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Dear Readers,

My hopes for this final revision are to examine the potential for individuals to use passing to enforce rather than interrogate the existence of identity categories and boundaries. Though my underlying claim remains somewhat based on the thesis of my initial draft, I believe that this time around I took responsibility for the whole of Ginsberg’s claim rather than referencing her argument out of context. Perhaps even more importantly, I tried my best to incorporate skepticism in my analysis of the film rather than allowing myself to be swayed by the perspective of its creators. In my first draft, my wording was on the whole too strong. Rather than presenting an alternative way of looking at and thinking about Ginsberg’s theory, I instead presented my own interpretation of the film as definitive. Moreover, I put too much faith in the characterization of Chris Buckwell without taking into account his fictitious origins as a product of the filmmakers’ imaginations.

The thesis of my revision is, “An evaluation of various scenes in *Old San Francisco* suggests that Ginsberg’s argument falls short in its failure to address the possibility for individuals, who by passing are granted the privileges of a more socially enabled identity category, to enforce rather than diminish these oppressive barriers onto those left behind” (Huang 1). This has changed from my original thesis in a few ways. First, I refrain from pigeon-holing Ginsberg’s text as prescriptive, in the sense that passing *should* be done in order to challenge the limiting social constructs people traditionally use to categorize identities. She merely offers the positive values that she sees in passing. Also, I changed my focus, from the use of passing to escape oppression to then impose it, to the use of passing (for a variety of reasons) to then enforce the divisive lines separating groups of people. I felt that this made my argument more applicable as a general extraction from both the text and film, instead of just applying to *Old San Francisco* and the oppression Buckwell engages in against his own people. Lastly, rather than stating that the film provides concrete evidence that my new take on Ginsberg’s theory is more true than her sociological work of academic merit, I reworded this to instead imply that my evaluation of the film provides a different approach but is, of course, only one of several possible interpretations. (My previous thesis was, “However, by focusing solely on the idea that identity categories should in fact be transgressed due to their falsity, she fails to acknowledge the potential evils brought on by crossing such boundaries, as evidenced by various scenes in *Old San Francisco*” as a point of comparison.) I think that the changes I applied to my thesis strengthened both my paper’s argument and credibility.

One of the biggest things I struggled with, however, was finding a balance between elaboration of key points while remaining concise and to the point. It was difficult trying to “linger” rather than breeze past my evidence and analysis in order to extract the deeper meanings present in the scenes I chose to examine, while not being too repetitive. What I would like you to focus on most when you read my revision is the way the different components of my paper come together to form a cohesive argument. How well does my motive serve to set you up for my thesis? Do I use enough analysis of my evidence to support my claim? Also, does the way I structured my paper help or hinder you in understanding my argument? Thank you for reading my work!

Fool’s Gold in *Old San Francisco*: A Reevaluation of Ginsberg’s View on Passing

Colloquially referred to as a “melting pot,” America has welcomed immigrants from around the world. Inevitably, the assimilation of these diverse cultures into one nation gradually led to the rise of mixed-race heritage and an ambiguous sense of identity, as individuals no longer strictly fit into one definitive category. The time-honored existence of a singular identity revolves around social demarcations established as a means of grouping individuals within a larger community. As manmade societal constructions, these artificial boundaries lend themselves to being crossed in the act of passing, in which individuals shed their putative identity in terms of race, sex, religion, or even sexual orientation.

Both Elaine K. Ginsberg’s “The Politics of Passing” and Alan Crosland’s 1927 silent film *Old San Francisco* examine this complex issue of crossing accepted boundaries in the context of American society. In her exposé, Ginsberg ventures beyond the traditional notion of passing as a means of “escaping the subordination and oppression accompanying one identity and accessing the privileges and status of the other,” (3) by suggesting the positive value passing has in its potential to blur the divisive edges separating different social categories. She presents passing in a positive light in its deconstruction of conventional boundaries, which thereby encourages society to reevaluate the categories into which it sectors groups of people. However, while to a certain extent Crosland’s film presents a fictitious tale that influences its viewers to sympathize with the perceptions of the filmmakers, it complicates this incomplete view of passing. An evaluation of various scenes in *Old San Francisco* suggests that Ginsberg’s argument falls short in its failure to address the possibility for individuals, who by passing are granted the privileges of a more socially enabled identity category, to enforce rather than diminish these oppressive barriers onto those left behind.

Challenging the societal invention of constructs such as race, gender, and class, Ginsberg depicts passing as a constructive impetus for society’s reconsideration of identity. She extends the predominant understanding of passing as a means for individuals to cross into other realms of being for the purpose of accessing the social status denied to them by virtue of their inherent identities, praising its reconstructive abilities:

The positive potential of passing as a way of challenging those categories and boundaries. In its interrogation of the essentialism that is the foundation of identity politics, passing has the potential to create a space for creative self-determination and agency: the opportunity to construct new identities, to experiment with multiple subject positions, and to cross social and economic boundaries that exclude or oppress. (16)

Ginsberg’s view of passing is a positive one. “Transgressors” of the norm challenge such manmade constructs by crossing these lines and thus expedite the blurring of these socially harmful and limiting groups. Evaluating the effects of passing on society, Ginsberg offers passing as a force driving society towards positive change by altering the insular way in which it views identity.

With Ginsberg’s theory in mind, we can now begin to explore *Old San Francisco*’s refinement of this positive interpretation of passing. Though certainly fictitious and prejudiced on the side of its white creators, the film promotes a deeper analysis of the consequences of passing when its viewers delve beyond a mere surface reading that feeds into the agenda of its filmmakers, instead assessing the cinematic work in terms of its wider implications. The merciless and cruel Chris Buckwell, first introduced to viewers as an oppressive white figure heading the corruption and exploitation in San Francisco at the beginning of the 20th century, offers such an example of the capacity for passing to perpetuate the rigid categories and boundaries subjecting minority groups to gross oppression.

Setting the stage for his first appearance on screen, the Western music of the preceding scene transitions into a distinctly oriental melody as viewers overlook a crowded Chinatown street. A swarm of activity and people fills the bustling district, which extends beyond the scope of the camera to provide the sense that this crowdedness pervades the whole of Chinatown and not simply this particular street. The scene then shifts to the inside of Buckwell’s spacious home, revealing lavish decorations that denote his power and status in San Francisco as an established American man. The camera focuses briefly on a group of visibly distressed Chinamen, then pans onto Buckwell’s cunning smirk, which is fittingly accompanied by dark and suspenseful music. The subsequent titlecards read, “Cruel, mysterious, crafty—Chris Buckwell had grafted his way from an unknown origin to power. Czar of the Tenderloin—chief persecutor of the Chinese” (*Old San Francisco)*. Indeed, he belligerently demands that the Chinamen turn over their land and threatens to use force should they fail to comply.

Not only does this scene establish the central plotline of the film as one that focuses on the oppression of the Chinese by a powerful yet enigmatic Chris Buckwell, but it also more importantly reflects the motives of the filmmakers, which can be understood in the historical context of the Chinese Exclusion Act. Buckwell is presented as sinister and villainous, both through the severity of his gestures and the accompanying music characterizing his entrance. The titlecard’s description of him offers a one-sided judgment focusing on his “craftiness” and “unknown origin to power,” which suggests an air of duplicity. Moreover, even by just considering the grandeur of his home, it is clear that the wealthy businessman is of high social status and import, which he uses to take advantage of his inferiors, namely the Chinese. The Chinamen summoned before him to negotiate a selling price for their land show complete deference to him, bowing and remaining silent while he insolently barks orders at them. Ironically, as shown in the establishing scene beforehand, there is an abundance of people sequestered in Chinatown, yet even so Buckwell desires to restrict their expansion. The juxtaposition of the Chinese containment with Buckwell’s spacious home accentuates the selfish cruelty of his demands.

Buckwell’s oppression of the Chinamen becomes more intricately intertwined with Ginsberg’s notion of passing as the film progresses, when his visible whiteness is called into question. Though on the surface he looks to be of Western descent, Buckwell soon privately reveals his oriental lineage and identification with his Chinese ancestors. In the confines of a Buddhist shrine concealed below his home, he hypocritically exclaims, “Oh, god of my ancestors—accept the sacrifices I offer for the sins I have committed against my own people” (*Old San Francisco)*. Meanwhile, Buckwell’s own brother Chang Loo watches on from within a locked cage. He not only victimizes the Chinese population at large but also his own family member. Evidently, Buckwell consciously uses passing, from Chinese to white, to harm his own fellow Chinamen; thus *Old San Francisco* offers insight into the problematic use of passing to perpetuate the oppression of cultural groups. By crossing into the identity category of a white man, Buckwell effectively constructs a public persona of power and authority, which would have been denied to him as a Chinaman. Therefore, calling Ginsberg’s theory into question, passing can become a transgression in that these divisive lines have been crossed in order to enforce rather than subvert them.

As the film comes to conclusion, a colossal earthquake hits San Francisco, killing Buckwell almost immediately. A surface reading of the film will lead viewers to believe that the Mongol is punished for daring to pass as white, a gross violation of nature. Presumably, Buckwell perishes in a catastrophic end due to his unnatural transgression of societal boundaries. However, the film’s greater implications must be separated from the prejudiced agenda of its makers. Rather than accepting the racially biased film as a pedagogical truth that passing from Chinese to white is intolerable and deserving of punishment, the film rethinks Ginsberg's theory. It suggests that passing has the potential to become a negative transgression against society when individuals engage in it to reinforce oppressive social stratification and ultimately betray their own heritage. Buckwell meets an unfortunate end not because he passes but because he then uses his visible whiteness to partake in the persecution of his own people, rather than simply masking his externally invisible oriental descent to leave behind the confines of a socially subservient identity.

The film’s treatment of Dolores, the granddaughter of the noble Don Hernando de Vasquez whose family has inhabited a Spanish Rancho in San Francisco for countless generations, in contrast with that of Buckwell further informs this interpretation of *Old San Francisco*. Dolores is presented in an angelic light and as the epitome of innocence. Viewers sympathize with her as the malicious Buckwell attempts to both rape her and usurp her father’s property. The most important aspect of her character, however, is the strong line of family loyalty that runs deep within the Vasquez line. Various members of the family declare, “A Vasquez avenges a Vasquez” (*Old San Francisco)* throughout the film, denoting a fierce sense of family loyalty. This of course provides a stark comparison with Buckwell’s shameless immorality, as he engages in the act of passing to impose oppressive constraints on the Chinamen in San Francisco as well as a direct member of his family.

From this scene, the separate fates of Dolores and Buckwell following the destructive earthquake can be considered in relation to their family loyalty. As the ground rumbles and fires begin to blaze in the streets, hysteria takes over white and Chinese people alike. While Buckwell gets crushed under the weight of a collapsed building amid screams and chaos, Dolores lives to see another day. She escapes from the wreckage unharmed and, in the closing scene, happily starts anew with a family of her own. A cheerful mixture of strings and brass unite to suggest the preservation of the noble Vasquez family heritage and provide a tone of optimism for the future. Whereas Dolores remains loyal to her kin, Buckwell betrays his family lineage and cultural ancestors, thereby warranting punishment by death. Contrary to the surface level implication that he is punished for passing from Chinese to white, the ending of *Old San Francisco* offers the perspective that Buckwell was in fact penalized for persecuting the Chinamen to whom he is, of some degree, related after having adopted this identity of whiteness.

Ultimately, the deeper meaning present in a close reading of *Old San Francisco* allows us to rethink Ginsberg’s conception of passing. Though she espouses the positive potential of passing as a way of moving beyond specular appearances and assumptions that limit individuals, the film suggests that passing has the same potential to become a transgression against society when individuals engage in it to betray their own people through the strengthening of these hierarchical divides. As Buckwell demonstrates in his subjugation of both the Chinese population at large and his own brother, passing has the capacity to be used not only to escape oppression but also to impose it when used as leverage against others who, by social definition and categorization, are subject to the authority and domination of a more privileged group.

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*This paper represents my own work in accordance with University regulations.*