



"I COULD PASS": CONFRONTING THE LINE OF COLOR, RACE AND SEXUALITY IN LARSEN'S PASSING

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ABSTRACT

Nothing is more desirable than to be released from an affliction, but nothing is more frightening than to be divested of a crutch.

James Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name*



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Nella Larsen has written two novels, *Quicksand* and *Passing* both of which focus on the educated middle class and black female sensibility. "The narrative representation of the conflicts of both the texts suggest at a symbolic level Larsen's repetition and working through her own anxieties about the rejection she experienced as a result of her racial identity," writes Nell Sullivan (373). Achievement of Nella Larsen rested on her ability to break free from her mulatto identity and create an identity for the African American female. She addresses questions like racial subjugation, discrimination along color lines, exploration of female sexuality, particularly those of the mulattos. Her handling of issues like female agency and female subjectivity is subtle as well as poignant. This study attempts at an in-depth reading of Larsen's novel *Passing* and aims at showcasing how a woman of African American origin confronts the barriers of color, race and sexuality and then move on to establish that writing fiction was a mode of encountering discrimination on the grounds of color and gender in public and private spheres.

Keywords: African American, Passing, Sexuality, Race

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The concerned novel has twin women protagonists and is narrated from the point of view of Irene Redfield, a light skinned, middle-class African American woman who disdains "passing" and is married to a successful doctor, too dark to "pass", by whom she has two sons. Irene, self-consciously proud of her African racial heritage feels shattered, however, by the unexpected arrival of Clare Kendry, a light skinned African American childhood friend. Being a mulatto Clare had a desire to pass:

"I was determined . . . to be a person and not a charity or a problem, or even a daughter of the indiscreet Ham. Then, too, I wanted things. I knew I wasn't bad-looking and I could pass" (56).

And she succeeded in "passing" through a combination of personal adventurousness and familial mishaps and ended up marrying John Bellow, a prosperous white businessman who knows nothing of her racial identity and by whom she has had a daughter. Hence, these once intimate childhood friends are simultaneously separated and tethered together, so to speak, by the divergent strategies they have adopted as adults to cope with their racial identities and their option to "pass" racially.

The novel "conforms to the stereotype of the tragic mulatto" (Tate 142). Mulattos were accredited the status as equal to the African American woman but separate by the American court three decades before Nella Larsen wrote the novel (Blackmer 50). Having lived a life that was scarred by racism and her racial status being "separate but equal" Larsen situates the racial issues in *Passing* within narratives of domestic disruption and conflict. And Clare Kendry, the ambiguously raced figure in the novel not only exists outside of a traditional African American bourgeois family structure, but repeatedly defies the confines of this structure, suggesting an overlap for Larsen between race and sexuality. *Passing* stresses the anxieties and obsessions that make convention bound people reluctant to allow "others" the freedom to travel freely throughout the many world's identities and sexualities of American society. Larsen's novel not only explores a legally fraudulent interracial marriage

between Clare Kendry and John Bellow, but also subtly delineates the sexual attraction of Irene Redfield for Clare. While Irene projects her taboo desires for Clare onto her husband Brian. Ironically, Brian Redfield, who the text implies might be homosexual, evinces no sexual interest in women, but Irene nonetheless begins to suspect that Brian and Clare are having an illicit, clandestine affair. Since the term passing carries the connotation of being accepted for something one is not, the title of the novel serves as a metaphor for a wide range of deceptive appearances and practices that encompass sexual as well as racial *passing*.

One afternoon while having tea at Clare's home, they have another childhood associate, Gertrude Martin. Gertrude, also an African American woman who looks white, is married to a white man just as Clare is, but unlike Clare, her husband knows her racial background. The full significance of this distinction is made clear when John Bellow, Clare's husband, arrives to join the group for tea: "The first thing that Irene noticed about [Bellow] was that he was not the man that she had seen with Clare Kendry on the Drayton roof" (28).

Irene is confused by this indication of Clare's wedded recklessness. She is further amazed when Bellow affectionately calls his wife 'Nig'. Prodded by Clare to explain this curious name, Bellow says good-naturedly, "Well, you see, it's like this. When we were first married, she was as white as well as, white as a Lily. But I declare she's getting darker and darker. I tell her if she don't look out, she will wake up one of these days and find she's turned into a nigger" (28). All present enjoy this little joke, none more than Irene, who in recognizing its true irony laughs for longer than is prudent for the circumstances.

Further, Clare's sexually daring interactions with whites seem to parallel her perceived availability to already married African American men, a group just as socially forbidden by African American bourgeois community. The sexual and domestic propriety embraced by race conscious figures such as Irene Redfield absolutely prohibits these behaviors that would threaten the safe function of the African American nuclear family and its patriarchal stability, the "security" that Irene



clings to throughout the novel. This social prohibition suggests that Irene's suspicion of Brian and Clare's sexual involvement is based at least in part on an assumption on Clare's disloyalty. But simultaneously brings out the psychic dilemmas confronting certain black women especially the mulattos. Of course, no concrete evidence is given in *Passing* for the adulterous indiscretion, and beginning with Deborah McDowell's analysis of the novel as a covertly lesbian text is suggestive that Irene's suspicious only exposes her sublimated desire for Clare. Whether or not Irene's suspicions are true, however, or based in her own desires and jealousies, there remains a sense in the text that Clare would be capable of such betrayal, empowered as she is with the "ability to secure the thing that she wanted in the face of any opposition, and in utter disregard of the convenience and desire of others" (201). Clare's potential for an adulterous involvement with Brian is emblematic of the potential for racial "infidelity" that resides in the mulatto figure.

Larsen connects the arbitrarily segregated lives of these two married women by having them meet accidentally in the roof-top restaurant of a Chicago hotel, where they are not in company with their husbands, and Irene, in this instance, has resorted to *passing* to escape a sweltering heat wave. There develops an inarticulate yearning to return to the condition of her childhood, before she and Irene "fell" into the self-divided condition of adult women, culminate in her decision, near the end of the narrative, to abandon her husband and child and return home to Harlem. As Clare's plans to reassume her earlier identity as an unmarried African American crystallize, Irene sets herself to believe, though with inconclusive evidence, that Clare actually intends to steal her husband Brian, a discontented urbane man who expresses periodic revulsions with United States racism and escapes into a reverie of immigrating with his family to Brazil. In the denouement, which again takes place on a roof top, Clare, Irene and Brian get together for a party hosted by a couple ironically named the Freelanders, John Bellow, who, unbeknownst to everyone except Irene, has accidentally discovered the racial identity of his wife as he bursts into the apartment. Before the scene can

develop beyond Bellow's initial reaction of pained horror and outrage, Irene pushes Clare from the window, and she falls to her death. In the end, Clare, whose death, the text indicates, is interpreted and dismissed by the authorities as an "accident" or "suicide" becomes a poignant symbol of the victory of *de jure* separation and narrow social conformity over integration and self-creation.

Irene, who has internalized the "separate but equal status" of the mulattos is driven to maintain sexual and racial decorum at any cost and kills Clare because the latter's misconduct proves too much for her to tolerate (38). This misconduct betrays a "respectable" reconceptualization of blackness and recalls the mulatto's sexual transgressiveness as a common stereotype representation of black erotic passion and excess. It also reifies a stigmatized version of blackness that many bourgeois African Americans long to escape.

Thus the issue of *Passing* is intrinsically linked to the issue of the community and the possibility of communal stability and the refusal of the Clare to align or identify herself to the community which her lineage (and/or gender, class, sexuality, etc.) assign. And in doing so Clare disrupts and challenges the possibility of an essential social bond, or common "nature", upon which communal ties are legitimated.

Passing suggests that racially and sexually characters who embrace their marginal status threaten the possibility of totalizing communities because they frustrate the validity of the assumptions upon which their failure as individuals are necessarily predicated. Therefore, Clare's *passing* state is a response to, or effect of, society's compulsion to organize itself according to certain absolute and fixed categories, or communities of being. Clare passes, in this sense, because these categories of being are insufficient, impractical, illusory but undermines and ultimately signals towards the impossibility of *passing*.

On the surface, Larsen's novel is primarily concerned with the phenomenon of racial *passing*. However, as the critical debate surrounding *Passing* suggests, the theme of the text as well as the implications of the title are not necessarily limited to the problematic of racial transgression.



While some critics have read *Passing* as a coded exploration of homosexual desire, ultimately, it is quiet eminent that “passing” (as an act and as the title of the novel) has multiple implications that encompass race, class and sexuality.

Irene and Clare have divergent strategies. Irene is only “passing” twice in the novel in contrast to Clare’s multiple “passing.” Immediately before reuniting with Clare, Irene passively agrees to the cab driver’s suggestion that she go to the Drayton (a posh establishment for whites); and during her first meeting with John Bellow, his blatantly racist opinions force her to pass for Clare’s sake. Both times she feels compelled to pass. And in these instances, and throughout the novel, Irene is both attracted to and abhorred by the idea of *passing*. Larsen emphasizes Irene’s desire for permanence. Most obviously, Clare’s *passing* state compels Irene to reaffirm her own racial identity and her responsibility towards the community that legitimizes that identity. Reflecting on her own willingness to pass in front of Bellow, particularly during his racist tirade, Irene chastises herself for betraying the very community to which her blood assigns her.

Having experienced life on both sides of the color lines Clare recognizes the “I” on the private and historical echelon rather than an intangible or exotic echelon. But Irene’s desire for stability extends across a multiple assortment of identity. She feels the urge to maintain a fixed racial and national identity which compels her to resist her husband’s desire to move to Brazil: “For she would not go to Brazil. She belonged in this land of rising towers. She was an American. She grew from this soil. And she would not be uprooted” (76).

Irene also stresses upon the essential characteristics that define her identity as a mother. And she is horrified by and self-loathingly curious about Clare’s apparent ambivalence towards motherhood. In an attempt to counter Clare’s off-hand remark that “children aren’t everything” (58), Irene reifies her allegiance to the community of mothers: “you know you don’t mean that, Clare. You’re only trying to tease me. I know very well that I take being a mother rather seriously. I am wrapped up in my boys and the running of my house. I can’t

help it” (58). Presumably, she “can’t help it” because, like being “African American” or being “American”, Irene can’t help being a “mother.” This is what – or, rather, what she desperately wants to believe.

Even if the various instances are bracketed she appears to be in danger of, and struggling against, becoming unfixed from her heterosexual identity, the above, example clearly highlights the disparity between Irene and Clare’s approach to their own racially ambiguous status. Unlike Clare, Irene rebels against the larger ontological implications suggested by her ability to *pass*. While Clare’s racial uncertainty leads her to embrace the possibility that all identity categories are social constructions, Irene desperately tried to be one of those categories. In other words, Irene desperately wants to be African American, to be a mother, to be an American, to be heterosexual and so on and so forth.

Clare effectively disrupts these ideological fantasies and forces Irene to acknowledge the fundamental impossibility of the social bond, of the “fixed socio-symbolic identity.” She manages to expose the impossible social bond, the impossible real, the “barrier” of inefaceable difference that permits the possibility of community and identity. Zizek points out that Clare’s *passing* highlights the basic desire that eternally prevents the formation of the self-identical subject while simultaneously suggesting that “This negative, disruptive power, menacing our identity is ... a positive condition of it” (qtd. in *Deauthenticating Community* 65). Clare also learns from her aunts who were white that her role in the division of labor is to be a worker, one of the “daughters of Ham” condemned “to sweat” doing “hard labor” (18). As a light skinned mulatto, she can opt out of the African American working class by *passing* for the white. *Passing* is a way to circulate like money, to become acceptable everywhere. It allows Clare to transgress the color line to acquire more of those “Things, Things, Things.”

Irene’s relationship with Clare also undermine the ways in which *passing* can be a precarious endeavour and grows increasingly dissatisfied with her African American middle class life as she begins to realizese that her own desire



for “security of place and substance” (43), “comes at a cost to her ability to feel and live life more deeply” (47). Even before the suspicion of her husband’s affair with Clare dawns on her, Irene intuits the logic of the racist market place of human value, where an African American woman is worth less than a white woman. And the moment she realized “she didn’t count. She was, to him, only the mother of his sons. That was all. Alone she was nothing worse. An obstacle” (66). She wants to restore the security of her middle-class home and marriage by taking Clare out of her social periphery. And she did it as a way of raising her own value for Brian. Critics of Larsen claim that if examined through the prism of African American female sexuality, these endings more understandable. Barabar Smith writes in “Towards a Black Feminist Consciousness,” “that the politics of sex as well as politics of race and class are crucially interlocking factors in the works of Black women writers” (170). While the ending of *Passing* appears to be concessions to the dominant ideology of romance, marriage and motherhood, viewed from a feminist perspective, they become much more radical and original efforts to acknowledge a repressed female sexual experience.

African American women novelists, since Emancipation have treated sexuality with caution and reticence. This pattern is clearly linked to the network of social and literary myths perpetuated throughout history about African American women’s libidinousness. It is well known that during slavery the white slave master constructed an image of African American female sexuality which shifted responsibility for his own sexual passions unto his female slaves.

Given this historical context a pattern of reticence about African American female sexuality tended to dominate novels by African American women, particularly in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Fighting to overcome their heritage of rape and concubinage they stripped the characters they created of all sexual desire, imprinting instead the “purity”, the sexual morality of the Victorian bourgeoisie.

The blue lyrics and the club women’s symposium capture, respectively, the dialectic of desire and fear, pleasure and danger that defines

women’s sexual experiences in male-dominated society.

As Carole Vance observes, “Sexuality is simultaneously a domain of restriction, repression, and danger as well as a domain of exploration, pleasure, and agency” (*Pleasure and Danger*, 143).

For women in general, sexual pleasure leads to the dangers of domination in marriage and repeated pregnancy: for African American women move often, it leads to exploitation and loss of status.

In their reticence about sexuality, the twin protagonists of the novel look back to their nineteenth-century predecessors, but in their simultaneous flirtation with female sexual desire, they are solidly grounded in the “liberation” of the 1920s. Their ideological ambivalences are rooted in the artistic politics of the Harlem Renaissance regarding the representation of African American sexuality, especially African American female sexuality. In the final section of the novel, Clare comes to Irene’s house before they go to the fateful Christmas Party. Coming again into Irene’s room, “Clare kissed her bare shoulder, deeming not to notice a slight shrinking” (74). As they walk to the party, Clare at Brian’s side, Irene describes a “live thing pressing against her” (78). This “live things” represented clearly as full-blown sexual desire, must be contained, and it takes Clare’s death to contain it. Significantly, in Irene’s description of the death, all of the erotic images used to describe Clare throughout the novel converge:

Gone! The soft white face, the bright hair, the disturbing scarlet mouth, the dreaming eyes, the caressing smile, the whole tortured loveliness that had been Clare Kendry. That beauty that had torn at Irene’s placid life. Gone! The mocking daring, the gallantry of her pose, the ringing bells of her laughter. (80)

Although the ending is mysterious Larsen seems to imply that Irene pushes Clare through the window and which in effect becomes “a psychological suicide” for her. Thus, Clare is both the embodiment and the object of the sexual feelings that Irene fails to understand.

So *Passing* is poised between the anxieties and conflicts that are western culture’s binary about



feminine sexuality: lady/Jezebel or virgin/whore. The heartrending close of the novel also advocates that the fortitude of racial assessments by the political economy of capitalism and sexuality presents a no-win position to smother and overpower the sexual expression of women. Larsen witnesses and tenders to the sources of this duality and resists the imposed identity and re-creates it too through the writing of this novel.

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