

Racial Classifications and Crossing the Color Line

Nella Larsen's novel *Passing*

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One three centuries removed
From the scenes his father loved,
Spicy grove, cinnamon tree,
What is Africa to me?

(Countee Cullen, "Heritage," *Color* [1925], lines 7-10)

This epigraph opening Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929) suggests one of the novel's central preoccupations: the tortuous relationships between racial identity and place for African Americans living in Jim Crow America.¹ Over thirty years earlier, in the notorious *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) case, the Supreme Court had upheld the constitutionality of "separate but equal" laws in the context of a state statute mandating racially segregated railroad cars (548). As Justice John Marshall Harlan argued in his famous dissent there, the decision seemed to signal a reversion to the antebellum period, when slave codes restricted enslaved peoples' mobility (555). Other spatial constraints on African Americans abounded during the so-called Jazz Age of the 1920s, when Larsen's novel is set, belying the Constitution's promise of "equal protection of the laws" after the Civil War. For instance, through restrictive covenants, people of color were frequently barred from owning houses in predominantly white areas, with African American physician Ossian Sweet in 1925 facing a homicide trial for attempting to defend his home from a white supremacist mob (Boyle 186). It was in this spatially and racially fraught milieu that Nella Larsen, the daughter of a Danish mother and West Indian father (Kaplan xiii), published *Passing*.

The novel's title evokes a racial and spatial phenomenon wrought by inequality, having deep historical antecedents and a long lineage of literary representations. W. E. B. Du Bois in *The Souls*

of *Black Folk* (1903) elicited a geographic metaphor in deeming “the problem of the twentieth century” as “the problem of the color-line—the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea” (17). “Passing” dating to the antebellum era and into the 1920s was an attempt to transgress these inegalitarian racial lines and particularly connoted African Americans “passing for white,” although the term can more broadly “refer to the crossing of any line that divides social groups” (Hobbs 31; Sollors 247). *Passing* indicates several motivations for African Americans taking this immense risk during the early twentieth century, when hysteria about racial subterfuges permeated the popular press (Kaplan xv). Clare Kendry, a mixed-race woman who passes for white in the novel, describes her desire ““to get away, to be a person and not a charity or a problem, or even a daughter of the indiscreet Ham. Then, too, I wanted things”” (Larsen 19). Passing could be seen as African Americans’ means to have their citizenship and humanity recognized before the civil rights revolution spanning from the 1940s through 1960s, which legally overturned *Plessy* (Ackerman 5-6).

Larsen’s novel followed in a literary tradition of “passing novels” by both white and African American authors, whose texts collectively demonstrated the arbitrariness of inequitable postbellum racial classifications. William Dean Howells’s *An Imperative Duty* (1891), Frances E. W. Harper’s *Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted* (1892), Mark Twain’s *Pudd’nhead Wilson* (1894), and James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912) are among prominent works in the genre. *Passing* adapts and critiques conventions from these novels as a Harlem Renaissance text published amidst a flourishing of African American cultural achievements starting at the end of World War I in 1918 until the cusp of World War II in 1937 (Hutchinson 2, 7). While the novel depicts rising middle-class and upper-class African Americans in relatively privileged spaces during this period, the precarity of the characters’ positions overshadows the text. And perhaps no character is more vulnerable than Clare Kendry, who is married to a wealthy, jet-setting white supremacist unaware of her heritage, but

who yearns for African American spaces she had seemingly chosen to spurn before.

Spatial inclusion and exclusion in *Passing* reifies communal and national recognition (or lack thereof), with Clare—who is unable to be “place[d]” and whose “identity” is in flux (Larsen 12)—exemplifying the perils of inter- and intra-racial policing of domestic spaces. Clare’s death in the novel evinces the impossibility of escaping spatial-racial bounds prescribed by custom at the time and reinforced by law; her ordeal nonetheless also suggests the potential for an equitable transformation of domestic spaces. Clare’s sophisticated understanding of identity as in part a fluid personal construction rather than an immutable genetic, social, and legal inheritance represents a vision of self-forging aligned with American Dream ideals. Yet *Passing*’s answer to Cullen’s question “What is Africa to me?” remains ambivalent, with the novel criticizing racially essentialist rhetoric that impedes integration while acknowledging the emotional appeal of racial solidarity and exclusive spaces to preserve an inequitable, but ostensibly comfortable, status quo.

***Passing* and the Complex Origins of Racial Inequality**

Passing depicts racial inequities being fortified between as well as within groups; inequality is shown to be a multifaceted problem, with a racial border patrol existing not only between whites and African Americans, but within the African American community. The novel thus exposes how a historically marginalized group may, wittingly or unwittingly, uphold the conditions keeping the group subordinated. Indeed, Clare’s husband John Bellew and her mixed-race childhood acquaintance Irene Redfield are portrayed as doubles. Bellew not only “dislike[s]” African Americans but “hate[s] them,” claiming to “draw the line at that. No niggers in my family. Never have been and never will be” (Larsen 29).² Irene, meanwhile, “adhere[s] to her own class and kind; not merely in the great thing of marriage, but in the whole pattern of her life as well” (24-25). Irene questions the “genuineness” of Clare’s apparent return to the racial fold after marrying Bellew, concluding that Clare actually “cared nothing for the race,” and should therefore

be refused “recognition” (34, 36). Although Irene conceives herself not to be “snob” who “care[s] greatly for the petty restrictions and distinctions with which what called itself Negro society chose to hedge itself about” (17), she consistently espouses and enacts such discriminations. Irene reflects on how inviting Clare to Idlewild, an African American resort, would subject Irene to opprobrium, and deliberately neglects inviting Clare to a party (17, 61).

Irene’s racial judgmentalism is censured in *Passing*, but it is also shown to arise from an innate source: the almost universal human longing for “safety” and “security,” two words that pervade the text and are “all-important” values for Irene (Larsen 47). Larsen’s novel, however, underscores the personal and social downsides of an overzealous commitment to these ideals, illuminating who and what may be sacrificed in return. Irene and Clare seem to embody two polarities on a figurative safety and security spectrum, with Irene envisaging herself as devoted to upholding familial and racial security, which Clare’s presence appears to threaten. Irene views the “hazardous business of ‘passing’” as “a breaking away from all that was familiar and friendly to take one’s chance in another environment” (17) and believes that Clare perches “on the edge of danger” yet, selfishly, refuses to withdraw regardless of “any alarms or feeling of outrage on the part of others” (5) and in spite of the threat to the “‘security’” of Clare’s own daughter (48).

Irene strives to insulate her family, including her husband and two sons, from racial dangers but is haunted by the potential of her plans coming to naught: “Was she never to be free of it, that fear which crouched, always, deep within her, stealing the sense of security, the feeling of permanence, from the life which she had so admirably arranged for them all, and desired so ardently to remain as it was?” (Larsen 40). Irene’s commitment to the status quo endures despite her younger son being called a “‘dirty nigger’” at school (73), and despite her living in the mid-1920s, at a time when 50,000 members of the Ku Klux Klan paraded through Washington, DC (Rothman). Irene chides her husband for disrupting the seeming placidity of their sons’ domestic life by discussing a lynching, as she would

prefer the boys be “happy and free” without knowledge about “the race problem” (73). In a moment of candor, while conversing with Clare, however, Irene admits “that no one is ever completely happy, or free, or safe” (48), although elaborate measures may be undertaken to conceal this reality in the face of flagrant injustices.

Passing implies that the possibility for real, widespread, long-term security may be compromised for an illusory security that may only transiently safeguard individual interests, but that cannot be dismissed as an entirely irrational choice. Irene’s dilemma when contemplating whether to “out” Clare as African American reflects these catch-22 options: “She was caught between two allegiances, different, yet the same. Herself. Her race. Race! The thing that bound and suffocated her. Whatever steps she took, or if she took none at all, something would be crushed. Clare, herself, or the race. Or, it might be all three” (Larsen 69). Moreover, regardless of her condemnation of Clare’s passing, Irene selectively passes as well for expedient reasons, separating those motivations in her mind from more problematic “social” rationales: “I don’t believe I’ve ever gone native [i.e., passed as white] in my life except for the sake of convenience, restaurants, theatre tickets, and things like that. Never socially, I mean, except once” (70).

The novel’s verdict on Irene’s and Clare’s actions as mixed-race women living in a racist and sexist age³ remains ambiguous, but is best captured in Clare’s postscript from a letter to Irene. Clare there ponders: “It may be, ‘Rene dear, it may just be, that, after all, your way may be the wiser and infinitely happier one. I’m not sure just now. At least not so sure as I have been” (Larsen 34). Rather than perceiving of passing as an unethical act constituting a form of race betrayal, readers of Larsen’s novel are prompted to scrutinize the underlying conditions giving rise to the phenomenon, including how the construction of domestic spaces may exacerbate inequalities. For, as Werner Sollors argues, “only a situation of sharp inequality among groups would create the need for the emergence of a socially significant number of cases of ‘passing’” (248).

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