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Wade Hall, ed. *Passing for Black: The Life and Careers of Mae Street Kidd.* Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1997. xiii + 193 pp. $18.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8131-0948-0; $24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8131-1996-0.

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"I want this book to tell people I did something aside from being almost white," businesswoman and politician Mae Street Kidd says early in this oral history of her life (p. 7). Wade Hall's *Passing For Black* certainly achieves this goal. The life work of Mae Street Kidd, told in her own words, represents an amazing achievement in both women's and African-American history.

Hall, through his editorship, provides us with a fascinating account of the life of Mae Street Kidd. His research centred on some forty hours of taped interviews with Mae carried out in 1993 when she was eighty-nine years of age. In addition to describing her business and political career, Hall's main objective was to present a clear coherent narrative that captures her life and her language (p. xiii).

Born during an increasingly bleak period in American history–in terms of racial antagonism–Mae refused to be cowed by a society who deemed it expedient to cast both women and African-Americans in secondary positions. She was both a successful businesswoman and, for seventeen years, a representative in the Kentucky General Assembly. Fiercely independent, she refused to let prejudice–whether it be on account of class, gender or colour–hamper her in both her public and private life.

Born Minnie Mae Jones in 1904 Millersburg, Kentucky to a black mother and white father, she grew to be an extremely beautiful woman who stood almost six feet tall with light skin and blonde hair. Classified as eighty percent white and twenty percent black, Mae never made an issue of her color. Accused of "passing" by some, she disagrees:

> Despite my dominant white features, I have been classified as a black person all of my life. I have lived as a black and have had to accept second-class citizenship. I never made an issue of my color or race, and when I was off by myself and no one knew my racial identity, I lived like a first-class American citizen....Nobody asked any questions. I never wore a badge saying, 'Look at me! ÎÃm Black!' Some people might call that 'passing,' but I don't. I was simply living my life as myself (p. 174).

Discriminated against by both white and other Afro-Americans, Mae argues that the light-skinned Afro-American population has "had to carry a special burden through life." Historically, of course, class and color have often been interrelated, the main premise being that lighter skin color can indicate a higher social class status. Mae herself acknowledges that this debate persisted, noting that people with darker skins were sometimes resentful of the lighter-skinned population: they "often feel that there is a caste system and we lighter ones have advantages" (p. 174).

Mae argues that African Americans with a white parent benefited in some way by this white connection, giving the example of white fathers sometimes sending their illegitimate children to college. This was not true in her own case. Mae Street Kidd never met her white father. Her mother, Anna Bell Leer Taylor, a respected member of the local community of Millersburg, made a conscious decision not to work as a domestic for a white family. Instead she worked as a caterer; her clients were several of the richest families in Central Kentucky. She impressed upon Mae the importance of independence and forbad her to work as a domestic to any white family. Her father never publicly acknowledged Mae's existence. This initially wounded her, but she "got over it." To Mae, the white side of her family did not exist. Once, when her father was pointed out to Mae in a post office, they exchanged glances but did not speak. She believed that he did recognize her.

For the period, Mae was well educated. After completing eighth grade at her local "black" school, she attended the Lincoln Institute for a short while. Unfortunately, she failed to complete the course because of financial reasons. Back home, she soon began to work for the black-owned and -operated Mammoth Life and Accident Insurance Company. It was here she began her successful career in business. Soon promoted, she moved to Louisville where she eventually created and directed their public relations department. The department initiated a centralised communication policy between company and policyholder. She publicised the company wherever possible, organizing conferences and press publicity, aiming to present Mammoth as a service-oriented business. Though successful in her work, she still found herself faced with sexism within the company. In 1957, for example, when she organized a credit union within the company, a number of men attempted to stop her. Outside of her work with Mammoth, the "National Negro Insurance Association" asked Mae to co-ordinate a public relations program for them. By 1948 she had organized a campaign for the seventy-two black insurance companies that incorporated the NNIA.

During the Second World War, Mae enlisted in the Red Cross and was deployed overseas in England as an assistant club director. During the training period she supervised other black female Red Cross workers. She notes a number of slights experienced in her work because of her color. On one occasion she discovered that white female trainees were scheduled to receive their instruction prior to the black trainees. Unhappy with this situation, Mae gathered her group of women together before the white group arrived and demanded that they be trained first.

After her training, Mae worked as assistant director of a Red Cross service club for black soldiers in Southampton, England. The club, segregated from similar dance halls for white soldiers, entertained and fed soldiers about to be shipped over to the war. Overhearing a white officer reprimand a black soldier within the club once, Mae told the officer: "You have your own clubs and your own men to worry about. Would you mind leaving ours? You doñÃt allow blacks in your club, so we doñÃt allow you in ours."

A determined and enterprising woman, Mae Street Kidd was also involved in the organisation of the 258th Signal Corps, an all-black unit. Her involvement began when her brother Webster enlisted for the signal corps but found himself being sent to the infantry. Mae visited the commander of the signal corps camp and asked for his help. Webster was soon sent to a signal corps unit, his transfer papers noting that he was white. The officer had assumed that Mae was white and hence her brother would be white as well. Webster, however, was a light brown colour, and the army's policy of segregation created something of a predicament. Consequently, the 258th Signal Corps for black American troops was created to resolve the situation.

Although she carried on her business and organisational activities after the war, her interest turned to politics, where she made her largest contribution to American history. She is best remembered for the sponsorship of Kentucky's ratification of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution in 1976. Together, these amendments freed slaves, conferred citizenship rights, and, in the case of black males at least, secured suffrage rights. The fact that Kentucky, over one hundred years after the end of the civil war had not yet formally rejected slavery is astounding. As a Democratic Kentucky State Legislator, this was Mae's proudest achievement. "I felt that Kentucky had been saying: 'You black people are still slaves, and that's the way you should remain,' " she said (p. 125).

For seventeen years–1968 to 1985–Mae served in the Kentucky General Assembly. She represented all her constituents, not just the African-Americans: "Everything I did was for the good of all people–black, green, grey, or white" (p. 114). Because many of Mae's constituents were from low-income households, she decided to concentrate upon housing–that is, open and low-cost housing. The open-housing bill, introduced in the senate

by Senator Georgia Davis and in the House by Hughes McGill, prohibited discrimination in housing in terms of race and religion. The implementation of the bill meant that people could live anywhere they wished–as long as they had the money of course. "Segregation by economics is still with us," Mae said, "but at least now the law is on the side of equal justice" (p. 113). The bill became law in 1968 and the Human Rights Commission had the power to enforce its implementation. This was reported as the first open housing law of any kind to be implemented in the South and Mae worked hard to get the bill passed.

Mae was also heavily involved in a bill to formulate a Kentucky Housing Corporation to provide mortgage loans for low-income people. She introduced the bill in 1970 and was able to convince a number of legislators to vote for its passage. Governor Nunn was against it and vetoed it, however. He did the same with her second bill. The following session, in 1972, Kentucky had a new governor, and Mae took up the fight again. It was a controversial bill and she campaigned rigorously. That same year, as a result of her efforts, it was passed by both houses and signed into law by Governor Ford.

Mae had a successful political career within the Kentucky General Assembly. She was the first woman to be assigned to the Rules Committee, and the first woman to be selected as secretary to the Democratic Caucus. She was also elected chairman of the Enrollment Committee, which received and handled the bills from the Senate. In 1974, she opposed the reinstatement of the death penalty in Kentucky because it fell chiefly upon the poor and black communities. In 1979, she was invited to a reception in the White House recognizing black office holders. By 1984, the May issue of *Ebony* cited Mae Street Kidd as a distinguished state legislator.

In her first year in the General Assembly, Mae was forced to stay with friends when she had political business in Frankfort because at that time it was difficult for black Americans to find a respectable hotel that would accept their custom. By the time that she left office in 1985 black Americans had their choice of hotels. While acknowledging the progress of black civil rights in America, she nevertheless argues that more needs to be done. She recognizes the contributions of whites, but also argues that blacks have had to fight their own battles: "If blacks hadnÎÃt fought for their rights themselves, we wouldnÎÃt be where we are today" (p. 143). All the gains made by blacks, women and other minorities, Mae argues, have been forced upon the white power structure. Her own personal battle against inequality took the form of speaking. Through her business careers, her political career, her writing and her social clubs she spoke out for equal rights. She has spoken in churches, schools and clubs in order to get people to register to vote. More importantly, she has also tried to live as an example of what can be achieved by a black women from a modest economic background.

Passing For Black illustrates the irrational and incoherent character of racial and gender definitions in America. Mae Street Kidd demonstrates just what can be achieved by one determined and intelligent individual–despite many obstacles. Her light skin has at times led to accusations of "passing." Racism from both the African American and white communities led Mae to argue that she lived in a "no-man's-land." Once, while shopping in Louisville, Mae passed two black schoolteachers she knew very well and spoke to them: "Neither one answered. I was a very sensitive young woman, and their snub hurt me, so I walked up to them and said, 'I spoke to you ladies, and you didnÎÃt say anything. DidnÎÃt you hear me?'...One of them said, almost in a whisper, 'Oh, we thought you were passing.' I said, 'Passing? Passing? Passing for what?...IÎÃve been passing for black all my life because IÎÃm almost 90 percent white' " (p. 176-7). This is an important contribution to both African-American and women's history. This oral history highlights one black woman's account of success in a period of racial antipathy. Mae Street Kidd refused to be "shoved around."

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