

The Curious Life of Anita Love, née Hemmings (1872-1960)



Anita Florence Hemmings, 1897 (Ref. #3.888)

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Anita Love, née Hemmings, was a mixed-race woman with a passion for learning and inclination for privacy. Like many of her fellow Victorians, her life is somewhat difficult to piece together. Hemmings is known as the first Black graduate of Vassar College, but she was also a cataloger at the Boston Public Library at the turn of the century. Having passed as white for the majority of her life, Hemmings's descendants were unaware of her race until the 1990s. Her descendant, Jillian Sim, unveiled her family's secret history in *American Heritage* in 1999. Now, she is working on a book as her great-grandmother's life becomes the focus of an upcoming film.

Born on June 8, 1872, Hemmings was the eldest of Dora and Robert Hemmings's four children: Frederick, Elizabeth, and Robert, Jr. Dora was a homemaker and Robert was a janitor. They lived in the Roxbury neighborhood of Boston, Massachusetts. Not much is known of her

early life aside from her attending Northfield Seminary and her dreams of studying at Vassar College. Close in age to his sister, Frederick John Hemmings was one of the first Black graduates of MIT and never passed for white. He worked at the Boston Navy Yard as a chemist for “all his life.”¹

Before the turn of the century, Hemmings became the first Black graduate of Vassar College in 1897, unbeknownst to the majority of the school. “Hemmings had proven herself an impressive student, mastering Latin, ancient Greek, and French, and, as a soprano in the college choir, had been invited to sing solo recitals at the local churches in Poughkeepsie. She was described by her classmates as an ‘exotic beauty,’ and many believed her heritage was Native American.”²

Vassar administrators believed that Hemmings was white until her roommate, Louise Taylor, outed her, just as graduation day was approaching. Taylor had the Hemmings family investigated and revealed that they were “mulattoes.” This revelation could have prevented Hemmings from completing her degree program. *The Providence Journal* reported, “a crestfallen” Hemmings appealed to the college president, “with the result that the girl was awarded her diploma.”³ While she was able to complete her studies and graduate, Hemmings would be hounded by the press that summer.

While Hemmings was relaxing with her mother and brother in Oak Bluffs, Martha’s Vineyard (formerly Cottage City), the *Boston Daily Globe* published an article about them. It describes Hemmings as someone who, “seemed to prefer the companionship of her books and a very few select friends to the social pleasures...”⁴ It is possible that her status as a graduate of Vassar and her brother, a graduate of M.I.T., gave the Hemmings a respectable image in the paper. The article makes no attempts to denigrate her for passing as white. Rather, it shares the

community's reaction to the news. "What strikes the good folks on the bluffs with especial force in connection with the 'Hemmings episode' is the realization that the brilliant young Vassar 'grad' has been coming down here with her interesting family for the past half dozen seasons and no one of this ruffled college community knew that Miss Hemmings' people on the highlands' were not of the same delicate hued complexion as they."⁵

Hemmings continued to be the focus of articles from the *Boston Daily Globe* to her chagrin. One piece reveals her reaction to this coverage. "Miss Anita F. Hemmings is much displeased at the notoriety she has had because of the publicity given the fact that she is the first woman not of purely Caucasian blood who has graduated from Vassar, and because it has been said that she met with some disagreeable experiences on that account. She feels that she has been unnecessarily drawn into public notice, and hence she refuses to say anything more about the matter herself."⁶

Unable to garner more quotes from Hemmings, the *Globe* interviewed her father, friends, and community. Robert Hemmings supported his daughter and her dreams and said as much. "We knew she went there as a white girl and remained as such. As long as she conducted herself in a manner becoming a lady, she never thought it necessary to proclaim the fact that her parents were mulattoes...Vassar was always her favorite college."⁷

"Prior to her marriage, Hemmings worked for the Boston Public Library [BPL] as a cataloguer in their foreign, incunabula, and the Brown music collections."⁸ The Incunabula and Allen A. Brown Music collections that Hemmings cataloged are listed on the BPL website today.⁹ Hemmings was one of many librarians and catalogers who would have processed the Incunabula collection over the past 110 years, which included "A single leaf of the Gutenberg

Bible.” According to the site, “as of February, 2020, approximately 431 editions, including every edition printed through 1480, has been fully cataloged.”¹⁰

As for the Allen A. Brown Music collections, the BPL describes Brown as “an amateur musician and avid collector” who “donated his collection to the Boston Public Library in 1894.”

¹¹As a former singer, Hemmings was likely a great fit for cataloging these materials. “At the time of the gift, there were approximately 6,900 volumes.” Just like the Incunabula collection, this work lives on today as, “the digitized four-volume catalog of the Allen A. Brown collection (published 1910-1916),” which is available online.

Hemmings’s job at the BPL, while productive, was short-lived. According to the census, she was a 27-year-old librarian living with her family in Roxbury in 1900.¹² In October 1903, Hemmings married Dr. Andrew J. Love of New York at Trinity church.¹³ Dr. Love had also been passing for white, although he previously attended “historically blacks-only Meharry Medical College in Tennessee.”¹⁴ They moved to Manhattan and crossed the color line for good as Anita and Andrew were both listed as “white” on the census and chose not to reveal their racial background to their children. On occasion, Hemmings still visited Martha’s Vineyard. Dora Hemmings visited her daughter once in New York City and was made to use the servants’ entrance.¹⁵ Her children were raised as white Americans and entered into exclusive white spaces such as the Horace Mann School in Manhattan and a camp on Cape Cod. The rest of Hemmings’s life is a mystery as she does not appear in the papers again, save two articles; one on an event she attended and the other, her obituary.¹⁶

Possibly intrigued by this secrecy, Ellen Love found her grandmother in Martha’s Vineyard before she, too, applied to Vassar College as a white student. Following in her mother’s footsteps, Love became Vassar’s second unofficial “Black” graduate in 1927.¹⁷ Louise

Taylor, her mother's old roommate, caught wind of this development and meant to stop it but the college rebuffed her since they believed Love was unaware of her Blackness, was living alone in the dorms, and was a legacy student.

Racial passing and duplicity were popular headlines in New York in the 1920s.¹⁸ In fact, as Love was beginning her studies at Vassar, the *Rhineland v. Rhineland* case dominated the New York Times. Alice B. Jones married Leonard Kip Rhineland, an American socialite, who soon accused her of hiding her race so that he could obtain an annulment. No doubt, the Love family would have seen these headlines. They also might have seen the increase in "race" films such as *Veiled Aristocrats*, *Imitation of Life*, *Lost Boundaries*, and *Pinky*, which warned of the torment that passing could cause and encouraged the audience to accept their own race.¹⁹

While Hemmings stayed out of the news, her daughter leaned into the limelight despite her family secret. According to her granddaughter Jillian Sim, Love worked on Broadway for more than thirty years and "opened in *Oklahoma!*"²⁰ Her brother Andrew Jr. became a performer, too, although his stage was radio and television. "He sang for band leader Mitch Miller, as well as with his band the Tune Twisters, and wrote many well-known commercial jingles."²¹

Having been close to her grandmother, Sim could tell that there was something that Love was not telling her about their ancestors. After her grandmother passed away in June 1994 at 89 years old, Sim was unsurprised to learn the secret; her grandmother's grandfather was a Black man. Through further research, she uncovered the full story of Hemmings and her parentage. *Vassar Quarterly's* editor, Georgette Weir, sent her information about Hemmings's life during and after college.²²

Sim also learned of a possible connection between Hemmings and the Hemings of Monticello.²³ Their website shares, “Jill Sim believes, but cannot yet say with certainty, that she is descended from Elizabeth Hemings’s son Peter Hemings, a Monticello cook and brewer who worked as a tailor after he became free in 1827, purchased by a relative at the Monticello estate sale.”²⁴ Peter Hemings was Sally Hemings’s brother. Sim is currently working on a book about Hemmings and her family.

Undeterred by seemingly limited information on Hemmings, her story inspired the novel *The Gilded Years* by Karin Tanabe. In the novel, Tanabe imagines Hemmings’s life from childhood longing for education to her years at Vassar as a highly intelligent student with looks drawing in young men from other Northern colleges. Passing over Hemmings’s life after college, Tanabe ends with Love entering Vassar. The historical fiction novel captured the attention of Reese Witherspoon’s Hello Sunshine and TriStar Pictures, leading to the upcoming film adaptation *A White Lie*, starring Zendaya.²⁵ The film is currently in production with no release date available.

Racial passing has gained more attention in recent years as Riverhead Books, an imprint of Penguin Group, published Brit Bennett’s novel *The Vanishing Half* in 2020 and another film adaptation of the novel *Passing*, directed by Rebecca Hall, premiered at Sundance in January 2021.²⁶ *Passing* is a film based on Nella Larsen’s novel of the same name, published in 1929, and stars actresses Tessa Thompson and Ruth Negga.

With the returned interest in racial passing narratives, the life of Anita Love, née Hemmings is enigmatic. Her roots stretch deep within the history of the United States and elicit discussions on the perception of race. Hemmings paved the way for integration at one of the Seven Sisters with the help of her supportive family. This one-time librarian will always be

remembered for her excellence and dedication to pursuing her education, despite the racist policies and attempts to stop her.

¹ Olivia Mancini, "Vassar's First Black Graduate: She Passed for White," *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, no. 34 (Winter 2001-2002): 108-109.

² Ibid., 108.

³ Ibid.

⁴ "On Fair Island: Many Seek Rest In The City Of Cottages. Miss Hemmings And Her Mother And Brother At The Highlands. Doings Of The Past Week Among Those On Recreation Bent." *Boston Daily Globe (1872-1922)*, Aug 22, 1897.

<http://proxy3.noblenet.org/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.proxy3.noblenet.org/historical-newspapers/on-fair-island/docview/498660196/se-2?accountid=40663>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ "Won Vassar Girls Friendship: Several Students Balled Upon Miss Hemmings --father Says He Paid For Her Education. Paid The Bills Himself. Mr Hemmings Says Daughter Went To Vassar As A White Gir1 And Applied Herself To Study." *Boston Daily Globe (1872-1922)*, Aug 18, 1897. <http://proxy3.noblenet.org/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.proxy3.noblenet.org/historical-newspapers/won-vassar-girls-friendship/docview/498664020/se-2?accountid=40663>.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Jillian Sim, "Fading to White" *American Heritage* 50, no. 1 (February/March 1999): 68-79.

⁹ Research Guides. n.d. "Incunabula Collection," Boston Public Library (website). Accessed May 28, 2021. <https://guides.bpl.org/incunabula>.

Archival Collection. n.d. "Brown, Allen A. (1835-1916) Music Collection," Boston Public Library (website). Accessed May 28, 2021. https://www.bpl.org/archival_post/brown-allen-a-1835-1916-music-collection/.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Year: 1900; Census Place: Boston Ward 18, Suffolk, Massachusetts; Page: 13; Enumeration District: 1424; FHL microfilm: 1240684

¹³ "Love-Hemmings.: Chattanooga Physician Marries A Boston Girl." *Boston Daily Globe* (1872-1922), Oct 21, 1903. <http://proxy3.noblenet.org/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.proxy3.noblenet.org/historical-newspapers/love-hemmings/docview/499985355/se-2?accountid=40663>.

¹⁴ Mancini, "Vassar's First Black Graduate," 108.

¹⁵ Sim, "Fading to White," 76.

¹⁶ "Obituary 1 -- no Title." *New York Times* (1923-Current File), Oct 27, 1960. <http://proxy3.noblenet.org/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.proxy3.noblenet.org/historical-newspapers/obituary-1-no-title/docview/115115979/se-2?accountid=40663>.

¹⁷ Karin Tanabe, *The Gilded Years: A Novel* (New York, Washington Square Press, 2016), 373-379.

¹⁸ Womack, Gabrielle C. 2017. "From "Mulatto" to "Negro": How Fears of 'Passing' Changed the 1930 United States Census." Order No. 10289063, Simmons College.

<http://proxy3.noblenet.org/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.proxy3.noblenet.org/dissertations-theses/mulatto-negro-how-fears-passing-changed-1930/docview/1954049630/se-2?accountid=40663>.

The New York Times, as well as other newspapers, published many other articles on people passing for white. The public seemed whipped into a frenzy about the number of people who may have people passing as white in the early twentieth century.

¹⁹ Womack, "From "Mulatto" to "Negro," 15-18.

Lost Boundaries, the film and book, was based on a true story of a Johnston family of Keene, New Hampshire who passed for 20 years. Albert and Johnston raised their children as white. Albert, Jr. experienced shock when he found out the truth. This story holds many similarities to the Love family, as Johnston was also a doctor. However, Love likely had more patients in New York City than Johnston had in Keene. A revelation like this could have left a stain on his legacy as a doctor in the city. Ellen Love would have been 44 years old when the film debuted and the truth of her race could have overshadowed her work on Broadway.

²⁰ Jillian Sim, "Fading to White" *American Heritage* 50, no. 1 (February/March 1999): 68-79.

²¹ Tanabe, *The Gilded Years*, 389.

²² Mancini, "Vassar's First Black Graduate," 109.

²³ African American Oral History Project. n.d. "Jillian Atkin Sim," Monticello (website).

Accessed May 28, 2021. <https://www.monticello.org/getting-word/people/jillian-atkin-sim>

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ N.d. “The Gilded Years,” Karin Tanabe (website). Accessed May 28, 2021.

<https://www.karintanabe.com/copy-of-a-hundred-suns-1>

²⁶ Kelley, Sonaiya. 2021. “‘Passing’ explores the complications of biracial identity. For Rebecca Hall, it’s personal.” *Los Angeles Times*, January 29, 2021.

<https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/movies/story/2021-01-29/rebecca-hall-passing-sundance>.