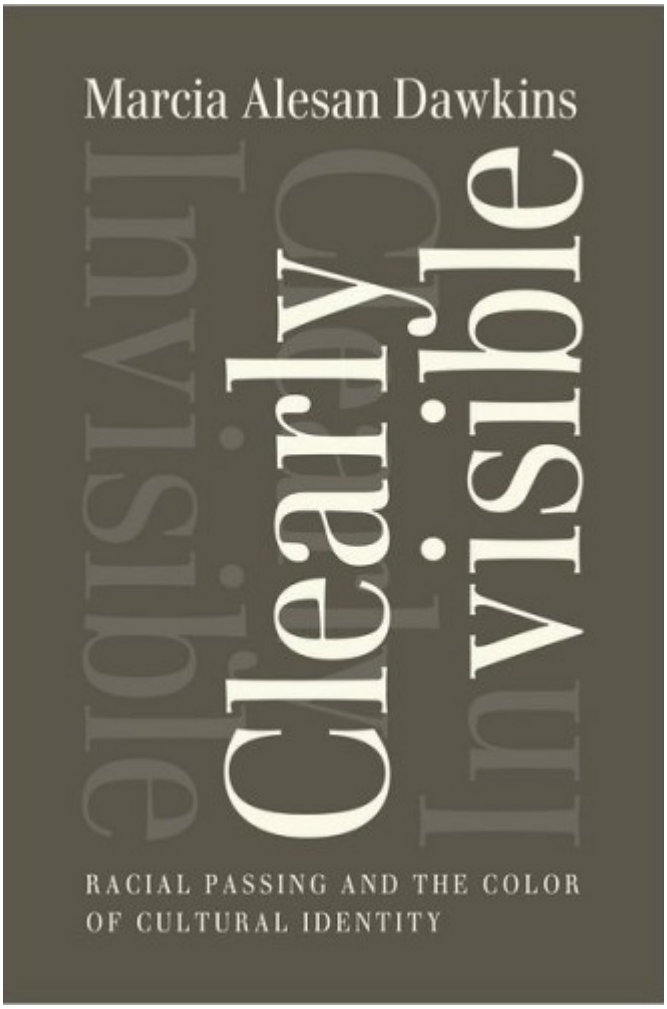
Clearly Invisible, by Marcia Alesan Dawkins

reviewed by Rachel Marie Stone in the February 6, 2013 issue

In Review



Clearly Invisible

By Marcia Alesan Dawkins
Baylor University Press

The one time I visited my maternal grandfather's house, we had planned to stay four days. I was ten and had seen my grandfather just once before in my life. I don't recall if he ever spoke to me, but my mother and I are fairly certain that he never

called me by my name. That was probably a matter of principle for him—Rachel being a Hebrew name and he being an active anti-Semite.

In the spaces around his desk where family photos might have hung were portraits of Hitler, Goebbels and Himmler. When I put my summer shorts and T-shirts in the creaky oak dresser of the guest room, there was a red, white and black swastika armband in the drawer. We stayed for the night but left the next morning. I never saw him again.

As strange as that story is, the stranger part is this: my grandfather was Jewish, a fact that seems to have been unknown or ignored by the white supremacist groups to which he belonged. He was a Jew passing as a white Christian separatist.

But what about me? My mother became a Christian in her teens after a thoroughly secular upbringing, and my dad was raised Catholic and is now a Baptist pastor. I'm told I don't look Jewish, or at least that I don't have a "Jewish nose." So am I Jewish? Am I passing? Does it matter?

In *Clearly Invisible*, Marcia Alesan Dawkins explores passing—presenting oneself as a member of a racial group to which one does not belong. Dawkins argues that passing is a rhetorical act that "forces us to think and rethink what, exactly, makes a person black, white or 'other,' and why we care." She articulates a critical vocabulary of 13 "passwords" that can help us understand passing as "a form of rhetoric that is racially sincere, compatible with reasoned deliberative discourse, and expresses what fits rightly when people do not fit rightly with the world around them."

To explore passing as a kind of power, a challenge to forces of oppression, Dawkins tells the story of Ellen and William Craft, who escaped from slavery by passing in the roles of a white male master and his black male slave. As the Crafts traveled and spoke about their journey, audiences struggled to make sense of their story. If passing was possible for slaves, then wasn't racial identity so "ambiguous and changeable" that race could not possibly be grounds to justify enslavement? Thus passing is a kind of power, a challenge to forces of oppression.

Whereas the Crafts' escape offered a challenge to dominant ideas about race, the practice of *bacha posh*, wherein Afghan girls perform socially as boys, challenges dominant ideas about gender. "If society recognizes that a change of clothes and behavior is enough to gain a woman honor and freedom," can there be any real

reason for their oppression?

Dawkins uses the 1890s case of Homer Plessy to illumine recent draconian immigration laws in Arizona and Alabama. Plessy's physical appearance made it possible for him to access the rights and privileges of whiteness, in response to which the Supreme Court asserted that "whiteness was subject to theft and needed to be protected." This led to the court's 1896 "separate but equal" decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson*.

Perhaps most provocative is Dawkins's final chapter, which explores the case of Leo Felton, the son of a white Jewish mother and a multiracial African-American father, both of whom were civil rights workers. While serving time in prison, Felton was inspired by the white supremacist writings of Francis Parker Yockey, and upon his release he began constructing homemade bombs and counterfeiting money as he and his girlfriend planned attacks against Jews and African Americans. Faced with a real-life "black white supremacist," writes Dawkins, the media immediately pathologized Felton. If such a person of mixed ancestry hated Jews and blacks, he must be sick—just as people always assumed my grandfather was.

But what if a person passes because society is "passing as just, free, equal or moral"? What if the passer is not sick or bad but simply "part of a larger society that treats people unequally based on who they are and appear to be"? The hope of *Clearly Invisible* is that we will be able to "assert ourselves as whole people who do not experience the need to assimilate to dominant norms"; that we can be called by our own names, whether Hebrew, Arabic, English or Spanish; that the portraits on the walls of our common spaces will affirm, not deny, our perfect right to be.