key sentences, even dialogues, and visualizes the distance between the adaptation and the adapted text by returning to the novel's cultural context: *Passing* is shot in black and white and in the 4:3 aspect ratio, the default for celluloid film at the time of the novel's publication. Furthermore, while Hall's film is made without the use of a traditional score, there are still leading acoustic events that cue the viewer to form distinct expectations of the plot, including a rambling jazz melody on a single piano and a few notes on a jazz trumpet, both invoking the musical ambiance of the Harlem Renaissance.

As is the case with most feature film adaptations to, Larsen's modernist novel is converted into a continuous, even linear story that takes precedence over causality. Thus, Hall's reinterpretation of Larsen's text inevitably has to skip distinct chapters that otherwise secure the logic of Larsen's medium, the literary text, such as Chapter One, which immediately sets the tone of the whole novel as Irene's virtually "biassed" narrative. The adaptation also inserts invented episodes in Larsen's narrative with their own distinct *mise-en-scène*, such as the one with Clare in the company of Irene's maid Zulena, this scene intimating both class solidarity – the rich and the poor Black woman bonding in the Redfields' backyard while Irene is away – and/or Clare's persistent invasion of Irene's personal space. Furthermore, the adaptation revises and hence also seems to scale down the power of Larsen's text at a crucial point (in Part One, Chapter Three) that dramatizes the unrelenting politics of racial codes defined by white male patriarchy. The novel suggests the subversive power of Black female laughter when the three women (Clare, Gertrude, and Irene in the Bellews' home) unite in a carnivalesque scene to make a buffoon out of a racist white man, who thinks he pulls all the strings himself. In Hall's revision, the historic encounter between John Bellew (who calls his wife Nig but remains blind to Clare's actual passing) and the two women (Irene and Clare) takes place in the Bellews' hotel suite in New York's Drayton, where the film begins (unlike in the novel, where the women's first and second encounters take place in Chicago). Larsen's figuration of the roaring female laughter that simultaneously upholds and uncovers the absurdity of racism as the

[10] Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 4.

operation of white male power is largely converted into a more static and symbolic setting of white dominion staged in a brightly illuminated interior with white, shiny, and metallic surfaces. As Hall explained in a roundtable talk following the release of her film:

> That scene is deliberately, oppressively white. The walls are white, the costumes are white, there is a huge amount of light coming in on the side of the window. He [John Bellew] doesn't see that they are black *[sic!]* because he's dumb and unobservant. It's because in this domain it's his world in which he has all the power. So he gets to see what he wants to see.[11]

Finally, the adaptation diminishes (or rather, reinterprets) the anger, anxiety, and sexual alienation that engulfs Irene's marriage in the novel. Whereas in Larsen's version the couple's marital problems attain a historical dimension, largely stemming from events that took place during World War I and its aftermath,[12] in Hall's version Brian appears to be a slightly distanced but fully devoted father and husband, with no reference to his involvement in the War. There is no comparable alienation in the Redfield marriage in the filmic narrative either: whereas in Larsen, wife and husband have long been sexually estranged, so they sleep in different rooms, in Hall the Redfields are expressly devoted to each other. They are not only represented in their tender moments, caressing, even kissing each other, but Irene and Brian are also put in the same spousal bed under the camera, which frequently turns out to be their intimate space even for clarifying conversations.

The most intriguing aspect of Hall's *Passing* is that she chooses two "recognizably" African American actresses, Tessa Thompson (as Irene) and Ruth Negga (as Clare), for the roles of interracial passers.[13] This is, at first sight, an iconoclastic decision, as Larsen clearly decided to erase from her main characters the assumed "African" features that white Americans traditionally associated with "Negroes" in the 1920s. Hence, Irene and Clare have no difficulty passing for white (performing respectable womanhood, with their femininity defined by white middle-class expectations). Furthermore, they are in full possession of the tools that keep the racist regime of (in)visibility in operation, so they feel empowered to

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[11] "Rebecca Hall, Tessa Thompson, Ruth Negg, André Holland, *Passing*. A Film Independent Presents Q&A."

[12] Irene and Brian's marital problems derive mainly from the postwar trauma afflicting Brian, who returns from overseas unimpaired in body but wounded in soul. His vulnerability is exacerbated by sustained American anti-Black cruelty, so he wants to heal by relocating with his family to Brazil, an allegedly less racist country. His plan is, however, methodically aborted by Irene, who tries to accommodate to her husband's "whims," yet insists that the family stay put in New York City, their home.

[13] "Rebecca Hall, Tessa Thompson, Ruth Negga, André Holland, *Passing*. A Film Independent Presents Q&A."

ridicule its insanity, as does Irene (through the double-voicing narrative function of Free Indirect Speech), at the beginning of the novel:

> White people were so stupid about such things [distinguishing black from white] for all that they usually asserted that they were able to tell; and by the most ridiculous means, finger-nails, palms of hands, shapes of ears, teeth, and other equally silly rot. They always took her for an Italian, a Spaniard, a Mexican, or a gipsy. Never, when she was alone, had they even remotely seemed to suspect that she was a Negro.[14]

While Larsen's novel was a pioneer in exposing the fluidity of racial boundaries, it also charts the territory of race as a constrained reality of lived experience defined by what W.E.B. DuBois called the *color line*. Thus, on the one hand, race appears to be an unresolvable puzzle and, on the other, a matter of life and death. Race is represented as a cultural construction in the form of hazy assumptions and nebulous projections (as in *Part Two*, *Chapter Three*, which turns on the chronotope of a colorful Negro Welfare League dance, undermining any palpable definition of who is what). Nevertheless, race also turns out to be distinctly ontological,[15] as the novel's end testifies, when an interracial life is irretrievably terminated.

When choosing Thompson and Negga and the antiquated black-and-white 4:3 format to shoot *Passing*, Hall ingeniously cuts to the bone of Larsen's *Passing* by successfully remedializing both the novel's racial concerns and its modernist aspirations by applying devices of free-floating indeterminacy and encoded determinacy. Indeed, Hall's visual and auditory replotting of the novel seems to be directly inspired by Irene's conclusions about the absurdities of racializing (and the subsequent policies of white racism), as if her film were seeking to literally transfer Mrs. Redfield's words from the printed page onto the screen. If racial identification of the Other by white Americans is not only inadequate but simply "silly rot," Hall seems to be encouraged to challenge her audience to fully comprehend the absurdity of race by making them follow the life of two interracial (or, in Hall's definition, Black) women, who successfully perform whiteness or blackness, whichever they deem useful in the given circumstances, yet also at their convenience. The director-screenwriter compels her viewers to see these leading women from the perspective of fear and danger, squeezed into uncomfortable boxes or the "prison-space" of the 4:3 aspect ratio. Thus, not only the characters

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[14] Nella Larsen*, Quicksand and Passing*, edited by Deborah E. McDowell (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 150.

[15] David Theo Goldberg, "Racial Europeanization," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 29, no. 2 (2006): 334.

but also the audiences are made "to feel cloying, and constrained, and claustrophobic."[16]

The touchpoints of Hall's plotting, cinematography, and sound design make sure to transfer Irene's interiority from the rhetorical devices of the novel to those of the film. The movie begins with the indistinct and subdued visual and sonic map of a big city: a train engine chugging, a horn blaring, muffled and fragmentary human conversations emerging and vanishing, human torsos swimming across the screen, the camera making bodies visible only from the waist down. The design suggests Irene Redfield's interiority as a passer, now out of her cocoon in New York City, peeping through her fashionable sun hat, which benevolently screens out both the scorching sun and uninvited gazes. Simultaneously, this symbolic landscape also situates Irene as a gentle-looking, interracial but Black-identifying woman, who lives her life in disconnect with the world around her, ensconced behind a facade of imagined racial security and female respectability, out of touch even with her own sensuality. To this end, the film's visual language and sound design systematically apply devices to blur images by defocusing, changing proportions (expressing Irene's perspective), repetition (scenes of bodies and things dropping and falling that suggest Irene's insecurities and foreshadow Irene's breakdown and Clare's fatal fall), and by maximizing the dramatic potential of the grainy black-and-white celluloid film.

In Hall's *Passing*, Irene and Clare are represented as complementary opposites. While Irene resembles a somnambulist, always ready to close up and doze off in her Victorian brownstone home (which never happens in Larsen's novel), Clare is an exuberant gate-crasher, always ready to open the floodgates of desire wherever she emerges. Somewhat in contradiction with Hall's articulated intention to contemporize the key problems of Larsen's narrative – and hence to alert her viewers to the danger of reductive binaries,[17] such as black and white, man and woman, heterosexual and homosexual, normal and abnormal – her interpretation of the two protagonists as different but also complementing/completing each other turns out to be counterproductive, even problematic, since she appears to reproduce the very problem she seeks to challenge.[18]

Finally, let me embrace the teasing questions a student recently raised in my postcolonial American literature class: what is the relevance of Larsen's African

[16] "Rebecca Hall, Tessa Thompson, Ruth Negga, André Holland, *Passing*. A Film Independent Presents Q&A."

[17] "Rebecca Hall, Tessa Thompson, Ruth Negga, André Holland, *Passing*. A Film Independent Presents Q&A."

[18] The issue of opposing yet complementary identities has been one of the first targets of (Anglo-American) feminist thought since Mary Wollstonecraft, who critiqued the operation of (white) heterosexual patriarchy and colonialism. Hall's adaptation clearly speaks to feminist agendas, yet her work seems to me reductive at this point.

American classic today, with its central concern about racial passing when Jim Crow laws are long gone in the USA? Why does passing (for white) matter for a young British director currently living in the USA? Yes: why was Rebecca – the daughter of the late Sir Peter Hall, the renowned English theater and opera director, and the late Maria Ewing, a unique star of the international opera world – so immensely struck by a Harlem Renaissance novel? Why risk her fledgling film director's career with such a difficult book to adapt? Furthermore, why all the effort to revisit and contemporize the theme of racial passing by transferring it from literature to film, namely, by changing it to suit new environments in post-civil rights US-America, wherein even African American literature has been pronounced *passé* by Black scholar Kenneth W. Warren? Although racism has certainly not disappeared from the nation's sociopolitical landscape, says Warren, the boundary of a once coherent African American literature has been eroded by the post-segregationist upsurge of diasporic, transatlantic, global, and other frames.[19] Likewise, Black in the post-soul era (of the millennial years) no longer designates the same social imaginary of racial authenticity, shared destiny, and the set of spiritual dispositions foregrounded in Black Aesthetics, which sparked an earlier generation of African American writers spearheaded by such luminaries as Toni Morrison.[20] Finally, one cannot but note that Larsen's race-obsessing heroines Irene and Clare come from the very same South Side of Chicago where the Princeton and Harvard graduate first lady, Michelle Obama (who happens to be eighteen years Rebecca Hall's senior) hails from.

There are certainly alarming signs of the toxic, white ethno-traditional nationalism of American politics, side by side with movements (such as "wokeism" and Black Lives Matter) that seek to articulate widespread social inequalities on all possible levels in the country. Intriguingly, contemporary Afropessimist intellectuals, such as Frank Wilderson III, go so far as to point out that Black has no place in civic life or community, let alone the existing socio-political conditions in the USA. Instead of Black human beings (which is a contradiction in terms to start with, as they contend), Black Americans remain sentient beings only, without human bodies of their own, in the current second era of Jim Crow racism.[21] Considering the fact that Hall's *Passing* is streamed by Netflix to international audiences, including that of Hungary, I must also refer to the political agenda of *pure race* versus *mixed race* in this country, supervised, maintained, and even circulated by the current Prime Minister. As in his recent talk at a political rally,[22] he outlined –

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[19] Kenneth W. Warren, *What Was African American Literature?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 1-44.
[20] For a discussion of post-civil rights and postsoul African American culture and literature, see Federmayer Éva, "A hitelesség újraolvasása a kortárs (afro)amerikai irodalomban," *Filológiai Közlöny* 65, no. 2 (2019): 40-63.
[21] For arguments of Afropessimism, see Frank B. Wilderson III's *Red, White, and Black* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010) and *Afropessimism* (New York: Norton, 2020).
[22] Tusnádfürdő, Romania, on July 23, 2022.

in black and white – his political vision of a pure-blooded Hungary, over and against a declining, "mixed-race" West.[23]

Hall was obviously intrigued by the thematic and formal aspects of both *interracial* literary adaptations and gaps in Black film history that she retrospectively sought to fill in with her own black-and-white *noir* and Black cast. As Alexandra Kleeman recalls her personal conversation with the director-screenwriter:

> To film in black and white was a way of honoring the films that she was raised on, which starred strong female leads like Barbara Stanwyck, Bette Davis and Myrna Loy. And casting Black actors allowed her to conjure the fantasy of a "lost noir film" that might have had a Black actress in a leading role, while nodding to a lineage of films like "Imitation of Life" (1934).[24]

As an ambitious young woman, Hall apparently cherished the idea of inscribing her name into a film history that she perceived as discontinuous. Despite the reconstruction work of African American film scholarship, the earliest period of Black film, including the Harlem Renaissance era, is truly fragmentary, mainly due to the nitrate-based stock in use, which was "highly unstable, extremely flammable, and, over time, would disintegrate inside the film can."[25] Discontinuities, however, were not only technical concerns for Hall.

Her thirteen-year personal involvement with Larsen's story of passing turned out to be her own personal journey, deep down into family history, which had formerly been disrupted by her mother's lapses in memory and story-telling.[26] At this point, the fiction writer Danzy Senna, an American "civil rights baby" (born to a white mother and a Black father, both committed to the civil rights cause in the 1960s), comes to mind as a striking parallel. While Senna devoted herself to extensive detective work in order to stitch together the Black side of her family history, which eventually surfaced in her memoir *Where Did You Sleep Last Night?* (2009), Hall's long relationship with Larsen's novel materialized in her film adaptation of *Passing* (2021). The process of writing the scripts, ruminating over Larsen's text, and making the film adaptation eventually led to a shocking discovery: her family history on her mother's side originated from Africa, continued in American slavery, and then was interrupted by Maria Ewing's father: at a crucial point in his

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[23] For the Prime Minister's speech and its evaluation, see "Orbán's Speech in Transylvania," A video summary, and "A kevert fajú népektől az orosz szankciókig: Orbán tusványosi beszédének 6 állítását ellenőriztük," *Lakmusz*.

[24] Alexandra Kleeman, "The Secret Tall of Racial Ambiguity," *New York Times,* October 20, 2021.

[25] Berry S Toriano and Venise T. Berry, *The 50 Most Influential Black Films: A Celebration of African-American Talent, Determination, and Creativity* (New York: Citadell Press, 2001), 3.

[26] "Rebecca Hall Discusses Making Her Film *Passing*."

life, he decided to cross the color line. Passing must have entailed his painful decision to break with his (Black) family, but he chose silence for the promise of a better life. His daughter Maria became the "daring and original American mezzo-soprano, known for risk-taking roles and an unwavering dedication to her art."[27] His granddaughter Rebecca became a British actress and filmmaker.

While Hall's socially engaged film nods not only to Larsen's *Passing* but to her Black ancestors and passing grandfather, it also aspires to a more comprehensive message. Her *Passing*, as she affirms, "transcends the specificity of race and becomes something universal. It becomes this question of how do we all show up for ourselves? How do we all overcome what society tells us we ought to be, what we decide that we ought to be versus what we actually want? And this is huge."[28]

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[27] For Maria Ewing's obituary, see Jessica Gelt, "The 'Uncompromising' and Versatile Opera Singer Maria Ewing Dies at 71," *Los Angeles Times*, January 12, 2022.

[28] "MVFF44: *Passing*. Conversation with Rebecca Hall, Ruth Negga, Nina Yang Bongiovi," The 44th Mill Valley Film Festival (October 7-17, 2021) Conversation. California Film Institute.

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