

Crossing Over: Racial Passing and Racial Uplift in Nella Larsen's Fiction

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An attractive young woman sits on a train destined for New York. Leaving behind the remnants of her oppressive past, she begins to make plans for the future—a bright future bursting with opportunity and adventure. Pain, isolation, shame—all fade into the distance. Surely New York will be the answer. Surely the happiness that has eluded her for so long awaits her there. She, Helga Crane, will no longer be the illegitimate daughter of a Danish runaway and an African American gambler. She will simply become another young woman trying to make a life for herself in the city. A remark from her new employer interrupts Helga’s pleasant thoughts. “‘How is it that a nice girl like you can rush off on a wild goose chase like this at a moment’s notice. I should think your people’d object, or’d make inquiries, or something.’”¹ In an instant, Helga’s excitement gives way to embarrassment. After the young woman admits to a less than ideal parentage, her employer replies coldly, “‘I wouldn’t mention that my people are white, if I were you. Colored people won’t understand it, and after all it’s your own business.’”²

So begins Helga Crane’s journey to New York in Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand*. Published in 1928, Larsen’s debut novel tells the story of a mixed race woman searching for a stable identity within a racist and unstable society. The daughter of a white woman and a black man, Helga constantly reminds herself and others of the threat lurking beneath America’s strict racial code. When her employer discovers Helga’s heritage, Larsen writes, “The woman felt that the story, dealing as it did with race intermingling and possibly adultery, was beyond definite discussion. For among black people, as among white people, it is tacitly understood that these things are not mentioned—and therefore they do not exist.”³ Helga is thus robbed of her true identity. Because she threatens the strict “color line” that guides all of American life, the mixed race Helga—the real Helga—cannot exist. According to Martha J. Cutter, “Helga Crane attempts to use ‘passing’

¹ Nella Larsen, *The Complete Fiction of Nella Larsen*, New York: Random House, 2001, 70.

² Larsen, 74.

³ Larsen, 72.

as a way of finding a unitary sense of identity—a sense of identity structured around *one* role, a role that somehow corresponds to her ‘essential self.’”⁴ Although Helga’s dark skin prevents her from passing for white, she in a sense passes for black by denying, or at least omitting, her white ancestry. Instead, she finds solace in a number of different identities. In Cutter’s words, she passes as “an exotic Other, a committed teacher, an art object, a devout Christian, a proponent of racial uplift, [and] a dutiful mother.”⁵

As the title of her second novel *Passing* suggests, Larsen continued to explore the African American search for identity. *Passing*, published in 1929, focuses more on the phenomenon written about so often during the 1920s—the idea of an African American passing for white. In the July 1929 issue of *The Crisis*, W.E.B. Du Bois wrote, “If it [*Passing*] did not treat a forbidden subject—the inter-marriage of a stodgy middle-class white man to a very beautiful and selfish octoroon—it would have an excellent chance to be hailed, selected and recommended. As it is, it will only be given the ‘silence.’”⁶ Yet Larsen was not the only, nor was she the first, African American author to explore such a “forbidden subject.”⁷ *Passing* began long before emancipation, but it became a prevalent topic in African American fiction during the early twentieth century. Along with Walter White and Jessie Fauset, Larsen became the face of the “New Negro” movement. According to Kevin Gaines, this was a “race consciousness that challenged racial uplift ideology’s accommodation to the racial and economic status quo . . . a younger black intelligentsia of artists and writers critical of established black leadership and given to satirizing professional race uplifters.”⁸

⁴ Martha J. Cutter, “Sliding Significations: Passing as a Narrative and Textual Strategy in Nella Larsen’s Fiction,” *Passing and the Fictions of Identity*, Elaine K. Ginsberg, ed., Durham: Duke University Press, 1996, 75.

⁵ Cutter, “Sliding Significations,” 75.

⁶ W. E. B. Du Bois, “Browsing Reader,” *The Crisis*, July 1929, 234.

⁷ Du Bois, “Browsing Reader,” 234.

⁸ Kevin K. Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996, 11.

In his review of Larsen's *Passing*, Du Bois goes on to describe racial passing as

a petty, silly matter of no real importance which another generation will comprehend with great difficulty. But today, and in the minds of most white Americans, it is a matter of tremendous moral import. One may deceive as to killing, stealing and adultery, but you must tell your friend that you're 'colored' or suffer a very material hell fire in this world if not in the next.⁹

But if passing was a "petty, silly matter," as Du Bois ironically states, why did it become so important during the early twentieth century?¹⁰ According to Du Bois, "The reason of all this, is of course that so many white people in America either know or fear that they have Negro blood."¹¹ Du Bois's explanation certainly makes sense. Fundamental to the myth of white supremacy is the juxtaposition of the civilized or superior majority with the inferior Other. By classifying African Americans as biologically different from and inferior to whites, the white majority justified the enslavement and, later, the political and social oppression of black Americans. America's understanding of race thus relies heavily on the visible differences between whites and African Americans. Interracial couples posed a threat to the socially constructed color line almost immediately by producing children who did not fit under the simple label of black or white. Instead, they were considered mulatto—a word that reveals much about white notions of miscegenation. Derived from the Spanish word for "young mule," mulatto essentially describes the infertile offspring of two distinct species. Not quite a horse and not quite a donkey, the mule lacks a cohesive identity and the ability to reproduce itself.¹² Whites did not just aesthetically differentiate themselves from blacks; they basically considered African Americans a distinct and inferior species. One's race came to be determined by one's "blood," or ancestry. The white fear of "Negro blood" was real, for the entire white social structure

⁹ Du Bois, "Browsing Reader," 234.

¹⁰ Du Bois, "Browsing Reader," 234

¹¹ Du Bois, "Browsing Reader," 234.

¹² Houston Roberson, personal interview, December 3, 2008.

predicated on it. But that reality still does not explain why passing was such a prevalent topic within the African American community.

Larsen's fiction reveals an inextricable link between the early twentieth century idea of "uplifting the race" and African American reactions to passing. Within the black community during these years, middle class blacks sought to improve the African American public image through upholding and exemplifying white middle class values.¹³ Although they did not pass for white, middle class blacks certainly assumed white ideals. The characters in Larsen's fiction are thus trapped in a complicated system that rails against social inequality while it espouses the oppressive structures of the dominant white culture.¹⁴ Larsen's *Quicksand* and *Passing*, as well as articles from black newspapers during the early twentieth century, reveal complex feelings about the passing phenomenon. To pass for white was to secure economic opportunities unavailable to most African Americans, and to some degree blacks understood, while not fully accepting, the choice to cross over. Still, within the ideology of racial uplift, attempting to secure one's own economic comfort at the expense of the entire race was nothing short of betrayal.

As Larsen's main female protagonists search for their true identities within a racist and patriarchal society, they struggle with DuBois's idea of "double consciousness." Bombarded with white ideals of beauty, respectability, and self-assertion, blacks were nevertheless denied the achievement of these ideals. African Americans instead viewed themselves through the prejudiced lens of the dominant white culture. Through racial passing, many black Americans hoped to obtain a more cohesive identity. But passing rarely if ever delivered on this promise. Within the African American community, gender also significantly influenced reactions to

¹³ Gaines, 4.

¹⁴ Gaines, 5.

passing. For men, passing was often associated with gender passing, rendering them somehow more effeminate in the eyes of black Americans. Women did not face quite the same dilemma; that is, women who passed for white were not considered less feminine. Yet they also faced their own gender specific issues. The struggle for black women who passed was the notion that they possessed the body of a white woman but the heightened sex drive of the black Jezebel.¹⁵ Larsen focuses more on the experiences of black women, who found themselves forced into an oppressive domestic role in an effort to uplift the race and affirm the masculinity of black men. For Larsen's female characters, passing provided an escape from domesticity.

Of course the very idea of passing points to the fluidity of race.¹⁶ According to Gayle Wald, "Racial passing can 'work,' in other words, only because race is more liquid and dynamic, more variable and random, than it is conventionally represented to be within hegemonic discourse."¹⁷ Even as Larsen's characters struggle with their racial identity, readers are reminded that race is a social, rather than a biological, construct. Yet in the words of Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, whether race "is an ideological rather than a biological fact does not deny that ideology has real effects on people's lives."¹⁸ Perhaps no one reveals this better than the characters in Nella Larsen's fiction.

"Double-Consciousness"¹⁹

In *The Souls of Black Folk*, W. E. B. Du Bois described the African American identity as "a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused

¹⁵ Roberson, personal interview.

¹⁶ Gayle Wald, *Crossing the Line: Racial Passing in Twentieth-Century U. S. Literature and Culture*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2000, 6.

¹⁷ Wald, 6.

¹⁸ Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "African-American Women's History," 255, quoted in Martha Hodes, *White Women, Black Men: Illicit Sex in the 19th-Century South* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 9.

¹⁹ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co., 1940, 3.

contempt and pity.”²⁰ The theme of forming and accepting one’s concept of self is indeed prevalent throughout American literature. In the words of Cornel West, “People, especially oppressed people, are hungry for identity, meaning, and self-worth.”²¹ Yet within African American fiction, the quest for an established identity is more than a personal journey of self-exploration and discovery. It is a journey rooted in the past, a pursuit of that elusive happiness guaranteed to all Americans yet conferred only to a select few. From the very beginning, whites denied African Americans access to the American Dream—the belief that all American citizens can pursue and realize their goals through hard work and self-definition. In a nation founded on the declaration that “all men are created equal,” slavery exposed the hypocrisy and inequality deeply embedded within American culture. Legally stripped of their humanity, slaves lacked the most fundamental of rights—the right to own oneself. From the moment the first African slave arrived on American soil, whites consciously attempted to destroy any semblance of self-respect by robbing slaves of their identity. Deprived of their African names, culture, religion, and language, slaves came to America for one purpose only—to serve the white man. By the time of emancipation, African Americans had come a long way in creating their own culture within the confines of slavery and white society. But to whites, African Americans fell under one of several categories: lazy Sambos, wild pickaninnies, loyal Mammies, smiling coons, Uncle Toms, and dancing Jim Crows.²² These stereotypes dominated American popular culture throughout much of the twentieth century.

Viewed negatively by white society, African Americans sought to refute racism by creating a positive identity for themselves as well as their entire race.²³ The accomplishments and

²⁰ Du Bois, *Souls*, 3.

²¹ Cornel West, *Race Matters*, New York: Vintage Books, 1993.

²² *Ethnic Notions*, dir. Marlon Riggs, California Newsreel, 1986.

²³ Gaines, 3.

failures of one man or woman thus represented the accomplishments and failures of all African Americans. Both black and American, they struggled to achieve white notions of respectability in order to prove their racial equality as well as their status as citizens.²⁴ According to Du Bois, the African American thus “ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”²⁵ “The history of the American Negro,” he goes on to argue, “is the history of this strife,—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self.”²⁶ Despite his gendered language, Du Bois sums up in this sentence the unique plight of African Americans—a plight of double-consciousness represented and explored throughout African American literature. Passing was an often desperate attempt to attain a “truer self” by fair-skinned African Americans, who longed for an unfragmented identity and an escape from the inner-struggle of being black in a white-obsessed society.

For characters in Nella Larsen’s fiction, the struggle to attain a positive identity frequently correlates to white standards of beauty, success, and respectability. As Larsen’s characters pass for white, either by literally claiming to be white or by assuming white ideals, Larsen vacillates between criticism and admiration. In *Quicksand*, for example, Helga contemplates the black woman’s struggle for white standards of beauty, “wondering for the hundredth time just what form of vanity it was that had induced an intelligent girl like Margaret Creighton to turn what was probably nice lively crinkly hair, perfectly suited to her smooth dark skin and agreeable round features, into a dead straight, greasy, ugly mess.”²⁷ Perhaps most striking in her

²⁴ Gaines, 3.

²⁵ Du Bois, *Souls*, 3.

²⁶ Du Bois, *Souls*, 4.

²⁷ Larsen, 48.

description is Larsen's use of the word "ugly." An unquestionably offensive word, it was often associated with black skin and black features.²⁸ Larsen offers a perversion of that association, instead referring to "straight, greasy" hair—a feature associated with whiteness—as aesthetically displeasing. Larsen, however, does not simply reverse the standard of beauty. Helga's observation implies not that all white features are ugly; rather, they become ugly only when black women reject their own beauty in order to mimic that of their white counterparts.

Of course Helga need not wonder—Larsen and the reader know very well "what form of vanity" leads to Margaret's "greasy" hair.²⁹ It is the same "vanity" found in black newspapers, where editors placed advertisements for skin bleaching and hair straightening products beside articles declaring race pride.³⁰ It is the "vanity" that later leads Helga to lament, "[Negroes] didn't want to be like themselves. What they wanted, asked for, begged for, was to be like their white overlords. They were ashamed to be Negroes, but not ashamed to beg to be something else. Something inferior. Not quite genuine. Too bad!"³¹ Constantly inundated with white ideals of beauty and success, black men and women felt torn between their two selves. Were they Americans first? That is, were they to adhere to the dominant culture's ideals? Or were they part of the black race, with their own unique identity and culture?³²

Perhaps no character in *Quicksand* represents this dichotomy—or double consciousness—better than Anne Grey. Even her name conveys color confusion, for gray is a diluted color that lingers somewhere between black and white. Anne "hated white people with a deep and burning hatred, with the kind of hatred which, finding itself held in sufficiently numerous groups, was

²⁸ Thomas Kochman, *Black and White Styles in Conflict*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983.

²⁹ Larsen, 48.

³⁰ For a few such examples, see "Display Ad 31," *The Chicago Defender*, 18 August 1917, p. 8; "Display Ad 23," *The Chicago Defender*, 15 December 1917, p. 9; "Display Ad 68," *The Chicago Defender*, 25 April 1925, A5; *The Crisis*, October 1929.

³¹ Larsen, p. 104.

³² Du Bois, *Souls*, 3-4.

capable someday, on some great provocation, of bursting into dangerously malignant flames.”³³

Yet in the next paragraph, Larsen writes,

But [Anne] aped [white people’s] clothes, their manners, and their gracious ways of living. While proclaiming loudly the undiluted good of all things Negro, she yet disliked the songs, the dances, and the softly blurred speech of the race. Toward these things she showed only a disdainful contempt, tinged sometimes with a faint amusement. Theoretically, however, she stood for the immediate advancement of all things Negroid, and was in revolt against social inequality.³⁴

In order to prove her worth as an American citizen, Anne displays outward, material signs of success. Her money, clothes, and demeanor all serve to better the African American race in the eyes of white society. She is, after all, fervently opposed to social inequality, as Larsen ironically writes. Yet in trying to prove the equality of African Americans, she has in effect suppressed part of herself. Although she dedicates her time and money to uplifting the race, and although she vehemently decries the white man for his mistreatment of African Americans, Anne herself has taken on the racist notions of the people she claims to hate. In *Uplifting the Race*, Gaines argues that this “double-consciousness captures the tragic difficulty of *racial* uplift ideology: its continuing struggle against an *intellectual* dependence on dominant ideologies of whiteness and white constructions of blackness.”³⁵ Operating within the socially constructed confines of race, Anne becomes a victim as well as a proponent of her racist society. “In short,” Gaines states, “desperation, ambition, and the imperatives of survival might produce an ostensibly positive black identity in simplistic, reductive terms that replicate the racist and sexist cultural codes of the oppressive society.”³⁶

It is within this oppressive, race-conscious society that African Americans struggled to find and defend their identity. Not only did they face racism from their white oppressors; they found

³³ Larsen, 80.

³⁴ Larsen, 80.

³⁵ Gaines, 9.

³⁶ Gaines, 5.

their every action scrutinized within the African American community in an effort to alleviate racism. It is not surprising that many fair-skinned African Americans sought refuge in passing for white. In the words of James Weldon Johnson, author of *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* published in 1912, “Prejudice against the Negro is exerting a pressure, which, in New York and other large cities where the opportunity is open, is actually and constantly forcing an unascertainable number of fair-complexioned colored people over into the white race.”³⁷

In Larsen’s *Passing*, Clare Kendry passes for white when given the opportunity. Yet for all of Larsen’s criticism of the assumption of white ideals by middle class blacks, she seems to admire Clare. The novel, and therefore Clare herself, is seen through the eyes of Irene Redfield, a middle-class African American who, despite her ability to pass, does so only when convenient. Irene finds Clare both beautiful and repulsive, intriguing yet somehow disconcerting. As Irene studies Clare’s features, she describes her “arresting eyes, slow and mesmeric, and with, for all of their warmth, something withdrawn and secret about them. Ah! Surely! They were Negro eyes! Mysterious and concealing. And set in that ivory face under that bright hair, there was about them something exotic.”³⁸ Larsen portrays Clare as the embodiment of racial ambiguity, a mysterious woman who physically and figuratively bridges the gap between white and black. Yet even in her description, Irene echoes a racial stereotype. By calling Clare’s “Negro” eyes “exotic,” Irene reveals the extent to which dominant white notions of blackness, namely the idea of black as the “exotic other,” have infiltrated her own thinking.

Despite finding wealth and security as a white woman, Clare cannot escape her roots. She personifies DuBois’s idea of double-consciousness. In a letter to Irene, Clare seems to regret her choice to pass, claiming, “For I am lonely, so lonely . . . You can’t know how in this pale life

³⁷ James Weldon Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, Boston: Sherman, French & Company, 1912, ii.

³⁸ Larsen, 191.

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.”³⁹ And yet only a few pages later, she questions Irene's decision to embrace her African American identity: ““You know, ‘Rene, I’ve often wondered why more colored girls, girls like you and Margaret Hammer and Esther Dawson and—oh, lots of others—never ‘passed’ over. It’s such a frightfully easy thing to do. If one’s the type, all that’s needed is a little nerve.”⁴⁰ Later she changes her mind again, telling Irene that “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.”⁴¹ Her uncertainty, her “two-ness,” plagues Clare throughout the novel.⁴²

As Clare juggles her life as a white woman with her desire to visit Harlem, the dangers of passing become apparent. In *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, Johnson expresses his own passing experience as “playing with fire, and I feel the thrill which accompanies that most fascinating pastime; and, back of it all, I think I find a sort of savage and diabolical desire to gather up all the little tragedies of my life, and turn them into a practical joke on society.”⁴³ In *Passing*, Irene emphasizes the danger of hiding one's identity, describing it as a “hazardous business,” a “breaking away from all that was familiar and friendly to take one's chance in another environment, not entirely strange, perhaps, but certainly not entirely friendly.”⁴⁴ To pass for white was to shed the “Negro” label, a label with which Clare became all too familiar during her childhood. After her father's death, Clare's white aunts treated her more like domestic labor than a beloved niece. Pointing to her “Negro blood,” they ““weren't quite sure

³⁹ Larsen, 174.

⁴⁰ Larsen, 187.

⁴¹ Larsen, 208.

⁴² DuBois, *Souls*, 3.

⁴³ Johnson, 1.

⁴⁴ Larsen, 187.

that the good God hadn't intended the sons and daughters of Ham to sweat because he had poked fun at old man Noah once when he had taken a drop too much."⁴⁵ Clare's flippant reference to the biblical justification of racism is anything but, pointing to its ludicrous nature while emphasizing its devastating effects. For African Americans, passing for white provided an escape no doubt, but it also brought with it new anxieties and dangers. Of course Clare constantly runs the risk of someone, especially her husband, discovering her secret. Married to a self-proclaimed bigot, Clare fears giving birth to a dark child. So terrified is she that having another child is simply not an option. As she says, "I nearly died of terror the whole nine months before Margery was born for fear that she might be dark. Thank goodness, she turned out all right. But I'll never risk it again. Never! The strain is simply too—too hellish."⁴⁶ While she feels isolated and somewhat empty masquerading as a white woman, Clare nevertheless associates dark skin with ugliness and exposure.

Given Clare's precarious circumstances, perhaps one can understand—without fully accepting—her fears. But Gertrude, a light-skinned, openly African American woman, also declares that "nobody wants a dark child."⁴⁷ On the surface, such an assertion from a black woman seems surprising, if not appalling. According to Gaines, however, within the African American community "it was understood that the 'less fortunate' included darker-complexioned blacks," and "dark skin and other black physical traits were 'handicaps.'"⁴⁸ Once again blacks found themselves torn between race pride and living in a racist, white society. In a nation that preached the goodness of all things white, to have lighter skin was to come closer to that ideal. While a sign of miscegenation, a topic many African Americans found unacceptable, lighter skin

⁴⁵ Larsen, 188.

⁴⁶ Larsen, 197.

⁴⁷ Larsen, 197.

⁴⁸ Gaines, 8.

led to greater economic and social opportunities. Yet Gaines argues that a darker complexion “might be ‘overlooked’ if the persons ‘had money or behavior.’”⁴⁹ Interestingly, it is Gertrude, the wife of a butcher, who professes fear and hatred of dark skin, while Irene, the wife of a wealthy doctor, takes pride in her “dark” son.⁵⁰

As the narrator, Irene spends much of her time contemplating Clare’s passing. Listening to her old acquaintance’s experience, Irene’s “reason partly agreed, her instinct wholly rebelled. And she could not say why It was as if the woman sitting on the other side of the table, a girl she had known, who had done this rather dangerous and, to Irene Redfield, abhorrent thing successfully and had announced herself well satisfied, had for her a fascination, strange and compelling.”⁵¹ Irene continues to fluctuate between disgust and curiosity throughout *Passing*. Other African Americans in the novel are not so indecisive. When childhood friends hear rumors of Clare’s passing for white, they discuss it in hushed and indignant whispers.⁵² After they discover her secret, former black friends refuse to acknowledge Clare, pretending that she does not exist.⁵³ To them, Clare’s rejection of her racial identity is unforgivable, an affront to the race and thus a rejection of her friends. To Clare, passing is a means to “get away, to be a person and not a charity or a problem, or even a daughter of the indiscreet Ham.”⁵⁴ Candidly confessing her contempt for blackness, Clare also realizes the economic and social benefits of being white: “Then, too, I wanted things. I knew I wasn’t bad-looking and that I could ‘pass.’”⁵⁵ Thus, in Cutter’s words, “‘passing’ becomes a mechanism to get what she [Clare] wants—which is not a singular identity, an identity that corresponds to a theoretical inner self, but an identity that can

⁴⁹ Gaines, 8.

⁵⁰ Larsen, 198.

⁵¹ Larsen, 190.

⁵² Larsen, 181-82.

⁵³ Larsen, 183.

⁵⁴ Larsen, 188.

⁵⁵ Larsen, 188.

escape the enclosures of race, class, and sexuality, enclosures that would limit her ‘having’ ways.”⁵⁶

The complex attitudes of Larsen’s characters toward passing reflect similar sentiments during the early twentieth century. Printed in the February 9, 1918 issue of *The Chicago Defender*, an article entitled “Losing Our Identity” encouraged race as well as national pride. According to the author, “Every real man or woman dislikes masquerading, and many of the ‘passers’ are coming out from under cover and standing on their own two feet.”⁵⁷ The article goes on to argue, “The advantages are far greater than the disadvantages, as the thoughtful are beginning to see. We must hold fast to our 100 per cent American slogan, defend the flag in a manner that will make the other fellow look like a ‘piker,’ and ever speak with pride of our race identity.”⁵⁸ By yoking together racial pride and patriotism, the article’s author echoes Du Bois’s idea of the split self, the “American” and the “Negro.” According to this author, one must constantly show pride of being both American and black, perhaps attempting to merge “his double self into a better and truer self.”⁵⁹ As Brian Redfield in Larsen’s *Passing* will later reveal, this is no easy task.

In “The Conservation of Races,” Du Bois claimed that “the history of the world is the history, not of individuals, but of groups, not of nations, but of races, and he who ignores or seeks to override the race idea in human history ignores and overrides the central thought of all history.”⁶⁰ Although he believes in the reality of race, Du Bois does not necessarily believe in biological essentialism. Yet he does argue that African Americans possess a unique history and culture that in effect separate them from other groups. The early twentieth century saw great interest in

⁵⁶ Cutter, 84.

⁵⁷ Du Bois, *Souls*, 4.

⁵⁸ “Losing Our Identity,” *The Chicago Defender*, February 9, 1918, ProQuest Historical Newspapers, <http://www.proquest.com>, accessed September 18, 2008.

⁵⁹ Du Bois, *Souls*, 4.

⁶⁰ W. E. B. Du Bois, “The Conservation of Races,” in *African-American Political Thought 1850-1920*, ed. Howard Brotz, 485 (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1993).

racial essentialism, and Du Bois's "double consciousness" affirms the idea, although it focuses on the historical and sociological aspects rather than biological differences between the races. Distinct racial identities exist because years of racial categorization and oppression have shaped the individuals belonging to each race.

In a 1929 issue of *The Chicago Defender*, author John Webster urges blacks to fight against prejudice and "do or die."⁶¹ Race pride was encouraged, for according to racial uplift ideology, one's individual behavior reflected on the race as a whole. To hide one's African American identity was a rejection of blackness. Many believed that by concealing their African American ancestry, passers aligned themselves with the dominant culture in believing that "not white" necessarily meant "inferior." Interestingly enough, Webster encourages blacks to "fight until we are either killed or absorbed into the oppressing race."⁶² Within Webster's statement lies an acknowledgement of miscegenation and a subtle reference to those individuals who had already become "absorbed" into the white race.⁶³ In this case, passing seems almost a solution to—rather than a perpetuation of—prejudice.

Only a few years earlier, another article in *The Chicago Defender* described an African American man who, "finding that it was hard to make a living wage and being light in color," opened his own business and passed for white.⁶⁴ The subtitle of the article says it all:

Whites Must Lift Embargo of Color if They Don't Want the X-Colored Man Passing in and Out of His Line—France Pays No Attention, All She Asks, Are You a Citizen--Rollings Lost Many Staunch Friends, Only Came to South Side at Night Time--Death Must Have Been Sweeter than to Live a Hounded Life--Rollings Not to Blame, Only Way He Could Get Opportunity to Make Living--More Men and Women Who Can Pass Should Do Same.⁶⁵

⁶¹ John R. Webster, "We Must 'Do or Die,'" *The Chicago Defender*, 3 August 1929, ProQuest Historical Newspapers, <http://www.proquest.com>, accessed 18 September 2008.

⁶² Webster.

⁶³ Webster.

⁶⁴ "Asses for White to Get Living Wages," *The Chicago Defender*, August 15, 1914, ProQuest Historical Newspapers, <http://www.proquest.com> (accessed November 18, 2008).

⁶⁵ "Asses for White."

The complex and conflicting ideas associated with passing are quite evident in the above newspaper headline. While it encourages “more men and women who can pass” to do so, it also draws attention to the devastating consequences of such a life—“Lost Many Staunch Friends . . . Death Must Have Been Sweeter Than to Live a Hounded Life.”⁶⁶ The same contradiction occurs in Larsen’s *Passing*, in which Clare spends much of the novel debating whether her decision to pass was indeed worth the price. Larsen makes it clear that, although Clare and other African Americans hoped passing would provide a unified identity, it failed to fulfill that desire. In order to pass, one had to conceal a part of one’s self and often abandon or deny family members and friends. And although African Americans were reluctant to “out” those who passed, their reactions to passing were complex. While black Americans understood the reasons for someone’s choice to pass, they did not always agree or welcome it with open arms.

Passing in Relation to Gender

On September 18, 1915, an article in *The Chicago Defender* declared that “thousands” of African Americans “have gone over to the other side and are ‘passing.’”⁶⁷ Claiming that “the reason for their leaving is obvious,” the article attributed passing to a lack of “‘Opportunities,’ the one thing we all crave, and the one thing that is the most difficult for the man of dark skin to find.”⁶⁸ While assuming whiteness provided economic opportunities unavailable to most African Americans, the article’s gendered language points to the more complex reasons for passing. As Wald states, race, class, and gender are “mutually reinforcing and inextricably linked.”⁶⁹ During the early twentieth century, middle class African Americans sought respectability in the eyes of

⁶⁶ “Asses for White.”

⁶⁷ “The Melting Pot,” *The Chicago Defender*, 18 September 1915, ProQuest Historical Newspapers, <http://www.proquest.com> (accessed November 18, 2008).

⁶⁸ “The Melting Pot,” *Chicago Defender*

⁶⁹ Wald, 9.

whites as well as fellow blacks. According to Gaines, this “often meant denouncing nonconformity to patriarchal gender conventions and bourgeois morality.”⁷⁰ Thus, for African American men, “to be the patriarch, the master of one’s family, was ardently desired” and considered “an essential prerequisite of respectability, civilization, and progress.”⁷¹ African American women occupied the domestic sphere, assuming the role of homemaker, mother, and moral leader.⁷² Far from denouncing white notions of masculinity and femininity, middle class blacks believed that assuming their gender roles would inevitably lead to greater economic and social opportunities.⁷³

Yet even as racial uplift ideology extolled the virtues of patriarchy and domesticity, the majority of African Americans could not achieve this ideal. They were in a difficult position—relentlessly inundated with notions of ideal manhood and womanhood, yet only partially allowed to fulfill their prescribed gender roles. Although black men felt obligated to provide for their families, employment opportunities often eluded them. Unable to serve as the family protector and provider inevitably influenced the way black men viewed themselves. To stay at home was simply not an option for many black women, who frequently found work within the private domestic sphere of white women in order to support themselves and their families.⁷⁴ But according to the principles of racial uplift, achieving success for the race as a whole far outweighed one’s individual accomplishments and failures. Masculinity became not only defined by a man’s individual role as master of the family; rather, black men became masters of their race. These “race men” fought for racial equality and uplift, putting the welfare and

⁷⁰ Gaines, 5.

⁷¹ Gaines, 169.

⁷² Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993, 29.

⁷³ Gaines, 169.

⁷⁴ All ideas in this paragraph thus far can be found in Gaines, 169-71.

protection of their people ahead of everything else.⁷⁵ Women, on the other hand, became the mothers of their race, providing examples of purity, temperance, and discipline.⁷⁶

In *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, one of the first major African American novels of the twentieth century to explore racial passing, James Weldon Johnson tackles the conception of black masculinity within the framework of racial uplift. The ex-colored man struggles with his decision to pass for white at the end of Johnson's novel. Contemplating his current situation masquerading as a white man, he claims, "It is difficult for me to analyze my feelings concerning my present position in the world. Sometimes it seems to me that I have never really been a Negro, that I have been only a privileged spectator of their inner life; at other times I feel that I have been a coward, a deserter, and I am possessed by a strange longing for my mother's people."⁷⁷ To the ex-colored man, masculinity and courage spring not from personal economic gain but from "making history and a race."⁷⁸ That is, by choosing personal economic comfort, he shirks his responsibility as a black man to influence history and improve the African American race as a whole. Instead of taking part in the "glorious" task of helping his fellow African Americans, he has chosen to sell his "birthright for a mess of pottage."⁷⁹ Compared to great race men such as Booker T. Washington, the ex-colored man is "small and selfish . . . an ordinarily successful white man who has made a little money."⁸⁰ The white notion of masculinity, which equated manhood with economic success and patriarchal rule, becomes cowardly and in a sense feminized.⁸¹ It is not enough to simply make money; for black men, manhood lay in their position as leaders within the African American community.

⁷⁵ Wald, 38.

⁷⁶ Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 14.

⁷⁷ Johnson, 206-07.

⁷⁸ Johnson, 207.

⁷⁹ Johnson, 207.

⁸⁰ Johnson, 207.

⁸¹ Wald, 40.

According to Wald, the ex-colored man's "passing becomes the sign of a 'wasted' (that is, effeminized) masculinity."⁸² Along with passing comes vulnerability, for like Clare Kendry, Johnson's ex-colored man worries that someone will discover his secret. Concealing his identity makes the narrator "feel weak and powerless, like a man trying with his bare hands to break the iron bars of his prison cell."⁸³ Johnson's language conveys the extent to which passing has rendered him a slave, a prisoner in a cell of his own choosing. Only a few lines later, he speaks of the "'brand'" of blackness, a word that evokes animal imagery.⁸⁴ According to Andrea Hunter and James Earl Davis, "The social construction of Black manhood in mainstream American culture is rooted in the idea of 'Blacks as beast.'"⁸⁵ By claiming that black men lacked intelligence and were ruled by base or inhuman desires, white Americans not only excused the enslavement of African Americans but provided slavery with a noble justification. Unable to care for themselves, African Americans needed the control and protection of whites.⁸⁶ Ironically, it is the ex-colored man's decision to escape the "brand" of blackness that ultimately robs him of his masculinity. By the end of the novel, Johnson's language implies that passing has transformed the narrator into a bound slave and a caged beast.

The ex-colored man's sentiments at the end of the novel also reflect the existing notion of masculine virility. According to Gail Bederman, "By 1930, 'masculinity' had developed into the mix of 'masculine' ideals more familiar to twentieth-century Americans—ideals like aggressiveness, physical force, and male sexuality."⁸⁷ Rather than face their problems, black men who passed for white hid from them. Passing was deceitful, to be sure, but it was also

⁸² Wald, 40.

⁸³ Johnson, 204.

⁸⁴ Johnson, 206.

⁸⁵ Andrea G. Hunter and James Earl Davis, "Constructing Gender: An Exploration of Afro-American Men's Conceptualization of Manhood." *Gender and Society* 6.3 (Sept. 1992): 466.

⁸⁶ Hunter and Davis, 466.

⁸⁷ Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 19.

cowardly within the twentieth-century notion of aggressive and courageous masculinity.⁸⁸ It was seen as an easy way out, a choice that benefited no one. Passing for white robbed the racial uplift movement of potential black leaders while it rendered the male passer effeminate in the eyes of many.

A 1913 obituary for Major Buckner published in *The Chicago Defender* reveals the extent to which masculinity and racial uplift were closely tied. The obituary states, “Major Buckner was a statesman, orator, lecturer, soldier, lover of charity and a Christian gentleman. He put the interest of his race above self. He loved manhood and equality of all men.”⁸⁹ It goes on to say that “a braver, truer man never lived. Illinois loses a noble son.” The obituary’s language is clear; Major Buckner’s work on behalf of the race defines his manhood. He is “brave” and “noble,” fighting against oppression rather than hiding from it.

Although Larsen’s fiction tends to focus more on the unique struggles of black women, her minor male characters reveal prevailing notions of masculinity within the black community. In *Quicksand*, for example, James Vayle, Helga’s fellow teacher at Naxos, represents “the trivial hypocrisies and careless cruelties which were, unintentionally perhaps, a part of the Naxos policy of uplift.”⁹⁰ Coming from a respectable African American family, James espouses racial uplift ideology, especially its focus on the patriarchal family.⁹¹ When Helga confesses her hesitation to have children, asking “Why add any more unwanted, tortured Negroes to America?,” James reveals his own class and racial prejudices. He exclaims:

Don’t you see that if we—I mean people like us—don’t have children, the others will still have. That’s one of the things that’s the matter with us. The race is sterile at the top. Few, very few Negroes of the better class have children, and each

⁸⁸ Roberson, personal interview.

⁸⁹ “The Passing of Major Buckner,” *The Chicago Defender*, December 20, 1913, ProQuest Historical Newspapers, <http://www.proquest.com>, accessed 14 October 2008.

⁹⁰ Larsen, 40.

⁹¹ Daylanne English, “W. E. B. DuBois’s Family Crisis,” *American Literature* 72.2 (2000), 291-319.

generation has to struggle again with the obstacles of the preceding ones, lack of money, education, and background. I feel very strongly about this. We're the ones who must have the children if the race is to get anywhere.⁹²

In the above passage, James echoes the promotion of patriarchy and eugenics which came to dominate racial uplift ideology of the twentieth century.⁹³ Larsen satirizes the notion of racial uplift throughout her fiction, and James Vayle is no exception. James' prejudiced speech is meant to shock readers, not convince them of the benefits of eugenics. Du Bois, however, did just that in a 1922 issue of the *Crisis*. Lamenting that "the Negro has not been breeding for an object," Du Bois argued that African Americans must begin to "train and breed for brains, for efficiency, for beauty."⁹⁴ Racial passing certainly threatened this ideal of the educated, middle class African American family. In order to pass, individuals naturally possessed lighter skin and "whiter" features. As already discussed, lighter skinned African Americans usually fell within a higher economic status. They also came closer to the white standard of beauty. Passing thus resulted in a loss of valuable genetic material to the white race, a devastating blow to those who saw eugenics as a way to uplift black Americans.

Larsen continues her critique of middle class patriarchy throughout *Passing*. Although Irene and Clare dominate the novel, Irene's husband Brian plays a small yet significant role. Brian stands in sharp contrast to the earlier article in *The Chicago Defender*, in which "real men and women" were encouraged to support their country as well as their race.⁹⁵ Brian certainly fits the mold of ideal black masculinity. In fact, he could merit the same obituary as Major Buckner. He is a wealthy doctor, a man committed to helping the sick members of his race. Yet Larsen reveals that such lofty notions of masculinity ring hollow in a country that continues to oppress

⁹² Larsen

⁹³ English, 291.

⁹⁴ DuBois, "Opinion of W. E. B. Du Bois," *Crisis*, August 1922, 152–53, quoted in English, 293.

⁹⁵ "Losing Our Identity."

and lynch its black citizens. Brian expresses his contempt for his profession, saying, “‘Uplifting the brother’s no easy job. I’m as busy as a cat with fleas myself.’ And over his face there came a shadow. ‘Lord! how I hate sick people, and their stupid, meddling families, and smelly, dirty rooms, and climbing filthy steps in dark hallways.’”⁹⁶ To Brian, racial uplift ideology falls apart in a world where his son is called a “dirty nigger,” regardless of his respectability.⁹⁷

While black men played the role of protector and provider, black women served as moral and domestic leaders of the African American middle class family. But in an oppressive society, black women found it difficult to fulfill ideal notions of womanhood. As already discussed, racial uplift ideology worked within the framework of dominant white patriarchy. Black women thus found themselves subordinate to black men. When a lack of economic opportunities forced women to work outside of the home, black men tended to blame women rather than society.⁹⁸ According to Gaines, “Status classifications based on the wife’s presence in the home presented an unattainable standard for many black women and men. While Du Bois certainly dwelled on the moral failings of black men . . . women who failed to meet the lofty standard of motherhood appeared to bear the brunt of his findings on family instability.”⁹⁹ During the 1920s, prevailing notions of gender equated increased separation of the sexes with heightened civilization. In other words, men’s and women’s involvement in separate spheres was a sign of a highly evolved and civilized society.¹⁰⁰ From the beginning, slavery denied African Americans the ability to fully recognize their prescribed gender roles by discouraging and brutally fragmenting slave

⁹⁶ Larsen, 217.

⁹⁷ Larsen, 220.

⁹⁸ Gaines, 169.

⁹⁹ Gaines, 170.

¹⁰⁰ Bederman, 28.

families.¹⁰¹ After emancipation, whites continued this denial through economic and social subjugation of black Americans.

Gaines argues, “Discussion of gender relations revealed the problematic presence of black women within black middle-class ideology Black women’s respectability and moral authority were contingent on their relationship to black men.”¹⁰² Larsen portrays and criticizes this argument throughout her fiction. In *Quicksand*, Helga finds herself forced into traditional female roles even as she tries to escape them. When the novel opens, Helga teaches at Naxos, a school that hopes, in Helga’s words, to “destroy” the “charm and distinctiveness” of its students.¹⁰³ She is engaged to a fellow teacher, James Vayle, but their relationship lacks passion and true love. When Helga decides to escape Naxos, she contemplates their relationship, saying, “Certainly she had never loved him overwhelmingly, not, for example, as her mother must have loved her father, but she *had* liked him, and she had expected to love him, after their marriage. People generally did love then, she imagined. No, she had not loved James, but she had wanted to.”¹⁰⁴ The love between Helga’s mother and father is a forbidden love between a black man and a white woman. Larsen juxtaposes this socially unacceptable yet passionate union with Helga’s own suitable yet ultimately hollow and unfulfilling engagement to James. Marriage and domesticity encouraged by racial uplift ideology had more to do with image and respectability than actual love between two people. In order to be someone—that is, to fulfill her role as a respectable woman and uplifter of the race—Helga finds herself engaged to a man she barely knows and for whom she has no strong affection. To remain unmarried is unacceptable in the eyes of her middle class black society. As Gaines argues, Du Bois believed that single “working

¹⁰¹ Gaines, 170.

¹⁰² Gaines, 170.

¹⁰³ Larsen, 40.

¹⁰⁴ Larsen, 58.

black women embodied the weakness of the patriarchal family, a condition from which prostitution seemed only a short plunge.”¹⁰⁵

Helga realizes the absurdity of the situation and abandons Naxos in search of a new life. As Cutter explains, she uses “passing” as a means to escape socially imposed labels.¹⁰⁶ Helga cannot physically pass for white, but she constantly shifts her identity throughout the novel, never truly able to realize where she belongs within a racist patriarchy that sees her not as an individual but as a black woman. Each new identity offers, at least for a time, an escape and a sense of happiness and excitement. The novelty soon fades, however, and Helga is left with the same emptiness and dissatisfaction. Like African Americans who sought a cohesive identity by passing for white, Helga hopes to achieve happiness and a sense of self by abandoning her “old” fragmented self. And like those who passed for white, Helga finds that passing does not offer the cohesive identity she seeks.

Larsen uses color throughout the novel to exemplify the oppressive stereotypes perpetuated by middle class African Americans and white society. In *Righteous Discontent*, Higginbotham describes the “conservatism” of the racial uplift movement, stating that middle class blacks often “attributed institutional racism to the ‘negative’ public behavior of their people—as if rejection of ‘gaudy’ colors in dress, snuff dipping, baseball games on Sunday, and other forms of ‘improper’ decorum could eradicate the pervasive racial barriers that surrounded black Americans.”¹⁰⁷ Larsen refers to black women’s clothing, particularly the color of their attire, numerous times throughout *Quicksand*. At Naxos, Helga wrestles with her desire to wear beautiful clothing and the strict dress code enforced by the school’s faculty:

¹⁰⁵ Gaines, 169.

¹⁰⁶ Cutter, 75.

¹⁰⁷ Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 15.

Drab colors, mostly navy blue, black, brown, unrelieved, save for a scrap of white or tan about the hands and necks. Fragments of a speech made by the dean of women floated through her thoughts—‘Bright colors are vulgar’—‘Black, gray, brown, and navy blue are the most becoming colors for colored people’—‘Dark-complected people shouldn’t wear yellow, or green, or red.’—The dean was a woman from one of the ‘first families’—a great ‘race’ woman; she, Helga Crane, a despised mulatto; but some unanalyzed driving spirit of loyalty to the inherent racial need for gorgeousness told her that bright colors *were* fitting and that dark-complexioned people *should* wear yellow, green, and red. Black, brown, and gray were ruinous to them, actually destroyed the luminous tones lurking in their dusky skins Why, she wondered, didn’t someone write *A Plea for Color?*”

Even as Helga critiques such behavior, she supports the idea of racial essentialism by referring to her “driving spirit of loyalty to the inherent racial need” for beauty. The desire for beauty is, after all, not restricted to African Americans. Still, this passage occurs at the beginning of the novel. Helga’s time at Naxos has inevitably influenced her idea of race. Only at the end of the book, after experiencing the plight of the impoverished black masses, does Helga truly change her thinking of race and racial uplift.

When Helga visits Denmark, her white relatives dress her in beautiful, bright colors. Helga initially finds the so-called “gaudy” colors exciting, but she ultimately realizes that her white relatives impose yet another stereotypical image upon her. Helga enjoys her time in Denmark, where she experiences little overt racism from the overwhelmingly white population. But she discovers that her white aunt and uncle encourage colorful clothing in order to create an “exotic Other” to display to their friends.¹⁰⁸ Middle class blacks’ aversion to bright colors was a reaction against the white stereotype of blacks as exotic and savage. Trying to escape one enclosure, Helga only finds herself trapped in another socially constructed notion of black womanhood—the notion of black women as exotic and hypersexual. No matter how many times Helga reinvents herself, she inevitably falls victim to society’s imposed racial and gender constructs.

¹⁰⁸ Cutter, 75.

Marrying the Reverend frees Helga of her Jezebel image, but it is a choice that will ultimately kill her.

For a time, Helga holds onto the ideology of racial uplift, even encouraging the poor black women of her husband's church to improve their oppressed and overworked status by exemplifying middle class values of beauty and hygiene. But Larsen writes:

When she [Helga] went about to try to interest the women in what she considered more appropriate clothing and in inexpensive ways of improving their homes according to her ideas of beauty She was unaware that afterward they would shake their heads sullenly over their washtubs and ironing boards. And that among themselves they talked with amusement, or anger, of 'dat uppity, meddlin' No'the'nah.¹⁰⁹

Helga soon learns that middle class respectability matters little when one is poor, oppressed, burdened with ten children, and married to an overworked, domineering husband. Like Brian in *Passing*, Helga finds that racial uplift ideology is futile in a nation plagued by institutional racism. According to Larsen, the majority of African Americans, who found themselves trapped in a vicious system of white racism and poverty, did not benefit from a respectable black middle class.

In Larsen's *Passing*, Clare Kendry passes for white in order to escape poverty and domestic labor. Like many African American women, Clare spends her early life working in the private domestic sphere of white women.¹¹⁰ Because Clare has African American ancestry, her white aunts assume their niece possesses an inherent skill and disposition for labor. But as previously mentioned, Clare does not choose to pass simply for economic reasons. By passing for white, Clare hopes to escape her society's racial, gender, and class enclosures.¹¹¹ In this, Clare mirrors Helga Crane in *Quicksand*, although Clare's blonde hair and fair skin allow her to actually cross

¹⁰⁹ Larsen, 147.

¹¹⁰ Gaines, 169-70.

¹¹¹ Cutter, 84.

over to the white race. By becoming white, Clare escapes the stifling domestic life of her African American friend Irene Redfield. Clare feels no obligation toward her own daughter, and in fact, she interacts with her very little throughout the novel. As Clare tells Irene, “Children aren’t everything.”¹¹² Yet, when she visits Irene, Clare spends more time with Irene’s sons than their own mother does, despite Irene’s constant preoccupation with the men in her life. As a white woman, Clare does not feel pressured to live up to the domestic ideal. Although middle class African Americans espoused domesticity and pure womanhood in order to uphold white middle class ideals, Clare can escape domesticity through becoming white. Being part of the privileged majority, Clare enjoys the freedom to transgress boundaries, whereas Irene, a black woman, does not.

As a white woman, Clare is also able to freely express her sexuality. According to Deborah Gray White, white slaveholders created the false notion of black women’s heightened sexuality—the Jezebel image—in order to justify slaveholders’ breeding practices and their sexual exploitation and abuse of black female slaves. White describes the Jezebel figure as the “counterimage of the Victorian lady.”¹¹³ While whites argued that black women were inherently sexual, lascivious creatures, they promoted the idea of pure white womanhood. In *Passing*, Clare is certainly very comfortable with her sexuality, which supports the idea that black women who chose to pass possessed white women’s bodies and black women’s overactive sex drives.¹¹⁴ Yet one cannot forget that Larsen describes Clare through the eyes of Irene, a woman very much influenced by the racial uplift ideology Larsen criticizes. When Irene first encounters Clare, she does not realize that she is an African American woman passing for white. In fact, as Irene

¹¹² Larsen, 202.

¹¹³ Deborah Gray White, *Arn’t I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South*, New York: Norton Press, 1985, 29.

¹¹⁴ Roberson, personal interview.

watches this strange woman's behavior, she notices "her smile up at [the waiter] as she murmured something—thanks, maybe. It was an odd sort of smile. Irene couldn't quite define it, but she was sure that she would have classed it, coming from another woman, as being just a shade too provocative for a waiter."¹¹⁵ When Irene discovers Clare's true identity, she immediately decides that the smile "was too provocative."¹¹⁶ Unconsciously associating black womanhood with an inappropriately sexual and "provocative" nature, Irene exposes the extent to which she has unconsciously accepted the dominant white culture's constructions of race and gender.

Race as a Social Construct

Although Irene acts as though passing is somehow alien, an intriguing and repugnant practice of which she has no personal knowledge, she herself passes for white at the beginning of Larsen's *Passing*. Exhausted and nearly faint in the Chicago heat, Irene seeks sustenance at the exclusively white Drayton Hotel. At this point, Irene has yet to reveal her race. While the reader is currently unaware of racial implications, Larsen's language clearly conveys a metaphor of passing.¹¹⁷ Larsen writes, "Stepping out of the elevator that had brought her to the roof It was, she thought, like being wafted upward on a magic carpet to another world, pleasant, quiet, and strangely remote from the sizzling one that she had left below."¹¹⁸ Passing for white may have indeed seemed like "another world, pleasant, quiet, and strangely remote" to black men and women who lived in a nation that supported the political, economic, and social oppression of African Americans.

¹¹⁵ Larsen, 177.

¹¹⁶ Larsen 180.

¹¹⁷ All material in paragraph thus far from Cutter, 87.

¹¹⁸ Larsen, 176.

During the early twentieth century, race defined almost every aspect of one's life. To claim that race was not real would have been, and still is, a ridiculous statement. But the idea of passing, the ability to move in and out of different racial categories, proves that race as a biological fact does not exist. Blackness and whiteness are social constructs that have developed and evolved from the moment the first African slave arrived. Even in 1915, an article published in *The Chicago Defender* claimed that "this bugbear prejudice isn't a matter of color after all."¹¹⁹ Speaking of white Americans, the article states, "If our friends on the other side but knew what a laughing stock they made of themselves in our eyes they would drop forever this question of color being a badge of inferiority," for "not a great percentage of those who term themselves Americans can truthfully say not a trace of dark bloo[d] courses through their veins."¹²⁰ The white social structure predicated on notions of white supremacy and black inferiority, but as passing shows, these categories are not so easily defined.

Larsen's exploration of passing in her fiction reveals the social construction of race. Even as Clare finds herself drawn to Harlem and her African American friends, she nevertheless continues her marriage to Jack Bellew—a man who declares the inherent inferiority of blacks, who ironically nicknames his wife "Nig," and who ignorantly tells her, "You can get as black as you please as far as I'm concerned, since I know you're no nigger. I draw the line at that. No niggers in my family. Never have been and never will be."¹²¹ Of course Clare Kendry *is* black, at least according to the white construct of blackness. Through Jack, Larsen emphasizes the arbitrary notion of race. If Clare's own husband, a man who openly professes his hatred for blacks, does not realize that Clare herself is of African American descent, then what exactly

¹¹⁹ "The Melting Pot."

¹²⁰ "The Melton Pot."

¹²¹ Larsen, 201.

constitutes being black? Race is obviously not as concrete as many Americans would like to claim.

Conclusion

Last Christmas, I found myself babysitting three very sweet and very rambunctious children. After exhausting every sing-a-long, board game, and Blues Clues DVD in the house, we needed a change of scenery. Standing in line at the local McDonald's, my five-year-old cousin could not help but look at the display of Strawberry Shortcake dolls. "I want the green one," she exclaimed, pointing to the doll wearing a green dress. By this time, my cousin had already made friends with another little girl standing in line. "I want that one, too!" the girl told her mother. "Are you sure, honey?" the woman asked. "What about that one in the purple dress, or the yellow one, or the doll with the red hat? Those look like more fun, don't you think?" For you see, the doll my cousin wanted, the "green one," as she called it, also happened to have a darker complexion than the other dolls.

Although a subtle example of racism, I have thought about that day often. It begs the question: what is color? It is one of the first things we are taught as children. Most of us know how to distinguish red from blue and black from purple before we learn the alphabet. But how does one define color? How does one explain color to someone who cannot see it? According to Webster, color is "a phenomenon of light or visual perception that enables one to differentiate otherwise identical objects." It seems so simple, and yet it has divided this country for centuries.

In 1848, Frederick Douglass declared, "By an honest, upright life, we [African Americans] may at last wring from a reluctant public the all-important confession, that we are men, worthy men . . . and ought to be treated as such."¹²² The racial uplift movement of the early twentieth

¹²² Frederick Douglass, "What are the Colored People Doing for Themselves?," *African American Political and Social Thought 1850-1920*.

century took Douglass's advice and sought to live "an honest, upright life" by exemplifying white middle class values. Yet what Douglass and proponents of racial uplift failed to consider was the degree to which institutional racism affected the everyday lives of African Americans. Although individual self-improvement was not a bad concept in itself, racial uplift took on the racist and sexist notions of white American society and tended to blame African Americans, rather than white racism, for continued oppression and prejudice.

Hoping to escape the stigma of being black in America, fair-skinned African Americans saw passing as a way to secure the American identity promised to all but denied anyone with "Negro" blood. Yet passing came with its own price. Along with newspaper articles from the 1920s, Nella Larsen's fiction illustrates the African American reaction to passing during a time when race consciousness and "uplifting the race" dominated discussion. And although passing proves that race is a social construct rather than a biological fact, it also proves that race has a tremendous impact on people's lives, their social structure, and their history. Color may simply be a differentiation between identical objects, but it is category that has not disappeared from our society. And it is one that certainly defines our past.

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