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## Seeing Black Women Anew through Lesbian Desire in Nella Larsen's *Passing*

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Beginning in the 1910s and 1920s, a series of novels advocate that African Americans commit themselves to “loving blackness,” as bell hooks calls African-American ethnic pride (9-10).<sup>1</sup> By loving blackness, the novels promise, African Americans will advance African-American culture, overcome internalized racism, and achieve emotional stability.<sup>2</sup> Together, these novels create a powerful, early 20th-century discourse about embracing ethnic pride and resisting assimilation into white culture.

Unfortunately, this discourse champions its iconoclastic ideas about race by invoking conventional images of women's gender and sexuality. The popular literary figure of the “mulatto” woman and her role in the triangle of desire, the literary device structuring almost all narrative in the Western literary tradition (Sedgwick 1-20; Girard 1-38), become central to this discourse.<sup>3</sup> The mulatto woman plays one of two roles in the discourse's triangles of desire. In the first, she conforms to the most conventional form of femininity imaginable and woos the black man toward ethnic pride. According to this discourse, the mulatto woman's extreme femininity bolsters the black man's masculinity, confirming his sense of superiority, power, and control. This ego boost endows the black man with the capacity to take pride in African-American culture and contribute to it rather than assimilating into white society. In the second, the mulatto woman defies all the sex and gender norms of dominant culture and lures the black man into vassalage to whiteness. Her rebellion against predefined sex and gender roles feminizes her partner, thereby seducing him into false servility. Since this discourse defines conventional femininity as sexual loyalty, submission, and homage to a black man, the way for the mulatto woman to express ethnic pride is not simply through loving a black man but actually through subordinating herself to one. Of course, embracing inferiority is a limited form of pride indeed.<sup>4</sup> In addition to representing mulatto women's submission as positive, this early 20th-century literary discourse blames assimilation on mulatto women's pursuit of freedom from gender and sexual strictures. Thus, mulatto women must

regulate their gender and sexuality for ethnic pride to burgeon, and their failure to do so spells a threat to the continuation of African-American culture.

These images of mulatto women circulate widely from the 1910s to the 1920s due to a shift in interest among African-American writers. Whereas late 19th- and turn-of-the-century African-American literature often stressed the need for white culture to accept African Americans, by the 1910s and 1920s, African-American writers began to encourage pride in both African and African-American traditions separate from white culture. This dramatic shift in values results in a corresponding change in representations of mulatto women. Through the two stereotypical roles allotted to mulatto women, writers weight the major “choice” within the erotic triangle—that of ethnic pride or assimilation—with gendered meanings.

In *Passing*, Larsen reveals that these two dominant fictions about mulatto women effectively regulate women of mixed ethnicity’s performance of gender identity causing them to enact a normative version of femininity. According to Larsen, the two fictions encourage self-regulation by escalating these women’s anxiety. As a result, the women become more aware of others’ external policing of their behavior and, in reaction, internalize these judgments and police themselves. In Larsen’s work, women of mixed ethnicity fear being defined by other African Americans as race traitors if they resist sexual and gender norms. Yet, their attempts to live up to a fictionalized ideal of femininity increases their sense of failure and self-blame as they find it impossible to conform themselves continually to such an image. Moreover, according to Larsen, the more women of mixed ethnicity invest in mulatto female stereotypes, the more they blame each other for and exonerate men from ethnic and sexual betrayal. In *Passing*, Larsen questions this construction of mulatto women as race and sexual traitors by tracing such blame back to the contemporary literary discourse that imagines racial uplift as dependent on women’s containment.<sup>5</sup>

Beyond revealing women’s regulation by them, Nella Larsen challenges these popular representations of women through two dramatic changes: she reconfigures the triangle of desire and women’s roles within the triangle. With such challenges, *Passing* affirms women of mixed ethnicity’s quest for ethnic pride. For Larsen, the quest’s success depends on women of mixed ethnicity’s willingness to defy both men’s regulation of them and traditional sex and gender expectations. In the popular discourse, the triangles of desire, while including mulatto women, highlight them predominantly to substantiate black male masculinity, desirability, and superiority. In this way, the triangles are male-dominated; men’s wants and needs trump women’s. Instead, Larsen creates women-dominated triangles within which women’s desires and bodies rise to the fore separate from male prerogatives. This innovation provides Larsen with the means to focus on sexual bonds between women. In the process, she

shows that, for her two main characters, Irene and Clare, loving blackness becomes inextricable from loving femaleness.

Critics, however, have not yet credited Larsen with representing a sexuality tied to pride in black and female embodiment. Instead, critics' various strategies in relationship to *Passing* tend to separate, if not actually oppose, black female sexual desire and pride in African-American identity. In her groundbreaking essay on *Passing*, Deborah McDowell becomes the first critic to comment extensively on the lesbian desire so rife in the text. Yet McDowell divides black female sexuality from racial politics. She interprets *Passing* as disguising its real concern with lesbian sexuality behind its more overt theme of racial passing (xxiii-xxvi). McDowell's original essay set the terms for the critical debate surrounding Larsen's novel. Therefore, subsequent essays, even when not engaging the theme of lesbianism overtly, often repeat this separation of ethnic pride from female desire.<sup>6</sup> Some critics like Judith Butler and Bimau Basu challenge McDowell's paradigm, calling for a theory that considers race, sex, and sexuality together rather than separating them. Yet, this new paradigm repeats the idea that lesbian desire is at odds with a desire for blackness. In this later critical tack, Irene's lesbian desire springs from Clare's "trespass," a term Butler employs (276) and Basu cites (385-387). Since "trespass" refers to Clare's racial passing as white, in Butler's and Basu's interpretations, Irene's desire for Clare originates from Clare's connection to whiteness. This formulation casts lesbian desire in the text as symptomatic of desire for whiteness. As such, for Irene, lesbian desire becomes a form of assimilation to white culture.

Most critics who read lesbian erotics in *Passing* agree, then, that whiteness is the initiator of lesbian desire between the two women. Critics intend this reading as commentary on Irene's overvaluation of whiteness, high-class status, and bourgeois domesticity, all of which she associates with safety. This interpretation, however, overlooks Irene's and Clare's awe of and delight in the signs of blackness they see in each other's bodies. In her discussion of ethnic pride, bell hooks points out her students' resistance to acknowledging Clare's love of blackness: "I asked the class to consider the possibility that to love blackness is dangerous in a white supremacist culture—so threatening, so serious a breach in the fabric of the social order, that death is the punishment" (9). Hooks sees her students' reluctance to discuss Clare's loving blackness as a reflection of the larger culture's inability to conceive of the possibility of loving blackness (9-10). I would extend hooks' idea regarding Clare's love of blackness and further suggest that critics' readings of *Passing* reproduce a cultural silence about black women loving black women. In other words, the idea of black women having lesbian desire for other black women, specifically due to their embodiment of blackness and femaleness, is virtually incomprehensible in a society

that repeatedly marks African-American women as victimized and blameworthy rather than touting their positive potentialities.

My own work builds from previous scholarship that recognizes Larsen's interest in lesbian desire. Following critics Basu and Butler's lead, I consider race, sex, and sexuality together in my interpretations of *Passing*. Yet, by using feminist theories of the body and, then, considering *Passing* in the historical context of Harlem Renaissance novels, I correct the continuing trend in scholarship of opposing lesbian desire and loving blackness. I show how *Passing* challenges earlier representations of the mulatto female character and offer an alternative reading in which Irene's and Clare's lesbian desire emerges from their idealization of the black female body.

To historicize Larsen's representation of Clare and Irene, I will trace the role mulatto women play within erotic triangles in a series of Harlem Renaissance novels appearing between 1910 and 1920. In their construction of triangles, African-American writers revise what Jean Kennard calls "the two-suitor convention," which underlies a majority of novels from the 18th century on, in order to expose whiteness as a simulacrum. According to Kennard, an author often plots the development of a female character by representing her choice between two suitors, one of whom signifies negative values the heroine must reject and the other positive values she must develop a taste for (13-15). The African-American revision of this white Western tradition foregrounds a choice between whiteness, the deviant possibility, and blackness, the proper possibility, within the triangle. In these triangles, the character's choice of the wrong beloved reveals his/her internalized racism and corrupt value system; the character desires the deviant possibility precisely because he/she invests unquestioningly in popular myths about the superiority of white culture. Mulatto women often face a choice between a white and a black man within the triangle of desire. In contrast, black men usually choose between two mulatto women, one with allegiance to whiteness and the other to blackness. To make the wrong choice in the triangle of desire leads the character not only into rejection of his/her original racial and cultural identification but also into a breaking of gender norms.<sup>7</sup>

Crucially, as evident in the dominant paradigms of the erotic triangles described above, mulatto women lure others into whiteness in ways that black men do not. Whereas mulatto women tempt black men into white culture and its values, it is white not black men who entice mulatto women and symbolize their distorted view of whiteness. Indeed, even when a black man chooses a beloved because of her ties to whiteness, this choice turns out to be not his own but a woman's fault. For example, in Jessie Fauset's *There is Confusion*, Joel chooses a light-skinned wife because he associates this skin color with whiteness. Yet, Joel's choice can be traced back to his own mother's belief that white men alone are capable of occupying

positions of power. His mother's internalized racism stunts Joel's dream of being a "man among men" and leads to his own desire for a woman who seemingly possesses those signs of whiteness that his mother so loves. Fauset's representation of Joel's white-identified black mother and mulatto wife exemplifies a major trend in the 1910s and 1920s. Black men in the triangle become seduced by signs symbolizing illusions about whiteness only because white-identified women encourage them to value such signs. In contrast, mulatto women purchase into the belief that signs of whiteness guarantee a path to leisure, wealth, and employment with no influence from African-American men whatsoever.

This pattern suggests that mulatto women are tied to white culture by the discourse in ways that African-American men are not. According to this discourse, mulatto women are most likely to assimilate into white culture, remain ignorant of their own internalized racism, and privilege whiteness over blackness. Moreover, mulatto women lure African-American men into white culture whereas African-American men do not take others down with them as they decline into a delusion about the benefits of whiteness. In these repetitions, the novels censure mulatto women as abandoning their original black-identified family, community, and self. They portray mulatto woman as capable of endangering the race as they induce African-American men with immense capacities to abandon black culture for white culture. In essence, the novels image mulatto women as potential traitors to the African-American culture.

I want to stress here that my reading of how triangulations work to expose false beliefs about whiteness relies on an understanding of whiteness as a simulacrum. In Jean Baudrillard's use of the term, a simulacrum is an illusion preserved and perpetuated by an intricate sign system whose very scope endlessly validates the verity of the illusion. Moreover, precisely because the sign system so widely disseminates it, the myth is, in fact, real; the myth takes on material form in the world as it comes to inform human relationships, forms of knowledge, and social institutions (1-4).<sup>8</sup> Whiteness fits this definition of a simulacrum. It is both a constructed illusion and one that has real-life consequences.

In Harlem Renaissance novels, it is mulatto women who believe unquestioningly at first in the simulacrum of whiteness. They are shown as jeopardizing black men's masculinity by valuing whiteness over blackness. In the example from Fauset's text above, entrapment in a triangle in which neither his mulatto wife nor his mother supports the vision of black male power leaves Joel to live out his days as a caterer. The novel ties this job to a feminization of the black man, since Joel's form of employment closely repeats his mother's own position as a servant to whites.<sup>9</sup> James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (first edition 1912 and

second edition 1927) also traces the black man's bad choices back to an offending black woman. Despite the white father's abandonment of the family to marry a white woman, the mother still urges her son, the novel's unnamed narrator, to align himself with whiteness and the father and to disidentify with blackness and herself.<sup>10</sup> As a result, the narrator ultimately passes in order to marry a white woman, becoming in the process a white, wealthy, feminine man with no connections to what he calls "my mother's people."

James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* establishes another dominant paradigm for Harlem Renaissance texts. In it, the mulatto woman, faced with a choice between whiteness and blackness within a triangle of desire, chooses whiteness. Further, she transfers this worship of whiteness to a male son, thereby shaping his career choices and overdetermining his desire for whiteness within future triangles of desire. For example, as both Siobhan B. Somerville and Phillip Brian Harper reveal, the narrator's relationship with his white male patron mirrors his mother's relationship with the white father (Somerville 120; Harper 111). Although never stated explicitly by either critic, Somerville's and Harper's arguments implicitly suggest that Johnson images the unnamed narrator as modeling himself after his mother and replicating her choices. Thus, Johnson blames the unnamed narrator's homosexuality on his mother's unconventional heterosexuality. The mulatto woman's love of whiteness, coded as sexual prostitution, leads the unnamed narrator to exchange himself for monetary gain. Thus, the triangle of desire in these texts works to connect the mulatto character's sexual deviance with race betrayal and, further, with the devolution or complete annihilation of black male masculinity. As in Johnson's text, African-American writers often rely on the unquestioned simulacrum of women's sexuality and gender to expose the simulacrum of race; reaffirmation of longstanding white middle-class ideologies about women is meant to destabilize racial constructs.

Another popular configuration of the triangle criticizes black women not merely for influencing black men's choices but actually abandoning them for white goods, white men, or a career in white society. The mulatto woman chooses these signs of whiteness in order to access leisure, power, respectability, and material wealth. In the process, she rejects normative femininity either by taking on masculine attributes or forsaking motherhood. In this way, straying from normative forms of gender and sexuality is equivalent to race betrayal with black men standing for the race. Walter White's *Flight* and Jessie Fauset's *There is Confusion* and *Plum Bun* follow this formula for triangulation. In them, the censure of female gender unconventionality and sexual freedom is apparent in the black man's suffering. In *There is Confusion*, the main woman character Joanna's choice of an ambitious professional singing

career in white culture drives off the African-American male love object and threatens his sense of reality, control, and power.<sup>11</sup> In *Flight*, the passing woman Mimi's marriage to a white man for financial security leaves her mixed-race son motherless and abandoned. *Plum Bun* actually associates mulatto women's passing with the ability to kill off the black man.<sup>12</sup> These novels vilify the mulatto woman as a threat to African-American male survival. Critics such as Susan Tomlinson and Kathleen Pfeiffer have argued that Fauset articulates a feminist consciousness in her text. Such readings emphasize Fauset's representation of women's capability of establishing careers for themselves (Tomlinson 94-97; Pfeiffer 89-90). Yet, such readings overlook the fact that Fauset associates these careers with a warped value system that privileges illusions about whiteness over all other considerations. Within the erotic triangle, the mulatto figure faces a choice between a sign for whiteness—expensive goods, a white man, or a career—and a black male and chooses the sign for whiteness only for material comfort while rejecting the black male. Such a plot works to blame African-American women for their overvaluation of class trappings, a preference that deprives black males of nurture and masculine status.

Yet, ultimately, this plot formation traces a trajectory in which the mulatto woman comes to re-embrace black culture through renewed love of black males. She redeems herself only by adopting the most conventional forms of femininity, ones that subordinate the self to male needs and wants. *Flight* closes with Mimi leaving her white husband for "Petit Jean [her son]—my own people—and happiness" (300). Mimi's fantasy about what whiteness entails crumbles through mother consciousness welded to race consciousness, indicated by the way the dashes redefine Petit Jean as her own people. In *There is Confusion*, to her fiancé's request that she "take [him] and make a man out of him," Joanna replies by renouncing her singing career and recovering an essential femininity: "Her desire for greatness had been a sort of superimposed structure which, having been taken off, left her her true self" (291). Like Joanna before her, Angela of *Plum Bun* decides to relinquish her interest in white society in order to pursue Anthony, her African American love interest. The feminist readings of Fauset outlined above only work because they give short shrift to the ending of Fauset's text. Yet, the endings make the woman's earlier choices suspect. For example, sending up the cry of all Fauset's racially loyal good women, Angela declares that while work would be Anthony's ambition, he would be hers: "He should be her task, her 'job,' the fulfillment of her ambition." In Fauset's novels, female submission to the black male actually ensures his masculinity and his future profession. In these constructions of the triangle, the mulatto woman's sense of duty to African-American males motivates her to extricate herself from white society; only desire for black males, whether heterosexual or maternal,

leads the black woman to overthrow the white man. Seemingly, the only way to encode the necessity of race pride is through black women's submission to traditional femininity, heterosexuality, and black men.<sup>13</sup>

Even more pernicious are the images of mulatto women as simultaneously masculine, sexually perverse, and violent. This sexually and morally corrupt mulatto woman tempts the black man away from a proper woman who retains her femininity and refuses to mix sex with money. When the men choose the corrupt woman instead of the proper one, they end up prostituted to women, the ultimate form of feminization. Carl Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven* and Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem* represent their "bad" mulatto female characters within the triangle of desire as prostituting themselves in exchange for cash, participating in violence, or securing the African-American male's sexual services through money. McKay equates light-skinned, monied African-American women with jungle animals and, thereby, with degeneracy.<sup>14</sup> For McKay, money is the ultimate sign of savage power and his derogation of women alone is clear; no African-American male is shown as having the wealth possessed individually by the text's three "mulatress[es]." Like McKay, Van Vechten images the mulatto Lasca as having excessive wealth unconnected to any career, immoral upper-class values, promiscuous sexual habits, and contempt for the black race—best captured in her denigration of her black male lover Byron as "you filthy Nigger kept boy" (259-260).

As McKay and Van Vechten envision it, for women, gender inversion and sexual perversity come about through the possession simultaneously of light skin color, money, and leisure time that together allow mulatto women to purchase black men to pander to their sadomasochistic desires. Mulatto women who participate in sexual prostitution and violence for pleasure corrode black men's sense of their desirability and masculinity. As usual, African-American men never lose their masculinity separate from mulatto women but only in relationship to them.

Larsen denounces the representation of mulatto women as prostitutes and betrayers of the black race. Through a reading of Larsen, Robyn Wiegman unravels the ways in which the definition of blackness in America relies solely on the visual, while whiteness depends on the visibility of blackness not whiteness to define itself. Yet, ironically, in a text that bemoans the ways that critics overlook African-American women's particularity, Wiegman references Larsen's text only to discuss race, never even glancing towards the representation of sex and gender in it. Following her example but extending it to sex as well, analysis of Larsen's exploration reveals how the vision of African-American women, not just blackness, is implicated in "a series of bodily fictions" (21).

Larsen insists on the fictional quality of representations of mulatto women and the false assumptions underlying them:

And she could remember quite vividly how, when they used to repeat and discuss these tantalizing stories about Clare, the girls would always look knowingly at one another and then, with little excited giggles, drag away their eager shining eyes and say with lurking undertones of regret or disbelief some such thing as "Oh, well, maybe she's got a job or something," or "After all, it mayn't have been Clare..." And always some girl, more matter-of-fact or more frankly malicious than the rest, would declare: "Of course it was Clare! Ruth said it was and so did Frank, and they certainly know her when they see her as well as we do." ... And then they would all join in asserting that there could be no mistake about its having been Clare, and that such circumstances could mean only one thing. Working indeed! People didn't take their servants to the Shelby for dinner. Certainly not all dressed up like that. (153)

These tantalizing stories show how stereotypes of the mulatto female character as promiscuous race betrayers pass as truth. Since Clare married the white man she was seen with, these stories turn out to be patently false. But the fiction itself produces two powerful effects: it bonds the group together at the expense of the woman of mixed ethnicity as well as provides safe vicarious pleasure and entertainment. These double benefits insure that the fiction will not be easily questioned. Indeed, each small effort to question the fiction produces a redoubled defense of it until "they would all join in asserting" the truth of the fiction. By defining this gossip between girls as "tantalizing stories" and emphasizing a group consensus about the veracity of the stories, Larsen references fiction generally about mulatto women and reader response to it. She criticizes this fiction for shaping female readers of mixed ethnicity to believe that they are blameworthy. Barbara Christian dismisses *Passing* as merely continuing in the traditional stereotyping of the "mulatta" (4). But, in fact, Larsen dedicates herself to revealing the storied quality of such representations. Larsen claims that, as popular discourse denigrates, devalues, sexualizes, and objectifies mulatto women, actual women of mixed ethnicity begin to believe this story and judge each other and themselves accordingly.

In delivering her criticism of such fiction, Larsen signals that repeated stories bring about an inability to see. Robyn Wiegman's study of the relationship between race and vision illuminates Larsen's critique of this situation. In particular, my understanding of regulation proceeds from Wiegman's argument that discourse shapes vision to see the body. Thus, vision is not a neutral receptor of bodily images (17-42). As shown in the last quotation above, vision is structured by a binarized narrative about women of mixed ethnicity: either they are morally respectable servants to whites who remain exiled from upper-class material comforts or they are morally

reprehensible prostitutes inaugurated into the joys of materialism only through sex with white men. Since Clare was seen in the context of an expensive restaurant, in elegant clothes, with a white man, she can be understood only in terms of the latter narrative. The problem is that the girls fail to realize the ways in which narrative conditions their vision. Instead, they invoke vision as the ultimate and most authentic form of knowing Clare, when their own uncertainty threatens to unravel their beloved stories: "Ruth said it was [Clare that she saw] and so did Frank, and they certainly know her when they see her as well as we do." Ruth's and Frank's stories are predicated on their knowing Clare which is predicated on their seeing her. Larsen shows that knowledge, vision, and stories all work together to give credence to false beliefs that women of mixed ethnicity are race and sexual traitors.

This particular form of corrosive seeing of women continues in Irene's seeing the woman of mixed ethnicity through men's eyes. Even when men resort to violence in their interactions with women, Irene blames women for evoking the response. This blame echoes the blame usually leveled at mulatto women within Harlem Renaissance novels. Larsen portrays Irene as internalizing this blame in order to show its damaging effects on the African-American female psyche. Irene's repeated blaming of women of mixed ethnicity, including herself, for men's egregious behaviors demonstrates her unconscious desire to align herself with the dominant perspective, no matter how wrong. It further signifies her compulsive need to reduce women of mixed ethnicity to the mulatto female stereotype, the woman who is always culpable for men's moral transgressions.

In her remembrance of Clare's father's violence toward his daughter, Irene conforms her view of Clare to male perception. Irene remembers Clare's rebellion against her father's dictate that he be given all her earnings, a grand total of a dollar:

And for a swift moment Irene Redfield seemed to see a pale small girl sitting on a ragged blue sofa, sewing pieces of bright red cloth together, while her drunken father, a tall, powerfully built man, raged threateningly up and down the shabby room, bellowing curses and making spasmodic lunges at her which were not the less frightening because they were, for the most part, ineffectual. Sometimes he did manage to reach her. But only the fact that the child had edged herself and her poor sewing over to the farthest corner of the sofa suggested that she was in any way perturbed by this menace to herself and her work.

Clare had known well enough that it was unsafe to take a portion of the dollar that was her weekly wage for the doing of many errands for the dressmaker who lived on the top floor of the building of which Bob Kendry was janitor. But that knowledge had not deterred her. She wanted to go to her Sunday school's picnic, and she had made up her mind to wear a new dress. So, in spite of certain unpleasantness and possible danger, she had taken the money to buy the material for that pathetic little red frock. (143-144)

Ostensibly Irene conjures this memory to prove Clare's selfishness; yet the adjectives describing the scene function otherwise. "Poor," "pathetic little," and "farthermost" speak to the meagerness of Clare's desires and demands. Clare's supposed wild rebellion, excess of desire, and selfish ways turn out to be a rather minor, even pitiful, attempt to establish an independent female identity. Yet, in pursuit of this small dream, Clare withstands harrowing injustice and threatening violence from her drunken father. Larsen conveys a double message: she criticizes Clare's father for regulating his daughter through violence, and she rebukes Irene for complicity with this violence in her harsh judgment of Clare's paltry attempts at resistance.

The phrase "Irene Redfield seemed to see" emphasizes the constriction of Irene's gaze, her inability to see Clare outside of the conventional mode. This wording resonates with doubleness. Literally, it refers to the fact that Irene's seeing Clare isn't actual because she is accessing memory. Figuratively, however, it acknowledges that ideology about women of mixed ethnicity, ideology promulgated through the mulatto literary figure, obscures Irene's seeing. Irene can't see Clare because her vision is complicit in Clare's father's seeing. Like him, she despises Clare for taking a fraction of a dollar of her own money in order to go to a Sunday school picnic. Like him, she believes that Clare has a failure of allegiance to black men.

When men are in the room, either in actuality or simply in memory, Irene takes the male victimizer's view that women should not develop identities and desires separate from men. At a tea party in Clare's hotel room, Irene is again witness to male violence directed at Clare: when Clare "laid her hand on [her husband Jack Bellew's] arm with an affectionate little gesture," asking him "what difference would it make if, after all these years, you were to find out I was one or two percent colored' ... Bellew put out his hand in a repudiating fling, definite and final ... 'No niggers in my family. Never have been and never will be'" (171). Like Clare's father, her husband Bellew insists through verbal and physical violence on his ability to control Clare's identity, his own, and his family's. Bellew bodily rejects Clare's "affectionate little gesture" at the least hint that her self-definition might change. Cheryl A. Wall explains that for both women: "Each reflects and is a reflection of her husband's class status" (125). I would add that it is violence that forces both women to be that reflection of the male. Larsen observes that control of women's racial and class identity is crucial to men's identity, and, further, that any threat to this control initiates a violent response. Irene's spontaneous although suppressed laughter conveys her belief that men should indeed control women's identity. Thus, she registers her glee at the violence meant to contain Clare.

Yet, the descriptors of Clare question Irene's assumption that Clare needs to be contained by suggesting that she already is. Clare struggles to claim mere fractions

of money, space, and race for herself: “a portion of the dollar” and “the farthermost corner of the sofa” in the earlier scene and “one or two percent colored” in this one. Irene believes that women of mixed ethnicity are threatening, even dangerous, if free. As she proclaims later, she “couldn’t have Clare Kendry . . . free” (239). This fear is bound to racist and sexist notions about women of mixed ethnicity’s propensity to betray others through sex. These ideas prime Irene to see Clare’s betrayals and, therefore, render her blind to others’, even her own, betrayal of Clare.

One of the real betrayers of Irene in the text is her own husband. Brian accuses Irene of a number of failings, including lateness, sexual reticence, and general conservatism. Brian’s misogyny fuels his virtual obsession with Irene’s flaws. After all, he “doesn’t care for ladies” (173). The doubleness of this phrasing hints at both Brian’s contempt for women and his failure to attend to them, particularly ironic given his career as a doctor. Brian’s disdain for Irene crystallizes in his gestures meant to regulate Irene to proper behavior: “Brian stood looking down on her with that amused smile of his, which was just the faintest bit supercilious and yet was somehow very becoming to him” (183). Immediately after this scene, Brian “defly, unnecessarily, pilot[ed] [Irene] round the two short curved steps, just before the centre landing” (184). Brian’s violent gestures in these two scenes, his look of condescension in the one and control of Irene’s movement down the stairs, connect him to Bellew and Clare’s father; like them, he claims an imperious control over the woman. Martha Cutter links Bellew and Brian together in their insistence on only one stable identity (85). They also mirror each other in their manipulation of their wives and their phallic vision, both ways of assuring women maintain that singular and stable identity. Irene’s attraction to Brian’s look of disdain divulges her servitude to a negative viewing of the African-American woman, even if that woman is herself. Male violence leads to the regulation of seeing much more explicitly in this scene. For immediately after their downward descent in which Brian forcefully directs Irene’s body, he delivers a warning veiled as a question: “You’re not . . . going to see [Clare]?” (184). That a male figure demands Irene not see Clare hints at men’s role in obscuring Clare from Irene’s vision.

Complicating the earlier scenes in which Irene blamed Clare for men’s violence against her, here, Irene displaces responsibility for Brian’s aggressiveness onto herself and Clare, thereby virtually justifying his arrogant behavior. Irene ventriloquizes Brian’s criticism of her, disguising it as her own self-criticism: “For she was late again, and Brian, she well knew detested that. Why, oh why, couldn’t she ever manage to be on time? Brian had been up for ages, had made some calls for all she knew, besides having taken the boys downtown to school. And she wasn’t dressed yet; had only begun. Damn Clare! This morning it was her fault” (183). Self-blame coincides

with blame of Clare. Nowhere is there even a hint that Brian's attempts to regulate her sense and use of time into a routinized daily ritual, into white people's time, are themselves tyrannical. Here, the text points out that, despite a character's identification with blackness, he/she can still conform to white values and beliefs. Despite Brian's overall affirmation of black identity, his love of timeliness is aligned in the text with the white business world. The text, after all, refers to lateness as "cp" or colored people's time, suggesting not that blacks are inherently late but rather that they refuse to regulate their time according to white Western-European versions of time. As shown here, a myth of whites' and men's superiority keeps in place a myth of African-American women's blameworthiness. Irene consistently fails to make men and whites culpable for their own violence sprung from racism and misogyny.

By unveiling the network of myths that produce Irene's own personal narrative about women of mixed ethnicity's inferiority, Larsen theorizes the workings of fictional representations of mulatto women. For her, textual blame of mulatto women has two major drawbacks: first, the illusion of whiteness remains firmly in place since mulatto women are the real targets of textual criticism and, second, mulatto women's supposed provocation of male violence justifies any and all violence by men, whether black or white.

The gestures passing between Clare and Irene are keys to Larsen's version of what Terry Castle calls "lesbian counterplotting."<sup>15</sup> Castle revises Eve Sedgwick's theory of the primacy of male homosociality in canonical textual triangles. She suggests that a lesbian counterplot can be identified whenever a narrative suppresses the potential for male homoeroticism and, instead, two women bond at the expense of a relationship with a man (72-74). *Passing* constructs such a counterplot. It denies any possibility that Jack Bellew and Brian Redfield might bond; each man's antipathy towards the other race precludes connection between them. Moreover, the women associate only by defying their husbands' favorite forms of regulation. Through lesbian counterplotting, Larsen refuses to repeat the popular strategy of promoting mulatto women's self-regulation and self-effacement for the betterment of black males. In *Passing*, women of mixed ethnicity must throw off their internalization of male and white regulation in order to indulge their desire and thereby repossess their own bodies. Loving the symbols of blackness as well as femaleness in the other brings about a new ability to love the self.

Lesbian erotics also allow for an original rewriting of the relationship between the woman of mixed ethnicity's illusions and her desire. Usually, in Harlem Renaissance discourse, as mulatto women slough off illusions about whiteness, they renew their desire for black men. Yet, Larsen scraps this design, plotting quite a different trajectory. For Clare, disillusionment with whiteness and a reevaluation of the Afri-

can-American community grow out of seeing Irene. The personal psychology that initiates this reversal of values is complex. First, Clare experiences erotic transference with Irene, imagining her as a figure for the protective black father. Later, she fetishizes Irene, perceiving her as an image of the lost African-American female self.<sup>16</sup> Because of transference, Clare does not want the nurturing black father in a man but in a woman: a provocative difference, to be sure. The initial moment in which Clare fuses Irene's body with the father's captures her erotic paternal transference: "Goodbye, 'Rene dear. My love to your father, and this kiss for him" (162). Obviously, this kiss lands on Irene's body not on her father's, making Clare's transference an enabling fiction that allows her to commune physically with Irene. Clare can both embrace the homoerotic and couch it in the familial.

The turn from transference to fetishization on Clare's part reframes her desire as moving away from the male in the woman to the woman herself. This interpretation is at odds with Jacquelyn McLendon's view which posits both Irene and Clare as craving a release from the body in order to liberate themselves from sexual repression (11, 103). According to de Lauretis, "In lesbian perverse desire ... the fantasmatic object is the female body itself, whose original loss in a female subject corresponds ... to the narcissistic wound that the loss of the penis represents for the male subject" (231). If de Lauretis' "female body" is shifted to the African-American female body, such a theory helps to explain the coalescence of loss, pain, and desire overwhelming Clare after seeing and parting from Irene:

For I am lonely, so lonely ... cannot help longing to be with you again, as I have never longed for anything before; and I have wanted many things in my life.... You can't know how in this pale life of mine I am all the time seeing the bright pictures of that other that I once thought I was glad to be free of.... It's like an ache, a pain that never ceases ... and it's your fault, 'Rene dear. At least partly. For I wouldn't now, perhaps, have this terrible, this wild desire if I hadn't seen you that time in Chicago.... (145)

The body of the other brings about a severe change in Clare's own body-image; through seeing Irene, Clare comes to consciousness about her wounded state within the white world, her "pain" and "pale[ness]." This recognition of paucity comes from the loss of her own African-American female body in passing as white. The assuaging of these wounds and fulfillment of "this terrible, this wild desire" are possible through a material reunion. In this way, Clare figures the physicality of Irene as a cure to her own threatened body image. The whole, joyous, valued African-American female self annihilated by Clare's father's brutalizing attacks, her aunts' self-serving exploitation of her labor, and her husband's unwitting racial denigration of her is

actually seen as recoverable in the body of Irene. In addition, self-love can come from love of Irene.<sup>17</sup>

Irene's answer to Clare's erotic transference reveals her desire for a female sexuality connected to women of mixed ethnicity specifically and unattached to men. Irene refuses to pass on Clare's love to the male; after receiving Clare's kiss, Irene "decided that she wouldn't, after all, say anything to him [her father] about Clare Kendry" (163). Her refusal to tell her father about her meeting with Clare and her act of withholding the kiss symbolize Irene's desire to preserve the kiss among women of mixed ethnicity, ultimately keeping it for herself. This desire flares again in Irene's destruction of Clare's first letter to her. This letter emphasizes Irene's connection both to the African-American community and her own father. In reaction, Irene "tore the offending letter into tiny ragged squares that fluttered down and made a small heap in her black *crêpe de Chine* lap. The destruction completed, she gathered them up, rose, and moved to the train's end. Standing there, she dropped them over the railing and watched them scatter, on tracks, on cinders, on forlorn grass, in rills of dirty water" (178). Here, the "black lap" represents African-American female sexuality and the white letter fragments (the "small heap") represent the phallic and whiteness. Irene refuses to define African-American female sexuality only in relation to black men. She recognizes, if only unconsciously, that such a definition is complicit in a white belief system. By tossing the paper scraps off the train, Irene shows her ability to resist Clare's language of love when couched in love for the father. This gesture speaks of her unconscious desire for an African-American female sexuality not implicated in white ideologies about black women.

Clare mirrors this desire once she begins to fetishize Irene's hair. Clare's kissing of Irene's "dark curls" symbolizes her longing for a woman of mixed ethnicity who consciously allies herself with the black race. Larsen sketches a spectrum of women's relation to the African-American community through the appearance of hair. Clare's hair is naturally "pale gold" (161), a trope emphasizing her ability to pass for white as well as her racial mixture; Gertrude's "black hair was clipt, and by some unfortunate means all the live curliness had gone from it" (167), a signifier of her denial of the race through erasure of the "live curliness;" and Irene's hair is dominated by "dark curls" (194), an exterior testament to her chosen race loyalty. Teresa de Lauretis' reading of the female body as lesbian fetish will open up these images of hair:

what the lesbian desires in a woman ("the penis somewhere else") is indeed not a penis but a part or perhaps the whole of the female body, or something metonymically related to it, such as physical, intellectual, or emotional attributes, stance, attitude, appearance, self-presentation.... [T]he fetish is at once what signifies her desire and what her lover desires in her. It is both an imaginary or

fantasmatic “object,” a cathected signifier, whose erotic meaning derives from its placement in a subjective fantasy scenario; and a symbolic object, whose meaning derives from a sociohistorical context of cultural *and* subcultural discourses and representations. (228)

In her theory, de Lauretis tries to strip fetishism from its negative connotation as a male sexual perversion and re-associate it positively with women’s attempts to possess a sign of the female body; de Lauretis’ innovative theory illuminates Larsen’s imaging of women of mixed ethnicity’s longing for and caressing of each other’s bodies in *Passing*. The “dark curls” are “at once what signifies [Irene’s] desires and what [Clare] desires in her”; they point to Irene’s desire to align herself with African Americans and Clare’s desire for that desire. In the text’s terms, lesbian sexuality in Clare flares in response to a sign she reads as a crafted African-American female femininity possessed by a woman of mixed ethnicity.

Similarly, Clare’s kiss transforms Irene by allowing her to access emotions and desires not usually available to her. Before Clare kisses her, Irene decides through a logical route that Clare cannot return to the African-American community. Her fear of blame, of being “responsible” for Clare’s choice, motivates this decision. Her point of view mimics male perception of Clare. It is Brian who originally demands that Irene reject Clare. Yet, Irene’s fear and self-regulation slip away after Clare “drop[s] a kiss on her dark curls” (194). Emotion overwhelms Irene, flooding her with “a sudden inexplicable onrush of affectionate feeling” (194). The kiss itself urges Irene to grasp Clare’s two hands, reclaiming Clare as part of the African-American community rather than abandoning her. Irene’s desire emerges in response to Clare’s own attraction to the fetish. Irene’s intense emotional reaction, passionate touch, and declaration of Clare’s beauty all affirm her unconscious desire for the female body of mixed ethnicity.

Although stories repeatedly inhibit Irene’s ability to see Clare, Clare’s body itself interrupts the effect of those stories and inspires Irene to see Clare positively even passionately. Fetishization facilitates this process. It moves Irene to recognize Clare’s positive embodiment of the black in the body of mixed ethnicity. For Irene, at times, the fetish reposes in Clare’s comportment:

It was as if the woman sitting on the other side of the table ... had for her a fascination, strange and compelling. Clare Kendry was still leaning back in the tall chair, her sloping shoulders against the carved top. She sat with an air of indifferent assurance, as if arranged for, desired. About her clung the dim suggestion of polite insolence with which a few women are born and which some acquire with the coming of riches or importance. Clare, it gave Irene a quick prick of

satisfaction to recall, hadn't got that by passing herself off as white. She herself had always had it. (161)

This scene sets up a parallel between Clare's bodily text and the oral tales told about it. Both the bodily and oral texts are seductive; just as Irene's "fascination" fixes on Clare's body, so, in telling the stories, "the girls" have difficulty "drag[ging] away their eager shining eyes" from one another. Yet, the oral texts, those "tantalizing stories about Clare[']s" prostitution, emerge out of a supposed ground of knowledge about her as insinuated by the way the girls "look knowingly at one another" (153). In counterpose, Clare's body itself, knowledge of which these stories are supposedly founded on, eludes Irene as she calls it "strange," a word suggestive of Clare's body's operation outside of the repeated stories told about it. Seeing Clare's body provides Irene with a "quick prick of satisfaction." What brings Irene such unexpected pleasure is her memory that Clare possessed her proud posture before passing; since this posture is "born" rather than "acquired," it stands as a sign to Irene of African-American beauty in the woman of mixed ethnicity.

Clare's eyes also stimulate Irene's desire. In her initial reaction to Clare, Irene reveals her unconscious desire for and attraction to the African American in Clare; even before she knows Clare's identity, Irene locates her beauty in "those dark, almost black, eyes," which she will later explicitly define as not only "Negro eyes" but a feature tied to Clare's female ancestry: "Yes, Clare Kendry's loveliness was absolute, beyond challenge, thanks to those eyes which her grandmother and later her mother and father had given her" (161). Eric Sundquist underscores the necessity of memory to the keeping alive of cultural origins: "The mythos of untraceable origins and unwritten—or rather, continually 'rewritten'—texts put a premium on remembering, on acts of consciousness that ground the racial nation and tie together its generations throughout the African diaspora" (38). In *Passing*, the text that affords access to African-American origins is that of the female body of mixed ethnicity; in the act of looking, one can find a sign of beauty tied to a distinctly African-American and female identity. Through fixation on Clare's eyes, Irene remembers consciously the link between Clare's eyes and her black grandmother, signifying her desire for a sign, a text, that will lead her back to African-American ancestry.

If the fetish signifies a route to recapturing the past, it also disrupts dominant modes of thinking. Just as it destabilizes popular narratives, it undermines the dominant mode of time, a central means of Brian's regulation of Irene. For Cheryl Wall, "Clare's 'Negro eyes' symbolize the unconscious, the unknowable, the erotic, and the passive. In other words, they symbolize those aspects of the psyche Irene denies

within herself” (130). I agree with Wall’s interpretation of Clare’s eyes, except that I would say the eyes represent the suspension of time rather than passivity:

Again [Irene] looked up, and for a moment her brown eyes politely returned the stare of the other’s [Clare’s] black ones, which never for an instant fell or wavered. Irene made a little mental shrug. Oh well, let her look! She tried to treat the woman and her watching with indifference, but she couldn’t. All her efforts to ignore her, it, were futile. She stole another glance. Still looking. What strange languorous eyes she had! (149-150).

By reading this excerpt in conjunction with the last long quotation, a number of intriguing repetitions come to the fore. Clare’s body has a stillness which is arresting for Irene; just as Clare’s body which is “still leaning back” has a “fascination strange and compelling” for Irene in the earlier passage, so Clare’s “strange languorous” eyes which are “still looking” and “never for an instant fell or wavered” bind Irene’s gaze in the latter excerpt. The repetition of “still” with a gerund in Irene’s delineation of Clare suggests an active, in other words intentional, fixedness about Clare’s body able to transport Irene into a suspended time. Too, Larsen describes Clare’s eyes variously as “hypnotic” (209), “arresting” (161), “languorous” (150), and “slow and mesmeric” (161), all indicating a slowing down or suspension of time and movement.

As theorist Claudine Hermann explains: “Men’s time is, in effect, just another system, but the most frightening of all, the one that deprives you of the present moment in the name of the future and puts off the present moment indefinitely by crushing it under the past and the future” (172). According to Hermann, a patriarchal time frame robs us of a sumptuous sense of the present moment. I suggest, though, a refining of what Hermann calls “men’s time” and a viewing of it instead as a dominant time linked to men, whites, and capitalism. With such a redefinition, Irene’s luxuriating in the moment with Clare takes on richer meaning: it refers to her eyes’ functioning outside of a regulated white, male, and economic form of time. As Hermann so nicely puts it, “there are women who sink into [the present moment], stretch and prolong it because for them it is an end in itself” (173). Such an extension of the present is crucial to the disruption of Irene’s dominant mode of seeing: “Looking up at her, Irene’s suspicions and fears vanished. There was no mistaking the friendliness of that smile or resisting its charm. Instantly she surrendered to it and smiled too” (150). In both passages, time suspension brought on by the bodily fetish leads Irene from a negative emotion and misinterpretation of Clare to a pleasurable thrill with Clare’s body and right reading of her.

While many literary critics read Larsen’s text as a validation of bourgeois culture, the sumptuousness of these moments defy a number of bourgeois expectations about women. Rather than pursuing heterosexual eroticism, standing as a sign of her

husband's wealth, and relating to other women only through and because of men, in her new-found version of time, Irene experiences both herself and Clare as free of male imperatives and immersed in erotic desire. Evidence that their looking defies bourgeois expectations of women exists in the fact that Clare's erotic stare forces Irene to abandon her usual self-regulation, thereby, allowing for pleasurable communion between the two women. Yet, of course, these moments though prolonged are, at the same time, fleeting, as bourgeois culture re-asserts itself in the foreground.

One other fetish is crucial to Irene's interaction with Clare: her association of Clare's body with golden hues that she further connects to the vaginal and oral. While originally, before she recognizes Clare's mixed ethnicity, Irene associates Clare with the colors "black," "scarlet," "ivory," and "green" (148), after Irene discovers Clare's identity, she consistently weds her with gold, the color of the melon (149), Clare's "golden bowl of a hat" (220), and the "golden tea" in the teacup (219). These phrases link mixed ethnicity (gold), vaginal shapes (melon, bowl, hat, and teacup), and oral consumption (melon, bowl, and tea). This unconscious process emerges in Irene's first lengthy physical description of Clare after learning of her identity in which she remarks Clare's "pale gold hair." Like her comportment which she possessed prior to passing, Clare "Always had that pale gold hair," signaling it as yet another definitive feature of Clare's racial status (161). To intensify the reader's connection of Clare with gold, Larsen describes her as being "golden" (203), "fair and golden, like a sunlit day" (205), and "a vital glowing thing, like a flame of red and gold" (239).

The images of tea and teacups further symbolize Irene's desire to define the fetish of golden hues as themselves distinctly belonging to the woman of mixed ethnicity, divorced from whiteness and maleness. Like Clare's body, the tea is described as "golden." In contrast, the tea cups are white and have "a good old hoary history," their ownership able to be traced from "the charming Confederates" to "Brian's great-great-grand-uncle" to Brian (222). After dwelling on Clare's "astonishing black eyes" and "caressing smile" (221), which she sees as geared toward men, Irene drops a tea cup, separating the "white" from the "golden": "There was a slight crash. On the floor at her feet lay the shattered cup. Dark stains dotted the bright rug. Spread. The chatter stopped. Went on. Before her Zulena gathered up the white fragments" (221). By letting the golden tea "Spread" over boundaries, Irene articulates an unconscious wish to reclaim Clare from both white and male possession akin to her earlier move of throwing the white paper off her black lap. Thereby, Irene believes she can return the woman of mixed ethnicity to a distinctly black heritage, just as the tea, which was "golden," becomes "dark" once spilled. In the phrase "a good old hoary history," the phonic pun hoary/whore-y coupled with the cup's shape

insinuates that the cup is a metaphor for the history of women of mixed ethnicity's sexuality, a sexuality passed from white ownership to black male ownership, from "Confederates" to Brian. The pun suggests that the stereotype of mulatto promiscuity is a history developed by both white and black men; Southerners first developed it to justify the rape of women of mixed ethnicity and black men continued it by representing mulatto women as sexually deviant in their active sexuality outside of marriage. This reading is further supported by the doubleness inherent in the image of teacups passing from white men to black. It suggests both a sexual passing of the mulatto women among men and a passing that confers ownership on black men by white men.

In this reading, the breaking of the cup and consequent spilling of the tea signifies a releasing of the woman of mixed ethnicity's sexuality from the bounds of whiteness and maleness. Only in this way could Irene claim Clare for herself, be the object of Clare's erotic gaze and the fetishizer of it. The word "Spread" emphasizes that the tea escapes its boundedness within the small space of the white tea cup. Irene has a moment, if only unconscious, in which she refuses to define the woman of mixed ethnicity's sexuality, a move similar to Clare's refusal to put a "return address" (143) on the envelope sent Irene, yet another vaginal image according to McDowell (xxvi).

In the text's ending, the regulation of vision and the phallic seems to win out over lesbian desire and the black feminine fetish. After Jack Bellew bursts into a Harlem party to confront his wife about her racial passing, Clare plummets to her death from a window. There are only two overt clues the narrative offers to determine who murdered Clare: Irene's hand on Clare's arm and Bellew's rapid rush towards Clare. One of the major debates surrounding the text revolves around who killed Clare. Most critics vote for Irene because of her seeming relief at Clare's death, articulation of fear that Clare might not be dead, and her interior struggle with herself concerning her role in the events leading up to Clare's fall.<sup>18</sup> An occasional critic reads a suicide in Clare's death (Larson 85). No critic to this date has fingered Jack Bellew alone as the killer, most likely because Irene herself vehemently opposes the suggestion that he might be a likely suspect. A number of critics also dismiss the ending as out of keeping with the rest of the text. Deborah McDowell goes so far as to argue that "Larsen performs an act of narrative 'dis'-closure, undoing or doing the opposite of what she has promised" (xxx).

My own reading of the text entire, however, provides evidence that the ending is continuous with Larsen's design in the rest of the text: it still concerns women of mixed ethnicity's own blindness to male culpability and men's investment in maintaining their identities through women. Irene's response to Clare's death shows that Irene can still only believe a narrative in which women of mixed ethnicity are

guilty and men are not. After Clare's fall, Irene sees only her own motive for murder: her unproved suspicion that Clare and Brian are engaged in a torrid affair. For Irene, a mulatto woman's uncontrollable violence against a promiscuous mulatto woman who stole her man is a tellable tale. In fact, it is a story told repeatedly in small vignettes in Carl Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven* and Claude McKay's *Home To Harlem*. Yet, given that Larsen clearly takes issue with McKay's and Van Vechten's images of mulatto women, why would she renounce her position and join in the usual excoriation of mulatto women at the last? More specifically, in a text that denaturalizes the discourse of blame of mulatto women, revealing Irene's blindness to men's acts of violence and tendency to indict women of mixed ethnicity for those violences, why would Larsen abandon this literary aim and craft an ending that makes the woman of mixed ethnicity guilty and the white man innocent? And, if Irene's vision is undependable, the question becomes why would we as readers invest in Irene's view of herself as complicit if not active in Clare's death?

My own partial answer to these questions is that Larsen provides the textual means to come to another reading of the text, one that sees Bellew as guilty and Irene as innocent. Through a number of structural repetitions, Larsen does point to Bellew as, at the least, a viable murderer. That Bellew causes Clare to fall out the window due to his aggression is hinted at by the fact that Clare's reaction to her father's bellowing is to move "to the farthest corner of the couch," and, indeed, when Bellew himself bellows upon entrance to the party "she got up from her chair, backing a little from his approach" (238). More damning evidence is available in the repeated images of men's violent gestures. Since the mere hint that the woman of mixed ethnicity might be expanding her boundaries motivates these gestures, Clare's reclamation of an African-American identity would certainly qualify as another potential instigator of male aggression. Further, there is the repeated event of Irene's seeing from a phallic point of view, and, therefore, blaming herself or Clare for men's outbursts. Given this constellation of details, Irene's blaming of herself for Clare's death and her certainty that Bellew didn't kill Clare are suspect at best. Such a conjunction is standard for Irene and, thereby, unbelievable. Bellew should be an equal suspect with Irene and Clare precisely because Irene can't see or craft a story about that possibility. Irene's potential innocence lies in the fact that she fixes on rejecting Clare multiple times in the text, but unmediated communion with the fetishized body, including touch, vanquishes that logical decision. The ending follows this pattern to the extent that she desires to reject Clare and reaches out and touches her, but readers are not fully privy to Irene's next act.

And, yet, certainly Larsen does not overtly reveal the murderer, and, so, such a reading only increases the list of suspects without solving the case. For, after all,

lesbian desire not phallic vision wins out in the end. It does not win out because of the events within the plot but rather because of the kind of desire the ending evokes in the reader. In *Passing*, the phallic and the male strive to define women of mixed ethnicity in constrained and limited ways, asserting authority over them to create order. In *Passing*, women of mixed ethnicity's lesbian desire escapes such definitive terms. It defies explanation, being "strange" and "inexplicable" even as it is "compelling." It flourishes only when women of mixed ethnicity escape men's regulation and definition of them. In turn, lesbian desire leads to a focus on the physicality of the woman of mixed ethnicity's body and its ties to the African-American community. And, it interrupts the usual stories told about women of mixed ethnicity.

Larsen shapes the end of the text as a lesbian ending, not with what happens but with the effect on the reader of what happens. Larsen positions the reader to occupy Irene's position and feel her lesbian desire. The ending urges the reader to come back again and again to Clare's body before the window, to dwell upon her, to desire knowledge about her, and to revel in the pleasure of not knowing. That is precisely the position that Irene is in throughout the text. The text ventures that lesbian desire is, as Judith Roof explains, "the desire for desire" and heterosexual desire "the desire for mastery" (108-109). As such, the text's ending in irresolution evokes lesbian desire. No final answers about the African-American woman are forthcoming, thus frustrating any potential mastery over or phallic vision of the text. By killing off Clare in an ambiguous fashion, Larsen thwarts any final knowledge about the two female characters of her text, which leaves the reader, after all, like Clare and Irene, desiring the African-American female body in a lesbian fashion. ✱

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers of *The Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature* for their perceptive suggestions for revisions. In addition, I am grateful to Suzanne Juhasz, Estella Lauter, and Lisa Tatonetti for critical commentary on this essay at crucial stages in its development.

<sup>2</sup> See James Weldon Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912, 1927); Jessie Fauset, *There is Confusion* (1924) and *Plum Bun* (1929); Walter Francis White, *Flight* (1926); Claude McKay, *Home To Harlem* (1928); and Carl Van Vechten, *Nigger Heaven* (1926).

<sup>3</sup> I want to clarify my language. I began this essay by putting the word "mulatto" in quotation marks. I wish to emphasize that mulatto is a problematic term for a number of reasons. It derives from white society's racist definition of African Americans in animal terms, participates in a blood quantum version of race that suggests that racial heritage can actually be quantified, and references a highly constructed literary figure. Therefore,

I use the words “mulatto female character” and “mulatto woman/women” only to invoke a sense of the constructedness of race itself, whether white or black, the literariness of this particular figure, and the myths of blood quantum and race betrayal so central to the figure. When I discuss generally women with a complex background that includes ancestral as well as cultural ties to both whites and African Americans, I will use the term women of mixed ethnicity. With this phrase, I also wish to emphasize that some textual images, including those of Irene and Clare, reveal the racial and cultural complexity of women rather than simply their allegiance to one race or the other. Finally, I use the terms black and African-American to refer to writers, traditions, or characters that consciously acknowledge and draw from African-American ancestry, identity, community, and culture, thereby, emphasizing race as a choice rather than a biological imperative. For a discussion of the word mulatto, see Samira Kawash, *Dislocating the Color Line: Identity, Hybridity, and Singularity in African-American Literature* (5).

<sup>4</sup> Theorists and literary critics writing on queerness and race together have noted the complex way homophobia operates in the black community to affirm African-American race consciousness. Phillip Brian Harper points out that, at times, within black communities, effeminacy and gay male sexuality are conflated and, further, linked with whiteness, while masculinity and heterosexuality are inextricably combined to stand as signs of blackness. Similarly, Michael Cobb reveals that this tendency to use sexual and gender markers to define race inflected the Harlem Renaissance period. In Cobb's reading, even those Harlem Renaissance writers who tried to challenge contemporary notions of race, ultimately, ended up relaying the New Negro movement's anxiety about homosexuality by affirming that one could not be black and homosexual and still live. While the idea that Harlem in the 1920s was sexually liberatory, even in regard to homosexuality, has become the stuff of legends, Lillian Faderman claims that the black community of Harlem actually mirrored the general homophobia dominant within white culture. Faderman suggests that the negative representations of lesbians generated in the Harlem Renaissance capture a general dis-ease with lesbians in the black community, even a “gentle contempt” for them. Clearly, heterosexism and homophobia inform the many affirmations of blackness in Harlem Renaissance discourse as blacks are linked to normative forms of heterosexuality and gender. As Siobhan B. Somerville points out, by the 1920s in American society generally, transgression against gender norms was conceived as transgressions against heterosexual norms. Therefore, one can read the desire to affirm blackness by proving that the characters operate within strict conventional gender and sexual norms as expressive of an anxiety, however repressed, about homosexuality and of a desire to expel this threat. (See Harper 11-12; Cobb 337; Faderman 69-70; and Somerville 54-55.)

<sup>5</sup> Long before Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, there are Larsen's invisible women, unseen and unseeing. In *Invisible Man*, Ellison suggests that no one sees his unnamed narrator precisely because racist stereotypes interfere with the onlooker's perception of him. Too, the unnamed narrator is unable to see his own manipulation by others and their versions of what black means. Likewise, in *Passing*, Larsen shows that no one can see her two main characters, Clare and Irene, because popular ideas about race, sex, and gender make the onlooker blind to these women. Moreover, due to the discourse of blame surrounding

them, Clare and Irene are unaware of the infractions committed against them by African Americans and whites alike.

<sup>6</sup> For example, Ann duCille questions McDowell's lesbian reading but repeats McDowell's model of splitting black female sexuality from race. For duCille, Clare represents the erotic black female self and Irene the racial black female self (103-105). Jacquelyn McLendon repeats this idea with a twist. In McLendon's reading, Clare represents erotic sexuality and Irene's desire to kill Clare is a desire to destroy simultaneously her internalized racism and her sexualized body. Such a reading makes Clare's body itself as well as Irene's interest in Clare signs of racism (103-109). David Blackmore repeats McDowell's reading of lesbian desire without revision (475-476).

<sup>7</sup> In a slight twist, in Johnson's text, the African-American mother's original choice of the unconventional route lands her son in a triangle where white people signify the scorned possibility, first a white man and, later, a white woman. In contrast, African-American men fighting on behalf of blacks for the political cause of racial equality represent the positive choice within the triangle of desire.

<sup>8</sup> For an excellent analysis of how the "color line" is a fiction and, yet, one with dramatic consequences for material lives, see Kawash (5-13, 20-21).

<sup>9</sup> My own approach to Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen differentiates them based on the rhetorical use of African-American women within their texts. For a quite different account of Fauset and Larsen, one that makes them equals in positively portraying African-American women and originators of tests imaging African-American female sensuality, see Ann duCille (86-109).

<sup>10</sup> The mother hierarchizes white heritage and the son's father over African-American ancestry and herself, explaining the no-name narrator's racial heritage in this way: "No, I am not white, but you—your father is one of the greatest men in the country—the best blood of the South is in you—." Such language indicates the mother's internalized racism as she implicitly identifies herself as the inferior to men like her lover and her own son who are supposedly infused with the "best blood" (Johnson 12).

<sup>11</sup> As a censure of African-American women's pursuit of careers in white society, the plot of *There is Confusion* offers a decided negative version of causality: servitude to an illusion about whites brings about both African-American women's sense of vocation and, what the text defines as, female masculinity. Obviously, if African-American women's vocational aspirations and masculinity develop only in relation to a false reality regarding whites, they stand as negative products for Fauset of a warped white value system.

<sup>12</sup> In *Plum Bun*, the main female character's choice of whiteness virtually kills off the African-American father. When Angela escorts her mother to a whites-only hospital after she faints while they are on a shopping spree and passing for white, Junius, the admitted "patriarch" of the family, masquerades as the two women's chauffeur—precisely the role he performed in the employment of a white actress—in order not to endanger his wife's

access to health care. His subsequent exile from the hospital because of his race and job status, however, leaves him subject to the harsh elements outdoors, resulting in his death.

<sup>13</sup> In contrast, Peter claims masculinity by establishing autonomy not only from whites but from African-American women: "No one but himself, not even Joanna, should captain his ship. He meant to be a successful surgeon, a responsible husband and father, a self-reliant man." The phrase "captain his ship" ties together autonomy, power, ownership, maleness, and profession, while the overt denial of Joanna's power over him marks a break from both his own recent past and his family history (Fauset, *There is Confusion* 292).

<sup>14</sup> McKay describes Rose as "mov[ing] down on [Jake] like a panther, swinging her hips in a wonderful, rhythmical motion. She sprung upon his neck and brought him down" and Miss Suzy and Miss Curdy as equally predatory: "Tight-faced, the men seemed only interested in drinking and gaming, while Suzy and Miss Curdy, guzzling hard, grew uglier. A jungle atmosphere pervaded the room, and, like shameless wild animals hungry for raw meat, the females savagely searched the eyes of the males" (McKay 149).

<sup>15</sup> For those who like their interpretations of lesbian desire backed up with biographical proof of concern with this experience, Thadious Davis bluntly states that "Larsen frequently associated with a literary and theater crowd that included lesbians, homosexuals, and bisexuals who were open in their sexual preferences" (325). In addition, Larsen's friends Van Vechten and Dorothy Petersen were both bisexual, although Petersen did not proclaim herself bisexual until after the publication of *Passing* (325).

<sup>16</sup> Through her work with census reports, Thadious Davis ventures a fascinating reading of Larsen's own life history. Her research reveals that Larsen's own nuclear family had a racial secret: the African-American father/husband passing for white in order to commune with the white mother/wife. Too, Davis speculates that Larsen was banished from the family to a boarding school due to her darker skin color (23-48).

<sup>17</sup> Thanks to the anonymous reviewer of *The Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature* who suggested that this idea about the relationship between fetishization and self-love be developed.

<sup>18</sup> Wall hedges a bit in reading the ending, stating that a "psychological suicide, if not a murderer, Irene too has played the game of passing and lost" (131). Yet, since this is the only weighing-in on the subject of the ending, it supports Irene as the murderer over and above any of the other characters. Disappointingly, Cutter's conclusion that Irene is Clare's murderer seems at odds with her brilliant reading of the text as "open and uncontainable," since, at the very end of her own essay, she closes down precisely what is elusive about the text's finale (96). McDowell concurs explicitly with Wall, connecting Irene's "banish[ment]" of Clare to her need to maintain lesbian desire as the repressed (xxix). McLendon views Irene as potentially killing Clare, the passing woman, in order to destroy her own internalized racism, the passing woman within (109).

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